



BECOMING *a New* PERSON

What the Bible Teaches About Regeneration,
Renewal, and Christ-Likeness

ERIC H.H. CHANG



REVISED EDITION
VOLUME TWO

BECOMING A NEW PERSON (VOLUME 2)

The topic of salvation is so deep and wide that few Christians are able to expound it beyond familiar statements such as “We are justified by faith” or “For God so loved the world ...” Biblical salvation is a vast subject, yet its full compass can be delineated by the three main elements of salvation as we find them in the Bible: *regeneration*, *renewal*, and *perfection* (Christ-likeness). Not only do these terms lend themselves to biblically accurate systematization, they are concepts thoroughly rooted in the teachings of Jesus and Paul.

In this two-volume work, Eric H.H. Chang expounds the rich aspects of salvation in a style that is both homiletic and expository. The result is a presentation that is lucid and personal, yet also technical and exegetical. An undercurrent of hope permeates this work, reflecting a pastor’s concern that all may arrive at a spiritual breakthrough in their Christian lives, by becoming new people in Christ.

ERIC H.H. CHANG was born in Shanghai, and came to know God in post-liberation China through a series of miracles. He graduated from the Bible Training Institute (Glasgow), London Bible College, and the University of London (Arts and Divinity, King’s College and SOAS). He has done pastoral work in England, Canada, and Hong Kong.

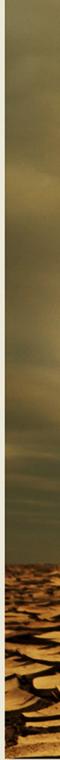
His publications include *The Only True God: A Study of Biblical Monotheism* and *The Only Perfect Man: The Glory of God in the Face of Jesus Christ*.

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a New
PERSON



WHAT THE BIBLE TEACHES ABOUT
REGENERATION, RENEWAL, AND
CHRIST-LIKENESS

Revised Edition

VOLUME 2

ERIC H.H. CHANG

Large Print Edition, Volume 2

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This e-book is released to the world free of charge and with the same goal that the author, Eric Chang, had always had for it: the glory of God and the edification of God’s people in Jesus Christ.

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August 9, 2020

BECOMING
a New
PERSON



ERIC H.H. CHANG

Revised by Bentley C.F. Chan

VOLUME 2

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Becoming a New Person: What the Bible Teaches About
Regeneration, Renewal, and Christ-likeness, Volume 2

By Eric H.H. Chang, Revised by Bentley C.F. Chan
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DEDICATION



To all the faithful disciples
of Jesus Christ in China who
“loved not their lives even unto death”
(Revelation 12:11)

Because of their lives,
and sometimes also because of their death,
“the Lord added to the church daily
those who were being saved” (Acts 2:47);
this He continues to do in large numbers
up to this present day.

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FOREWORD

his collection of 32 messages on Biblical salvation, in two volumes, comes from the pulpit ministry of Pastor Eric H.H. Chang, which spanned several decades and was based mainly in Montreal, Canada. His messages have spoken powerfully to many in Canada and Asia, and are now made available to a wider audience.

Few Christians are able to expound salvation in any depth beyond familiar statements such as “We are justified by faith” or “For God so loved the world ...” Although Biblical salvation is a vast subject, its full compass can be delineated by the three main elements of salvation as we find them in the Bible: *regeneration*, *renewal*, and *perfection* (Christ-likeness). Not only do these terms lend themselves to biblically accurate systematization, they are concepts thoroughly rooted in the teachings of Jesus and Paul.

In this work, Chang expounds the rich aspects of salvation in a style that is both homiletic and expository. The result is a presentation that is lucid and personal, yet also technical and exegetical. It is suitable for Christians and non-Christians, lay people and church leaders alike. An undercurrent of hope permeates this work, reflecting a pastor’s concern that all may arrive at a spiritual breakthrough in their Christian lives.

This work is uncompromising in its adherence to Scripture, and does not hesitate to question any doctrine, whether from church tradition or contemporary Christianity, that is not rooted in biblical teaching. However, the tone is not dogmatic or combative, but irenic, open-minded, and intellectually engaging. I am confident that it will foster a systematic and biblically-based grasp of salvation.

This second edition is a refinement of the original edition of 2004. It has a smoother flow of writing achieved mainly by removing the repetition that is natural and desirable in preaching but is not needed in writing. It also incorporates Eric Chang's mature reassessment of certain biblical and theological themes. The book is now divided into two print volumes for easier reading.

In June 2010, Eric Chang gave me full freedom to revise the second edition of this work, just as he had previously given me full freedom to work on the first edition right up to the penultimate draft.

For this second edition, I express my heartfelt gratitude to Winston Lam, my friend and brother for four decades. He proofread the manuscript, and made numerous helpful suggestions related to grammar and style. My deepest thanks also to Pastor Bruce Lyon of Ottawa for his constant encouragement, and for expressing the hope that this revised edition will see the light of day for the benefit of God's people.

It is our hope and confidence that this work will fulfill the goal that its author, Eric Chang, had always had for his books: the glory of God and the edification of God's people in Jesus Christ.

Bentley C.F. Chan (Editor)
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October 29, 2019

PREFACE

Most Christians will admit that they have little understanding of the fundamentals of salvation. In Biblical teaching, salvation can be described by the terms *regeneration*, *renewal*, and *perfection* as its three main elements. Most Christians are unfamiliar with any of these terms, and are generally uninformed of what it means to be saved. Their understanding of so important a matter as salvation is often limited to a few scattered verses of the Bible which they are unable to draw together into a coherent framework. This is alarming for it indicates that the average Christian doesn't really know what it means to be a Christian. And Christians who don't know what it is to be a Christian are, in effect, Christians who are non-Christians. For how can we be Christians without knowing what the basic principles of the Christian life are?

Many Christians, when they hear that *dying* with Christ is the first step in becoming a new person in Christ (Romans 6:3-5), are so taken aback by it that they wonder if this is some new doctrine. And in the case of those who have at least heard of it, they usually do not know what dying with Christ means exactly, other than that it has some kind of symbolic meaning. But if dying with Christ is merely symbolic, it would follow that rising with him in resurrection is

also symbolic. The message of the Gospel deals mainly with practical *reality*, with real life, and not just symbols and concepts.

Other Christians consider themselves well informed for being able to explain salvation in terms of a substitutionary theology, yet without explaining how it brings out the meaning of dying with Christ. All too often, its practical application, which is where its primary importance lies, is buried under quasi-theological jargon. As a result, the meaning of the new life in Christ is lost from view and, with it, the hope of living victoriously in our daily Christian walk.

As for the crucial element of *perfection* in the Biblical teaching on salvation, it is a subject that most preachers discreetly avoid, regarded as a daunting theme to be sidestepped. The thinking of most teachers and preachers probably goes like this: “If it is with difficulty that the righteous is saved” (1Peter 4:18), why make the Christian life more difficult by bringing up the subject of perfection, and with it the sinister shadows of “perfectionism”?

This work first took shape through a series of messages preached over a period of three years, the first of which was delivered in August 1982. They were made available in the tape libraries of a number of churches and published in condensed form in *Oasis*, the newsletter of Christian Disciples Church.

It was not until Bentley Chan coordinated the transcription of the messages and edited them to make the messages more readable in written form that there was an impetus to

bringing this book into being. Were it not for Bentley's dedication, determination and, above all, devotion to God, it is not at all certain when this work in its present form could have reached the general reader. Moreover, the Lord had given him the insight by which he perceived the spiritual importance of these messages on salvation, which he felt ought to be made available to a wider audience. I wish, therefore, to record my heartfelt gratitude to Pastor Bentley for his enormous contribution. He has also done, in the midst of his busy schedule, the proofreading and the formatting, and prepared the Scripture index. Even though it is my obligation and joy to acknowledge my thanks to him, it was of course not my gratitude he sought in the first place. Rather, it is the "well done my good and faithful servant" which he seeks from the Lord that motivates him. I am certain that, by God's bountiful grace, he will not fail to receive that commendation on that Day.

In my final editing, much of the material had been rewritten to reduce even further the colloquialisms which still remained, to improve the flow of thought where needed, and to add supplementary material where more clarification was called for. Where the supplementary material was extensive, an Appended Note would be added at the end of the chapter. As a result of these additions, about one third of the material is new.

Those conscious of literary style will notice variations in style in the book. Some sections retain more of the casual colloquial style of the original messages as they were

delivered from the pulpit, whereas supplementary material added later has a more literary style.

Though based on careful exegesis, this work is not meant to be an academic discourse on soteriology, but is addressed to everyone who is concerned about the vital matter of salvation.

It remains for me to state, even though it should be self-evident, that responsibility for any infelicities, inadequacies, or mistakes rests solely with me. Every time I re-read the manuscript, I feel that something could be improved. But if I carry on in this fashion, I suppose the book may never reach the publishers.

Given the constraints of administrative responsibilities, I must now leave the work as it stands, realizing that absolute perfection is unattainable in this present age. We must therefore be content with a relative perfection, if by God's grace we can attain even that. May the Lord our Redeemer be glorified in spite of our "spots" and "wrinkles" (cf. Eph.5:27). May God's church be built up in these last days, and may the word of His mighty and wondrous salvation reach the ends of the earth.

Eric Chang
August, 2004
Montreal, Canada

Chapter 17



FAITH: SEEING THE UNSEEN

Faith is central to any study on regeneration and renewal. But explaining faith is no easy task. Many books, in fact, have been written on the subject.

Faith can be described in terms of a total commitment to God or complete faithfulness to Him, as is well known in biblical scholarship.¹ We are faithful to God because we trust

¹ The understanding of faith as total commitment is well known to New Testament scholarship. *Zondervan Bible Dictionary*, article “Faith”: “Faith is not to be confused with a mere intellectual assent to the doctrinal teachings of Christianity, though that is obviously necessary. It includes a radical and total commitment to Christ as the Lord of one’s life”. *Dictionary of the Bible* (John McKenzie, S.J.), article “Faith” (p.268): “The scope of the faith demanded by Isaiah shows that faith was a total commitment to Yahweh, a renunciation of secular and material resources, a seeking of security in the saving will of God alone.” *Nelson’s*

Him and have faith in Him. Thus faith and faithfulness are inseparably linked. In fact the Greek word (*pistis*) for faith in the New Testament can mean either or both. We are to have faith in God *and* be faithful to Him.

In this chapter we discuss New Testament faith by going back to something even more fundamental. Our aim is not merely to gain an intellectual understanding of faith but to actually enter into faith. The concern is practical rather than intellectual, for without true faith, we cannot know God. We are therefore dealing with something basic and vital in the Christian life.

Definition of faith in Hebrews 11

To arrive at a Scriptural meaning of faith, let us turn to Hebrews 11, which is the chapter *par excellence* on faith. Hebrews 11 is one of the few places in the Bible that has anything close to a definition of faith. The rest of the New Testament also speaks of faith, but with the assumption that the reader already knows what it is.

Few today know what faith is. The Protestant Reformation did us a great service by showing us the importance of

Illustrated Bible Dictionary begins the article "Faith" as follows: "Faith—a belief in or confident attitude toward God, involving commitment to His will for one's life." See also *The New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, article "Faith, Faithfulness," subarticle "Faith as assent and commitment" (vol.2, pp.416-417). [This footnote is a duplicate of a footnote in volume 1, chapter 1, and is repeated here for the reader who does not have volume 1.]

faith and the principle of *justification by faith*. What the Reformation didn't quite manage to do was to explain clearly what that faith is.

Though faith has been discussed and analyzed in a plethora of doctoral dissertations, academic essays and scholarly books, Christians are not much clearer about what it is. This may indicate that faith is not something that is amenable to academic analysis or intellectual dissection but has to do with a *living* relationship with God.

We all have a general idea of what faith is, but we need to be more precise. This present chapter cannot, of course, cover the entire scope of faith, or resolve all the questions pertaining to faith. Nonetheless, may God be pleased to grant us some important insights that will have a profound impact on our lives.

Within the space of one chapter, Hebrews 11, the word “faith” occurs 23 times, and “believe” once (v.6). This chapter gives many examples of great men and women of faith, people who have a dynamic faith rooted in a living relationship with God. The use of real-life examples is effective for explaining faith, by giving us insight into what faith is. This is achieved not by an analytical procedure but by seeing what faith does, or happens, in the lives of those who have it.

Faith gains God's acceptance and approval

Hebrews 11:1-2 says, “Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. For by it the men of old gained (God's) approval.”

We have previously seen that what counts is not whether we accept God but whether He accepts us. It is a serious mistake to assume that God will accept us just because we accept Him. The price of this error is incalculable.

In Europe I once asked a woman whether she was a Christian. Then came the retort, “Of course I am! What do you think I am, a heathen?” The people in that country were all baptized as infants into the state church. So if they are not Christians, what are they? Heathens? In many cases, the blunt answer, unfortunately but factually, may have to be “yes”. In the West where Christianity has become a cultural tag, being a Christian does not always mean much in God’s sight, nor can it provide assurance of His approval.

WHAT IS FAITH IN BIBLICAL TEACHING?

Faith: Seeing the unseen

“Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen” (Hebrews 11:1). It is not easy to translate the Greek text of these words, but the general idea is clear enough. The verse speaks of “the assurance of things hoped for”. What do we hope for? Romans 8:24-25 gives an answer:

For in hope we have been saved, but hope that is seen is not hope; for why does one also hope for what he sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, with perseverance we wait eagerly for it.

Salvation cannot be separated from hope. By grace and faith we enter the salvation which God has provided for us in Christ. But we haven't yet seen the final outworking of God's program of salvation in all its wondrous glory. This verse speaks of the unseen, stressing that we hope for the things we don't see, not the things we see at the present time.

Hope, by definition, has to do with things that we don't see. In the past few days, we were hoping to meet up with a dear friend, but we didn't get to see him until today. If he had been with us all along, we wouldn't need to hope for his arrival.

We hope for what we don't see, and wait for it "with perseverance". Faith is the assurance of things *hoped for*, the conviction of *things not seen*—things which are invisible in the present age but which we will see in the age to come.

Paul says, "We look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen; for the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal" (2Cor. 4:18).

The visible things are transient. Every physical object that you see around you is transient. None will remain forever. Our physical bodies are similarly transient. We are reminded of this every time we meet up with friends after a five-year absence. As age takes its effect, we have thinner hair or more

gray hair. Our faces will be “dignified” with a few more sculpted lines. Nothing that our physical eyes can see is permanent. The transience of physical things is an incontrovertible fact.

But if we have faith, we will focus our attention not on the things that are seen (transient) but the things that are unseen (eternal). The unseen things, invisible to the physical eye, are eternal. The spiritual world is eternal, and will continue to exist long after this physical world, even this universe, vanishes into oblivion.

This church building will disappear one day. Its massive columns will pass away as surely as the preachers and the people who assemble here. In a hundred years from now, none of us will be around. We are not being morbid but simply stating a reality of life.

Faith, then, has to do with the unseen things, the spiritual things, the eternal realities, the eternal God, the Lord Jesus, the Holy Spirit, the Jerusalem above, the Church as a redeemed spiritual body—and not with transient things.

(1) Faith is analogous to physical sight

Faith—seeing the unseen—is analogous to physical sight. Our physical eyes see visible things, but the blind man doesn't see them just as those who lack faith are blind to spiritual things. To the spiritually blind, God is just a theory or a philosophical concept. They may believe certain things about Jesus—that he is the Son of God, that he was born in

a manger, and so on—but is that true faith? Do we base our faith on a narrative about a manger?

True faith has to do with spiritual perception, without which spiritual things or spiritual reality will be nonsense to us, or will be reduced to abstract concepts couched in philosophical or theological jargon.

Without faith, the things that will be real to us are cars, houses, fame, and the like. But spiritual things are real to the man of faith, who sees them with spiritual eyes, not with physical sight.

Scripture speaks of faith as *seeing things spiritually*. But in addition, faith is also *the seeing of spiritual things*. These two are related but not identical; they are two aspects of the way faith functions. The first aspect (seeing things spiritually) means that a person of faith looks at everything with the eyes of faith, that is, from the spiritual point of view and not by external appearance. The second aspect (seeing spiritual things) means that the person of faith sees invisible things, including spiritual realities.

(2) By faith Noah saw the unseen

By faith Noah, being warned by God concerning events as yet unseen, took heed and constructed an ark for the saving of his household; by this he condemned the world and became an heir of the righteousness which comes by faith. (Hebrews 11:7)

Noah was warned of “unseen” events (future events) which are imperceptible to the five senses. He perceived unseen events in a way that few people do. How did he know they are real? Was it just pure imagination on his part?

If you claim to be a Christian, consider a Christian doctrine that pertains to unseen things: *the return of Jesus Christ*. Whether his coming is real to you depends on whether you have faith. Every Christian knows in theory that Jesus was born of a virgin, that he died, that he was resurrected, that he ascended into heaven, that he will come again. When he comes again, will you exclaim, “Amazing! So his coming is real after all!”?

Unseen things are unreal and absurd to those who lack the spiritual perception that comes from this remarkable thing called faith. Faith is not a matter of exercising the imagination, but taking God at His word (as Noah did), and in so doing receives spiritual insight from God.

(3) By faith Abraham saw the unseen

The next verse says:

By faith Abraham, when he was called, obeyed by going out to a place which he was to receive for an inheritance; and he went out, not knowing where he was going. (Hebrews 11:8)

Abraham didn’t even know where he was supposed to go when he first launched out in response to God’s call. The intended destination was Canaan, an unfamiliar land that

Abraham had never seen. More than that, Hebrews indicates that Abraham set out on his journey by faith not knowing beforehand what his final destination was going to be: “He went out, not knowing where he was going”. This is also seen in Genesis 12:1 where Yahweh said to Abraham, “*Go forth ... to the land which I will show you*”. At this point in his life, Abraham’s final destination had not yet been mentioned.

Hence Abraham had to walk by faith, being led one stage at a time. Had his faith failed along the way, he wouldn’t have arrived at the “place which he was to receive for an inheritance,” not only because he wouldn’t know which place God had appointed for him, but also because he wouldn’t have the perseverance of faith to attain the promised inheritance.

The true longing deep down in Abraham’s heart was for the eternal things, for he “was looking for the city which has foundations, whose architect and builder is God” (v.10). He longed not for an earthly inheritance but the heavenly city, “for God has prepared a city for them” (who have faith, v.16), a city called “the heavenly Jerusalem” in Hebrews 12:22 (cf. Rev.21:2). This was not a figment of his imagination. Abraham did see the city of God through the eyes of faith, and as a result he turned his back on his earthly wealth. The world meant nothing to him, for he longed for the eternal things. Fixing his eyes on the city of God reserved for those who walk with Him, Abraham was oblivious to the world with its riches and pleasures.

Are you like Abraham, or do you find spiritual things nebulous or even absurd? Do you regard Jesus' coming and the heavenly city as a Biblical fairy tale?

Faith is seeing the unseen, the spiritual things. Because we are saved by faith rather than by dogma, salvation is granted to those who, like Abraham and Noah, see the unseen with spiritual eyes, and live in obedience to God by faith. People with true faith will receive God's approval and be saved.

(4) By faith Moses saw the unseen

Regarding Moses, Hebrews 11:27 says, "By faith he left Egypt, not fearing the wrath of the king; for he endured, as seeing Him who is unseen." Moses endured persecution and the anger of Pharaoh, king of Egypt. Why would Moses go through suffering when he, a prince of Egypt, could have enjoyed the pleasures of Egypt? These pleasures meant nothing to him because his spiritual perception was fixed on the things invisible to the physical eye.

If we claim to be saved by faith, do we likewise "endure as seeing Him who is invisible"? Or is our faith nothing more than accepting certain Christian doctrines, even that of a crucified Christ? Or stories learned in Sunday school? If that is the sum of faith, then all we would need is Christian culture and education to be saved.

In Scripture, faith is the capacity to see spiritual things. Moses endured because he saw beyond the transient. With his eyes fixed on the invisible God, Moses was willing to go

through many hardships in the wilderness. He “regarded disgrace for the sake of Christ as of greater value than the treasures of Egypt, because he was looking ahead to the [eternal] reward” (Hebrews 11:26).

(5) Looking to Jesus

Hebrews 12:2 says, “Fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.”

This verse exhorts Christians to live their lives by “fixing our eyes on Jesus” (continuously, present participle). But where is he now? We cannot see him because he is seated at the right hand of the throne of God. This verse wouldn’t make sense if “fixing the eyes” refers to physical sight, but only to *spiritual sight*. Every Christian is called to a persevering faith that constantly looks to Jesus.

Intellectual faith

To the great confusion among Christians today, there are two things that go by the same name “faith,” yet are radically different in nature. There is *intellectual* seeing and there is *spiritual* seeing. That both are called “faith” obscures the fact that they are fundamentally different. Intellectual seeing is not the same as spiritual seeing. The “faith” that most people have today is intellectual seeing, not spiritual seeing.

What is intellectual seeing? If I explain something to you, and you reply, “Yes, I see what you mean,” you indicate that you understand with your mind what I have just told you. This is intellectual seeing; it is not what is meant by “faith” in the New Testament.

Many people claim to believe in Jesus, but if you should ask them why they believe, they might say, “Because my friend believes in Jesus. My friend is trustworthy, and I believe him absolutely. He even told me of his spiritual experiences, even hearing God’s voice speaking to him! My friend wouldn’t lie to me. He did hear God’s voice, and it proves to me that God is real.”

Your reasoning is acceptable. There is no need to doubt your friend’s experience, or limit God in what He can do in the world. But there is a crucial difference. Your friend has a direct first-hand faith in God, but you have a second-hand faith. Your faith is based on your friend’s. Your faith is intellectual, his is spiritual. That is the key difference. There is nothing wrong in believing his testimony, but that is not faith as defined in Hebrews 11:1. Intellectual faith may serve as an introduction or a preamble to spiritual faith, but it is not a substitute for spiritual faith.

Some people become Christians after reading biographies or autobiographies of people such as Sundar Singh, a great Indian Christian who experienced amazing things. God worked miracles through him, and I don’t doubt the truth of these accounts. As one who has experienced some of these things myself, I know that God does such things.

You may have witnessed a sick man being healed at a Christian meeting. There is no need to doubt the miraculous, though we must remain alert to the fact that some “miracles” are fake.

I once saw a man’s leg being lengthened through prayer. One of his leg bones was considerably shorter than the other, making him incapable of walking properly. Somebody prayed for him with the laying on of hands, while the TV camera zoomed in on his leg. It was lengthened right in front of the camera during the prayer. There is the evidence before your eyes. “Seeing is believing”. Your eyes tell you that a miracle has happened.

Many people, after seeing a miracle, cry out, “Hallelujah! I believe in God now!” They now believe in a God who performs miracles. That is certainly faith of some sort, but is that saving faith? We may be surprised to learn that that kind of faith is not yet saving faith.

Throughout the land of Israel, Jesus healed people in front of large crowds. They saw him give sight to the blind. Many believed in him after witnessing the miracles. They saw Jesus say to a paralyzed man, “Stand up, take your bed, and walk” (Mk. 2:9-11; Mt.9:6). The man got up and walked right before the eyes of the multitudes.

When Lazarus died, the whole neighborhood soon knew about it. After he had been dead four days, Jesus commanded him, “Lazarus, come out,” and sure enough he came out of the tomb. Many saw this, and believed in Jesus because of what their physical eyes had seen. But according

to Hebrews 11:1, true faith consists in seeing what *the physical eye cannot see*.

There is nothing wrong in believing in God after witnessing a miracle. That is not yet saving faith, but only the preparation for faith. What kind of faith do you have? Did you become a Christian after reading a biography? That is good, but if your faith is built on someone else's experiences of God, even miraculous experiences, then your faith is still second-hand. Saving faith, according to the New Testament, has to do directly with God. Like Moses, you endure as seeing Him who is unseen.

Intellectual faith involves the analysis of facts and data. You weigh propositions and arrive at a logical deduction. You saw a miracle, and deduced through a logical process that God is real and has the power to heal. That is intellectual faith. It is based on an investigative procedure similar to that used in a court of law, where the judge and the jurors listen to the witnesses. They weigh the evidence, the arguments, and the credibility of the witnesses, and then arrive at a judgement. There is nothing wrong with intellectual analysis. In this world we cannot do without intellectual analysis. Every day we assess whether something is true or false, and then accept or reject it.

But we must distinguish between the two fundamentally different types of faith. One is the intellectual acceptance of certain statements. That is not wrong in itself, but it is only a preamble to, or a preparation for spiritual faith. Saving

faith, on the other hand, is the seeing of eternal things that are invisible to the physical eye.

Two kinds of seeing and two kinds of knowing

The difference between the two kinds of faith can also be expressed by the vital difference between “knowing” and “knowing about”. When I say “I know about John,” it doesn’t necessarily mean that I know him personally, but only that I know something about him. But when I say “I know John,” it means that I know him personally. But even if I have met John, shaken his hands, and exchanged a few words with him, it still wouldn’t be accurate for me to say that I know him. In Scripture, “know” refers to a *relationship* based on a personal experience of that person. It is a first-hand knowing, as distinct from “knowing about” which is a second-hand knowing.

When we witness a miracle, we gain some knowledge of God’s love, power, and majesty. If this knowledge spurs us on to establish a living relationship with God, we will have moved from knowing about Him to knowing Him, a vital transition from a second-hand to a first-hand faith. Seeing is a primary means by which we know someone or something. Faith is spiritual sight, hence it is by faith that we come to know God and establish a living relationship with Him.

If it is through seeing with eyes of faith that we come to know God, at what point can we say we truly know God? As we have said, even if we have met someone, shaken hands

with him, and exchanged a few words, we are still not entitled to say that we know the person until a relationship or friendship has been established.

In our lifetimes we have met or spoken with many people, but in most cases without a true mutual knowing. Only where a friendship or relationship has been established can we say that we know them and they know us. True knowing has to be *mutual*.

This is also the case with knowing God. “The Lord knows those who are His” (2Tim.2:19); “If anyone loves God, he is known by Him” (1Cor.8:3); “You have come to know God, or rather to be known by Him” (Gal.4:9).

This is also true of Jesus: “I am the good shepherd, and I know my own, and my own know me” (John 10:14). In Matthew 7:21-23, Jesus talks about people who claim to know him because they called him “Lord, Lord” and did mighty works in his name. But he says to them, “I never knew you”.

The physical prevents us from seeing the spiritual

We come to our second point: Man’s physical component has the tendency of preventing him from seeing spiritual things. Let us use the picture of baptism to explain this point.

Baptism symbolizes death—death to the self and to the old way of life in the flesh. Why is death important? You may say, “That’s easy. Through death we die to sin.” That is

correct, but it is not as simple as that. That is because you cannot die to sin unless you first *die to the flesh*.

(1) **Bondage to the flesh**

Romans chapter 6 explains the meaning of baptism using the picture of death to sin. This topic is carried over into Romans 7 by means of the connecting word “or” (which is not preserved in some Bibles), that is, Paul is now looking at it from another angle. Chapter 7 gives a clear link between flesh and sin, so it is evident that we cannot die to sin unless we die to the flesh.

In chapter 7 Paul describes his former predicament when he was “in the flesh”: he could not do the good he wanted to do, but did the evil he hated (Romans 7:15ff). It reminds us of those who make New Year’s resolutions but cannot keep them. People find themselves in the dilemma of wanting to do something good but are powerless to do it. The “old man,” the unregenerate man, finds himself defeated by a power dwelling in him, such that despite his good intentions he ends up doing something sinful.

Paul says, “Now if I do what I do not want, I agree that the law is good. So then it is no longer I that do it, but sin which dwells within me” (vv.16-17). What is Paul saying? Something is stopping me from doing the good I want to do. What is it? *Sin which lives within me*. Sin is not just an act but a power that compels me to do something contrary to my intentions. In verses 18-20 Paul continues:

Nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh; for the wishing is present in me, but the doing of the good is not. For the good I wish, I do not do; but I practice the very evil I do not wish. But if I am doing the very thing I do not wish, I am no longer the one doing it, but sin which dwells in me.

Continuing on this point, Paul says in verse 23:

But I see in my members another law waging war against the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. (ESV)

Here Paul speaks of “members,” namely, the members of the physical body—arms, legs, eyes, etc. In the plural, “members” collectively refer to the body. Paul speaks of “the law of sin” which operates in “my members” (my body), waging war against “the law of my mind” and taking me captive. Paul closes the chapter with these striking words: “With my flesh (physical body) I serve the law of sin” (v.25).

This brings out what we said earlier: *You cannot die to sin unless you die to the flesh*. It is as simple as that. Death at baptism signifies the putting off of the flesh, and the finishing of life in the flesh. When we experience this death and receive the Holy Spirit, what happens next? Romans 8:9 says, “You are not in the flesh, but in the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God dwells in you.”

“You are not in the flesh”? But your body has not disappeared, has it? Paul is of course speaking *spiritually*, saying that we are no longer controlled by the flesh or its power.

This is what he means when he draws the contrast between “in the flesh” and “in the Spirit”.

(2) The veil of the flesh

Many Christians live in defeat, and say to themselves, “Romans 7 is right on the mark because it describes my situation perfectly. I want to do good but I do evil instead.” This assessment of Romans 7 is valid if you are still living under the control of the flesh and the power of sin, or if you haven’t moved from the dire situation described in Romans chapter 7 to the new life described in chapter 8.

The flesh is a veil that covers your face and prevents you from seeing spiritual things. No one in the flesh can see the things of God. To the man in the flesh, spiritual things are conceptual, abstract and even mythological. What matters to him is material reality—a car, a house, travelling—the things he can see, hear, taste or touch. The things of God make no sense to him, and are even foolishness to him (1Cor.2:10-14). It takes a radical and fundamental transformation for him to become a whole new person in Christ.

At baptism we “put off the flesh”. It doesn’t mean that baptism has magical properties. At baptism a *spiritual transition* takes place through faith. By God’s grace, the flesh’s dominion or tyranny over us is “put off” or removed by the power of the Holy Spirit, and we willingly place ourselves under the control of the Spirit. This is a radical transfer from one sphere of power to another. But if you

remain in the flesh, it will cover your spiritual sight like a veil, blinding you to spiritual reality. The apostle Paul says:

But even to this day, when Moses is read, a veil lies on their heart. Nevertheless when one turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away. Now the Lord is the Spirit; and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty. But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as by the Spirit of the Lord. (2Corinthians 3:15-18, NKJV)

We cannot “see” the Lord’s glory so long as the veil of the flesh which covers our spiritual eyes is not removed. Paul continues to speak of the veil in the next chapter:

And even if our gospel is veiled, it is **veiled** to those who are perishing, in whose case the god of this world has **blinded** the minds of the unbelieving, that they **might not see** the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. (2Corinthians 4:3-4)

The gospel is veiled to those who are perishing, and makes no sense to those whose faces are veiled. They are in the flesh, and sin rules the flesh. They are perishing because the wages of sin is death (Rom.6:23).

But thanks to God, the veil of the flesh is removed in Christ. Now “we have confidence to enter the holy place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way which he inaugurated for us through the veil, that is, his flesh” (Heb.10:19,20). Even Jesus’ flesh is spoken of as a “veil”. When his flesh was pierced and torn upon the cross, we were

given access into the holy place where God's Presence is. Jesus' body is the temple or "holy place" of God because "in him dwells all the fullness of Deity bodily" (Col.2:9). When the veil of Jesus' flesh was pierced, the way into God's presence was opened, and we have access to God.

(3) Second-hand faith costs you nothing

Hence we must put off the old way of life dominated by the flesh, a way of life preoccupied with the pursuit of material and earthly things such as cars and houses—the visible things, but also other things of the present world such as praise, respect, applause from men, and *earthly* concerns and aspirations. To an earthly minded person who has only a second-hand faith, spiritual things are abstract, remote and nebulous.

But something else is defective about a second-hand faith: *It costs you nothing*. By contrast, for the one who sees God's glory, the putting off of the flesh involves a high cost, unlike intellectual faith which does not require dealing with the flesh.

"If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me" (Mt.16:24). If you take up your cross, you are finished with the flesh. But intellectual faith does not require you to deny yourself, and can even toy with theological concepts.

Sight is its own proof

New Testament faith is spiritual sight as opposed to physical sight, yet there is an important similarity. Like physical sight, spiritual sight is its own proof or self-verification. If you ask me how I know that a certain person exists, I would reply, *I have seen him with my eyes*. Seeing is the evidence that something or someone is real. When John² was asked for the evidence for the truth of Jesus, his reply was based on the strength and truth of eyewitness evidence:

¹ That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, **which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at** and our hands have touched—this we proclaim concerning the Word of life. ² The life appeared; **we have seen it** and testify to it, and we proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and **has appeared to us**. ³ We proclaim to you **what we have seen** and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ. (1John 1:1-3)

Here both kinds of seeing, physical and spiritual, are present. In verse 1, physical seeing is indicated by the words “which

² This is not the place to discuss the authorship of First John nor is it necessary for our purpose, since all that is intended here is to show *the kind of answer* that an eyewitness like the apostle John would give. Any the other eleven apostles could have given this kind of answer. If the author of 1John is an “Elder” different from John the Apostle, then either he too was an eyewitness, or the “seeing” he speaks of is to be understood as a spiritual seeing. The latter option seems unlikely in the light of verse 1.

we have looked at and our hands have touched,” and “which we have seen with our eyes”.

In verse 2, there is evidently a change of emphasis to spiritual sight because Jesus is here spoken of on the spiritual level as “the life”; life *per se* is not visible to physical sight, since the life being referred to here is “eternal life” which has now “appeared to us” in the person of Jesus Christ.

In verse 3, the words “what we have seen” refer to both kinds of seeing mentioned in the previous verses.

The reliability of spiritual sight

Once we realize that faith is spiritual sight, and that the sight is self-verifying (in the sense of being certain that what we have seen with our eyes is real and not a figment of imagination), we won't have difficulty understanding the meaning of Hebrews 11:1, “Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.”

Seeing is necessary for knowing, as distinct from knowing about. The quality of the perception affects the quality (the depth and accuracy) of the knowing. The more superficially I see, the more superficially I know; the less I see, the less I know. The deeper my perception, the better my knowing. The wider my scope of perception, the fuller my knowledge.

The link between faith, seeing, and knowing is now clear. Paul says, “I *know* whom I have believed, and am convinced ...” (2Tim.1:12). Paul's faith, which is spiritual sight, allows him to know the one who is now seated at the

Father's right hand, though Christ cannot be seen with physical sight at the present time.

Stephen was granted to see the ascended Christ at the end of his earthly ministry, whereas Paul was granted such a vision at the beginning of his apostolic ministry. In both cases, they saw what cannot be seen by the physical eye, for it is perceived by the faith that sees the spiritual and the eternal. In both events, the other people who were present did not physically see what Stephen or Paul saw. If those who were stoning Stephen (Acts 7:54f) had seen Jesus as Stephen saw him, they would have stopped stoning him immediately!

The account of Paul's Damascus experience doesn't say that he saw Jesus with his physical eyes, but that "suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and *heard a voice say* to him, 'Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?'" (Acts 9:3,4). A dialogue is recorded in verses 5 and 6 but there is no mention of physical vision. Verse 7 says, "The men traveling with Saul stood there speechless; they heard the sound but *did not see anyone*". That Paul saw Jesus with *spiritual* sight cannot be doubted in view of his affirmation of having seen Jesus ("Have I not see the Lord?" 1Cor.9:1).

But if we say that Stephen and Paul saw Jesus with spiritual sight rather than physical sight, what would be the natural man's reaction to our assertion? The immediate reaction would be to say that their seeing was purely of their imagination, since only physical seeing is real such that

reality is established by physical perception. That too would be our reaction if our thinking is carnal.

Actually, *it is our physical sight that is unreliable*. We often don't see things accurately; sometimes we see things that don't exist, such as a mirage in the desert. Many people recall an event which upon closer investigation of the facts turn out to be different from their memory of it. That is why eyewitness accounts often disagree with one another.

Why is spiritual seeing reliable whereas physical sight is not? It is because *true spiritual seeing is something inseparable from God's work in us*. It is God who opens the eyes of the blind when they call upon Him. It is God who enables us to see with the eyes of faith, and who reveals to us the things we need to see for our eternal welfare.

It doesn't mean that our spiritual sight has reached full clarity of vision, but only that our seeing is true and genuine, though it may be inadequate. Paul says, "Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known" (1Cor.13:12). Again the link between seeing and knowing, as brought out in the aphorism, "I see, therefore I know". To the extent we see, to that extent we know and have the assurance of knowing.

Since so much is at stake regarding spiritual vision, we must always be on high alert to any form of spiritual deception, which is an ever-present threat in this age. What precautions can we take against it? We need to be ever watchful for every machination of the powers of darkness

because these operate through the deadly reality of sin. If anyone harbors sin in the heart, spiritual vision would not be possible, for sin gives Satan an opportunity to deceive us through false visions.

But when our hearts are pure, God will give us sight through the eyes of faith. Hence the importation exhortation: “Let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles ... Let us fix our eyes on Jesus the author and perfecter of our faith” (Hebrews 12:1,2).

Chapter 18



THE THREE TYPES OF PERFECTION

PRELIMINARY CONSIDERATIONS

Perfection rejected

 In most churches, perfection is not a topic that is preached. Have you ever heard a message on perfection anywhere? It is a topic we don't hear about, being one which Christians generally are happy to ignore. It is embarrassing to talk about perfection when we barely reach the minimum level, so perfection is regarded as unrealistic and impracticable. Yet perfection is taught in the Scriptures.

Hebrews says that “the word of God is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword ... and able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart” (4:12). When we

hear the word of God, it searches our hearts, examining and judging our thoughts, motives, and intentions. God's Word, especially when it deals with perfection, has a way of making us feel uncomfortable, for it examines our very *motive* for being Christians.

The true reason for the church's resistance to perfection is that *most people just want salvation*. We want to stretch out our hands and accept the free gift of salvation. If I can get salvation, who cares about perfection? What has it got to do with me? Perfection is for those who are obsessed with the loftier realms of the spiritual life.

Most Christians are content to settle for the minimum level, seldom going beyond "me, myself, and I". I want to get saved, and that's all that matters. Perfection is so far away that you can hardly see it with a pair of binoculars. It is so remote that it is like reaching for the stars. Why talk about rocket theology when we can't even get off the ground? Riding a bicycle ought to be good enough. If I can get from point A to point B in a car, that would suffice. Who cares about space shuttles? They're for Christians who are out of touch with earthly reality. Let's talk about bicycle theology, or motorcycle theology, or if you're ambitious, automotive theology. But don't bother about rocket technology. You've got to keep your feet on the ground.

This way of thinking reveals a failure to see that perfection in the Bible is very practical, and is in fact what the Christian life is about. This will be demonstrated as we proceed. Since perfection is the goal which we are called to

in Christ, we press on towards it by grace, going beyond subsistence-level Christianity.

Perfection and the whole purpose of God

Paul said to the disciples at Ephesus, “I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole purpose of God” (Acts 20:27). He omitted nothing that was important for their new life in Christ. Paul’s constant aim was to “present every man complete (perfect) in Christ” (Col. 1:28), which is why he says in the next verse, “For this purpose also I labor, striving according to his power, which mightily works within me”. The church today would be transformed if every pastor and church leader had this as his goal too.

Perfection is integral to, and inseparable from regeneration and renewal in God’s plan of salvation for us. What will happen when we remove perfection from salvation? We truncate and distort “the whole purpose of God”. It is no longer the full salvation proclaimed in the Scriptures.

Notice Paul’s words “*I did not shrink from*” in regard to “declaring to you the whole purpose of God” (Acts 20:27). “Shrink from” translates a Greek word which means to draw back, or shrink from something, or keep silent, out of fear.³

³ “mid.—a. draw back in fear Hb 10:38 (Hab 2:4). b. shrink from, avoid because of fear; I did not shrink from proclaiming Ac 20:27. c. keep silent about someth. in fear; I have kept silent about nothing that is profitable Ac 20:20.” An abbreviated extract from *A Greek-English Lexicon of the NT*, BAG.

The same word is also used a few verses earlier: “I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable” (v.20). Within the space of a few verses, Paul used the word twice. What might have caused him to shrink from declaring the whole purpose of God?

Anyone who has preached the *whole* message of salvation will know that his hearers will gladly receive some truths, but are less willing to accept some other truths, while yet other truths they find so utterly unpalatable as to strongly reject them. They gladly accept that part of the truth they like, but not the *whole* truth. Their opposition to that part of the truth they don't like can be so strong and violent that some preachers have been thrown out of churches for preaching the *whole* truth which would necessarily include those portions distasteful to the natural man.

Paul had much first-hand experience not only of being thrown out, but also of being slandered, beaten, and nearly killed. I too have had some experience of these things. It takes divinely supplied courage to preach the whole truth, and not merely to dole out those portions we know will appeal to the multitudes. We must choose between preaching the whole gospel and dismembering it. Who do we fear more, God or man?

We do well to consider the closing words of Revelation, which are also the closing words of the Bible by the fact that Revelation is the last book of the Bible. These words give stern warning about any attempt to change the contents of God's word, whether by adding to or subtracting from them:

I testify to everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: **if anyone adds to them**, God shall add to him the plagues which are written in this book; and **if anyone takes away from the words** of the book of this prophecy, God shall take away his part from the tree of life and from the holy city, which are written in this book. He who testifies to these things says, “Yes, I am coming quickly.” Amen. Come, Lord Jesus. (Revelation 22:18-20)

This passage begins with the words, “I testify”. Who is the one making this solemn statement? The answer is found in the second part of the quotation: he who testifies is none other than Jesus himself. Though the warning may sound stern, it is given in love, just like the stern note in a father or mother’s voice warning a child for his own good not to play with fire.

Many people in their ignorance of the Biblical teaching on perfection—the teaching of being conformed to the image of Christ, and growing into the fullness of his stature—have decided that perfection has nothing to do with salvation. But would God teach us anything that is irrelevant to salvation? We give the excuse that given our human weaknesses, perfection is unattainable. But who knows our weaknesses better than God does? Why does He still call us to be perfect? Will He not supply the grace to accomplish that which He calls us to?

The separating of sanctification from justification

There is no basis in Scripture for bypassing perfection in salvation, a method of theological categorization has become popular which *separates justification from sanctification*. In general, the categorizing of subjects is a useful teaching tool, but it will mislead if it is inaccurate. This would be the case if we place justification under salvation, and perfection under sanctification, as two separate branches.

This simplistic classification does not accurately reflect the deeper pattern found in the Scriptures. It leads us to equate justification with salvation, and to dispense with sanctification as a redundant theological appendage. These theological categorizations become a deadly snare by classifying a substantial part of Scripture as irrelevant for salvation.

Nowhere in the Bible can we separate sanctification from justification so neatly, slicing between them down the middle with a theological knife. The cost of this error to the church is unimaginably high. One such consequence is that Christians by and large have ceased to be the light of the world. Those who don't have light cannot give light or be light, so we remain in darkness, which is the state of those who are unsaved.

Many Christians today are ignorant of being light in the world (cf., Eph.5:8, "You were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord"). Someone in our church once wrote an article about Christians being the light of the world. A reader phoned him up to challenge him, saying that it is

Jesus, not Christians, who is the light of the world; and demanded to know where the Bible says that Christians are the light of the world. The writer of the article was astonished. Is it possible for a Christian, in this case a leader of a Christian fellowship, not to know that Jesus had said, “You are the light of the world” (Mt.5:14)? Yes, she really didn’t know that! She had to be shown the exact chapter and verse.

That is what happens when we separate sanctification from justification. Justification, like the first stage of a rocket, is essential for the initial “liftoff” stage of salvation. But without the sanctification stage (Christ-likeness), the purpose of salvation won’t be fulfilled. We must never forget that the saved are those who “have been called according to His *purpose*” (Romans 8:28). And what is that purpose? It is stated in the next sentence, “To be conformed to the likeness of His Son” (v.29).

This whole discussion about the inseparability of sanctification and justification would scarcely have been needed in the apostolic church. But these things need to be expounded at length today.

Jesus says, “You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Mt.5:48). This is both a call and a command, so anyone who refuses to obey it is evidently being defiant, by insisting that perfection is irrelevant to salvation. But even if we don’t understand these deep complex theological issues, do we think that anyone can disobey the Lord and still be saved? *The matter is as simple as that.*

And because we have separated these two things, much of the Lord's teaching has become incomprehensible to us. For example, he says that you cannot be his disciple unless you deny yourself, hate your life, take up your cross daily, and follow him (Lk.9:23; 14:26-27). Many Christians react negatively to this teaching, saying that Jesus is speaking to his disciples, not Christians. There we go again, separating Christians from disciples. No such distinction exists in Scripture, yet we have decided that discipleship is not necessary for salvation. That is amazing, given that the only Christians in the Bible are disciples (Acts 11:26).

Because we have separated sanctification from justification, we don't know what to do with Jesus' teaching, a good part of which we regard as being irrelevant to Christians. That is why we say that Jesus' teaching is meant for higher-level Christians called disciples, not ordinary Christians who just want to get saved. In making false distinctions and classifications, we imagine that we can evade Jesus' call to deny ourselves, take up our cross daily, and follow him—and still be saved!

But the call to take up the cross and follow him is integrally related to his call to perfection. Perfection is seen in complete obedience to God and the denial of the self. Perfection is part of Jesus' most basic teaching to the multitudes (Lk.14:25-27). He starts at that foundational level without being vague or ambiguous about it.

Three types of perfection in Philippians 3

Let us now define perfection more precisely. What does the Lord Jesus require of us when he says, “You therefore must be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect”?

If you have at all seriously tried to live the Christian life, even for one day, you would sympathize with those who say that perfection is impracticable. You would know how hard it is to be a true Christian. It is no easy thing to love God with all your heart and strength, and your neighbor as yourself—even for one day. Who ever said salvation is easy?

The Lord makes it clear that, “The gate is small and the way is narrow that leads to life, and few are those who find it” (Mt.7:14). That is why salvation is by grace, for without God’s empowering through the Holy Spirit, it would be impossible for us to live the new life to which He has called us.

One of the great difficulties we face in the world is that many things go by the same name. Those who have studied philosophy would know that this is a problem for the philosopher and thinker. It also poses a challenge to the Christian. The reason is that human language is somewhat limited, so it often uses the same word to refer to a variety of disparate ideas. If you open a dictionary, you would see that many words mean totally different things. The same is true of “perfection”.

Hence we need to distinguish the different types of perfection if we are to avoid dangerous confusion. Some ideas about perfection are not Biblical, while some are. The understanding of perfection which many Christians have

derives from the world, not from Scripture. So when they read about perfection in Jesus' teaching or in the New Testament, they assume that the word means the same as in the world because that is the only definition they know. The result is confusion. It is crucial that we be well acquainted with the Biblical teaching about perfection.

First type of perfection: Carnal perfection

Philippians 3 is the chapter *par excellence* on perfection, for it defines it to the fullest extent. In this chapter we find three types of perfection which we need to distinguish. The first type of perfection is found in verse 6, but let us read verses 4 to 6 to get the context:

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** (or faultless or without defect, i.e., perfect).

This is the first type of perfection. In his former way of life, Paul was blameless and perfect—*but in the flesh*. He is saying, “If you have anything to boast about in the flesh, I have more. In terms of the Law, I have a perfect track record”. He scrupulously fulfilled every detail of the Law. Yet it was this perfection “in the flesh” that drove him to persecute the Church, which at that time was seen as an emerging sect.

Why did Paul (at that time called Saul) persecute the church so vehemently? Today the word “cult” or “sect” is bandied about freely. The Church was initially regarded as a Jewish cult or sect (Acts 24:5,14; 28:22). Paul thought it his religious duty to persecute with utmost zeal this Jewish cult whose members had come to be called “Christians,” a cult which at that time was an apparently insignificant movement started by a professed Messiah, the leader of a small band of disciples, some of them fishermen. The learned Saul would have regarded them as ignorant, unlettered, and untrained in rabbinical theology. “How arrogant can you get?” he must have thought, “These ignorant people profess to know a new way to God!” So Saul was determined to exterminate this sect. He put Stephen to death, and the church in Jerusalem was scattered (Acts 8:1).

This first type of perfection is that *of the carnal man*. Carnal, fleshly perfection is totally different from spiritual perfection, in fact its very opposite. It is deadly. This type of perfection within the sphere of religion results in *fanaticism*. It embodies human enthusiasm and the zeal to establish one’s own righteousness before God. It is man-centered and imbued with human notions of perfection.

There are two types of zeal: a spiritual zeal for God, and a human zeal for God. Human zeal is prone to carnal jealousy. That is why “zeal” is often rendered “jealousy” or “envy” in the Bible. Paul says to the carnally zealous Christians in Corinth:

But I, brethren, could not speak to you as spiritual men, but as to **men of the flesh**, as to babes in Christ. I gave you milk to drink, not solid food; for you were not yet able to receive it. Indeed, even now you are not yet able, for **you are still fleshly**. For since there is **jealousy and strife** among you, are you not **fleshly**, and are you not walking like mere men? For when one says, “I am of Paul,” and another, “I am of Apollos,” are you not **mere men**? (1Corinthians 3:1-4)

(1) Carnal zeal is motivated by the self

The Corinthian Christians were zealous and probably regarded themselves as quite perfect, with zeal being an expression of perfection. Zeal burns with a concentrated, single-minded devotion to a cause or ideology. Zeal of this kind does emanate from a perfect commitment and obedience of heart to God, but is inspired by a wrong motive: *It is of the flesh, of the self*. It is dangerous to the church because it splits and divides people: “I am of Paul, I am of Peter, I am of Apollos.” To this Paul would say, “Why the need to choose between Peter or Apollos or me? We serve the same God, follow the same Lord; why the zeal for the one over the other?”

This kind of zeal and perfection, seen often in single-minded devotion to a particular theology or dogma, is very dangerous. Outwardly it is not always easy to discern whether a person’s zeal is fleshly because both types of zeal, the carnal and the spiritual, are said to be “for God”. Yet these are motivated by different things.

To avoid being ensnared in the wrong kind of zeal, our hearts and motives must be thoroughly scrutinized before the Lord. Is God truly at the center of our lives, or are we still at the center? Are we subtly running the show, or is the Holy Spirit really in control of our lives?

If you are a zealous person, then bear this in mind: *carnal zeal will blind you to spiritual things*, and blunt your ability to distinguish light from darkness, true from false. This kind of zeal and perfectionism is spiritually dangerous because it is of human origin. It is not inspired by the Spirit of God or rooted in God and a concern for others, but derives from the old ego.

A person with this kind of zeal is a deadly threat to the church. He will attack and slander fellow Christians in the name of the truth as he sees it. The Lord warns of such people when he says to his disciples, “A time is coming when anyone who kills you will think he is offering a service to God” (John 16:2). In his early days, Paul thought he was serving God when he, in his carnal zeal for God, persecuted the church and had Stephen put to death.

From Paul’s recollections of his own past, we could imagine him telling us, “I studied at the feet of Gamaliel the First, that eminent rabbi known as Gamaliel the Great. I was steeped in the theology of the rabbis, and was on fire for my religion. But being in bondage to the flesh, I did not realize that I was opposing God. I persecuted His church and tried to destroy it” (Gal.1:13; 1Cor. 15:9).

If you are in bondage to the flesh, please forget about perfection because you will end up with the wrong kind of perfection. You must start with regeneration, starting at the beginning and not the end.

We must start with regeneration because only that which is born of the Spirit is spirit, and therefore spiritual. We are made spiritual and new people in Christ, not by human zealotry but by God's work of the new creation in us. When we become spiritual, our new life will grow and develop, moving towards a specific goal: the fullness of the image and stature of Christ.

(2) Carnal zeal and atrocities

The first type of perfection, then, is carnal perfection. Anyone who is not regenerate should not aim for perfection because one of these days he will persecute fellow Christians, putting them to death or calling them cults, antichrists, and so on. As in the case of Paul when he persecuted the church, this person will think he is rendering God a wonderful service. One day some of us may be killed by this type of Christian. Be prepared, for they are most dangerous. Jesus warns us that in the last days, the greatest threat to Christians is not unbelievers but misguided Christians, who will commit every form of evil against us in the name of God.

This kind of carnal Christian lacks spiritual perception. They easily stray from the truth without being aware of it. And because they don't know they have departed from the true faith, they think that they still stand in it. In this

dreadful condition, they sway other carnal Christians, creating schisms within the church and violently attacking those who refuse to go their way. This situation will reach its climax in these last days: “At that time many will turn away from the faith and will betray and hate each other” (Mt.24:10). There will be internecine strife; there will be the betraying and hating of “one another”. How dangerous and hateful is carnal zeal.

The history of the church has many a wretched chapter in which Christians have put fellow Christians to death. It is probably true to say that in the course of church history, more Christians have been put to death in the hands of Christians than in the hands of non-Christians. It is hard to imagine anything more brutal and terrifying than the Inquisition, in which Christians tortured other Christians to death in God’s name.

If we strive for perfection yet without centering our hearts on God, on Jesus, and on love for neighbor, we will arrive at a carnal zeal. Flee from it as fast as your feet can carry you, because that kind of zeal will take you to hell. Some of the greatest enemies of the church operate within her and come forth from her. The Antichrist will come out from the church, that is, with a past or present Christian identity. The apostle John says that “antichrists ... went out from us”. They originated from within the church (1Jn.2:18-19). The final Antichrist is unlikely to be an exception. Be well prepared, for we are living in the last days.

Second type of perfection: spiritual perfection

The second type of perfection is found in Philippians 3:15:

Let us, therefore, as many of us who are perfect, have this attitude; and if in anything you have a different attitude, God will reveal that also to you. (Philippians 3:15)

Two verses earlier, Paul explains this perfect attitude in terms of the unrelenting pursuit after the Lord Jesus:

One thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.” (Phil.3:13-14, NIV)

When your life is focused on a goal, you are like an athlete who fixes his eyes on the gold medal. His whole being is focused on the finish line. His thoughts are centered not on himself but on the mark ahead of him. Paul’s single-minded goal is “the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord” (Phil.3:8), reaffirmed in verse 10: “I want to know him”. Paul’s life, heart, and thoughts are all centered on Christ. That, according to Paul, is how the perfect think.

This second type of perfection must not be confused with the first type, which is perfection of the flesh, an external perfection that looks at things, even heavenly and spiritual matters, from the human point of view. It is “mere human” (1Cor.3:3,4) even if it has the outward appearance of being spiritual. It may quote the Bible, but it tends to interpret it by human reasoning and with carnal objectives (e.g., saying

that the Bible teaches us to get money from God). It adheres firmly, even fiercely, to human traditions and theological dogma, creating conflict within the church. It is motivated by human love as distinct from spiritual love.

Spiritual or inner perfection, on the other hand, is governed and motivated not by earthly and external things but by the Lord Jesus, the One who sits at the Father's right hand. If we have been crucified with Christ and no longer live our self-centered lives, but Christ lives in us, we will no longer look at things from a human point of view, but with the "mind of Christ" (1Cor.2:16), seeing things from his point of view.

(1) Perfection has to do with the heart

Let us try to understand the Biblical meaning of "perfect" more precisely. How are we to ascertain its true meaning in the New Testament? By consulting a Greek dictionary? That won't be adequate because the New Testament idea of perfection is rooted in Old Testament ideas, not Hellenic (Greek) ideas. In the Old Testament, perfection⁴ has

⁴ The Hebrew word for perfect (תָּמִים, *tamim*) is frequently used of sacrificial animals which are to be without defect, perfect, healthy, e.g. Ex.12:5, and of people whose hearts and conduct are "blameless" and "upright," e.g. Ps.119:80; Prov.11:20. KJV translates the word as "perfect" 18 times, but other translations often use "blameless"; cf. Prov.2:21; 11:5; Ps.37:18, etc. It is used of God's call to be "perfect" or "blameless" (Gen.17:1; Dt.18:13), and to speak of a "perfect heart" (Ps.101:2), God's work (Dt.32:4) and His ways (Ps.18:30).

fundamentally to do with *the heart and its attitude*. It speaks of a heart that is blameless, upright, or perfect.⁵

This is the type of perfection that God expects of us. He does not require absolute perfection in the sense of absolute sinlessness and moral perfection, for this would involve factors beyond the *intentions* of the heart. We may genuinely want to be perfect, yet did something wrong because of insufficient knowledge in spiritual matters. The intention may be good but the action is wrong because of not knowing the right course of action in a particular situation. This is often true of new believers who haven't yet learned to walk close to God and to know His will for their lives.

Many Christians cannot handle real-life decisions. Should I take this job or that one? They may arrive at a wrong decision, only to realize their mistake later. They failed even though the intention of the heart was right in the first place. They need to learn to commune with God and be led by the Spirit.

God knows that even if the heart attitude is perfect, the action may be wrong. That is why we distinguish internal perfection and external perfection. God does not, I repeat, require that we be perfect in every external act, because that would require a knowledge of God's will at a level which we have not yet attained.

⁵ For example, 1Chr.29:17-19 speaks of a "perfect heart" (NASB). It repeatedly speaks of the heart in expressions such as "the integrity of my heart," "the intentions of the heart of Thy people," and "directing their heart to Thee".

Although the Spirit of God is there to guide us into all truth, we may still be limited in our capacity to communicate with God. The intention may be perfect but the level of communication is often inadequate, so we do not know God's will in every situation.

This second type of perfection is an inner perfection that is not always outwardly visible to others, for it is not something for display. Attention-seeking belongs to the first type of perfection, not the second type. Carnal perfection craves man's approval. We want people to see us praying when in fact we usually don't pray much. People may be impressed with two hours of prayer, less so with 30 minutes. How do we assess someone who prays for 30 minutes, but for the rest of the day is in constant communion with the Lord?

The Lord looks at the heart. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says, "When you pray, close your door behind you so that no one will see you" (Mt.6:5,6). People don't need to know how long we pray. I wonder how people knew that Martin Luther prayed for three or four hours at a time. Sometimes, of course, you cannot hide it, especially if you are sharing a room with someone else. But the intention of the heart must be right. True spirituality is not concerned to let people know how religious we are, how long we pray, or how many Bible chapters we read daily. Someone once told me he had read through the Bible forty times. But if you talk with him, you may wonder if he has even read it once. How

does it benefit you if you read the Bible forty times, yet fail to see the spiritual meaning of any particular verse?

When Jesus says, “Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect,” he is saying, “Be spiritual as your heavenly Father is spiritual.” True spirituality means, firstly, that we are born of the Spirit, and secondly, that we walk by the Spirit. Romans 8 talks about walking in the Spirit and being led by the Spirit. Do we experience the Spirit’s presence and leading every day?

(2) Led by the Spirit

Will anyone still insist that perfection is irrelevant to salvation? Put simply, perfection is a life oriented towards God in which we commune and walk with Him, and experience the wonderful reality of being led by the Spirit. God leads His children even at times when we are not fully aware of it, but only in hindsight. Who are the children of God? They are those who are led by the Spirit of God (Romans 8:14). To be perfect means to be holy, blameless, and in tune with the Spirit’s leading. Holiness means to be separate from the world and its carnality.

The churches today, like the church at Corinth, have many carnal Christians, and these often create trouble in the church. Paul is concerned to move them out of that state as quickly as possible, so he exhorts us to move on to a Christ-like attitude (Phil.2:5), which is the essence of perfection.

Third type of perfection: Absolute perfection

The puzzling thing about Philippians 3:12-16 is that Paul speaks in an apparently self-contradictory way. He says that he is not perfect, yet he is perfect. He expects every Christian to be perfect (v.15), yet he says, “Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect” (v.12). He uses the same Greek word for “perfect” in both verses,⁶ yet in the one case he is perfect, in the other case he is not. This remarkable paradox is lost in some translations which use “perfect” in one verse and “mature” in the other.⁷ Paul consciously uses the same word twice, the first time to say he is not perfect, the second time to say he is perfect. There is no self-contradiction because “perfect” is used in three different senses in the same chapter.

When Paul says he has not attained to perfection, he is speaking of *absolute perfection*. This type of perfection involves much more than having a right attitude and the right intentions of the heart; it includes absolute perfection in every thought and action, without the slightest sin or error, a type of perfection that is impossible for us to attain at the present time. Paul does not claim to be perfect in this sense.

⁶ Verse 12 uses the verb *teleioō*, from the same root as the adjective *teleios*, used in verse 15.

⁷ *New American Standard Bible* preserves the paradox by using “perfect” in both verses, whereas *Revised Standard Version* uses two different words.

Our heart's attitude may be perfect towards God, but we could still be inconsiderate, or overlook someone's needs, or forget to say something appreciative. I confess to failing in this way many times, e.g., failing to express the appropriate gratitude for a kindness shown to me. That failure is sin. In the last chapter we saw that a mistake is a sin according to the Biblical definition of sin. By that definition, my error, my omission, my failure, is sin. I am nowhere near the absolute perfection that we see in Jesus, who has never failed in any action whatever. This kind of perfection is unattainable to us at the present time.

The body of flesh hinders perfection

Perfection is spirituality, but our spirituality is limited by the fact that we are still in the body, and are circumscribed by the imperfections inherent in the flesh, including that the flesh obscures our spiritual vision. Paul says, "When perfection comes, the imperfect disappears ... Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror, then we shall see face to face" (1Cor.13:10,12, NIV). Our spirituality is limited because we see an imperfect reflection in a mirror. My communication with God is hindered by my flesh, so I cannot communicate with Him face-to-face. The communication passes through the veil of the flesh. I see spiritual things, but not as clearly as when the veil of the body of flesh will finally be removed.

But John has good news for us: “We know that when he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is” (1Jn.3:2). Only then will we become fully Christ-like. Absolute perfection is attainable only in the future, when we see Christ as he is, when this body of flesh is no longer, when we put on immortality. Paul concludes the chapter by saying that Jesus Christ “who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they *will be like his glorious body.*” (Phil.3:21)

All in all, Paul is saying, “I am not absolutely perfect at this time because the body of flesh is still with me, hindering my communion with God, though I do have heavenly moments of fellowship with the Lord.” Paul experienced being transported into the third heaven, not being sure if he was in the body or out of it (2Cor.12:2). But after this brief interlude, he was back again behind the veil of flesh. The flesh obscures our spiritual vision at present and will continue to do so until we see Christ face to face and become transformed into his perfect image and likeness.

We are waiting for the transformation or “the redemption of our bodies” (Rom.8:23), when the mortal will put on immortality, and this physical body will be changed into a spiritual one (1Cor.15:44,53). Then we will be absolutely perfect in everything because we will have unhindered communion with God. Paul longs for that day with such intensity that he cries out in Romans 7:24, “Who will rescue me from this body of death?” He would much prefer to die

and be with Christ (Phil.1:21-23) because at death the body of flesh is put off and the spirit is free to go to be with Christ.

The spiritual man does not fear death. Paul is not afraid to die because he knows that the carnal and the physical stand as a barrier to direct communion with God and absolute perfection in Him. His fervent hope is that “I may attain to the resurrection from the dead. Not that I have already obtained it or have already become perfect, but I press on ...” (Phil.3:11,12). Here is an explicit link between absolute perfection and the resurrection from the dead. At the future resurrection, we will receive a spiritual immortal body, and become absolutely perfect, free from the flesh, sin, and death.

What is our attitude to this physical life?

In summary, there are three types of perfection: First, there is the carnal or fleshly type, which should have been left behind in the *past* when we became new persons in Christ. The third type is what we look forward to in the *future* when we become like the Lord, fully conformed to his perfect image. Only the second type, spiritual perfection, concerns us in the *present* time as people who have become new persons, a “new creation” in Christ (2Cor.5:17).

But the path of spiritual perfection is a great challenge. We will soon discover that it leads us to the “narrow road” (Mt.7:14) on which we are to take up our cross and follow Jesus (Mt.16:24; Mk.8:34; Lk.9:23). Anyone who refuses to

bear his own cross will find that he will be unable to walk this road that leads to life. Our physical life with its earthly appetites, pursuits and aspirations will fiercely oppose the call to spiritual perfection because its security and interests are being threatened. When we become new persons in Christ, we must settle the question of our attitude towards our earthly or physical life. Failing to do so is to court certain defeat from the outset.

Whether perfection is important to us or not, can be seen in our attitude to this world and physical life. It can be seen in whether we fear death. The one who fears death will cling to the physical life. But Jesus says, “Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell” (Mt.10:28).

What is our attitude to this physical life? Are we alarmed when our health deteriorates? Or our income is limited? Do we strive for an ever-bigger savings account? Do we seek the applause from men?

Or are eternal things the main concern of our hearts? Do we look at our health and our occupation through the eyes of a faithful steward who serves God as the center of his life? Material things may pass through our hands, but we don't cling to them, like “those who use the world, as though they did not make full use of it; for the form of this world is passing away” (1Cor.7:31). The Christian life is very practical, for it comes to grips with these concrete realities of life. It is within the sphere of daily life that we see perfection

in the enduring spiritual quality of our lives. That is what salvation is about.

Chapter 19



BEING PERFECT: IMITATING GOD

The world knows the necessity of perfection

Someone gave me a baseball cap bearing the logo, “Strive For PERFECTION”. How appropriate! “Strive for” is in small letters, “Perfection” is in big letters arranged in a circle to symbolize perfection. These caps were issued to employees of a large U.S. company that manufactures electrical appliances and electronic products. The management gave out these caps to encourage everyone in the company to aim for ever higher standards of excellence in their work. Like many American companies, this company felt that they were falling behind the Japanese in product quality and innovation, as well as in commitment to their company. So everyone was given a pep talk on the importance of excellence and perfection, and then given a cap. The idea was to remind every employee to

strive for quality every time he or she sees “Strive for Perfection” on a cap.

Even a secular company knows that perfection is vital for survival, and that it cannot survive in this competitive world without it. Commercial enterprises understand very well that perfection is a necessity, not a luxury. Why are we Christians so slow to understand what the world understands so readily? Is the explanation for this to be found in the Lord’s words, “The sons of this age are more shrewd (*wiser*, KJV) in relation to their own kind than the sons of light” (Luke 16:8)?

Satisfied with mediocrity?

Since Christians are God’s workmanship, would God be satisfied with imperfect work? Deuteronomy 32:4 says that God’s “work is perfect,” but I wonder if a non-Christian who looks at a Christian might be disappointed by God’s “workmanship” in this Christian?

Paul does say explicitly that “we are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works” (Eph.2:10). Do we dishonor God by living a life that causes people to say, “Is this God’s workmanship? The Japanese can make a better TV than God makes a Christian. Where is the evidence of a new life quality in this Christian?”

If the world sees the importance of perfection for survival, why can’t Christians? Most Christians think that perfection is a luxury, a non-essential, an extracurricular activity for

people who have ample time on their hands. All we want is salvation; who wants to talk about perfection? If that is your way of thinking, then you still do not realize that perfection is *required* of you.

Perfection and salvation are rooted in the “obedience of faith”

Many Christians do not aspire to spiritual excellence which they consider unnecessary or too costly. Yet the Bible affirms that perfection is an integral part of salvation. If we hope for a place among the saved, then perfection must also be an integral part of our lives. The statement “you are to be perfect” (Mt.5:48) is in the *imperative* mood, indicating a command. Hence it has to do with salvation, for obedience to God is essential for salvation.

Paul’s letter to the Romans is the only systematic exposition on salvation in the New Testament. Significantly, Romans has the phrase “the obedience of faith” at its beginning and its conclusion (Romans 1:5; 16:26). Faith is not saving faith unless there is obedience. To address God as Lord and yet refuse to obey Him is to make a mockery of professed faith.

In the previous chapter, we saw that in Scripture, perfection as it concerns us in the present time is primarily an attitude of the heart (the second type of perfection mentioned in Philippians 3). That is precisely what the obedience of faith is. Romans 6:17 says “you became

obedient from the heart” to God’s word, so you were set free from sin and became slaves of righteousness (v.18). Let us look at the whole passage and note the repeated occurrence of the words *obedience* or *obey*, and *slave*:

Do you not know that when you present yourselves to someone as **slaves** for **obedience**, you are **slaves** of the one whom you **obey**, either of sin resulting in death, or of **obedience** resulting in righteousness? But thanks be to God that though you were **slaves** to sin, you became **obedient from the heart** to that form of teaching to which you were committed, and having been freed from sin, you became **slaves** of righteousness. (Romans 6:16-18)

This passage shows that obedience is the basic character of the spiritual life because the hard reality is that everyone in this world, without exception, is a slave to something. But the good news is that God has given us the freedom to choose whose slave we will be; slaves don’t normally have such a choice. We can choose to be enslaved to sin or to righteousness in Christ, to obey the one or the other. Paul also puts this as a choice between life and death. If we acknowledge Christ as Lord and we as his slaves, we would gladly obey his commands, not least because he loved us and gave himself for us to deliver us from sin.

Biblical principles of imitating God

(1) Imitating God with our hearts

What does obedience of *heart* mean? It certainly means far more than obeying external rules and regulations. It is rather a conforming of our hearts to God's heart, such that God becomes the model and the pattern of the way we live, think and feel.

Paul says, "Be imitators of God, as beloved children" (Eph.5:1). "Be" is in the imperative mood; it is a command or exhortation. Notice that this instruction is given to God's "beloved children," those who are "born of God" (1Jn.3:9). Hence the call to imitate God is issued to all who are born anew, who are regenerate, and who have God as Father. In what specific ways can we imitate God?

(1) *Giving what is most precious to us.* We are motivated to do this because of a most selfless act of God: "God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son" (Jn.3:16). To imitate God means to love as He loved, for He loved us at the cost of what is most precious to Him.

(2) *Loving those who do not love us.* In imitating God, we need to see that His amazing love seen in giving us His Son, was a love poured out not just for those who love Him but for "the whole world" (1Jn.2:2). It is a world that does not acknowledge Him, and is at enmity with Him. Yet God gives rain and sunshine to the evil and the good alike (Mt.5:45), and even gives them His "one and only Son"!

(3) *Reconciling the world to God.* In giving His Son, “God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself” (2Cor.5:19). Will we follow Him in reconciling the world to God? In the call to imitate God, our life mission has been marked out for us. God sets before us the scope and standard of what we are called to imitate and to reproduce in our lives. His Holy Spirit (*pneuma*, which also means “breath”) will sustain and strengthen us as we follow Him.

(2) Imitating Him means following Him, and vice versa

Paul speaks of imitating God, imitating Paul himself, and imitating the churches. Why speak of imitating in so many different ways? The reason is that our spiritual perception is rather limited, so we don't know how to imitate God in every situation. We need to see a true Christian in person, and imitate him. That is why Paul says, “Be imitators of me as I am of Christ” (1Cor.11:1). But if Paul is not around, whom do we imitate? He says, “For you, brethren, became imitators of the churches of God in Christ Jesus which are in Judea” (1Th.2:14). We imitate those churches in which God's life is effectively manifested.

The New Testament brings out this principle in yet another way: Jesus says, “I am the way” (John 14:6). That is why Acts describes the church or the Christian community as those “belonging to the Way” (9:2). Likewise the gospel is called “the Way” (19:9,23; 24:14,22). The churches or the people who are faithful to God's word embody “the Way”

in their lives and become worthy models for others to emulate.

Disciples are followers of the Way. What do we do on a highway? Do we simply believe in the road, whatever that means? We must walk in the way, and follow it. Did we arrive at the church service by sitting on our beds and believing there is a road that leads to the church building? Did our friend here come from Toronto by closing his eyes and saying, “I believe in Highway 401 with all my heart”? And when he opened his eyes, he found himself in Montreal!

We see the absurdity of this scenario. We are perceptive in worldly things but dull in spiritual things. A person may be smart at his research lab, reeling off chemical formulas or mathematical equations, yet is dull in spiritual matters.

When Jesus says, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life,” is he saying that we close our eyes and believe in the Way in a simple faith, and suddenly arrive at the Father? What do we do with the Way? We follow it if we hope to arrive at its destination. When the road turns left, we turn left. When it turns right, we turn right.

Jesus as the Way is a picture of salvation that few Christians have seen: Salvation has to do with a commitment to follow Jesus wherever he leads. It means that our lives conform to his. Jesus is the model, the pattern, the template, according to which the Holy Spirit daily fashions us, that we will finally be fully conformed to his image (Romans 8:29).

(3) Saved by merely believing that Jesus died for us?

Is it possible to be saved without following “the Way” of salvation? Is Jesus not that Way? Popular teaching maintains that all that is needed for salvation is to “believe that Jesus died for you”. Is this really so? To find out whether this accords with Scripture, I searched through all my concordances for such a statement or something similar. I searched through every available list to ensure that I had not missed anything, yet *nothing of this kind could be found!* A computer search failed to find the statement that we are saved by believing that Jesus died for us, in RSV, NASB, NIV, KJV, NKJV and NJB.

“You are saved by believing that Jesus died for you,” is a Christian cliché which we hear so often that we don’t bother to question it. It is necessary for the sake of our salvation that we subject our doctrines to the rigorous scrutiny of God’s word. Does the word of God say anything to that effect? Have you checked the Bible on this point? Which New Testament passage says that we are saved by believing that Jesus died for us? Even a determined search turned up no such statement, to our great surprise.

How easily we make logical errors in spiritual things. Jesus came to save us, right? *Right!* Jesus died for us, right? *Right!* We are saved by faith, right? *Right!* All three statements can be confirmed from Scripture separately. So we combine the three separate statements into one formula: I am saved by believing that Jesus came into the world to die

for me. Right? *Wrong!* These three statements are separately correct, but the combination is wrong and fallacious.

Firstly, as we have seen, Scripture *never* says that we are saved by believing that Christ died for us.

Secondly, in Scripture, the object of faith is not the death of Christ but *Christ himself*. We place our faith in a Person, not in a historic event. The ultimate object of our faith is the Father (John 12:44).

Thirdly, the combination of the three elements produces an invalid result. To use an analogy, we can say that a human being has a head, two arms, and two legs. So far so good. But we cannot combine the three statements and conclude that man is composed of only a head, two arms, and two legs, but lacks a torso. The individual premises are correct, but the conclusion drawn from combining them is false, even ludicrous.

The statement, “We are saved by believing that Christ died for us,” is incomplete and, as such, is false. It is not the whole truth, and is for that reason a misrepresentation when it is presented as *all* that is needed for salvation. We are not saved simply by believing that Christ died for us. He has indeed died for us, but equally important is that we *die with Christ*. Unless his death takes effect in me, it cannot be effective for me. It is not just an external transaction but an inner transformation.

Romans 10:9

It is simply not true to Scripture to maintain that all that is needed for salvation is believing in Jesus' death for us. Paul says, "If you confess with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord,' and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved" (Rom.10:9). There are other important things necessary for salvation: (1) public confession of Jesus' lordship, (2) believe in your heart, (3) believe in the resurrection of Jesus that was done by God's power. To omit all these is no less disastrous for faith than truncating a person by omitting the torso.

Philippians 2:12,13

It is the Holy Spirit who makes Christ's death and resurrection a reality in us through our union with Christ. Note the important words "with Christ," which won't mean much to us unless we identify with him and follow him who is the Way, the Truth, and the Life.

Philippians 2:13 says: "It is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure". We "work out" what God "works in" us by our union with Christ. In the process of salvation, the out-working must proceed from His in-working.

What does this in-working mean in practice? Does it not mean that the Spirit is transforming our "inner man" into Christ's likeness? What does the out-working mean but that we conform our thoughts and deeds to his likeness?

(4) Identifying with Christ

The word “identify” is important. *Oxford Concise Dictionary* defines it as “to associate oneself inseparably with a party, policy, person”. In the context of Christ, it means to associate oneself inseparably with Christ.

John explains identification with Christ in these memorable words, “As he is, so are we in this world” (1Jn. 4:17). This statement is significant because the whole verse speaks of perfect love and the Day of Judgment: “By this is love perfected with us, that we may have confidence in the day of judgment; because as he is, so are we in the world.” Three things are linked here: *perfection* (of love), *salvation* (confidence at the final judgment), and *identification* (with Christ).

How do I learn to become perfect? By consulting *Encyclopedia Britannica* under “perfect”? Of course not. I must associate myself with Christ inseparably, going where he goes, following his every step, and learning from him constantly.

Every New Testament writer has his own way of expressing it. Paul uses the term “imitate” whereas Peter uses the expression “follow in his steps” (1Pet.2:21). Where the Lord Jesus takes a step, there we take a step; when he takes another step, we follow him in that step too. We are inseparably associated with him in everything he does, becoming like him under the leading of the Spirit.

(5) Learning by imitation

A long time ago, I was the pitcher in a baseball team. Unfortunately for us, there was a rival team whose pitcher would always demolish us with his fastball. It was so fast that before you had a chance to swing the bat, the ball would whiz by and end with a loud clap in the catcher's glove. How do you hit a ball that approaches you at that speed? No wonder professional players are paid astronomical salaries for hitting a tiny ball. Some people study hard to earn a decent salary, yet professional baseball players are paid millions just to whack a ball! What is more, they miss the ball more often than they hit it!

If you think these professionals are incompetent athletes despite their training, just go onto the field and try hitting a ball that comes at you at 95 miles an hour (150 km/h). See if you can hit it, even if you are paid five million dollars a year for doing it. The ball is simply too fast. I used to stand there looking like a complete fool because as the pitcher was winding up for the pitch, the next thing I heard was a crack in the catcher's glove. I wasn't even given a chance—or the dignity—to swing the bat.

I then decided to do something about it. Did I pick up a book on baseball techniques? No, I began to study this pitcher's every move right down to the last detail: how he held the ball, where he placed his foot, how his body wound back, how he lunged forward, how he delivered the pitch. I imitated his moves, but found myself all twisted up! I couldn't even throw the ball at 20 mph, never mind 95 mph.

But I kept on working at it. I knew his every move had a reason for it. I knew I couldn't pitch like him because I hadn't mastered his moves. So I imitated them down to the last detail, and eventually my pitches got faster and faster. Finally, after a year of perseverance, the day came for me to give my opponents the same problems that we used to get from this pitcher. They would raise their bats, and the ball would whiz by. You could see the look of surprise on their faces. I continued to improve to the point where few people could hit my pitches. I had imitated this pitcher to perfection.

(6) Discipleship means imitating Christ

When Paul says, “Be imitators of God” (Eph.5:1), is he speaking to those who have too much time on their hands? Certainly not, for Jesus taught the same truth from the start: “Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple” (Luke 14:27). Such a person cannot be Jesus' disciple, not even if he calls himself a Christian. A true Christian—a disciple—is one who follows in the footsteps of his Lord. What does Jesus require of his disciples but to imitate him? The Lord bears his own cross and says to us, “Come with me; go where I go, and do what I do; carry your cross as I carry mine, and you will thus be my disciple.” To follow him is to imitate him in everything, above all his attitude. “Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus” (Phil.2:5).

Discipleship is not just external imitation. Many think that the imitation of Christ is a spiritual exercise for people like Thomas à Kempis, whose book *The Imitation of Christ* is thought by some to advocate a higher level of Christianity. That is a wrong understanding because the imitation of Christ is basic to discipleship.

“Christian” is simply a name for a disciple of Christ: “The disciples were first called Christians in Antioch” (Acts 11:26). “Christian” occurs only 3 times in the New Testament, whereas “disciple” (μαθητής, *mathētēs*) occurs 261 times.

From the first day of our Christian life, we are called to take up our cross daily (Lk.9:23). The cross is the instrument of the death of the “old man” or ego, allowing us to follow Christ in the newness of life. The cross is God’s means of fashioning us into Christ’s image.

(7) Evading the cost of following him

The one who follows Jesus is a disciple. If we “believe” but not follow, we are not his disciples. Only when our believing is of the kind that causes us to take up our cross and follow him are we genuinely his disciples.

What does it mean to take up our cross? Since it is Jesus we are following, we need only ask, “What did taking up the cross mean for Jesus himself?” Paul says of Jesus:

... who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the

likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. (Philippians 2:6-8, ESV)

Looking at these words, can we not know what it means for us to take up our cross? Perhaps we evade it because the cost of discipleship is too high for us. It costs us nothing to believe, but it costs us everything to imitate him.

Here we see two fundamentally different positions: a faith that costs nothing (and which has no life and bears no spiritual fruit) versus the imitation of Christ in the Scriptural sense of following him. This is the mark of true disciples: “These are the ones who follow the Lamb wherever he goes” (Rev.14:4). Jesus says, “My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me” (Jn.10:27). How can a sheep survive without its shepherd? If Jesus is our Shepherd (Lord and Savior) and we are his sheep, the question is *not* whether the cost of following him is too high but what is the cost of not following him? It is a question of surviving versus perishing, life versus death.

Some evade Jesus’ call because they fear it will cost them everything in this earthly life. They are blind to the fact that in clinging to their earthly values, they forfeit eternal values and eternal life. “What will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and loses his own soul?” (Mk.8:36; Lk.9:25).

There are those who insist that they can gain the world and save their souls, that they can serve God and Mammon. They think they understand spiritual things better than Jesus himself. So they opt for a salvation of easy-believism or what

Dietrich Bonhoeffer (who died for his faith in a Nazi prison) rightly called “cheap grace”. But cheap grace will not save anyone, for true grace is never cheap.

(8) “With” Christ at baptism

To follow Jesus is to be united with him. This takes place at the beginning of the Christian life, in baptism. Paul expounds its meaning in Romans 6 where in just five verses he uses the term “with Christ” (or “with him”) five times:

We were **buried with him** through baptism into death, in order that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have become **united with him** in the likeness of his death, certainly we shall be also in the likeness of his resurrection, knowing this, that our old self was **crucified with him**, that our body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves to sin; for he who has died is freed from sin. Now if we have **died with Christ**, we believe that we shall also **live with him**. (Romans 6:4-8)

Here “with” occurs five times in relation to Christ in the original Greek text (though some English translations such as RSV have a sixth occurrence). In each case, the Greek word used is *syn* (σύν, “together with”). This word often appears as a prefix to another word, in Greek and English. For example, the English word *symphony*, derived from *syn* and *phōnē* (φωνή, sound), gives a picture of people playing music together and producing a harmony of sound. Another example is “to die with,” which translates one Greek word

synapothnēskō (συναποθνήσκω, Mk.14:31; 2Cor.7:3; 2Tim. 2:11). The “with” (*syn*) here indicates a togetherness in a bond of union and identification.

If we are united with him, how can we not follow him? If we are not following him, it would indicate a serious problem in our union with him. But if we are united with him, how can we *not* conform our lives to his?

(9) Imitating God is the way to knowing Him

But before we consider “with Christ” more deeply, let me mention one or two things about the word “know” that Paul uses in this passage (Romans 6:6). Here the Greek word for “know” (*ginōskō*) means *experiential* knowledge rather than head knowledge (for which *oida* would be used instead).

There are two ways of knowing something: one way is hearing or reading about it, the other is experiencing it. When you read a book about something, it is just head knowledge until you experience it. You already know something *about* Australia, as does every schoolboy and schoolgirl. Australia has kangaroos, koalas, wombats and other cute creatures. Australia also has vast deserts. You might not like deserts but you love the koalas. You know *about* Australia in terms of its geography, its flora and fauna, its distinctive features such as the Great Barrier Reef. But if you haven’t visited Australia, then you don’t really know Australia. Australia would be just head knowledge to you, being little more than a country in a world atlas. To know

Australia, you must go there, talk to the people, listen to the Aussie accent, and view the landscape.

Do you know Jesus, or only about Jesus? If you don't know him, you are believing in a person who is not real to you personally. How can Jesus be real to you if he is just a name in the Bible? You may know that the name "Jesus" occurs some 917 times in the Bible, but do you know the person behind the name?

Why was the Lord so real to Paul? Because they met on the Damascus road in an encounter that changed Paul's life. When we too experience the Lord, even if in a different way, he will be real to us too. It can be affirmed on the basis of Scripture and experience that no one who has died with Christ will fail to know him in increasing measure.

What are the steps of knowing Christ experientially?

(1) Die with Christ so as to enter into new life

From the passage we just quoted from Romans, we know experientially that "our old self was crucified with him" (Romans 6:6). To die with Christ involves imitating him: he dies and we follow him; we "imitate" him by dying with him. This is the vital first step towards knowing him experientially.

The link between imitating Christ and experiencing him should now be obvious. It is equivalently the link between

“imitating Christ” and “being with Christ”. Is this true in our experience? Has our old self been crucified with Christ? Paul says that “our old self was crucified with him so that ... we might no longer be enslaved to sin.” We can know experientially, not just theoretically, whether we are slaves or not. If we are still slaves of sin, we would know from daily experience that we cannot do the good we want to do. If we don’t experience freedom from sin, in what sense are we saved from sin? And if we are not saved from sin, in what sense are we saved?

Many profess to having been Christians for a long time, yet have never experienced the reality of the new life in Christ. They are still enslaved to sin, to the self, to worldliness, and finally realize that they are unregenerate. How many years must pass before you discover that you are not born of God?

But do they believe that Jesus died for them? Yes they do. I don’t doubt the sincerity of their belief. Why then are they unregenerate? Beloved, it is because they have never *died with him*. Jesus’ suffering and death on the cross won’t mean much to us until we die with him.

“We have died with Christ” (v.8) refers specifically to death to sin because verse 10 says, “The death he died he died to sin, once for all, but the life he lives he lives to God.” In saying that we are united with Christ in his death, we don’t mean that we die his very death (this we can never do), but that we die a “death like his”. Verse 5 says, “If we have become united with him *in the likeness of his death*, certainly

we shall be also in the likeness of his resurrection.” This is God’s work in us, not something we ourselves could have done (cf., the passive in “our old man *was crucified* with him,” v.6).

Although we cannot die Christ’s death, we can die “in the likeness of his death”. Just as he died to sin (v.10), so we die to sin. We share in the *likeness* of his death to sin. Sin is every form of disobedience to God. It is firmly lodged in our flesh (Romans 7:17,18); hence to finish with sin *I finish with the flesh* and with everything that is carnal within me. From now on I live under the leading, control and empowering of the Spirit.

The counterpart to “the likeness of his death” is “the likeness of his resurrection” (Rom.6:5). His resurrection is what makes the new life not just a possibility for us, but a reality. Dying with him is not an end in itself but the doorway to the new life in Christ, in which we live to God (Rom.6:10).

(2) Buried with Christ so as to rise to a new kind of life

Secondly, “we have been buried with him” (Rom.6:4; Col.2:12). The term “buried with” translates one Greek word, *synthaptō* (συνθάπτω). Imagine a hole in the ground which you step into to be buried. To be buried with Christ is to finish with the world, such that the world is finished with you. Death terminates everything you have in the world. Of what value is money or possessions to a dead man?

You might say that this is getting scary. Your fear is justified. As we have seen, “believing” costs us nothing but following Jesus will cost us everything. It cost Jesus everything, including his own life, to save us. Are we prepared to take up our cross for his sake?

The rich young ruler asked Jesus, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” How would we have answered him? We would have said, “Believe in Jesus and you will be saved”. This answer would be correct if by “believe” we mean the same as what Paul meant by it: “the obedience of faith”.

How does Jesus answer the young ruler’s question? In exactly the same way. The first part of his answer addresses the matter of *obedience*; the second part has to do with *faith*. Jesus first says, “You know the commandments” (Mk. 10:19). The man replies, “Teacher, I have kept all these things from my youth up.” Jesus then comes to the second part of his answer, which is a call for faith: “One thing you lack: go and sell all your possessions, and give to the poor, and you shall have treasure in heaven, and come, follow me” (v.21). Without faith, obedience to God’s commands would be just an external act without spiritual value. A faith that doesn’t respond in total obedience to the Lord’s call is not faith that leads to eternal life.

Sadly, the rich young man didn’t have the faith to respond positively to Jesus’ call to follow him. When he heard Jesus’ words, “his face fell, and he went away grieved, for he was one who owned much property” (v.22). Was it worth it to forsake the chance to inherit eternal life in order

to cling to earthly wealth for the few remaining decades of his earthly life? This man didn't have the faith to discern the priceless value of the eternal as opposed to earthly transience. He lacked faith, and with it the obedience of faith. Consequently, eternal life eluded him. He let it slip from his grasp, turning his back on a priceless treasure for the sake of fading transient possessions. At the final judgment he will have ample occasion to bemoan his unspeakable foolishness. But if we lack the obedience of faith, we will be no better off ourselves.

We must die with Christ. If the rich young ruler had been willing to do that, would he have worried about his possessions? We must make up our minds to die with Christ or not. If we die with Christ, our lives won't be the same anymore. Our relationship to the world will change beyond recognition.

(3) Crucified with Christ: freedom from slavery to sin

“Our old self was crucified with him, that our body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be enslaved to sin” (Rom. 6:6). Contra Paul's affirmation, Christians promote the idea that our old self was crucified *in* Christ, not *with* Christ. They take the liberty to make a subtle but fundamental change. What is the difference? “In Christ” indicates that something was done *in him for us*, which leaves dying *with him* redundant. Even if the latter is not stated explicitly, the emphasis on “in” to the exclusion of “with” implies that “dying with him” is treated as

redundant. It means that *it is not we who die*, but that we die in Christ our representative. Our representative died for us, so we die in him.

This is not entirely false because Jesus is our representative (2Cor. 5:14). But it is false if “in” is made to exclude “with”. The New Testament nowhere says that we “died in Christ” in reference to dying to the old life under sin; it is always died or crucified “with Christ”. “In Christ” always refers to the new life in Christ, brought to full completion at the resurrection (1Cor.15:22).

According to the “died in Christ” interpretation or misinterpretation, death is not something that needs to happen to us because it has happened to him on our behalf. He does all the dying, I do all the living. I die in Christ, the representative man. This suits our carnal mind just fine because it allows us to get on with our own lives and remain Christians who have not changed one iota.

There is truth in the statement that Jesus is our representative, not least in his role as Mediator (1Tim.2:5; Heb.8:6; 9:15; 12:24), but that is not directly relevant here. What is directly relevant is a clearer understanding of the term “in Christ” which brings out our living relationship with him in our union with him. But “in Christ” is never used of our *initial* death with him on the spiritual level when we were crucified with him at baptism. When speaking of that death, the consistent term is “with Christ”. When speaking of the new life, the consistent term is “in Christ”. It is erroneous to speak of having “died in Christ” to imply

that we don't really die except in some vague sense in our Representative. (For a study of "with Christ" and "in Christ," see the Appended Note at the end of this chapter.)

(4) Live in Christ and experience the dynamic of the new life

If we have died with Christ, we now live in him, and experience the power of the resurrection life as we "walk in newness of life" (Romans 6:4). Many Christians don't know what it is to live in the resurrection power of Christ because they haven't died with him. Nothing has changed on the spiritual level; they think like a non-Christian, and indulge in sinful thoughts in the secrecy of their hearts even while bearing the name "Christian" and speaking pious things at church.

The Christian who lives in Christ will follow him, imitating his holiness, his mercifulness, his wisdom, his single-minded focus on his mission, and his communion with the Father. He patterns his whole life on Christ, and follows in his footsteps from the first step to the last. That first step is to walk into the grave—into death—having been crucified with him.

As people mocked Jesus, so we stand to be mocked *with him*. "Let us, then, go to him outside the camp, bearing the disgrace he bore" (Heb.13:13). As they spat on him, so they may spit on us, for we are finished with the world (Gal.6:14).

How much do we cherish our material possessions or our family? "He who loves father or mother more than me is not

worthy of me; and he who loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me.” (Mt.10:37) Even our relationship to our dear ones will have to change. It doesn’t mean that we love them less, but that we love them differently—and more deeply than they realize. It is a different and deeper kind of love. God’s power changes even the way we love, changing our aspirations for ourselves and our loved ones.

The command to be perfect is a call to be like Christ, to follow in his steps, to take up our cross and follow him daily (Lk.9:23). Day by day the cross will transform our thinking, as we are being made conformable to his death (Phil.3:10) and even his thinking. “We take every thought captive to make it obedient to Christ” (2Cor.10:5). We apply this to every decision in life, seeking to do his perfect will.

(5) Imitate Christ and end self-centeredness

What is our way of thinking? Are we self-centered, being ever conscious of ourselves and our needs? If we have not died with Christ, we will be the center of our own thinking. But when we imitate Christ, he will be the center of our thinking. That is why we look to Jesus (Heb.12:2) in order to imitate him and his life pattern.

As we progress towards perfection, our focus will move away from ourselves to God, the Father of Jesus Christ. If we are still the focus of our own lives, we are still unregenerate. But if we focus on God, remarkable things will happen in our lives. It can even remove nervous tension! Many are tense because they are conscious about themselves all the

time. But when we forget about ourselves and focus on Jesus, amazing things will happen. We will experience God's work in us, and then through us to others. Our life will radiate upward and outward. We will start to think of the needs of others and of the church.

Of course we must weigh our priorities. Some people take up a lot of our time just when the church needs our attention. In assessing what is important, we may have to put the interests of the church above the interests of one person. He or she may feel unhappy about it, but our conscience is clear because we are doing this for the sake of the church and not for ourselves. When you labor for the general good, some people, even members of your own family, may be unhappy with you.

If we follow Christ's pattern, our lives will be focused. Nervous tension will disappear, and we will sleep better. When we are tired, we tend to focus on ourselves and our exhaustion. But now we turn our attention to the Lord: "I am tired but I turn my heart and mind to you. As you lived and died for others, so by your grace I will forget about my fatigue, and do what needs to be done". The tiredness won't drag us down because we will experience the Lord strengthening us. Wonderful things happen when Jesus Christ is our model.

There is another point about copying something. In our primary school days, we would be asked to draw a picture of something. We would focus on the object, adding a line here and there, and erasing a line here and there, to conform to

the object being copied. This is precisely what takes place when we copy Jesus' life and character into our own lives. Our thinking is focused on him when we are being changed into his image by God's power.

APPENDED NOTE: “WITH CHRIST” AND “IN CHRIST”

“In Christ”

The important term “in Christ” (or “in Christ Jesus”) occurs 90 times in the Greek New Testament. The equivalent term “in him” (referring to Christ) occurs 44 times, not counting occurrences in the four Gospels (to adhere more closely to the meaning of “in Christ” in Paul’s letters and the other letters); “in the Lord” occurs 48 times in the New Testament. This comes to a total of more than 180 times.

The post-resurrection use of “in Christ” is closely related to “in me” in Jesus’ sayings in the gospel of John, where “in me” occurs 24 times. This comes to a grand total of over 200 times. The importance of “in Christ” is statistically evident. Even so, only a brief survey of “in Christ” can be provided in this Appended Note.

If we check through the references one by one (as I have done, and encourage the reader to do the same to get a deeper understanding of it), we find that “in Christ” always has to do with life. Here are a few examples from different sections of the NT: “consider yourselves to be dead to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus” (Rom.6:11); “the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom.6:23); “the promise of life in Christ

Jesus” (2Tim.1:1); for “God has given us eternal life and this life is in His Son” (1Jn.5:11).

Believers are “in Christ” and have the new life in Christ, as Paul puts it: “if any man is in Christ, he is a new creature” (2Cor.5:17). There are many examples of this in Romans 16: “Greet Andronicus and Junias ... who were in Christ before me ... Greet Urbanus, our fellow-worker in Christ ... Greet Apelles, the approved in Christ,” and several more in verses 7 to 13.

Believers don’t cease to be in Christ when they die physically. They are described as “those who have fallen asleep in Christ” (1Cor.15:18). Hence even in death they are alive in Christ, though “asleep” (also Jn. 11:13; 1Cor.15:51; 1Th.4:13-15). At the Lord’s return, “the dead in Christ will rise first” (1Thess.4:16).

We can summarize the Scriptural evidence as follows: “In Christ” is never used to refer to our *spiritual* dying with Christ (at baptism) that takes place at the start of our new life in Christ. In this initial event, the term “with Christ” would be used instead.

“In Christ” is also used when referring to the *physical* death of those who are “in Christ” (the true followers of Jesus), hence death does not remove them from being “in him,” but ensures that they will go on to be “with him” at a new level of spiritual life, namely, eternal life with him “face to face” (1Cor.13:12).

“With Christ”

Virtually all references in the Pauline writings to “with Christ” refer to our union with Christ in his death and our rising to newness of life, which find outward expression at baptism. The following are a few examples: “we have been buried *with* him through baptism into his death” and “we have died *with* Christ” (Rom.6:4,8; Col.2:20). “I have been crucified *with* Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me” (Gal.2:19,20). Believers have been “buried *with* him in baptism, in which you were also raised up *with* him ... He made you alive together *with* him” (Col.2:12,13; Eph.2:5). There are a number of related points associated with death and resurrection:

(1) *Suffering*. In Scripture, suffering is closely linked with death, and indeed can include death as in Luke 24:46: “Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and rise again from the dead the third day”. Here “suffer” is used instead of “die” because it is used as a comprehensive term that includes death. Hence we can expect to see “with Christ” in relation to suffering as in Romans 8:17: “*if indeed we suffer with him*”.

(2) *Glorified with Christ at the resurrection on account of suffering with him in the present*. Suffering with him is not something that we endure in vain, for it leads to being glorified with him. As God’s children we are “fellow heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him” (Rom.8:17). Here “glorified with him” refers to a time after the Lord’s return when we

enter into our inheritance at the resurrection. This is also seen in Rom. 6:8 and Phil.1:23. Hence “with Christ” is also used when speaking of the glorious things awaiting us when we meet with him “face to face” (1Cor.13:12).

(3) *A foretaste of resurrection power in the present.* In Christ, death is overcome by his redemptive and triumphant life. If we are walking with Christ, we would already have a foretaste of the glorious future resurrection life. Though this foretaste is never itself described as a spiritual resurrection, Paul does say that we now “walk in newness of life” (Rom. 6:4). This foretaste of the resurrection is what Paul expresses by the word *suzōopoiēō* (συζωποιέω) which means “made alive together with”. This word occurs only twice in the New Testament: In Ephesians 2:5 in reference to our being saved by grace, and in Colossians 2:13. In both cases, the word refers to the resurrection of Christ, the power of which we now experience in our new life in Christ.

Examples of “with Christ” in reference to the future resurrection are: 2Cor.13:4, “We shall live *with* him because of the power of God toward you”; 2Tim.2:11, “For if we died *with* him, we shall also live *with* him”; and 1Thess.5:10, our Lord Jesus “who died for us, that whether we are awake or asleep [metonym for ‘alive or dead’], we may live together *with him*.”

Summary and conclusion

As a general rule, “in Christ” is used of our *present* living relationship with our risen Lord. But because this living relationship begins at our dying with him at baptism and continues until we meet him face to face, it applies to every present moment and extends from the past to the future. Even so, *its emphasis is always on the present*. On the other hand, “with Christ” is used with reference to:

1. Our death with Christ at baptism
2. Our suffering with him and our receiving, in the present time, a foretaste of his resurrection power
3. The time when the Lord will come again for his redeemed ones and “we will be with the Lord forever” (1Thess.4:17).

Therefore, “with Christ” can apply to *past, present, and future*. We are both in him and with him. His presence is both in us and with us. There is both union and communion.



PERFECTION AS AN ATTITUDE OF GIVING

Regeneration (the new birth), then renewal

Regeneration—the new birth—is the starting point of the new life in Christ. We formerly lived a life of sin that separated us from God, a life governed by the flesh and self-centeredness. But when we are born again, we enter a new life that is sustained by God’s power, and is centered on Yahweh our God.

After regeneration comes *renewal*, a lifelong process during which God transforms us progressively into the kind of person He wants us to be. Becoming a Christian is not the end but only the beginning of God’s plan for us. The potential beauty of a renewed person is something wonderful to think about.

In the process of renewal, God will keep on transforming us into the beauty of Christ which far exceeds the beauty

crafted by a plastic surgeon even if he gives you a movie-star look. God does not concern Himself with superficial appearances; He changes us inwardly until Christ's beauty radiates from us. God renews us progressively until the full perfection of Christ is seen in us on that Day when we stand in His presence. What a community of beautiful people we will be!

Physical beauty fades and withers like a flower. With the passing of time, the physical vitality and exuberance of youth declines; white hair emerges and wrinkles are etched across the face. But when God adorns us with spiritual beauty, *it gets better with time*. Has it ever been possible for a person to get more and more beautiful right up to the end? That is entirely possible if we let God get on with His work of renewing and beautifying us.

Seeing a person in the first year of his Christian life, and then later in the fifth year, we often say to ourselves, "That's an impressive transformation over five years." The person becomes more beautiful as he walks with Yahweh God. When God beautifies a person, He does something no plastic surgeon can do. The plastic surgeon's handiwork will deteriorate within a short time, but God's masterpiece will shine brighter and brighter until that perfect day.

Justification, sanctification, glorification

In summary, *regeneration* is the starting point of the Christian life. This sets in motion the process of *renewal*, which is God's work of making us ever more like Christ, conforming us to Christ's perfect image and beauty. When that beauty reaches its final *perfection*, we will have arrived at glorification. For those who like theological terms, there is a three-fold equivalence:

Regeneration = Justification

Renewal = Sanctification

Perfection = Glorification

There you have it: *justification, sanctification, and glorification*—the three stages of salvation. Although theological categorization has its dangers and limitations, there is didactic value to it if used carefully. The first stage is regeneration or justification, by which we become Christians. But it does not stop there. The second stage is renewal, a program of sanctification and beautification. The third stage is final perfection or glorification, to which we are heading.

Die with Christ, Live In Christ, Reign with Christ

Equivalently, Scripture describes the three stages (past, present, and future) in the following terms: we died with Christ, we live with Christ, we will reign with Christ. A verse that mentions all three is 2Timothy 2:11-12:

Here is a trustworthy saying, “If we died with him, we will also live with him; if we endure, we will also reign with him”.

At baptism we *die with Christ*. If we have died with Christ, we are now *in him* and live *with him*. This second stage is *renewal*. In the third stage—final perfection or glorification—*we reign with him*.

Before we can reign with Christ, we must first reach perfection, because the Lord won’t allow anyone to reign with him who is not like him. If we reign on his behalf but without his mind and character, we would misrepresent him and become petty dictators. Even now, some church leaders feel self-important when their churches get bigger, and begin to throw their weight around. No one should assume authority in the church of God who is not Christ-like or who is unwilling to be a servant. “The Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many” (Mark 10:45).

The three interrelated aspects of salvation

Regeneration, renewal and perfection are the three interrelated aspects of salvation. We cannot be perfect or Christ-like unless we are being renewed, and we cannot be renewed unless we have been regenerated. These three form a succession in the process of salvation.

Every Christian who is being renewed will model his life on Christ’s life. It is possible to “believe” in Christ in some

vague sense without following him, but the reverse is impossible, that is, we cannot possibly follow Christ unless we have true faith in him. True faith is not just believing in certain Christian truths. The demons believe yet tremble (James 2:19). It is possible to “believe” in some sense without obeying the call to follow Christ.

Since regeneration is the first stage of salvation, we need to have some degree of certainty that we have truly been regenerated. Let us now consider the main evidences of regeneration as taught in Scripture, with specific focus on God’s self-giving character.

Five evidences of regeneration

(1) Freed from the power of sin

How can we be *assured* that we are regenerate? There is true assurance and false assurance. Many Christians base their hopes on a false assurance. Many are uncertain if they are regenerate: “I don’t know if I am regenerate or not. Am I born again? Am I a true Christian?” How long can you continue in the Christian life without knowing the answers to these questions?

Let us begin with the non-Christian’s situation because we all know what it is like to be a non-Christian. The non-Christian life is well described by Paul in Romans 7:19f: In his non-Christian days, Paul couldn’t do the good he wanted to do, but did the evil he didn’t want to do.

We are familiar with the making of New Year's resolutions. You aim to achieve certain things and refrain from others. But before long and to your great disappointment, you fail to fulfill the resolutions. The problem is not with your intention. You sincerely want to fulfill your resolutions, but you are unable to.

As a non-Christian, you soon realize that you are powerless to live the righteous life. A common solution to the problem is to lower the moral standard to such an extent that anyone can fulfill it. But even with the lower standard, you are amazed at how hard it is to do a few good deeds. Your sinful inclination is so strong that you cannot break its grip. It controls you so firmly that you cry out, "Why can't I do the good that I want to do?"

The first evidence of regeneration is this: *You have been freed from the grip and the control of sin.* Whether you are born again can be seen by whether you can do the good you want to do. And thanks be to God, when you died with Christ at regeneration, you were freed from sin. Romans 6:7 says, "He who has died is freed from sin." This principle permeates all of Romans 6, which teaches that we are no longer under the dominion of sin. Slaves of sin no longer, we are now free to do what is good.

If the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed (John 8:36). If you lack the power to live righteously, it means you haven't been born anew or freed from sin, and Romans 6 is not part of your experience. Christians of this type won't survive for long because sooner or later they will say that

Christianity doesn't work. In a sense they are right, for you cannot live the true Christian life just by getting baptized or accepting certain doctrines. You have not yielded your life to Christ, nor accepted his absolute lordship in your life. Spiritually and morally, a life of sin is an ugly life. When has a selfish person ever been beautiful? "I want this, I want that!" But a person becomes beautiful when God so changes him that his life goes out to others. If your life has been freed from self-centeredness, then you are born anew, the sure evidence of regeneration.

(2) Aiming for practical perfection

We return to Matthew 5:48 ("you therefore must be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect") which we have already studied, but now from a practical angle. It is vital for our spiritual growth to see that Biblical perfection is not an airy-fairy ideal but is something that has to do with the way we live.

Jesus *commands* us to be perfect as God is perfect. What does "perfect" mean here? A basic principle of biblical interpretation is to study a passage in its context. Jesus uses the word "therefore," which indicates a link to the preceding verses. Let us therefore read the section immediately preceding it, namely, verses 43-47:

You have heard that it was said, "You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy." But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, in order that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven; for He

causes His sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. For if you love those who love you, what reward have you? Do not even the tax-gatherers do the same? And if you greet your brothers only, what do you do more than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? (Matthew 5:43-47)

Our heavenly Father is generous to all humankind, and this gives us a clue as to the nature of His perfection. Let us now read the other side of the context, namely, the verses immediately after Matthew 5:48:

Beware of practicing your righteousness before men in order to be noticed by them; otherwise you will have no reward with your Father who is in heaven. When therefore you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may be honored by men. Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full. But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing that your alms may be in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will repay you. (Matthew 6:1-4)

The whole context, whether the preceding context or the succeeding context, speaks about *gracious giving without desiring earthly reward or recognition*. This is important for understanding the statement, “You, therefore, must be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect”.

(3) Give expecting nothing in return

To understand Jesus' statement, let us look at another passage, Luke 14:12-14, which teaches the same principle. Here Jesus tells a man who had invited him for a meal not to look for earthly repayment, but for a future repayment of eternal value:

And he also went on to say to the one who had invited him, "When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, lest they also invite you in return, and repayment come to you. But when you give a reception, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed, since they do not have the means to repay you; for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous." (Luke 14:12-14)

Note the words, "they do not have the means to repay you," and "you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous." What is the Lord saying? He is telling us to give, seeking nothing in return. Don't invite your rich friends because if you do, they will invite you to an even more sumptuous meal than the one you gave them. Not only will you get back what you gave, you will receive more than you gave, and will be in their debt. For a \$20 lunch you get a \$100 dinner in return, which is a good return on investment. In the world we make friends with those who give us a good return on our investment. We make friends in the right places and pull the right strings.

But the Lord's teaching is contrary to worldly thinking. When you make an investment, seek no financial return from it. Try telling that to the businessmen's club or an MBA class! It makes business sense to invite the bank manager, the airline executive, or the vice-president of a company. You invite them to a banquet and lavish your generosity on them, and in due course they will return it to you with interest. Worldly logic makes perfect business sense.

But who does the Lord tell you to invite? The poor, the maimed, the lame, the blind! Your nice house will be crammed with "uncultured" people who will bring fleas to your carpets and filth to your sofas. "Lord, don't you know how much it costs to clean the carpets and the furniture? Why do you ask me to invite a bunch of down-and-outs?"

The Lord is laying down a vital principle for us: The true Christian life is marked by a constant giving that seeks nothing in return. Isn't that remarkable? Have you ever heard a sermon on this topic? Some people may even warn us: "We may end up bankrupt and be accused of teaching salvation by works."

On the contrary, this is salvation by grace, because we cannot fulfill this teaching without God's grace. Would you allow your house to be filled with people who, for lack of shower facilities, want to dive into your bathtub? Can you endure seeing the clean towels reduced to filthy rags? We don't normally encounter this kind of scenario in Canada, a rich country in which the blind and the lame are few, and

are taken care of through government assistance. But wait till you go to third-world countries. Then you will say, “Lord, your teaching cannot be right. It must be hyperbolic!”

(4) Imitating Jesus who gave freely, seeking nothing in return

What is Jesus telling us about inviting the poor and the blind? Nothing he says is trivial, redundant, or in jest. He is bringing out a vital principle of the new life which we received at our new birth. And what is that principle? It is that God is always giving, even to the highest extent of giving His only begotten Son. The children of God, because they bear His likeness, will imitate their Father.

The other aspect of this principle is that God gives freely without seeking something back from us. In our carnal thinking, we assume that God thinks in the way we think, and that He gives in order to get a return on investment. But God is all-sufficient and needs nothing from us that we can supply. And from our perspective, we have no need that He cannot supply.

If in giving we seek something in return, it is evident that our giving does not come from a pure love, but that there is a self-seeking element in our giving. Any trace of self-seeking in our love means that our love is not pure or self-giving. Yet in our self-centered thinking, we project this kind of devalued love onto God.

One might argue, “Yes, Jesus did give himself for us on the cross, but doesn’t he also demand that we give ourselves to him? He gives everything, but he also wants everything!” That may be a crushing argument, but on further thought, perhaps not.

It takes only a few questions to dismantle this argument. What do we gain from Jesus’ sacrifice on the cross? The answer is that we gain everything, including eternal life. And what does Jesus gain from *our* taking up our own cross? Is it sufficient to say that he gains us as his disciples? Is our giving “everything” (whatever it may be) really equivalent to his giving everything for us?

Everything that Jesus gave us and did for us was—and still is—for our benefit. It was never in his mind to benefit himself. And the same with the Father. Jesus succinctly described God’s benevolence to us in the words, “Freely you received” (Mt.10:8). Jesus, like his Father, gave freely without any thought of getting something in return. That is why he expects his disciples to do the same: “Freely give” (10:8).

(5) The regenerate gives, the unregenerate takes

This vital principle—“Freely you received, freely give”—is elaborated in Luke 14:12-14, quoted earlier about inviting the poor, the lame, and the blind. This principle will tell us whether we are regenerate or not by whether we want to give or to take.

The unregenerate man resists Jesus' teaching because it is against his nature. Jesus' teaching is hard to swallow because our self-seeking nature cannot cope with the "give all" way of life. Giving without seeking something in return is, to our human nature, impractical nonsense. Only when we are born anew and see God's kingdom do we see that "our sufficiency is of God" (2Cor.3:5), the One who abundantly provides for our every need. As we freely receive, we freely give. And the more we give, the more we receive (Lk.6:38).

If Christians reject Jesus' teaching as impractical, what will be the inescapable result? Christians will then think just like non-Christians, being just as greedy, just as self-centered, and just as keen in making friends in high places for personal gain. The difference between a Christian and a non-Christian is thus non-existent in practice.

Haven't we heard unbelievers say, "I'm just as good as Christians, maybe better"? And they are correct, for the churches are full of so-called Christians who reject the Lord's clear teaching and whom the Lord will not recognize on that Day. "Why do you call me, 'Lord, Lord', and do not do what I say?" (Luke 6:46)

Another objection: Don't the commandments show that the Lord wants something from us?

Regarding this verse, Luke 6:46, one might argue again, "Doesn't the fact that the Lord requires obedience to him show that he wants something from us? His love is not

selfless because he wants something.” This argument is forceful, but its force depends on the human presupposition on which it is based: When men issue commands, it serves the interests of those who issue them. The presupposition is that the Lord does things for the same reasons as we.

It shows that we don't understand God's character which is also displayed in Jesus Christ. Take for example the two great commands, loving God and loving the neighbor. Have we ever asked why the second commandment is attached inseparably to the first? Why didn't God say, "You shall love Me and absolutely no one else"? We might expect that kind of commandment from the One who alone is God of heaven and earth. Yet contrary to our expectations, He says in effect, "If you love Me with all your heart, you must love everyone else too." Thus the commandment, far from proving any selfishness in God, proves the exact opposite!

Even among human beings the giving of commands does not necessarily come from self-interest. A lifeguard who gives instructions to a person in danger of drowning is hardly motivated by any self-interest but only the safety of the one he is trying to save. A guide who is leading people out of a jungle or over a mountain pass will demand that they follow his every instruction. An army commander issues orders in order to gain victory in battle, one that he might not survive to see.

The union of our will with God's

There is another vital reason that obeying the commands is necessary for our eternal welfare: God's commands are the concrete expression of His will and character. In the act of obeying God's commands from the heart, our will becomes united with His. In this union of wills, there is a union of persons. In obeying Him we become one with Him (1Cor. 6:17). It is by our union with Him, from baptism onwards, that we are saved and transformed into the image of His Son. These three things—union, communion, transformation into Christ's image—correspond to regeneration, renewal, and perfection in terms of our relationship with God.

When we see God's love and selfless character in all that He does, does it not draw forth from our hearts praise and adoration for a God who is wonderful beyond what we can imagine?

Not superficial obedience but transformation of heart

The point in Luke 14:12-14 is not whether we invite the poor for dinner once in a while, and think that we have fulfilled his teaching. The matter is not so superficial. You and I might invite a few poor people to dinner, so we say to ourselves, "Good, we have fulfilled Jesus' teaching. Now let's clean up the place!"

We might do this occasionally and think that we have fulfilled his teaching, but the Lord goes much deeper than

that. The plastic surgeon deals with outward appearance, but God deals with the heart. He is not mainly interested in whether we have invited a few people for dinner. That we can do from time to time. God is interested in the transformation of our hearts and a lasting change in our attitude. He doesn't want us to deceive ourselves by covering our carnality with a few good deeds. He looks into the heart to see if there is an inner attitude of giving that seeks nothing in return. This further elucidates the meaning and content of Jesus' call to perfection, which is to become like God his Father.

God's generous nature

God gives unceasingly, but what does He get in return? What have we given Him today? Five dollars in the offering box? Even if we put in a hundred dollars, does God gain any benefit from it? Does God need our money?

What does God gain when we acknowledge His kindness? A sense of satisfaction from our thanksgiving? There is of course no reason to doubt that our thanksgiving, feeble though it may be, is pleasing to Him. But we must not turn the matter upside down, and think that He showed us His kindness with the goal of gaining thanksgiving. And how often have we remembered to thank Him at all? Is a mere "thank you" sufficient recompense to God?

Yet God continues to give freely. He causes the rain to fall on the good and the evil (Mt.5:45). While the good

scarcely remember to offer their thanks, the evil do not thank Him at all. Yet God gives them rain and sunshine for their crops, sustaining their lives. He is always generous yet receives almost nothing in return. If He gave with the aim of receiving an adequate return, then He miscalculated the situation. But God makes no mistakes. It is out of His love that He gives without any self-serving motive.

It does not mean that expressing gratitude is unnecessary just because He was not motivated by the desire for thanksgiving. This way of thinking would be perverse. We have the perverse tendency to project our human motives onto God, which negatively affects the way we think about God and the way we relate to Him. We must get it in our hearts and minds that God was not motivated by any desire to gain something for Himself when He paid the huge price of saving us from eternal condemnation. His love is absolutely pure.

The selfless character of God, Lord of all

One might still ask, “Doesn’t Scripture say that God redeemed us and bought us with a price so that we are no longer our own but belong to Him as His possession? In redeeming us, didn’t He gain us for Himself?” That is partly correct, but what is the implication? That God redeemed us for His own benefit? Or partly for His benefit and partly for ours?

Is humankind not God's possession in the first place? We belong to Him because we are His creatures and owe our existence to Him. By the blood of His Son, He purchased back from the grip of sin what was His own, for we had taken the liberty to sell ourselves into bondage to sin. God got back by redemption what was His by creation. Our sins made Him pay for what belonged to Him in the first place. He did not gain but regained what rightfully belonged to Him from the start.

When talking about the things which belong to God, we must not pollute the matter by reading our carnal thinking into God's way of thinking. God has none of the selfish possessiveness that characterizes the way we exercise authority over others.

God's exercise of His lordship over His people is so different from our human ways that it is hard for us to comprehend it. The vast difference between God's way and man's way is exemplified by His Son Jesus Christ who washed the feet of his disciples (Jn.13:1-17).

Many Christian see this a model of serving others, but the matter goes deeper than that. The emphasis is not mainly on the serving, but the *attitude* of serving, namely, the attitude of *self-forgetful* serving with its focus on caring for the other person. Jesus as Lord does not need to wash his disciples' feet, but he cares that they remain clean (here the physical symbolizes the spiritual). His lordship stems from his self-forgetful care for his people.⁸ It is a reflection of his

⁸ It is in this light that Matthew 20:27 ("whoever wants to be first

Father's self-giving love for His people that is free of self-interest.

Learning to give as God gives

When we give to others especially the needy, have we really done anything meritorious? Are we not merely giving what God had given us in the first place? If He takes away our money, our health, and even our lives, we would have nothing left to give. So when we give, we don't let the left hand know what the right hand is doing. Give and forget, expecting nothing in return, is God's attitude. But no one can do this consistently who has not been born anew.

What we are talking about is not something airy-fairy, but is practical, down to earth, and connected to daily life. You cook up a nice meal for your roommate, and he gobbles it down without noticing that you had labored an hour in the kitchen. "How insensitive! He could have at least said a word of appreciation."

The point about gratitude is valid. I am not justifying ingratitude. I am talking about our inner attitude in doing things. If we had, in the first place, cooked the meal as a service to the Lord, seeking no reward from man, then any thank-you would have been a bonus. Even if no one thanks you, God Himself will reward you. In fact, receiving a thank-you may work to your disadvantage. If someone

among you must be your slave") is properly understood, while also providing a comment on John 13:1-17.

acknowledges your work and generosity, you have already received your reward, and no further reward will be expected from God. If someone is about to say thank-you at the dinner table, it may be better to cry out, “Stop! Don’t say that word! I’m going to lose my reward!”

We are, of course, being humorous. Yet it takes us to the heart of why Jesus tells us not to look for earthly reward: It is so that we may seek that which is eternal, a reward from God that endures forever. He teaches us to think spiritually, to exchange the earthly for the heavenly, to give away transient things to obtain eternal things. Paul lived according to its spiritual principle. Regarding earthly values and transient gain, he said, “I ... count them but rubbish in order that I may gain Christ” (Phil.3:8).

Who governs our lives, God or others?

We tend to feel insulted when our hard work is not appreciated by others. It shows us why renewal is important. We cannot remain at the stage of rebirth; our mind has to be renewed. Renewal is a new way of thinking that focuses on God and conforms to His way of thinking. This God-centered way of thinking frees us from being affected by other people or by our circumstances.

“If the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.” If everything we do is for the Lord, even cooking or washing, would we feel upset if people don’t remember to thank us for it? If I feel hurt when others fail to thank me, and happy

when they do, then my life is being controlled by them. If our minds are not focused on God, if our lives are not God-centered, if our deeds are not done for Him, then we will be governed by other people, who will make us happy or sad. God has called us to freedom. If I live for God, I won't be affected by what others say or do.

If we love our enemy, he wouldn't be able to govern our feelings. If he slaps you on the face, will you be miserable for years to come, unable to forget the hurt? Will you allow your enemy to be your lord and boss who makes you feel miserable long after the event? If you are a victorious follower of Jesus, the enemy cannot control you. When he slaps you on the face, you will continue to show him God's love. He slaps you more, and you love him even more, until he goes down on his knees and surrenders to God's love. He doesn't determine your life, you determine his. That is the power of Christ-likeness and freedom from the self. People may hit you or even kill you (Mt.10:28), but they cannot do anything to impair the quality of your life.

This kind of freedom does not mean that we become insensitive to other people's actions. Out of love and concern for others, we feel for them, both their joys and their grief. It is to say, rather, that we are free in the sense that our lives are not controlled by what people do or say.

No one determines God. If anyone blasphemes God, it is that blasphemer who will suffer in the end, not God. If we refuse to believe in God, He loses nothing. We are the ones who will end up losing eternal life. Whether we believe that

God is real or not does not change the fact of His reality. The moon doesn't disappear just because someone refuses to believe in its existence.

A true Christian lives wholly under God's authority and by His power, and is free in every situation. He is the truly free man. Have you experienced the freedom of regeneration, renewal, and Christ-likeness? If we give without seeking anything in return, we are truly free, and God will be glorified in us.

Chapter 21



MADE PERFECT THROUGH SUFFERING

The problem of suffering

Suffering, pain and death are among the most difficult problems in philosophy. Philosophers are forever wrestling with the question of suffering, yet its answer remains elusive. Why is there so much suffering in the world? What is the meaning of suffering, if it has any meaning at all? Many philosophers who have wrestled with this problem have found no meaning in suffering.

Yet we see the reality of suffering every day, whether reported in the newspapers or experienced by people we know personally. Or even in a dead bird. We feel a twinge of pain and sorrow over an innocent bird that could have sung so sweetly in the trees and hopped so cheerfully on the

grass. It now lies dead, never again to enjoy the warmth of the sunshine, the fragrance of the flowers, or the gentleness of the breeze.

I mention a dead bird because just the other day we found two baby birds in the garden, one dead and the other alive. The living bird was injured, having fallen from a tree, so we took it in and nursed it. To our joy it recovered. It recognized us, and would chirp merrily whenever it saw us. When it had grown big enough to care for itself, we released it to fly away into the open field. But the other bird was dead. When we watched the mother bird gazing at her dead chick, we were wondering how she felt.

Suffering in human relationships

Suffering is not only about a horrific car accident or a death in the family. The scope of suffering is much wider than that. It is the emotional and physical pain of one kind or another, whether great or small, which is an inalienable reality of life in this world. In a world in which sin reigns, suffering is woven into the fabric of daily life.

Do you not suffer when someone speaks unkindly to you? In all likelihood, you suffer for one reason or another every day. Perhaps someone in your household was inconsiderate to you, or misunderstood you, or said something that humiliated you in front of others.

Suffering is a daily experience that, for the most part, involves human relationships. It usually arises when people

rub shoulders in the wrong way, perhaps at home, at school, or at work. People are a common source of suffering and unhappiness, so much so that many prefer to run away and be left alone. But that might not solve the problem either because there would then be the problem of loneliness. With no one to talk to, or to share one's difficulties with, running away may not be a solution. But neither is staying put. Either way, pain and suffering seem to be inescapable.

Many have tried to arrive at an explanation for the existence of suffering. Is suffering meaningless? If not, what meaning does it have?

Made perfect through Christ's sufferings

It is in relation to salvation and perfection that the meaning of suffering begins to emerge. In the pursuit of perfection we cannot escape from the reality of pain and sorrow. In the first place, we are perfected—cleansed from sin—through the suffering and death of Christ (Heb.10:14). If suffering has any meaning at all, surely it is seen in the person of Christ and his saving work for mankind. For that reason we cannot be Christians without believing that suffering has some value, meaning, and purpose.

We can point to the cross of Christ in support of the statement that suffering has value. The cross helps us to see that because Christ suffered to redeem us, suffering is the most meaningful thing for the Christian life. That is an astonishing assertion to make, but it finds full confirmation

in Scripture. While to the non-Christian suffering is an unnecessary and meaningless intrusion in life, to the Christian it is supremely meaningful because we were redeemed through Christ's suffering and death. We are thereby perfected, cleansed from sin, and freed from its power.

Perfected through suffering

Not only is suffering of the greatest significance for us because of what Christ Jesus accomplished for us on the cross, suffering is supremely meaningful because *it is the means by which we are brought to spiritual perfection in Christ*. It is of the greatest importance for our spiritual lives that we grasp this remarkable truth. We will confirm it from Scripture since our aim is not to purvey our own opinions. Hebrews 2:10, a verse whose importance can hardly be exaggerated, says:

In bringing many sons to glory, it was fitting that God, for whom and through whom everything exists, should *make the author of their salvation perfect through suffering*. (Hebrews 2:10, NIV, italics added)

Who is this author of our salvation but Jesus Christ? Yet God had to make him *perfect through suffering*. Think about it. If it were possible for Jesus to be perfect without suffering, what would be the point of subjecting him to suffering? If anyone in the world could be perfected without suffering, surely it would be Jesus Christ.

Note what this verse does not say; it does not say anything about Jesus' suffering for the purpose of redeeming us. What this verse does say is that he suffered in order that *he himself* may be perfected! Only when he is made perfect can he die on the cross for us and become the author of our salvation.

This astonishing fact is hard for us to grasp. The very begotten Son of God, Jesus Christ, had to be “made perfect” through the only means possible: *suffering*. In no vague or uncertain terms, Scripture affirms that God made Jesus perfect through suffering. This is stated again in Hebrews 5:8-9:

Although he was a Son, he learned obedience from what he suffered and, once made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him.

We can meditate on these remarkable statements over and over without exhausting their depth. Jesus is the Son of God, yet he “learned obedience” through suffering, and was thereby “made perfect”. How much more, then, do *we* need to be perfected through suffering?

Four things are linked here: learning, obedience, suffering, and perfection. Jesus *learned obedience* through *suffering*, and was made *perfect* by it. Then, having been made perfect, he became the author of salvation to all who, in following him, are learning obedience through suffering.

Let this fact sink into our hearts: Even Jesus Christ, the Son of God, Lord of lords and King of kings (Rev.17:14), had to learn obedience through suffering in order to become

perfect. Why did he need to “learn obedience”? The Lord learned obedience for our sake, and it evinces the *utter selflessness* of his character.

Not all suffering is related to sin

It is crucial to appreciate the value of suffering because only then will we have a safeguard against falling away. Many Christians have fallen away from Christ because of bitter resentment over suffering. Finding no meaning in suffering, they wonder why they have to suffer at all. In the minds of most people, suffering is an unfortunate and unnecessary misfortune that has befallen humankind.

The situation is not helped by those Christians who teach that *all suffering is caused by sin*. By this reasoning, because sin is to be abhorred, so is suffering. This equating of sin with suffering and vice versa is utterly erroneous. Jesus was sinless but that did not prevent him from suffering. It was precisely because he was without sin that he suffered more intensely than those accustomed to sinning. The sufferings which Christ endured for our sake show that suffering has value and meaning quite apart from sin.

Moreover, suffering is not always necessarily due to sin. In your household, why do misunderstandings arise that create so much anguish and suffering? The problem is often due to character differences or different ways of doing things. The husband has one way of doing things, the wife has another, and a third person yet another. It is often not a

matter of who is right and who is wrong. The clash of characters is a major cause of everyday unhappiness.

Can we pin the blame on sin for this kind of suffering? Is it a sin for us to have different characters and different ways of doing things? Does the other party not have a right to be different from us in character and personality? We like to think, “My character is the norm of civilized behavior. If you had a personality like mine, there would be no misunderstandings.” The other person thinks in the same way: “My way is right and yours is wrong.” Insisting on our own way often leads to sin, but disagreement is not necessarily sinful in itself.

Who is right and who is wrong? It is a fact of life that problems do arise over differences in ways of thinking. Everyone who is married, or who has a family, or who shares an apartment, is aware of this. It is not always a matter of sin but of personality and looking at things from different perspectives. Such differences need not always be a cause of friction but often they are, because we are not yet fully perfected. But even in our imperfect state, God can use our differences to balance one another, and bring forth beneficial results. It is by no means always a question of who is right and who is wrong.

1. Paul and Barnabas

It is possible that both parties are right. The Bible tells of a conflict between Paul and Barnabas, two great servants of God. They parted company because they disagreed

vehemently over what to do about Mark. Paul did not want to take Mark on a missionary journey because of what he had done in a previous journey: for some (unknown) reason Mark had decided to leave Paul and Barnabas and go home (Acts 15:37-40). In Paul's mind, anyone who serves the Lord like that is unfit for God's work. We can imagine Paul saying to Mark, "If you want to go, just go; but don't come back, because you are unfit in your present state to serve the Lord."

But Barnabas, whose name means "Son of Consolation," was lenient on the young man. We can imagine him saying to Paul, "Mark does have his weaknesses (and who doesn't?), so perhaps he left the last time because he was a bit homesick, having been away for some time. It was not because he didn't want to serve the Lord." There was another possible reason for Barnabas' concern for Mark: Mark was his cousin (Col.4:10).

Who is right and who is wrong? If we see the one as right and the other as wrong, we are making a fundamental mistake because *both were right* in what they did. The fact that Paul and Barnabas did what was right according to their respective characters was a saving factor for Mark. Mark was rebuked by Paul and consoled by Barnabas, and he needed both.

It was a saving factor for Mark that he received both rebuke and consolation, as can be discerned from the fact that he later came back to God's work and wrote a gospel that stands before us, the Gospel according to Mark. The character difference between Paul and Barnabas was

necessary for Mark's spiritual survival and growth. In a sense Paul was a father to Mark, and Barnabas a mother. Paul punished Mark, but Barnabas wiped the tears. Both were necessary for Mark.

To argue over who was right and who was wrong is to show a lack of spiritual insight. Some criticize Paul for being too harsh, or Barnabas for being too sentimental. We would be wise to refrain from this kind of speculative judgment. The fact is that God used both Paul and Barnabas to bring a great blessing to Mark, who eventually became an effective worker for Him and His church.

The character differences between Paul and Barnabas led to great suffering—the suffering of separation. The suffering was not the result of any specific sin in either Paul or Barnabas, yet it was deep and protracted. There is no record in subsequent history that Paul and Barnabas ever had an occasion to cowork again. But this does not mean that they harbored any ill will against each other. It is more likely that they recognized that their styles differed to the extent that it was best for both parties not to cowork together.

Mark later came back to cowork *with Paul* as a faithful servant of God (2Tim.4:11). He had by then learned his lesson. By this time, perhaps Barnabas had died. The fact that Scripture never mentions a subsequent reunion of Paul and Barnabas cannot be taken to mean that they were never reconciled. The fact that Mark later served with Paul provides evidence to the contrary.

2. Suffering can be caused by love, not sin

The point that we need to drive home is that sin and suffering are not necessarily causally linked. If one day we bid farewell to loved ones, do we not suffer? Of course we do. That kind of suffering has nothing to do with sin. On the contrary, there is suffering because there is true love. The pain of separation is caused by love, not sin. It is painful to bid farewell to those who are dear to us. On the other hand, if there is no mutual love, we would say, or think, “Are you leaving? Good riddance! How quickly can you go?”

We need to dispel the deeply rooted notion that sin and suffering are always connected. It is true that they are often linked, but not always. *Sin and suffering are neither intrinsically nor inseparably linked* (see the Appended Note at the end of this chapter).

This is a central message of the book of Job. Job’s friends held to the notion that all suffering is caused by sin. When great calamities fell upon Job, they immediately assumed that he was guilty of heinous sins, and pressured him to repent in dust and ashes. When Job protested his innocence, he was sternly reprimanded.

As a result, Job in his intense anguish was driven to despair. His once firm faith in God was shaken to its foundations. This goes to show just how dangerous the linking of sin and suffering is. It can, and has, destroyed the faith of some people.

3. The notion that all sickness is caused by sin

There are not lacking among Christians those who fail to understand the message of Job. The same erroneous linking of sin and suffering lies behind the notion of many charismatics who claim that it is not God's will that believers should suffer from physical ailments. Their whole healing ministry is based on this assumption. God's will, as taught by them, is that we should all have health and prosperity.

A well-known charismatic church leader whom I knew personally in England, when he was dying of cancer, was apparently in a state of near despair, not for fear of physical pain but the fear of having been rejected by God, because God did not answer the many prayers for his healing. He was barely fifty years of age. This also brought turmoil to the churches and the Christians associated with him. When they saw that it is not always God's will to heal pain and suffering, the erroneous foundation on which they stood began to crumble beneath their feet.

We should now be able to see how far-reaching the consequences of this error are, and to see the error of ignoring the Lord's call for us to take up the cross.

4. God Himself suffers because of love for us

God Himself suffers profoundly even though He does not sin. He suffers because of *our* sins, but that is so only because of His love for us. "And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption"

(Eph.4:30). The more you love a person, the more you suffer.

We can now better understand Isaiah 63:9 which speaks of Yahweh God in relation to Israel: “In all their afflictions He was afflicted ... in His love and in His mercy He redeemed them.” Significantly, the next verse (v.10) says, “But they rebelled and *grieved* His Holy Spirit,” which is precisely what Ephesians 4:30, just quoted, cautions against.

Suffering has profound meaning

You may still be unconvinced that suffering has any value at all. But the Biblical truth is that *suffering is essential for spiritual perfection*. We must grasp this principle so that we won't feel bitter or indignant when suffering comes. Far from feeling bitter, Paul says, “I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake” (Col.1:24). Do we rejoice in suffering? That would be impossible unless we see its profound value and meaning.

We no longer understand the meaning of suffering today, nor do we rejoice in suffering. We only know how to rejoice in good and rosy circumstances.

I wish that someone would teach young Christians the great value of suffering. Then they will learn to accept suffering joyfully, as did the apostle Paul. But when we are taught to believe that all suffering is caused by sin, we inevitably harbor a negative view of suffering. It is right to

hate sin, but tying all suffering to sin results in hating suffering as well, and that is a grave mistake.

Sin is evil, but suffering can be good (depending on our attitude to it). Sin brings pain and suffering, but suffering can teach us to be righteous and perfect. In God's wisdom, suffering can serve as an antidote and deterrent to sin.

But having some discernment of good and evil doesn't mean that we understand all there is to the meaning and purpose of suffering, for our knowledge is still imperfect at this time (1Cor.13:12). Some types of suffering will always seem to our limited understanding to be quite incomprehensible, especially the suffering of the innocent, and particularly when we consider ourselves innocent. Being unable to understand suffering is itself a form of suffering. What we know from Scripture is that to indiscriminately lump all suffering together with sin is a failure to distinguish between good and evil.

We may be left wondering what sins we have committed to deserve suffering. This situation can be dangerous because it can lead to resentment against God for being supposedly unjust, especially when we, like Job, are unaware of having committed any particular sin for which we seem to be punished.

1. A clearer understanding of its value

Scripture teaches that the relationship between suffering and sin cannot, and must not, be simplistically asserted in this form: *suffering is always due to sin*. The matter is much more

complex than that. For the sake of clarity we use the following itemization:

(1) I suffer ⁹ because I have sinned. The Holy Spirit convicts me of my sin, and God as a loving Father disciplines me for my good (Heb. 12:5,6). Suffering, in this case, is a call to repentance.

(2) I suffer not because I committed any sin but because somebody sinned against me. Suffering of this kind gives me the opportunity to learn to forgive, even as I myself have received forgiveness.

(3) I suffer because the thinking of the other person is entirely different from mine. This results in pain on both sides, though neither party has sinned (as in the case of Paul and Barnabas). In this situation, I evaluate whether my standpoint is valid before God. I bear in mind that even if my standpoint is right from my own perspective, that does not necessarily mean that the other person is wrong. Thus I learn to be conciliatory even when it is not always possible to agree, and where the disagreement must stand, to nurture no bitterness or grudges.

(4) I suffer because of love for others. This causes me to be intensely concerned for them, suffering with those who suffer, weeping with those who weep (Rom.12:15), and sharing their burdens (Gal.6:2). Love is the cause of grief

⁹ In this and the following points the word “suffer” includes every kind of suffering, whether spiritual, mental, emotional, or physical.

when we have to part physically (e.g., Acts 20:37,38). Or, like Paul and other servants of God, enduring hardship and every form of suffering to bring the gospel to the whole world, and to build up the church of God (cf. the list of sufferings in 2Cor.11:23-28).

(5) I suffer because I love God, and gladly endure hardship and even die for His sake. This kind of suffering often cannot be totally separated from the previous kind (suffering because of love). Stephen is the first in a long line of those who suffered and died for the Lord they loved (Acts 7). Some martyrs suffered unspeakable tortures before they were killed, but would under no situation deny the Lord who loves them, and whom they love. It is often the case that *because* we love God, we also love people. In this case points (4) and (5) are interconnected.

There are many causes of suffering, and some of the most intense sufferings are not caused by sin. Whatever the cause, suffering is never meaningless or useless. *Pain and suffering have incalculable value in the process of our being conformed to Christ's image.* It is for this reason that suffering is indispensable, as can be seen from the fact that even the Son of God himself had to be perfected through it.

2. Every Christian is called to bear the cross of suffering

Brothers and sisters, we need to go deeper until we grasp the profound value of suffering, and be like Paul who *rejoices* in his sufferings for the sake of God's people (Col.1:24). We

must grasp this vital principle if we are to understand the heart of the gospel. The gospel that Jesus proclaimed is a gospel of suffering. If we are not ready to accept suffering, we are not ready to be Jesus' disciples.

The gospel that Jesus preached is different from what we often hear today. Too often the sales pitch of the gospel—in radio, television and literature—is that the gospel brings joy and comfort to your life, and abolishes every form of suffering. Don't believe that lie. The Lord Jesus preached just the opposite:

Then Jesus said to his disciples, "If anyone wishes to come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me. For whoever wishes to save his life shall lose it; but whoever loses his life for my sake shall find it. For what will a man be profited, if he gains the whole world, and forfeits his soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul?" (Matthew 16:24-26)

There is no more potent symbol of suffering than the cross. We are called to suffering just as we are called to perfection, and perfection comes through suffering.

The cross is the most painful and prolonged form of execution that man has ever devised. Other forms of execution are relatively quick. Execution by the sword takes one quick stroke, leaving you little time to feel the pain. A bullet to the head is a quick way to die.

But the cross is the most gruesome and protracted torture-execution that man has ever devised. The Romans used this form of punishment frequently. People are known

to have hung on the cross in excruciating torment for two or three days.

Jesus did not say, “If any man would come after me, let him accept the sentence of being shot or electrocuted.” We may be willing to die if not too much suffering is involved. Suffering is the most frightening aspect of dying, and if the suffering could be minimized or eliminated, death would be much easier to accept. But to our shock and dismay, the Lord speaks of bearing the cross.

We find ourselves saying to the Lord, “May I stand before a firing squad instead?” A firing squad of several marksmen will ensure a quick death, but Jesus calls us to the cross! So we start bargaining: “Lord, I want to follow you, but taking up the cross is a bit much. You really strike a hard bargain.”

We have read Jesus’ statement about bearing the cross many times, yet we close our eyes to its clear meaning. We see, yet do not see; hear, yet do not hear or understand (Mt.13:13).

Why does Jesus insist on the cross? Does he enjoy subjecting us to torture and death? No, it is not the Lord but the world who will crucify us. Jesus did not crucify himself; it was the Sanhedrin together with the Romans who crucified him. Likewise, when we are crucified, it is not the Lord but the world that inflicts the execution upon us.

In all this, we must not lose sight of the fact that in speaking of the cross Jesus *does not emphasize the physical aspect exclusively, or even primarily*. The call to take up the cross is above all the call to die to the old self and enter into

a new life of walking with Christ. Martyrdom is not ruled out, but if it is not accompanied by being born anew through the Holy Spirit, it would be an act of human heroism comparable to a soldier dying for his ideology or his country. Patriotism and heroism have their value, but these are not what Jesus calls us to.

We are called to break with the old life and be totally committed to God and His people, even if that leads to suffering comparable to that of crucifixion. As a form of execution, crucifixion is no longer practiced today, so Christians are no longer crucified. But even when it was practiced, Jesus did not mean that every Christian will inevitably be martyred by being hung on a literal cross.

In the history of the church, comparatively few Christians died by crucifixion. The apostle Peter is believed to have been one of them. Stephen the first martyr was stoned to death. Paul, a Roman citizen, was probably beheaded, for Roman law did not permit the crucifying of Roman citizens. So when Jesus spoke of the cross, it was meant above all to be taken on the *spiritual* level. We are called to follow in his footsteps first and foremost with our *hearts*.

Today's Gospel rejects suffering

But Jesus' call is rejected today. Many today preach a gospel of material prosperity and enjoyment, and freedom from every form of suffering, including poverty and illness. The other day I was listening to a television evangelist who was

saying that it is so wonderful to believe in God. Someone in that church, he told his viewers, believed in God, and as a result, when he wanted a nice car, even a specific make and model, guess what? The Lord of course gave him a luxury car of that make and model!

While the man who had received the car sat on the platform rejoicing over his good fortune, this evangelist continued: “When you pray, don’t just ask for a car. Tell God the exact model and color.”

God is there to do our bidding. To believe this is to have “faith,” according to this preacher. Believe that God will give you what you want and you will get it!

Excuse me for interrupting this utterly self-centered sales pitch, and let me ask, “Since when do we tell God to get us what *we* want, or give orders to the King of kings and Lord of lords?”

But let the television evangelist continue with his “gospel”: When you go into a restaurant, don’t order hamburgers. Hamburgers are for the poor, but we are the children of God. God is the great King and we are His children—we are the “King’s kids”—so order the finest filet mignon you can find.

I am not exaggerating what was said by the televangelist, whose name I will not mention. He has a regular audience of hundreds of thousands, and rakes in hundreds of millions of dollars a year through his television ministry. You cannot get your millions unless you preach a gospel of steak over hamburger, or a gospel of luxury cars.

This evangelist must have thought to himself, “Poor Jesus, the gospel he preached will barely get you hamburgers, more likely it will get you the cross!” If you preach a gospel of filet mignons and Rolls Royces, you will bring in the crowds and the money. But Jesus was not interested in money or pleasing the crowds.

While listening to the televangelist, I could hardly believe my ears. To confirm that I had heard him correctly, I listened attentively, and sure enough he was saying again and again, “This man asked for a luxury car, and God gave it to him!”

I was thinking, “Are you sure that it was God who gave it to him?” I know of someone who said to the Lord Jesus, “I will give you the glorious kingdoms of the world if you will just bow down to me” (Mt. 4:8-9). The televangelist’s message sounded uncannily like the words of Satan. It is Satan who will say, “I have the power to give you the kingdoms of the world, so what are filet mignons and luxury cars to me? They are included in this package called the world.” And wouldn’t Satan gladly endorse this preacher’s message, which is the opposite of Jesus’ teaching?

Which gospel are we preaching, the gospel of Jesus Christ or a different gospel (Gal.1:6-8)? Could the one who said, “Take up your cross and follow me,” be the one who said, “Come to me and I will give you a life of luxury”? Are we hearing the same voice? Jesus says, “My sheep know my voice” (Jn.10:27). Are we able to differentiate the Lord’s

voice from the chorus of voices offering the world to us? Can we distinguish good from evil?

The logic of rejecting suffering

The logic of rejecting suffering goes like this: If sin leads to suffering, and if sin is the sole cause of suffering, it follows that if we are saved from sin, we are also saved from suffering. That sounds logical, right? As Jesus saves us from sin, so he saves us from suffering. If sin and suffering are intrinsically and inseparably linked, then this conclusion would be correct and incontrovertible.

But it is an error of the first degree, based on a wrong presupposition. Sin and suffering, as we have seen, are not intrinsically linked. Yes, we do suffer because of sin, but we also suffer because of love and righteousness. Love makes us vulnerable to deep suffering, so much so that some people would rather not love. When you have a deep love for someone, you are vulnerable to pain and suffering.

I lost some sleep over a little bird I found in the garden because I was concerned for its survival (this is not the same bird as the one I mentioned earlier). I was telling myself, “Don’t be silly. There are more important things to care about than a tiny bird. When you’ve got churches to look after, who has time for a little bird?” That line of reasoning, however, could not keep my mind off the bird. I ended up telling myself, “Love is painful.” I lost some sleep over a tiny bird, trying to figure out how to get it back to its natural

habitat, and to help the mother bird find the baby so that it may teach it to live as a bird.

Was sin involved here? Of course not. I suffered only because I cared about the bird. How much greater, then, is the suffering that comes from love for a human being! And didn't Jesus tell his disciples that the Father cares about the sparrows? How much more will He care about His people? (Mt.10:29-31)

I was planning to settle the bird in a nest, but was concerned that the neighborhood cat may go after it. After surveying the trees, I came up with a few possibilities. Can I install a net around the tree to stop the cat from climbing it? I sprayed the trunk with anti-cat smell, but that did not deter the cat. Someone mentioned that cats generally do not climb fir trees, so I settled the bird on a fir tree. That solved the problem! Indeed the cat made no attempt to climb the tree.

The next problem was getting the bird back to its mother. There were so many things to figure out. What do we feed the bird with, and how often? Can it go through the night without food? While these things were going through my head, I was saying to myself, "Just go back to sleep. There are many more important things to care about." But I could not stop caring about the bird, and as a result I lost some sleep.

Don't be swayed by the notion that all suffering is related to sin. Sufferings, problems, and hardships provide love with opportunity. If there were no problems in the world, how would love get a chance to express itself? Love rejoices at the

chance to help. It does not complain about being obliged to help someone, or despise the one who is too weak to help himself. Love rejoices at the opportunity to love and to care. When you see someone struggling to carry a load, you being stronger are eager to carry it for him or her.

It is easy for us to grumble, “Why don’t people study the Bible for themselves so that I won’t have to spend time and effort teaching them the word of God?” The fact that they don’t know the Scriptures gives you an opportunity to serve them, even to the point of exhaustion. I have observed that brother Joe gets very tired after every Bible training session, yet he does not grumble, “Why am I the one doing this? Can’t they get someone else to teach them the Bible?” This exhaustion is not the result of sin but of love and a readiness to serve others.

The situations that give rise to suffering are those that give love an opportunity to love. Love would have no opportunity to express itself if adverse circumstances did not exist. If there were no occasion to give to the poor, would that be good? The selfish man thinks so, but love thinks differently. When there is a genuine need, financial or otherwise, love rejoices at the chance to help. When love is denied a chance to show practical concern, it is disappointed. If no one in the world ever gets thirsty, there would be no opportunity to give anyone a cup of cold water.

Two radically different gospels

Much of what is preached today is unashamedly egocentric with its constant stress on material and physical blessings. A gospel is being preached which promises that if you become a Christian, you will have no physical disabilities or financial problems. Or that if you are sick, God will heal you straightaway.

God may heal you, or He may defer the healing, or He might not heal you. His ways are not our ways, nor is His thinking our thinking (Isa.55:8). If even His only begotten Son was made perfect through suffering (Heb.2:10), would God not also perfect us through suffering?

It takes suffering to reach perfection because moral and spiritual perfection is not something that can be created just like that, with a snap of the fingers. If that were possible, then surely Jesus would have been born into the world as a perfect human being. Yet Scripture states plainly that he was perfected through a process of suffering. *Perfection on the spiritual level is attained, not created.* Perfection had to be accomplished in Jesus through suffering and obedience. If Jesus had been born perfect, God wouldn't have had to perfect him. The perfection of faithful obedience is learned, not created.

For the sake of our spiritual survival, we must distinguish two contradictory gospels. In these last days, it will become harder and harder to discern who is speaking the truth and who is speaking falsehood. Those who speak the truth will be maligned. It is always the case that those born according

to the flesh will persecute those born according to the Spirit (Gal.4:29). Those who reject suffering for themselves do not hesitate to impose it on others!

You need not be afraid when people speak evil of you, for that is part of the suffering to which we are called. Those who love the truth need not be afraid of affliction or vilification. As Jesus says in the Sermon on the Mount, *Rejoice when you are persecuted!* (Mt.5:11,12). To rejoice under such circumstances is contrary to our nature and way of thinking. The Lord does not say that we intentionally seek trouble. But when persecution comes upon us, we rejoice because the prophets were treated the same way (v.12). We are in the company of the perfect: God's people who see the value of suffering.

The false gospel rejects every form of suffering and is ambivalent towards holiness and righteousness. The gospel of Jesus Christ, by contrast, welcomes suffering for righteousness' sake. In fact we are called to suffer: "To you it has been granted for Christ's sake, not only to believe in him, but also to suffer for his sake" (Phil.1:29).

The two gospels differ in spirit, not in doctrine

These two gospels share the same basic dogma. Both affirm that Jesus died for our sins, that he rose from the dead, that he will come back to reign. These are the basic doctrines that we have in common in the Christian faith. Most of those

who preach a man-centered gospel of prosperity claim to accept these doctrines.

Where lies the difference? *It is a difference in spirit, not in dogma.* In basic doctrine there is general agreement. Paul himself shared the same doctrinal tenets with the Pharisees. He had no disagreements with them over basic dogma. Paul was a Pharisee himself, and remained a Pharisee right up to the end. In the presence of many Pharisees and Sadducees, Paul proclaimed, “I am a Pharisee” (Acts 23:6)—using the present tense. He was already a Christian by then, so he was both a Christian and a Pharisee. This is entirely possible because he held to the same basic doctrines as the Pharisees.

Jesus did not disagree with the Pharisees in basic doctrine. In fact he taught the multitudes to obey their teachings: “So you must obey them and do everything they tell you. But do not do what they do, for they do not practice what they preach” (Mt.23:3). He accepted their teaching but disapproved of their conduct.

The difference lies not in the fundamental doctrines but in the spirit. In every church there are people who, despite sharing a common doctrine, are entirely different in spirit. Jesus was different in spirit from the religious establishment of his day. Paul, like his Lord, was different from the Pharisees in spirit, not in doctrine. In the spiritual life, it is of the utmost importance to grasp that the crucial factor is the relationship which we have with God *in our hearts*. Where a heart relationship with God is non-existent, even if we hold to the orthodox doctrines, we will end up with

nothing but eternal condemnation, for it is only through a living relationship with God that we have eternal life.

Caleb and Joshua were the only two men of all who came out of Egypt who were allowed to enter the Promised Land; the others died in the wilderness. What made Caleb and Joshua different from the others? Was it a matter of holding to different doctrines, or different modes of worship, or different covenants? Did they believe in a different God? No, Caleb and Joshua belonged to the same covenant as the other people of Israel. They worshipped the same God and accepted the same doctrines. But Caleb had a “different spirit” from those of his generation (Numbers 14:24); he and Joshua followed God wholly, not holding back anything from Him (32:12).

The value and glory of suffering

To have a different spirit, we must see the value of suffering. Never think that suffering has no meaning or value. In Scripture, as we have seen, no one attains to perfection or Christ-likeness without going through suffering. In daily living, when someone misunderstands us or says something unkind to us, let us take that as an opportunity to move closer to perfection.

Suffering is a grindstone that polishes a diamond and brings out its beauty. We need to see the redemptive value of suffering—redemptive because suffering in the right attitude results in Christ-likeness, while also progressively

grinding down our old ego and freeing us from it. The grindstone of suffering will bring spiritual quality and beauty to our lives.

Not long ago Terry Fox died of cancer after raising lots of money for cancer research. Every heart was touched by the noble persistence of a one-legged cancer victim who tried to run across Canada to raise the funds. Could the greatness of his spirit have been manifested without the corresponding suffering? He showed that greatness is born of suffering.

Many glorious stories have emerged from the battlefields, especially when a soldier lays down his life for a comrade, or loses a leg to save a fellow man. We admire the greatness of the human spirit that emerges from suffering in battle.

The horrific sufferings in the concentration camps of World War II have brought out glory and beauty in people. Many accounts of courage, compassion, and selfless generosity have emerged from these horrendous camps. When we see the appalling ugliness of evil at its worst, we see the beauty of good at its best. But when everything is nice and rosy, there is less opportunity to triumph over suffering and evil.

Living in the comfort and ease of an affluent society, and drinking in its prosperity is detrimental to the spiritual life. We ought to heed warning from the fact that the wealth of "Babylon," the commercial center of the world, was not a blessing but a curse that presaged its downfall (Revelation 18). Failing to understand the spiritual message of the fall of Babylon, many in the Western churches are taught to strive

through “faith” and prayer to get God to bless them with the riches they clamor for. They turn a deaf ear to the warning,

People who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge men into ruin and destruction. (1Timothy 6:9)

But we are touched when we see someone overcome impossible odds, including poverty, to achieve noble goals. But is anyone ever impressed by someone who graduates from a famous university because he could afford a good education thanks to the financial support from his millionaire father? With enough money, almost anyone can get a university degree. I know of a young man from a rich family who took eleven years to collect a law degree from Cambridge University in England. He was able to stay in Cambridge for so many years only because his rich father was holding a high position in an Asian country, and had the means to pay for his education—and for the fancy sports car that he drove around.

But the one who has had to struggle against poverty or hardship or physical handicap or mockery to gain success—this man or woman is worthy of our admiration. Adversity has supreme value because it affords an opportunity for God to perfect us. But realistically, because our minds have been so trained to reject suffering, we are not easily convinced of its value and importance, not even when it is established from Scripture that we cannot be perfected without it.

It is important that we are convinced of the value of suffering, for affliction does not *automatically* benefit us or perfect us. Whether or not it benefits us depends on our attitude towards it. If we realize that it is an important means by which God purifies, molds, and transforms us, then we gladly submit to God's will and wisdom, following what Jesus did at that profound moment at Gethsemane—a moment of the greatest significance for our salvation—when he yielded himself to the Father with the words, “Not my will, but yours be done” (Lk.22:42).

But if in the face of adversity we lament over it with an attitude of resentment and bitterness, then far from benefiting us, the suffering could do us harm. If we persist in that attitude, it will lead to disaster. This was what happened to the Israelites in the wilderness. They responded to every trial and difficulty with a negative spirit expressed in grumbling, resentment, and outright rebellion. As a result they perished in the wilderness despite having witnessed many miracles which God had performed for them, confirming His presence with them.

Being with Jesus in suffering

Perfection in Scripture is not an individual human effort in which I lock myself in a secluded place to perfect myself. Day in and day out, I try to achieve perfection through meditation, sitting still with my eyes closed, and focusing my

mind on the spiritual. Nowhere in the gospels are we told that Jesus ever did anything like that.

In Scripture, that is not how perfection is acquired. This kind of pursuit is often an escape from reality and suffering. When Jesus says, “Take up your cross and follow me,” he is not promoting a gospel of escapism. Instead he calls us to: “Follow me into a world where there is conflict and hostility. I will lead the way and you will follow right behind. Together we will confront every form of evil that opposes us and we will suffer in the process. We do this in order to bring eternal life to those who are perishing in the spiritual darkness of the world.”

Jesus does not say, “As commander-in-chief, I order you into battle while I cheer you on from behind the front lines.” No, he is telling us, “Follow me into the thick of battle. Together we will go through intense suffering whose redemptive effect will defeat evil. If you want to be my disciple, you must come along with me to overcome evil and establish righteousness, to accomplish the salvation of mankind.”

Jesus died to redeem us, and we too must be prepared to die to spread the gospel of redemption (Jn.12:24). The alternative is to turn on the television set and listen to a gospel about a God who grants us luxury cars and gourmet food. Listen carefully and discern the voice of truth.

Growing in Christ-likeness together

In Scripture, growing into Christ-likeness is not only an individual endeavor but also the perfecting of a community of God's people. The diverse members of the body of Christ need to grow into perfection *together*; or, as the apostle put it, "till *we all* come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to *a perfect man*, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ" (Eph.4:13; cf. Col. 4:12). Notice that "we" are to become "a perfect man" collectively. The plural turns into a singular!

Oneness is of the essence of perfection or maturity. Where there is true faith there will be unity—"the unity of the faith" of which Paul speaks in this verse, a faith that has to do with the "knowledge of the Son of God".

It is surely not God's will for the body to have a perfect hand but a stunted torso. How is that a complete or perfect man? The Bible has in view a perfect body of God's people, in which every person attains to the oneness, the harmony, and the maturity of "a perfect man". This doesn't involve just a few members of the body of Christ. Either the whole is perfect or nothing is perfect. If only three or four in the church are perfect, the church as a whole still would not become "a perfect man". This perfect manhood has to do with the *whole* body of Christ.

But we are well aware that community has its own problems. For that reason, many avoid community life altogether. If five people stay together, they will become five sources

of problems with five different characters, five different ways of doing things, and five potential causes of friction.

We can choose to run away or face the situation squarely. If we know the value of suffering, we will say, “I will stay put because it is refining me. I aim to encourage and build up the others. Together we will overcome our weaknesses, and grow to perfection in the image of Christ”.

If we don't value perfection or harmony, or are unwilling to face painful problems and resolve them, we would not want communal life. If you decide to live a solitary life, you will have only one source of problems: you yourself. That may seem to be easier than handling five sources of problems. But by secluding ourselves, we avoid the Lord's command to love, which is an act of disobedience. The disobedient won't see the glory that God has planned for the body of Christ. Worse yet, by secluding ourselves we cut ourselves off from his body. How can we be saved without being a member of Christ's body?

It is up to us to choose the easy road or the hard road. God calls us to walk on the narrow road because it is the one that leads to life.

AN APPENDED NOTE

Now is the time of salvation, not judgment

We have seen that sin and suffering are not intrinsically related. Since not all suffering is due to sin, it follows that *not all suffering is punishment from God*. This is contrary to the usual assumption that all suffering is inflicted by God.

According to the New Testament, the present age in which we live is not a time of judgment but of salvation. “God did not send the Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world should be saved through him.” (John 3:17)

We are living in the New Testament era as distinct from the previous Old Testament era when God did indeed intervene in executing judgment against Israel and the nations. The present time is what Scripture calls “the day of salvation” (2Cor.6:2); the same verse goes on to say, “Now is the time of God’s favor”. Jesus came “to proclaim the favorable year of the Lord” (Lk.4:19) in which slaves are released and debts forgiven. We live in this favorable “Jubilee year”. Jesus proclaims it a time in which God has made eternal salvation available to all mankind. It is not the “year” or the time when He condemns or judges debtors (sinners).

One looks in vain in the New Testament for any direct act of God’s judgment at the present time upon the people of the world. God’s judgment will come upon the world at

the end of the present age of grace, and it will set in play a series of events leading up to the Final Judgment, as is described in the book of Revelation. But at the present time, everything God does is in order to give people the opportunity to come to Him for salvation.

1. Paul's action against Elymas

Even in the incident in which Paul exercised what appears to be an act of judgment against the magician Elymas who had tried to prevent the proconsul Sergius Paulus from believing in Jesus (Acts 13:7-12), the salvific intent of Paul's actions are clear. The salvation of the proconsul was his paramount concern. Paul had no choice but to act in the way he did. As a result of Paul's action, and also because of his teaching, the proconsul believed in Christ (v.12). As for the blinding of the magician, it was limited to "a time" (v.11), after which he will recover his sight. And because of that experience, the magician may be inclined to contemplate the question of his own salvation.

2. Disasters

It is of the greatest importance that we grasp the fact that we are living in a time of salvation, not a time of judgment or condemnation. If we realize this, we would not think that people killed in an airplane crash or a car accident are the objects of God's judgment. Neither does God judge nations at this time by means of earthquakes, floods, droughts, volcanic eruptions, and other natural disasters.

3. The Holocaust

For this reason, too, it is entirely erroneous to suggest, as some have, that the Holocaust, in which six million Jews and four million non-Jews were murdered, is in any way attributable to God's judgment. It is nowhere written in Scripture that God exercises His judgment upon the peoples (including the Jews) and nations of the world at this present time, though the time is indeed coming when He will judge all men on Judgment Day. *At the present time the only actions He takes, whether in relation to nations or individuals, have always to do with His overall plan of eternal salvation, which He graciously makes available to "the whole world" (1Jn. 2:2). In God's eternal plan, "Now (Gk. nun, 'at the present time') is the day of salvation" (2Cor.6:2), not of judgment or condemnation (Jn.3:17).*

4. "You do not know what kind of spirit you are of"

The account in Luke 9:52-56 underscores this truth:

He sent messengers on ahead of him. And they went, and entered a village of the Samaritans, to make arrangements for him. And they did not receive him, because he was journeying with his face toward Jerusalem. And when his disciples James and John saw this, they said, "Lord, do You want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them?" But he turned and rebuked them, and said, "You do not know what kind of spirit you are of; for the Son of Man did not come to destroy men's lives, but to save them." (Lk.9:52-56, cf. 19:10).

James and John were thinking of emulating Elijah in calling down fire from heaven (2Kings 1:10,12) when the Samaritans did not welcome the Lord Jesus. They were still thinking in Old Testament terms, not having entered into the spirit of the New Testament.

5. How does God deal with His church?

So far we have looked at how God deals with the world in the present era. Is there any difference in His dealings with His church? As is to be expected, the same overarching concern for salvation (in its multiple aspects of regeneration, renewal, and perfection) governs His dealings with His people, but with an important difference: the church is the community of *God's children*. God deals with His children for their good, not ruling out the application of *chastisement* when needed. Hebrews chapter 12 elaborates on this at some length:

And you have forgotten the exhortation which speaks to you as to sons: “My son, do not despise the *chastening* of the LORD, nor be discouraged when you are *rebuked* by Him; for whom the LORD loves He *chastens*, and *scourges* every son whom He receives.” If you endure *chastening*, God deals with you as with sons; for what son is there whom a father does not *chasten*? But if you are without *chastening*, of which all have become partakers, then you are illegitimate and not sons. Furthermore, we have had human fathers who *corrected* us, and we paid them respect. Shall we not much more readily be in subjection to the Father of

spirits and live? For they indeed for a few days *chastened* us as seemed best to them, but He for our profit, that we may be partakers of His holiness. Now no *chastening* seems to be joyful for the present, but *painful*; nevertheless, afterward it yields the peaceable fruit of righteousness to those who have been *trained* by it. (Hebrews 12:5-11, NJKV)

It is not my business to discipline my neighbor's children, but it is my responsibility to train my own. Likewise, when God chastises us, He treats us as His children. The people of the world, not having yielded themselves to God, are not His children. His children are those who have received Him, believed in His Name, and are born of God (John 1:12,13).

Being God's children has many privileges. One of them, which few Christians count as a privilege, is to be disciplined by God our Father. Chastisement is painful as Hebrews 12:11 affirms, but it is necessary in order "that we may be partakers of His holiness" (v.10). Thus suffering has an important role in God's salvific actions in His church. Nevertheless, this chastisement is not to be understood as judgment or condemnation, which are antonyms of salvation, but as the expression of God's saving love for His children.

6. First Corinthians 5

The severe disciplinary action taken by Paul in 1 Corinthians chapter 5 in dealing with a heinous sin is in line with this. The salvific intent of the action is made explicit in verse

5: “the destruction of the flesh, that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus”.

7. Acts 5

How is the incident in Acts chapter 5:1-11 to be understood? Peter says to Ananias, “Why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit?” (v.3); “You have not lied to men but to God” (v.4). And speaking to Ananias’s wife, Peter exposes her conspiracy with Ananias “to put the Spirit of the Lord to the test” (v.9). These statements with their repeated reference to the Holy Spirit indicate that Paul had discerned that these two professed believers had sinned against the Holy Spirit, for which there is no forgiveness.

Jesus warned, “Any sin and blasphemy shall be forgiven men, but blasphemy against the Spirit shall not be forgiven” (Mt. 12:31; also v.32; Mk.3:29; Lk.12:10). Sin is committed in the heart before it finds expression with the tongue. To blaspheme is to speak evil against someone. Lying is a malignant form of evil speaking.

In this tragic incident of Ananias and Sapphira, sin against the Spirit of God had to be summarily dealt with for the sake of the purity of the infant church which was threatened by it. It confirms that the way God deals with the church, the community of His children, is different from the way He deals with the people of the world; yet His actions are nonetheless governed by His saving purposes, especially for His church as a whole.

In the case of Acts 5, the well-being of the church was protected by the godly fear that came upon the church to deter sin. Twice in this passage we read of how the fear of the living God came upon all, Christians and non-Christians, who had heard of the matter: “Great fear came upon all who heard it” (v.5); “Great fear came upon the whole church, and upon all those who heard of these things” (v.11).

A brief excursus: Herod Agrippa I

Was not what happened to King Herod Agrippa I in Acts 12 clearly an act of God’s judgment? Herod Agrippa I, described by *Unger’s Bible Dictionary* (Moody Press, 1966) as “a zealous Jew,” was actually the last of the Jewish kings who reigned (AD 37-44) over the land which under the Old Testament was the land of Israel. His son, Agrippa II, ruled a small territory in the Lebanon area; he did not reign over Judea, Samaria, Galilee and Peraea; hence he did not reign over the land of Israel as it was in the Old Testament.

As the last of the Jewish kings, Herod Agrippa I does not come within the purview of this Appended Note which discusses the world in general and the church in particular in *the New Testament era*, but he must be considered rather in relation to *the Old Testament era*. What happened to him in Acts 12:21-23 is comparable, for example, to the demise of King Jehoram (2Chr.21:18,19; cf. Isa.14:11; 51:8).

Chapter 22



PERFECTION: SPIRITUAL PERCEPTION AND INSIGHT

Trifles make for perfection

The Olympic games have much to do with striving for perfection, without which no one can hope to win a medal, much less a gold medal. It is often the difference of a fraction of a second—a mere “trifle”—that separates the medalists. Only one person or team wins the gold medal, and often by a tiny margin. Yet it is often that extremely thin margin of excellence that makes the whole difference. The margin which secures the prize is the result of many years of arduous, exhausting and dedicated training. If athletes train hard to gain an earthly prize, why don't Christians see that they need to do the same if they are to gain the eternal prize? What does the apostle Paul have to say about this?

Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the

prize. Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last; but we do it to get a crown that will last forever. Therefore I do not run like a man running aimlessly; I do not fight like a man beating the air. No, I beat my body and make it my slave so that ... I will not be disqualified for the prize. (1Cor.9:24-27, NIV)

Michelangelo knew the importance of perfection. When we look at his sculptures, we are struck by a powerful realism that radiates forth. In Rome I once gazed at his statue of Moses, and there the force of Moses' personality was conveyed in every facial detail, and in the posture of the body and arms.

When Michelangelo was working on one of his statues, someone had noticed that for a whole month that Michelangelo would do little more than polish an arm here, or remove a bit of marble there. To this observer, these were trivialities. Michelangelo would spend a long time to chisel at one point, then stand back for an overall look. Then he would chisel at another point, then stand back again.

For a whole month he was polishing a little here, a little there, adding a line to accentuate the hair, or fine lines for the beard. These minor changes were barely noticeable except up close. The person said to Michelangelo, "Aren't you wasting your time? For the past month you have been doing nothing but adding a touch here and a touch there. Then you stand back and add another touch. These are trifles."

Michelangelo, a genius who understood the importance of perfection, said, “It is the trifles, as you call them, which make for perfection, and perfection is no trifle.” What excellent insight!

The difference between a gold medal and a silver medal is often a hair’s breadth of a second. It is that tiny bit of superiority that makes for perfection. In a car crash, life versus death is often decided by a split second in swerving from danger.

God is perfect in His creation

Our God is a God of perfection. Look at His handiwork in creation. The other day I was admiring a moth that flew into our bathroom. I called for my wife Helen and said to her, “Look at this interesting moth!” I had never had such a close look at a moth. Like most moths, this one was delta-winged, similar to the wings of supersonic aircraft. Long before man had ever conceived of delta-winged aircraft, there was the humble moth, outfitted with streamlined aerodynamic features. Long before our physicists and engineers had worked at their drawing boards, God had crafted a moth, aerodynamically shaped and delta-winged.

I was so fascinated with the moth that I had forgotten to get something from the bathroom. I said to Helen, “Look at its wings!” The tip of each delta wing had a dark edge which bordered an area of a lighter color which, in turn, contained intricate arch-shaped designs spread over the wing. One

particular arch spanned the entire wing. All this complexity is found in a humble moth that no one notices.

When God creates beauty and perfection in a lowly moth, He takes into consideration fine details and delicate touches. Nothing is wishy-washy or half-hearted about God's creation, as anyone who has peered through a microscope or a telescope would know. The perfection in God's designs is breathtaking in all its features.

Protruding from the moth's head were two feather-like antennae which branched out from both sides, forming what looked like a crown. Imagine! God has crowned the lowly moth with a diadem that befits its beautiful garments! I gazed at the exquisite design of the two plume-like extensions protruding majestically from its head.

I am filled with admiration for Michelangelo's masterpieces, but even more so with the work of my God and King.

Helen observed, "Look again at the wings! They look like a royal mantle that flows from the shoulders to the floor!" I took a closer look, and exclaimed, "You're right. It's like a royal robe!"

1. Perfection is composed of "trivialities"

My God and King is amazing. Perfection is His standard, and He looks for excellence in you and in me. Do we think we can live a wishy-washy mediocre Christian life and that is good enough for God? Do we think that God is unconcerned about the way we live from day to day? Does He turn a blind eye to the so-called "trifles"—to our inconsiderate

word, our arrogant gesture, our haughty glance, our self-centered action, our unclean thought? If you think God is unconcerned about these things, take a close look at a moth. Examine a seashell or a blade of grass or a humble flower, and ponder carefully: On the day when you and I stand in God's presence, will He overlook the trifles?

Life depends on tiny little "trifles," doesn't it? What is a body but a composition of tiny cells? Is not every material object made up of atoms and molecules? Doesn't a whole lifetime consist of the seconds that tick away, sixty per minute? One can hardly utter a word within the space of a second, yet the seconds add up to a lifetime. Nothing is trivial to God. Is an atom or a second trivial?

2. How a triviality can spoil a good thing

The Lord Jesus is so concerned about details that he says you will have to give an account for every careless word you say (Mt.12:36). He cares about every word that comes out of our mouths. It shows the extent of his concern about so-called trivialities. How many careless words have we spoken? We may have a lot of trivial words to account for at the Judgment, and the consequences will not be trivial.

Have you ever picked up your photographs from a photo shop only to be horrified by a tiny speck that appears on your beautiful cheek? It's only a tiny speck, but because it happened to land on your cheek, it has ruined a picture of your beautiful self. People will think it's your own pimple! A triviality? To you it's not.

How far down the road will you get if your car tire has a pinhead hole so small that you cannot see it with the naked eye? Not very far.

It takes one inappropriate word to spoil a conversation, doesn't it? The discussion is proceeding nicely when suddenly the atmosphere is soured by one wrong word. It's just a triviality, but suddenly that one word, like that speck, becomes very significant.

God is a God of perfection who doesn't overlook tiny things. If that is so, what will happen to those who commit major sins which are not trivial by any standard?

The first reason, then, for paying close attention to the Biblical teaching of perfection is that God is a God of perfection—or of purity, which is another way of describing God's character. "Everyone who has this hope fixed on him purifies himself, just as he is pure" (1Jn.3:3).

The teaching of perfection helps us see our imperfection and total dependence on God's grace

There is a second reason for the importance of this teaching: *It makes us profoundly conscious of our imperfection or impurity.* When we see our imperfection and realize that God will take note of every flaw and stain, what will be our response? We will see our need to rely totally on God's grace. We will cling to God every moment and depend on His grace to forgive us our imperfections, to make us perfect in

heart, and to see us through to the end. From start to finish it is all of grace. The teaching of perfection makes us utterly aware of our continuing need for God's grace.

The rejection of perfection is a rejection of grace, for if God is unconcerned about perfection, then grace would not be needed to sustain us moment by moment, and we could go on living without it. But when we realize that we serve a most holy and perfect God, we acknowledge that we cannot live for one moment without grace.

The overstress on doctrine and the failure to live according to Biblical teaching

A third reason for stressing perfection is that we Christians tend to stress doctrine and more doctrine, as if God is more concerned about our theology than our spiritual quality or heart attitude. God is portrayed as a master theologian or heavenly Doctor of Divinity who is chiefly concerned about our theology. The church is so preoccupied with doctrine that Christians fight tooth and nail over it. This conflict is a sad result of the loss of the spiritual perception that comes from living in God's light, in which we see things from His point of view. "In your light we see light" (Psalm 36:9). When people insist on seeing things from their own human point of view, conflict will be inevitable.

Doctrine is certainly important. But if we think we can overlook the spiritual quality of our lives and fight each other over doctrine, something must be seriously wrong with us.

There are times when we must take a firm stand for the truth, but that does not absolve us from behaving in a Christ-like manner in every situation.

Some Christians go so far as to slander others, speaking all sorts of evil of those they regard as doctrinal opponents, yet they never bother to check the facts to ascertain whether their allegations contain so much as a grain of truth. Can such people be defenders of the truth? Or do they suppose that the end justifies the means?

There is often something more sinister in these doctrinal attacks than merely expressing disagreement. Frequently what is implied, or even stated, is that those with whom we disagree are “heretics” or at least leaning to the heretical. The one who considers himself qualified to pass this kind of judgment regards himself as the representative of pure orthodox doctrine. Since he is convinced of his own rightness, any question about his own humility or conceitedness would scarcely cross his mind.

That is the tragic outcome when the stress is placed on doctrine rather than life quality. The evil one has deceived the church into thinking that God’s primary concern is with right doctrine rather than right living. When we put right our relationship with God, which will be seen in right living, we can be sure that He will direct us on the path of right doctrine.

May God save us from thinking that there is nothing wrong with our relationship with God, and therefore nothing wrong with the way we live our Christian lives. If we

are self-deceived about this, we would feel wholly justified in carrying out doctrinal attacks on others who do not share our doctrinal convictions. Didn't the Lord Jesus caution against this kind of blind arrogance when he instructed his disciples to first see the log in their own eye before passing judgment on the speck in someone else's (Mt.7:3)?

Purity or perfection is important in Scripture because it has to do with *life*. When Jesus instructs us to be like the Father (Mt.5:48), he is not formulating a *theology* of perfection but commanding us to be new persons who live a certain quality of life, namely, to be perfect as God is perfect, holy as He is holy, and merciful as He is merciful. Jesus is not concerned about some abstract theological notion of perfection but a *practical perfection* that is seen in daily living. If we don't grasp the practical importance of perfection, sooner or later we will end up fighting over dogma, damaging the church, and disgracing God, for without practical perfection we will be "blind or shortsighted" (2Pet.1:9).

It is when we walk close to God that He will guide us into all truth (Jn.16:13; Ps.25:5), and lead us to right doctrine. But if we don't walk with Him, our discernment of the truth will be blurred. How then can we distinguish between true and false doctrine? We live in a time when false doctrines abound, which is why it is all the more urgent that we live in His light so as to be able to distinguish the true from the false.

Right doctrine is for right living. For those who don't live in righteousness, of what use to him is right doctrine except to bring greater condemnation upon him at the Judgment?

Pastors chosen according to academic qualifications

I receive many publications together with requests for donations from various Christian organizations and theological seminaries. Some of the publications contain advertisements from churches looking for a pastor. I would sometimes read the job requirements, and the foremost is of course your academic qualifications. It is the undisputed number one requirement. Next in line is your doctrinal position. Further down the list are things such as your age and marital status. There is a general preference for married people, and for people between the ages of 30 and 45. Those below 30 are too young and inexperienced, and those over 45 will soon be “over the hill”.

In general the ads say nothing about spirituality or life quality. Occasionally I am refreshed and encouraged by the rare ad which says, “We are looking for a spiritual and godly man.” It makes me keen to visit this church and to meet the people there.

Generally the stress is on doctrinal position and academic qualifications. This moves the focus from the practical to the intellectual, which is dangerous for the future of the church. An unspiritual church leader cannot build up a spiritually

strong and healthy church. In this case, the outlook for the church will be extremely bleak.

In contrast to contemporary practice, the stress in Scripture is not on dogma but on *spiritual quality* in appointing a pastor, overseer or church leader. In the list of qualifications in 1Timothy 3:1-7, we see that this is what Paul, or ultimately God, looks for in the one who serves God and His church.

We modern Christians would have expected Paul to instruct Timothy, “First check out the candidate’s level of education.” Most ads for a pastor require at least a university degree. But Paul, who was himself immensely learned, does not even mention, much less stress, the candidate’s academic training or qualifications.

More surprising, he does not even mention doctrine! What then are the requirements? He outlines them as follows:

It is a trustworthy statement: if any man aspires to the office of overseer, it is a fine work he desires to do. An overseer, then, must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, temperate, prudent, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not addicted to wine or pugnacious, but gentle, uncontentious, free from the love of money ... (1Timothy 3:1f)

The candidate’s spiritual qualities—his character and conduct—are of foremost concern. Remarkably, though Paul touches on the ability to teach (v.2) and thus to communicate, he never mentions doctrine. The same spiritual

and practical concerns govern the selection of deacons in the next section, 1Timothy 3:8-13.

We might argue that Paul doesn't mention doctrine for the reason that all along he is assuming Timothy would choose a person with the right doctrines. This reasoning is unconvincing because, firstly, it is an argument from silence, and secondly, why did Paul not assume that Timothy would look for spiritual quality without having to be told to do so? Paul's detailed instructions about looking for spiritual qualities indicate that he does not assume that Timothy will automatically choose a person by his spiritual qualities. If Paul does not assume the one, what makes us think that he assumes the other?

It is an undeniable fact that in the selection of church leaders, the candidate's *spiritual quality* is of supreme importance to the Apostle, and this is seen in the way it is singularly emphasized by him.

The spiritually perfect man discerns true doctrine

Does it mean that we swing to the other extreme and downplay the importance of doctrine? Not at all. Doctrine is certainly important.

Why then does Scripture stress spiritual quality above all else? The reason is not hard to understand: Only when our heart is perfect or pure with God will we be able to discern doctrine, and to tell the true from the false, good from evil.

If our heart is not right with God, we won't be able to understand the spiritual content of His word. It is something that is confirmed by experience: A person who is out of tune with God can still read the Bible, but he won't be able to understand its spiritual message. If we go out and commit sin, and then try to read the Bible, we will discover that God's word does not enter our hearts, and no longer speaks to us. Sin closes our hearts and blinds our eyes. If our heart is not perfect before God, we will be unable to discern the truth. Purity of heart, along with righteous living, ensures that the Spirit of God will reveal to us what is true and what is false.

If you hold a grudge against a brother or sister, your ability to discern doctrine will be impaired. That is something you can verify for yourself. If you hold a grudge against someone in the church, you will notice that your spiritual thinking becomes unfocused. The moment your heart is not perfect before God, as soon as it becomes impure, you will lose your capacity to tell truth from falsehood.

In God's wisdom, Paul does not need to tell Timothy about doctrine. Choose a man whose heart is right with God and walks faithfully with Him, and you will have found a man with razor-sharp discernment of spiritual things (cf. Jn.7:17; 1Cor.2:15). But as soon as he sins or harbors sin in his heart, his spiritual discernment declines. If for a moment his commitment to God is less than perfect, his spiritual perception will start fading. That is an experiential fact.

Purity of heart needed for understanding God's word

A pastor once asked me about something I had said to him, namely, that the Bible nowhere teaches that God's image in Adam was lost at the Fall. I soon realized that a certain kind of theology had been so drummed into this pastor (as was the case with me when I first came to God) that it prevented him from understanding God's Word on this matter. The problem was not an unwillingness to see the truth, nor a hostile or argumentative spirit. Despite a genuine effort to understand the issue, it became clear that he was confused about basic spiritual things.

It then occurred to me that the way to help him was not to present more Biblical evidence. I had already given him lots of incontrovertible evidence to show that both the Old and the New Testaments explicitly state that the image of God in man is still intact, yet this pastor could not grasp the Biblical teaching because it was so different from the doctrine he had been brought up on, namely, that the image of God in man had been destroyed. This is also what I had been taught as a young Christian, so I can understand his situation. But could there be something else in his life besides doctrine that was preventing him from understanding the Scriptures?

Instead of presenting more evidence, I asked him, "Dear brother, how is your heart before God? How is your commitment to Him? Let's get back to the basics, and leave

aside the question of doctrine for now. Could we talk about our relationship with the Lord?”

This way we can help each other in love, not by condemning or criticizing, but by seeing whether there is any wrong attitude in us towards our God and King which prevents us from seeing His truth.

The central and essential question is: Do I have a right heart attitude towards God? Only by facing up to this question honestly can our hearts, by God’s grace and power, be made pure before Him. Then our eyes will see the truth, and no sin will obscure our spiritual sight.

We help those who oppose the truth not by crushing them in debate but by reaching out to them in love. We begin with the one thing that God is concerned about: *the heart*. In God’s kindness, if our hearts are right before Him, He will remove such blindness as still remains in us which prevents us from seeing some aspect of the truth. How wonderful it is to help each other. But first we must let God deal with our *hearts*.

If you approach the word of God but cannot understand it, the right thing to do is not to run to a commentary or another person, but to say to God, “Lord, are there hindrances in me?” Sometimes you can get help from another person, but usually the problem lies foremost in the heart. When we let God deal with the problem, we will discover that He enlightens us with His truth.

Spiritual vision for the pure (perfect) in heart

May God work powerfully in us and grant us spiritual vision. Many have said to me, “I don’t see the preciousness of Christ. I don’t echo with great Christians such as Paul who consider everything as loss in order to gain Christ.” As Philippians 3:15 tells us, Paul’s attitude is one of perfection: “Let us therefore, as many as are perfect, have this attitude.” This attitude, as the context tells us, is that of pursuing Christ and regarding everything as loss in order to gain him.

Who can do this but the one who sees the beauty and preciousness of Christ? If we read a Bible passage like Philippians 3 and don’t understand it, the problem lies not in a failure to know Greek or some other technical information, but in the failure to capture Paul’s vision of the priceless value of Christ. Do we solve this problem by listening to a homily about the beauty and perfection of Christ, in order that some fire may be kindled in our hearts? That may help a little, but if your heart is not right with God, all this would be sweet-sounding talk, like music that floats past the ear without speaking to the heart.

But when by God’s grace our hearts are purified and we enter into a right relationship with Him, something will happen to our spiritual vision. Try it for yourself. What you could not see before will become clear before your eyes.

You might find it hard to understand Paul’s statement, “But we all with unveiled face behold the glory of the Lord” (2Cor.3:18). You scratch your head and say, “But I don’t behold the Lord’s glory.” Here Paul speaks of the “unveiled

face”. If our face is still veiled, we won’t be able to see the glory of the Lord.

This veil, as we saw in an earlier chapter, is the flesh. The crucial question is whether the flesh is still having a grip on our hearts. The thicker the veil, the more we will live “according to the flesh” and the more it will obscure the Lord’s glory from our sight. How can the fire of God be kindled in our hearts if we don’t see His glory? Nothing will be kindled until we begin to see spiritual things as Paul did.

If we allow the veil of the flesh to remain on our faces, it will hinder us from experiencing the Lord. We won’t behold His glory until our hearts are purified and the veil is removed. It is removed only in Christ (2Cor.3:14) by God’s grace, not by our own strength or wisdom.

When that happens, what doctrines will still confuse us? Scripture stresses, first and foremost, what we *are*. When that is sorted out, the question of doctrine will be sorted out as well. “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God” (Matthew 5:8).



BEING PERFECT MEANS FUNCTIONING SPIRITUALLY

Perfection is viewed by the church as irrelevant today. This error is deplorable because learning to be perfect, far from being a luxury, is essential for spiritual survival.

Functional perfection

In Scripture, perfection is not an airy-fairy ideal but something that is eminently practical, for it has to do with the Christian's *capacity to function*, that is, to live as a disciple of Jesus. Let me explain what I mean by this.

If a car is in perfect mechanical condition, it will function properly. By “perfect” we do not mean that the engine could not be improved in its design, or that it could not be made more powerful or more fuel efficient. It simply means that

the engine is running properly, and is able to fulfill its purpose. The engine is said to be in *perfect working condition* even if its design could benefit from improvements. To be perfect, therefore, means to be *functional*.

In the case of the Christian, to be functional or “functionally perfect” means that he is living the life that God has designed for us as disciples of Christ. It is to be effective and productive in accomplishing what He has entrusted to us in this world. “Functional” means that the Christian life, like a good engine, is “in good working order,” able to function in the way it was designed to.

Some time back, when I was driving to Ottawa with my family to attend a meeting, we were saying to ourselves, “This old car has been regenerated!” Outwardly the car’s body looks the same, but inside it is brand new. The old engine had been written off and replaced with this engine which, though second-hand at four hundred dollars, is in good working condition. The steering is also new, as is the radiator. Almost everything except the outer shell is new. It is a reborn, regenerated car. It has a new heart (engine), a new circulation system (radiator system), and new kidneys (filters). Isn’t this a parable of the Christian life?

When we are born anew, we become new people inside. Outwardly we look the same, and we may be wearing the same clothes as before our baptism. Everyone still recognizes our faces, but inside we are brand new. That is what regeneration is all about. When a regenerated car is running smoothly, there’s a nice feeling about it. It purrs along the

highway, and no longer makes the noise of worn-out cylinders.

But the next day my wife Helen started the car but could not turn the steering wheel even though the steering system was new. Equally strange, the day after that, after starting the engine I stepped on the accelerator (with the gear in neutral) and the engine would not slow down! It kept racing at high speed. What has happened to the car? Yes, it has been regenerated and renewed, but no, it is not perfect! And if these imperfections are not corrected, we are going to burn out the engine or have a terrible accident. Any imperfection in the condition of a car will seriously impair its functionality.

I lifted the hood and discovered that the steering fluid was leaking. I took the car to a garage, and as it turned out, some of the hoses in the steering system had not been tightened properly. So the fluid was forced out at the joints by the pressure in the system. One particular joint had come apart altogether, and this accounted for the problem with the steering wheel. This was fixed simply by tightening the clips that held the hoses. Even minor imperfections can render the whole system non-functional.

The mechanic discovered that the engine problem was caused by a defective throttle return spring. When you step on the accelerator and release it, there is a spring that closes the throttle. But because this spring was too weak, the throttle remained open and the engine kept on racing. That little spring costs only 50 cents, but because the mechanic did not have a proper one in stock, he had to re-tool another

type of spring to the proper size. This took twenty minutes of work, so I ended up paying fifteen dollars to have the 50-cent spring adjusted and the hoses tightened! A seemingly trivial imperfection can turn out to be expensive. After that the car was running well again.

Imperfections hinder functionality

Perfection, then, has to do with the capacity to function properly, that is, as God intends us to function. You may be regenerate and in the process of being renewed, but like so many Christians, you may not be functioning perfectly. Because the steering fluid is leaking in your life, you cannot turn in the direction you need to go. You cannot be maneuvered, so God cannot lead you in the right direction. Have you ever tried turning a steering wheel on a power-steering system that is out of fluid? You have to put your whole weight on the wheel just to turn it.

God cannot direct our lives if we are unresponsive to Him. He wants us to do something, but we don't budge. He tells us to go fast, but we go slow. He tells us to go slow, but we go fast. If the throttle doesn't close properly, and the engine is racing away, it will overheat and burn out in a short time.

Imperfections hinder functionality. What good is a new engine if a 50-cent spring is defective? In the same way, many Christians are not functional. After baptism, you feel great to be a new person, but the next day you wake up to

discover that the steering wheel doesn't turn. The engine is stalling, or is roaring away even at the stop sign. The car is taken to the church mechanic, usually the pastor, who has to roll up his sleeves and figure out the problem through counseling. He is always busy because many Christians are not in a good working condition. Sometimes there are pastors who don't function properly themselves.

Functioning perfectly means to function as God meant us to. An engine is said to be in perfect working condition if it is functioning according to its engineered design, and is not polluting the air with black smoke. My old engine spewed out black fumes, made my clothes smell of engine oil, and was beyond repair. So it was replaced.

You cannot take a non-Christian and make him into a Christian by making repairs to the old life. The old life is beyond repair, and God has to replace it altogether. When you die at baptism, your old life is finished. God gives you a new life, but it has to be maintained in working order. If we fail to maintain it, it won't work properly.

Do we still insist that perfection is a luxury? Is it a luxury for a car to be in perfect working condition? Every mechanic knows that perfection is not a luxury. Rather, it is *imperfection* that is a luxury because it leads to engine blowouts and all kinds of costly repairs.

If an engine is racing when it ought to be idling, it is behaving improperly. If a Christian is not behaving as he ought to, there must be something wrong with his spiritual life. He may be prone to losing his temper. If a car's

temperature gauge is pointing to the red zone, it may be that the radiator is overheating, or the thermostat is dead, or the radiator core is blocked. We have to act fast because an overheated engine will destroy the transmission.

In fact we should check for potential problems even before they happen, through regular servicing and maintenance. Brake failure, for example, could result in a fatal accident. For this reason we ought to make the Psalmist's prayer our own:

Search me, O God, and know my heart; try me and know my anxious thoughts; and see if there be any hurtful way in me, and lead me in the everlasting way. (Psalm 139:23,24)

Functionality and Christian witness

Perfection as functionality has mainly to do with relationships, not just a living relationship with God but also a harmonious relationship with the brothers and sisters in Christ. Good interpersonal relationships with God and with man are rooted in a functional spiritual life.

Far from being pie-in-the-sky, the Christian life is practical. As for the one who easily gets hot under the collar or speaks rudely, his Christian life is not what God intends it to be.

“Glorious things are spoken of you, O city of God” (Psalm 87:3). How can people see God's glory in His people, His “city,” if they see bad tempers, nasty words, or a lack of self-control? The witness of the whole church depends on

each Christian's functional quality. People see Christ, or reject Christ, by what they see in you and me. Imperfect, non-functional Christians will cause them to turn away from the Lord. How great is our responsibility!

Perfection versus anxiety

When “perfect” is used in the Bible, it is always in a *practical* context. The statement, “You must be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Mt.5:48), is found in the context of Christian conduct. The preceding verses describe, among other things, how the Christian ought to relate to the non-Christian. If you greet only those who greet you, how are you better than the unregenerate? Perfection must be evident in conduct that far surpasses the conduct of the non-Christian.

In times of danger or pressure, you remain composed while the unbeliever panics. When a Mediterranean storm was battering the ship he was traveling on, Paul remained calm and did not panic like the others. He even found strength to reassure them, “Keep up your courage, men, for I believe God that it will turn out exactly as I have been told” (Acts 27:25).

It was this kind of faith that impressed John Wesley. In the old colonial days, he once went on a voyage from England to the new world. Along the way, an Atlantic storm battered the ship. Everyone was panicking except a group of German Christians who were calmly singing hymns and

worshipping the Lord. But Wesley, though he was a minister and a preacher, was gripped by great fear—the fear of death—for he hadn't yet had a living relationship with God. He was astonished by the peace that these believers had in the midst of a raging storm that threatened to send the ship into the depths of the ocean. He saw, for the first time, humble and unlearned disciples of Jesus who functioned perfectly as Christians ought to. It was a turning point in Wesley's life.¹⁰

Do you worry about your job security? Or that you didn't earn enough this year to have any savings? If a Christian starts worrying about these things as a non-Christian does, where is perfection to be seen in his life? But when we function perfectly and are in tune with God, we will have peace even if the unemployment situation is dismal, or the whole world is in turmoil. Being perfect is not a pie-in-the-sky ideal, but something down to earth. If a believer trusts in God, why should he be anxious? Doesn't our anxiety prove our unbelief?

¹⁰ Wesley records this event in his Journal for Sunday, 25th January, 1736. The following is an extract: "In the midst of the psalm wherewith their service began, the sea broke over, split the main sail in pieces, covered the ship, and poured in between the decks, as if the great deep had already swallowed us up. A terrible screaming began among the English. The Germans calmly sung on. I asked one of them afterwards, 'Was you not afraid?' He answered, 'I thank God, no.' I asked, 'But were not your women and children afraid?' He replied, mildly, 'No; our women and children are not afraid to die.'" *The Heart of Wesley's Journal*, Keats Publishing, Inc., 1979.

Many Christians exhibit non-Christian behavior such as fear, lack of love, and worldly conversation. Their speech is indistinguishable from that of non-Christians, being largely about things such as job prospects and promotions. Non-Christians will see that Christians love the world as much as they do, and pursue money just as greedily, so they ask why they should become Christians. These Christians are spiritually non-functional, which is to be unholy: “Just as He who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; for it is written: ‘Be holy, because I am holy’” (1Pet.1:15-16, cf. Lev.19:2; 20:7, from which the quotation is derived).

The fallacy of “positional” perfection

At this point it is urgent to sound a warning about a serious error that has gained popularity in certain Christian circles. It is the notion that perfection is primarily a “positional” rather than an experiential matter. It denies the necessity of functional perfection, reducing it to something optional.

In this view, so long as you have the positional, the functional does not matter for salvation. No matter how a positional Christian lives or behaves, he will still be saved. It is not hard to see that this teaching will create Christians who behave like non-Christians.

In the light of Scripture, this teaching is patently false, and must be refuted vigorously to avoid falling into dangerous error.

In this teaching, perfection is something that we have because of what is called our “position in Christ”. For convenience, we will call it *positionalism*. This doctrine is dangerous because it misleads by means of a specious and subtle argument. It begins with something true, namely, that when we are saved, we are “in Christ”. But it goes on to say that because Christ is perfect, and because you are “in” him, you are *positionally perfect*. This sounds reasonable, but is it true? Not everything that sounds reasonable is true (see the note at the end of this chapter).

It sounds reasonable to say that, just as Christ is our righteousness and our sanctification, he is our perfection. But all this has to do with *a living relationship with him*, not some kind of “position” in him. We derive our perfection from him because of our relationship with him, not because of some “position” located within him.

Positionalism forces us to decide between two radically different pictures of the Christian life. One is the New Testament picture of a dynamic, functional Christian faith based on our relationship with Christ. The other, *positionalism*, is static and non-functional: you are perfect without any corresponding change of conduct because you are already perfect by being located in Christ. *Positionalism* has no need for functional spirituality because of us already being *positionally perfect* in Christ.

1. The meaning of “In Christ”

The positional error is based on a mistaken understanding of the term “in Christ” (which is explained in the Appended Note of chapter 19). This term has a significant place in the teaching of the apostle Paul. In his teaching, however, being “in” Christ has nothing to do with a “position” as if “in” Christ has some kind of “physical” connotation or the like. Christ is a person, not a geographical location.

Moreover, “in Christ” is always taken spiritually, never physically, in the New Testament. How are we “in him” spiritually? In much the same way as the branches are in the Vine (John 15:1f) or, to use the picture in 1Corinthians 12, as the foot and the hand (v.15) are “in the body” (vv.18,25) in the sense of standing in the vital *relationship* that constitutes the Vine or the Body (the church).

Let it be affirmed that Christ is a living Person, not a place. In the New Testament, to be in Christ means to stand *in a living relationship with him*. When the Bible says that we “stand” in his grace (Rom.5:2; 1Pet.5:12; 2Tim.2:1), it does not mean that grace is a place on which we plant our feet. To stand in his grace is to stand in a relationship to him whereby we are recipients of his grace. Grace is not a place or a locus, and neither is Christ.

Nor can being “in Christ” be reduced to a *legal* position, as if life in Christ has to do with law rather than grace. This same legalist logic would require that the converse, “Christ *in us*” (e.g., Col.1:27), also be reduced to a legal position. It would mean that Christ does not actually dwell in us, and

no mutual indwelling relationship exists. Hence the legalist separates us from our Lord at the level where it matters most, that of our living relationship with him.

Jesus prays to the Father, “As You are in me, and I am in You, may they (the disciples) also be in us” (Jn.17:21). Here Jesus uses the “in” terminology three times. What would he mean by that prayer request other than that one person is “in” another person through unity and mutual love? This is confirmed in verse 23: “I in them, and You in me, that they may be perfected in unity, that the world may know that You sent me, and have loved them as You have loved me”.

Here we see what Jesus means by being “in” another person: it is being in a living relationship (Jn.15:1ff) of perfect oneness or unity with the other person—a union so close that the Lord speaks of it as being “perfected in (or, into) one” (*teteleiōmenoi eis hen*, τετελειωμένοι εις ἕν). The difficulty of bringing out the meaning of these words is seen in the variety of translations in the major versions: “made perfect in one” (KJV, NKJ); “brought to complete unity” (NIV); “perfected in unity” (NASB); “become perfectly one” (RSV, ESV).

Paul evidently derives his “in Christ” theology from Jesus’ teaching of the vine and the branches: “I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in me, and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing” (John 15:5).

“Abiding” describes how the branch relates to the vine. The branch is not located *within* the stem of the vine, but is

connected to it as an extension of it. Neither is the reverse true: the stem is not located inside the branch. “In” therefore means that they stand in a vital relationship with each other.

When Paul speaks of being “in Adam” (1Cor.15:22), he is hardly suggesting that we are located inside the person of Adam. Adam is not a place. To be in Adam or in Christ is to stand in a definite relationship to Adam or to Christ.

The New Testament speaks of being “in the Spirit” and being “in the flesh” (e.g., Romans 8:9). “In the Spirit” does not mean that we are located in the Spirit in some quasi-physical sense, as if the Spirit were a place, but that we stand in a relationship to the Spirit in which God is Lord in our lives. Similarly, “in the flesh” describes a state of being that is controlled by the flesh.

2. Clothed in Christ

The doctrine of positional perfection is dangerously misleading. It implies that because Christ is perfect, and because we are in him, we are absolved from being functionally perfect. Although the doctrine does not deny that experiential or functional perfection is available to the one who pursues it, it nonetheless implies it is optional. This directly contradicts Jesus’ teaching on being perfect, which is now changed to: *Because I am perfect, you don’t actually have to be perfect.* Do you see the glaring error of this doctrine? It perverts the very heart of the Lord’s teaching.

An argument which positionalism often employs would be humorous if it were not so tragically erroneous. It is based

on Galatians 3:27: “For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ”. Paul is here using the language of garments: We are in Christ, hence we put on Christ and metaphorically wear Christ as a garment. The metaphor is then interpreted as follows: Because we have put on Christ as a garment, when God looks at us, He sees Christ, not us. The garment conceals us, as it were, serving as a disguise. Since God sees Christ, not us, He sees Christ’s perfection, not our imperfections.

This is comical. When you wore your shirt today, did you put it over your face? I hope not, or you wouldn’t be able to see where you are going. I think we know how to clothe ourselves (I feel embarrassed talking such nonsense). Surely no one wears his clothes over his face. I know of no garment in the Bible that is worn over the face. We are speaking of garments, not veils (which are used by women in some countries). If clothes are not worn over the face, what can prevent anyone (much less God) from recognizing you when you wear clothes, even if they are new clothes? Even if we wear a veil, surely we are not so foolish as to think that it would prevent God from knowing who we are. Why would God be unable to recognize us (and our imperfections) when we “put on” Christ? When God clothed Adam and Eve with garments of skin (Gen.3:21), presumably He did not wrap the skins over their faces, and then supposed that they were two sheep. Does God provide us with garments of salvation in Christ so that He no longer knows who we really are?

Such an idea exposes a warped and fallacious concept of God, in implying that God deceives Himself. On the contrary, God knows us perfectly, and for that reason His Spirit in us works tirelessly to bring us to Christ-like perfection. He works in us so that we “may grow up in all things into him (Christ)” (Eph.4:15, NKJV). But if God sees us as being already like Christ because we are in Christ, then obviously that kind of work would be unnecessary.

Positionalism has erred in understanding the metaphor of the garment, by taking it literally. Galatians 3:27 reflects the language of Isaiah 61:10:

I will rejoice greatly in the Lord. My soul will exult in my God; for He has clothed me with garments of salvation, He has wrapped me with a robe of righteousness. (Isaiah 61:10)

God has provided us salvation in Christ, which we received at baptism. There is nothing “positional” in all this.

Paul in other passages also uses the imagery of Christ being our garment because, as their context shows, the imagery emphasizes the decisive “laying aside” of the old life like an old threadbare garment, and the “putting on,” or entering into, the new life in Christ. The use of the garment metaphor is particularly suited to bringing out the change from the old to the new life. For example,

Let us therefore **lay aside** the deeds of darkness and **put on** the armor of light ... **Put on** the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provisions for the flesh in regard to its lusts. (Romans 13:12,14).

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 **put on** the new self, which in the likeness of God has been created in righteousness and holiness of the truth. Therefore, **laying aside** falsehood, speak truth. (Eph.4:22,24, 25; also Col.3:8,9,10,12)

The garments of salvation and the robe of righteousness (Isa.61:10) are not meant to hide us, but to beautify us, so that we may reflect Christ's beauty and glory. We retain our identity, and people still recognize us. God Himself recognizes us as His "beloved children" (Eph.5:1).

3. Positionalism exempts us from right conduct

If all that positionalism wanted to maintain is that we have some kind of position in Christ, it would not be objectionable. It is when it says that "position" is all that matters whereas actual functional spirituality is optional, that we see its true face.

Let us consider some of the practical implications of positional theology. It implies, for example, that because Jesus is forgiving, you don't have to be forgiving because you are in Christ. God sees Jesus' forgiving spirit, not your unforgiving spirit, so He accepts you even if you refuse to forgive. Christ's perfection then becomes a carpet under which every manner of evil can be swept, providing a license to sin. It rejects Jesus' warning that if we don't forgive men their sins, neither will our heavenly Father forgive us (Mt.6:15).

Positional perfection does not fit in any part of the Lord's teaching, but is a gross distortion of God's word. Instead of drawing us close to God, positional perfection makes communion with Him unnecessary. Because Jesus prays for us day and night, we don't need to pray. We end up not just with vicarious death, but also with vicarious living. He dies for us and lives for us, so we can live as we please, remaining unrepentant and unregenerate.

In the New Testament, position and function are not separate. What we *are* and what we *do* cannot be separated in Christ. I *behave* like a child of God because I *am* a child of God. By God's grace, we do have a position in Christ, but it is inseparable from spiritual functioning. In fact our position in Christ—our relationship to Christ—obliges us to function spiritually, for to whom much is given, much is required (Luke 12:48).¹¹

¹¹ *New Bible Dictionary*, to its credit, does not endorse positionalism. When J.I. Packer writes about perfection in *New Bible Dictionary*, he never brings up the doctrine of positionalism, and in fact never uses the word "position". Most other Bible dictionaries also do not endorse positionalism. Packer in his article "Perfection" says that perfection in saints is marked by "loyal, sincere, wholehearted obedience to the known will of their gracious God." Perfection "is faith at work, maintaining a right relationship with God by reverent worship and service." Packer also says, "The realm of perfection is 'in Christ' (Col.1:28), and perfection of fellowship with Christ, and likeness to Christ." *New Bible Dictionary*, 2nd Edition, J.D. Douglas, editor (Tyndale House, 1982).

4. Two kinds of Christianity

From all this we see two fundamentally different types of Christianity: One is New Testament Christianity for which sees “in Christ” as a relational, functional and dynamic new life. The other sees “in Christ” as a static, fixed, and positional concept.

Because there are two basic types of Christianity, there are two types of Christians. What type of Christian we are hinges on the kind of relationship we have with Christ. The two types of Christianity are reflected in the way Christians live their Christian lives, the way they relate to one another in their Christian communities, and the way they relate to the world as a whole.

Having said that, we recognize that Christians do not necessarily live according to their stated doctrinal positions, nor do they always strictly abide by doctrines they were taught. A person brought up in a positionalist church may nevertheless, by God’s grace, have a living relationship with Christ. There are undoubtedly positionalists who have not taken that teaching to its logical conclusion. They still see the importance of living in a functional relationship to Christ.

Conversely, there are those who have been taught the necessity of a relationship with Christ but have not actually entered into such a relationship. Every church has its share of dynamic and static Christians. These represent two very different types of Christianity. The static type is inclined towards the idea of salvation in terms of a position in Christ.

The other type knows that salvation is not possible apart from a living relationship with Christ through the Holy Spirit given to us.

5. Sonship is not static

The static character of positionalism is seen in how it views sonship, as expressed in the phrase: *Once a son, always a son.* It presumes that even if one does not live like a child of God, he or she will still inherit eternal life in the end. Position is what matters for salvation.

Many Christians embrace this teaching because they see sonship as something static and positional, and are receptive to the concept of the unconditional “assurance” of salvation, which does not depend on how they live and behave, or the sins they commit.

Some Christians justify their positionalism by accusing those who live and teach a dynamic life in Christ of practicing salvation by works. Apparently they don’t know the difference between the works of the law and the works of faith (Gal.5:6; Rev.2:19; the latter are seen in Hebrews 11). The works of faith are the deeds proceeding from a living and dynamic faith, and are not the works of keeping the law.

The Bible portrays sonship in functional terms, not as something static. Let me explain.

There are some thirty parables in Jesus’ teaching. If we go through the list of parables, we will see that they fall into different thematic categories. For example, seven of the parables fall into the category of being servants, in which

people are portrayed as servants, slaves, stewards, and laborers. These include the parable of the talents and the parable of the unforgiving servant. The theme of servanthood is not limited to these seven parables, but we can say that only these seven deal *explicitly and specifically* with the theme of being servants of God.

Only two of the thirty parables speak of sons, and both depict *two types of sons*, the difference between them being their different responses to their father. These are the Parable of the Two Sons and the Parable of the Lost Son (Mt.21:28-32; Lk.15:11-32). These two depict sonship in *functional* terms, for in both parables the two sons already have the position or status of being sons. They do not differ in their being sons but in what kind of sons they prove to be.

In the first parable (Mt.21:28-32), there is a father and two sons. The father told one son to work in the vineyard. The son said, "I will go" but did not. The father gave the same command to the other son. The son said, "I will not go," but later regretted what he said, and went. Then Jesus asks, "Which of the two did the will of his father?" This is very much like the question Jesus asked on another occasion:

"Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?" And stretching out his hand toward his disciples, he said, "Behold my mother and my brothers! For whoever does the will of my Father who is in heaven, he is my brother, and sister, and mother." (Matthew 12:48-50)

On judgment day, who will God recognize as His children, His sons and daughters? Those who do the Father's will. Doing His will is what being functional means. Anyone who thinks he is saved by a positional teaching will be in for a shock on that Day, for "Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven; but he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven" (Mt.7:21).

In the other parable, that of the lost son (Lk.15:11-32), there are again two sons, both of whom are non-functional. In fact this parable could also be called the parable of *two* lost sons. One son was lost by staying home; the other was lost by leaving home. The one who stayed home fulfilled his father's requirements externally and legalistically, but not from his heart.

The son who left home was also non-functional. Like so many Christians, he wanted to go out and do his own thing. Finally, after realizing that he was lost, he repented and returned to his father, saying, "I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Make me like one of your hired servants" (v.19). We cannot be God's son until we are willing to be His servant. This is a principle we also find elsewhere in Scripture.

The son had learned his lesson by now. He used to think in positional terms, namely, that he, as a son, was entitled to his inheritance. And because he had banked everything on his position as a son, he lost all that he had. Finally "he came to his senses" (v.17), realizing his error, and returned to his father, begging him to accept him as an ordinary servant. It

was from that point on that he became functional, having become willing to serve, and thus truly became a son.

Finally, how practical is perfection?

How practical or down-to-earth is perfection? The Biblical answer is: practical enough to govern our everyday conduct, even our speech. James says, “If anyone makes no mistakes in what he says, he is a perfect man, able to bridle the whole body also” (James 3:2). A man is perfect if he can control his tongue, which is the focus of the whole passage. Verse 6 says, “And the tongue is a fire. The tongue is an unrighteous world among our members, staining the whole body, setting on fire the cycle of nature, and set on fire by hell.”

Do we still insist that perfection is a luxury? Since we interact with people daily, a controlled tongue is surely no luxury.

When James says that no one can tame the tongue (v.8), Paul’s picture of a man controlled by the flesh comes to mind, for the flesh has a pivotal center in the tongue, an unruly piece of flesh. To control the flesh—“the whole body” (3:2)—we must tame the tongue (1:26).

“Death and life are in the power of the tongue” (Prov.18:21). The tongue has the power of life and death! Great power has been granted to us in that tiny member inside our mouths, which can do much good or much evil. A wise man once said that the tongue has the tendency to

slip because it lives in a wet place! How easily it causes other people to slip and stumble too.

Rabbi Gamaliel, a great Jewish teacher, had a servant named Todi. One day Gamaliel said to his servant, “Since we will be having a celebration, go to the market and buy the best thing you can find there.” Todi went to the market and came back with an ox’s tongue. Gamaliel asked, “Why did you buy this?” Todi answered, “A tongue is the best thing.”

The rabbi then said to Todi, “Return to the market tomorrow, and buy the worst thing you can find there.” And what does Todi come back with? A tongue! Rabbi said to him, “Yesterday you brought back a tongue, and today you bring back another tongue. Please explain.” The wise servant said to his wise teacher, “The tongue is the best thing in the world, but also the worst thing in the world.”

The tongue has the power of life and death. The tongue of the wise brings health, but rash words pierce like a sword (Prov.12:18). A gracious tongue is a tree of life, but the perverse tongue breaks the spirit of people (15:4).

The power of the tongue is at our command, and we can use it for good or for evil. The perfect man controls his tongue, and with his controlled tongue, he strengthens, encourages and builds up people. What blessing, what encouragement, what joy we give to people if we live as God intends us to live. Every day we can bring spiritual blessings to people through this powerful instrument, the tongue, which the Lord has entrusted to us.

May we, by God's grace, be functionally perfect and become a channel of God's life to those around us.

APPENDED NOTE: THE ERROR OF "POSITIONAL" THINKING

In discussing the fallacy of positional perfection, I did not comment on the "positional" syllogism. Since I see my responsibility in this book as being that of an exegete and expositor of God's word rather than that of a logician, in this note I shall confine myself to a brief discussion of the logical error of that syllogism.

First, for the benefit of those unfamiliar with syllogisms, here is a clear and concise definition, together with an example, given in *Encarta World English Dictionary* under *Syllogism*:

Argument involving three propositions: a formal deductive argument made up of a major premise, a minor premise, and a conclusion. An example is ...

Adapting Encarta's example to our discussion, we have:

The "positional" syllogism takes the form:

"Christ is perfect, I am in Christ, therefore I am perfect."

This is no more valid than the following: "The Temple is holy, I am in the Temple, therefore I am holy."

These two syllogisms arrive at a false deduction or conclusion because for it to be valid, there has to be a *substantial relationship* between the major and the minor premises beyond “in” in the sense of location.

Penguins *are* birds (the minor premise in Encarta’s *Syllogism*), and “all birds have feathers” (major premise), so the conclusion has to be that “penguins have feathers”. But no such relationship between the major and minor premises exists in either the positional syllogism or the Temple syllogism. Being in the Temple courts, or even in its sanctuary, does not make me a part of the Temple; it is the Temple *itself* that is holy, or wholly consecrated to God.

Being in the Temple of God does not make one holy, not even if one lives in it. The Sadducees, Pharisees and scribes all spent a lot of time in the Temple, not to mention the money changers and the merchants who sold sacrificial animals. Did their being in the Temple make them holy? The answer is certainly “no”.

Likewise, being “in Christ” does not make me a part of the very person of Christ. I cannot claim his attributes as though they were my own. To help us see this as clearly as possible, let us return to the picture of the penguin.

A penguin is not just like a bird or related to a bird, it *is* a bird; hence the attributes of a bird apply to it. But if the original syllogism is restated as: “all birds have feathers, penguins are *in* birds, therefore penguins have feathers” (patterned on the “in Christ” syllogism), we see at once that

the insertion of “in” causes the syllogism to disintegrate and become invalid.

Being *in* a bird in any sense (physical, legal, etc.) does not make a thing a bird. There could be food and parasites *in* a bird. Even if a bird had an egg in it, the egg is still not yet a bird, and may never hatch to become one. It follows too that the attributes which belong to birds in a unique way cannot be applied to creatures which are not birds.

Even in the valid syllogism of the penguin, although the penguin as a bird possesses the attributes of birds, it does not possess *all* of them. A penguin is unable to fly even though flying is a common characteristic of birds. Hence, even if we were related to Christ in a sense that is much closer than is described in the term “in Christ,” it would not necessarily or logically prove that we share *all* his attributes.

This should help us to see why the positional argument is false. It should also alert us to the fact that there are plausible sounding arguments which, upon closer inspection, prove to be utterly spurious.

May the Lord grant to us that purity of heart through which we gain clarity of mind and penetrating spiritual discernment.

Chapter 24



PERFECTION AND ASSURANCE

Fear and insecurity in the world



In a world wracked by fear and anxiety—in which security is an illusion—people long for assurance. Life hangs on a thread, exposed to every danger and mishap, from burglary to bankruptcy, from cancer to car accidents. Every year more people die on the roads and highways of North America than American soldiers had fallen on the battlefields and jungles of Vietnam. Many more, thousands upon thousands more, whether they be drivers, passengers or pedestrians, are maimed or crippled in car accidents. The statistics of these unsung victims of the roads would be even more appalling if we included those killed and crippled worldwide.

Man's sense of insecurity is heightened by the element of the unexpected. Accidents are called accidents because they

are unexpected. Yet the unexpected may be more horrific than a car accident.

Just to name one incident out of many, we were shocked not long ago by the news of the San Diego massacre. One fine day in San Diego, people were enjoying their Big Macs and sundaes at a McDonald's restaurant when a man stormed in and shot as many as he could. The final death toll was 22 or 23, with children accounting for half that number. Armed with three automatic weapons, the killer calmly walked up and down between the tables, and shot people in sight.

This savagery has no known motive other than misanthropy, the general hatred of mankind. Some people are so full of hatred that they kill for no sane reason. It is amazing that so many murders and atrocities are committed without any clear motives.

The San Diego police, too, had no clues as to the killer's motives. They surmised that the gunman, filled with rage and hatred, and fuming over a job loss, had decided to vent his anger by taking it out on innocent people at McDonald's, gunning down adults and children who had done him no harm.

Finally a SWAT team stormed the restaurant and shot him dead. But it was too late for his victims, who ranged from a 70-year-old to an infant less than nine months old.

Imagine yourself sitting in a restaurant when a madman storms in and shoots you dead for no known reason. As the first person in sight, you have only enough time to see him

pull the trigger. Life is unsettling when this sort of thing happens; and it is not as uncommon as we wish. Time and again there would be a report of a gunman who shoots down people at random.

Sin has driven many people to an irrational hatred of mankind. No explanation for the hatred is given, and none will be of any use so far as the victims are concerned. Some of the killers are deemed insane but few are truly insane. The violence is often triggered by nothing other than an intense hatred of people. Life gets insecure when normal-looking people can explode into a murderous rage.

Who killed the babies at a Toronto hospital by lethal injection, exterminating newborns who hadn't said a bad word to anyone? Again the motive was probably the hatred of fellow human beings.

Not long ago a man drove his car into a lake with his three children trapped inside the car. The father was facing divorce, so he decided to kill himself and take his children along with him. One daughter, aged 12 or 13, managed to escape through a window. As the sole survivor, she has to begin life anew without her father and siblings, forever haunted by the memory of this dreadful event.

This kind of thing happens every day. Life is all too often tragic and insecure. If you think that only a madman would shoot you, then you have not accounted for every possibility. Last month a man was sleeping peacefully in his motel room when, in a case of mistaken identity, two police officers opened fire through the door and windows. Reacting to the

noise, the man sat up on his bed and was hit by a hail of bullets. It turned out that he was not the dangerous escaped convict they thought he was, but a carpet salesman.

Life gets insecure when you don't know who might shoot you. You may look like a most-wanted criminal only to be shot dead before you can identify yourself. Police officers are only human, and they get jittery when they confront someone who might be a dangerous killer. A man was shot when he reached into his pocket for his ID card. They found out afterwards that he was unarmed.

How do we survive in the jungle that is called the world? My friend's mother was taking a nice stroll one day when, suddenly, a car ran onto the sidewalk and killed her. The driver had lost control of his vehicle. How can you feel secure if you can't even take a walk without looking in every direction? You had better look up too, because some have been killed by falling flower pots!

The insurance industry thrives on insecurity

Man's sense of insecurity is the main factor that fuels the multibillion-dollar insurance industry in North America. Now we have all kinds of insurance, from life insurance to fire insurance, from health insurance to malpractice insurance. It is not only medical doctors but also pastors who buy malpractice insurance. Recently an American pastor was sued for having taken disciplinary action against a member of his church who had committed a serious sin.

People dare not go anywhere or do anything without getting insurance. When you fly, you might want to get insurance to cover baggage loss or flight cancellations, on top of medical insurance and life insurance.

Health insurance companies rake in billions annually because the threat of a fatal or crippling disease is very real. Surgery is very costly, and even a bottle of medicine can be expensive. Life insurance is in great demand even though the benefits do not go to the policyholder when he dies, but to his beneficiaries.

Beware of free assurance

The world longs for insurance and assurance. These two words mean the same. *Oxford Dictionary* says that they are derived from the same root. That is why some companies are called *life assurance companies* and others are called *life insurance companies*.

Churches do not use the word “insurance” because it sounds too commercial, but many talk of “assurance,” which means the same.

Millions have turned to religion, the most successful insurance (assurance) provider in the world. Among the purveyors of assurance are preachers “whose god is their belly” (Phil.3:19), and who cash in on man’s sense of insecurity. People are so insecure that they fall victim to unscrupulous predators who peddle religious assurance.

The prudent man would never trust an insurance policy that claims to cover you for everything from hay fever to death, from unemployment to bankruptcy, at a low premium. If \$5 a year could buy you assurance which covers every imaginable contingency, there must be something dubious about it.

But some churches offer an insurance policy that outperforms anything offered by insurance companies, because it offers you *eternal assurance* for nothing on your part, not even a hint of commitment—all you need to do is believe it. This, we are told, is the essence of grace even though it bears no resemblance to the biblical definition of grace. There are others who offer even more than that: *riches and prosperity*. They promise that God will bless you with these things if you follow their teaching and donate to their organization.

In some churches, people who apply for church membership encounter a tiny clause about giving ten percent of their income to the church. This, we are told, is not the purchase price for assurance but an act of thanksgiving for God's free grace which, as it turns out, is less than free because ten percent of your income can be quite substantial. It is indeed important to offer a tithe to God, but it is a different matter to make it a condition of church membership that the tithe must be given to a particular church. The quest for assurance draws multitudes into religion, raking in vast amounts of money.

Where can you find an insurance company that will keep you safe from hell and eternal destruction? Can any

insurance company insure you from all these? But religion will make you such an offer.

If the assurance which is offered is genuine and substantive, and meets the spiritual needs of people, then a valuable service is indeed rendered. Assurance is certainly of value in the kind of world in which we live. We do not reject assurance. But we must reject *false assurance* that preys on people's needs.

We do well to be cautious if something is said to be free and unconditional. Many preachers have seized the opportunity to exploit man's universal sense of insecurity, making an offer too good to refuse: *unconditional assurance*. That is truly remarkable because insurance policies are never unconditional. Yet there is no shortage of preachers and teachers who proclaim unconditional assurance, a teaching with great appeal for gullible people. Many are so desperate for security that they will clutch at any straw. And when unconditional assurance is dignified with the words "God's free grace," it sounds most convincing and even irresistible.

1. No unconditional assurance in the Old Testament

On the authority of Scripture, let it be declared that no one has the right to exploit human insecurity by offering unconditional assurance. This is crass deception even if it is taught in ignorance, and is a falsehood with no basis in Scripture.

In God's word we see something remarkable. Pick up a concordance, look up "assurance" or a similar word, and

count the number of occurrences. You will be surprised at its rarity.

In the 39 books of the Old Testament, the word “assurance” occurs only twice in the King James Version and once in RSV. From the rarity of “assurance” in the Bible, it would be instructive to assess the Biblical basis of any teaching of assurance such as “unconditional assurance”.

The first occurrence of “assurance” is in Deuteronomy 28:66. A few verses earlier, we see the conditional “if”:

If you are not careful to observe all the words of this law which are written in this book, to fear this honored and awesome name, Yahweh your God, then Yahweh will bring extraordinary plagues on you and your descendants, even severe and lasting plagues, and miserable and chronic sicknesses. (vv.58,59)

There are dire consequences for failing to fulfill the conditions which God stipulates:

“Every sickness also, and every affliction which is not recorded in the book of this law, Yahweh will bring upon you, until you are destroyed.” (v.61)

“As Yahweh took delight in doing you good and multiplying you, so Yahweh will take delight in bringing ruin upon you and destroying you; and you shall be plucked off the land which you are entering to take possession of it.” (v.63)

Verse 66 is where the word “assurance” comes in:

“Your life shall hang in doubt before you; and you shall be in dread night and day, and shall have no assurance of your life.”

To our astonishment, the first instance of “assurance” in the Bible is found in the words, “you shall have no assurance of your life”. Just as surprising, God says He will revoke (take back) all the promises He has made to His people Israel because of their disobedience. God will revoke His promises if the conditions for receiving them are not fulfilled. This is affirmed in verse 68:

And Yahweh will bring you back in ships to Egypt, a journey that I promised that you should never make again; and there you shall offer yourselves for sale to your enemies as male and female slaves, but there will be no buyer.

To be a slave is bad enough, but to be a slave that nobody wants to buy is the ultimate humiliation. Yahweh God will cancel the promise He has made to Israel, namely, the promise that He will never send them back to Egypt, that is, into bondage.

So much for unconditional assurance! There is no assurance of life for those who disobey God. *The Bible never teaches unconditional assurance* because true assurance is given only to those who obey God from the heart.

The only other occurrence of “assurance” in the Old Testament of KJV is found in Isaiah 32:17, which is rendered in NIV as: “The fruit of righteousness will be peace;

the effect of righteousness will be quietness and confidence forever”. This verse speaks of *confidence forever*, which KJV renders as “*assurance for ever*”—that is, eternal assurance, which is conditional on righteousness.

It is clear that the teaching of *unconditional assurance* is foreign to the Old Testament, and is nullified by the two occurrences of “assurance” in the Old Testament.

If we search for another word that has the basic meaning of assurance, we might find it in the term “assured peace” (*shalom emet*, שְׁלוֹם אֱמֶת) in Jeremiah 14:13-14 (KJV, NKJV, ESV). But when you turn to this passage, you will discover that “assured peace” is something that is taught by the false prophets! Here Jeremiah says to God:

Ah, Lord God, behold, the prophets say to them, “You shall not see the sword, nor shall you have famine, but I will give you *assured peace* in this place.” And Yahweh said to me: “*The prophets are prophesying lies in My name; I did not send them, nor did I command them or speak to them. They are prophesying to you a lying vision, worthless divination, and the deceit of their own minds.*”

Just when we find “assured peace” in the Bible, it turns out to be the teaching of false prophets!

We need to be discerning, not gullible. In a world desperate for security, refrain from clutching at every straw. Doctrines do not save us. We must cling to the living God, for it is He who saves us, or we are not saved at all. Check every doctrine in the light of God’s word. If this simple safeguard is not something that you take seriously, then your

situation is truly precarious, for the world is teeming with false prophets who preach peace and security when in truth there is no peace and security for those who ignore God's kingship.

2. Also no unconditional assurance in the New Testament

The same truth is seen also in the New Testament:

For you yourselves know full well that the day of the Lord will come just like a thief in the night. While they are saying, "Peace and safety!" then destruction will come upon them suddenly like birth pangs upon a woman with child; and they shall not escape. (1Thess.5:2-3)

Again the familiar chant of false prophets, "Peace and safety!" Despite the clear message of this passage, many Christians will tell you, "There's nothing to worry about. Our church will offer you everything, including peace and eternal security, and all you have to do is accept them." The truth is that on the day of the Lord, destruction will come upon the multitudes who are unprepared to meet Jesus at his coming.

As for "unconditional assurance," let us recall the most basic facts about salvation in the New Testament. God's grace is free; but it is *not* unconditional. "Free" and "unconditional" are not one and the same thing as some preachers confusedly imagine.

Much wrong teaching on assurance stems from a confusing of these two completely distinct matters: "free" and

“unconditional”. A look at any dictionary will make it clear. We are saved “by grace, through faith” (Eph.2:8; Rom.5:2). Grace is His free gift to us in Christ, *faith is the condition* through which He grants us His gift. There is no salvation without faith.

God has freely given us “great and precious promises” (2Pet.1:4), but none of these would be available to us without faith (v.5).

A beautiful verse which, regrettably, is misused by the preachers to sell “free and unconditional assurance,” is Isaiah 55:1:

Ho! Everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you who have no money, come, buy and eat. Yes, come, buy wine and milk without money and without price.

The water and the bread of life, the wine and the milk, are given freely and abundantly, but that is far from saying that they are obtained without fulfilling conditions. What conditions? The word “come” appears three times in this verse, reminding us of Jesus’ invitation, “Come to me” (Mt.11:28).

What does it involve? Verse 3 says, “Incline your ear and come to Me. Listen, that you may live”. The purpose of coming to God is to listen, so that you “may live”. The coming and the listening are the conditions for receiving life. And whom do we listen to? Verse 6 says, “Seek Yahweh while He may be found; call upon Him while He is near.”

Joel 2:32 says, “Whoever will call on the name of Yahweh will be saved” (cf. Rom.10:13; Ps.116:13).

In order that “you may live” (Isa.55:3) and be saved, there are a series of conditions to be met: *come, listen, seek, and call*. Free indeed, but not unconditional.

First occurrence of *plērophoria* in the New Testament

In the New Testament, “assurance” generally translates *plērophoria*,¹² a Greek word that occurs four times (Col.2:2; 1Thess.1:5; Heb.6:11; 10:22). Let us look at this word to see whether it supports the teaching of unconditional security which is so popular today.

The word first occurs in Colossians 2:2:

... that their hearts may be encouraged, having been knit together in love, and attaining to all the wealth that comes from the full assurance of understanding, resulting in a true knowledge of God’s mystery, that is, Christ himself.

¹² “πληροφορία, ας, ή *full assurance, certainty*. πλοῦτος τῆς πληροφορίας τῆς συνέσεως *a wealth of assurance, such as understanding brings* Col 2:2. ἐν...τλ. πολλῆ, *with full conviction* 1 Th 1:5. ή πλ. τῆς ἐλπίδος Hb 6:11. πλ. πίστεως 10:22. In Col 2:2; Hb 6:11; 10:22; the mng. *fulness* is also poss.” Bauer-Arndt-Gingrich, *A Gk-Eng. Lexicon of the NT*, 2nd edition. See also the authoritative unabridged Liddell and Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, Oxford, 1973, πληροφορία: “*fullness of assurance, certainty, 1Thess 1:5; Col.2:2; Hebr.6:11*”.

Here the “assurance of understanding” is conditional on spiritual understanding, namely, the knowledge of God’s mystery, which is Christ. We enjoy full assurance *provided* that we have spiritual “understanding, resulting in a true knowledge of ... Christ”.

What does “understanding” mean in Scripture? The Greek word *sunesis* in this verse has the basic meaning of intelligence. One is said to be intelligent if he or she understands things quickly, but is less intelligent if he or she is slow to understand things.

Matthew 11:25 says that God hides spiritual things from the “wise and understanding” but reveals them to “babes”. Here “understanding” translates *sunetos* (“intelligent, possessing understanding”), and refers to the intelligent people of the world.

But it is not to them that God reveals spiritual things, for He gives spiritual understanding to “babes”. One may be intelligent, yet dull in spiritual things. Another may be unintelligent by the standards of the world, yet spiritually perceptive. And there are people who have both intelligence and spiritual insight.

Second occurrence of *plērophoria*

Plērophoria (assurance) occurs also in Hebrews 6:11,12:

Show the same diligence so as to realize the full assurance of hope until the end, that you may not be sluggish, but

imitators of those who through faith and patience inherit the promises.

Those who “inherit the promises” are those who have “faith and patience” (endurance) and “hope”. God’s promises are conditional on a faith that endures to the end (cf., Mt.24:13; Mk.13:13).

Third occurrence

Plērōphoria (assurance) occurs next in Hebrews 10:22,23:

Let us draw near with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful.

Again the link between assurance and hope. The link is specifically between “full assurance of faith” and “the confession of our hope without wavering”. To have assurance, we must hold fast to our hope without wavering. Of the many exhortations in Hebrews, one of the most prominent is the exhortation to hold fast and not let go.

“Assurance of faith” indicates an assurance that is conditional on a faith rooted in a pure and unwavering heart, sprinkled clean from an evil conscience. Faith is the foundation and prerequisite of assurance. That is why true faith is marked by assurance. Faith does not doubt or waver. Faith in its nature possesses certainty, confidence and

assurance. Conversely, a lack of assurance reveals a lack of faith in the living God.

Fourth occurrence

Our final reference is 1 Thessalonians 1:5:

For our gospel did not come to you in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction; just as you know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake.

“Full conviction” translates *plērophoria*, a word that is usually rendered “assurance”. The assurance is that of Paul and his co-workers who brought the gospel to the Thessalonians. It is the assurance of preaching “in power and in the Holy Spirit ... with full conviction”.

A conclusion

In summary, we have looked at the four occurrences of *plērophoria* (assurance) in the New Testament, and also the two occurrences of “assurance” in the Old Testament (KJV). The unmistakable conclusion is that Scripture has only a few references to assurance, *and none to unconditional assurance*. The Bible, however, has a lot more to say about faith, from which true assurance stems.

Note: The word “unconditional” appears nowhere in the Bible. Neither does Scripture promulgate the idea that our

relationship with God or with one another is not governed by any principles (laws), requirements, or conditions.

3. Assurance is rooted in perfection

Since the idea of assurance receives little mention in the Scriptures, are we to conclude there is no assurance to speak of both in Scripture and in the Christian life? Certainly not. We have strong assurance. But how can we have such assurance when the Scriptures rarely mention it? The answer to this question is simple: Assurance is a *byproduct* of the fundamental elements in our new life in Christ, things such as faith, hope, and love. Where these elements are present there will inevitably be firm, confident assurance. But where these are lacking, assurance will correspondingly be lacking.

It is now clear why assurance is conditional. Its existence depends on the presence of those other spiritual elements. That is why it can be described as a byproduct. When the Holy Spirit strengthens our faith, encourages our hope, and causes our love to grow, our assurance increases proportionately, even if we are not conscious of it.

As to be expected, it is those who lack assurance who clamor for it. They are the easy victims of false teachers who offer their own brands of “free and unconditional assurance”. But Christ alone is the foundation of true assurance. Rooted in him by faith, there will be no lack of stability and assurance. Security is ours, not by clinging to doctrines that turn out to be false upon inspection, but by trusting in the

living Christ who is the truth. Focus on a living relationship with him, and you won't need to concern yourself with assurance, for *where faith is, there assurance is too*.

Faith, hope, love, and purity are the constituent elements of perfection. Since assurance is rooted in these elements, assurance is *rooted in perfection*.

4. A perfect heart

As we have seen, the stress in Scripture is not on sinlessness but on a heart that is perfect before God. It is heart-perfection that Yahweh God looks for. "Perfect heart" is a term familiar to anyone who is acquainted with the Old Testament historical books, in which the term occurs 12 or 13 times (e.g., 1Kings 8:61; 11:4; 15:3,14).

A perfect heart—a heart perfect in obedience to God—is seen in a perfect *attitude*. This does not mean that everything we do is perfect in every detail. Biblical perfection has to do with the *intentions of the heart*. By contrast, it takes time and effort to achieve excellence, not to mention perfection, in the practical outworking of things. Paul exhorts us to "work out" our salvation (Phil.2:12); God's work in our hearts has to be lived out in our daily conduct.

You might practice at the piano daily, playing the same piece of music over and over again, yet still make mistakes. This does not necessarily mean there is something wrong with your attitude. You might be striving for excellence with a perfect attitude, relying on God. That is the attitude of my

wife Helen. In the past few days I have heard the same piano pieces a few hundred times. With a perfect heart she strives for perfection even though the actual outworking may be less than perfect. What counts is that you have tried your best, having a determination that befits your perfect attitude.

Perfection is a heart that is wholly committed to God and quick to obey Him. It doesn't rule out the possibility of error. We may have spoken a rash word, so we apologize quickly. We didn't mean to be rash, yet we did speak an unkind word that hurt someone, and we thus sinned unwittingly. Perfection in the Bible is not absolute perfection or the total eradication of sin, but a perfect heart attitude towards God.

Jesus calls us to be perfect as our heavenly Father is perfect, but this does not mean that we attain to God's absolute perfection, holiness, or love in this present age. We cannot attain to *absolute* perfection in this life. Perhaps for all eternity we will be striving to be like Him, on the level of the absolute. But in the intentions of our heart, we can make it our single-minded aspiration to be like Him, as expressed in the words of the hymn: *Oh, to be like Thee, blessed Redeemer, pure as Thou art! Come in Thy sweetness, come in Thy fullness; Stamp Thine own image deep on my heart.*

If our hearts are genuine, free of deceit or hypocrisy, and wholly committed to doing God's will, we are right now perfect in the Biblical sense of the word. God does not expect absolute perfection of us at the present time when we are still living in a body where sin dwells in the flesh. But in our

hearts we aim to be like Him. We remain totally yielded to Him, to let Him fashion us ever more fully into His image. That is what the Bible means by a “perfect heart”.

5. Assurance and perfection

Assurance is linked to perfection in Colossians 4:12:

Epaphras, who is one of your number, a bonds slave of Jesus Christ, sends you his greetings, always laboring earnestly for you in his prayers, that you may stand perfect and fully assured in all the will of God.

Full assurance is linked to being perfect, for it flows from perfection and is rooted in it.

Assurance is given to the perfect of heart. I challenge you to find anyone who walks with God with a perfect heart, yet lacks assurance. Such a person does not exist because anyone who is led by the Spirit (Rom.8:14), and thus walks with God with a perfect heart, will inevitably have full assurance from God. It is a deep assurance that comes from the indwelling Holy Spirit, who witnesses with this person's spirit that he or she is a child of God (8:16).

This is not a matter of theory but of experience. If your heart is right before God, you will experience assurance from Him. You will no longer be terrified by the Judgment. The slavish fear of condemnation will make way for a holy fear of, or a reverence for God.

6. Perfect love

Assurance is linked to perfect love in 1 John 4:17-18:

By this is *love perfected* with us, so that we may have confidence for the day of judgment, because as he is so are we in this world. There is no fear in love, but *perfect love* casts out fear. For fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not been *perfected in love*. (ESV)

In these two verses, “perfect” and “love” are mentioned together three times. Not only is “perfect love” possible, it is *necessary* if we are not to live in the shadows of fear and be paralyzed by it. If we are not perfected in love, it means that our conscience is not right before God; hence we wait for the coming judgment with fear and apprehension. The fear that arise from a nagging conscience can so weaken us as to render us spiritually nonfunctional.

Perfect love for God and His people, on the other hand, casts out fear. It doesn't mean that the outward expression of our love is perfect in every aspect; it is often inadequate, leaving much room for improvement. There are occasional mistakes, but when that happens we grieve over them and repent of them. What the Bible requires is a love that is perfect in its *intention*, and resolves to love God and His people. This love dissipates fear just as sunlight drives darkness away. We need not tremble in the fear of judgment, for God has granted us deep assurance in Christ.

7. Examples of perfect love

Perfect love, as we saw in an earlier chapter, is a Christ-like love that keeps on giving without seeking reward or gratitude. Let me illustrate this with two incidents which, though they may seem insignificant, are striking examples of a perfect love that seeks nothing in return.

In my student days in London, I learned much from the life of a certain fellow student called Peter. He was not an eloquent preacher or Bible teacher but his life spoke to me time and again. He once heard that I was going to preach in Nottingham, a city north of London, at the church where Philip Doddridge, a famous hymn writer, had been pastor in the 18th century. He insisted on driving me there. His usual mode of transportation was cycling, but he also had a vintage car dating from perhaps the forties, a veritable museum piece.

Peter lovingly insisted on driving me to Nottingham and back, to save me time and spare me the inconvenience of changing trains. He also wanted to have a share in the preaching of the gospel, even if only by driving me there and back. He was a medical intern, and had been on night duty, working hard through the night. In this situation most Christians would say, "I am too tired. Take the train or get somebody else to drive you there." Not so with Peter. When I expressed concern over the fact that he had not slept all night, he still insisted on driving me there, assuring me that he was used to this sort of thing.

After finishing his overnight shift, he rushed over and drove me to Nottingham, some 110 miles (180 kms) from London “as the crow flies”. The highway had not yet been built at that time, so the drive took about three hours in each direction. I preached in the morning and again in the evening, after which he drove me back to London, arriving late at night.

By now he was so exhausted that he became the only person I have ever seen sleeping while standing up! This happened when we got back to the apartment in London. Roommates and friends gathered around, asking how things had gone in Nottingham. We were standing in a circle. And as I was sharing about the events, I saw Peter standing with his eyes closed. He was swaying back and forth, and it seemed that he might fall any moment.

This spoke to my heart. Here is a perfect self-giving love that is unconcerned for one’s own needs. I said to Peter, “You’re awfully tired, aren’t you?” He opened his eyes and smiled with a sweet smile of devotion to God that spoke to me more powerfully than a hundred eloquent sermons. There was not a word of complaint or self-pity.

The second incident has to do with my hay fever. I sympathize with those who suffer from hay fever because back in England I used to suffer badly from it. Whenever I wrote my three-hour exams, my nose would be dripping away, and I had to keep the exam paper dry. I could never figure out the reason for placing the exam period in the worst

time of the year, right in hay fever season when thousands of students are suffering from itchy eyes and runny noses.

Peter took notice of my condition—red eyes and runny nose—but he also knew that giving me antihistamines could make me drowsy. He told me that a new drug had come out that does not cause drowsiness. In fact it keeps you awake. He asked if he could get some for me. I told him that if he thought it could be useful, I would be grateful if he did.

A few days later when he gave me a bottle of antihistamine, I noticed dark circles around his eyes. I asked him if he had been on night duty again, seeing that he looked as though he had not slept. He said he hadn't been on night duty, and admitted that he hadn't had any sleep. He explained said that this was because he wanted to test the drug on himself first (he did not suffer from hay fever) to make sure that it would not cause drowsiness. To be certain, he took a double dose. The result? He stayed awake all night!

I was deeply touched. He was willing to test the drug on himself though he knew that it would keep him awake all night. It was a price which in his love he gladly paid; it was a sacrifice which, following in the Lord's footsteps, he gladly made.

This is Christ-likeness indeed! And the glory goes to the Lord who puts such love in men's hearts and makes us like himself, beautifying us with his own perfect beauty.

Chapter 25



PERFECT IN LOVE

We discussed perfect love in the last chapter, and caught a glimpse of its importance for our lives as new persons in Christ. In this chapter we consider other aspects of this essential life quality which adorns our lives with spiritual excellence and Christ's beauty, such that we leave behind the spiritual mediocrity which we have been accustomed to.

No perfect love, no living church

Without perfect love there is no church, the body of Christ, in the New Testament sense of "church". It is as fundamental as that. If we subtract love from "church," what would be left of the church? An organization? Church buildings? Christian doctrines? Yes, all of these. But do these constitute the church in the Bible?

In the New Testament, "church" never refers merely to a human organization or to buildings. There were no church

buildings in New Testament times. What then is the church? The word for “church,” *ekklēsia* (ἐκκλησία, made up of *ek*, ἐκ, “out” or “out of,” and *klētos*, κλητός the “called, invited, chosen”) literally means a group of people who have been “called out”.

The word was used in a secular context among the Greeks to refer to an assembly of citizens called out by the town crier. In the Septuagint (a Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible), the word referred to the assembly or congregation of the Israelites. Its meaning in the New Testament is well expressed by Peter’s statement that God “called you out of darkness into His marvelous light”:

But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. (1Peter 2:9, ESV)

The phrase “his marvelous light” refers to salvation, for light and life are inseparable. Christ gives us “the light of life” (John 8:12). God is both light and life, and so is Jesus.

We have been called out of death into life. The church is a community of people who have been *called out* of the darkness of this world to live in God’s light and life given to us in Christ.¹³

¹³ The importance of “call” is seen in its frequency in the New Testament: *kaleō* “call” 140 times; *klēsis* “calling” 11 times; *klētos* “called” 10 times.

But light and life are also inseparably joined with love, which is God's very nature (1Jn.4:8,16). It is impossible to have His light and His life without having His love.

When Paul speaks of the church, his first preference is to refer to it as the "body of Christ". The word "body" does not in itself indicate whether it is dead or alive. Yet Paul is certainly not speaking of a dead body but a living body with its various members working together for the benefit of the whole (1Cor.12-14). And what do we find in the middle of this discourse on the body? *A homily on love*, in the middle chapter 13! God is telling us by this striking arrangement that love is the very heart of the body of Christ, one that pulsates with God's life and God's love.

1. Where do we see the body of Christ today?

In the world today, where do we see the body of Christ in the biblical sense of that term? There is no shortage of church buildings and church organizations, but where do we find a body of God's people that conforms to what we see in Scripture?

In my student days in London, England, I attended one of the most famous churches not only in London, but in England. In that church there was a preacher and pastor of great renown with an extraordinary gift of teaching; he was gifted in the clarity and the expository skill of his preaching. Church attendance was perhaps about a thousand per service. People flocked from all over London to listen to his preaching. When we walked in and sat down, there was a

certain sense of expectation as we waited for the preaching of the word. But after the service was over, people would head straight for the door, rarely greeting or shaking hands with anyone.

It was in this church that many of us received our spiritual nourishment. We were also attending another church at the time, but like so many churches, there was little teaching or preaching of any substance there. To survive spiritually, and to get solid exposition of God's Word, people had to go elsewhere.

An old friend of mine also attended this famous church. I once asked him, "We attended that church for several years in our student days. Did you get to know anybody there?" His answer was no. Of all the amazing things that could happen in the world, we attended that church for several years without knowing anyone in it! There was not even a church get-together where people could have fellowship over a cup of tea.

In what sense then is this a New Testament church? It is of course a church in the sense of its having a building, a congregation, some administrators, and a preacher, but not in the sense of its being a body in which people are related to one another. How many churches in the world would you describe as an integrated body, not in some vague theoretical sense, but in a dynamic and spiritual way?

2. A Bible lecture?

Where do we find a church in the New Testament sense of the word? We scarcely know what it is. Today we go to church to listen to a Bible lecture with some time allotted for hymn singing. Dignifying a lecture with the word “sermon” or “homily” does not change the reality of the matter. There is, of course, nothing wrong with having Bible lectures or calling them sermons, but that does not make a New Testament church.

A church service is basically a meeting that you attend for an hour or so, in which you sing a few songs and listen to a sermon, and then go back home. If the same sermon is given in the faculty of divinity at a university, it would be called a “lecture”; but because it is delivered in a church building, it is called a “sermon”. Yet there is no fundamental difference between the two apart from the fact that at the university you would not normally sing before the lecture. But is this what God wants His church to be?

3. Is a church really a church without love?

What is the answer to this question in the light of Biblical teaching? As we will see, *a church is truly a church only where there is love*. By that definition, of course, a college is not a church; in fact even a church might not be a church. We need to elaborate on this definition because we could easily arrive at a simplistic understanding of what a church is and what love is. We are not seeking a theoretical but a practical and spiritual understanding of the matter. The church as the

body of Christ is a profound concept and can only be touched upon in this chapter in a preliminary way. Love as perfect Christ-like love is profound, and we aim to consider it more fully in this discussion.

The church I attended in London had a thousand people per service. Love one another? We didn't even know one another. Christian love was mentioned in the preaching from time to time, but that meant little in reality because in the rush to go home for lunch, people hardly found time to greet one another.

At the end of the church service, the speed at which people rushed for the doors was amazing. Those who are pressed for time might want to take up jogging in order to beat the traffic jam at the exits where a thousand are trying to get out. It is advisable to preserve your dignity in so doing, by not rushing for the door like a commuter chasing a bus, but quietly trucking along with long, elegant strides.

In that church, the topic of love was brought up occasionally in the sermons, but most people were not interested in communicating with others apart from showing a polite smile.

In all my years in this famous church, I was wondering if it was a church. I attended the lectures (sermons)—good solid lectures—week after week for several years without knowing anyone there, *not even the pastor*. In all those years, only once did I speak to him, and it was not even in church. We bumped into each other at the narrow door of a Christian library, and exchanged a greeting. I never spoke to

him in church because he never stood at the door to greet people. Immediately after the church service, he would retreat to the privacy of his study. Somehow people got used to it.

4. What is a body?

Without perfect love there is in reality no New Testament church, that is, a church as delineated in Biblical teaching, in which it is called the “body of Christ”. What is a body? We don’t have to study medicine to know what a body is; we all possess a body and know something about it.

What can we say about a body? For one thing, the members of the body don’t need to be in direct contact with all the other members. That is not even physically possible. A brain cell cannot be in direct contact with a liver cell; they are linked indirectly through the network of cells in between. Each cell has a direct link with its adjacent cells. The link is not of course a mere physical juxtaposition but a vital, living connection. If a cell is isolated from its neighboring cells, it will die.

In the body of Christ we likewise don’t need to be directly related to every other person in the church universal; that is not physically possible. But it does mean that we ought to be vitally related to those immediately around us.

Let us suppose that, like many Christians, I go to church once a week, and say hello to the people there. When the service is over, I don’t rush for the door but stay back ten minutes, even half an hour, to greet some of the people. I

chat with them for a while, “How are you? You’re down with a cold? Take some medicine and drink plenty of fluids. And how about you over there? Oh, you’ve bought a car? I hope it’s running well.” After this I say goodbye and head back home.

If we call this the body of Christ, we must be jesting. Does a cell come into the body once a week to say hello to the other cells, and then disappears for another week? If you think this is getting comical, you are getting the picture. Someone may point out, however, that this is the way things are nowadays; people are individualistic, so they don’t want to get too involved in people’s lives.

If that is so, how can we ever practice love? For the moment, I am not even talking about perfect love but a general and superficial love that we might call communal friendship or social rapport. How do we practice love when we are living an individualistic way of life? By sending Christmas cards? Or contributing cans of food to the needy? There is simply no body of Christ without perfect love.

And how does a conventional church as we know it differ from a secular organization? If you say that your church is a body, what about your company? The non-Christian works from nine to five, and spends far more time with his colleagues than church members spend with each other. He knows the people in the office better than the church people know each other because he spends far more time with his colleagues. The people in the office are more appropriately called a “body” than are the people in church.

Is there any reason for your reluctance to call the company a body? In the company you have the boss, the operations manager, the sales manager, the office staff, and so on. They spend a large part of the day and the week (and sometimes a good part of their lives) working together, even eating together at the cafeteria. That is more like a body in actual or realistic terms than what can be found in most churches. There is a commitment to one another because the survival of the company and their jobs depend on cooperation and shared objectives.

In what sense is the church a body if the people get together for an hour or two a week? That is perhaps why some theologians speak of the “mystical” body of Christ, a body so mystical that nobody knows what or where it is!

The New Testament never talks about a mystical body of Christ. We read only of the “body of Christ,” a tangible, living, dynamic body. Today this body of Christ is scarcely visible anywhere, so in an ironic sense, sadly, they are not entirely wrong when they say it is mystical. But if we describe it as “mystical” to justify its being spiritually nonfunctional, then we fall into self-deception.

5. Where in practice is the one body?

We won't have a body of Christ in the New Testament sense unless its cells are vitally connected to one another in love. But the average church today has no structure of interconnected cells, much less a body in which there is constant interaction in a vital relationship between all its members.

Students who share a household would understand what I said at the beginning, namely, that without perfect love there is no body of Christ. When you live together, you see the importance of love, without which it would be impossible to tolerate each other for long. Perfect love is vital when you stay together as a household, or a team, or in communal life, because without perfect love, people won't be able to stay together in oneness.

People who isolate themselves won't need to concern themselves with love because they are not living in a direct relationship with others. All they need to do is to show up on Sunday with a friendly smile. But when people stay together, love is indispensable. It is easy to put up with people one hour a week, but not ten hours a day. So if there is no love, you are obliged to seek refuge in isolation.

Many Christians are afraid of communal living because of its special pressures. But if you live a solitary Christian life, in what sense are you a member of the body? When people remove themselves from a living relationship to each other in the body of Christ, the body starts to fall apart.

Right after Pentecost, as love was being poured into their hearts by the Holy Spirit, the Christians at Jerusalem began to draw close to one another. Where love permeates the heart, people are drawn together. These Christians "broke bread" or had meals together whenever possible. They interacted with one another. Not even the married couples isolated themselves from the main body. Everyone had a

vital link to the others in the body of Christ on the cell level, and practiced hospitality.

In the body of Christ, commitment to one another is not optional. If you live an isolated Christian life, commitment wouldn't be necessary. Do you still remember how easy it was to be a Christian when you stayed by yourself? Love was not really necessary. But when you moved in with others, suddenly it became very hard to be a Christian. You stepped on each other's toes, and stumbled over each other. In the household are people of different temperaments and different ways of doing things. In this situation, the necessity of love becomes perfectly clear.

6. What is our concept of the church?

We now see why we do not, in practical terms, have a body of Christ today. The question before us is whether we are truly engaged in building up a New Testament church. If all we want is a church where people get together on Sundays, but who don't interact for the rest of the week, then the task is relatively easy. If we all yield to our egoism and individualism, what will happen to the body of Christ? Do we think we can be saved without being members of his body?

Has love become a luxury today? In this age of spiritual poverty, is talking about perfect love as farfetched as a beggar talking about living in a palace? Do we tell ourselves that perfection of love is out of touch with reality? That we spiritual beggars should not waste time talking about love and other lofty topics? If so, we might as well say the Bible

is irrelevant, for it was Jesus himself who called us to be perfect.

Either we strive for perfection, aiming for nothing less than perfect love, or it may be better that we don't talk about the church at all. When we talk about the church today, we talk about raising funds for a church building. But the Bible never talks about a church building. We form a congregation and call it a church, but it is not a New Testament church unless its members are committed to one another in love.

Today "church" refers to any Christian group with an organizational structure. We have the Roman Catholic Church, the Baptist Church, the Methodist Church, and so on. That in itself is not a "church" in the New Testament sense. *The New Testament has in view a body that functions as an organism*, not merely as an organization. A body is a living organism, or it is not a true body. The Body of Christ is a living spiritual organism, hence Paul could speak of members who function as feet, ears, eyes, or hands within it (1Corinthians 12:15ff).

I am preaching the gospel today, but maybe I should get another job. If we have no body of Christ in the New Testament sense, then neither do we have a church. If that is so, then I have no ministry, for I don't want to preach God's word as a Sunday lecture. Either the preaching of the Word brings about the body of Christ, or I have no useful function in the church. My task, as I see it in Scripture, is to build up the body of Christ.

The danger of partial obedience

One of the most dangerous things in the Christian life, and therefore for the life of the church, is partial obedience as opposed to perfect obedience. Partial fulfillment deceives us because it manages to soothe our conscience by making us think that we have done something when in fact we have not done it perfectly. If we obey partially, we think we have met our obligations in one sense or another.

Anything less than perfect obedience will only lead to self-deception. As we have seen in an earlier chapter, Scripture says that no sacrifice is acceptable to God unless it is perfect. You cannot offer Yahweh a sacrificial sheep that has the slightest blemish. If it has a limp or a deformed ear, it is unacceptable. The priest inspects the sheep carefully to make sure it is perfect. Only when it passes the inspection can it be offered to God as a sacrifice.

In much of Christianity today, people offer just about any kind of junk to God. Christianity has become a garbage collection center where people offer to God imperfect, partial, or half-hearted service. Yet they think they are doing quite well because they are doing more than those who just go to church and offer nothing, not even a tithe. And there are those who go to church with the intention of getting whatever they can for themselves.

Saul fulfilled God's command *partially*, and thought he was obeying God. Samuel said to him, "Why then did you not obey the voice of Yahweh?" To which Saul retorted, "But I did obey the voice of Yahweh" (1Sam.15:19-20). Like

so many Christians today, he thought he had obeyed Yahweh God when in fact it was only partial obedience.

Partial obedience, as Samuel pointed out to Saul, is disobedience and the rejection of God's word: "Because you have rejected the word of Yahweh, He has also rejected you from being king" (v.23). If Saul had continued to obey Yahweh, his kingship over Israel would have remained in his house and lineage forever; but that was taken away because of his partial obedience which, in God's sight, is disobedience. Samuel said to Saul:

"You have acted foolishly; you have not kept the commandment of Yahweh your God which He commanded you, for now Yahweh would have established your kingdom over Israel forever. But now your kingdom shall not endure ... because you have not kept what Yahweh commanded you."
(1Samuel 13:13-14)

On judgment day, some will commend themselves to the Lord Jesus, saying, "Lord, Lord, haven't I done this and that, and even cast out demons in your name?" Yet Jesus will say to them, "Depart from Me, you evildoers" (Mt.7:22-23). Evildoers? How could he say that? Surely exorcism benefits the spread of the gospel, and demons are cast out only by the power of God. Satan doesn't cast out demons because that would weaken his own kingdom (Mk.3:23,24). Hence those who cast out demons must have functioned by God's power. In what sense, then, are they evildoers?

We could imagine them pleading, "Lord, Lord, haven't you called us to cast out demons and do mighty works to

build your kingdom? Surely we have done your will.” They did obey, but it was partial obedience. When will we learn, once and for all, that disobedience in one area despite obedience in another is ultimately disobedience in God’s eyes? Christians seem to feel that because they have obeyed in one area or another, they will be safe on the Day of Judgment.

On the day when all Christians stand “before the judgment seat of Christ” (2Cor.5:10), many will find themselves in serious trouble with the Lord, not because of outright disobedience but because of *partial obedience*. Like the people in Matthew 7:22, they will say, “Lord, Lord, I went to church every Sunday, gave financial help to so-and-so, and even cast out a couple of demons,” only to hear the reply, “Depart from me, you evildoer.”

In what sense an evildoer? Since this statement occurs in chapter 7 in the Sermon on the Mount, we can ask ourselves whether we are obeying the Sermon itself. It is precisely in this Sermon that Jesus calls us to be perfect in love (Mt.5:48). Will not the rejection of this clear command be the downfall of many Christians on that Day?

Not just love, but perfect love: Jesus’ love

Brothers and sisters, partial obedience is why we don’t have a functional New Testament church. Even in New Testament times, not all the churches lived up to the Biblical teaching. The Corinthian church is a well-known example.

Towards the end of the New Testament period, we see serious failings in five of the seven churches in Revelation chapters 2 and 3. These failures in the “obedience of faith” arose from partial obedience. They were called to repentance, with stern warnings of the consequences of continued disobedience. We do well to heed these warnings in Revelation 2 and 3, for these were written also for our instruction.

Hence we are not hiding the faults of the various local churches of the New Testament era, which had their own failings even if they were generally better than the churches today. What we mean by “New Testament church” is the church as it is meant to be *by the standards of the New Testament*.

In New Testament teaching, there is no true church if *love does not prevail in it*. In fact Jesus’ requirements are even higher than “Christian love” as we understand that term, for he says, “This is My commandment, that you love one another *just as I have loved you*” (John 15:12).

Some may object to my repeated reference to perfect love: “Did Jesus really call us to perfect love, or are you setting a standard higher than what Jesus and the Bible require?” I would never dare set a higher standard than what Jesus sets for his people, but neither do I dare to set a lower standard.

What is the standard set by Jesus? It is stated lucidly in the words, “*Just as I have loved you*”. The question is not whether we love one another, but whether we love one another *as Jesus loved us!* And how did he love us? At the cross

he poured himself out for us without reserve, holding back nothing even to his last breath. Isn't that the absolute expression of perfect love?

Yet he calls us to it. "We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us; and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren" (1John 3:16). Again the call to love *as he loved*. Perfect love or perfected love is mentioned in 1John 4:18, but the idea permeates the whole New Testament, especially in regard to Christ's saving work for us. Perfect love is not something new that appears for the first time in the New Testament, for God had already called His people to such love in the Old Testament. Jesus himself emphasized this fact. To the question, "Which is most important of all the commandments?" Jesus replied:

The most important one is this: 'Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with **all** your heart and with **all** your soul and with **all** your mind and with **all** your strength.' The second is this: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no commandment greater than these. (Mark 12:28-31, NIV)

Notice the fourfold "all" and the totality of the call to love. Yet it sums up the "old" commandment of the *Old* Testament:

Beloved, I am not writing a **new commandment** to you, but an **old commandment** which you have had from the beginning; the **old commandment** is the word which you have

heard. On the other hand, I am writing a **new commandment** to you, which is true in him and in you, because the darkness is passing away, and the true light is already shining. (1John 2:7,8)

Jesus' perfect love for us is the standard of love to which we are called by this "new" commandment: "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another" (John 13:34).

The "new" in the "new commandment" brings out the substance and character of "as I have loved you" of Jesus' cruciform love. Can we love as he loved? Yes, but *only if God's love is poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit*. God has done this very thing in those who have yielded their lives to Him in the obedience of faith. This is what Paul says in Romans 5:5, "The love of God has been poured out within our hearts through the Holy Spirit who was given to us" (cf. Acts 5:32, "the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey him").

If we are truly God's people, it means that He has already provided us with a more than adequate supply of His love, in fact an abundant supply as expressed in the words "poured out". What then would be our excuse for failing to love with His perfect love other than that we refused to open our hearts to His outpoured love?

It is clear that we who profess to be God's people have refused to open our hearts wide to the influx of God's love; thus we don't have His perfect or total love to channel to others. I once asked a coworker, "Do you think your

teammate loves you?” The answer was yes. When I asked further, “Do you think your teammate loves you totally?” This time the answer was no. Very significant indeed! “Yes, my teammate loves me, but not totally.” There was love, but it came with a great measure of hesitation. The question is not whether we love others (to which the answer would be an easy “yes”), but whether we love them *as Jesus has loved us*.

1. Perfect love: love to the end

Since we are commanded to love as Jesus loved, the obvious question is: How did Jesus love his disciples? John 13:1 gives the answer:

Now before the feast of the Passover, Jesus knowing that his hour had come that he should depart out of this world to the Father, having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end.

Jesus loved his own, but more than that, he loved them to the end. That is perfect love indeed. He was about to be crucified, to lay down his life for his people. Having loved them, he loved them to the end—that is, unto death. And he expects the same from us when he says, “Love one another as I have loved you.”

The phrase “to the end” comes from the Greek *eis telos* (εἰς τέλος). Bauer-Arndt-Gingrich’s Greek-English lexicon (*eis*, section 3) says, “In addition to place and time, it can be used to indicate degree: εἰς τέλος completely, fully,

absolutely”. Referring to John 13:1, the lexicon goes on to say that the verse “combines in εἰς τέλος (*eis telos*) the meanings to the end and to the uttermost”. Jesus’ perfect love means loving his disciples to the very end, to the farthest extent, to the absolute limit, to his last breath upon the cross.

2. Enduring to the end

To understand what it means to love to the end, let us look at another instance of *eis telos*. In Matthew 10:22, Jesus says, “You will be hated by all for my name’s sake, but he who endures to the end will be saved.” Here *eis telos* has to do with salvation.

What does it mean to endure to the end? This verse stands in the context of persecution, which is so severe that it could cost his disciples their lives, as the previous verse stated explicitly. Enduring to the end means enduring to the end of one’s life, *enduring unto death*. It has in view a martyr’s death, which could mean a death by stoning (Acts 7:58,59) or by crucifixion, the most terrifying form of torture-execution. Jesus loved his own to the end, unto death on the cross.

Such love is possible in us only by grace and faith

Just as we are saved by grace through faith, so perfect love is possible only by grace through faith. We need grace and faith to attain what we cannot accomplish for ourselves, things such as salvation, perfection, and loving to the end.

If Jesus didn't require perfect love in the first place, why would we need grace and faith? It is humanly possible for us to love in a human way without God's help. That kind of love would not, of course, be perfect love, but a partial or selective human love. The non-Christian doesn't need grace to love his family members. Or to believe in Jesus intellectually. There is nothing inherently difficult about believing in the historicity of Jesus, or that he died a heroic death. We don't need God's grace to believe in historical facts.

It takes grace and faith, however, to accomplish the impossible. By any standard, perfect love is humanly impossible. That is something that everyone knows from experience. It helps us to see our dire need for saving faith, for we now realize that if God's perfect love is not in us then His life, eternal life, is also not in us. His life and His love are one integrated whole. Without the one we don't have the other.

The necessity of grace becomes equally apparent, for it is out of His boundless grace that God gives us His life and His love. When we draw upon God's grace by faith, we will experience the power to love with His perfect love—to the end, to the uttermost, to the absolute limit, even unto death.

Persistent, stubborn love

The term *eis telos* (to the end) appears also in the parable of the unrighteous judge who refuses to take up the case of a widow because she has no money to bribe him with. In her

desperation, she takes the only course of action available to her: *nag him to the end* (*eis telos*). As a result, the weary judge says to himself,

Even though I do not fear God nor respect men, yet because this widow bothers me, I will give her legal protection lest by continually coming she wear me out. (Luke 18:4,5)

Where does *eis telos* occur in this passage? In the word *continually*. The widow pursues the judge *eis telos*—absolutely, persistently, to the end. When he sips his cup of tea, he gets a phone call from her. When he collects his mail, he finds a letter from her. When he opens the front door, she is standing outside. He is losing sleep over the widow, and has nightmares about her. This is *eis telos*—persisting to the end.

So when *eis telos* is applied to love, it portrays persistent, determined, stubborn love. As the widow would not let go of the judge until her cause reaches the desired conclusion, so Jesus loved his own to the end irrespective of their failings and weaknesses, even their spiritual dullness. Jesus calls us to love one another as he loves us: tenaciously, tirelessly, resolutely—to the end, unto death, even death on a cross.

“As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.” (John 13:34,35)

Chapter 26



SALVATION AND PERFECTION ARE INSEPARABLE

In this chapter we examine three important matters regarding regeneration, renewal and perfection.

First, in the teaching of Jesus, there is *no salvation apart from perfection*. In today's Christianity, this statement may seem astonishing, so it will be examined in some depth.

Second, there is *no perfection apart from faith*. Combining this with the first point, we have the vital principle of *salvation by faith*.

Third, we need to define more precisely the meaning of faith as seen in Scripture. The Reformation did us a great service by teaching the principle of *justification by faith*, but did not complete that service because it failed to define what that faith is. So I will return to the topic of faith with the aim of arriving at a more precise definition.

No salvation apart from perfection

In Scripture there is no salvation without perfection, that is, we cannot hope to be saved without being perfect in heart. This is seen in the account of the rich young ruler in Matthew 19:16-26, a passage that is crucial for understanding the Lord's teaching on salvation. Let us read this account, paying particular attention to the word "perfect" in the middle of the passage (v.21), and to the many references to salvation (shown in boldface):

¹⁶ Now a man came up to Jesus and asked, "Teacher, what good thing must I do **to get eternal life?**"

¹⁷ "Why do you ask me about what is good?" Jesus replied. "There is only One who is good. If you want **to enter life**, obey the commandments."

¹⁸ "Which ones?" the man inquired. Jesus replied, "'Do not murder, do not commit adultery, do not steal, do not give false testimony, ¹⁹ honor your father and mother,' and 'love your neighbor as yourself.'"

²⁰ "All these I have kept," the young man said. "What do I still lack?"

²¹ Jesus answered, "If you want **to be perfect**, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will **have treasure in heaven**. Then come, follow me."

²² When the young man heard this, he went away sad, because he had great wealth.

²³ Then Jesus said to his disciples, "I tell you the truth, it is hard for a rich man **to enter the kingdom of heaven**.²⁴ Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the

eye of a needle than for a rich man **to enter the kingdom of God.**”

²⁵ When the disciples heard this, they were greatly astonished and asked, “Who then can **be saved?**” ²⁶ Jesus looked at them and said, “With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible.” (NIV)

1. Seven references to salvation

Let us examine this passage. What is the main issue here? The whole discussion is started by a simple but crucial question, “*What must I do to have eternal life?*” Hence the whole account is centered on the question of obtaining *eternal life*, as confirmed by the many words shown in boldface. The evidence for this is so abundant that it can be presented in seven brief points:

First, there is the question which starts the whole discussion, the one asked by the rich young ruler: “Teacher, what good thing must I do *to get eternal life?*” (v.16)

Second, Jesus refers to eternal life when he replies, “If you want *to enter life*, obey the commandments” (v.17).

Third, Jesus refers to eternal life when he speaks of “treasure in heaven” (v.21), with its inseparable link with perfection: “If you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have *treasure in heaven.*”

The “if you want to” clause that is used here and in the second point, shows the parallel between “if you want to enter life” and “if you want to be perfect”. These are not two

alternatives from which we choose one and not the other. “To enter life” and “to be perfect” are inseparably linked. We cannot have God’s life (eternal life) without having His perfection (His character or image).

Fourth, Jesus says, “I tell you the truth, it is hard for a rich man *to enter the kingdom of heaven*” (v.23). Elsewhere he says, “No one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit” (Jn.3:5). To be born of the Spirit (born anew) and enter the Kingdom is to “enter life”.

Fifth, Jesus again refers to the Kingdom when he says, “It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man *to enter the kingdom of God*” (v.24).

The word “enter” in points 2, 4, 5 highlights the parallel between three phrases: “enter life”, “enter the kingdom of heaven”, and “enter the kingdom of God”.

Sixth, the astonished disciples exclaim, “Who then can be saved?” (v.25), demonstrating that the whole discussion is about salvation.

Seventh, Jesus concludes the discussion with a striking statement on inheriting eternal life that returns to the initial question of eternal life: “And every one who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or lands, for my name’s sake, will receive a hundredfold, *and inherit eternal life*” (v.29).

The overwhelming evidence in the whole passage shows that this passage, from the beginning to end, focuses on the question of *inheriting eternal life*. Moreover, this question is intertwined with the matter of *perfection* (v.21). Without

perfection of heart, you cannot enter into life, or inherit eternal life, or be saved, or enter the kingdom, or have treasure in heaven.

2. Is the Lord's teaching distasteful to us?

Today we are so used to the preaching of a cheap gospel that we can read this passage and miss its plain meaning. Jesus' teaching on salvation is so distasteful to us that we tell ourselves that he cannot mean what he says. But if that were so, could someone tell us what he really means? And why does he speak of being perfect?

When Jesus talks about perfection, how does he present it? Does he say to the rich young man, "My friend, you're a nice person and are moving on the right track. So why don't we add a cherry on top of the icing, and supplement your spirituality with a touch of perfection?"

That is not how the Lord depicts perfection. Perfection is not a spiritual luxury or a higher-level Christianity, but something fundamental to salvation. It is crucial to the whole question of eternal life. When the rich young ruler turned away sorrowful, rejecting the call to be perfect, Jesus did not say, "He is a good man, but he could have been better by aiming for perfection". On the contrary, what Jesus said was, "It is hard for a rich man *to enter the kingdom of heaven*" (v.23). It is not an issue of spiritual improvement, but of salvation. Perfection is not about reaching a higher spiritual state *after* having entered the kingdom of heaven. It is about entering the kingdom, *period*.

The disciples caught his point, so they asked him: Who then can be saved if not this rich man? He is moral and religious, noble and upright, and if he is not saved, who stands a chance? Jesus acknowledged their point, saying: “With men this is impossible, but with God all things are possible” (v.26).

With men this is impossible. Jesus teaches a salvation that is impossible for the natural man to attain or even accept. Yet many churches preach a sugar-coated gospel that is almost impossible for man to *refuse*.

Jesus makes perfection a condition for entering the kingdom of heaven (v.21), so you may think that he is making salvation impossibly difficult. And you’re right! Jesus wants us to understand that *salvation is unacceptable and impossible to the natural man*. That is how he himself proclaimed the gospel.

Many churches today preach a salvation by grace, the free gift of God. But they also say that *faith is the hand that reaches out to take it*. Salvation, as it is presented today, makes it impossible for you to refuse it, unless you are a fool. What level-headed person would refuse a free gift with no strings attached? Here we see the wide gulf—the infinite chasm—between the gospel that Jesus preached, and the gospel that we often hear today.

But how did they arrive at that definition of faith in the first place? Where does Scripture say that faith is the hand that reaches out to accept the free gift?

It would be more biblical to portray faith not in terms of hands, but in terms of knees (and heart) bowed humbly and gratefully before God who bestows His mercies. Paul says, “I bow my knees before the Father” (Eph.3:14), a statement that is sandwiched between two references to faith: “We have boldness and confident access through faith in him” (v.12), and “So that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith” (v.17).

Contrary to what is often preached today, Jesus gives a different answer to the question of eternal life: *Be perfect*. Fortunately he doesn't leave us in the dark about the meaning of “perfect”. As he explains to the rich young ruler: To be perfect, you must give up all your possessions; this will be the outward expression of *offering up yourself to God*, who had given you all that you have in the first place (1Cor.4:7). Then you will have treasure in heaven which you cannot see with your eyes now, but which you will receive in the future (a vital ingredient of faith, Heb.11:1; Gal.5:5; Rom.8:24). *Then come, follow me*.

Being perfect is here defined in terms of forsaking all to follow Christ, which shows its connection to Christ-likeness. For what will be the outcome of following Christ daily but to become like him?

As for Jesus' call to follow him, we can imagine the young man getting worried: “Lord, just now you were talking about keeping the commandments. If I may say so, I have kept them to the best of my ability.” Nobody, not even the Lord Jesus, doubts his sincerity. He has genuinely kept the

commandments to the best of his ability. Surely a decent person like him, after trying his best, deserves to inherit eternal life without necessarily following Jesus, doesn't he?

But the Lord's response is: "No, you must sever your attachment to the world, which is represented by your possessions. Then, free from all hindrances, come and follow me."

Many Christians have reacted negatively to this story: "There must be a mistake here. Salvation isn't so difficult. The rich young man has kept the commandments to the best of his ability, and has never done a wicked deed. Tell him to give up some of his possessions, but not all. Given his wealth, that's already a big sacrifice. If he keeps some of his possessions, he can be a good Christian by helping out the church financially."

But Jesus takes it to the absolute limit: "*No one of you can be my disciple who does not give up all his own possessions*" (Luke 14:33). The words "no one" allow for no exception. The word "all" rules out keeping anything in the world. It doesn't take a genius to see the stark contrast between the gospel that Jesus preached and the gospel we hear today. Today we dare not preach the true gospel for fear of getting few converts. If you want to pack your church with people, you need to avoid preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ because it is *impossible* for the natural man to accept it. It sticks like a fish bone in his throat. Jesus knows it is impossible, and he has decreed it that way.

3. The rich young ruler: as perfect as a man can be in the world

The rich young ruler is an elegant and attractive man who must have caught the eye of many a girl. He is not just rich, but “extremely rich” (Luke 18:23). In modern terms, you might picture him driving up to the Lord Jesus in a Mercedes sports coupe. Yet the admirable thing about him is that he is not arrogant. In this man we see the rare combination of wealth and humility. We marvel at his unassuming dignity and noble demeanor, the very qualities that are so rare in rich people.

He kneels before Jesus (Mark 10:17), humbling himself before a teacher of lowly status in Israel. At this point Jesus is just a newcomer and an upstart teacher, having been in his ministry for one or two years. Yet the rich man gets out of his Mercedes sports coupe, and kneels on the dusty ground.

His self-effacing humility is different from the way rich people might swagger up to Jesus, saying, “Hey, I want eternal life. What’s the deal?” If the rich young man had talked like that, the Lord would have ignored him.

To add courtesy to humility, he addresses Jesus as “Good Teacher” (Lk.18:18). But Jesus questions him on that point: Are you just being polite? Do you know what “good” or “goodness” really means?

The young man is free of hypocrisy or superficiality. Jesus looks at him, and loves him (Mark 10:21) for the genuineness of his attitude.

More than that, the young man is learned and capable by the fact that he is a ruler (Luke 18:18). The word “ruler” may refer to a synagogue leader, or it may refer to a member of the Sanhedrin, the highest legal and religious body in Israel, the rough equivalent of the Supreme Court. The Bible does not say whether he is a synagogue leader or a member of the Sanhedrin, or both. Whichever is the case, he must have been reasonably learned and capable to hold either position. In Israel, a position of this type is not obtained by wealth or status, but by one’s ability and knowledge, especially of the law. That is the more impressive given the fact that he is a young man (v.20).

What more do you want in a man? He is young, he is learned, he is a ruler, he is extremely rich. Yet he is humble, polite, moral and religious. Possessing all these qualities, he is a worthy representative of all that is the best in the human race.

He is perfect as far as the world is concerned. If you are looking for the perfect man, he is an obvious candidate. He has every quality that you could seek in a man. And he has everything that one could wish for in the world: wealth, influence, status, learning, youth. Given that he is moral and sincere, doesn’t he deserve to inherit eternal life?

But the Lord Jesus, despite his love for the rich young ruler, refuses to lower the standard for the sake of admitting him into the kingdom.

This whole account brings out the fact that you can have everything in the world yet have nothing in the kingdom of

God. You can have worldly (even moral) perfection, yet lack spiritual perfection.

Jesus makes it clear that to obtain the spiritual we *must* give up all that is worldly. We cannot have both because they are incompatible. Hence Jesus could not admit the young ruler into the kingdom until he forsakes his worldly attachments. No one who clings to the world can take hold of the kingdom.

This is a vital spiritual truth, and we ignore it to our eternal cost. The Lord Jesus says to the church in Laodicea:

“You say, ‘I am rich, and have become wealthy, and have need of nothing,’ and *you do not know* that you are wretched and miserable and poor and blind and naked.” (Revelation 3:17)

These Christians in Laodicea think that they have everything (“have need of nothing”) when in fact they have nothing. Their true spiritual condition is described as being “wretched, miserable, poor, blind, and naked” (five dire adjectives!), yet they were not even aware of it!

4. What captivates your heart?

Jesus is saying to the rich young man, “As far as the world is concerned, you are as perfect as you could be. But you lack one thing, the most important: *perfect obedience to God*. My friend, you cannot inherit eternal life because your heart is still tied to the world.”

Before we congratulate ourselves for not being attached to riches, let us search our hearts because there could well be something in the world that still appeals to us. If it is not money, it could be status, recognition or academic degrees. *Whatever it is in the world that captures your heart, that is what will stop you from following the Lord wholeheartedly.* More than that, the thing that is gripping your heart will stop you from entering into life, as in the case of the rich young man who was captive to his wealth.

The wealthy seldom think of themselves as being slaves of their riches, but rather as masters of their possessions, for they can dispose of their assets as they wish. But our possessions often control us by taking up our time, energy and attention to manage our assets (house, car, bank account, business). Do we control our possessions or do they control us? The one who is confident that he has control over his riches has not understood “the deceitfulness of riches” (Mt. 13:22).

We may congratulate ourselves for not being rich. We own nothing of great value that we need to give up. If we take our belongings to a pawn shop, they may be rejected as worthless. So we say, “The rich young ruler cannot enter the kingdom but, hallelujah, we can!”

Not so fast. The Lord Jesus is never superficial. Riches hindered this young man, but something else may be hindering us. We can be sure that everyone is attracted to something in the world in one way or another. It may be a respected position in society, the pride of academic

achievement, or the applause of men. To a performing artist, praise is better than diamonds. I knew this only after listening to comments made by several artists. Applause might not mean much to you, but it is everything to an artist. It is music to his ears and the thing he lives for, because it is the indicator of his success.

One way or another, everybody is attracted to something in the world, and that thing is specific to each person. It is amazing what people are attracted to. Some are so obsessed with traveling that they work for years to save up for a trip around the world.

Some work like slaves to get a job promotion that comes with perks such as a swivel chair and an office cubicle. The cubicle may be small and suffocating, but for many it represents all of paradise. That swivel chair and the executive desk represent the sum total of his aspirations. He dreams of sitting behind the desk presently occupied by his manager, hoping that one day he will be able to put his feet on it and twiddle his thumbs. To gain that cubicle, he toils like a slave for many years.

Something in the world is captivating your heart. For some, it is food. Hong Kong people are familiar with this, and they don't need me to explain it to them. Food is the joy and contentment of life for which one is willing to work hard. Not just the Chinese but also the French. When we were in France, I was shocked by the menu prices, yet the restaurants were full of people. Either the people are fabulously rich, or food is for them an enjoyment that is

worthy of financial sacrifice. They toil all day at the office in order to dine in the evening.

It doesn't mean that we Christians are not permitted to enjoy a good meal. We can and we do. But we must not let this or anything else become our obsessive desire that drives our lives. The apostle Paul puts it like this:

What I mean, brothers, is that the time is short. From now on ... those who buy something, as if it were not theirs to keep; those who use the things of the world, as if not engrossed in them. For the world in its present form is passing away. I would like you to be free from concern. (1Corinthians 7:29-32)

Whatever enslaves the heart must be removed by painful surgery. In fact, it is *impossible* for the natural man to sign the consent form for that surgery. If he cries out to the Lord, "I can't do it. I can't give it up!" then he is absolutely correct. It is impossible with man.

To summarize our first point: Without perfection of heart, no one can inherit eternal life. The word that Jesus uses, *teleios* (τέλειος), is the common Greek word for perfect or complete. In this context, it means perfect obedience to God. It is the readiness to give up everything in the world, especially the things that captivate our hearts. We must turn our backs on them, deny ourselves, and follow the Lord. The gospel that Jesus preaches is not a crowd-pleaser, but is for those who pursue the truth.

Perfection calls for a faith that believes in the impossible

We are talking about faith because we are talking about the *impossible*. That is the first and basic character of faith in Scripture. If our definition of faith does not include the impossible, we are not talking about Biblical faith. New Testament faith always has to do with the *humanly* impossible. Faith is not needed for anything that is possible to man. If we could gain eternal life by human wisdom or effort, we would not need faith.

Let us consider the popular cliché, *Salvation is a free gift, and faith is accepting that free gift*. The first question that comes to mind is this: Is there anything impossible about this definition? Is it beyond human ability to accept a free gift? If someone offers you a free movie ticket, a free car, or even eternal life with no strings attached, what is so impossible about accepting it? The offer is too good to refuse.

There are many today who, by taking a few verses (Rom.5:15,16; 6:23) out of context, tell us that *all* we have to do to be saved is to receive eternal life as a free gift, as simple as that. When we compare Jesus' teaching with these statements by Paul, we may be wondering whether we are listening to the same gospel, or whether there is a glaring contradiction between Jesus and Paul.

Jesus compares eternal life to a priceless pearl (Mt.13:46) which is utterly beyond our means to gain. If we are ever to obtain it, there is no way to receive it except as a *gift* from

God. But He does not give it indiscriminately or unconditionally.

What is the condition? In the parable, the man had to sell all that he had in order to acquire the pearl. That is not to say that the pearl of eternal life is worth only what we possess (which may be nothing), but that unless we are prepared to part with all that we have, the pearl will never be given to us.

Does Paul teach differently? We hear preachers say that Paul's only condition for receiving the gift of salvation is to have a faith that, like outstretched hands, receives it. But this is a misrepresentation of Paul's teaching, indeed a falsification of it, even if it is unintentional.

The fact is that Paul teaches the same truth as Jesus. By "all things" in Phil.3:8 ("I have suffered the loss of all things"), Paul does not only mean material things or possessions, but *our very lives*. This can be seen from the statements, "I have been crucified with Christ, and it is no longer I who live" (Gal.2:20), and "the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world" (6:14). These are radical statements that apply to all true believers. "For we have become united with him in the likeness of his death ... our old self was crucified with him" (Romans 6:5,6).

Where does the New Testament portray faith as the hand that reaches out to accept the free gift of salvation? Have we become so bold as to invent our own gospel, and reduce God's costly grace to a cheap grace which many would gladly clutch at?

To the contrary, New Testament faith has to do with what is *impossible* for man to accomplish. This comes out clearly in Matthew 17:20 where the disciples ask Jesus why they could not cast out a demon. Jesus replies, “Because of the littleness of your faith; for truly I say to you, if you have faith as a mustard seed, you shall say to this mountain, ‘Move from here to there,’ and it shall move; and nothing shall be impossible to you.”

If you have faith, nothing will be impossible to you, because God will act when you have faith. Mark 9:22-23 tells of a man who begs Jesus to save his demon-possessed son: “If you can do anything, have pity on us and help us.” Jesus replies, “If you can!’ *All things are possible to him who believes.*”

Salvation is impossible to man. In answer to the question, “Who then can be saved?” Jesus says, “With men this is impossible, but with God all things are possible” (vv.25,26).

All things, even the impossible, are possible to him who believes. Because salvation is utterly impossible to man, it depends utterly on God through faith. If being saved is as easy as reaching out for a free cake, what do we need faith for? Do you need faith to accept a free gift? When we get Christmas gifts, do we need faith to accept them?

What is difficult about receiving a free gift from God? I haven’t met anyone who refused salvation as a free gift because he thought that God had some hidden motives! What God requires of us is never concealed in “fine print” but is plainly stated in His word.

Abrahamic faith as a model of biblical faith

Romans 4 is an important chapter that defines faith in terms of the impossible. When Paul speaks of justification by faith, he never cheapens faith into something that is humanly possible or obtainable without God's help. Paul is too well versed in God's word to make this elementary error. In Romans 4, Paul talks about the faith—*Abrahamic faith*—that constitutes saving faith:

And without becoming weak in faith he [Abraham] contemplated his own body, now as good as dead since he was about a hundred years old, and the deadness of Sarah's womb; yet, with respect to the promise of God, he did not waver in unbelief, but grew strong in faith, giving glory to God. (Romans 4:19-20)

When God promised Abraham that his descendants will be as the stars of the heavens and the sands of the sea, why did Abraham have to exercise faith? *Because this was humanly impossible!* He was already a hundred years old, but that was not the most daunting impossibility. The main obstacle was that Sarah was already ninety years old, and had been barren all her life. If she could not bear a child at the age of twenty, how could she at ninety? She had long lived past the age of child-bearing. It was in the face of these impossibilities that Abraham believed God; and this, as Romans 4 tells us repeatedly, was accounted to him as righteousness.

Abrahamic faith exemplifies saving faith, a faith that believes that God can do the impossible, and must indeed do the impossible to fulfill His word in us. Paul applies

Abrahamic faith to us, in the affirmation that Abraham is the father of all who believe (v.11), and in the following:

But the words, “It was counted to him,” were written not for his sake alone, but for ours also. It will be counted to us who believe in him who raised from the dead Jesus our Lord, who was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification. (vv.23-25, ESV; see also the appended note at the end of the present chapter)

Paul speaks of Abraham’s faith in terms of believing in the resurrection of Jesus Christ. It takes a great miracle, one that is impossible to man, to raise someone from the dead.

In fact the whole gospel is characterized by the impossible. Nothing in the gospel is possible to man or can be accepted by human reasoning. Right from the start, we are confronted with an impossibility: the virgin birth of Jesus. Impossibilities characterize his life from his birth to his resurrection to his ascension. Ascension into heaven? That is beyond the realm of the humanly possible! How did Jesus ascend into heaven? “Oh, that’s easy. A UFO passed by and picked him up!” People would rather invent a wild explanation than believe that God can do the miraculous.

Nothing in the gospels is acceptable to natural reasoning. To the human mind, what God does is “supernatural”. The gospel in its nature confounds human or natural explanation. God in His wisdom established a gospel that cannot be understood or accepted on the basis of human reasoning alone. If you don’t believe in God’s supernatural power, the

gospel would be nothing more to you than fairy-tale nonsense or mythology.

Man's rejection of the impossible

Repulsed by the offensiveness of the gospel, the natural man tries to make it palatable by making the impossible into something possible. A striking example of this has to do with today's passage.

After the rich young ruler walks away, grieved and disappointed, the Lord Jesus says, "It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God." This is a vivid way of describing the impossible, as is explicitly stated two verses later, "With men this is impossible."

But what does one Bible commentator tell us? He invents a story about a city gate called the Eye of a Needle, which a camel can just barely squeeze through. How amazing! I have searched high and low through every scholarly commentary, encyclopedia, and dictionary, and none is aware of any evidence for such a city gate.¹⁴

¹⁴ *New Bible Dictionary*, 2nd edition, article "Eye of a Needle," says that the imagery of a camel or an elephant going through the eye of a needle is familiar to the rabbinic writings, e.g., the Talmud, and that it signifies something very unusual, very difficult, and impossible. The dictionary further says "there is no historical evidence to support" the view that "needle's eye" is the name of "a narrow gateway for pedestrians".

What motivated this commentator to invent such a story? Jesus says it is impossible, yet we decide it is possible, so we fabricate a story of a city gate called “Eye of a Needle,” when in fact nothing of this kind is known to history, archaeology or biblical scholarship. I am curious as to which preacher first fabricated this whole thing in an attempt to explain away the impossible by means of the possible.¹⁵

The gospel offends the natural man, and God forbid that we remove the offense. Yet there are those who twist the gospel into a shape or form they prefer: Though it is hard for a camel to squeeze through a small gate, it is still possible.

First point: Faith is confidence in a God who does the impossible

The first and most basic aspect of faith is confidence in a God who does the impossible. In this light, let us consider something that is humanly impossible. Can your heart turn away from the world? Can the rich young ruler give up all his possessions? That’s impossible! Can a musician give up his music? That’s equally impossible. Music is his life. To give up his music is to give up his life.

¹⁵ A well-known Christian leader in his bestselling book admits to having promulgated this teaching (viz. a city gate called Eye of a Needle). He had been teaching it for many years to promote his health-and-wealth gospel. Regretting what he has done, he now publicly rejects that interpretation. It is not clear if he was the one who invented it.

That is precisely the point! The whole point is to give up your life, and nothing less. This leads to a dilemma because it is impossible to give up your life. But the impossible becomes possible when God works in your life and you accept by faith that He can do the impossible in you. The rich young man could have said, “Lord, to be honest, I can’t let go of my riches. You are asking for the impossible. But if eternal life is that valuable, then do a miracle of transformation in my heart so that I may regard my riches as rubbish and gladly give them up.”

The definition of “impossible”

For the sake of precision and completeness, a distinction needs to be made between the *relatively* impossible and the *absolutely* impossible. In any standard dictionary, one of the definitions of “impossible” is “very difficult” or “extremely difficult,” as in “an impossible child” or “an impossible situation”. The word “impossible” often refers to something not *normally* possible. A musician does not normally abandon his passion for music, for that would be quite inconceivable to him. Yet it is not absolutely impossible, for he could encounter some exceptional circumstance in life which might leave him so depressed that he refuses to return to music again. A wealthy man would not *normally* give away his wealth, but that is not altogether inconceivable. He may be afflicted with terminal illness, and with no one to whom

he desires to bequeath his wealth, he may choose to give it away to a charitable foundation.

But when we speak of the impossible in relation to salvation, we mean that it is *absolutely* impossible, akin to the absolute impossibilities that Abraham faced.

Some impossibilities in life are only relative. Even then, that which is relatively or “normally” impossible is still subjectively experienced as something *genuinely impossible* in the heat of the moment; hence the word “impossible” is an acceptable description even in such cases.

Second point: Grace is specific to each person

Faith has to do with *grace*. Grace in turn means that God does for us what we cannot do for ourselves. Grace means that salvation is God’s work, not man’s.

The second point is this: *God’s grace is specific to each person*. In Romans 4, grace is shown specifically to Abraham. In Matthew 19, the invitation, “Come, follow me,” is given specifically (though not exclusively) to the rich young ruler.

God’s grace to you and to me is specific. He does not treat you as a face in a crowd, a record in a database, or a name in a phone book. God knows you as a distinct person, and He will do a work of grace specifically in your life. In turn, it is you and specifically you who must exercise faith. You cannot sneak into the kingdom of heaven on someone else’s coattails; it is you who must make the response of faith.

God speaks to every individual. That is why faith is not second-hand. We are not saved just because our father is a pastor, or our mother is a good Christian. It is you who must make the response of faith, and enter the kingdom of your own accord. Moreover, it is you who must turn your back on the world. Hence we can speak of *personal faith* insofar as each person makes a personal commitment to God on his or her part.

God's love is not just shown to the human race but to you specifically. "For God so loved the world"—but I am just a face in the crowd, a nobody in this vast world. Yet Paul speaks of "the Son of God who loved *me* and gave himself for *me*" (Gal.2:20). God's love is shown to you specifically and not merely to the whole world. Faith apprehends the truth that Christ died on the cross *specifically for me*.

God's specific love calls for a specific response of faith, as in the case of Abraham and in the case of the rich young ruler. Because Abraham depended on God's grace by faith, he succeeded where the rich young ruler failed.

Third point: Faith believes God's promise

The third point about faith is that *faith always has to do with a promise*. The word "promise" is prominent in Romans 4 where it occurs five times in the space of nine verses (vv.13-21). The two main themes of this chapter—faith and promise—are linked in this way: *Abraham received God's promise by faith*.

What is a promise? It is something you don't have in your hands right now, but which you will have in the future. A promise is seen, for example, in Jesus' invitation to the rich young ruler: Sell what you have (present) and you will have treasure in heaven (future). By faith you exchange the present for the future. Your faith in God rests on His faithfulness and His promise, which He will certainly fulfill at the proper time in the future.

Faith looks forward not backward

The standard question regarding faith—"Do you believe that Jesus died for you?"—is not the right one. Because faith looks to the future, the question should be, "Seeing what Jesus did for you in the past, do you believe you will inherit eternal life in the future?" We are not saved through a memory, but through a faith that looks to God's promises.

We are not saved just by believing that Jesus died for us in the distant past. Faith has to do with the past only insofar as the past relates to the future, that is, insofar as the past (e.g., the atonement) is of a promissory character relating to the future. Future does not refer to some vague, indefinite, or uncertain future, which is the only kind of future the unbeliever has. For the believer, the future refers to both the *immediate* future and the more *distant* future. By faith we believe that what Jesus did in the past avails for us:

(1) In the *immediate future*, that is, the next moment or the next day *very close to the present moment*. It means that

we act upon his saving work *immediately*; for example, we contritely ask for his forgiveness of our sins and receive his forgiveness the very next moment.

(2) His saving work will avail for us in the somewhat *more distant future*, for example, at the Resurrection.

You can tell whether you have true faith by whether you look to the future and to God's promises. Abraham lived by God's promises. He walked with his eyes focused on the future, unlike many Christians who walk with their eyes looking back. How important is the future to you? Do you look with eager expectation for eternal life, "the hope of salvation" (1Thess.5:8)?

Hope is a central concept in Paul's writings. The Greek word *elpis* (ἐλπίς, hope) occurs 36 times in his writings, but only 17 times in the rest of the New Testament. It occurs 13 times in the book of Romans alone. In the New Testament, hope means *looking forward with eager expectation*. The English word "hope" does not bring out the full meaning of the Greek word.

Apokaradokia (ἀποκαρακοκία, "eager longing, deep desire") occurs only twice in the New Testament, and in both instances it serves as a kind of synonym of "hope," expressing its *emotional* aspect (Rom.8:19, "hope" v.20; Phil.1:20).

Do we have a forward-looking faith? Or are we like the natural man who clings to what he has now, unwilling to let go of the present for something in the future? That is

precisely the problem with the rich young ruler. He has great riches in his hands right now. He sees the Mercedes Benz parked in his driveway. He opens the door, and touches the leather seats. He presses a button, and the roof goes down. He presses another button, and the CD starts playing. These are tangible things he can experience right now whereas treasure in heaven is too remote.

Many Christians say to themselves, “Must I really give up what I have now to gain something that is still in the future? My bank book shows a good balance. It is real. It is here and now. I’m not going to give it up for treasure in heaven. I don’t live in cloud-cuckoo-land. I am not overly enamored of a future heavenly utopia. I did not get rich by day-dreaming but by being practical. I will stick to the present! My type of faith helps me in the present by providing emotional support.” But that is not Biblical or saving faith.

Faith exchanges the present for the future

Exchanging the present for the future is impossible, even unacceptable, to the natural man because in worldly wisdom, *the present life, indeed the present moment, is all that you have*. You may not see tomorrow or the day after tomorrow, never mind eternity. Faith is contrary to human reasoning. The natural man says, “I have invested many years for this degree. Exchange it for eternity? No thanks. I can taste the lollipop in my mouth, but I can’t taste eternity. Give up the present for the future? I might not have a future!”

And he is absolutely right. The natural man has no future. Only a man of faith—Abrahamic faith—has a future. Abraham succeeded where the rich young ruler failed because he offered up everything to God, even his only son. He was looking to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God” (Heb.11:10), the city where God dwells (Rev.21:2,3).

Jesus is saying to us, “My friend, if you have faith, let go of what you have, exchange the present for the future, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come and follow me. What you will get from following me in this present age may be blood, sweat and tears, but in the age to come you will inherit the fullness of eternal life.” (Mt.19:29)

The natural man is frightened by all this talk about taking up the cross and following Christ. But how different is the way a man of faith like Paul looks at the cross which he bears: “For this slight momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison” (2Cor.4:17). Compared to the “eternal weight of glory,” Paul considers the cross he bears as a “slight¹⁶ momentary affliction”.

What Paul means by “slight affliction” is seen a few verses earlier, in 2Corinthians 4:8-12. Only someone of true faith can speak of these immense afflictions as “slight” or “light”! That is because Paul has his eyes fixed on the “eternal weight of glory”. By faith he sees God’s promises, and looks to the

¹⁶ This is the same word (*elaphros*, ἐλαφρός, which also means light in weight) as appears in Mt.11:30, “For my yoke is easy, and my burden is *light*”.

things that are unseen rather than the things that are seen. The visible things are transient (“momentary”), the unseen things are eternal (2Cor.4:18). This is impossible for the natural man to see, but faith trusts in God’s faithfulness to do the impossible.

Hope in Scripture is not wishful thinking but confident expectation

Promise has to do with hope, but not hope as the word is generally used. In common usage, “hope” means *wishful thinking* as in, “I hope the weather will be nice tomorrow.” This does not represent the meaning of the Greek word *elpis* as it is used in the Scriptures. “Confident expectation” more accurately defines the word in the Bible, for hope in the Bible is imbued with faith, which results in “confident expectation”. Especially in the New Testament, this confidence rests on the fact that God’s promises in Christ are always “yes” (2Cor.1:20).

Hope characterized the life of Abraham, who gave up everything to follow God. When God first promised him that his descendants will be as the stars of the heavens and the sands of the sea, Abraham didn’t even have a child. Later on, his body was as good as dead, and Sarah’s even more so, being childless in all her ninety years. Yet Abraham believed God’s promise. Romans 4:21 says that he was “fully convinced” (ESV, RSV, NKJV), “fully persuaded” (KJV, NIV), or “fully assured” (NASB). Though confronted by all the human reasons that regarded the fulfillment of the promise

impossible, he accepted the promise of God with absolute conviction.

This conviction was not a make-believe or wishful thinking, for it had a solid basis. What did Abraham base his faith on? On nothing less than *God's faithful character and omnipotent power*, for Abraham was “fully convinced that God was able to do what He had promised” (v.21). If God cannot be trusted, then nothing and no one can be trusted. Yet no one who has ever trusted in God has ever been put to shame for his trust (Isa.45:17; 50:7; 54:4; Rom.9:33; 1Pet.2:6, etc).

True faith hinges on believing that God is able. It is not believing in some intellectual or theoretical sense, but in a real practical sense—so real that we willingly give up our present realities for the kind of future that only God can give. Do we believe that our God—the King of kings, and Lord of lords—is able to do what He has promised us in Christ?

That is saving and justifying faith, the kind we see in Romans 4. We must never twist faith into something wishy-washy, and then mumble something about justification by faith. True faith, as defined by Paul and the Lord Jesus himself, is *the full conviction that God will do as He says*. He is both able and willing. That is the solid foundation of the perfect obedience of faith.

AN APPENDED NOTE: ABRAHAM'S FAITH AND JUSTIFICATION BY FAITH

Our understanding of Romans 4 will govern our understanding of justification profoundly. If we go with the popular view that justification means “declared righteous,” then justification would not have a relevant connection to Abraham’s faith, and Paul’s reference to justification (4:25; 5:1) would be a *non sequitur*, that is, left hanging without connection to all that he said about Abraham’s faith.

Abraham was not simply *declared* a father of many nations, but was *made* the father of many nations by a life-giving transformation within his body which was “as good as dead” (4:19). It is now imbued with the new life. And as a channel of life, Abraham became the father of nations according to God’s promise, all this because he believed God who gives life to the dead (4:17).

Abraham believed God even though the fulfillment of God’s promise was not humanly possible given the situation that he and Sarah were in. He believed first, and later the promise was fulfilled.

Abraham was “fully persuaded that God had the power to do what He had promised [to give new life to one as good as dead]. That is why ‘it was credited to him as righteousness’” (4:21,22).

What is the evidence that righteousness was credited to Abraham? By the fact that he *did* actually receive that new life in his own body, and likewise for Sarah. Because of God's life-giving power in them, His promises were fulfilled. The same is true of those who believe as Abraham did (4:23, 24).

In the case of Abraham and Sarah, what God did was nothing less than a resurrection that took place within their bodies. Paul says that God "raised Jesus our Lord from the dead" (4:24) and "raised him to life" (v.25). God did this "for our justification" (v.25) "through faith" (5:1), with the result that we too receive "new life". This is explicitly affirmed in Romans 6:4, "Just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life".

The firm link between righteousness and life

Righteousness and life are always linked in Scripture. "He who is steadfast in righteousness will attain to life, and he who pursues evil will bring about his own death" (Prov. 11:19). Just as righteousness and life are connected, evil and death are connected (Prov.12:28; 21:21; Ezek. 18:27, etc).

Paul makes that connection in Romans 5 which is linked to the previous chapter by the word "therefore". In Romans 5, righteousness and life are mentioned together three times (vv.17,18,21; cf. Gal. 3:21). Verse 18 speaks of "justification of life," which NIV renders as "justification that brings life".

Because righteousness and life are connected, when righteousness is “credited” or “reckoned” to Abraham (Rom.4:3,5,6, 9,10,22,23) but also to those who believe as Abraham did (vv.11,24), life is likewise credited to them (granted to them). The statement, “Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness” (Rom.4:3) is a quotation of Genesis 15:6. Consider the following observations:

First, was Abraham not already a righteous man, one who had close communion with God, when he first heard God’s call and obeyed Him (Gen.12:1ff.)? His righteousness is seen in the events of Genesis chapters 12 to 14. What then is the significance of his being credited with righteousness? An answer can be found in the next observation.

Second, being credited with righteousness has to do with the fact that Abraham was heirless, and that he and his wife were incapable of having a child. When God promised him an heir “from your own body” (15:4), “Abraham believed Yahweh” (15:6). It has to do with a life-giving work which God would do in Abraham and Sarah, making it possible for them to bring forth life in the form of a child and heir.

The crediting of Abraham with righteousness means that God will soon commence in him and Sarah an amazing life-transforming work by which their “as good as dead” bodies will have a new life that could bring forth life. Likewise, if we are credited with righteousness through faith, or justified by faith, we can begin to experience the new life in Christ because of God’s life-giving work in us.

Analogous to Abraham, we were “as good as dead,” being “dead in transgressions and sins” (Eph.2:1). But whereas Abraham’s difficulty was physical, ours is spiritual and for that reason far more serious. God had no way of saving us from our spiritual predicament apart from the death and resurrection of His beloved Son. “God, being rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in our transgressions, made us alive together with Christ” (Eph.2:4,5; Col.2:13).

Chapter 27



THE PATH OF ETERNAL LIFE

What must I do to inherit eternal life?

Let us continue to explore that most important question which the rich young ruler¹⁷ asks the Lord Jesus. We have by no means exhausted the significance of his inquiry. Because of its importance, his question merits a second look from a different angle.

The importance of this account (which is found in all three synoptics, in Mt.19:16-30, Mk.10:17-31, Lk.18:18-30) lies in the fact that this is the only event in the gospels in which Jesus is *sincerely* asked this most vital question: What must I do to inherit eternal life?

¹⁷ He is often referred to as “the rich young ruler” in Christian literature because he is young and wealthy (Mt.19:22) and is a ruler (Lk.18:18).

I said “sincerely” because there are other ways to ask that question, perhaps out of intellectual, philosophical, or theological interest for the purpose of academic discussion or debate. This is seen in Luke 10:25 where a lawyer (a specialist in the Old Testament law and its application to daily life) asks Jesus the same question. Either out of academic curiosity or possibly hostility, he wants to see how Jesus would handle the question of inheriting eternal life. But no one who is more interested in theory than in practice will enter eternal life. That is why the Lord Jesus concludes the conversation with the concise instruction, “*Go and do likewise*” (Lk.10:37).

By contrast the rich young man has a sincere and seeking heart. He does not treat the matter of eternal life as an academic question, and is hence only a step away from the kingdom and eternal life. But sadly his riches prevented him from taking that step. For him, giving up his possessions was comparable to giving up his life. In the end, what will his wealth profit him? “For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his life? Or what shall a man give in return for his life?” (Mt.16:26)

The question of eternal life is that of *the meaning of life*. Before Jesus came into the world, the question of eternal life, or how to inherit it, was irrelevant because no answer was available. Hitherto no one in the world, neither in religion nor in philosophy, could give a meaningful answer to the question of inheriting eternal life. In that sense, the question was pointless. In our daydreams we may long for eternal life,

but in reality nobody knew where it could be found or whether it even existed.

Before Jesus came, you could search high and low in religion or in philosophy for an answer to the question of eternal life, and emerge empty-handed. Not even the Old Testament has much to say about eternal life apart from a few hints here and there.

The question of eternal life could not be discussed meaningfully until Jesus came. Then all of a sudden it made sense to ask the question not as an academic or speculative topic but as something that is attainable. There was something in the person and ministry of Jesus Christ that made that question meaningful.

The futile pursuit of achievement

If eternal life is just an illusion, what is life all about? Does physical life have any enduring meaning? Even if we attain to 70, 80, or 90 years of life in this world, the end will finally come. Life must reach its finish line, its terminus, and all its labors and achievements in the world will come to a final halt.

Many study hard for many years, expending time and effort to get a degree, then a second degree, then a third, acquiring impressive titles. I know of a person in England who, on the day after his graduation, rushed off to print his name card with *Bachelor of Divinity* after his name. He gave me one of his cards even though no introduction was

needed, we having known each other for several years. He felt that this degree was his greatest achievement in life.

Some academics in England, after having earned multiple degrees, join the Royal Geographical Society. By joining the Society you can get the title F.R.G.S. (Fellow of the Royal Geographical Society) which looks almost like F.R.C.S. (Fellow of the Royal College of Surgeons), so people may think you are a surgeon!

Some people seek achievement not in the academic world but in business. But after we have established our little business empire, the whole endeavor looks futile when we reach the end of our lives. But even before that, the achievements will look like a cruel joke if the years of hard work are reduced to zero by bankruptcy, which does happen in the business world.

I have a childhood friend who grew up together with me. Her mother and my mother were good friends before we were born, and they were even hoping that a nice arrangement could be worked out for the two of us! My childhood friend was exceptionally bright, and felt ready to take on the challenges of life. She went on to collect a whole array of degrees, including her Ph.D. She became a professor at Michigan State University in her area of scientific specialization. Eventually her pursuit reached its limit when she found nothing more in her field that stimulated her interest. With no further challenges to conquer in her field, she decided to go into business. Her father was a wealthy but aging businessman, so he was glad to hand the reins of his business

enterprise over to her. She became the general-manager in her father's import-export business in Hong Kong.

When I met up with her in Hong Kong some years ago, I asked her, "What's a scientist like you doing in business?" She said, "I got bored with science, so I decided to give business a go. I climbed to the top of my academic profession, and there was nowhere else to go. When you reach the mountain top, you can't go any higher. When I was still at the foot of the mountain, the peak looked so glorious. But when I reached the peak, it looked so small. I could not take a step backward or forward without falling off the peak! So it's time to climb another mountain."

As childhood friends, we could speak frankly to each other. I asked her how she was enjoying business. She found it boring: "I have learned a lot about business administration, the ins and outs of being a general-manager. But now there are no further interesting challenges for me."

I asked her if she would like to try something else, but she was no longer sure there was anything still worth trying. One possibility was politics. The last I heard of her, she was at Stanford University doing political science, if I remember correctly. Having run out of things to do, why not pick up one or two more doctorates!

She is not doing any of this for money. Her father is wealthy, so she doesn't need to strive for riches. Not only is life meaningless for her, even her marriage fell apart. She is now divorced from her husband who is also a scientist and

professor. It is tragic when people cannot find the meaning of life.

What is the meaning of life?

Without the hope of eternal life, there is nothing of enduring meaning to live for. All the achievements in life could be likened to a sand castle built by the seashore. People spend hours to build a sand castle, fashioning every little gate and tower, even the surrounding moat. But when you return the next day, it is all washed away. There is no trace of the castle, not even an imprint in the sand.

Life is like that when it has no enduring purpose. We cannot make an enduring mark in the world; everything will pass away. The glorious kingdoms of the past are now found on the pages of history, or under the spade of an archaeologist who unearths some pottery and concludes, "This kingdom was glorious in its time." The present-day world powers look mighty and glorious, but they too will vanish into the pages of history.

Life has no true meaning unless it has an eternal purpose. Even as a teenager, I grappled with this dilemma, and was constantly wondering to myself, "What is life all about?" Thoughts of eternal life did not come to my mind because I knew nothing about it; and surviving eternally as some kind of disembodied spirit was not particularly appealing to me even if it were true, as ghost stories affirm. Perhaps the noblest thing to do in the face of such hopelessness is to put

on a brave smile, and stoically accept the fact that one day all things will vanish into oblivion.

The futility of life without hope

The rich young ruler in Matthew 19 was like my childhood friend. He was wealthy and educated. He was well versed in the Law, which was the standard of education in Israel in those days. But he could not fail to realize that all these things are transient. He wanted something enduring, eternal. Wealth, education and status did not provide him with an answer to the all-important question of *eternal life*.

Before Jesus came into the world, humankind was groping about in the darkness. But when he came, suddenly the question of eternal life became meaningful. The answer, however, is not an easy one. If anyone tells you that getting eternal life is as easy as a “piece of cake,” don’t swallow that nonsense. As we will see, the path to eternal life is no easy road. Jesus himself said, “Narrow is the gate and difficult is the way which leads to life, and there are few who find it. (Mt.7:14)

Before Jesus came into the world, people were living without hope or purpose. Today, too, those who don’t know him are walking in darkness. Sooner or later the power of death will come in like a tide, sweeping everything away, including every proud achievement, from the sands of earthly existence.

We can try to put on a brave face, but the fact remains that we are without hope if Jesus does not come into our lives. We are like valiant soldiers fighting impossible odds, displaying a courageous demeanor in the face of certain defeat. Scientific knowledge may prolong our lives by a few years. But even an artificial heart can only, so to speak, buy our sand castle a little more time before it is swept away. We are soldiers fighting without the hope of victory, and moving closer and closer to the inevitable. Deep down in our hearts we know that the situation is grim, for death will one day conquer all.

Hope in the midst of darkness

In this suffocating air of hopelessness, the soldiers see the commanding general appear on the scene. He stands purposefully and calmly, surveying the situation. He takes the necessary measures to turn the situation around. He leads his troops forward, calling them to follow. His very presence inspires hope among the battle-weary soldiers. The tide is turning, and victory looks possible. When Jesus came into a world languishing in hopelessness, it became meaningful to talk about hope.

This picture finds expression in one of Jesus' most faithful disciples, in whose life Jesus could be so clearly seen that he could say, "Be imitators of me, just as I also am of Christ" (1Cor.11:1). Paul was one of 276 people on a ship that was being ripped apart in a violent Mediterranean storm

(Acts 27:18ff). The crew had done everything possible to hold the ship together, including wrapping cables under the ship. Everyone was terrified except one man—the apostle Paul—who made the difference, and 276 lives were saved.

We can imagine Paul standing on the ship that was rattling in the churning sea and howling wind. He was probably a frail man, about sixty years old, with many scars on his face and body, a testimony to the beatings and stoning he had received during his missionary journeys. His body was weakened by hardship and disease. Some scholars (based on hints in his letters, especially Gal.4:13,14) think he may have contracted malaria while traveling through inhospitable terrains in Asia Minor on one of his missionary journeys; others suggest that he had contracted some kind of eye disease. This frail man gripped the railing as the ship was swaying wildly. Whereas the sailors were panicking like rabbits, this frail figure radiated calm and confidence.

Like the commanding general who stands at the scene of battle, Paul confidently assures the crew and the passengers: “Listen to me! Not one life on this ship will be lost.” We can imagine one of the sailors saying to him, “With all due respect, you’re just a landlubber whereas we are professional seaman. You know nothing about ships or the ferocity of Mediterranean storms.”

Yet no one on the ship contradicts Paul, for although he is weak in body, he is mighty in spirit. Then he says, “Now I urge you to take heart; for there will be no loss of life among you, but only of the ship” (v.22). After declaring that this is

a message from an angel of God, Paul says, “So take heart, men, for I believe God that it will be just as it was told me” (v.25). Like Abraham, he has complete confidence in God’s word and promise in the face of a hopeless situation.

Here was a man to whom God sent a personal messenger from heaven. The mention of an angel carried weight with heathen sailors who believed in spiritual beings. Paul’s words reassured them. This was almost certainly the reason God sent an angel to him on this occasion, for it was not the usual way God communicated with him.

There is no other recorded instance of an angel carrying a message from God to the apostle, for Paul did not need an angelic intermediary to facilitate his communion with God, with whom he walked. Indeed Paul had an abundance of “visions and revelations from the Lord” (2Cor.12:1), even “surpassingly great revelations,” such that a “thorn” was placed in his flesh to keep him from being conceited (v.7).

Since the days of Noah, how many have walked with God? There was Abraham. But after him, it was a long time before Moses and later Elijah and Elisha came into the scene. In history only a few have walked with God closely enough to carry the torch of hope against the tide of hopelessness. In these rare moments of history, there emerges such a man or woman, and one of them was the apostle Paul.

In that raging storm, Paul was merely walking in the steps of his Master. Jesus and his disciples were once crossing the Sea of Galilee on a small boat that was caught in a storm. Though the disciples were experienced seamen, they became

afraid whereas Jesus was sleeping peacefully in the midst of the storm. The disciples woke him up, crying out, “Save us, Lord; we are perishing!” Jesus replied, “*Why are you afraid, O men of little faith?*” (Mt.8:26)

Men of little faith? But wasn't their fear justified? Take a look at the twenty-foot waves! But the Lord, calm and composed, looked into the eye of the storm, and rebuked the winds and the sea, and there was immediate calm. The disciples marveled, “What sort of man is this, that even winds and sea obey him?”

We are not first-hand witnesses of the event, so how do we know that it really happened? We know from the fact that all the disciples in that boat, except Judas, eventually sealed their witness with their blood. No one would die for a fairy tale. The apostle John, though he was the only disciple who was not martyred, had his share of suffering when he was exiled to Patmos. The apostles lived, suffered, and died for the truth concerning Christ of which they were *eyewitnesses*.

The path to eternal life is costly

When Jesus came into the world, it became meaningful to ask about eternal life. His very person made the question credible. It was Jesus whom the rich young ruler asked about eternal life. Jesus answered him to the effect, “You have studied the Law. What does it say? Do not kill, do not commit adultery, do not steal, do not bear false witness, do not ...”

We can imagine the young man saying to him, “Lord, I am not asking what I must not do, but what I must do, to inherit eternal life.”

The young man is to be commended for understanding that there is something one has to do to inherit eternal life. But when Jesus told him what it was he needed to *do*, the young man was dumbfounded. He departed quietly and sorrowfully, for he found the cost too high.

The path to eternal life is so costly and difficult that we cannot walk on it alone; without Jesus we cannot proceed along that path. Nor can we climb the ladder to heaven in our own strength. We go forward and upward together with Jesus, or not at all.

On the way to eternal life, two difficulties confront us immediately: Firstly, it is very costly to walk on that road. Secondly, the road is fraught with many dangers, one of the greatest of which is the false teachers who say that eternal life is a gift that costs you nothing.

We must decide in our minds whether it is costly or not. Jesus says it is costly, but many say it is not. It is difficult enough to grapple with the cost without having false teachers telling us we are wasting our time because there is no cost at all. When the gospel is preached, it will always be opposed by a false gospel.

Does Paul have a different teaching?

When we talk about the high cost of eternal life as seen in Jesus' teaching, some will immediately say that Paul's teaching is different. They often refer to Acts 16:30-31 in which the Philippian jailer asks Paul and Silas, "What must I do to be saved?" Paul replies, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household".

You are probably more familiar with this verse than with Jesus' teaching about inheriting eternal life. Few Christians can recall Jesus' exact words to the rich young ruler, but most can readily quote Paul's statement, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved." This is taught to many children in Sunday school.

The obvious question arises: Are these two different answers? The question of eternal life seems to be getting one answer from Jesus and another from Paul. Are these contradictory answers?

The Lord's demand has three aspects

To resolve the apparent contradiction, we observe that Jesus' demand (or condition to be fulfilled) given to the rich young ruler has three aspects.

Firstly, *it is a functional requirement* that serves a spiritual purpose: to detach the rich young ruler from the world so that he may become attached to Jesus. That is why the Lord uses the vocabulary of *action*. In fact the whole passage is brimming with action verbs. Within one verse we see four

powerful action verbs: *Go, sell your possessions, and give to the poor; then come*¹⁸ *follow me* (Mt.19:21). The four verbs are *go, sell, give, and follow*. These are functional demands that we must fulfill if we are to inherit eternal life.

Secondly, the demand is a *total demand*. The Lord tells the rich young man to sell *all* that he has.

Thirdly, it is an *impossible demand*. “With men this is impossible, but with God all things are possible” (v.26). The Lord wants us to know that we cannot obtain salvation by our own ability, cleverness, or will power. We don’t have the power to fulfill God’s requirements unless His grace operates in us through the Spirit.

Positionalism and deception

Tragically, and contrary to the Lord’s teaching, many churches interpret salvation in a positional rather than a functional way. It is alleged that by faith a legal transition takes place that makes us positionally righteous even if nothing functional has actually taken place. God is said to establish our legal position as righteous so that we are declared righteous even if we are still enslaved to sin—a legal status without the corresponding reality.

¹⁸ The Greek *deuro*, here translated as “come,” is an adverb. Though it is not a verb, it sometimes functions rather like a verb. Here it is joined with the word immediately following it: “come follow,” thus forming one unit.

Positionalism is legal fiction. To say that you have died when you have not died is legal fiction. No, it is worse than that, it is a lie. Fabricating a death certificate to make the legal authorities believe that you have died, is gross deception. Sending a letter to the government declaring that you are dead and won't be paying taxes anymore, is fraud.

Even worse, God is alleged to be the perpetrator of this deception! Is this not a blasphemous suggestion? And on whom is this deception perpetrated? On God Himself, who else? Does that not imply that God is deceiving Himself in so doing? Such notions are so twisted and perverse as to be unworthy of the Christian faith.

More than that, positional Christianity does not address the root problem. We previously considered the hypothetical case of a drug addict who is arrested for cocaine possession. He is brought before the judge, and sentenced to imprisonment and a large fine. Then somebody comes along, a good friend or a rich uncle, who offers to pay the huge fine and even go to jail in his stead. In this hypothetical case, the drug addict is now legally free though he is still controlled by cocaine and the power of sin. What would be the point of legal forgiveness if he is still being destroyed by cocaine and a sinful lifestyle?

This is not to say that there is no legal pardon. There is. The point is that inheriting eternal life involves *much more* than that. From the term “eternal life” itself, it should be evident that to receive it means receiving *life*, not just a

pardon. “Eternal life” is the new life we receive from God now, and which continues into eternity.

A closer look at the Lord’s threefold requirement

First: A functional requirement

Jesus makes a *practicable* demand, one that must be obeyed to inherit eternal life. Obedience to this call opens our hearts to the Holy Spirit to do God’s saving and transforming work in us. But many preachers quote verses selectively without reference to their context to make Paul say that there is no demand. They thus put the apostle in the position of contradicting his Lord. But even if you think that Paul’s teaching is different from what Jesus teaches, whom should you follow, the servant or the Master?

Paul is in perfect harmony with his master

Any suggestion of a difference between Jesus and Paul quickly collapses upon an examination of the vocabulary used in relation to eternal life. The crucial words here are “*inherit* eternal life”.

Both Mark (10:17) and Luke (18:18) agree in reporting that these were the words used by the rich young ruler. But he is not the first to use this phrase. Jesus already used the word “inherit” at the beginning of his ministry, in the third beatitude, “the meek will *inherit* the earth” (Mt.5:5). In the seventh beatitude he said, “the peacemakers ... will be called

the *sons of God*,” since peacemakers thereby prove themselves to be God’s children (Mt.5:9), and since it is the children who inherit from their Father. Jesus also uses the phrase “inherit eternal life” in Matthew 19:29.

Paul likewise uses the words “inherit,” “inheritance” and “heir” frequently with reference to believers. The phrase “inherit the kingdom of God,” which is the equivalent of inheriting eternal life, is found in 1Cor.6:9,10; 15:50; Gal.5:21. Nor is this usage restricted to Paul; a similar use of “inherit” appears also in James 2:5; 1Pet.3:9; Rev.21:7. “Inherit salvation” occurs in Hebrews 1:14.

Paul also speaks of “an inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God” (Eph.5:5; cf. Gal.3:18; Col.1:12; 3:24; Acts 20:32). The Holy Spirit “is given as a pledge of our *inheritance*, with a view to the redemption of God’s own possession” (Eph.1:14).

Those who are entitled to inherit are called “heirs”. It is usually a person’s children who are named his heirs. This was true in Biblical times: “When the tenants saw the *son*, they said among themselves, ‘This is the *heir*’” (Mt.21:38; Mk.12:6,7; Lk.20:13,14). In Luke 12:13, two sons squabble over their inheritance. Accordingly, Paul writes concerning believers,

Because you are sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, “Abba, Father.” So you are no longer a slave, but a son; and since you are a son, God has made you also an heir. (Galatians 4:6-7, NIV)

And again,

Now if we are children, then we are heirs—heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory. (Romans 8:17)

The second of these passages shows that Paul, like his Master, teaches that being the children and heirs of God *is conditional upon* sharing in Christ's sufferings; the "*if indeed*" brings this out forcefully. Didn't Jesus call the rich young ruler to follow him and share in his sufferings when he stated his functional requirements? Jesus was not asking him to do anything more (indeed, a lot less) than what Jesus himself did, namely, lay down his life for us.

To inherit certainly means to receive something, but in a particular way. What way? To inherit something does not mean getting it by one's own efforts or achievement; it is not earned. In inheriting something, the requirement or condition is that we are named in the will of someone to whom we are related in some way. Sons and daughters are usually named as inheritors.

Since only God can give eternal life, the question of how to inherit eternal life is a question of how to enter into the Father-child relationship with God. That is precisely the requirement or condition for *inheriting* eternal life which Jesus talks about. It is the faithful and obedient children who prove to be truly God's children.

Second: A total requirement

Secondly, the Lord's call to the rich young ruler involves a total demand: *Sell all that you have*. It doesn't mean that he expects you to rush off to the marketplace, sell the shirt off your back, and freeze in the Canadian winter. As we saw earlier, selling our possessions does not mean selling the things we need but selling the things that are extra and which we store away. Do not store up treasure on earth, but store up treasure in heaven (Mt.6:19,20; Lk.18:22).

But this does not diminish the fact that the Lord's demand is *total*. His total demand, moreover, goes far beyond material possessions. *It includes our hearts, above all*. It is possible to give away all our belongings, yet not have love (1Cor.13:3). We are called to love God with all our heart, all our soul, all our mind, all our strength; and our neighbor as ourselves.

Third: An impossible requirement

Thirdly, the Lord's demand is an *impossible demand*. The natural man cannot possibly give up everything he has, much less his very self. Fulfilling God's demand takes a miraculous transformation of heart. But preachers today remove the element of the impossible when they say that you need only believe that Jesus died for you. What is so difficult, much less impossible, about believing that Jesus loves you?

Europe is nominally Christian. In Germany and Scandinavia, almost everyone is officially Lutheran. If you ask them whether they are Christians, most would say, "Of

course I am. What do you think I am, a heathen?” In Switzerland I once asked a woman if she was Christian, and she felt insulted. “Of course I am a Christian. Do I look like a heathen to you?” But how are you a Christian if you don’t even go to church? “But I do go to church—at Christmas!”

An impossible demand? For many in Europe, it is impossible *not* to be a Christian (and therefore impossible not to believe in Jesus in some sense) since the alternative seems unthinkable: to be a heathen, which appears to be more or less equivalent to being a barbarian! You may not even be considered a member of Swiss or German society if you are not Christian. Some Swiss people have told me that if you state that you have no religion, you may have difficulty getting hospital treatment beyond basic care, or getting a burial place in a cemetery.

The free gift of eternal life

Some Christians will say, “I know the Bible too. The wages of sin is death, *but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus*. It is written there in Romans 6:23 in black and white. Eternal life is a free gift. A free gift by definition has no demands at all, much less a functional demand, a total demand, an impossible demand. If a gift has any demands, it is no longer free.”

As we mentioned earlier, the path of eternal life is fraught with two great problems. Firstly, eternal life is very costly. Secondly, there are many traps along the way, with the

greatest danger coming from false teachers. The second problem is more dangerous than the first because you may be willing to accept the high cost, but are unable to discern the false teachers. Most Christians are not sufficiently equipped in God's word to handle these vital issues of the Christian life.

When quoting from Romans or any part of Paul's writings, it needs to be understood that this apostle of Jesus taught nothing different from what his Master taught. The need to choose between Jesus and Paul is imaginary because there has never been a more faithful servant of Jesus than Paul.

You may protest, "But Romans 6:23 clearly says it's a free gift!" My dear friend, don't do what people were doing even in Paul's day, namely, twisting his teachings by taking them out of the context of his general teaching and making him say what he didn't intend to say. Peter gives this warning:

Bear in mind that our Lord's patience means salvation, just as our dear brother Paul also wrote you with the wisdom that God gave him. He writes the same way in all his letters, speaking in them of these matters. His letters contain some things that are hard to understand, which ignorant and unstable people distort, as they do the other Scriptures, to their own destruction. (2 Peter 3:15-16, NIV)

To be sure, there is nothing particularly hard to understand about the words "the free gift of God". The words as they stand are simple enough—until the vital question is asked whether the Bible says anything else about His free gift and

how it is received. How, then, are these words to be correctly understood?

A basic principle of biblical exegesis is to study the verse *in context*. If this is true of human writing, how much more of Scripture? What then is the context of Romans 6:23? Have we failed to notice that it stands as the last verse of Romans chapter 6, and is therefore its conclusion? Have we ever bothered to read chapter 6 to see how Paul's conclusion was arrived at?

While reading a magazine the other day, I came across an interesting ad for a free book that was promoted as follows: "*This free gift will cost you your life. It cost me mine.*" Yes, this gift is free but it is going to cost you your life. The ad was so intriguing that I cut it out for future reference. This book is about missionary work, and is sent free of charge, postage paid, to anyone who wants to know about missions. It comes with a warning that if you read the book, you might become a missionary yourself. Yes, that free gift is going to cost you everything. The person in the ad says, "The free gift changed my life. After reading the book, I gave up everything, including my job, to become a missionary." Eternal life is a free gift, but a *costly* free gift.

A brief exposition of Romans 6

Death, then life

The first part of Romans 6, spanning verses 1 to 8, is about death, and says that we must die before we get life. Many Christians reverse the order: get the free gift first, then later give up your life (but only if you want to). This is incorrect. Paul says our old self must die *before* we get the free gift of eternal life from God. He says in verses 1-4:

What shall we say, then? Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase? By no means! We died to sin; how can we live in it any longer? Or don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life. (NIV)

Paul repeatedly talks about death before he talks about life. The “new life” in verse 4 does not take effect until we die with Christ and are buried with him. As for our place in the world, we are dead and buried. Hence baptism is “baptism into death” (v.4). If anyone thinks it is a fictional death, let Paul tell him otherwise: “Far be it from me to glory except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world” (Gal.6:14). Paul glories in the cross. It is the means by which Paul died to the world, and the world to him; he is finished with the world, and the world with him. There is nothing fictional about it.

“I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as refuse, in order that I may gain Christ” (Phil. 3:8). Hence Paul fulfilled in his own life what Jesus required of the rich young ruler, and more. In bidding the Ephesian elders farewell for the last time, Paul says:

“... the Holy Spirit testifies to me in every city that imprisonment and afflictions await me. But I do not account my life of any value nor as precious to myself, if only I may finish my course and the ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God.” (Acts 20:23,24, ESV)

Looking at Paul’s life and teaching, how can anyone imagine that he taught and practiced anything differently from his Master? Anyone who construes Paul to contradict his Lord must be held in contempt of God’s Word and, therefore, of God Himself.

To whom does God give His gift of eternal life?

Does anyone still think that Jesus and Paul taught differently? To clinch the matter, let us look yet more closely at Paul’s teaching.

To avoid lifting the “gift” of Romans 6:23 out of its context and distorting it, we need to understand some other important aspects of Paul’s teaching directly relevant to this verse. The concept of a redeemed slave of God or of Christ is a very important one for Paul. He uses the word “slave” (*doulos*, δούλος) some thirty times; and the verb “to be a

slave” and other cognate forms another thirty times, for a total of sixty times, indicating its importance for him. Formerly we were slaves to sin, but now we are slaves of righteousness and of God.

“Lord” is the common term for the owner of a slave. This gives specific meaning to the term “Lord” as it is applied to Jesus, including the term “Christ Jesus our Lord” which appears precisely in Romans 6:23, though Paul also uses it frequently elsewhere.

In Romans chapter 6, “slave” (*doulos*) appears in vv.16,17,19,20; “enslave” (*douloō*) in vv.18,22; “to be, and to serve, as slave” (*douleuō*) in v.6. These amount to seven occurrences of *doulos* and its cognates in this chapter alone. Hence the concept of slave with its associated ideas is central to this chapter.

In view of these biblical facts, let us read Romans 6:22-23. We will immediately discover the same ideas which are woven into these verses as part of their very fabric:

²² But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves to God, the benefit you reap leads to holiness, and the result is eternal life. ²³ For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Verse 22 says that *eternal life is the result of being a slave of God!* Notice that “eternal life” is mentioned in both these verses, indicating that it is the subject of these verses. In them Paul portrays salvation as having a definite sequential order:

(i) freedom from sin; (ii) becoming a slave of God; (iii) sanctification/holiness; (iv) the gift of eternal life. Can it be stated any more clearly than that? *It is the slaves of God who receive the gift of eternal life.*

Verses 22 and 23 are linked by the word “for,” emphasizing again that receiving the free gift of eternal life is inseparable from being slaves of God. Yet many preachers quote Paul out of context, and dish out eternal life like confetti: “Stretch out your hands, and eternal life will drop from the sky!”

Unlike a hired worker, a slave receives no wages from his master. A slave works for nothing, *so anything he gets is a free gift*. As slaves, we are not legally entitled to wages, yet God is so gracious a Master that He gives us something far better than wages: the gift of eternal life. Even more amazing, Jesus is willing to die in order to secure eternal life for his slaves!

Though we are rightfully slaves of Jesus, having been “bought with a price” (1Cor.6:20; 7:23), yet Jesus (with whose blood we were bought, Acts 20:28) told his disciples that he considers them friends rather than slaves (Jn.15:15).

Does anyone still think that Paul teaches something different from Jesus? Paul regards “slave” a title of the greatest honor for himself. Many of his letters begin with, “Paul, a slave of Jesus Christ” (e.g. Romans 1:1), sometimes translated as “Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ”. Interestingly, Paul never refers to himself as a “son of God”.

It is to His beloved slaves that God gives the gift of eternal life.

Chapter 28



PERFECTION: ABSOLUTE DEMAND, ABSOLUTE RESPONSE

 e do well, by way of summary, to return to the story of the rich young ruler in Matthew 19:16ff. This is one of the most difficult Bible passages to expound because it is difficult to get to the heart of the Lord's message here.

Why is it so difficult to understand the Lord's words?

The difficulty lies not so much in Jesus' teaching as within ourselves. We are naturally inclined to reject what we do not want to hear. The Lord says, "Though seeing, they do not see; though hearing, they do not hear or understand" (Mt. 13:13). This hardness of heart is innate to the human heart, and the disciples were not immune to this (Mk. 16:14). It is

this hardness that constitutes the humanly insurmountable barrier within us to understanding what Jesus is saying to us. The tendency is to interpret his teachings superficially, and evade the central message altogether. Unless the Lord has mercy on us to help us open our hearts, we would never understand his message.

In the last chapter we asked the question: Does the Lord Jesus preach one gospel and the apostle Paul another? Whereas Jesus demands absolute obedience and commitment, Paul seems to preach an easy gospel. Are they preaching the same gospel or are these two contradictory gospels? We have already seen that Jesus and Paul preach the same gospel; but we need to go deeper into the heart of the matter.

Eternal life and the commandments

The story of the rich young ruler is important because it answers the most important question that one could ask: “Teacher, what good thing must I do to get eternal life?” (Mt.19:16). The whole account contains the Lord’s teaching on salvation in a nutshell. The danger is to think that we know the answer to the young man’s question when we actually understand it *less than he does*.

In response to the young man’s earnest inquiry, Jesus replies, “If you want to enter life, keep the commandments” (v.17). The young man asks the next question, “Which commandments?” Jesus replies:

You shall not commit murder, you shall not commit adultery, you shall not steal, you shall not bear false witness, honor your father and mother; and you shall love your neighbor as yourself. (v.18,19)

The young man says, “All these I have observed; what do I still lack?” Then Jesus gives him a most important reply:

If you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me. (vv.20,21)

Hearing this, the young man walks away dejectedly because he is exceedingly rich. Then Jesus says to his disciples,

I tell you the truth, it is hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven. Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God. (vv.23,24)

How do we inherit eternal life? Are we sure we know the answer to this question? Let us put aside all the theology we have learned, and listen afresh to what the Lord is saying as if we had never heard him speak before. A common danger is that our preconceived ideas often hinder us from listening to the gospel without prejudice.

To the question, “What must I do to get eternal life?” the Lord’s surprising answer is this: “If you want to enter life, obey the commandments.” Many Christians will protest: “That can’t be true! (Interpretation: If Jesus’ teaching doesn’t accord with our doctrines, it is he who is wrong!)”

That would be salvation by works! No one is ever saved by keeping the commandments.” But like it or not, that is what the Lord plainly says, even if it does not suit our theology.

If we reject the Lord’s own explicit words, we had better be ready with a good explanation for it when we stand before him, as if that will be of any avail. The inescapable fact remains that Jesus did say to the rich young ruler in clear language, “If you would enter life, keep the commandments.”

In a separate incident, a lawyer asks Jesus the very same question, “Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?” (Luke 10:25), and the Lord gives the same answer: “What is written in the Law? How do you read?” The lawyer replies, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself.”

Jesus responds positively, “You have answered correctly; do this, and you will live” (v.28). Like it or not, you must keep the commandments to inherit eternal life. Jesus gives the same answer to the lawyer as to the rich young ruler.

The Ten Commandments and the two great commandments

When the young man asks, “Which commandments?” Jesus gives a list of well-known commandments: you shall not murder, you shall not commit adultery, etc. The stress is not on keeping these individual commandments but the

commandments *as a whole*, all of which are summed up in, “And you shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Mt.19:19). In his answer to the rich young ruler, Jesus includes more or less the second half of the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20, Deuteronomy 5) which have to do with the neighbor and are put in negative form: “You shall not ...”

It is striking that most of the Ten Commandments are put in negative form. Only two are stated in positive terms, the fourth and fifth commandments: keep the Sabbath holy, and honor your father and mother. Upon closer inspection, even these two are essentially negative in character. How is the Sabbath kept holy? By not doing any work on that day (Ex.20:10; Dt.5:14). The Ten Commandments do not prescribe what is to be done on that day, for the stress is on not doing.

As for the command to honor father and mother, it must mean essentially *do not dishonor father and mother* because the commandment does not specify what one must do to honor them. Again, no specific works are prescribed.

Surprisingly, the Old Testament does not link the command to honor one’s parents specifically with a command to obey one’s parents.¹⁹ It is only in the New Testament that

¹⁹ There is no command in the OT that specifically states the requirement to obey one’s parents. Regarding filial *disobedience*, the only reference to a son “who does not obey” his parents is found in a provision of the Law in Dt.21:18-21. In this case the son *dishonors* his parents by being “*a profligate and a drunkard*” (v.20), and refuses to listen to their pleas for him to change his ways. If a son persists in his ways, the death penalty could be applied according to the Law (v.21). There is, however,

we find the injunction, “Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right” (Eph.6:1; cf. Col.3:20).²⁰

At a certain time in life, when children reach a certain age and financial capability, one way of fulfilling the command to honor one’s parents might be to provide for them financially if they are in need. But this does not apply to the many people whose parents are financially self-sufficient or have passed away. In many cases today, the parents are financially better off than their children and do not need their support. So there is no uniform way of implementing this command in *a positive form* that is applicable in all or most cases.

Keeping negative commands does not involve doing anything, but is a refraining from doing certain things. This should not be very difficult, yet Adam and Eve failed when instructed to refrain from eating of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

no recorded instance of this death penalty having ever been carried out. The Law can be an effective deterrent to lawless behavior. In the case of a gross violation of the law regarding honoring one’s parents, by behavior that *publically* dishonors them (e.g., drunkenness), the provision for a public execution would serve as a warning to other recalcitrant sons.

²⁰ The fifth commandment is referred to in Eph.6:2 but the Greek has no particle connecting it with the previous verse. Col.3:20 makes no reference to the fifth commandment. Hence it seems that the injunction to “obey your parents” stands in the NT as a command in its own right, distinct from the fifth commandment.

Keeping the Ten Commandments is largely a matter of *not* doing rather than doing certain specified acts. The keeping of these commandments is not a matter of doing works; Jesus only mentions more or less the second half of the Ten Commandments which are all negative or prohibitive.

To our surprise, the Ten Commandments do not provide any basis for a teaching of salvation *by works*. Many Christians have the ignorant and (especially to the Jews) outrageous notion that Jews seek salvation by works (by observing the commandments) while Christians are saved by grace and by not works of any kind. As we have seen, it is possible to fulfill the written requirements of the Ten Commandments *by doing nothing!* — *no works!*

The young man thinks he has kept the Ten Commandments, and Jesus does not reject that claim. The young man, since his youth, has genuinely refrained from breaking any of the commandments.

There are Christians but also non-Christians who have not deliberately broken the Ten Commandments. Some non-Christians can truthfully say, “To my knowledge, I haven’t broken any of the Ten Commandments. I have never worshipped an idol, killed someone, taken God’s name in vain, or committed robbery.” I myself was one of these. Paul could say of his earlier non-Christian life, “as to the righteousness which is in the Law, blameless” (Phil.3:6). There are moral people who have kept the external requirements of the Law—by *doing nothing* that would transgress the commands.

But Jesus turns the Ten Commandments inside out, and brings out its *positive* character. Keeping the commandments is no longer just a matter of refraining from doing what the Law forbids. Now it means to fulfill *the spirit* of the Law, represented by the two greatest commandments: *love for God and love for neighbor*. Having quoted the second half of the Ten Commandments, Jesus summarizes them with the words, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Mt. 19:19). These words are not a part of the Ten Commandments but are found in Leviticus 19:18. You cannot obey the command to love simply by doing nothing.

When Jesus says, “Keep the commandments and you will live,” he is not referring merely to the Ten Commandments in negative form, but to the two great commandments in positive form. If you love God with all your heart and your neighbor as yourself, you will inherit eternal life. On two separate occasions when someone asks him about eternal life, Jesus gives the same answer.

What has this to do with regeneration, renewal and perfection? Everything! As we have seen, these are the three aspects of salvation in Scripture. They have everything to do with the whole question of inheriting eternal life that the rich young man asked. It is in answer to the question of eternal life that Jesus speaks of keeping the commandments, but also of perfection (“If you would be perfect ...” Mt.19:21).

Perfection and keeping the commandments are not two different things but *one and the same*, provided we understand that Jesus is not referring to the negative

commandments alone but sums them up in the all-embracing positive command, *Love your neighbor as yourself*. This has to do with perfection because how can anyone who is not perfect or Christ-like keep this command?

The command to love the neighbor as oneself is humanly impossible to obey. Since it is tied to the young man's question of inheriting eternal life, the disciples are compelled to ask: *Who then can be saved?* Jesus' answer: *With man it is impossible, but with God all things are possible*. Salvation is impossible for man to achieve, so it is attained by grace through faith (Eph.2:8). No one can fulfill the Law or the spirit of the Law except by God's transforming power working in us through the Holy Spirit (Rom.8:4). Contrary to popular thinking, we *do* fulfill the spirit of the Law: "Do we then nullify the Law through faith? May it never be! On the contrary, we establish the Law." (Rom.3:31)

The rich young man might not fully understand the spirit of the law, but to his credit he knows that something is lacking in his life. As far as he knows, he has kept the commandments faithfully, yet senses that something is amiss. Do you sense that something is lacking in your own life? Or that your relationship with God is weak? Or that your prayers are not getting through? Or that you have no spiritual direction? Or that you cannot do the good you want to do?

We can imagine the rich young man saying thoughtfully, "I have kept the commandments to the best of my knowledge. Yet something is missing." The Lord answers, "Since you are asking me, let me tell you the answer. What

is missing in your life is a *total* response to God. You have made a response in terms of keeping the commandments, but it is not a total response because you do not love God with *all* your heart.”

Total demand, total response

God requires nothing less than total commitment. The nature of the new life in Christ is such that *we cannot live it without total commitment*. From personal experience we know that we cannot live the victorious Christian life if our obedience to God is partial. Perfection is nothing more, nothing less, than the fulfilling of God’s absolute requirements by the grace which He supplies freely and abundantly. *An absolute demand calls for an absolute response*. “Absolute” here means total or complete as distinct from partial or inadequate.

That Paul concurs totally with Jesus is seen in the way Paul teaches God’s absolute requirements. He begins by going all the way back to the creation, for it is on the basis of the creation that God makes an absolute demand *on all mankind*. God as the Creator not only brought man into existence, but also in His love “richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment” (1Tim.6:17). But “even though they knew God, they did not honor Him as God” (Rom.1:21). Instead they went their own self-willed way, and refused to love, honor and serve the living God.

It is to Christians that Paul says, “In view of God’s mercy, offer your bodies as living sacrifices” (Rom.12:1). It is in our bodies that we live in the world as living persons; hence, to offer our bodies to God means offering up ourselves to Him as living persons. How can we offer our bodies without offering our whole being? To kill the body is to kill the person; to sacrifice the body is to sacrifice the person. How can anyone suggest that Paul does not call for a total response to God?

But the gospel as it is presented today portrays God as a fatherly figure who demands nothing from us except that we be kind enough to believe in Jesus. God sent His only Son into the world, so please show him some kindness by accepting him. Kind and soft-hearted, God says, “I demand nothing from you, but spare an hour of your time every week to honor Me by going to church and dropping a few dollars into the offering box.”

This beggarly portrayal of God is nothing less than an insult. It is not the God of the Bible. God is Creator of heaven and earth, and the King of kings. He “commands all people everywhere to repent” (Acts 17:30). He is enthroned above, seated above the circle of the earth (Isa.40:22). On judgment day, you and I will answer to Him. The supreme God has the authority to send a person to heaven or to hell according to His righteousness. The sovereign Lord of all does not merely ask for an hour on Sunday, or a few coins in the offering box, but demands *everything*. “Love the Lord

your God with all your heart, all your soul, all your mind, all your strength”—*the fourfold “all”*.

One gospel for the rich, another for the poor?

Jesus says to the rich young ruler, “If you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.” (Matthew 19:21)

In this day of diluted Christianity, a thousand voices will protest: “This can’t be true for everyone! This teaching applies to the rich young man, not to us!” But is there one gospel for the rich, another for the poor? We see only one gospel in the Bible. If there is another gospel, it must be a false one. Everyone, Jew or Gentile, rich or poor, is saved through the same gospel. Does the Lord custom-design a gospel for the rich young man? Some invent another gospel in order to flee from the sword of the Spirit, which penetrates our hearts and discerns our thoughts (Heb.4:12; Eph.6:17).

Giving as a spiritual key

What is the heart of the matter? What is Jesus saying to the rich young man? That he can gain eternal life by selling his possessions? That a millionaire can buy eternal life for a million dollars, and a poor man two dollars, so long as you empty your bank account? Again we see the danger of looking at things externally.

The Lord speaks of four things: *go*, *sell*, *give*, *come*—in that order. The young man must *go* before he can sell; and *sell* before he can give; and *give* before he can *come* to Jesus.

The key idea is to give. Giving is at the heart of the matter. It is human nature to grab things but the Lord wants to transform our attitude into a giving spirit. If the point is merely to sell your possessions, you might say to yourself, “How fortunate, my possessions are worth only twenty dollars. I can inherit eternal life for twenty dollars!” Is God so superficial?

There is but one gospel for the rich and poor alike. Everyone, rich or poor, must have a transformed heart attitude, from that of taking and grabbing, to that of giving and helping.

By nature we make decisions or make friends according to how much benefit we get from them. Whether I join a certain group or not will depend on how much I can get out of it. It will depend on whether those in the group will give me help, encouragement, or money. If I get what I want, I would say it is a wonderful group. But if some in my group need my help in terms of encouragement or other forms of assistance, or if they tax my patience, then I consider them undesirable.

If someone gives us a hundred dollars, we say, “Hallelujah! God is so kind to me.” But if God tells us to pass it to a needy person, we say, “Why me? There are richer people around.” It is not in our nature to think that it is blessed to

give, even to the needy. Jesus says, “It is more blessed to give than to receive” (Acts 20:35).

Our mindset is focused on what we can get, not what we can give. Isn't that the prevailing attitude among Christians, even those who claim to be regenerate? We go to church meetings for the purpose of getting, not giving. The carnal man—the man of the flesh—wants to get and to hoard, until his possessions choke him.

How did the young man become rich in the first place? Was it not by *keeping* what he already had, and *storing up* any additional income he was getting? No one becomes rich by giving away what he possesses, and, after buying what he personally needs, refrains from storing up what he receives. The young man most probably inherited his wealth, and now he wants to inherit eternal life. But he has yet to learn that we are only *stewards* of our possessions. The possessions we have, whether much or little, are what God has entrusted to us. As His stewards, we use what He has given us according to His will.

God is a God who is always giving, and we must learn to do the same if we hope to inherit eternal life. The rich young man's failure stands as a warning to us. He will have all eternity to reflect on it.

How can the two great commands, loving God and loving the neighbor, be carried out except through the attitude of giving? It is in the nature of love to give. To love God with the fourfold “all” is, in practice, to give all. It is to offer our whole being to God, and to give our possessions to

meet the needs of our poor neighbors, whom we love as ourselves. What the Lord told the rich young ruler to do (go, sell, give, come) was the implementation of the two great commands, which apply to everyone, and not only the young man.

The Collier brothers

A striking example of the grabbing mentality is seen in the Collier brothers. They were two wealthy bachelors who were famous in their time, more than half a century ago. The Collier brothers were so stingy that they remained single for fear that marriage could prove to be expensive.

So miserly were the brothers that they would not throw anything out, not even a newspaper, a magazine or an empty bottle. They inherited a big mansion, but with time it became cluttered almost to the ceiling with newspapers, magazines, bottles and jars. Hoarding had reached the level of absurdity. The rooms in the mansion were filled with all this garbage that they would not throw away. They did not install a telephone because they wanted nothing to do with people, so why waste money on the monthly telephone fee?

But one day they got sick apparently from food poisoning, and had to get a doctor. Presumably they will tolerate this expense if they are to survive long enough to store up more bottles and magazines. *But they had no telephone!* According to the news reports, the mansion was so cluttered with rubbish that they struggled to find their way to the door to make a call from a public telephone. As they

tried to plow a path through the refuse, they ran out of strength, collapsed, and died. The police found them lying half buried in the garbage.

Their thinking is hard to understand. These two brothers exhibit the opposite of what it means to be generous, giving, or openhanded. Their tightfistedness reached the level of the ridiculous. But if we have not learned to be generous, we would differ from them only in degree but not in kind, in quantity but not in quality.

We are by nature selfish and greedy. These traits are often instilled by education, but never eradicated. If there is good food at a function, everyone will be well mannered, as they have been taught to be. But in a situation where food is scarce, a very different type of behavior will emerge from the natural man. Only when Christ has transformed us into new persons will a change take place at the *core* of our being, making us Christ-like.

Following Jesus without encumbrance

But giving is not an end in itself. The young man was to go, sell, and give in order to “Come, and follow me”. He was to be free from the weight of his possessions and the demands of the world, and then follow the Lord without distraction.

But sadly for him, the rich young man chose to cling to what Paul would have considered “rubbish” (Phil.3:8) in comparison to the eternal riches that could have been his. Within a finite number of years, death would in any case

part the young man from his wealth. He had not learned the wisdom of Job's observation, "Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked I will depart" (Job 1:21). He wouldn't be able to take one cent with him at his departure from this world. When he walked away from the Lord's call to be his disciple, he walked away from eternal life. He who does not consider eternal life with Jesus to be worth all that he has, is not worthy of it.

Will you too walk away disappointed? You were expecting a spiritual bargain but ran into an absolute demand. The gospel is costly because, firstly, it cost God His Son, and secondly, it will cost us all that we have. "If anyone would come after me", says Jesus, "he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me" (Lk.9:23; Mt.16:24; Mk. 8:34). It takes denying one's own life to follow Jesus, as the young man realized. His possessions were to him his very life which he refused to part with. Jesus continues, "Whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will save it" (Lk.9:24 and parallels). This is a fundamental truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Only after the "go and sell" do we finally *come* to the Lord and *follow him*. But follow him where to? Soon after his conversation with the young man, Jesus talks about his own death: "The Son of Man will be handed over to the Gentiles. They will mock him, insult him, spit on him, flog him and kill him. On the third day he will rise again" (Lk.18:32-33; Mt.20:18,19). To follow him means to follow him to the

cross. No one who clings to his possessions and saves his life will want to walk this path.

The rich young ruler turned away from Jesus' absolute requirements, and many are doing the same today. The standards of truth are not alterable or negotiable. If truth could be adjusted to suit each person's likes or dislikes, it would no longer be truth. The unalterable character of eternal truth is the reason that the Lord cannot lower the requirements. When the command says "all," it is total and absolute; it cannot be adjusted to mean 99 per cent, much less 50 percent.

Jesus represents his Father, who is the *absolute* God and the One from whom Jesus derives his life (John 5:26) and even his authority to judge (v.27). God issues absolute commands, and expects an absolute response. All else is relative to Him and dependent upon Him. All life derives its existence from Him as its Creator. He is perfect and complete in Himself. Nothing can hinder His plans. Theologians describe His absoluteness with such terms as *omnipotent*, *omniscient*, and *omnipresent* to convey that God is not limited in power or knowledge, or restricted by time and space. It is by the absolute authority of his Father that Jesus gives absolute commands.

A cut-price gospel on offer

There are vast multitudes of Christians in the world today, about 1.5 billion in the 1980s, growing to over 2 billion by the year 2000, and representing over 32% of the world's population.²¹ All the highly industrialized nations of the world are Christian except for a couple of Asian countries. The industrially advanced countries of Europe are predominantly Christian; the same is true of North America, Australia and New Zealand.

But let this be recognized with deep concern: There are so many Christians today only because the cost of obtaining eternal life has been slashed. In almost all churches, one would be surprised if the true cost of being a Christian is even so much as mentioned. Instead, being a “Christian” often means nothing more than membership in a particular church or denomination.

Is it possible to reduce the cost even more (it is already rock bottom) so as to gain more converts? If eternal life is available for nothing, why not give it a try? Then people need only attend church once or twice a year, during Easter or Christmas, or even just once or twice in a lifetime, which is already the case in many “Christian” countries.

A good part of the world is Christianized by slashing the price (to a voluntary offering perhaps?). So much of Western

²¹ *World Christian Encyclopedia, A Comparative Survey of Churches and Religions in the Modern World A.D. 1900-2000*, edited by David B. Barrett, Oxford University Press, 1982, pp.3&4.

Christianity has devalued itself and brought itself to the edge of irrelevance. And who authorized the price cut?

The absolute demand of Christ's call to discipleship has been removed, and Christianity has been repackaged into something easier to accept and more suitable for converting the world. But surprising as it may seem, Jesus is not interested in converting the world *en masse*, but in making disciples who obey God.

A cheap gospel quotes Bible verses selectively without regard for their context. The cross to which Jesus calls us is rarely mentioned; neither is dying with Christ to the old life and rising with him to become a new person. Multitudes have been brought into the church, or were brought up in the church, on a diluted gospel. But sadly these are not the Christians whom the Lord will recognize on that Day.

How can we experience God?

It is when we come to Jesus in the obedience of faith, beginning with repentance, that we begin to experience his unlimited love for us. Mark 10:21 says that Jesus "loved" the rich young man. But the young man turned away from Jesus' call, so he will never experience that love in time and eternity.

King Edward VIII abdicated his throne for a woman's love. What would we not forsake for Jesus' pure love? Paul rejoiced in Jesus "who loved me and gave himself for me" (Gal.2:20).

The rich young man's heart was fixated on temporal and transient things, so he lost sight of the things of eternal value. When we overvalue the temporal, we undervalue the eternal. He was afraid to burn his bridges behind him because he wanted to keep his link to the world. If he gives away his riches, who will support him in his old age? Or cover his medical fees? Or pay for his children's education? Did it not cross his mind that if he were following Jesus together with the other disciples, he can trust Jesus to provide for all these needs?

A total response to God is impossible without faith. Without faith, it would be spiritually pointless to contemplate selling one's possessions. If we are not open to God's transforming work in our lives, we should not even think about giving away what we have. It is dangerous to implement the Lord's teaching outwardly without having the right heart attitude. If you rush out and sell all you have, two days later you will start regretting what you have done. What the Lord calls for is a change of heart, not mere external compliance.

It was love that affixed Jesus to the cross

A main reason for the lack of faith is the failure to see the extent of the Lord's love for us, or the significance of his death for us. Jesus was transfixed upon the beams of the cross by crude nails, but more than that, in God's eternal wisdom, the vertical and horizontal beams of the cross symbolize love

for God (vertical) and love for man (horizontal). It was Jesus' absolute commitment to God and to humankind that held him firmly to the cross. When he had laid down his life out of his unreserved love for God and man, the Father raised him from the dead and affirmed that death can never triumph over love.

Though Jesus is no longer on the cross, the cross will always be an inseparable part of him because he will forever bear its marks in his body. He is forever the crucified One (1Cor.2:2), "the Lamb that was slain" (Rev.5:12; 5:6; 13:8).

The cross that Jesus calls us to take up after him is not literally a physical cross-shaped instrument of death but the call to love God totally and the neighbor as ourselves. Even in death we conquer it by God's power working through the cruciform form of love.

It was this that the rich young ruler was called to. But he took the transient path of self-preservation, to perish at the end clutching his earthly treasures which cannot benefit him one iota in the grave.

Jesus' love and the "mind of Christ"

Experiencing Jesus' love will inevitably transform us into new people created in his likeness. The new person will begin to think, feel, and act as Jesus does. This is having the "mind of Christ" (1Cor.2:16; Phil. 2:5). Following Jesus is not just an external act. Judas followed Jesus outwardly but not with his heart. It is crucial to be a heart follower of Jesus.

Are we willing to let God transform us by letting Him renew our hearts and minds? A study of the mind of Christ would take a separate work, but let us note its characteristic features:

(1) *He gave all he had.* “You know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, that you through his poverty might become rich” (2Cor.8:9).

(2) *He gave himself wholly.* “He became poor” doesn’t just mean giving up various possessions for our sake. Rather, Scripture uses the remarkable term “emptied himself” (Phil.2:7) to describe his self-giving. It expresses in vivid terms that Jesus kept nothing for himself. He didn’t hold back his life, but offered his whole self on the cross: “the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me” (Gal.2:20).

(3) *He gave first.* Jesus’ giving was not in response to someone else’s giving. He took the initiative. Hence Jesus never asks us to do anything which he himself did not do first.

Looking at these features of his character and actions, we can only exclaim: What a wonderful Person is the Crucified One!

The blessing of following in his steps

God is always giving. His supernal generosity is reflected in the life of His Son Jesus Christ. The one who has the mind of Christ is one who will gladly, yet with “fear and trembling,” follow in his steps.

Many Christians find no joy in giving, whether it is the giving of money or the giving of themselves. Since it is more blessed to give than to receive (Acts 20:35), God’s blessings are reserved for those who, like Himself, are happy to give. The word “blessed” (*makarios*) also means “happy”.

Jesus says, “Give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over, will be poured into your lap. For with the measure you use, it will be measured to you” (Lk.6:38, NIV). Six chapters later, in Luke 12:20, a rich man is called a “fool” for accumulating riches much like the Collier brothers, and for constructing larger and larger storehouses for his grain and goods. God says to him, “You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. Who then will get what you have prepared for yourself?” What this rich man refused to give in life was taken from him in death. He was called a “fool” for not understanding the transience of earthly treasure or the permanence of heavenly treasures.

Experiencing the reality of God

When we have the mind of Christ, we will experience what the Lord has taught: it is in giving that we receive. After we

have given what we have, we will discover that God will give us even more to pass on to others, and we become a channel of God's life and generosity to others.

If we walk on the narrow road of self-giving, we will discover that God becomes very real. Many Christians say that God is not real to them; that's because they are not living according to the mind of Christ. They refuse to let go of their self-centered interests, or burn the bridges behind them; they want to retreat to their worldly security if the Christian life gets too tough. They choose the path of compromise, and settle for a partial commitment to Christ. They do not experience God's reality, leading to a Christianity that lacks joy, conviction, and power. Like the rich young man who was called to perfection, they are unwilling to face the cost or to walk on the narrow road in response to that call.

The mind of man is by nature focused on man, not on God. That is why it was impossible for the young man with his self-centered mind to respond to Christ's call, which is a God-centered call, heavenly and upward. But he who has the mind of Christ will know that: "With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible" (Mt.19:26).



I HAVE COME, O GOD, TO DO YOUR WILL

What did Jesus come into the world for?

Let us begin with a fundamental question: *What did Jesus come into the world for?* If you are a Christian, especially a long-time Christian, you may think that the answer to this question is easy. In actual fact, the answer is not evident to the average Christian.

What did Jesus come into the world for? Most Christians have the answer ready on the tips of their tongues: “*Jesus came to die for us!*” It is true that Jesus came to die for our sins, but that is hardly the complete truth. If his only purpose was to die for us, why are we given the four gospels? Why is the life of Christ given to us in quadrasonic? If his only purpose was to die for us, we wouldn’t need to know anything about him apart from the fact that he died. Even then, we only need to know *that* he died, not *how* he died.

All we would need is the last part of Matthew or another gospel, plus a few verses from Romans or Ephesians; the rest of the New Testament and most of the Old Testament can be discarded.

Neither would we need to know anything about his compassion to the poor, the sick, the dying. Or how he dealt with hypocrites, of which there are too many in the world today. Or how he cleansed the temple. We wouldn't need to know any of this except to satisfy our intellectual curiosity.

The answer to the question, *What did Jesus come into the world for?* is not so obvious. It is certainly true that he died for us, but there is more to it than that.

1. He came not only to die, but to give life

Much more, Scripture tells us that *Jesus came to give us life*. This life is God's own life given to Jesus (John 5:26), a life that extends from the heart of God to the heart of man through Jesus Christ, a life that transcends physical or earthly life.

God has given us the best gift possible. The gift of eternal life is far better than the gift of physical life, which in itself is truly valuable. People cling desperately to physical life even when it is seeping through their fingers like sand. As age takes its toll, it saps away the strength of even the sturdiest of men. The last flicker of life will elude every attempt to prolong it.

Physical life is certainly valuable, but God has something better in store for us: *eternal life, which does not pass away*. It is better not only in terms of duration but also of quality. This new life with its eternal character is, sadly, something that many Christians have never truly experienced.

How precious is the gift of life, yet how few have obtained it! The main reason is that many preachers, perhaps with the intention of attracting larger crowds into their churches, have been peddling eternal life at cut-rate prices, telling us that there are no conditions apart from “believing”.

What do we do with the life God has given us?

An equally important question is, *What do you do with the life that God has given you?* Few people know what they are doing with their earthly lives, much less their spiritual lives.

God has given you physical life, and you may live to 70, 80, or 90. What will you do with life? As you get older, you might no longer strive for new achievements. While you are still young, you can study for a degree or look for a job. After graduation, life becomes a grinding routine of working from nine to five at the office, and going home tired in the evening. Then you start asking yourself, “What am I doing with my life? It is just a hectic hand-to-mouth existence. But what choice do I have? I need income to live.”

There is nothing wrong with studying or holding a job. But if life is nothing more than studying, working, retiring, and dying, we can rightly ask what life is all about. What is the meaning of life if our goal is to earn more money to buy

a faster car? The speed limit in Canada is 100 kms/hr (about 60 mph) and 65 mph in some parts of the United States. Just how important is it to have a car that reaches 100 kms/hr in five seconds flat?

The good news is that God wants to give us the gift of eternal life. But the question remains, *What do we do with it?* God has a special purpose for us in the new life, yet few Christians know what it is.

2. Jesus came to show us our mission in life: Carry out God's will in the world

Jesus came to die for us *and* give us new life. We are given four different gospels so that we may learn, from a multi-dimensional perspective, what he wants us to do with the new life. In the new life, God has prepared a whole program for us. He calls us to follow Jesus so that he may show us, step by step, how to fulfill the purpose of our lives.

In the new life, do I sit back and wait for heaven? And when I get to heaven, what I am supposed to do there? Take a beginner's course on harp-playing? Playing harps for eternity is not everyone's "cup of tea". Many imagine that the only activity in heaven is sacred music. Baseball fans will be bored to tears! If heaven has no TV sets or CD players, how will you occupy yourself for all eternity?

Thankfully, God has given us something to do in the new life: In this present time, He has assigned us the awesome task of *carrying out His will in the world*; and we can be sure

that He won't leave us without significant responsibilities in eternity.

How do we know what God's will for us is? Does He call us into His office to explain it point by point? Not quite, for He has his special way of revealing His will. The earthly life of Jesus, the Son of God, is recorded for us in the gospels, and Jesus tells us, "Look at my life and my deeds. Then follow my example as the Spirit leads and empowers you."

This principle is foreign to most Christians because discipleship of the kind that Jesus taught has all but vanished from most churches. But any church that does not know about discipleship in its true sense, or what to do with the new life, will eventually die. This is true also on the personal level: The Christian who has no direction will become frustrated and may not survive spiritually for long.

Hebrews 10:5-7 explains what Jesus came into the world for:

When Christ came into the world, he said, "Sacrifice and offering you did not desire, but a body you prepared for me; with burnt offerings and sin offerings you were not pleased. Then I said, *Here I am*—it is written about me in the scroll—*I have come to do Your will, O God.*" (NIV)

In this remarkable passage, we see that when Jesus came into the world, he said to his Father, "I have come to do Your will, O God," quoting Psalm 40:6-8.

Let the force of this statement sink into our hearts. I meditated on it until tears came to my eyes, because I began

to see a dimension of the Lord's life that I had not seen before with such clarity. I was struck by his total and absolute commitment to the will of his Father. His life was resolutely fixed on one focal point: *doing the will of God*.

3. Jesus chose to be a slave

Two chapters ago, we discussed the significant fact that the concept of being a slave of God is central to Paul's teaching. The failure to grasp this point will lead to a failure to understand his teaching, not least in the matter of receiving the gift of eternal life.

What is the defining element of the life of a slave? Isn't it the fact that he must always do his master's will, whether he likes it or not? The mark of a servant or slave of God is that he always does God's will. That is why being a slave of God is central to Paul's teaching. In various places in his letters, he emphasizes that doing God's will is a fundamental element in the life of the new man in Christ.

Given his Christ-centered thinking, Paul's teaching on this matter is rooted in Christ himself, who took upon himself the status of a slave (Phil.2:7). Is any disciple above his Master? If we refuse to live as his slaves, we are not his disciples who follow in his steps. And since all of Jesus' earthly life was governed by the singular purpose of doing the Father's will, can our lives have any other goal?

Since Jesus himself chose to be a slave, Paul regarded "slave of Jesus Christ" a title of honor that he applied to

himself (Rom.1:1; Gal.1:10; Phil.1:1; Titus 1:1). Paul's earnest desire was to be like his Lord in every way. And Paul was by no means alone in describing himself as a slave of Christ. Other servants of Christ did the same: James (1:1); Peter (2Pet.1:1); Jude (1:1); John (Rev.1:1). Rejoicing in the privilege of being slaves of Christ, and zealously doing his will, they were greatly used by God in their lifetimes.

Few people will achieve anything

The great tragedy is that few people will achieve anything in this world, much less accomplish God's will. What about us? Will we achieve anything meaningful in this life? Or are we marching with the vast regiments of people, billions and billions of them, who live in this world without knowing what they are living for, other than perhaps trying to enjoy themselves—though often not successful even at that? Do we know where we come from, and where we are going? “I know where I came from, and where I am going” (John 8:14).

A life without direction is pitiable. Many have been baptized and have joined various churches, yet don't know what they are living for, and won't accomplish anything of spiritual value in the world. Let us make it our prayer that we won't pass through this world in our earthly sojourn without having achieved the purpose God has for us.

That God has a task for each one of us in the world is an absolute certainty. If we fail to complete our task, we wouldn't want to see the Lord's face on that Day. Imagine

the horror of being asked by the Lord, “What have you done with the life I had given you? Have you completed the work I gave you to do?” Work? What work? “Well, lots and lots of work. Here in front of you is the Bible with over a thousand pages. Have you discerned my heart and mind in it?” Some Christians say they have read the Bible many times, but do they live their lives according to God’s will as revealed in it?

If you are a Christian, let it be clearly affirmed: If you squander the life that God has given you, you will be without excuse because you hold in your hands the Book which explains what He wants you to do with your life, and also because He has given you the Holy Spirit to lead you and empower you in doing it.

Yet the tragedy is that many Christians will accomplish nothing, and will stand empty-handed when they meet the Lord. One doesn’t need to be a prophet to see this. Most Christians will achieve little or nothing in this life because their lives are not focused into one sharp point: *the will of God*.

Focus your life on God’s will

If you swing a metal bar against a tree, you won’t fell the tree no matter how strong you are or how heavy the bar is. The tree will sustain a few scars, and your hands will hurt after a few blows. But if the metal is melted down and molded into an axe, the entire weight of the axe head is now concentrated onto one sharp edge that can fell a tree in a short time.

Nothing will happen if you place a sheet of paper under sunlight. But if you focus the light into one concentrated point with a magnifying glass, the paper will start burning within minutes.

When we study the four gospels, we will see that Jesus' life was sharply focused on one thing: *doing the will of the Father*. "I have come, O God, to do Your will."

Jesus is the light of the world, and how powerful is his radiance. We too are the light of the world, but how weak is our glow. We reflect Christ's light so inadequately. But if we focus that light, weak though it is, onto one point, it can do amazing things!

This principle was impressed in my mind when I learned scuba diving. Diving at night led to an adventure I had never experienced before: going into the ocean on a dark night. Our boat took us to a place where a ship had sunk to the bottom, fifty feet below. The wind, the rain, and the waves were battering our boat. It was pitch dark, and the water looked ink-black.

The guide said to everyone, "Are you sure you want to dive in?" Seeing that nobody was backing off, he said, "Think again. It's dark, it's windy, it's raining." Still no one withdrew. So he told us to put on our masks and tanks. One by one we went into the water, descending fifty feet down, to explore the sunken ship. As each person took his turn to dive in, he or she was given a flashlight. It was not the powerful type that I had expected, but a tiny thing about six or seven inches long. I thought to myself, "How are we going

to explore the ocean with this tiny flashlight?” But at this stage there was no time to ask questions, each person just took a flashlight and dived in.

After entering the water, I was amazed that this light could throw a long, effective beam. I could see objects forty feet away. Looking at the flashlight, you could see that it was a weak source of light. Yet it could do amazing things in the murky ocean because it was focused into one sharp beam. Had the beam been scattered, out of focus, we couldn't have seen much in the ink-like waters.

What can we Christians do with our weak light? If it is focused into a sharp beam, it will do wonders. If your life is sharply focused on God's will, the power of that light will amaze you. God's light has indeed come into our lives, but it's up to us to focus it into one single concentrated beam.

4. Jesus' life: Focused on God's will

If you study the life of the Lord, you would see the secret of his earthly ministry. His light is far brighter than ours, and when it is focused into one sharp beam, we can scarcely fathom its awesome power. Jesus came into the world with one intense, focused goal: “I have come to do Your will, O God” (Heb.10:7). His intense desire to do the Father's will is seen in all four gospels.

Wherever Jesus shone his light, many turned to God. Some hated the light, but many others were attracted to it. In this world, some will love the Lord, and some will hate

him enough to crucify him. His intense light will frighten off anyone who wants to hide his own sins. But for people who are searching for a way out of the darkness, how welcome is the light that points the way to God and to salvation.

Once when Jesus was twelve years old, his parents were searching for him all over Jerusalem, but couldn't find him even after three days (Lk.2:46). They then decided to look for him in the temple, which is where they should have gone to in the first place. Finding him there, they said, "We've been anxiously looking for you everywhere." Jesus then said to them, "Don't you know that I had to be in my Father's house? That I must attend to His affairs? That I must do His will?" Already at that early age, Jesus was focused on the will of the Father.

Later, when he began his ministry, one of the first things he did was to cleanse the temple of religious commercialism (John 2:14-17). Consumed by a fiery zeal, he fashioned a whip with which he drove out the animals, and overturned the tables of the moneychangers.

Nothing is as abhorrent to spirituality as commercialized religion. Commercialized religion is crass and abominable. Churches tend to be caught up in the business of raising funds and constructing church buildings. Non-Christians rightly accuse the churches of being fund-raising organizations.

After Jesus cleansed the temple, one verse stuck in the minds of the people who observed him: "Zeal for Your house

consumes me” (Psalm 69:9). His heart was consumed by a fiery zeal for God’s will.

In today’s wishy-washy Christianity, where do we find Christians with a fiery zeal like the Lord’s? Brothers and sisters, in this generation we will accomplish absolutely nothing with the life that God has given us unless it is concentrated by God’s grace into a single-minded spiritual zeal for God. May He deliver us from a superficial, commercialized, easy-going Christianity.

If your Christian life is not focused, it will be feeble and directionless. In that case, it may be better to forget about being a Christian. A wishy-washy Christian life will only disgrace the Lord; it cannot reveal His glory or accomplish His will. If we are not doing God’s will, we are living in disobedience, and will have to face the judgment.

The four gospels provide us with a comprehensive four-dimensional view of the life of Christ. In them he resolutely sets his face to fulfilling God’s purpose. His absolute commitment to his Father, and his fiery zeal to accomplish His purpose, inspired the disciples as they observed him. Can our lives bring similar inspiration to others too?

The preoccupation with God’s will is seen in Jesus’ own teaching. He says that not everyone who believes in him and acknowledges him as Lord will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only *he who does the will of the Father* (Mt.7:21). He also says, “My food is to do the will of Him who sent me, and to accomplish His work” (Jn.4:34). What sustains me, says the

Lord, and strengthens me like food, is doing my Father's will. It is his nourishment and delight.

“I do not seek my own will, but the will of Him who sent me” (Jn.5:30). Jesus also says, “I always do the things that are pleasing to My Father” (8:29).

His intense desire to please the Father may be hard for us to fathom. His whole being is imbued with a fervent love for the Father. How weak is our love for God, how little we care to please Him, how puny our concern for His glory. We are at risk of passing through this life without leaving a mark on the sand for His glory. The choice is ours. If we live for ourselves, we will be blown away like dust. If we live for God, we will live forever: “he who does the will of God abides forever” (1John 2:17).

As he approached the end of his earthly ministry, and as the cross was looming large before him, the Lord Jesus said to his Father, “What shall I say? ‘Father, save me from this hour’? No, for this purpose I have come to this hour” (Jn.12:27). Amidst the encircling gloom of his impending death he declared, “Not my will but yours be done” (Lk.22:42). Even in that final dark hour, his heart and mind remained wholly focused on his Father's will.

5. Gethsemane

We tend to think that because Jesus was sinless and dedicated himself to doing the Father's will that it was easy for him to do God's will. This erroneous notion is refuted by

the account of Gethsemane and the wrenching struggle that Jesus went through there, which wrung from him “sweat, like blood”. The whole verse reads, “And being in agony he was praying very fervently; and his sweat became like drops of blood, falling upon the ground” (Lk.22:44).

Such was the depth of the suffering in his innermost being that the sweat that poured out from him was as if what came forth was blood. His sweating was equivalent to bleeding. When the nails pierced him, he bled. But before the nails ever pierced him at Golgotha, his heart was pierced at Gethsemane. Blood flows from a physical wound, but sweat flowed in lieu of blood from his pierced spirit.

We are not told what actually transpired at Gethsemane, and what the cause of Jesus’ intense agony was when he was confronted with the imminent actuality of doing God’s will—to be crucified for our sins. Yet it is possible for us to deduce at least a tiny particle of it.

When I was a child, I was once required to swallow a spoonful of castor oil. Even though I knew that it was being administered for my good, the struggle to get the oil into my mouth and down my throat was exhausting because the repulsive smell and taste of the oil caused me to retch. Knowing that it was a good and necessary remedy did not make it any easier for me to swallow it. If this little example could be magnified to the nth degree, it may give us a glimpse of what Jesus went through at Gethsemane.

What if the horror of “being made sin for us” on the part of him “who knew no sin” (2Cor.5:21) was beyond what

even he could cope with? What would have become of our salvation? In a real sense, our salvation hung upon his final “not my will, but Yours be done” (Lk.22:42). Without that final decisive submission to the Father’s will, there would have been no cross and therefore no salvation for us. *Without Gethsemane there would have been no Golgotha.* The question of man’s salvation was assured in these decisive words in which Jesus embraced his death in embracing God’s will.

Gethsemane, which forever uniquely exemplifies the doing of God’s will, was therefore every bit as important for our salvation, and perhaps even more so, than Golgotha. The cross followed from that decisive acceptance of God’s will. The act of doing the Father’s will reached its climax in the Garden of Gethsemane, and then went on to its full expression at the cross. At Gethsemane his sorrowful agony had already brought him to the point of death: “My soul is very sorrowful, even to death” (Mt.26:38; Mk.14:34).

Our eternal well-being was lost in a garden, Eden, where Adam and Eve fell as a result of disobeying God. Appropriately, it was regained in another garden, Gethsemane, where our precious Savior already began to shed his blood for us in the form of sweat wrung from him by “the travail of his soul” (Isa.53:11), which represented the “blood” of his inner most being.

His agony is seen in the fact that “an angel came and strengthened him” (Lk.22:43; cf. 2Cor.13:4). The intensity of his suffering in the course of doing God’s will uniquely

qualifies him to be a high priest who can sympathize with our weaknesses (Heb.4:15).

Though we are unable to fathom the depths of Gethsemane, the crisis he faced there—in weakness, then in strength—makes it so much easier for us to turn to him for help when we too wrestle with doing God’s will in difficult circumstances.

Jesus commenced his ministry with the prayer, “I have come to do Your will, O God”. He concluded his ministry with the prayer, “Your will be done”. The Father’s “good and acceptable and perfect will” (Romans 12:2) was determinative for him from the beginning to end.

How do we know God’s will?

You may say, “I don’t know what God’s will for my life is. If you could tell me what it is, I would be ready to do it.” Is it possible not to know what His will is? Every page of the Bible reveals something about His will. If we read the Bible searching for an answer to the question, “Lord, what is Your will for me?” the answer will call to us from every page.

George Mueller, that faithful servant of God, was once asked how he knew God’s will so clearly. He answered, “From the start I seek to get my heart into a state in which it has no will of its own in a given matter.” Ninety percent of the time the problem lies in our self-will. If our hearts are ready to do God’s will whatever it may be, the door of our heart will be open to knowing His will. As Mueller tells us, the reason you don’t know God’s will is that you don’t really

want to do it. Many want to know what God's will is, to see if it coincides with theirs before deciding whether to do it or not. But God's will is not subject to our inspection and approval. Unless we are committed to doing His will, and sincerely say, "I have come, O God, to do Your will," we wouldn't know what His will is.

A challenge

If you are a non-Christian or a nominal Christian, I have a challenge for you: Stand up and say, "I don't know if God exists, but if He does exist, I will do His will totally and unconditionally." If you say that in all sincerity, I guarantee you that He will reveal Himself—and His will—to you as clear as is day from night. But if you start playing tricks with the living God, you will be in deep trouble.

The Christian life is not a matter of religion or philosophy, but walking with the living God. If you are serious about knowing Him, I challenge you to say, "I have come, O God, to do Your will." That declaration of commitment is exceedingly powerful because the one who does the will of God will experience the reality of God.

You will also know whether Jesus is from God, for you will know whether his teaching is from God. Jesus says, "If anyone chooses to do God's will, he will find out whether my teaching comes from God or whether I speak on my own" (John 7:17).

Whether you are a Christian or a non-Christian, I hope you can see the power of the words, "I have come, O God,

to do Your will.” If you say to God from your heart, “I am willing to do Your will whatever it may be,” you will surely be on the road to eternal life, and will experience the living God along the way.

Unworthy as I am, I can testify from long experience that God reveals His will to those who are willing to do it totally. Many profess the Christian faith, yet God is not real to them because they are still struggling over whether to do His will *fully* or not. I stress “fully”. We must do God’s will fully, or we are not doing it at all. As we have seen, partial obedience is partial disobedience, and ultimately disobedience. We cannot tell God that we want to do only this part or that part of His will. We must do all His will or we don’t do it at all. God does not accept half measures.

6. Jesus came so that we may know God intimately

Some may think: “Jesus could do his Father’s will because he enjoyed intimate communion with Him. If I had this level of intimacy with the Father, I might do His will too.” But we too can get to know God very well, as I shall explain in a moment.

You might say, “Your situation is different from mine. You know God because you have been following Him for over four decades. It is easy for you to stand there and talk about focusing on His will.” That is not quite the correct

picture because in the beginning I didn't know God either. But our knowledge of God increases with time.

As I was meditating the other day, I came to a startling conclusion: I know more about God than I know about my wife in terms of her biographical details! That may sound incredible, but the more I thought about it, the more I realized it is true. I know more about God's character and dealings than I know about my wife, Helen, who is the person closest to me. I know little, for example, about the first twenty years of her life. I know she was born in Shanghai, where she lived in Hong Kong, and which school she attended. I have met her parents, her brother, and a few of her friends. But if I were to write down every biographical detail I know about her in her first twenty years, I am not sure that I could even fill one sheet of paper.

Yet I know a lot about God, and in detail. From the Bible I have learned a lot about what He said and how He dealt with certain people and certain nations. By contrast, I don't know of a single statement my wife had made in her first twenty years. I have pages and pages on what God said and did, but I have nothing approaching that amount of material regarding my wife.

In a given situation, I can more accurately predict what God will do than what my wife will do. I can guess what she might do, but not always accurately because human beings are not always consistent. But God's ways can often be predicted with astonishing accuracy when we know the

principles by which He did things in the past as recorded in the Bible.

My wife is a witness to that. On one occasion, in a particularly problematic situation, I predicted the exact timetable of what God will do in the next few days to resolve the problem. I said to Helen, "Tomorrow the Lord will do this; the next day the Lord will do that". I gave her the whole timetable of the four days during which the Lord will resolve the problem. I told her, "I am telling you all this in advance so that you will be a witness of how our God will work out everything wonderfully." And she is my witness that the events did come to pass exactly as I predicted they would.

You may wonder how this is possible. We can know God's mind and character to the extent He helps us, by His indwelling Spirit, to discern His actions on the basis of His Word. That is why the Bible is given to us. The realization that I know God better than I know anyone else in this world filled me with joy as I was walking around the kitchen. Because God's character does not change, and because the Bible reveals Him in great detail, it is possible for us to know Him better than anyone else in the world.

This is not to say that we can presumptuously assume we can predict everything that God will do with perfect accuracy. Although we know Him, we do not know Him perfectly. At the present time we only "know in part" (1Cor.13:12).

7. He came to bring us into union with God

In regard to doing God's will, there is yet one more truth that is of great significance: *The union of wills is the closest possible union between two persons.* In what way can two persons be more closely and permanently united than in the union of their wills?

We often speak of love as that which unites. But human love is a fickle emotion that can dissipate like a morning mist. Only a love that results in a true union of wills can typify the relationship we are called to have with God.

When we say, "I have come, O God, to do Your will," what will be result? The union of our will with Jesus' will and the Father's will. It also means that *through doing His will, we become united with God!* This fulfills what Jesus prayed for in the words, "That they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us." (Jn.17:21)

But we must bear in mind two things. First, while God's will is unchanging, man's will can change. If there is any parting of the wills, it will be from man's side, not God's. This weakness of man's will, which arises from the weakness of his flesh, is the main reason for Paul's exhortation to live in "fear and trembling" (Phil.2:12). Even though "he who is joined to the Lord becomes one spirit with him" (1Cor. 6:17), that union with him can be threatened by sin. This drives us to depend utterly upon God.

Secondly, this union with God through the union of wills is not our achievement, but the result of the work of the

Holy Spirit within us “to will and to work for His good pleasure” (Phil.2:13). God wants to bring us into union with Himself. It is His desire that we be united with Him, that we be one with Him. This fills us with unspeakable joy and thanksgiving.

Chapter 30



FAITH AND THE POWER OF CHRIST'S RESURRECTION

That I may gain Christ, and may be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own ... but that which is through faith in Christ ... that I may know him, and the power of his resurrection, and the fellowship of his sufferings, being conformed to his death; in order that I may attain to the resurrection of the dead. (Phil.3:8-11)

The story of Faust

peratic dramas are performed all over the world, and one of the most famous is a story which has intrigued people for many generations. The name “Faust” is familiar to anyone who enjoys literature. There are several versions of this story, the best known of which is the one by the famous German writer Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, first published in 1808. It is a story

of a certain Dr. Faust, a philosopher, whom Satan has ensnared by offering him youth, knowledge, and the pleasures of this world.

What do people want in the world? They want wealth, status, good health, and a love life. These things are easier to acquire when one has youth, because when you get too old, love may be hard to find, and you may be running out of time to enjoy your riches.

Faust, like most people, longed for the things that his learning in philosophy could not get him. The old story of Faust sums up the deep yearnings in man's heart. It also tells of Satan's cunning in dangling a bait in front of him; Satan takes advantage of man's longings, using them to gain control over him and bring about his ruin. In the great temptation, Satan showed Jesus the glorious kingdoms of the world, and said to him: "All these things I will give you, if you fall down and worship me" (Mt.4:8-9).

Satan has an attractive deal for us too. If we are willing to give him some honor and surrender our lives to him, he would be happy to give us many things in return. Yes, even wealth, position, and whatever it takes to turn our hearts away from God and eternal things. As Satan would explain it to you, spiritual things are airy-fairy whereas the things in the world are real and concrete. He does not tell you, of course, that the world is quickly passing away.

The university diploma feels very real in your hands. You can touch the vellum and see in exquisite calligraphy the words Bachelor of Arts, or Master of Science, or, as in the

case of Faust, Doctor of Philosophy. But at the end of the road, will that piece of paper have any value? Of what help will it be to us when we stand at the gates of God's eternal kingdom?

But that does not deter Satan from making us an attractive offer, and he has a way of making things look appealing. Make no mistake about it, if we choose the world rather than God, Satan has the resources to give us all these things.

And Satan offers these good things to Faust: "I have a fabulous deal for you, similar to the one I offered Jesus many years ago. He is admittedly very intelligent, but not as clever as you, Dr. Faust, for he turned down my offer. But you, being more sensible and intelligent, can see the excellence of my offer."

Faust's ego is inflated by the lavish praise that Satan heaps upon him. So Faust says, "I am ready to negotiate. But Satan, I know that you are tricky. Long ago I read in the Bible that you are smart and cunning like a serpent. But don't you forget that I am a Doctor of Philosophy! Just now you rightly acknowledged my intelligence. Before I sign on the dotted line, I want some assurance that I can enjoy these things, otherwise at the very instant I swallow the bait, the hook pulls me out of the water. I want some time to relish the bait. And when it's over, I am ready for the frying pan."

So he signs a deal with Satan who in the story appears as a man called Mephistopheles. Mephistopheles says to Faust, "Here's the deal. I give you all these things, plus some time to enjoy them, but when you die, your soul belongs to me."

Faust replies, “Why should I care about the soul or the spiritual side of me? So long as I enjoy life in this world here and now, why should I care about what happens after I die?”

Does that sound familiar to you? That is exactly how the worldly man thinks. “Who cares what happens after I die? I don’t know and I don’t care whether the resurrection is real or not. I am a practical man who lives for today. If Satan wants to take my soul after I die, he can have it, so long as I enjoy life right now. ‘Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die’ (Isa.22:13; 1Cor.15:32)”.

Have similar thoughts crossed your mind? Do you see Dr. Faust as a reflection of yourself? For all his learning in philosophy, Faust was shortsighted in his thinking. “My life is going to end anyway, so who cares about what happens after that? If I roast in Satan’s frying pan, that’s fine with me. He’s a roaring lion in search of someone to devour. He can have my corpse when I am done with this life. But right now I want to enjoy riches, honor, and love!”

In the story of Faust, there is a beautiful girl he wants to marry. In some versions of *Faust*, she gets rescued in the end, and does not share Faust’s fate. Whereas Faust is taken away by Satan, Marguerite goes to be with the Lord.

Whether Faust gets to marry her or not is not the main point in this story. The main point is that he wants to enjoy the good things of the world, the very things that the people of the world universally desire, things such as happiness, prosperity, enjoyment, health and longevity. Faust wants all these things in the world, and who can offer them to him—

in exchange for his life—but Satan? Are you willing to accept that offer and make the exchange? Satan doesn't give something for nothing. The deal is: Enjoy now, pay later.

Satan's chess game with mankind

Satan is playing a chess game with you and me, and he is rather good at it. If you want to beat him at chess, you would have to work very hard because he has had thousands of years of practice. In fact, no chess player in this world can beat Satan at this game.

If you go to Paris, be sure to visit the famous museum called the Louvre. In the museum is an intriguing painting of Faust playing chess with Mephistopheles, who is Satan in human form. The painting shows Mephistopheles on the verge of making the final move—*Checkmate!*—on Faust. Faust is not just losing a chess game, he is about to lose his soul. As the Lord says, “*What will a man give in exchange for his soul?*” Faust exchanged his soul, his whole spiritual being, for transient goods and is about to be checkmated.

As the story goes, one day a great chess player visited the Louvre, and went straightaway to this painting of Faust playing chess with Satan. As he was studying the painting and analyzing the chess positions, he suddenly cried out, “Satan, not so fast! There is yet one more move that could save Faust!” It was a move that could turn the game around and rescue Faust. Apparently the chess master saw a move that Faust—and the painter—had not seen.

Humankind as a whole is alienated from God, greedy for material gain, and is in the position of being checkmated by Satan. In this game of pursuing what the world has to offer and of enjoying the pleasures of sin, Satan maneuvers us into a checkmate situation with no way out. The pieces are being taken off the chessboard of life one by one. Satan is playing simultaneous chess with all of mankind, and he is taking them off one after another. If you think you can beat Satan, then you obviously don't know your situation, or Satan's cunning, or the high stakes of this game of life.

The resurrection of Christ

Then the Son of God appears. He surveys the chessboard, and sees a near-checkmate situation. Man's situation appears to be hopeless, but the Lord sees one move that will turn the situation around and save us. And what is that move? *It is the death and resurrection of Christ, the Son of God.*

Christ's death and resurrection are the two parts of one integrated work of God for the salvation of mankind. There would be no resurrection without death; on the other hand, a death that is not followed by resurrection would leave us with a dead savior who won't be able to save anyone from sin and death. This integrated event of Christ's death and Christ's resurrection is God's move on the chessboard of human life, His masterstroke to secure our redemption.

In discussing this question of the resurrection, I won't be going into the historical details of the resurrection or the

apologetical arguments for it. Those interested in these matters can consult books such as Frank Morison's *Who Moved the Stone?* which are helpful in demonstrating the historicity of the resurrection.

Jesus rose from the dead and is very much alive. But the founders of the other great religions still have their burial places and occupied tombs. Muhammad is buried in Medina. Various parts of Buddha's body are kept in several places; one tooth is kept in a great pagoda in Rangoon, Myanmar. They are revered in the acknowledgment that Buddha was a great man. But he is dead and buried, and his body remains in the world.

Great religious leaders come and go, and their tombs are still with us. But nowhere in the world can you find a tomb of Jesus except an empty one.

Believing in the resurrection

How do we know that Jesus is risen? How can we experience the power of his resurrection? If we don't experience it, we can't possibly believe in the resurrection except as intellectual assent.

Believing in the resurrection of Christ is crucial to our salvation. The apostle Paul says, "If you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you shall be saved." (Romans 10:9)

Do you truly believe that Jesus was raised from the dead? It is not enough to say to yourself, “I’ve just read an interesting book on the resurrection. Judging from the evidence, I conclude that Jesus did rise from the dead. In any case, I live in a Christian country, and the story of the resurrection has been drummed into my head ever since I was knee-high to a grasshopper. That story is part of our Christian tradition.” Since when is salvation based on a cultural tradition?

Many in Christendom have heard the story of the resurrection so often, usually from their childhood, that *they do not disbelieve it*. But not disbelieving is not the same as believing. Many are stranded in the spiritual destitution of the “no man’s land” between not disbelieving on the one hand and not truly believing on the other.

Salvation according to Romans 10:9 depends on two things: First, “confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord”. Second, “believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead”. These two things are inseparable because a dead Jesus cannot be the living Lord of our lives.

Romans 10:9 does not ask us to believe in Jesus’ resurrection merely as a historical fact that we accept with our intellect, but to “believe in your heart,” in the very depth of our being. What goes into the heart affects us at the deepest level of our being. Believing in our hearts that God raised Jesus from the dead will lead to *God’s resurrection power working in our lives through the Holy Spirit*.

But if we only believe in our minds that Jesus’ resurrection is a historical fact, then we are no better off than Satan

who also believes in the resurrection, being a first-hand witness of the event, yet trembles every time he thinks of it. “You believe that God is one; you do well; the demons also believe—and shudder” (James 2:19).

Three vital aspects of saving faith in connection to Christ’s resurrection

We will be saved if we believe that God raised Jesus from the dead. The connection that we see here, that between faith and the resurrection, has three aspects.

First aspect of saving faith: The resurrection as God’s promise

The first aspect of faith, as it pertains to the resurrection, is this: *By faith we take hold of God’s promise of resurrection*. If we don’t take this step, the resurrection would be nothing more to us than a great historical event. That kind of intellectual faith does not save anyone.

To be saved, you must recognize that the resurrection of Christ is *God’s promise to you*, and that you make it your own by faith. The resurrection of Christ avails for you and for me *only* if we receive it into our hearts by faith.

What kind of faith? The word “faith” is used rather loosely today. We have faith in the bus driver, or faith that the airplane will fly us safely to London, Frankfurt, or Hong Kong.

Saving faith rests securely on the word of God or the act of God—in this case Christ’s resurrection—*as a promise*. The resurrection would be meaningless to us unless it is God’s promise *to us*. We must recognize that Jesus died and was raised *for your sake and mine*.

It was when Abraham believed God’s promise *to him* that it was “counted to him for righteousness” (Rom.4:22); he believed because he was “fully convinced that God was able” to do it (v.21).

Do we have a faith that believes that God can and did raise Jesus from the dead, and that He did it for us? If not, then we do not really believe that He is able to save us from sin and death.

If we believe that the resurrection is God’s promise to us, it will become our hope. Faust had no hope. He studied the chess pieces and saw a checkmate coming. In a desperate attempt to save himself, he analyzed his predicament with all the skills at his disposal, but to no avail.

Promise leads to hope. When a couple is about to get married, you can see the sparkle in their eyes. Living in the hope of marriage makes every day oh-so-bright whether it rains or shines. Does that not express what hope is about? We as the church have been betrothed to Christ (2Cor.11:2), and we look forward with expectation to the “marriage of the Lamb” (Rev.19:7-9).

But before we can talk about hope, there must be faith. At least you must believe that the other person will show up on the wedding day! Imagine being left at the altar by

yourself, with your hopes dashed to pieces. Unfortunately, this sort of thing does happen in real life when one party gets cold feet. The promise collapses, and hope disappears.

Abraham: In hope against hope

When Paul speaks of believing in the resurrection, he has in mind the faith of Abraham whom he calls “the father of all who believe” (Romans 4:11). Abraham is the example of faith *par excellence*.

In the space of five chapters, Romans 4 to 8, Paul uses the word “hope” nine times.²² One of these occurrences is: “Against all hope, Abraham in hope believed and so became the father of many nations, just as it had been said to him, ‘So shall your offspring be.’” (Romans 4:18, NIV)

Abraham had no son to bear his name, yet Yahweh promised him that he will be the father of many nations; his descendants will be as the stars of the heavens and the sand of the sea. But how is it possible to fulfill such a promise? Yet by faith Abraham was “fully convinced” that God’s word is reliable and His promise will never fail.

Abraham “hoped against hope” for there were no human grounds for hope. He was already one hundred years old, but the greater difficulty lay in the fact that Sarah was ninety years old (Gen.17:17; 21:5), and had never given birth. Yet Abraham believed in a God “who gives life to the dead and

²² Greek *elpis* (ἐλπίς, hope) occurs twice in Romans 4.18, three times in 8:24, and once each in 5:2,4,5; 8:20.

calls into being that which does not exist” (Romans 4:17)—he believed in the resurrection!

Abraham and Sarah were as good as dead in terms of their reproductive capacity (Rom.4:19; Heb.11:12); yet Abraham hoped against hope, trusting in God’s promise. He placed his hope in God when there was not a shred of hope to be found on the human level.

Do we trust God’s promise of resurrection? Do we believe in our *hearts*, on the basis of God’s word, that Jesus rose from the dead *for us*? In the same five chapters, Romans 4 to 8, Paul refers to the resurrection of Jesus ten times, using words such as “resurrection” or “raise”. If you believe that Jesus rose from the dead *for you*, then through him you will defeat Satan in the chess match of life.

Second point: The promise affects our lives

The second point about faith, as it pertains to the resurrection, is this: If you take hold of God’s promise, *it will bring forth profound and blessed changes to your life.*

Abraham was almost a hundred years old, and Sarah was ninety, when God said, “I make you a promise. At about this time next year, you are going to have a son.” The promised child was to be born in twelve months’ time! It takes nine months to go from conception to birth. Soon after God had said these words, all kinds of remarkable changes would be taking place in their bodies, especially Sarah’s. God’s life-giving power was about to take effect in them. To say that

their “youth is renewed as the eagle’s” (Ps.103:5) would, in this case, be something of an understatement! Though, certainly, what God did in the lives of Abraham and Sarah will serve as a commentary and an illustration of these words of the Psalmist.

God did a life-giving miracle in Abraham and Sarah. Sarah was barren since her youth, unable to conceive. To fulfill His promise, God had to do the impossible: bring about a transformation in their bodies of a kind *that is equivalent to resurrection—bringing forth life from the dead*. And when we take hold of God’s promise that *Jesus rose from the dead for us*, there will be profound changes in our lives.

Have you ever slept on your arm in an awkward position and the arm feels dead? You pinch it but there is no sensation. This has happened to me once or twice. I woke up only to discover that I could not lift my arm. The blood circulation was constricted, so there was no sensation when I touched my arm. But when life flows back into your arm, you start to feel “pins and needles”. Slowly it comes back to life! I wonder what Abraham and Sarah felt when God’s life-giving promise began to take effect in their bodies!

This is the dynamic Christian life that we find in the Bible. When we receive God’s promise of the resurrection into our hearts, we begin to experience His power that effects deep things in our lives. Christ’s resurrection life is applied to us by the Spirit and results in the “newness of life” (Romans 6:4) in our spirits.

This new life continues to be active in us until the final bodily resurrection from the dead, when “this mortal will have put on immortality” (1Cor.15:53,54). That is when “the Lord Jesus Christ will transform the body of our humble state into conformity with the [resurrection] body of his glory” (Phil.3:20,21).

This is God’s resurrection promise to us, our hope, and it calls for faith in Him “who gives life to the dead and calls into being that which does not exist” (Romans 4:17).

In the newness of life, we *now* experience God’s resurrection power at work in us, just as Abraham and Sarah noticed changes in their bodies in preparation for the birth of the promised son. Like the arm that is coming back to life, the spiritual “corpse” will start to feel the tingling sensation of a return to life.

Having a new sensitivity to good and evil, we feel a stinging sensation in our conscience. Previously you thought nothing about sinning, but now, because God’s power has come into your life, your conscience is pricked by a spiritual “pins and needles”. A powerful conviction of sin drives you to repentance. This is the evidence that God’s resurrection power is bringing you back to life. The inner conviction compels you to kneel before God, and to say, “Lord, have mercy on me, a sinner! Forgive me my sins and my self-righteousness” Even if you were not religious before, now you are overpowered by the Spirit’s conviction. What moves people to confess their sins in public? Is it not the pins and

needles of a convicted conscience that is becoming aware of the living God?

1. Promise leads to joy

Those who experience God's life-giving power have joy in their spirit. There is a sparkle in the eye, a confidence in the step, a sense of purpose in their lives. We see this in people who are about to get married, for whom every day is charged with hope and joy. Long-married people tend to forget these happy memories, which become covered with the dust of time. When you experience God's power, there will be a spring in your step and a sparkle in your eye, even more so than when you get married!

Hope leads to joy (Rom.12:12). I smile when I think of Abraham and Sarah. Can you imagine Sarah getting pregnant at the age of ninety? If you think you are old, you are still young as far as Sarah is concerned. Yes, at the age of ninety she is getting bigger with a child! Exactly as God had promised Abraham, life is flourishing in a "dead" body and will soon come forth to be a blessing to the nations. Abraham looks at Sarah, and day by day she is moving closer to the fulfillment. What joy God was bringing to their lives!

We can imagine Abraham saying, "God is so real! In my hundred years, I had no child to bear my name. But one day Yahweh said to me, 'Abraham, next year you are going to have a son.' I laughed because God is humorous. Imagine having a child at the age of one hundred!" It is the laughter of joy. Abraham laughs (Gen.17:17) not because he doubts

God but because he thinks that God is humorous for choosing the age of one hundred to give him the promised child.

Doing the impossible is the hallmark of God's work. In doing that which is impossible, He certifies it is His work, for only He can do it. This is the more necessary because of man's unbelieving character. What do I mean? If God had fulfilled the promise early in Abraham's life, would Abraham be certain it was something that God did rather than a mere natural birth?

Let's say that Sarah gave birth at the age of fifty. This would be considered *almost* impossible. Seventy would be *certainly* impossible. As for ninety, few women live to that age in ancient times, so the impossibility would be so absolute as to be beyond any shadow of doubt.

2. The raising of Lazarus from the dead

It is like the case of Lazarus. When Jesus was informed that Lazarus was seriously ill, Jesus did not go to heal him, but waited several days. It was only after Lazarus had died and was buried that Jesus went to Lazarus' home in Bethany. By the time Jesus arrived, Lazarus had been in the tomb four days (Jn.11:17). What was the purpose of the delay? It was "for the glory of God, that the Son of God may be glorified" (v.4). In what way would God be glorified? By doing the impossible: raising Lazarus from the dead.

Healing Lazarus would also have been a miracle. But it is the life-giving miracle of creation (God "calls into existence

the things which do not exist,” Rom.4:17) and resurrection (giving “life to the dead,” Rom.4:17) that can be described as bearing *the unique hallmark of God’s work*. They are His signature, done by God “through” Jesus of Nazareth (Acts 2:22). Jesus declares, “I am the resurrection and the life” (John 11:25).

Jesus’ delay in going to Lazarus was intended to strengthen the faith of the disciples. As he told them explicitly, it was “so that you may believe” (v.15). We need to remember this whenever we find ourselves in a difficult situation, with no help from God in sight. But when the situation finally becomes impossible, He will act. There will then be no doubt about who did it, leading to great joy and thanksgiving.

God is doing a great work in those who belong to Him. He will raise us up bodily on the day of resurrection. But even at this present time, we already experience His resurrection power working in us on the spiritual level of our lives.

3. Are our lives a message of the resurrection?

Do we allow God to transform us to the extent that we have the Abrahamic quality in our lives? Look at the average Christian today. Do you see a sparkle in his eye, or a spring in his step? If not, how can he inspire anyone to want to know Christ? Then think of Abraham and Sarah, and the impact they made on their community, and even on the world. Everyone will be talking about them: “Have you

heard about the woman who became pregnant at the age of ninety? She and her husband are as lively as teenagers!”

My grandmother lived to her ninetieth year. Was there a gleam in her eye, or a spring in her step? She was generally alert and reasonably healthy for her age even up to the end, but her eyesight had faded by then and she was frail. Now try to imagine a woman who is about to give birth at that age. This is unprecedented in the history of the world. The whole nation, indeed the whole world, will take note of it. Can we see its significance? It means that Abraham and Sarah have become *a sign to the world—a sign of the resurrection*—which proclaims that God is the God who brings forth life from death.

Every Christian is to be a sign of the resurrection to the world. That wouldn't be possible unless we experience God's resurrection power in our own lives. Then people around us will ask, “What is this hope and joy that is in you?” “Be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have” (1 Peter 3:15).

People must have bombarded Abraham and Sarah with questions about her pregnancy. Abraham and Sarah, in giving their testimony, were preaching the gospel to their generation.

Is there anything in our lives that catches people's attention? Has God's power ever touched your life and made you different? Has anyone ever said to you, “There is something different about you”? If your colleagues or classmates don't ask you such questions, we can rightly ask, *Has God*

done anything in your life? If we have not experienced the power of the resurrection here and now, what gives us the confidence that God will raise us up from the dead on that Day?

When Paul speaks of our being raised with Christ, he often uses the past tense to emphasize that it is already a reality in us (e.g., Eph.2:6; Col.2:12; 3:1). And who gets the praise and glory? God gets all the credit. No one gives the credit to Abraham or Sarah for the miracle in their lives because only God's power could have done it.

Third: We channel God's resurrection power to others

The third point about faith, as it pertains to the resurrection, is this: The resurrection is not just a reality we experience, but something *we channel to others*. If we are not a channel of God's resurrection life, which is the new life in Christ, then our faith is defective. God's promise is not given to us to cater to our selfishness. We are not an end in ourselves but a channel of salvation to others. God gave Abraham a promise not just for Abraham's sake, but that all the nations may be blessed through him (Genesis 22:18).

We do not live for ourselves or die for ourselves. "He died for all, that they who live should no longer live for themselves, but for him who died and rose again on their behalf" (2Cor.5:15). If we are living for ourselves, then we

are merely Christians in name and have not experienced freedom from sin and the self.

This point on channeling our new resurrection life is related to the previous point on how resurrection changes your life. God's resurrection power changes the whole focus of our lives, from the egocentric preoccupation with "me, myself, and I," to a concern for others.

On the day when we stand in God's presence, will anyone say to us, "May God be praised for the day I met you, for you were the channel of His blessings to me"? Or will we depart from the world without having been a blessing to anyone? Jesus says:

"Whoever drinks of the water that I shall give him shall never thirst; but the water that I shall give him shall become in him a well of water springing up to eternal life" (John 4:14). And "He who believes in me, as the Scripture said, 'From his innermost being shall flow rivers of living water.'" (7:38)

God will make us a channel of blessing to others. The Greek word *koilia* (κοιλία, stomach, belly), here translated "innermost being," has strong correspondence to Genesis 15:4 where God says to Abraham, "He that shall come forth out of thine own *bowels* shall be thine heir". This is KJV's *literal* rendering of the Hebrew word as "bowels". Other translations regard the word "bowels" as inelegant, and generalize it to "body". The Septuagint (an important Greek translation of the Old Testament) generalizes it even further to "you" ("out of you").

Significantly, the Hebrew word *mē'eh* (מֵעָה, inward parts, bowels) in Genesis 15:4 corresponds exactly to the Greek *koilia* in meaning. As every linguist knows, words from different languages seldom correspond to each other exactly. An English word and a Chinese word may overlap in meaning, but seldom are they identical in all their nuances and shades of meaning. Remarkably, the Greek *koilia* in John 7:38 corresponds exactly to the Hebrew word in Genesis 15:4. The Hebrew *mē'eh* can mean the belly, the womb, or the heart. These cover all the three meanings of *koilia*.

It is this promise—that the world will be blessed through the seed that came from Abraham's "inward parts" (*mē'eh* or *koilia*)—which is given in Genesis 22:18: "In your seed all the nations of the earth shall be blessed because you have obeyed My voice". Ultimately, the fulfillment of this promise, as Paul points out, is in the person of Christ; he is the promised "seed" of Abraham and the one who brings blessing to all nations (Galatians 3:16; cf.v.8).

"So those who have faith are blessed with Abraham, the man of faith" (v.9). In what sense are those who have faith "blessed with Abraham"? One important way is that like Abraham, from our innermost being will flow rivers of living water to bring God's life to a parched world (John 7:38). When Jesus portrays believers as rivers of living water, a spiritual equivalent of Genesis 15:4 is intended. Hence John 7:38 is a prophetic promise to the believer in the same way that Genesis 15:4 was a prophetic promise to Abraham.

A sequence of how the nations of the earth will be blessed because of Abraham's obedience now emerges: God's blessing to the nations comes through Abraham (Gen. 22:18); then through Christ (Gal. 3:16); then through those who believe in Christ Jesus (Jn.7:38)—and thus it flows out to all the nations of the earth. God can do a mighty work in our lives that will bless the nations of the earth if, like Abraham, we trust God to fulfill His promises through us. The message of the resurrection is not only a promise to us but also a *commission* to us to channel His life to the world.

Chapter 31



BASIC PRINCIPLES OF BEING PERFECT IN CHRIST

Perfection is ignored by most churches today, yet it is the one thing that drives the apostle Paul forward, and causes his heart to burn with a fiery zeal to “present everyone perfect in Christ. To this end I labor, struggling with all his energy, which so powerfully works in me” (Colossians 1:28-29, NIV).

Not many Christians today understand, much less share, Paul’s concern for perfection. Today the main and perhaps sole concern is getting saved. The goal is to get someone to make a decision or a profession of faith. After that has been done, our mission is accomplished for that person, and now it remains for him or her to wait for heaven. Anything beyond getting saved—such as sanctification and perfection—is of no real concern. Yet for Paul, perfection was the one thing that burned in his heart; he toils and strives that everyone may be *perfect in Christ*.

Many churches are content with getting people to “make a decision for Christ”. To be fair to them, they often have no idea what more they can do for the spiritual growth of those who “come to Jesus” beyond asking them to join a church group or be involved in some service in the church. But these activities do not in themselves necessarily help bring new believers to Christ-likeness, to which God calls every believer.

The man of God strives for perfection

Close your eyes and think of a dynamic Spirit-filled Christian whom you know personally. If you know any such person, try to think of him or her for a moment. Right now I do have someone in mind, and somehow this person causes my attention to be directed to *Christ*. This person has a Christ-likeness that deflects my thoughts to the Lord like a mirror. Do you know anyone like that? Perhaps you have in mind a lay Christian, a Christian worker, or a pastor. The church is desperately in need of such people. In fact, when I asked you to think of a dynamic Spirit-filled Christian, you probably had to search hard through your mental database.

When you think of him or her, what spiritual qualities come to your mind? I can say categorically that in every such case, he or she is striving for perfection in Christ, that is, for Christ-likeness. There is no exception to this spiritual rule. Any Christian who radiates Christ-like quality is a person who shares the same goal as Paul: “I press on toward the goal

to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus” (Phil.3:14). The upward call—the heavenward call—is nothing more, nothing less, than the call to perfection or Christ-likeness (cf., v.12). There is no Christian who manifests spiritual excellence who is not driven forward by the Spirit towards perfection.

Pressing on toward the goal

One chapter earlier, Paul says, “It is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure” (Phil. 2:13). The natural man does not pursue the things of God, but is mainly interested in money, position, enjoyment, and praise from men. No one will strive for perfection whose heart is not open to God’s Spirit driving him forward and fulfilling God’s will.

What is this heavenward call? Is it more Bible study, more prayer, more evangelism, more church activity? All these things are good, but that is hardly what Paul means by the goal of the upward call. We need to know what the goal is, or we will end up going nowhere or running towards the wrong goal. There was once a conference on the theme, “Press on Towards the Mark.” At the end of the conference we were no wiser than at the beginning as to what the mark was that the conference wanted everyone to press towards!

It is urgent that we pay attention to the matter of being perfect in Christ because so few know anything about it and think that perfection is an impractical ideal. On the

contrary, it is a most practical matter, for God never commands anything that has no practical spiritual value. By rejecting God's call to perfection, are we not implying that He is impractical, being out of touch with reality?

The Christian who does not aim for Christ-likeness will sorely lack spiritual *dynamic*. Take a look at your own life and see how much spiritual vitality you have. The intensity of your pressing to the mark is a spiritual barometer of your Christian life.

In talking about perfection, we are talking about the practical Christian life, not some pie-in-the-sky ideal that we leave to our old age to consider. We are talking about the driving force in the Christian life, our very motive for being a Christian.

In pressing towards the goal to which God has called us, we experience in ourselves His resurrection power: "That I may know him and the power of his resurrection" (Phil.3:10), a power that is seen not only in the future bodily resurrection, but right now in our spiritual lives through faith. This empowers us to pursue the objective before us with yet greater vigor. The result is an upward spiral in the spiritual life, going from strength to strength (Psalm 84:7), and from grace to grace (John 1:16).

What exactly is the goal?

Many people in church don't seem to be experiencing God in a real way. There may be a sincere faith and some measure of love, but God is still not experienced in a deeper way. What would be helpful for making progress in this direction is not just to aim for Christ-likeness in ourselves, but to guide others towards becoming perfect in Christ. In guiding others towards the goal, we will find ourselves progressing towards the goal. This is the principle of "Give and it will be given to you" (Lk.6:38), which we see also in Paul.

The lack of a clear goal results in spiritual lukewarmness. Ask the average Christian what the goal of the Christian life is, and see how few know the answer. But do you know the answer yourself? How can we press towards the mark when we don't know what it is?

Paul pushes forward with determination because he knows what the objective is that he is aiming for: to "gain Christ" (Phil.3:8). But how do we gain Christ when he is not a piece of property that we gain possession of? There are three mutually related ways in which we can gain Christ:

(1) We gain Christ by *becoming like him*, that is, gaining his image or likeness, molded by the Holy Spirit into Christ's image. The more fully we gain his image, the more completely we gain the essence of his character. We will possess his image fully when we are conformed to the image of Christ (Romans 8:29).

(2) We gain Christ by *pleasing God*. It is God's predetermined plan that we be conformed to the likeness of His Son (Romans 8:29).

(3) We gain Christ by *knowing him* in an ever-deeper relationship with him. This knowing is not head knowledge, but knowing him experientially in daily life, entering into an ever-deeper relationship with him, and being transformed into his likeness (Romans 8:29). So important is "knowing Christ" that Paul mentions it twice within three verses (Phil. 3:8,10). He speaks of "the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord ... that I may gain Christ" (v.8).

Experiencing God in pursuing Christ-like perfection

A lack of spiritual determination and direction will hinder us from knowing God and experiencing His power. We must press on to know the Lord, and through knowing Him to become more like Him.

In learning to be like Christ, of which one aspect is interceding for others (Heb.7:25), the Lord granted me many experiences of his grace and power.

Not long ago, I was driving to Toronto in foggy road conditions. Traveling alone, I was communing with God. My thoughts were eventually led to one particular person who had been coming to church and was in a desperate spiritual condition. Suddenly the Spirit of God moved in my heart, and I said, "Lord, as You are moving me, I am going

to claim this person for You. He has been languishing in hopelessness for a long time, and no one has been able to help him, least of all himself. So I claim him for You.” In this simple prayer, I took hold of him for the Lord by faith.

After arriving in Toronto, I had many church matters to attend to, and thought no more of the matter. Early Tuesday, 5 or 6 am, I clearly heard the voice of this person whom I had claimed for the Lord, and it was calling my name. To me it was a most unusual experience. I had heard the voice of the Lord speaking to me before, but I cannot recall any previous occasion of this kind in which somebody called my name. From this I knew that God had answered my prayer, and had done something in this person’s life.

When I returned to Montreal on Wednesday night, my wife Helen told me immediately upon my arrival, “This person called you half an hour ago.” I said, “I know what has happened in his life.” She asked, “How do you know? You just came in through the door.” Then I told her how I had claimed the person for the Lord, and how I heard his voice somewhat like what happened in the Macedonian vision (Acts 16:9). I did not see a vision; I only heard a voice calling me clearly and distinctly. The person had a distinctive voice that was easily recognized, and I knew what God had done. I related this to Helen upon my arrival so that she can be a witness that God had given me prior knowledge of His work in this person’s life.

The next day I felt tired and unwell, so I slept through most of the day. In fact most of those who visited Toronto

that weekend also got sick. The following day, I phoned up this person, and the first thing he said to me was, “I have committed my life to the Lord!” I told him I had already known about this. I told him about the voice I had heard, and then said to him frankly, “If God hadn’t revealed this to me, I would have been skeptical (because of his former unstable character) about your commitment to the Lord.” Our God is the living God. His deeds are remarkable.

God does wonderful things

This is not to say that we seek signs and wonders as an end in themselves; we should not. There is a danger of becoming fascinated with these things instead of seeking God Himself. I know from experience that when we follow God, signs and wonders follow us. We don’t follow them; they follow us (Heb.2:4; Mk.16:17).

Some time back, when a certain preacher and I were standing at a river’s edge near my home discussing the Lord’s work, a fish swam out of the water onto the river bank directly in front of our feet! It was not a big fish, being slightly less than a foot in length, but it was evidently meant to convey the Lord’s response to our discussion. With fish being a metaphor for people (Mt.4:19; 13:47f), the Lord was telling us that He himself would send people to us. This is in fact what he has done. That preacher is an eyewitness to this remarkable episode; otherwise it may sound like a fishy story. A few coworkers had that fish for dinner.

Most Christians do not experience God much. But those who follow Him in pursuit of perfection or Christ-likeness will experience Him, for He dwells in them and works through them. If you walk with God or Jesus the Son of God, you will see wondrous deeds. Jesus says to his disciples, and therefore to all Christians: “I tell you the truth, anyone who has faith in me will do what I have been doing. He will do even greater things than these, because I am going to the Father” (John 14:12, NIV).

Perfectionism and psychology

When we hear all this talk about perfection, we may say to ourselves, “Wouldn’t all this emphasis on striving after perfection make the Christian life exhausting?” Let us address this question.

Perfectionism is often regarded today, especially in psychology, as something that is bad for your mental health. An example of this is seen in an article in the April 1985 issue of *Reader’s Digest* with the title, *Perfection Can Be Bad For You*, written by a psychiatrist. The subtitle says, “Striving compulsively for impossible goals can lead to depression, troubled relationships, and decreased productivity.”

After reading this, you wouldn’t want to think about perfection any more. If perfection leads to depression, low productivity, strained relationships, and even broken marriages, then certainly newlyweds wouldn’t want to think about perfection at all!

The article says, “By perfection I do not mean the healthy pursuit of excellence by those who take genuine pleasure in meeting high standards.” Well, it’s comforting to know that pursuing perfection is not always bad. The writer goes on to say, “Without concern for quality, true accomplishment would be rare.”

He draws a useful distinction between a healthy pursuit of excellence on the one hand, and perfectionism on the other, the latter of which his subtitle defines as “striving compulsively for impossible goals,” which is bad for mental health. If “compulsively” here means being driven irrationally and irresistibly to pursue goals which are impossible to attain, we would agree that perfectionism is undesirable. The writer confirms that this is indeed what he means by perfectionism: “I am talking about people who strain compulsively and unrelentingly towards impossible goals, and measure themselves entirely in terms of their achievements.”

As for impossible goals, is Christ-likeness possible or impossible? It is humanly *impossible*, so it is true that we are striving towards an impossible goal. *But it is possible by the power of God.* If you try to be Christ-like by your own efforts, or imitate Christ externally, then yes, you are pursuing an impossible goal. In this case we would agree with the psychiatrist that we are attempting the impossible, and will be heading for depression, troubled relationships, and the like.

God’s call to perfection is not compulsive in the sense of being irresistible; nor is it unattainable, for He abundantly

supplies grace through His Spirit. It may seem irrational to the self-centered man, but it makes perfect *spiritual* sense. In that case, perfection is the pursuit of spiritual excellence, which is Christ-likeness. Therefore, when we talk about perfection, we are not talking about “perfectionism”.

In a Christian magazine, I came across another article with the title, *No One Is Perfect, Not Even the Perfectionist*. Whereas Paul exhorts everyone to strive for perfection, this *Christian* magazine belittles the pursuit of perfection. It is true that nobody is perfect, but that is precisely why we press on towards perfection.

The writer is a psychologist employed by the Christian organization that publishes the magazine. It would be interesting to find out how many psychologists today are employed by Christian organizations. They are influencing a large segment of church ministry, and mainly (with some notable exceptions) in a human rather than a spiritual direction.

The article has a section titled *Symptoms of Perfectionism* (by the word “symptoms,” perfectionism is likened to a sickness) which says, “The perfectionist is most likely to be a workaholic, and one who depends on his work to give him pleasure and satisfaction; work is all-consuming in his life, and he is helplessly controlled by it.” It goes on to say, “The perfectionist is indecisive.” I don’t know if the statement works in reverse: If you are indecisive, you are a perfectionist!

It also says, “He takes problems at work very seriously. And when someone makes a statement about his work, he

interprets it as an affront or criticism.” Is there something wrong with taking problems at work seriously? The definition of perfectionism has been stretched so wide as to become almost meaningless.

It continues, “As a result he cannot relax and play. He is often described as grumpy, anxious and isolated.” If that describes your college roommate, you had better watch out because he may be a perfectionist!

“A perfectionist Christian is usually thing-oriented rather than people-oriented. In his world view, things have a higher priority over people. He is very meticulous in how things should be done ... Because of this tendency to be a workaholic and thing-oriented, the perfectionist Christian is often unable to express warm and tender emotions.”

Further on, the writer seems to contradict himself when he says that a perfectionist is often authoritarian. So is a perfectionist authoritarian or is he indecisive? Or an indecisive authoritarian? How can he tell others what to do if he himself can't decide what to do?

I am not saying that there is no truth whatever in these articles. But even if an observation is valid, especially in the case of this Christian psychologist, it can be exaggerated to the point of the ridiculous.

How firm is the opposition to being perfect! You are striving for perfection and then along comes a *Christian* psychologist telling you that perfection is bad for your mental health. Though, to be fair, he is striking at perfectionism.

But the impression left with the reader is that perfection can be criticized in the same way as perfectionism.

Perfection versus perfectionism

I just acknowledged some valid observations in the critique of perfectionism set out in the two articles. Let me elaborate on this.

To the extent that the analyses of perfectionism are valid, it will be seen on closer inspection that the problems which the articles expose all have to do with the type of behavior which the Bible associates with the natural or carnal man. Perfectionism is the natural man's attempt to achieve perfection by his own wisdom and effort, like his attempt to reach the heights of heaven by building the tower of Babel (Gen.11:4). It is man perfecting himself in his own way, and according to his own ideals and for his own glory.

If the definition of perfectionism is limited to the *carnal* striving after self-perfection, then it becomes a useful term to describe the type of perfection which is the diametrical opposite of the *spiritual* perfection the Lord calls us to pursue.

But in this case, it is crucial that perfection and perfectionism are clearly defined and distinguished from each other, and not confused with each other. One of them is a God-centered, God-motivated and God-empowered perfection; the other is a man-centered and man-driven perfection. Apart from the use of the word "perfection," the

two have nothing in common. We can for convenience's sake call man-centered perfection "perfectionism," since it has many of the negative characteristics outlined in the magazine article. Then perfectionism becomes a useful reminder that we are to avoid man-centeredness at all costs, and to seek only the vital perfection that is in Christ.

Spiritual perfection is essentially Christ-likeness

Can we still say that the one who strives for the perfection taught in Scripture is a tense workaholic who doesn't express warm and tender feelings? Is he driven compulsively like a drug addict? Are the servants of God in the Bible neurotics, striving for the goal with obsessive-compulsive intensity? When we read his letters, does Paul appear to be someone who stands with his eyebrows knit together, and his eyes fixed on some distant mark? And if you talk to him, he would say, "Don't interrupt me. I am concentrating on the goal!"

This may be a caricature, but that is basically how some psychologists, Christian and non-Christian, caricature the person who pursues perfection. Such a person is depicted as a joyless obsessive-compulsive workaholic who is fixated on an unattainable ideal.

Would any of these descriptions aptly describe Jesus Christ, whose life and character are recorded in the gospels? Is he a "tense workaholic who is unable to express warm and

tender feelings”? It is important to stress that perfection in Scripture is Christ-likeness.

For those who are living the new life in Christ, what perfection would they pursue other than becoming like him? What else would anyone who loves his Lord and Savior consider as perfection? Will the Christian psychologist deny Christ’s perfection? If not, why the unmitigated attacks on perfection? Why not encourage us to become like Christ while avoiding man-made perfection? Christ’s perfection is generally not something that Christians are aware of except as a theological concept; otherwise they would see that an attack on perfection is tantamount to a critique of Christ, the embodiment of perfection.

Joy in pursuing perfection

What is the lifestyle of the Christian who strives for perfection? Are there so few who pursue perfection in Christ that the matter has to be discussed theoretically? If we know any such person, does he or she fit the profile of the perfectionist as painted by psychologists?

When you meet servants of God, you will be amazed by their abundance of joy. They laugh readily and heartily, and find great joy in the Christian life. Seeing their joy you may even have doubts about them because they don’t conform to the notion of a perfectionist who has his eyebrows knit together in some sort of tense concentration.

When you pursue God, it is easy to be joyful and relaxed. I wonder if some people may be offended when they see God's servants laugh so heartily. There is a common notion that holiness is incompatible with joy and laughter. Portraits of saints show them to be somber.

Jesus says, "I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven" (Mt.18:3). Are children somber by nature? Do they not tend to be cheery and joyful? In this respect, men of God have much in common with little children who rejoice in their Father's presence. They are not tense or neurotic; their eyes are not focused on some distant object, looking past everyone as some preachers do when they preach!

If we had the chance to meet with the apostle Paul, we would be amazed by his joyful and relaxed character. I draw this conclusion not only from reading his letters (e.g., "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice!" Phil.4:4) but also from having had the privilege of knowing a few outstanding men of God when I was a young Christian, an arrangement made possible by God's remarkable provision. When I got to know them, I thought that every Christian would be like them, only to discover later on, to my great disappointment, that there are actually few like them.

The first thing I notice about men of God is their undivided loyalty to God, and their unrelenting pursuit after

Christ and Christ-likeness, which is the essence of perfection. There is remarkable joy and peace even under intense pressure and persecution. I had never seen people so relaxed, so thankful, so full of peace, as these men of God, even when their lives were in danger.

I also noticed their loving and caring attitude. The fruit of the Spirit is love, and love does not look past the people it meets. When a disciple is pursuing after Christ, he or she will be concerned about the needs of the brothers and sisters. When Paul says that he strives and toils to present every man perfect in Christ, you might say to him, “Do you really have time for me? I thought you were single-mindedly pursuing after Christ.” He cares for you precisely because he is pursuing after Christ and Christ-likeness.

Another reason Paul wants to present every man perfect in Christ is that the pursuit of perfection is not a solitary effort. The church is a body, the Body of Christ. When we strive for perfection together, the body of Christ grows harmoniously.

Five basic principles of growing into perfection

First principle: Remove the body of flesh

There are five basic principles of growing into perfection. The first principle is to *remove the body of flesh from your heart*. I am, of course, using Paul’s language here, an example of which is seen in Colossians 2:11: “In him (Christ) you

were also circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, in the removal of the body of flesh by the circumcision of Christ”. Paul’s language may seem hard to understand, but there is nothing mysterious about it.

Firstly, Paul is talking about circumcision, a procedure that cuts off flesh.

Secondly, it is a “circumcision made without hands”—carried out by God, not by man. Hence it is called the “circumcision of Christ”. We cannot perform self-surgery and remove the flesh from our own hearts; it is God who, by his Holy Spirit, carries out the surgery. And when does this take place? The next verse says, “You were buried with him in baptism” (v.12). It is at baptism that the circumcision of Christ takes place, by which the body of flesh is removed and buried.

Thirdly, “He is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is that which is of the heart, by the Spirit” (Romans 2:29). Spiritually, you become a Jew not by literal circumcision but by being circumcised in your heart.

Fourthly, Paul speaks of the “body of flesh” because the flesh is integral to the body, and is its dominant element. Flesh does not exist by itself apart from the body. If the flesh controls our lives, it exerts its influence through the body. But when by God’s grace the body of flesh is “removed,” it means that its control over us is removed, and we can now live under God’s gracious lordship.

Many Christians are still controlled by the body of flesh. Examine your own way of thinking. Is it controlled by things

such as food, clothes, money, praise, the comforts of life, and sexual desires? Is your way of thinking dominated by the body?

Teenagers are particularly prone to this, and it continues on to adulthood. From their conversations you can tell that their thinking is controlled by things pertaining to the body. These things are not sinful in themselves, but if our thinking is dominated by the body of flesh, we won't experience spiritual reality and vitality in our Christian lives.

In the important chapter on baptism, Romans 6, Paul says, "Our old man was crucified with him (Christ), *that our body of sin might be done away with*, that we should no longer be slaves to sin" (v.6). At baptism we are crucified with Christ and buried with him. Our "old man" is crucified so that the body of sin may be done away with—not in the sense of physical extermination but of its being removed from our hearts, and no longer exercising control over us.

If the body of flesh is not removed from the heart, our thinking will be controlled by it and will produce "the deeds of the body," which will result in death. "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). Many Christians have made shipwreck of their faith because they have not, by the Spirit, put to death "the deeds of the body" or "the deeds of the flesh" (Gal.5:19).

Hence there are many weak, unhappy, and stressed-out Christians. The battle between flesh and spirit will create deep inner tensions. The tendency is to compromise

between flesh and spirit, but at the cost of the loss of joy, power, and the fruit of the Spirit.

Second principle: Joyful acceptance of suffering

The second point about the Christian who strives for perfection: His striving for perfection is expressed in a joyful acceptance of suffering. When the body of flesh is dealt with, you won't be afraid of suffering, fatigue, poor health, lack of sleep, or even death.

Whereas suffering is an unwelcome topic to those who are in the flesh, it is embraced by those who are pressing towards the high calling of perfection, for it is through suffering that we are made perfect, as was true even for Jesus himself (Heb.2:10; Heb.5:8,9).

Interestingly, when Paul brings up the topic of suffering, he often does it “out of the blue,” without any obvious connection to the main discussion. An example is Romans 5:1-2 which begins by speaking on justification by faith: “Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ ... and we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God.” Suddenly in the next verse (v.3) he says: “*Not only so*”—referring to what he has just said, namely, justification by faith and *rejoicing* in the hope of the glory of God. This then becomes yet another reason for rejoicing: “... *we rejoice in our sufferings.*” Do we, like Paul, see suffering as something to rejoice in?

Few Christians consider suffering as cause for rejoicing. Many complain, “Why is God unfair to me? Why did He

give me a wife (or husband) like this? I thought that marriage was going to be heaven on earth, but it turned out to be years of torment. God didn't give me a good job either; my boss twists my arm every day. Add to this my poor health, my aches and pains."

But the man of God rejoices in suffering because he knows that it will lead to spiritual excellence in the likeness of Christ. That is why Paul considers suffering as good a reason for rejoicing as justification by faith! God has a predetermined plan for all who through faith have responded to His call (Rom.8:29,30), those who "have been called according to His purpose" (v.28). And what is that purpose? To be "glorified" (v.30). It is to become a new person "conformed to the likeness of His Son" (v.29). But this cannot be accomplished without suffering, for if we wish to "share in his glory" we must also share in "his sufferings" (v.17).

Romans chapter 8 is a vital discourse on life in the Spirit. All of a sudden, in the midst of wonderful statements such as "the Law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and death" (v.2) and "The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God" (v.16), Paul again brings up the topic of suffering out of the blue. In the very next verse (v.17) he continues, "Now if we are children, then we are heirs—heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory". This may seem an

abrupt change of topic, but it demonstrates the importance of suffering to Paul and his reasons for rejoicing in it.

Many people grumble over small misfortunes, but the man of God rejoices in every situation. When Paul and Silas were beaten and thrown in jail, they sang hymns and praised the Lord (Acts 16:25).

Are we able to say, “Praise God, my car broke down this morning and I got stranded on the road for three hours! I had a great time of communing with Him.” Thanking God for a car breakdown may seem irrational, but that is what makes a disciple of Jesus extraordinary where others would be cursing and swearing.

Third principle: Set the mind on spiritual things

Thirdly, the Christian who strives for perfection *will set his mind on spiritual things*. He is inclined towards spiritual things because God’s Spirit is guiding him into all the truth (Jn.16:13). He sets his mind on the things above, not on earthly things (Col.3:2). Paul warns us:

For those who are according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who are according to the Spirit, the things of the Spirit. For the mind set on the flesh is death, but the mind set on the Spirit is life and peace. (Romans 8:5-6)

What you set your mind on—the flesh or the Spirit—is a matter of life and death. If you set your mind on the flesh, you will die. If you set your mind on the Spirit, there is life

and peace, including the inner peace that fills a man of God even in situations of danger.

In China many years ago I had the privilege of knowing brother Yang, a faithful servant of God. We shared a room together for several months, and I saw that his life was in constant danger. He knew he could be arrested at any moment for preaching the gospel. At that time, such arrests routinely led to prison, labor camps, and sometimes death in those camps. Yet I have never seen a more peaceful man in the face of danger, with no hint of fear or anxiety. His life spoke more powerfully to me than a hundred eloquent messages. His heart and mind were so focused on God and eternal things that transient trials on earth did not disturb him.

What are “the things of the Spirit” we can set our minds on? Meditate on love, joy, peace, the fruit of the Spirit, the glory of the church, the things to come, the coming of the Lord, God’s power to transform people, and His plan for your life. Have you ever pondered what God could do through you? Do we suppose that God has use for only one John Sung, one Wang Ming Dao, or one D.L. Moody? He can use any of us to shine forth His light to this generation.

Fourth principle: Let God do His will in you

The fourth point touches on something we mentioned earlier: Let God do His work in us, both to will and to work for His good pleasure. We may be familiar with these words in Philippians 2:13, but we often quote them as if they

happen by some automatic or self-fulfilling way. The fact is that this verse is not a reality in most lives. To make it true in us, we must yield our lives wholly to God.

The preceding verse (v.12) speaks of obeying God and working out our salvation with fear and trembling. If we don't obey God, He won't do His work in us, and we are acting contrary to His will (cf., "to will and to work for His good pleasure").

If God could fully implement His will in the lives of His people, there would be many spiritual giants in the world today. The reality is that God is prevented from willing and doing His good pleasure in most Christians because they do not submit wholly to His will. But when our will is totally yielded to God's, we will do whatever He wants us to do, think as He inspires us to think, and live according to the mind of Christ (1Cor.2:16).

Fifth principle: Faith in God's power

Fifthly, the man of God stands firm in the truth expressed in Romans 8:28ff: "We know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love Him, to those who are called according to His purpose." Do you catch the spirit of this statement? The one who loves God and pursues after spiritual excellence is confident in God's love and power. He knows that God's will for him is always for his good, and is the expression of His perfect love.

"Who shall separate us from the love of Christ" (v.35)? Nothing can separate us, neither tribulation nor distress nor

persecution. If there is anything or anyone that could separate us from the love of Christ, it would be we ourselves. Paul gives a list of things that cannot separate us from Christ, but never says you cannot separate yourself from Christ.

The reality is that many Christians do this very thing one way or another through continual disobedience to the Lord. This results in their being “severed from Christ” and “falling from grace” (Gal.5:4). This is especially true in these last days (1Tim.4:1). They deny the faith (1Tim.5:8), “even denying the Master who bought them, bringing swift destruction upon themselves” (2Pet.2:1; Jude 1:4).

But there is no external power in heaven, on earth, or under the earth that can separate us from the love of Christ. The man of God is confident of God’s love and power. His spiritual intensity comes not from himself but from the Lord. “It is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me” (Gal.2:20).

By daily applying these five principles of spiritual victory, we will not live second-rate Christian lives. May Yahweh our God be pleased to raise up mighty men and women for Himself in this generation and reveal His saving glory to the world through them.

Chapter 32



COMMUNION WITH GOD

 In chapter 29, we considered a matter that is central to the Christian life, namely, doing God's will. But this raises a related issue, namely, communion with God. In order to do God's will we need to know what His will is. And how can we know what His will is unless we are in touch with Him in such a way that He can communicate it to us?

The loss of God's presence

I once woke up in the middle of the night, and suddenly for a few minutes it seemed as if God's presence had left me. It was like a spiritual blackout that had switched off the lights. In those moments of darkness and despair, there was a frightening sense of emptiness and of being forsaken by God.

It was a whole new experience for me. It lasted only a few minutes, yet it drove home forcefully, as never before, the

fact that if God should ever withdraw His presence from us or we lose fellowship with Him, life would lose all meaning.

Of course if I had never experienced God's sweet presence in the first place, I would not have noticed the difference. But in those few moments when His presence seemed to have left me, I woke up and exclaimed, "Where is the Lord? What has happened to my line of communication?" Emptiness and meaninglessness seized my heart.

God undoubtedly gave me this experience partly for your sake because I had been meditating on today's subject for some time. Without this experience I wouldn't have been able to give this sermon with the level of conviction as I now have.

It reminds me of a childhood incident when I was four years old. My father was playing hide and seek with me. He hid so well from me that I was searching for him in vain, and began to feel abandoned. Yet all the while he was right behind me. But his movements were so fast and agile that I, as a small boy, could not turn around fast enough to see him. When he saw that I was becoming despondent, he came up to me with a smile: "Look, I've been with you all the time."

That nightmarish experience of being forsaken by God (cf. Psalm 22:1) left me with a deeper appreciation of God's care and presence. He was showing me that His presence is vital to my life. It is something that is easily taken for granted until you lose it.

God communicates with us

Brothers and sisters, nothing is as vital to our Christian lives as our communion with God. It is inconceivable that anyone can live the Christian life meaningfully without communing with Him.

How is your communion with God? Would it make any difference to your life if you are not getting through to Him?

When I share about my experiences of God—telling others of how God spoke to me or did something miraculous through me—the usual reaction is one of amazement as if these things no longer happen today. Many Christians are astonished that miracles still happen today and that God still speaks to people.

It made me wonder if I was a spiritual oddity, a relic or throwback from the distant past. But shouldn't these experiences be the norm in the Christian life? Why do we suppose that miracles and communication with God do not happen today? Few people echo with me when I share about my experiences of God.

When I was a young Christian, I sought God's will for my life. What does He want me to do? Where does He want me to go? One time, as I knelt before God in prayer, He said to me in a clear and distinct voice, "I will take you out of China". The voice was so clear that it startled me. It came from behind, so I turned around to see who was speaking. Yet I was all alone in the room. I was a young believer then, and it was the first time He spoke to me in an audible voice.

Isaiah 30:21 says, “And your ears shall hear a word behind you, saying, ‘This is the way, walk in it.’” If the Old Testament saints could have direct communication with God, how much more shall we in the New Testament age? It is an age in which the Holy Spirit is poured out on all flesh, accompanied by prophecies, visions, dreams, and communication with God (Acts 2:16-18).

In my walk with God, He speaks to me by one means or another. He seldom does it in an audible voice but more often through an inner communication. This kind of communication is common in the Bible, so could it be that we Christians are not living as we ought? In my reading of Scripture, I see nothing unique or special about my relationship with God. Similar things are recorded in Scripture, beginning with Adam in the book of Genesis and going right up to John in Revelation. Without a communications link with God, I don’t see how you can survive as a Christian or experience joy in the Christian life.

To crystallize the matter, let us ask a fundamental question: Why did God create us in the first place? Right from the beginning, in Genesis 3, God already talks with man. Why would God walk in the Garden of Eden if not to fellowship with Adam and Eve? Why would He create man if not to commune with him?

We were created in God’s image so that God may communicate with us. Deep communion with God is possible because we share a common image with Him. We cannot have deep communication with a dog because a dog is made

not in man's image. But God made us in His image so that He may communicate with us at the deepest level. Scripture reveals a God who wants to communicate with us more than we want to communicate with Him. Few know the longing in His heart to fellowship with us.

In fact we can know God better than we know anyone else in the world, for God reveals Himself in every page of Scripture. The typical Bible has over a thousand pages, each of which reveals something about Him. You can write more about God than about your wife in terms of her biographical details.

All through Scripture we see God communing with man. Genesis 3:9f gives us the first recorded conversation between God and man (not counting Genesis 2:16-17 in which God speaks to Adam in a monologue rather than a two-way dialogue). By then man had sinned and lost the privilege of intimate communion with God. But the word "lost" must be qualified because the lost communication can be restored through repentance. In the Old Testament, God continued to communicate with many of His people. If He communicated with people in the old covenant, how much more in the new covenant?

God wants us to be with Him

God has made Himself known to us through His son Jesus Christ, His visible representative; hence Paul speaks of "the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ" (2Cor.4:6). "Our

fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ” (1John 1:3).

Paul offers a glimpse into Jesus’ heart: “He died for us so that whether we wake or sleep we might live with him” (1Thess. 5:10). But how can we live with him without communicating with him?

Jesus died for us so that we may live “with him” and not merely for him. He died for us, not only that we may receive the forgiveness of sin but much more to remove the barrier between God and man. Indeed the “man Christ Jesus” is the mediator between God and men (1Timothy 2:5).

The words “live with him” are significant. Jesus chose his disciples “so that they might be with him” (Mark 3:14). But as we just saw in 1Thess.5:10 (“we might live with him”), this type of communion applies to us too. Jesus died for us having in view that we might live with him.

In the Greek, there is a difference between the two verses just quoted. In Mark 3:14, the Twelve were chosen to be “with” (*meta*) Jesus at least in the sense of physical presence. 1Thessalonians 5:10, on the other hand, has the tiny but powerful word *syn* (“together with”) which expresses union and communion. The twelve disciples were with Jesus physically but one of them, Judas, was not with him spiritually. Initially the other disciples were not with Jesus in a deep spiritual way, and this carried on until Pentecost.

Here *syn* expresses spiritual togetherness, a communion that is deeper than physical presence. Jesus invites everyone to “come to me” (Mt.11:28). In this invitation we feel his

longing to be with us. He lamented how people were unwilling to be with him: “How often I wanted to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were unwilling” (Mt.23:37). Do we feel the yearning of his heart to fellowship with us?

Lukewarmness: A barrier to communion with God

Jesus says, “Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me.” (Revelation 3:20, RSV)

This verse is often quoted at evangelistic rallies as if it were addressed to non-Christians. In fact it is addressed to Christians and specifically to the church at Laodicea which was languishing in a dangerous lukewarmness. Lukewarmness is the reason that few Christians are in communion with God. We want to gain eternal life but are unwilling to accept the cost of following Him. We commune with Him only at our convenience or when we need Him; but when we don't need Him, we don't talk to Him. But God doesn't function on those terms, and is not there to be exploited. He communes with those who seek Him with all their heart: “You will seek Me and find Me, when you seek Me with all your heart” (Jeremiah 29:13).

No lukewarm person can commune with God. If we dabble with religion on the one hand and with God on the other, while pursuing the world, we cannot hope to get

through to Him. I wonder if the fatal disease of the church today is a lack of seriousness in the things which are eternal.

Christians who claim to be committed to God may discover, in the face of temptation or difficulties, that they are not committed after all. There is a big place in their hearts for the world, the flesh, money, position, and academic status. If anything other than God is dear to you, it will stop you from communing with Him.

Hearing the Lord's voice

Revelation 3:20 reveals the depth of Jesus' longing to commune with us, a longing that mirrors God's own longing, for God lives "in Christ" (2Cor.5:19). Jesus will dine with us and we with him. The communication is bilateral and bidirectional, not one-way.

This involves two stages. First, we hear his voice calling to us outside the door. This is the first and preliminary stage, and is not, as we tend to think, the highest stage. Hearing his voice is only the preparation for opening the door.

The next step, after you hear his voice and invite him in, is a blessed dinner fellowship. The dinner is a relaxed and intimate fellowship with the Lord, and it enriches our inner being just as a good meal gives physical nourishment and satisfaction.

The sweet communion with Jesus is expressed in discipleship, in taking up our cross daily, and following Jesus. Discipleship unites our will with the Lord's by walking

together on the same path, and helps us to understand what Jesus meant when he said “my food is to do the will of Him who sent me and to accomplish His work” (Jn.4:34). The Father’s will is our food too if we commune with God.

The word “voice” in Revelation 3:20 occurs frequently in John, and is a key word in Revelation. The Greek word *phōnē* (“voice, sound, utterance”) occurs 139 times in the New Testament, and 55 times in Revelation alone, the latter accounting for 40% of the occurrences in the New Testament. The book of Acts comes in at a distant second with 27 occurrences.

Revelation begins and ends with a great voice. In chapter one, John says, “I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet” (1:10). Near the end of Revelation, he says, “I heard a loud voice from the throne” (21:3). In both cases, a voice delivers a supremely important message. In the first case, the Lord instructs John to write to the seven churches. In the latter, the Lord gives John a grand revelation of New Jerusalem. Hence Revelation begins and ends with a great voice that speaks great things.

The Lord’s voice is mentioned four times in John chapter 10, e.g., “My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me” (v.27). It is ultimately the Father who speaks through Jesus: “For I do not speak of my own accord but the Father who sent me commanded me what to say and how to say it.” (John 12:49)

God's voice saved me from death

God spoke to me when I was a young Christian, and continues to speak to me to this day, as in a recent incident which took place at an intersection near my home. In Canada, when a car reaches a four-way stop sign, it must come to a complete halt. Whoever stops first has the right to cross first. I stopped at such an intersection, and was about to accelerate when God clearly said to me, "Stop, don't step on the accelerator!" So I stopped. Then a bus tore across the intersection. The bus driver failed to stop not only at the stop sign but also for the bus stop just before the intersection.

Had I gone on ahead, the bus would have smashed into the right side of my car. It doesn't take much imagination to see what could have happened if my car had been rammed by a heavy bus running at 50 kms per hour. After the bus tore across the intersection, the driver slammed on the brakes. I sat in my car taking in the whole scene in astonishment.

So hearing the voice of God can be a matter of life and death. In Scripture, there is nothing unusual about this kind of experience. The voice of the Lord is part of the normal Christian life.

The first way God speaks: Publicly to a multitude

Many Christians think that God likes to keep silent, but the truth is that He is more eager to speak to us than we are to listen to Him.

God speaks to people in various ways. In fact there are five ways in which God speaks so that we may hear His voice. He speaks not just to so-called “elite” Christians but also to “ordinary” folk.

The first way in which God speaks is *publicly to a multitude*. The gospels record three occasions in which He spoke publicly.

The first occasion took place at Jesus’ baptism when God spoke audibly from heaven to the multitudes, saying, “This is My beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased” (Mt. 3:17).

The second case took place at the transfiguration of Jesus when God’s voice spoke from a bright cloud: “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him” (Mt.17:5). This time God spoke to a smaller audience, namely, three of Jesus’ disciples.

Near the end of Jesus’ ministry, God spoke again to a gathered multitude. Jesus was facing the looming reality of the cross, and was about to lay down his life. In this hour of decision, Jesus said to his Father, “Glorify Your name” (Jn.12:28). Then God’s voice answered from heaven, “I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again.” The multitudes heard the voice and even debated over it, with some concluding,

“An angel has spoken to him” (v.29). Then Jesus said to them, “This voice has come for your sake, not mine” (v.30).

We see a pattern: God spoke publicly to the nation of Israel at the beginning of Jesus’ ministry, then to three disciples in the middle of his ministry, then again to Israel at the end of his ministry.

In the Old Testament, at the giving of the Ten Commandments, God’s voice spoke directly to the Israelites who were gathered at Sinai (Exodus 20). They were so terrified that they said to Moses, “Speak to us yourself and we will listen; but do not let God speak to us, lest we die” (v.19).

God’s speaking to people is not something unusual. When necessary for the occasion, God will speak directly from heaven to a multitude.

Second way: God speaks through His word

But God does not usually speak audibly to a multitude except at special or momentous events in history. The second way in which God speaks to us is far more common: We hear His voice through the word of God—the Scriptures—delivered to us. To understand this, we first note the close link between “voice” and “word”.

When Moses was addressing the nation of Israel, he recalled for them the incident of the Israelites being frightened by God’s voice:

Then Yahweh spoke to you from the midst of the fire; you heard the sound of **words**, but you saw no form—only a

voice. So He declared to you His covenant which He commanded you to keep, that is, the Ten Commandments, which he wrote on two tablets of stone. (Dt.4:12-13)

Here Moses refers to “voice” and “words,” indicating a close link between them. Likewise Jesus’ voice speaks to us through his words recorded in the gospels. Those who have ears to hear will discern his voice and his words.

Yet there is also a distinction between voice and word. The voice delivers the word but more than the word. Through factors such as speed, volume, and intonation, the voice conveys things that words alone cannot. The voice expresses more than the literal word because the manner in which something is said and the feelings behind it can affect the hearer by communicating non-verbal cues.

The spoken word and the printed word have different effects on a person even if the words are identical. This explains the Israelites’ frightened reaction to God’s voice when they heard His words accompanied by thunder and lightning—and a trumpet—at the mountain blazing with fire and smoke (Ex.20:18; Dt.5:23-27; Heb.12:18-21). But when we read these verses in a print Bible, the words lack the same awe-inspiring effect they had on the Israelites when they heard it with their own ears.

While there is much in common between voice and word, there is also a distinction. In any case, it is the voice that delivers the word, and the word that contains the message.

Many want to hear God's voice but ignore what He has already said in His word. We must follow the example of the Psalmist and meditate on God's word day and night (Ps.1:2; Josh.1:8), feeding on it as food until our ears are attuned to His voice. Before long you will be familiar with His style of speaking and the substance of His words such that if He should ever speak to you audibly one day, you will be able to discern it by its substance.

This is also true on the human level. If you are familiar with what I say and teach, and if someone should come along and tell you that I had said this and that, you can say, "I know what he teaches, and he would never say such a thing." If someone tells you that a certain friend of yours has said such and such, you can say, "That's impossible. My friend would never say something like that." You can discern a voice by the substance of the message.

It is important therefore to be familiar with God's word so that when He does speak to us directly, we can discern His voice. The same is true of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. If we know his voice, notably his words recorded in the gospels, we won't be tricked by an imposter's voice even if it sounds genuine to some people. Jesus says that his sheep "know his voice" (John 10:4); "they will never follow a stranger but will run away from him for they do not recognize a stranger's voice" (v.5). "My sheep hear my voice; I know them, and they follow me" (v.27).

Third way: God speaks to us through His servants

The third way in which we hear God's voice is through His servants. Samuel rebukes Saul for disobeying God: "Why then did you not obey the voice of Yahweh?" (1Sam.15:19). Interestingly, Samuel refers to God's "voice" even though God's command to Saul was indirect, being spoken to Samuel and not to Saul himself (vv.1-3). This is just one of many examples in Scripture where God's voice is uttered through His servants.

Similarly, the nation of Israel heard God's voice through Moses. There are many examples of this, but one is seen in the following words of Moses to Israel: "If you obey the voice of Yahweh your God, keeping all His commandments that I am commanding you today ..." (Dt. 13:18). Moses is said to command Israel even though the commandments are ultimately God's commandments.

Moses was God's voice not only to Israel but also to Pharaoh:

Then Yahweh said to Moses, "See, I have made you as God to Pharaoh; and your brother Aaron shall be your prophet. You shall speak all that I command you; and your brother Aaron shall tell Pharaoh to let the sons of Israel go out of his land." (Exodus 7:1-2)

When Pharaoh hears Moses or Aaron speaking, he is hearing God's voice. If Pharaoh rejects Moses's word, he is rejecting God's voice, for Yahweh has made Moses "as God to Pharaoh".

The Old Testament prophets were God's voice to Israel and ultimately to the world. They lived so fully under God's control and were in such deep communion with Him that they could declare, "Thus says the LORD" (literally, "Thus says Yahweh"). This phrase occurs about 418 times in the Old Testament.

A similar principle is found in the New Testament. Concerning the preaching of the gospel, Jesus says, "He who receives you receives me" (Mt.10:40); "He who listens to you listens to me, he who rejects you rejects me, and he who rejects me rejects Him who sent me" (Lk.10:16). Only the voice of a faithful servant of God can represent the voice of God.

Fourth way: Hearing God's voice in a vision

Scripture mentions a fourth way in which we hear God's voice: in a vision. Many Christians regard this as being out of the world, yet it is common in Acts, Revelation, and the Old Testament. Ezekiel 1:25-28, for example, describes a glorious vision in which Yahweh's voice spoke and was heard.

The Lord spoke to Ananias in a vision (Acts 9:10), instructing him to render spiritual assistance to Saul, later called Paul. Ananias was instructed to restore Saul's eyesight through the laying on of hands, through which Saul will be filled with the Spirit (v.17).

A vision can come in the form of a dream. In fact a dream is also called a “vision of the night” (Job 20:8; 33:15; Isa.29:7). In a vision of the night, the Lord said to Paul, “Do not be afraid, but go on speaking and do not be silent” (Acts 18:9). In a vision, the Lord communicated with Paul by means of a “trance” or “ecstasy” (Greek *ekstasis*, Acts 22:17ff, used of Peter in Acts 10:10), which is a state of being in which one is unaware of one’s immediate surroundings.

Fifth way: Hearing God’s voice through the Spirit

The fifth way of hearing God’s voice is far more common: hearing God’s voice through the Holy Spirit (that is, the Spirit of God or the Spirit of Yahweh). At Antioch the Holy Spirit said, “Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them” (Acts 13:2). God’s voice spoke through His Spirit to those gathered for prayer and fasting.

God speaks to us through the Spirit even in the matter of assurance: “the Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God” (Rom.8:16). We cannot have genuine assurance unless the Spirit of God tells us that we are children of God.

Many Christians are so out of touch with God that they want to base the assurance of salvation on doctrine or dogma rather than on a living relationship with God. In their weak spiritual condition, they dare not base assurance on something that they regard as unreliable, namely, communication with God. So they base assurance on dogma which they

think exists independently of a living relationship with God. Unfortunately for them, Scripture provides no basis for true assurance apart from the witness of the Holy Spirit which is mentioned in Romans 8:16 with absolute clarity.

We either have a living relationship with God in which He speaks to us and gives us assurance through His Spirit, or we don't have assurance at all. Without a living relationship with God, no amount of doctrine can provide true assurance. Nothing is as dangerous as a false assurance that lulls you into a false sense of security. You hear "peace, peace" when there is no peace, for true peace is a fruit of the Spirit that comes from a living connection with God. To base our assurance on something else is to follow a blind guide who falls into the pit.

Many Christians feel insecure about basing assurance on a living relationship with God, but what is so insecure about it? Are we afraid that we may have communion with Him today but not tomorrow? And would that be God's fault in the first place? Is God so fickle as to speak today and hide Himself tomorrow?

Beware of basing our assurance on a false foundation. We must walk with the Lord and remain with him. "Abide in me, and I in you" (John 15:4). If we do this, we will bear much fruit—the fruit of the Spirit—and have true assurance. But if we do not abide in Christ, how can we have the assurance that comes from the Spirit of God? Those who put their trust in a false security will end up in disaster.

God gives us His spirit—the Holy Spirit—so that we may have a deep and secure relationship with Him. Whenever our communion with God is weakening, why not repent immediately? All it takes is repentance to restore the fellowship. Or are we betting our security on something other than repentance?

Here is another passage that depicts the Holy Spirit as the voice of God:

“But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all the truth. He will not **speak** on his own; he will **speak** only what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come.” (John 16:13, NIV)

Note the underlined word “speak”. The Spirit does not speak on his own authority but speaks what he hears, and reveals to us the truth, including the things that are to come. These are not necessarily eschatological events but events of a personal nature that guide us in our walk with God.

Jesus further describes how the Holy Spirit speaks to us:

“But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things, and **bring to your remembrance all that I said to you.**” (John 14:26)

The Holy Spirit brings to our memory the things that Jesus had taught. This is in line with John 16:13 which we quoted regarding the Spirit of truth; but now, more specifically, the Spirit speaks to us by bringing to our memory the words of Jesus. The Spirit brings to our minds a particular Bible verse that speaks to us so powerfully that we underline

it in our Bibles or write it down on paper. I often experience this. A particular verse speaks powerfully to me and remains with me until the matter at hand is resolved. Then the Spirit brings to my remembrance yet another verse that becomes a guiding light in the next phase of my walk with God. “Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.” (Psalm 119:105)

Hearing God’s voice: An example

Two centuries ago, a woman was leading a women’s Bible study group to great effect and success by God’s grace. But the church leaders, instead of rejoicing over this, were unhappy that a woman was leading Bible studies which they felt was the exclusive right of the clergy. When confronted about it, she said she would often hear God’s voice in her deep fellowship with Him, and that the voice would guide her to lead the Bible studies. They asked her how she knew it was God’s voice. In a meek and gentle tone, she said to the panel of clergy, “Can you tell me how Abraham knew it was the voice of God that told him to offer up Isaac?”

God’s instruction to Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac, in whose seed is the fulfillment of God’s promises, is utterly contrary to human thinking. God required from Abraham what was most dear to him, even more than his own life, yet all this was for the purpose of blessing him and through him all humanity. It is absolutely crucial that in this situation—a scenario that may lead to the wrongful slaughter of one’s

own son—Abraham was absolutely sure that it was God who had spoken to him. Would Abraham have offered Isaac if he had the slightest doubt that it was God who spoke to him? God speaks in every generation to those who, like Abraham, have “the obedience of faith” (Romans 1:5; 16:26).

How do we hear God’s voice? Seven principles

1. Purity of heart

The first principle we must grasp, if we are to hear God’s voice, is purity of heart. If our hearts are not pure, we won’t be able to discern His voice.

When I was serving as the pastor of a church in Liverpool, there was a woman in the church who, for a time, was prophesying in the name of the Lord in a trance, in a state of ecstasy. She prophesied with such power that it frightened her listeners. In a state of ecstasy she would say, “Thus says the Lord ...” and would quote whole passages of Scripture which she, in her normal state of mind, could not remember or didn’t even know were in the Bible. In fact this dear woman could hardly read, for she had never had the opportunity to receive even elementary school education. But after waking up from her trance, she would not remember what she had said.

This went on in the church for several weeks, so I sought God’s face to discern whether this prophesying was from Him. In this particular case, one could not tell from the

substance of her prophecies. Nothing in her proclamations gave any clear indication one way or the other.

One day, as I waited before the Lord, He made it clear to me that the prophesying was not from Him. So I went to this woman and said to her, “Sister, the prophecies you have been proclaiming in the name of the Lord are not from Him.” At this she fell off her seat and onto her face — literally with her face to the ground. With tears flowing, she asked, “If this is not from the Lord, why have I been prophesying like this?” I said, “Dear sister, Satan has been able to use you because there is sin hidden in your heart. Search your heart before God, and tell me the sin you have committed.”

She thought about it for a minute, but couldn’t come up with anything. She said, “In all honesty, I can’t think of any sin I have committed that I have not repented of.” I looked to God for discernment, and He revealed the exact sin to me. I said to her, “In that case, I will tell you what it is. There is impurity in your heart because deep down you hate your husband.”

This woke her up from sleep, as it were, and she confessed that she hated her husband because he had abused her and treated her as a slave. Deep in her heart, she hated him because he humiliated her, degraded her, and treated her as an object rather than as a human being. She knew that hatred is wrong, but instead of dealing with it, she buried it deeper and deeper into her heart until she was no longer

conscious of it. Yet all along, the root of hatred was poisoning her whole person. Bitterness, hatred, and sin, when hidden in the depth of one's being such that one ceases to be aware of them, are like a toxin that poisons one's life.

She repented and drew upon God's grace to forgive her husband and to live a new life in Christ. Within two years, her husband, who had been a nominal Christian, became a changed person.

If we wish to hear the voice of God and not confuse it with the voice of Satan, we must have a pure heart. The blood of Jesus must cleanse us of every sin, especially the hidden ones. We need the Spirit of God to reveal our sins to us, because sin, known or unknown, cuts off our communion with the holy and righteous God.

Many Christians think that the message of repentance is only for non-Christians, but that is a grave error. Even the verse we are looking at, Revelation 3:20, is preceded by a call to repentance: "be zealous and repent" (v.19). This call is not addressed to unbelievers but to the Christians in Laodicea. Repentance is not a one-time act. We have not graduated from the Christian life to the extent that we no longer need to repent. Repentance and contrition are required for approaching a holy God who delights in a contrite heart:

For thus says the One who is high and lifted up, who inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy: "I dwell in the high and holy place, and also with him who is of a contrite and

lowly spirit, to revive the spirit of the lowly, and to revive the heart of the contrite.” (Isaiah 57:15, ESV)

But this is the one to whom I will look: he who is humble and contrite in spirit and trembles at my word. (Isaiah 66:2, ESV)

We must not allow our sins to drive us away from God. On the contrary, the realization of our sinfulness ought to draw us closer to God. In our spiritual destitution, to whom can we turn but the One who alone can rescue us? When we come into His presence with a humble and contrite heart, we can stay in His presence even if we feel ourselves to be unclean.

If I may dare say so, and with cautious qualification, our sinfulness can be a blessing if it drives us to genuine contrition: “O Lord, be merciful to me, a sinner. Grant me to come into Your presence so that You may cleanse me from my sins and transform me into a new person.” Our sinfulness then becomes the reason for coming to Him rather than fleeing from Him. We will understand why Jesus, Son of God, is called a “friend of sinners” (Mt.11:19; Lk.7:34).

2. Absolute commitment to the truth

The second thing we must have, if we are to hear God’s voice, is an absolute commitment to the truth. Here “truth” refers to the truth of God’s word, not our pet doctrines or theologies. Several times in my life, I have had the painful experience of discovering that the doctrines which I held to

be true do not conform to God's word. I would discover to my shock that a certain doctrine is not supported by the word of God as a whole, but only by a few verses taken out of context. When further study reveals the unscriptural nature of the doctrine, I have no choice but to abandon it because of my commitment to the truth.

3. Singleness of heart

Third, we need to have the singleness of heart. Many Christians cannot commune with God because their hearts are distracted by many things which clamor for their attention, so they are caught in a whirlwind of busyness. Jesus said to one such frenetic person: "Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things, but one thing is necessary. Mary has chosen the good portion, which will not be taken away from her." (Lk.10:41-42). What distracted Martha were not the bad things but good and legitimate activities. But her sister Mary "sat at the Lord's feet and listened to his word" (v.39).

Many Christians are so busy with good things that the good has become the enemy of the best. They cannot hear God's voice because their ears are deafened by the din of activity.

Similarly, a lack of faith—or plain unbelief—results in a divided and impure heart, and the incapacity to make up one's mind about spiritual things. That is what James describes as double-mindedness. In this condition we cannot commune with God or receive anything from Him:

But he must ask in faith without any doubting, for the one who doubts is like the surf of the sea, driven and tossed by the wind. For that man ought not to expect that he will receive anything from the Lord, being a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways. (James 1:6-8, NASB)

Draw near to God and He will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners; and purify your hearts, you double-minded. (4:8)

4. Inward quietness

Fourth, we need to have inward quietness. In our fast-track high-tech era, few know how to be quiet. Inward quietness is important because God does not shout at us but speaks to us in a quiet voice, and we need to be still to hear the soft voice.

Yahweh told Elijah to stand on a mountain, and wait for Him to pass by. A violent wind tore through the mountains, but Yahweh was not in the wind. A powerful earthquake shook the earth, but Yahweh was not in the earthquake. A consuming fire scorched the place, but Yahweh was not in the fire. Finally a quiet voice—the voice of Yahweh—said, “What are you doing here, Elijah?” (1 Kings 19:11-13)

If we cannot be still, or if we allow the noise and commotion of the world to invade the privacy of our inner being, we won't be able to hear His voice. What we need is an inner quietness. When we approach a man of God, we can sense an inner quietness about him. It is second nature to him because it is his means of hearing God's voice. As Elijah

found out, God does not speak in a whirlwind, an earthquake, or a fire, but in the quiet voice of the Spirit.

5. No fear of death

Fifth, we must be freed from the fear of death if we are to hear God's voice. Hebrews 2:15 says that Satan keeps people in lifelong bondage to the fear of death. It is this fear that causes people to cling to the security of the world. But the one who has let go of the world is not afraid to die.

It was the fear of death that compelled the Israelites to say to Moses, "You speak to us, and we will listen; but do not let God speak to us, lest we die" (Exodus 20:19). From the blazing mountain, God spoke to the nation of Israel. The people pleaded with Moses not to let God speak to them, for they were afraid to die.

Are you running away from God's voice because you are afraid that it may cost you your life in this world? You are pulled in two directions: You want to hear His voice, yet are afraid that God may call you to something that will cost you your place in the world.

"Do not let God speak to us, lest we die," the Israelites cried. But why should they fear death? Isn't hearing God's voice a privilege worth dying for? Does God's voice bring death or does it bring life to those who receive it? The Israelites were afraid to die, so they fled from His voice. Yet ironically they later said to Moses:

“Behold, Yahweh our God has shown us His glory and His greatness, and we have heard His voice from the midst of the fire; we have seen today that God speaks with man, *yet he lives.*” (Deuteronomy 5:24)

Interestingly, this time they acknowledged that they didn’t die after hearing God’s voice! Yet in the very next verse, they inexplicably returned to their fear of hearing God’s voice:

“Now then why should we die? For this great fire will consume us; if we hear the voice of Yahweh our God any longer, we will die. For who is there of all flesh who has heard the voice of the living God speaking from the midst of the fire, as we have, and lived?” (vv.25-26)

This is followed by Yahweh’s poignant response to their vacillation:

“If only they had such a heart to fear Me and keep all My commands always, so that they and their children will prosper forever.” (v.29)

Ironically, God here said that the Israelites *did not* fear Him. This is a strange statement to make because they did fear His voice. But their fear was the wrong kind of fear, a carnal and slavish fear, not the righteous and obedient fear that God had expected of them. So God dismissed them from His presence: “Return to your tents” (v.30). But He said to faithful Moses, “As for you, stand here by Me, that I may speak to you” (v.31).

6. Engaged in His service

Sixth, we must be fully engaged in the Lord's service. This applies to every Christian, not just those in full-time service. We belong to God because we have been redeemed by the blood of Jesus, the enormous price by which we were purchased. We are now God's slaves. There are no part-time slaves, for all slaves are full-time slaves. So we must live full-time for Him irrespective of our occupation in the world.

If you are not living for God, how will you ever hear His voice? In all our examples cited from Acts, God speaks to His servants who are fully engaged in His service. He does not speak to satisfy our curiosity but to instruct and encourage us in the work of building up His church.

7. Faithful unto death

Seventh, God speaks to those who are willing to be faithful unto death. The statement, "He who endures to the end will be saved," occurs twice in Matthew (10:22; 24:13). The Lord is looking for people who are willing to follow Him unto death. Many claim to be Christians, but how many will remain faithful in the face of death?

Of course even in our sincerest intentions, it is still possible to falter at the final minute. But God's grace is sufficient to help us stand! At the very least, we must have the genuine desire to be faithful unto death. But many don't even have that desire. God looks into our hearts and knows whether our intention is genuine or not. If He sees in your

heart a genuine desire to be faithful unto death, He will speak to you.

Abraham was faithful not only unto death but also the death of someone far more precious to him than himself: his beloved son Isaac. Moses, too, was faithful unto death when he prayed, “Please forgive their sin. But if not, please blot me out of your book which you have written” (Ex.32:32).

Elijah too was faithful unto death. He feared for his life when he found himself in a dangerous situation, yet by God’s grace he overcame his fear and confronted Ahab at a great risk to his own life (1Kings 19:3; 21:20f). Elijah was ready to die for God, but he was eventually taken up to heaven (2 Kings 2:11).

The prophets were faithful unto death and were recognized as such by Jesus who spoke of the blood of the prophets (Mt. 23:30; Lk.11:50). In Acts 7:52, Stephen said to the Jews, “Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute?” The prophets sealed their testimony with their blood, as did the apostles. It is this kind of people—faithful unto death—to whom God speaks.

Stephen, in his final moments when a mob was about to stone him, remained faithful and continued to commune with the Lord (Acts 7:54-60). As the mob was seething with fury, Stephen gazed heavenward and said, “Look, I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God” (v.56). While he was being stoned, he cried out, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.” As he was about to die, he interceded for his adversaries, “Lord, do not hold this sin

against them.” Stephen’s heart was not swayed by the fear of death. He reached the end of his earthly sojourn in an intimate communion with his Lord.

“If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and will dine with him, and he with me.” Dining with the Lord is a sweet communion that requires no words. This peaceful non-verbal intimacy is the highest level of communion.

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