

THROUGH THE BIBLE

Zac Poonen

Through the Bible

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WHY GOD GAVE US THE BIBLE

Before studying God's Word, we must understand why God gave it to us. It is possible to study the Bible for the wrong reasons – and I think a lot of Christians do just that. We must study the Scriptures for the same purpose that God gave it.

When I was considering this study through the whole Bible, and was trying to look into the heart of God, the verse that came to my mind was: "**God so loved the world that He gave His Son, that whoever believes in Him should never perish.**" (*John 3:16*). The primary purpose with which God gave us the Scriptures was that all people might know that He loves them so intensely that He sent His Son to save them from the grip of sin and bring them into fellowship with Him. In God's heart there is a great desire that no one should be ruined by sin and perish.

Let us keep that in mind as we study God's Word. Even if there are matters in the Word that we cannot fully understand, let us pray, "Lord, we want to understand Your heart, even if we don't understand the meaning of everything in Your Word."

We must pray as we study the Scriptures that we will understand what is in the heart of God. We can get so taken up with little details as we study, that we miss seeing the heart of God. God reveals His heart in His Word.

But God's purpose does not stop there – just like the construction of a building does not stop with laying the foundation. We read in *2 Timothy 3:16, 17*: "*All Scripture is inspired by God (God-breathed) and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; that the man of God may be adequate (perfect), equipped for every good work.*"

God breathed into this book, exactly as He breathed into Adam. If God had not breathed into Adam, Adam would have been just a pile of dust; and any book that God has not breathed into is also a pile of dust.

God's Word has been given to us:

1. *To teach us, to show us the right path.*
2. *To reprove us and rebuke us. We need strong rebukes to be preserved in the pathway of godliness.*

3. To correct us when we go astray, to direct us into the right path.
4. To train us in righteousness. It is a training manual.

So we see that God's Word has been given to us to change our character, so that we can become godly men and women.

The ultimate goal is "*that the man of God may be adequate*" – perfect and complete. Like a glass of water filled to the brim, our character is to be rounded off, balanced and complete. We are to be anointed and equipped to serve God, so that we can do every good work that God has planned for us. That is the purpose of Scripture.

So if you study the Bible, *you must study it for these reasons*.

The Holy Spirit alone can teach us God's Word. The same Holy Spirit Who taught the apostles in the 1st century, seeks to teach us in the 21st century too. That is how I studied the Scriptures from the time I was born again in July 1959. I have never been to a Bible-school or Bible-college. The Holy Spirit taught me God's Word, as I spent many hours studying it. When Jesus walked with two disciples to Emmaus, He "*opened the Scriptures to them*". That is what He wants to do for us today, as we walk with Him. Those disciples found that their "*hearts burned within them when the Lord opened the Scriptures to them*" (*Luke 24:32*). That is what will happen to our hearts too, when the Holy Spirit opens the Scriptures to us today.

The truths that God reveals in His Word can *never* be boring, because Jesus is *never* boring. If we walk with our Lord and listen to Him, our hearts will burn within us – because we will see the glory of Christ in the Word.

Under the old covenant, people meditated on God's *written* Word. But now we meditate on the *Word made flesh*, our Lord Jesus Christ (*John 1:14*). Now we see the glory of Jesus as we meditate on the Scriptures (See *2 Corinthians 3:18*). A man who looks at that glory constantly will be like a tree planted by the rivers of water, and will always be fruitful. Even in old age he will bring forth fruit (*Psalm 1:3; 92:14*). That is the will of God for each one of us.

Proverbs 25:2 says, "*It is the glory of God to conceal a matter, and the glory of kings to search it out.*" Gold and diamonds are found deep down, many thousands of feet beneath the earth's surface. It is the same with the Scriptures – its riches are concealed deep within. We are kings in Christ and our glory is to find those hidden treasures in God's Word.

Jesus once said, "*I thank You Father that You have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to babes*" (*Matthew 11:25*). We don't have to be clever to understand the Scriptures, but we must have clean, humble, trusting hearts, like an infant. It's our *heart* condition and not our *intelligence* that determines whether we understand God's Word or not.

God's Word gives us *promises to believe* and *commands to obey*. It has words to rebuke us, and words to comfort us as well.

Unless we make the Bible our final authority in all matters relating to our faith, we will be tossed about here and there, until our faith itself is lost.

We are told by the psalmist that God has magnified His Word above all His Name (*Psalm 138:2*). To reject or ignore it therefore, or to treat it lightly, is to end up with immeasurable loss. But to reverence it is to discover a door into untold riches.

So with those words as an introduction, let us begin our study of the Word of God.

Bangalore
November 2015

Zac Poonen

THE OLD
TESTAMENT

GENESIS

BEGINNINGS

The word ‘Genesis’ means “beginning”. In this book, we read about the beginning of creation, the beginning of man, the beginning of sin in the human race, the beginning of redemption, the beginning of the two streams of religiosity and spirituality, the beginning of Babylon, the beginning of Jerusalem, and the beginning of counterfeit religion and true religion.

The Scriptures begin with the words, “*In the beginning God.*” That’s how it must be in our life every day. God must be in the beginning of everything in our lives, not man. In every area of our life – in our goals and our ambitions, in everything – God must be first. And wherever God finds a man or woman who will put Him first in every area of his/her life – in business, in finances, and daily life – there will be no limit to what God will do in and through such a person.

Creation

In *Chapter 1*, we have a description of creation. Notice two different words that occur in this chapter – ‘created’ and ‘made’. There is a difference between these two words. God *created* the earth (1:1), but He *made* the firmament (1:7). He *created* man (1:27), but He *made* the beasts of the earth (1:25). ‘Made’ refers to something made from what already existed, whereas ‘created’ refers to something that never existed before.

In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. That *may have been* millions and millions of years ago – we don’t know. When the heavens and the earth were created by God through His spoken word (*Hebrews 11:3*), He made them perfect. Nothing that God creates is ever imperfect. How then did the earth become empty, dark and shapeless (1:2)? God never creates anything empty, dark and shapeless. It *became* like that because something happened between *verses 1 and 2*.

The angel Lucifer fell and became the devil. That was when sin first came into the universe. That is not mentioned at this point, because the Bible was not written for angels, but for man. That's why the creation of man is mentioned in the first chapter, and the fall of Lucifer is mentioned only much later (in *Isaiah 14* and *Ezekiel 28*).

What we read of in the rest of *Chapter 1* is the *re-making* of that corrupted, spoilt, dark, empty earth. And by the time you come to the end of the chapter, it has become a beautiful earth once again. God Himself could look at it and say, “*It is very good.*”*

Chapter 1 has a message for all of us. Satan has come into the human race too and made man exactly as mentioned in *verse 2* – empty, dark and shapeless. We have lost the image of God. God did not create Adam like that. Adam was created perfect. But the devil came in and ruined man. And God had to begin to *remake* man.

God is in the business of remaking ruined humanity today. It doesn't matter how shapeless, dark or empty you are. *Chapter 1* teaches that God can remake you. He can make you so perfect that you will finally reflect His likeness perfectly, and God Himself will be able to certify about you, “*Very Good*”. That is the message of the very first chapter of the Bible.

But how did this change take place? If you understand how it happened, the same thing can happen in your life too.

Every day God spoke *His word*. He said something the first day. And He said something the second day. Every day He spoke. That's what you need to see in the very first chapter of the Bible – that our God is a living God Who speaks. If you want to be transformed, the most important thing you need is to hear God speaking to you. “*Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.*” (*Matthew 4:4*). That's how God planned for man to live. And so if we don't listen to His voice daily, we will not be transformed.

We have to develop the habit of listening to God. God speaks every day. But most believers do not listen to Him. Even those who read the Bible every day don't *listen to God*. Listening to God is not the same as reading the Bible. You can read the Bible like you read a storybook or study it like a chemistry book – and never hear what God is trying to say to your heart.

The other thing we see here is that the *Spirit of God* moved on the face of the waters (1:2). After you hear God speak, you must allow the Holy Spirit to move upon you. Only then can you be transformed. We see the Holy Spirit working along with God's Word right from the beginning. Only the Holy Spirit can change man. It was the combined working of God's Word and of the *Holy Spirit* that brought change and beauty to that chaotic earth.

* For a more detailed study of the creation and re-making of the earth, read my article: “*The Creation of the Earth and the Origin of Satan*” at: <http://www.cfcindia.com/article/the-creation-of-the-earth-and-the-origin-of-satan>

The great need in Christendom today is for balance. Many believers emphasise the study of the word of God, but do not emphasise dependence on the Holy Spirit equally. If you study the word of God without the Holy Spirit's enabling, you will be as dry as a bone and just as dead. Others emphasise the ministry of the Holy Spirit and neglect God's Word and thus get sidetracked into emotionalism, which they mistake for the Spirit's workings. Like steam engines that have gone off the rails (of God's Word), they blow their whistles furiously and make a lot of noise, but they are stuck in the mud and make no progress, because they do not allow the word of God to guide them.

So we see that we can get correction and instruction in righteousness in order to be perfect in the very first paragraph of the Scriptures.

In 1:4, we read that "*God separated the light from the darkness*". This separation is repeated on the fourth day (1:18). This is a very important thing, and that is why it is repeated. When God created the light, He didn't want the darkness mixed up with it and that was why He made a separation.

Many people imagine that all division must be from the devil. But here we read that the first person to make a division was God Himself. Light can have no fellowship with darkness. When light comes into our hearts, the very next thing that God wants to do in our lives is to separate us from all that is darkness. In 2 Corinthians 4:6 we have a Divine commentary on the creation of light. There we are told that this was a picture of the light of the gospel of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ coming into our hearts. Then two chapters later, in 2 Corinthians 6:14–17, we are told of the necessity of separating ourselves from all darkness. The world is full of darkness, and there must be nothing of the world in our hearts. When Christians don't separate from the darkness, confusion is the result.

When God placed the sun and the moon in the middle of the skies, again He separated the light from the darkness (1:18). On both occasions, we read that "*God saw that it was good*." Only when you are separated from all that is of darkness can God say, "*It is good*", not otherwise. Many who have received the light have not separated themselves from the darkness. That is why they have so many problems in their Christian life.

Man was created on the sixth day. The beasts of the field were *also* made on the same day, just before Adam (verse 24). Those beasts were made from the same dust that man was made from. Only one thing distinguished man from those beasts: *God breathed into man*. It is only the Spirit of God in man that lifts him above the level of animals. From this we learn that if we stop living by the Spirit of God, we will sink to the level of animals very soon! God made man from the dust to teach him that he was worth nothing apart from the breath of God.

God kept the seventh day as a day of rest. That was the *seventh* day for God, but it was the *first* day for man. Man was created towards the end of the sixth day and so his very first living day was a day of rest. God was

trying to teach man thereby that he must fellowship with God first before going out to work for Him. Adam and Eve were to work in the garden of Eden only after they had spent a day in fellowship with their God. That is the Divine order for man: *Fellowship first and then service*. In the beginning God *Himself* – then God's *work*. We forget that order to our peril. This was why God taught Israel to respect the Sabbath so strictly. Today, there remains a Sabbath rest for God's people to live in (*Hebrews 4:9*).

In 1:28 God told Adam and Eve to "be fruitful and multiply." How did He expect them to do that? Obviously by having a sexual relationship. It was God Who created the sexual function and told man to use it to produce children. The sexual function in man was also included in what God finally called "*Very good*" (1:31). So we see that sex in marriage is something that God himself has termed "*Very good*"? Sex is *very bad outside* of marriage, but *very good inside* it. There are many Christians who think that sex is a dirty thing even in marriage and therefore imagine that they can be holier if they are not married. This is un-Scriptural.

When God created man He blessed him (1:28). He told him not only to be fruitful, but also to subdue everything under him and to rule over everything. So we see that God created man to be a ruler, not a slave. God created man to be an overcomer who has everything under his feet. In *Genesis*, we read of God's desire for man to *rule*. And in *Revelation*, we read of God's desire for man to *overcome* (*Revelation 21:7*). That was God's original will for man, and He finally finds a few who fulfil His plan and become overcomers. God's purpose for you is to rule over everything. He wants you to rule over sin in your life, over your anger, your lusts and your passions. He wants you to put them all under your feet. God never created you to be a slave. He created you to be a conqueror and a ruler. And that can come about only when God *blesses* you (as we read in 1:28).

Notice in *Chapter 1*, that God examined each day's work and certified it as good. (God did not say that on the second day, because Satan who had been cast down by God was permitted to dwell in the second heaven). We too should allow God to examine our work each day, to see whether it meets with His approval.

In *Chapter 2*, more details are given about the creation of man. We see there that God gave man three gifts – a marriage *partner* (Eve), a *home* to live in (Eden) and a *work* to do (as a gardener). These are the three things that many young people are seeking for today. God was interested in providing all three for Adam and He is interested in providing all three for His children today. Adam didn't even have to ask God for them. God Himself saw Adam's need and provided him with them. God knows your need of a marriage partner, a house and a job too. If you walk with Him, He will provide you with these and other needs too.

In 2:11, 12, it says that the gold in Eden was *good!* It is only in the presence of God, that gold is good. Away from Him, gold is a snare and can be a curse.

In 2:19, 20, we read that God brought the beasts to Adam – and Adam gave them all names. Then we read these words: *"But for Adam there was not found a helper suitable for him."* That phrase seems to indicate that when Adam saw each of the animals having a partner, he wondered whether he could have one of them as a partner!! The lion had its lioness, the elephant had its partner, the cat had its partner, and so on. Adam looked at them one by one and rejected them one by one, because none of them corresponded with his own nature. And when Adam had rejected all of them, God said, *"All right, I will make a helper for you."* He then caused a deep sleep to fall on Adam and made a wife for him.

There is a spiritual application to this: If you are a child of God, and are looking for a marriage partner, God may first allow some pretty girls (or handsome men) to come by you, who do not have the same Divine nature that you received when you were born again. He will test you through them to see whether you will choose one of them as your partner. If you do, you will miss the one God has planned for you. Honour God and obey His word that says, *"Don't be unequally yoked with unbelievers"* (2 Corinthians 6:14) – and He will give you His very best.

Notice this: After God saying that *"It was good"* six times in 6 days (1:4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25), He suddenly said, *"It is NOT good"* (2:18). It was not good *for Adam to be alone*. Then, after He had made Eve, He says, *"It is VERY good"* (1:31). That is the difference that a happily married couple made to God's creation!

In 2:24, we read something that all married people need to pay heed to: *When a person gets married he must leave his father and mother and cleave to his partner.* This is not referring primarily to leaving one's parents physically (although that may also be necessary), but to being detached from them emotionally. Once a person is married, his marriage-partner must be far more important to him than his parents. A married couple must make their family-decisions in consultation with each other and not in consultation with their parents. I wish I could go up and down India proclaiming this important message to all married couples. There will be many more happy marriages in our land, if every married person obeyed this command. Here is a commandment given by God, even before sin came into the world. *It is in fact the very first commandment written in the Bible for us.* Why did God put this as the very first commandment in Scripture? Because He Who ordained marriage knew the vital importance of this step. Yet many married couples have not understood its importance.

Two Men Who Listened to Satan

In *Chapters 3 and 4*, we read of two men who listened to the Devil – Adam and Cain. We can learn some lessons from how each of them fell a prey to Satan's wiles.

When God sent Adam into Eden, He did not send an angel with him to check up on him. Why? Because it is only when we are *not being watched*, that God can test our heart's attitude. He tests us when no-one else is around. Adam and Eve were by themselves and could sin without being observed by any created being.

There were thousands of trees with beautiful fruit in Eden. The tree of life was there too, that would have brought them eternal life. But Adam and Eve did not choose any of these. They went for "*knowledge*". They rejected life and chose knowledge – exactly like man does today.

If you had a choice between Bible-knowledge and life, which would you choose? I'm sure you will all give the right answer: "*Life*." But test yourself: Do you study the Bible to get knowledge or to obey God? If you study the Bible in order to get knowledge, you are going to the tree of knowledge too. And the knowledge of good and evil will only bring death. God wants us to know good and evil through a living connection with Him, and not by study of the Scriptures alone. If we have the knowledge of good and evil without a living connection with God, we will go astray. That was how Adam died – he got the knowledge of good and evil without a living connection with God. Our knowledge of good and evil must come through the Holy Spirit telling us what is right and wrong, moment by moment. Any other way of knowing good and evil will only bring death.

The devil told Eve that she could be like God (3:5). Jesus came with a message that sounded very similar. But it was totally different. Whereas Satan told Eve that she could be like God *in knowledge, authority and power*, Jesus tells us that we can be like God *in humility, purity and love*. Which of these two messages do most people desire? Alas, even most believers hanker after the former!! But it is thus that we can distinguish between the voice of the devil and the voice of Jesus. Temptation is very subtle. The devil is a deceiver. His counterfeits look just like the genuine thing on the surface.

When the devil was tempting Eve he was also insinuating that God didn't really love her. If God loved her (Satan implied), God would have allowed her to eat from this beautiful tree. That's the way Satan tries to get into our hearts as well – by making us doubt God's love.

Jesus told Peter, "*Satan has decided to sift you and has asked God for permission to do so*" (Luke 22:31). God gave Satan that permission, just like God had given Satan permission to sift Adam and Eve in Eden. The Lord told Peter, "*I am praying for you that when you are sifted, your faith will not fail*" (Luke 22:32). Jesus did not pray that Peter would not fall, but that even if he fell, he would still believe that God loved him. That is faith.

In the hour of trial and temptation, even if we fall, if we still have faith in the love of God, we have triumphed. Even if your prayer is not answered or something you wanted was not given to you, even if you have to go through some deep trial like Job's, where your children die and your property is lost – don't ever doubt the love of God. That is true faith.

What does it mean to live by faith? It means to constantly assert (no matter what happens) that God loves you. It was such a faith in his father's love that brought the prodigal son back home. He knew that even though he had done a lot of wrong things and messed up his life, his father still loved him. So he went back to his father.

The tree of knowledge of good and evil looked so attractive! It was God Who had made it so attractive because only when it was attractive could Adam and Eve be tested as to whether they would choose God Himself above His beautiful creation. In every temptation, what we essentially face is this: *Are we going to choose the Creator or His creation?* The temptation could be a pretty woman or gold or some other created thing. Even when seeking the honour or approval of men, the alternate choice is the approval of God. Which do you want? We sin when we choose the created thing above the Creator. We overcome when we choose the Creator above all His creation. It is as simple as that. Yet most people in the world (including believers) fail this test daily.

We either worship God's creation – a beautiful face or gold or some man's approval – or we consider all of this as garbage compared to God Himself. To the overcomer, the beauty of Jesus and His approval are far more valuable than anything He created. If you were to make just this one choice in every decision in life, you will be a man of God. You will be a woman of God. You will know God and His Word in a personal way – better than any man can teach you. Make that choice in every temptation and say, "Lord, I choose You above all created things." That is the secret.

What was Adam's sin? Was it just that he ate of the fruit of the tree that was forbidden? No. It was more than that. In 3:17, God told him, "*You listened to the voice of your wife.*" Is it a sin to listen to the voice of one's wife? Yes, if it leads to disobeying God. God had made Adam the head of his home. But he did not exercise his authority as the head. He saw his wife talking to the devil and he just stood there listening to the conversation and made no effort to stop her. He should have put his foot down and said, 'Come away, Eve. Don't listen to him.' There are many husbands like Adam today. They are not the head in their homes. Adam sinned when he did not assert his headship.

God is a good God. He cursed the serpent and the ground, but He did not curse Adam. There we see the tremendous love of God. God killed an animal to cover Adam and Eve. That was the first death on earth. An innocent animal was killed as a sacrifice for Adam's sin, and that animal's

skin was used to make garments to cover the nakedness of Adam and Eve (3:21). That was a picture of what God would one day do on Calvary's cross, allowing His Son to die so that His righteousness may clothe us.

Before man sinned, there was no flaming sword in front of the tree of life. Adam could have gone to it and eaten of it and received eternal life. But God put a flaming sword in front of that tree after man sinned. Today, if you want to partake of that tree, you have to let the sword fall upon your flesh. We don't have to be punished for our sins now, because that sword fell upon Jesus on Calvary. But that sword must fall on our flesh today. As Paul said, "*I am crucified with Christ... and I live.*" (*Galatians 2:20*). When we are united with Jesus on the cross, that sword falls on our flesh and we can partake of eternal life. There is no other way to life. This sword guards this tree even today.

Notice some of the words that God spoke to Adam as the punishment for his sin – *curse, sorrow, thorns, sweat, dust, death* (3:16–19). All these words are found in the suffering and death of Jesus on the cross. Jesus took all of this upon Himself, so that we can be totally free from the punishment that was put upon Adam in Eden.

We see that as soon as Adam's fellowship with God was broken, his fellowship with his wife was broken too. The proof of this is seen in the fact that he begins to accuse her. Whenever you begin to accuse others, it proves that your fellowship with God is broken. When you are in fellowship with God you don't accuse others. You judge yourself. It is Satan who is the Accuser of the brethren.

In *Chapter 4*, we read of another man who listened to the devil – Cain. Eve gave birth to Cain, and said, "*I have created a man with the help of the Lord*" (4:1). A human birth was a miracle at that time, for Cain was the first person to be born into the world as a living soul. And Eve said, "God made a man. And I made a man too!! I have created a man out of my own body." It was a spirit of pride that manifested itself there: "*I made, I created. God helped me a little, but I did it.*" And her son Cain grew up with that wrong spirit.

Cain and Abel came to present their offerings to God. If you read 4:4 carefully, you will discover that it does **not** say there (as some imagine) that God accepted Abel's offering and therefore accepted Abel. No. It says, "*The Lord had regard for Abel (first) and (then) for his offering*" – not the other way around. Similarly, it was not because the Lord rejected Cain's offering that He rejected Cain. No. He rejected Cain first and therefore He rejected his offering too. The Bible says, "*The sacrifice of the wicked is an abomination to the Lord,*" no matter how good the sacrifice may be (*Proverbs 21:27*). Cain was a wicked man, and that was why God rejected his offering.

When Cain was angry, God came to warn Cain that he was in danger. In Eden, God came seeking Adam and now He comes seeking Cain. God is always the One Who comes seeking for fallen man. Jesus came into the world seeking for fallen man too. God is the One Who comes seeking for us every time we backslide or go astray. That is a great encouragement to us. God came and warned Cain, but Cain did not take heed to that warning. He allowed the sin that was crouching at the door of his heart to come inside and destroy him.

Jealousy is the first sin mentioned in the Scriptures, after man was put out of Eden – jealousy of a younger brother who was more blessed by God. Whenever you see someone younger than you more blessed and more anointed by God than you, be careful that you don't become jealous of him, lest you go the way of Cain.

Notice what God said to Cain now: “*You are cursed*” (4:11). Why did God curse Cain but not Adam? In Adam's case, God cursed only the ground, but not Adam. The reason is that when Adam sinned, he hurt only himself. But when Cain sinned, he hurt somebody else as well. When you commit a sin like smoking or drinking, you destroy your body, but you hurt only yourself. But when you gossip, you hurt another person and that sin is therefore more serious. But how many Christians believe that gossiping is worse than smoking? The sins that hurt other people are much more serious in God's eyes than those sins that hurt only you. That is why Cain was cursed. So, take it seriously whenever you hurt another person.

God said to Cain (4:10), “*The voice of your brother's blood is crying out to Me from the ground.*” That person's blood, whose reputation you spoilt by gossiping, is crying out to God. It will never stop crying out until you confess your sin to God and ask Him to forgive you and until you confess your sin to the person you gossiped against and ask him to forgive you too. Otherwise, your sin will keep on crying out to God until the day of judgement.

When Cain was punished he said, “*My punishment is too great to bear!*” This is the language of people who go to hell. They don't say “*My sin is very great*”. They only say, “*My punishment is very great.*” Are you more disturbed by your sin or by its punishment? Through the answer to that question, you can discover whether you are a godly man or an ungodly man. An ungodly man is worried about the punishment he is going to get, whereas a godly man is heartbroken by his sin.

Cain went away from the presence of the Lord and his children became like him. One of his sons became a murderer. They married many wives. They made musical instruments to entertain themselves. There we see the beginning of rock music and the entire entertainment world. This is what happens to children, when their fathers go away from the Lord (4:16–24).

In Cain and Abel, we see the beginning of two streams – the religious stream and the spiritual stream. Cain was not an atheist. He was a deeply religious man. He was the forerunner of the Babylonian system of counterfeit religion. Abel was the forerunner of all godly men. Jesus referred to Abel as a righteous man (*Matthew 23:35*). Cain was *religious*, whereas Abel was *spiritual*.

Two Men Who Walked With God

We have seen two examples of men who walked with the devil – Adam and Cain. Now consider two men who walked with God – Enoch and Noah.

In *Chapter 5*, we read the expression ‘*and he died*’ eight times. But right in the middle of that chapter, we read of one who did not die at all!! That was Enoch. He walked with God and God took him to heaven alive. That is a picture of resurrection life in the midst of death. Enoch was a man who lived in resurrection power, overcame death and was taken up to heaven – a picture of a godly church living in the midst of spiritual death, overcoming by resurrection power and finally being raptured.

Enoch was probably a godless man for the first 65 years of his life. But at 65, he got a son. He named the boy “*Methuselah*”, by Divine revelation. “*Methuselah*” means “*At his death, the waters will come forth*.” That seems to indicate that God gave Enoch a revelation when his son was born. God told Enoch that when that son died, the world would be judged by a flood of waters. That revelation of judgement came first to Enoch and not to Noah. So he named his son Methuselah.

Now when you have a baby, you don’t know how long he will live. So every time Methuselah was sick, Enoch would have wondered whether the time for judgement was near. Can you imagine a baby having a name that means, “*At his death the flood will come*”? Each time you called him, you would be reminded of judgement. And that fear of God’s judgement made Enoch walk with God and realise that the things of eternity were more important than the things of time. That was the crisis that made Enoch walk with God every day for the next 300 years.

The Bible says, “*The world will pass away*” (*1 John 2:17*). If we believe that, we too will realise, as Enoch did, that the things of eternity are more important than the things of time.

God’s tremendous longsuffering with man is seen in the fact that He allowed Methuselah to live longer than any other human being – 969 years. For 969 years, whenever people heard Methuselah’s name, they heard a message of judgement to come. But the people rejected the message. It was not only Noah who preached about this judgement. Enoch preached it for 300 years too and Methuselah preached it by his name for another 669 years.

Noah also walked with God and preached about judgement for the last 120 years of Methuselah’s life. Enoch and Methuselah did not know

the details of the flood as clearly as God later revealed to Noah. But they knew that some type of judgement connected with a flood of waters was going to come when Methuselah died.

Jude tells us that Enoch prophesied judgement against all the ungodly people of his time (*Jude 14, 15*). Enoch was a prophet and he walked with God. Adam was 622 years old when Enoch was born, and died at the age of 930 (5:5–23). So Enoch must have known Adam for 308 years. I can imagine that Enoch must have often asked Adam about how things were in Eden where Adam himself had once walked with God. And Enoch must have had a great longing to walk with God himself. Enoch became the first man to prove that one could walk with God outside Eden too. Even after sin came into the world, man could walk with God.

I've met a lot of great preachers in my life, but I have met very few who walk with God. But it is those few who produced a longing in my heart from my younger days, to walk with God myself.

Methuselah's grandson was Noah. And Noah lived with Methuselah for 600 years. He must have asked Methuselah many times about how Enoch had walked with God. Into Noah's heart came a longing to walk with God himself. We read in 6:9 that Noah also walked with God. As Noah walked with God, God revealed His purpose of judgement to him.

It was the truth of *judgement against sin* that God revealed to the first two people who walked with God (in Scripture). And Enoch and Noah faithfully preached that message, even though no-one believed them. Every true prophet of God since then has also preached the same message: *God will judge believers and unbelievers for their sins*.

Enoch and Noah are the first two preachers mentioned in the Bible and they both walked with God. Would to God that every preacher since then had done the same.

God told Noah to build the ark and Noah immediately began to build it. He did not ask God who was going to pay for the ark. If he had asked God that, God would have told him, "You have to pay for it yourself of course."

Have you ever heard God tell you that you must pay for the expenses of *His* work from *your own* pocket? Most Christian workers feel that if they do God's work, someone else must pay them for that! But Noah didn't think like that. He supported himself and his family and served the Lord. He had to put in extra hours of work to earn the money needed to build the ark. But he did that gladly. God needs men like that today too. If, as Jesus said, the last days are going to be evil like in Noah's time, then God must be needing many "*Noahs*" in the last days too – men who like the apostle Paul support themselves and serve the Lord.

People must have asked Noah how the animals would come into the ark. Noah knew that that was God's business and not his. And God brought the animals inside supernaturally. Noah only did what he was supposed to do – build the ark. He left all other matters with God. We too

have to do only what God has told us to do. We can leave all the impossibilities with God.

Finally we read that God shut the door (7:16). It was God who shut the door of the ark, not Noah. God will also shut the door of salvation one day when the time is up for entering God's kingdom.

The ark is a picture of Christ and of His Body, the church. It must have been inconvenient living inside the ark, just like it can be in the church! In the church, we have to mingle with people who are different from us, and many of them may rub us the wrong way at times. But even if the ark was *not convenient*, it was *the only safe place* on earth at that time. So is the church today. I am happy to be in the church, even if there are difficult people in it. I hope you are happy too. That's why we invite people to join us.

When the flood was finally about to subside, Noah sent a crow and a dove out of the ark – a picture of the *flesh* and the *Spirit*. The crow never came back. The crow found the dead bodies of men and animals and was delighted at the feast that all that provided for it. Similarly, those who live according to the dictates of their flesh find the world a very enjoyable place. But the dove came back very quickly. And that is how it is with those who live according to the Spirit. They never feel at home in the world and always long to come back to the fellowship of God's people in the church.

After Noah came out of the ark, the first thing he did was to build an altar to the Lord on which he offered a sacrifice of thanksgiving (8:20). That example of putting God first and offering Him our worship and thanksgiving is a good example for us to follow at all times.

Noah however was not a perfect man. He got drunk one day and lay naked in his tent. His son Ham saw him and reported this to his brothers. Because Ham dishonoured his father thus, a curse came upon him. Shem and Japheth however walked backwards and covered their father's nakedness. Therefore they were blessed. There is an important message here for us. This is the first place in Scripture where we read of God punishing a son and his seed for dishonouring his father. It is a serious matter before God, when we disrespect authority. When you see a weakness in your father or in a man of God, don't expose his nakedness to others, as Ham did, unless you want to get a curse upon yourself. Be like Shem and Japheth and cover it. "*Love covers a multitude of sins*" (1 Peter 4:8; Proverbs 10:12). Noah blessed Shem and Japheth with the blessing of fellowship saying, "*May God enlarge Japheth, and let them dwell in the tents of Shem*" (9:27). We too must build fellowship with those who live together and cover each other's sins. Only such believers can build the church of Jesus Christ.

Babylon

In *Chapter 10*, we see a continuation of the two streams that began with Cain and Abel – *religiosity* and *spirituality*. If these streams were atheism and spirituality, the difference between them would have been as clear as *black and white*. But religiosity and spirituality are like *cream and white*. Only in bright light can the distinction between these two colours be seen clearly. The devil is a deceiver and he makes the counterfeit look as much like the genuine as possible. The gate to the broad way looks very similar to the gate of the narrow way, and a lot of people who enter through it don't even realise that they are entering the broad way. They are deceived by clever preachers. We must be careful.

I am talking now about believers who are deceived. Consider just one area: How many believers really believe what Jesus said: “*You cannot serve God and money*” (*Luke 16:13*)? Very, very few. There are multitudes of Christians and Christian workers who believe that they can serve both God and money at the same time. That's just one example of the great work that Satan has done in deceiving Christians. There are believers who love money and who imagine that they love God too, even though Jesus said that this was impossible. Such people are not spiritual but only *religious*.

In *Chapter 10*, we read of the beginning of Babylon. Its destruction is described in *Revelation 18*. Babylon appears at the beginning of the Bible and continues until the end of the Bible. We read here of a man named Nimrod (*10:8, 9*) who was a mighty hunter “*against the Lord*” (Literal translation). The beginning of his kingdom was Babel (or Babylon). Babel originally meant ‘*the gate of God*.’ Nimrod was not an atheist. Like Cain, he was a religious man whose profession was to lead people to God! That is how the Babylonian system works.

Babylon is a *religious* system (*Revelation 17*) as well as a *financial* system (*Revelation 18*). Money and the work of God are joined together, and that's how Babylon is formed. And that's how people are deceived. They think they are doing the Lord's work, but they are drawn towards the work because there is money to be earned in it too! There is fame to be earned there too.

Christendom has become like that today. We see preachers today using the money given for God's work by poor people, to build expensive houses and to buy expensive cars for themselves, with a lifestyle that resembles that of film stars and not that of Jesus Christ and His apostles. We don't have to *judge* them, because the Bible tells us not to judge. But we must not *follow* them either. Neither should we be deceived by them. Let us follow Jesus instead. A “*Christian*” religious system that brings people fame, wealth and power is certainly a Babylonian system. Babylon claims to show people the gate to God (Babel). But it actually leads them to the gate to hell. Jesus said, “*I am the door*” (*John 10:9*) He is the door to Jerusalem, the true church of God.

Nimrod is a type of the Antichrist, who will arise in the future. It says here that he was a hunter. Perhaps a lot of people were being killed by wild animals in those days, and Nimrod hunted down those animals and got a name as a great deliverer. Thus he became a world-leader. The Antichrist is going to be like that in the last days. He is going to deliver people in some amazing way and will thus earn the respect of many. In *Revelation*, we read that a *false prophet* will be very closely associated with the antichrist. Religion and politics will be closely joined together in the last days. We see that at election time both in India as well as in the United States. Political leaders know that using the religious card will get them more votes. Even the “*Christian religion*” is used by politicians for promoting themselves. But that is not the faith of Jesus Christ. Jesus said “*My kingdom is not of this world*” (*John 18:36*). That is the identifying mark of the true faith. You could never get Jesus or His apostles to be secular kings like Nimrod was. They were servants. Once when they tried to make Jesus a king, He ran away from their midst. He would not be their king.

In *11:4*, we read that the people of the world decided to build a tower. They said to each other, “*Come, let us build for ourselves a city and a tower whose top would reach to heaven.*” They wanted their tower to be the gate of God (Babel). Human effort to reach God is a major constituent of false religion. False religion is always a religion of works – and not one of faith and dependence on God. The leaders of false religion are always strong personalities with the charisma of film stars. They are not weak, unimpressive men like Paul, nor are they men with no reputation like Peter. The leaders of false Christianity are people who seek fame and honour for themselves. The true prophets of God however are always misunderstood and called “heretics” and cast out by religious Christendom. That’s how Jesus and the apostles were.

There can be a lot of unity in Babylon. It says here that the whole earth used the same language (*11:1*) – not just the same language in terms of speech, but also the same language of human cleverness, human ability and human glory. That is the language spoken by the world and that unfortunately is the language spoken by many “*Christian*” leaders as well. Jesus Christ however was crucified through *weakness* and there was *no beauty* in Him to attract people (*2 Corinthians 13:4; Isaiah 53:2*). He was a *servant* Who washed people’s feet. He was not a General Director or a Superintendent or a Pope. He called himself an ordinary man (“*son of man*”) and had *no title* whatsoever. These are the identifying marks of a true servant of God.

In Babylon they say, “*Come, let us build.*” They don’t need to consult God about such matters. They could build the gateway to heaven themselves! False religion does not depend helplessly on God for its every need.

They may pray. All religions have prayer, but it will be meaningless prayer. The prophets of Baal prayed for hours on Mount Carmel, but nothing happened. Elijah prayed for one minute and the fire of God fell from heaven! Some of us may glory in hours spent in prayer. That may be good. Jesus spent all night in prayer too. But prayer has value only if it is an expression of our helpless dependence on God for His guidance and help. Babylonians however do not need to seek God's will, for they depend on human cleverness. False religion begins with man, not with God. Its motto is: "In the beginning *man*," not "In the beginning *God*," (as in 1:1). False religion originates in man, it is done through man's power and it is propagated for man's glory.

The Bible speaks about building with *wood, hay and straw* or with *gold, silver and precious stones* (*1 Corinthians 3:12*). What does it mean to build with gold, silver and precious stones? The answer is found in *Romans 11:36*: "*From God, through God and to God*". This is how Jerusalem (the true church of God) is built. The opposite of that is "*From man, through man and to man*." That is how Babylon is built.

Babylon is built *by man's ideas*. A lot of Christian organisations are doing their work today through human ideas and not God's. They follow the principles of multinational companies and large business corporations, rather than the teachings of the apostles. They run their organisations like business enterprises and not like the churches that the apostles built. Why didn't Jesus give His gospel to an advertising agency? Wouldn't they have done a better job than those twelve apostles? But that would have been man's method. God's methods are different.

Very few people know God's methods, because very few people know God. Man is a religious creature and he would rather have religion than God. It is uncomfortable to live *with God*. It is comfortable to live *with religion*. You cannot live with God and be a great man in the world. But you can have the "Christian religion" and still be a great man. People don't want God. Even most believers would rather have Christianity than God Himself. They don't want the yoke of Jesus Christ on their necks.

Babylon is built *through man's power*. It does not need the Holy Spirit's anointing or the supernatural gifts that God gives. With natural gifts, good music and electronic gadgets, the job can be done! No wonder our work for God is of such poor quality! We do not know the power that the early apostles knew. The baptism in the Holy Spirit that many people *claim to have experienced* today, I am convinced is a counterfeit baptism of their own human soul – a psychological experience that satisfies them but far removed from what the apostles received on the day of Pentecost. Few today have experienced that genuine anointing of the Holy Spirit that came upon Jesus and the apostles. I would urge you to seek for that *genuine enduement with power* that Jesus promised His apostles, before

He ascended to heaven. Thus alone can we truly serve God. Why do I say that a lot that goes on today in the name of the Holy Spirit is counterfeit? Because Jesus said that we would be able to identify false prophets by their fruits. The love of money is so glaringly obvious in most of those who claim to be baptised in the Holy Spirit today. Such fruit is certainly not from God, for the Holy Spirit is not a lover of money. These people love power, position and the honour of men. These are not the fruit of the Holy Spirit. Then their “*power*” must be coming from some other source, from some other spirit.

Babylon is built *for man's glory*. “*Let us make a name*” is what we read in 11:4. Years later, we read in Daniel 4:30 that Nebuchadnezzar looked over the city of Babylon that he had built. I have heard that it was built as a square, 25 kilometres long and wide, with walls that were 87 feet thick and 350 feet high. It had a beautiful hanging garden that was one of the wonders of the world. And Nebuchadnezzar said, “*Is this not Babylon the great, which I myself have built, by the might of my power for my glory?*” It was built *from man, through man and to man*. Nebuchadnezzar lived nearly 2000 years after the building of the tower of Babel. But he had the same spirit. 2500 years after Nebuchadnezzar, we find the same spirit in operation in Christendom today. This is what Babylon is – *From man, through man and to man*. And it is the very opposite of Jerusalem.

We read in 11:5 that “*the Lord came down to see what man had built*”. Remember that the Lord will come down to examine whatever we build. He does not come to examine the size of our church or organization, but the motive with which it was built. *For whose glory was it built?* If He were examining the size of the Tower of Babel, it was very impressive. But God came down looking for something else at that time. And He comes down looking for something else today as well.

Jerusalem – Abraham and Melchizedek

In 12:1, we see the beginning of the building of the true Jerusalem. This began with Abraham through whom came the nation of Israel the capital of which was Jerusalem. There would have been no Jerusalem if there had been no Abraham. We observe in Abraham something completely different from what we see in Babylon. It says, “*The Lord said to Abram, ‘Go forth from your country, and from your relatives and from your father's house to the land which I will show you.’*”[†]

Abraham didn't suddenly get a bright idea one day like these people in Babel, and say, “I think I have lived long enough in Ur. Let me move to Canaan and do something there.” No. His move was totally dictated by God. Abraham was 75 years old. It is good to wait for even 75 years to hear God and then move. Moses waited for 40 years as a shepherd

[†] The timeline of the patriarchs is given on page 141.

and then moved, when God spoke to him. And think of what he accomplished! I am not saying we must wait for 75 or 80 years. All I am saying is that we must *wait until we hear from God and then move.* But, do you think busy 21st-century-man has time for that? No.

I am thankful that when I was a young man, God taught me one lesson: “*Don’t let men move you. Let God alone move you.*” Many good men have urged me to do various things – including my co-workers. I hear their advice, but I don’t move until God also speaks to me. I wait until I hear God, because I know I will end up disastrously, if I listen to the opinions of men. I am not saying that we should not consider the opinions of our co-workers. All I’m saying is that the final voice we hear must be God’s. God told Abraham to “*Go,*” and he went. God told Moses to “*Go,*” and he went. God told Paul to “*Go,*” and he went. These are the people who accomplished something with their lives. Today people run around trying to do something or the other for God. But they accomplish nothing of eternal value. Statistics-wise, what they do may be impressive. But it’s all religious Babylon, and not Jerusalem.

“*Come, let’s move. Let’s do something for the Lord. Let’s make bricks, let’s make mortar, let’s do something.*” You can impress men. “*Let us make us a name.*” And you may make a great name for yourself building Babylon – like Nebuchadnezzar did. This is happening today in Christian work and that is the message in *Revelation 17 and 18*. But Abraham waited for God’s “*Go.*”

Notice that whenever Abraham moved without the leading of God, he got into trouble. For example: We read that God had told Abraham to leave Ur of the Chaldees and to go where He would lead him. But in *Chapter 11:31* we read that it was Terah (Abraham’s father) who took Abraham and moved out of Ur. But what had God told Abraham? “*Leave your relatives and leave your father’s house.*” But here we see the 75-year-old Abraham holding his Daddy’s hand and moving out! That was how Abraham started!!

The ones who will hinder you from doing the will of God will be your relatives first of all – your parents, your brothers, your sisters, your wife and your children. Jesus said, “*If any man comes to Me and does not hate his father, mother, brother, sister, wife and children, he cannot be My disciple*” (*Luke 14:26*). You may want to follow the Lord. But your father or your wife may say “No”!

So Terah took Abraham, and they came as far as Haran (*11:31*) and settled there. That was not God’s will. Why did they settle there? That was Terah’s idea. Haran perhaps had good pasture-land for the flocks. But it was not God’s place. And Abraham settled down there with his Daddy! Abraham was a man who made mistakes – and the first mistake he made was to listen to his father, when God had already told him to do

something else. So what did God do? God can easily deal with such situations. He took away Terah through death (11:32)! Then “*Abram went forth as the Lord had spoken to him.*” (12:4).

Do you have to wait until God does something drastic like that before you move on? If God loves you, He will do something drastic like that. But if God sees that you yourself are a compromiser, He may allow you to stay on in Haran all your life and miss the will of God totally. Learn to move with God. Don’t listen to relatives who do not know God. By all means, learn from a father if he is a godly man, who knows God – but not from a father who is worldly. (I’m referring to spiritual principles here). Finally when Abraham reached Canaan, “*the Lord appeared to him and said ‘To your descendants I will give this land.’*” (12:5, 7).

And then God tested Abraham again. God tested Adam and He tested Abraham, and He will test you and me too. This time the test was through a famine in the land (12:10). What do you do when God has told you to go to Canaan and there is a famine in Canaan? You either live by the witness of your senses or you live by what God has told you through His Spirit. There is a lovely verse that says about Jesus that “*He would not make a judgment either by what His eyes saw or His ears heard.*” (Isaiah 11:3, 4). But that is *not* the way man lives. If we hear about or see a famine in Canaan, we make a decision immediately, by what our eyes and ears and our clever brain tell us. We decide that Canaan is certainly not the place to be in now. We need to move on. We don’t have to consult God, because we are living by our senses! That was what Abraham did: “*So Abram went down to Egypt*” (12:10). Who told him to go to Egypt? Not God, but his senses!

Can’t God preserve a man during a time of famine? Certainly. “*Blessed is the man who trusts in the Lord. He will not be barren even in time of famine*” (Jeremiah 17:5–8). The man who trusts in the Lord will not move until God tells him to. That was what our Lord told Satan in the wilderness when He was tempted. Satan told Jesus to turn the stones into bread. There was a famine there in the wilderness and there were no food stores around. But Jesus replied, “*Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.*” (Matthew 4:4).

But Abraham did not live like that. He decided to live by bread alone. So, since there was bread in Egypt, he went there. That is how a lot of Christian work is done today too. Most Christian workers don’t go where the Lord tells them to go. They go where they can get a good salary, where bread is available in plenty. They join organisations where there is no famine of money. “*Egypt*” may be a comfortable place to be in – during a famine. But the question is whether that is the place that God wants you to be in. If God has called you to be in “*Canaan*”, you should not move to “*Egypt*”. If you don’t hear what God is saying to you right now, you may do the same thing when you are tested. Live by the words that come from

the mouth of God, like Jesus did. His attitude was, “Yes. *Bread is necessary for life. But to obey God is more necessary for life.*”

If Satan tempted even Jesus like this, don’t you think he will tempt you too – to go where there is plenty of bread? If you are in full-time Christian work and face a financial trial, Satan will tell you that you can get more money in another organization or another church and tell you to go there. May God have mercy on you at such a time, that you don’t listen to Satan and thus ruin your life.

What was the result of Abraham’s going down to Egypt? He had to tell a lie there, that his wife was his sister. You can get into a lot of problems when you go to ‘Egypt’. You have to tell lies, write false reports, state things that are not 100% true, compromise your conscience etc.,

Sarah was about 65 or 70 years old. But she must still have been a very attractive woman, for Pharaoh the king of Egypt to want her in his harem. The sad thing is that even when Abraham saw his wife being taken into the harem to be corrupted, he still loved his own life so much, that he didn’t tell Pharaoh the truth. It is when we are in a tight spot that we discover whether we love the truth or not.

So we see that the great Abraham was a man who made serious mistakes. At first, he held his Daddy’s hand and disobeyed God. Then he told a lie to save his life, even when it meant losing his wife. Such was the man whom God chose – a weak and selfish man. Abraham was just like us. And that is our encouragement. God can use us too.

But God saved Abraham from both situations. God delivered him from Haran and God delivered Sarah from Pharaoh. And God will deliver us too, even when we have made mistakes, if He sees that our heart is sincere, like Abraham’s was. That is what encourages us.

It was Pharaoh who rebuked Abraham for telling a lie (12:18). Can you imagine a heathen king rebuking a prophet of God for telling a lie? Sometimes God’s people get into compromising situations where worldly people have to correct them. That is what happens when we go to ‘Egypt’.

Now I want to mention something more serious. Something happened in Egypt that produced consequences for the next 4000 years. When Abraham went to Egypt and saw the rich people there having maids (female servants) in their houses, he decided to have one himself too. So he picked up a servant-woman named Hagar. When he came back from Egypt, he brought her with him. Sarah didn’t have to do all the work in the tent now. Hagar was there to help her. Later, when Sarah didn’t have any children, Hagar was there to help her with that problem too! Through Hagar came Ishmael whose descendants have been in conflict with the descendants of Isaac for 4000 years. But all this started with one man not listening to God *once*. You may say, “Well, most of the time I listen to God.” Good. But what we see here is the consequence of not listening to God *just once*. I hope that message will come home to us with seriousness.

Who are the ones who can build Jerusalem? Men who listen to God. When there is a famine, we must wait on God, and say, "Lord, what do You want me to do?" Maybe God will tell us to go somewhere. Maybe not. Years later, God *did tell* Jacob to go to Egypt during a time of famine. But that was not God's will at this time for *Abraham*. If God tells you to go somewhere, go. If God tells you to turn the stones into bread, do that. And if God tells you to join some other church, do that. But wait for God to speak. That is the important thing.

Now I want to show you something good about Abraham. I am mentioning these things just to show you that Abraham was an ordinary man just like all of us. We shouldn't be discouraged by our failures. In 13:7 we read that there was strife between Abraham's servants and Lot's servants. Abraham and Lot obtained vast wealth through their trip to Egypt and now that wealth causes problems. Wealth always causes problems. Lot and his wife were affected by what they saw in Egypt. They wanted to make more money. But Abraham was a man who would *not* fight with anybody. But his servants fought.

"There was strife between the herdsmen of Abram's livestock and the herdsmen of Lot's livestock. Now the Canaanite and the Perizzite were dwelling there." Why is that last sentence included there? Because those heathen people were watching this fight. This is very relevant to the situation in today's Christendom too. The heathen are dwelling in the land and what do they see? Christian groups fighting with each other. And in the midst of all this can we find a godly man like Abraham today who will call Lot (the worldly person who loves money) and say to him, "*Let there be no strife between you and me (verse 8), we are brothers*"? They were not brothers. Abraham was the uncle, Lot was his nephew. See the graciousness of this 75-year-old man to his 35-year-old nephew. "We are brothers!" A godly man is a humble man. He was 75 years old, but he could look at his young nephew and say, "We are brothers. You are equal to me. I will give you first preference. Choose what you want." Jerusalem is built by such men. Christendom needs such leaders – and they are not easily found.

Today, we have many leaders who assert their authority, who would have said, "I am 75 years old, I am your uncle. I am the one whom God called, not you. You just came along with me." But Abraham did not speak like that to Lot. He said to Lot, "If you go to the right, I'll go to the left. And if you go to the left, I'll go to the right. You take what you want first." And Lot, greedy man that he was, with the spirit of Babylon, grabbed first. He looked at the lovely fields of Sodom, saw the opportunity to make money there, and the rich people who lived there, and said, "I'll move there and serve God there as well."

Many Christian preachers migrate to wealthy countries and to preach in wealthy churches because they love money. But invariably, they lose out spiritually. I have seen that happen again and again. Do you go somewhere because God led you there or because money attracts you?

When Abraham was taking this decision, the Lord had come down (as in Babel), to see what he and Lot were doing. And the Lord saw the godly way in which Abraham conducted himself. Immediately after Lot had left him, the Lord said something very important to Abraham (*verses 14–17*). God separated him first from his father (by death), and then He separated Abraham from yet another relative (who would have been a hindrance to him through his covetousness).

The Lord said, “Now you are alone and now I can get you to go where I want you to go and to be what I want you to be. I saw exactly what happened” Do you know that God watches every transaction that takes place between people? He watches our attitudes. Have you given up your right to something because you are a Christian? God says to you, “I have taken note of that.”

Then God said to Abraham, “Just stand here and look north, south, east, west. All the land that you can see will one day belong to your children. I promise that. It will not belong to the descendants of Lot. God said that to Abraham 4000 years ago. Look at that land today 4000 years later and ask yourself who is living there. The descendants of Abraham, not the descendants of Lot. God keeps His word. Thousands of years may go by, but if God has said to Abraham, “*I will give this land to your descendants forever*,” (*verse 15*), then it will be exactly like that.

Then we see in *Chapter 14* how Lot got into trouble. You always get into trouble when you go outside the will of God. He was captured by his enemies. Abraham could have said, “Serves him right. The fellow grabbed something from me.” But Abraham didn’t react like that. There you see another time that Abraham was tested: What would Abraham’s attitude be, when he hears that this man who cheated him, has got into trouble? When somebody who has cheated you gets into trouble himself, then you will discover very quickly whether you are a man of God – or not. Abraham’s reaction was, “Let me go and help Lot. It’s true that Lot cheated me. But what did he cheat me of? Some garbage of earthly wealth. That’s nothing. I’ve got heavenly riches. I feel sorry for Lot because he went after earthly things, and now he has got into trouble. Let me go and help him.” And Abraham went and delivered Lot himself. That’s the attitude of a godly man. Only such people can build Jerusalem.

On his way back from the battle, Abraham was exhausted, and possibly proud as well of the fact that with just 318 servants he went and destroyed the many armies of so many kings. He was also in danger of collecting all that wealth that he had accumulated through winning

this battle. In those days if you won a battle all the gold and silver of the enemy's was yours. At that time God sent a servant of His to Abraham. Isn't it wonderful to see that? An unknown man named Melchizedek, who was living out there in the desert, was in touch with God. You read about him in 14:18.

The reason why Melchizedek is important is because in *Psalm 110:4*, Jesus is called a Priest after the order of Melchizedek. And in *Hebrews 7* that is confirmed. The only place in Scripture where Melchizedek comes is in 14:18–20 – three verses, that's all. Melchizedek appears, fulfils his ministry and disappears. And God said to his Son, “*You are a Priest forever after the order of Melchizedek.*” Not a priest after the order of Levi – the old covenant priesthood. How did this man Melchizedek, who appears in only three verses in the Bible become so important? It is good for us to know the reason.

First of all he was king of Salem (14:18) – Jerusalem. Jerusalem, we have seen, is a picture of the true church, the opposite of Babylon. Jesus is the High Priest according to the order of Melchizedek in this church, and we are to be priests according to the same order. Jesus is King in Jerusalem, and we are called to be kings too. Our Lord has made us kings and we shall reign on this earth. We are called to rule over sin and we are called to rule over our passions.

What did Melchizedek do? He first of all brought food for Abraham and for his 318 servants. Christianity is practical. If a man is exhausted, what he needs is food, not a sermon! There is nothing unspiritual about providing food to a hungry man. That is the most spiritual thing you can do for him. When Elijah was exhausted, an angel came from heaven and gave him food *twice* (*1 Kings 19:6–8*). After Jesus rose up from the dead, when He saw His disciples one morning, coming back exhausted from a whole night's fishing, He kept food ready for them (*John 21:9*). That is true spirituality, to help others with food and material things, where there is a need. That is the first part of the priesthood of Melchizedek.

It goes on to say that Melchizedek then blessed Abraham (14:19). He did not criticise Abraham. There is no accusative spirit in the order of Melchizedek. No. Only blessing. And how did he bless him? He said, “*Blessed be Abram of God Most High, Possessor of heaven and earth.*” He reminded Abraham that his God owned the heaven and the earth and that therefore he should not take the little gold and silver that he won in the war. He was trying to save Abraham from being covetous. Then he said, “*Blessed be God Most High, who has delivered your enemies into your hand.*” Thus he reminded Abraham that it was God Who had given him the victory, thus saving him from pride.

How did Melchizedek know that Abraham had these *three* problems – that he was exhausted and needed food, that he was in danger of covetousness and of pride? How did his ministry fulfil these three needs exactly. Melchizedek's ministry was like arrows that went straight to the centre of the target. His secret was that he was a man who had the habit of listening to God every day. He did not live by his bright ideas but by God's Word. This is the secret of all prophetic ministry that meets people's needs exactly.

When Melchizedek was waiting on God one day as usual, God told him, "Get up. Take a large quantity of food for about 400 people. And take this two sentence message with you and give it all to a servant of Mine, whom you have never met, who is travelling on such-and-such a road." Like Philip went to meet the Ethiopian eunuch on the road to Gaza, Melchizedek got up and went, not knowing whom he was going to meet. When he went to the place God told him of, he met Abraham. He gave him the food and gave him the message – and then went off back home. What a ministry – blessing people and then disappearing, without waiting around to receive a gift or appreciation. The priesthood of Melchizedek is one that ministers and disappears. Jerusalem is built through such priests. These are the true kings of Jerusalem today.

One day God took Abraham outside his tent and told him, "*Look towards the heavens and see if you can count the stars there. That's how many descendants you are going to have*" (15:5). At that time Abraham didn't even have one child. There are millions of stars in the sky. And it says that Abraham believed the Lord (*verse 6*). The word 'believe' there in the original Hebrew is 'aman' from which we get the English word 'Amen' which means '*I believe that it will be so.*' So when God told Abraham that his seed would be like the stars of heaven, Abraham just said, "Amen. I believe it will be so." That's it. And it was fulfilled. Today, the children of Abraham (physically and spiritually) number in millions.

Faith means saying "Amen" when God has said something to you. Faith is always based on the word of God. "*Faith comes by hearing and hearing by the word of God*" (*Romans 10:17*). You can't have faith, if you don't listen to God. Abraham heard God first. Then he said "Amen".

Nowadays, I find many believers saying that they have faith for things about which God has said nothing. They say: "I have faith that God will give me a Mercedes-Benz car. And I believe it's going to be black in colour." That's not faith. That is *presumption*. It is *tempting God*. Faith can be born only after hearing God speaking to us *first*. Only *then* can we say, "Amen. It shall be so." If you remember this, you will be saved from presumption and from "counterfeit faith". *Faith begins with God's promise and not with our desires*. That which begins with our own desires will only lead to Babylon. What begins with God will lead to Jerusalem. Once God has spoken, we must keep on saying,

“Amen” to it, all through our life, no matter how long God takes to fulfil His Word..

But in *Chapter 16*, we read that Sarah was impatient. She suggested to Abraham to have children through Hagar, her maid (16:2). What did Abraham do then? Unfortunately he said, “Amen”, to Sarah too. That caused a problem for Abraham’s descendants that has now lasted for 4000 years.

What are we to learn from this incident? Just this that we must never say “Amen” to man’s word, when God has told us something else. God can solve any problem we have, without our having to adopt carnal methods. We don’t need Sarah’s advice. God is well able to do what He has promised.

Thus Ishmael was born (16:15). Notice something here. When Ishmael was born, Abraham was 86 years old. The next verse carries on from when Abraham was 99 years old (16:16 & 17:1). What happened during those 13 years? The Lord was silent. The Lord appeared to Abraham again only when he was 99, after a silence of 13 years. It is as if the Lord was saying to him, “Did you say ‘Amen’ to Sarah’s suggestions? Then you will have to learn a painful lesson. I won’t speak to you for 13 years, until you learn to value My voice more than anyone else’s.” Yes, God is very strict. He teaches us some lessons in a very hard way at times – for otherwise the lesson won’t sink in. 13 years is a long time to live without hearing God. But Abraham learnt his lesson by then and never consulted Sarah again – not even when he was told to sacrifice Isaac much later.

God did not give up on Abraham. He now told him, “Your name will no longer be called *Abram* (exalted father) but your name will be *Abraham* (father of a multitude). You won’t just have that name; you will actually *be* the father of a multitude.” Abraham said, “Amen” once again – and within a year, he got a son – when things appeared hopeless. God gave him a son because he finally learnt to say, “Amen” to God alone. Abraham had learnt his lesson.

God also told him at this time to circumcise every male member of his household. Circumcision under the old covenant was a cutting off of the flesh. Under the new covenant, it symbolized “*no confidence in the flesh*”. “*We are the true circumcision, who have no confidence in the flesh*” (*Philippians 3:3*). God was telling Abraham, “You must not depend on yourself. Trust in Me.”

We read a little bit about Abraham’s hospitality in *Chapter 18*. We’re told in *Hebrews 13:2* to be hospitable to strangers, “*because some have thus entertained angels without knowing it*”. That is referring to *Chapter 18*. A godly man is always hospitable, warm and good – even to strangers.

Then in *Chapter 18 and 19*, we read of Lot getting into trouble again. The Lord told Abraham that He was going to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah for its sins. Again Abraham was concerned about Lot. Lot still hadn't learnt a lesson. After being captured as an enemy, he went back to Sodom to make more money. But Abraham didn't judge Lot. As a godly man, he prayed for Lot to try and save his life. This is the first recorded intercession in the Bible and it is for the salvation of souls. Lot was saved as a result of Abraham's prayers. But his wife was left behind as a pillar of salt. Jesus referred to this when He said that at His second coming, two would be in one bed (husband and wife), and only one would be taken up. The other would be left behind (*Luke 17:32, 34*).

Lot's is a sad story. He lost his wife and both his sons-in-law, and all his property, in his pursuit of wealth. Finally, he had to go as a pauper to the very place where God had told him to go in the first place! His daughters then committed incest with him and bore two sons – Ammon and Moab (*19:37, 38*). From them came the Ammonites and the Moabites who fought with Israel constantly.

In contrast to the way Lot brought up his children, we read the Lord Himself testifying concerning Abraham that Abraham would "*command his children to keep the way of the Lord*" (*18:19*). God also said there that this was why He could fulfil all His promises for Abraham. God cannot do much for many people today, because they cannot control their children in their own home!

In *Chapter 20*, we see Abraham failing a second time in the same area of telling lies to a heathen king in order to save his life. He was even willing to allow his wife to go to bed with another man to save his own life. How weak a man he was – just like us. But God was good to Abraham and saved Sarah from being touched by Abimelech. It is interesting to see that God praises a heathen king for "*the integrity of his heart*" (*20:6*). God told him that it was the integrity of his heart that made God stop him from committing adultery with Sarah. God will help any young man who has integrity of heart today, in the same way as He helped that heathen king 40 centuries ago!

We see something wonderful in *20:17–21:2*. We see Abraham praying here for many barren women in Abimelech's household, at a time when his own wife Sarah was barren. It requires much largeness of heart to pray that others might get what we ourselves have not received from God. But when Abraham prayed like that, not only did all those women receive children, barren Sarah also conceived and gave birth to Isaac. "*He who waters others will be watered also himself (by God)*" (*Proverbs 11:25*). When Job prayed for others, God blessed those others and Job as well (*Job 42:10*).

But Abraham had waited patiently for 25 years before he got what God had promised him. King Abimelech now heard of Isaac's birth and came to Abraham and told him, "*God is certainly with you*" (*21:22*). When we

are faithful to the Lord, the Lord will make even the heathen recognise that He is with us.

In *Chapter 22*, we read of the first time in the Bible that God testifies about a man saying, “*Now I know that you fear Me.*” That was when Abraham offered up Isaac. Abraham was about 125 years old at this time, and God tested him again. This time it was to see whether Abraham still loved God supremely, as at the beginning. God told him, “*Sacrifice your son Isaac. I am not asking you to do it tomorrow morning. No. Do it on Mount Moriah – three days journey away. Take those three days to think about it.*” God never asks us to do anything in a hurry. Abraham walks for three days and counts the cost and lays Isaac on the altar, and says, “*Lord, here You are. I love You more than my dearest earthly possession.*”

That showed Abraham’s dedication and Isaac’s dedication too. Isaac, as a 25-year-old young man was much stronger than 125-year-old Abraham. Abraham would never have been able to tie Isaac on the altar if Isaac had not been willing. That shows how Abraham had taught his son to obey him. Blessed is the man who can bring up his children in such a way that even if he were to say to them, “I am going to offer you to God now. Lie down here,” they will lie down and say, “OK, Dad. Go ahead.” You can be certain that such a father is a godly man indeed.

Abraham called this an act of “*worship*” to God (22:5). This is the first time that the word “*worship*” occurs in the Scriptures – and this is what true worship is. The Father seeks for such worshippers even today.

God saw Abraham’s devotion to Him and said, “*Now I know that you fear Me*” (22:12). The first time it is recorded in Scripture that *a man feared God* is when a man obeyed God totally saying, “God, I love You more than my dearest earthly possession”. Abraham had left Ur 50 years earlier because he had loved God more than his own family members. 50 years later, his love for God had not waned even slightly. It was through such a man that Jerusalem began. What an example to follow! Blessed are you if you can go this way all the days of your life.

Abraham named this place “*Jehovah Jireh*” – *the Lord will provide* (22:14). That is a word we can think of whenever we face any problem in life, for His promise is, “*God shall provide all your need*” (*Philippians 4:19*).

It was here on Mount Moriah that Abraham caught a glimpse of the heart of God Who would one day offer His Son as a sacrifice 2000 years later. Jesus referred to this in *John 8:56*: “*Abraham rejoiced to see My day and he saw it and was glad*”. God was so delighted with Abraham’s attitude here, that he commanded the temple to be built on this very spot 1000 years later (*2 Chronicles 3:1*). Yes, God’s house is built even today by those who fear and worship God like Abraham did.

Before Abraham finished his life, we read in *Chapter 24* of his concern for his son. He sent his servant to go and find a bride for his son. There are

many marriages mentioned in Scripture, but only two marriages that we see clearly as being God-ordained. One was Adam's. Eve was definitely God's choice. The other was Isaac's marriage. Rebekah was God's choice too. People ask me, "Do you believe in *arranged* marriages?" "Yes," I tell them, "I believe in marriages arranged by God!" God may arrange it through one's parents (as in Isaac's case) or apart from parents (as in Adam's case). The thing that matters is that it must be arranged by God.

If you are a godly father, you will have a concern for your children's marriages. If you as a young man are fortunate enough to have a godly father, I would say that you should take his advice very seriously. If such a godly father says "No," to the one you want to marry, *wait*. God may be testing you there. Your father's "No" may only be for a time. After God sees that you are willing to respect your godly father's advice, He will give you the partner He has chosen.

Abraham sending his servant to find a wife for Isaac is a picture of God the Father sending His Holy Spirit to earth to pick a bride for His Son Jesus Christ. That is what is happening in the world today as the gospel is preached. Read that chapter, and you will find some beautiful analogies.

One of the tests that the servant applied was to find out whether the girl would be willing to offer water to his camels. You know that camels drink a lot of water. What Abraham's servant wanted to find out was whether the girl was a gracious, hard-working girl. And Rebekah was such a girl. She was also a modest girl, for it is clear from *Chapter 24:16*, that she had no interest in gazing at strangers, like Abraham's servant who was at that well. She had filled her jar with water and was about to go home, when Abraham's servant made his request. That is the type of wife you need.

And that is the type of bride for Christ that the Father looks for on earth too. God led Abraham's servant sovereignly to the right person – Rebekah. The servant then took Rebekah on that long and dangerous journey of 700 kilometres (that probably took a month) all the way back from Mesopotamia to Canaan – a picture of our journey in this world as the bride of Christ.

What do you think the servant talked to Rebekah about, during that long journey? I am sure it was about Isaac. What do you think the Holy Spirit wants to talk to us about on our long journey? *About Jesus*. Not about doctrine, not about heaven, but about the Lord Jesus. And I am sure Rebekah herself was keen to hear about Isaac too. I want to know more and more about my wonderful Saviour, from the Holy Spirit on this long journey, until the day I see Him face to face (like Rebekah saw Isaac). And then one day, like Rebekah, I too shall enter the tent of my Lord and be His wife. Do you have that longing? That is what *Chapter 24* is all about.

The Life of Isaac

But Rebekah had a problem. For 20 years or more, she was barren (*cf. 25:20 with 25:26*). Is it possible to have problems, when you get the wife that God Himself chose for you. Yes! That may be part of your spiritual education. Even when God leads you somewhere, you can face problems there. Problems don't indicate that you are out of God's will. No. They only mean that you have to pray and ask God to solve the problems. Isaac prayed, and the problem was solved. Rebekah conceived (25:21).

Twins were born to Rebekah. Jacob came out grabbing Esau's heel (25:26). Jacob's grabbing nature started in the womb itself. He dashed for the exit to come out first but missed. Esau came out first and so he grabbed Esau's heel. That was Jacob. This was the man God chose to be the head of the nation of Israel!! God chose a weak man to be His servant – a man who was interested only in furthering his own interests and in grabbing for earthly things. They called him 'Jacob' meaning 'Grabber.' What an encouragement that is for fallen sinners like us. Our Lord came to call sinners and not the righteous.

Isaac was not a wise person like his father Abraham was. Isaac's home was filled with partiality. Isaac was on Esau's side and Rebekah was on Jacob's side. Such an attitude is the best way to split a home. Esau and Jacob became lifelong enemies because of the partiality of their parents. One parent favoured one son and the other parent favoured the other. So the two boys became jealous of each other. And no doubt this separated Isaac and Rebekah too. What a beautiful marriage theirs was when they had started out as a couple chosen by God for each other and deeply in love with each other! But their partiality towards their children ruined their marriage thoroughly. The saddest part is that the reason for this partiality, in Isaac's case, was his love of good food: He liked the deer-meat that Esau would bring home regularly. Jacob was not a good hunter and so Isaac did not care for him. Isaac's blessing of Jacob (that caused so many problems) also came about through his love for deer-meat. A glutton like Isaac certainly doesn't come forth as a good father at home, like Abraham was. Godly fathers can at times have sons who act quite foolishly.

We read in *Chapter 26:7* of another of Isaac's foolish acts – but here he followed in his father's lying footsteps. When Isaac was in Gerar, the men there asked him about his pretty wife, Rebekah. He told them that Rebekah was his sister. That was the lie that his father Abraham had said concerning his mother Sarah, on two occasions (*Chapters 12 and 20*). But Isaac had not learnt from his father's mistakes. We don't have to make the same mistakes that our parents have made before us. A wise man will learn from the mistakes of others so that he does not repeat them.

But to Isaac's credit, it must also be said that he had some of the good qualities of his father, when it came to dealing with people outside his family. We read of a time (in 26:18) when Isaac re-opened the wells that his father had dug earlier and that the Philistines had closed up out of jealousy. Those wells belonged to Abraham, because he had dug them. And so they now belonged to Isaac. But the herdsmen of Gerar quarrelled with Isaac's servants and said, "The water is ours!" So Isaac's servants went and asked Isaac, and Isaac said, "Give it to them.". Just like Abraham gave Lot the land Lot wanted, Isaac also follows in his father's footsteps here. Then Isaac dug another well (verse 21) and the Gerarites quarrelled over that one too. And a second time, Isaac said, "Give that also to them." He moved away from there and dug another well. The Gerarites were ashamed by now and did not fight for this well. And so Isaac named it 'Rehoboth', saying, "At last the Lord has made room for us, and we shall be fruitful in the land."

Think about that phrase "*Rehoboth, the Lord has made room for us.*" Isaac did not make room for himself by pushing people out. No. He gave up his rights and the Lord made room for him and he became fruitful. This is the way to build Jerusalem. This stream (of giving up one's rights) began with Abraham, continued with Isaac and flowed on finally into Isaac's grandson Joseph many decades later. This is the principle we must live by: "*I won't fight or grab for earthly things. Let the world, and worldly Christians have what they want. I'll take what's left over. And from the leftovers, God will make room for me and I will be fruitful in the land.*" Those who grab Sodom and Gomorrah and its wealth will remain barren. The way of the church (Jerusalem) is the way of giving up one's earthly rights, even as Jesus our Lord did. His kingdom was not of this world. Neither is ours. The way of Babylon however is the way of grabbing.

Jacob started life as a grabber and he had to be converted before he could become Israel and thus be in the "Jerusalem stream". Otherwise he would have been in the "Babylon stream". These are some of the important principles that we find in the book of *Genesis* that apply to us even today. Look at the number of believers who are seeking for position and honour in Christendom. *The very first qualification to be a Christian leader (or elder) is that you have no desire to be a leader because you are thoroughly convinced that you are not fit to be a leader.* We must allow the Lord to make room for us and to make us leaders. Then we will be fruitful in the land. If we try to make room for ourselves, we will never be fruitful. That is certain.

In *Chapter 26:28*, we read that this man who was Isaac's enemy finally comes to Isaac and says, "*We have seen clearly that the Lord is with you,*" and he makes a feast for Isaac. That is God's way. A man of God makes peace with his enemies. If our enemy is hungry, we must feed him. That is the way of the Jerusalem-stream.

In 26:34, 35, we read: “*When Esau was 40 years old, he married Judith the daughter of Beeri the Hittite, and Basemath the daughter of Elon the Hittite; and they brought grief to Isaac and Rebekah.*” We see here that Isaac was not as careful as Abraham was, to find a partner for his son. He allowed Esau to marry whomever he liked. He had spoilt Esau by his favouritism and partiality. Isaac was more interested in the food Esau brought him than in the wife whom Esau chose. These are some of the warnings in Scripture, for us today.

Toward the end of his life, Isaac’s eyesight began to fail. There is nothing serious about that. As we grow older our eyes will naturally become weaker. But the sad thing was that Isaac’s *spiritual vision* also was dim and clouded. As we grow older, our outer man may decay. But our inner man should become stronger and our spiritual vision must be sharp. But Isaac’s was not. He knew what God had said when his two children were in Rebekah’s womb: “*The older will serve the younger.*” But he still decides to go against God’s word and to give his blessing to the older brother. Can you see his folly there? He tells Esau in 27:2, 3: “*I am going to die soon. Go and get your bow and your quiver and get some venison for me.*” This old man with one foot in the grave is still thinking of food!! No wonder he lost his spiritual vision. Paul said in 1 Corinthians 9:27, “*If I don’t subdue my body, I will preach to others and still be disqualified myself.*” This is the reason why the word of God encourages us to *fast from food* now and then – so that we can keep our gluttonous desires and our sexual passions under control, so that we worship God and not our stomachs. It was love of food that made Isaac spiritually blind. And it is love of good food that has made many preachers spiritually blind too.

Isaac was saying as it were, “Esau, go and bring me this venison. If it is tasty I will give you God’s blessings. I know God told me many years ago that your younger brother is to receive the birthright. But I don’t care about what God said those many years ago. You have been a good son to me and have always brought me good venison to eat. So I am sure God will understand if I give you the blessing instead of giving it to your brother who never brought me a good meal in his life”!! Think of the depth of Isaac’s stupidity here. But God ensured that Isaac’s plan failed.

Rebekah was on Jacob’s side. Rebekah knew that God had said that the younger brother must get the blessing. So when she heard that Isaac was going to give the blessing to Esau, she schemed to help God fulfil His promise! She told Jacob, “Esau will take some time to get the venison. Meanwhile I’ll make some good, tasty curry that your Dad likes. You go put on some animal skin and pretend to be hairy Esau and take the curry to your father.”

But did God need all of Rebekah’s clever schemes to fulfil His promise to Jacob? Rebekah made the same mistake that Abraham made with regard to Hagar. Abraham felt: “God needs help! It looks as if the promised seed will not come. I must go in to Hagar and have a son.” Here Rebekah

says something similar: “God needs some help now, because it looks as if Esau is going to get the blessing. I must help Jacob to grab it.” Let me assure you that God doesn’t need our help to fulfil His promises. He certainly doesn’t want us to cheat and tell lies to promote His work.

Many Christians think that the end justifies the means. That means that if our *ultimate* goal is good, it doesn’t matter how we get there. But that is wrong. The goal must be spiritual, and the way to the goal must also be spiritual too. If God wants Jacob to get the birthright, the way he gets it must be spiritual too. In the same way: If it is God’s will that the gospel must be preached to every creature, then the way we do it must be spiritual too. We must *not* do evangelism or church-building by hook or by crook. It must be a godly way by which we reach that godly goal. And if as a result of choosing a godly way we find that we are not able to do as much as other people can do in an ungodly way, then so be it. But we will not compromise spiritual principles in order to do God’s work. It is better to spend all our life building a *small little* structure made of gold, silver and precious stones than to build a *massive* structure made of wood, hay and straw that will be burnt up in the final day!

What about you? Are you building in a godly way towards a godly goal? Esau had despised his birthright. It says in 27:34 that when he heard that he had missed the blessing, “*he cried out with an exceedingly great and bitter cry.*” Now he regretted the decision he had taken many years earlier to sell his birthright. He had then thought that he would outsmart his simple-minded brother Jacob by getting the porridge from him then and the birthright as well later. But God outsmarted Esau finally. God knows how to “*catch the wise in their own craftiness*” (1 Corinthians 3:19). He ensured that Jacob got the birthright. So let all clever schemers beware. You will finally reap from God what you sow now.

It says in Hebrews 12:16, 17: “*Let there be no immoral or godless person like Esau, who sold his own birthright for a single meal, for you know that afterwards when he desired to inherit the blessing he was rejected.*” You make a choice in life when you are young. You come to a fork in the road when you are young, concerning moral matters especially. That is why it talks there about immoral people. Do you want the birthright, the eternal blessings, the spiritual blessings, or do you want the temporal blessings, the immediate ones, the bowl of porridge, that will satisfy your bodily needs? That’s a choice that faces many young people today – a choice between that which is eternal, spiritual and in the future – and – that which is temporary, material (physical) and available immediately.

We all come to that fork in the road often. Moses came to that, and he refused the *pleasures* of sin, the *wealth* of Egypt and the *honour* of being Pharaoh’s grandson (*Hebrews 11:24–26*). And so God could use him.

Many of you are at that fork in the road right now. You may say, “Let me indulge a little bit in these things. Ultimately I will repent and get the spiritual blessing too.” Let me assure you that you *will not*. Like Esau, you will only reap what you have sown. Make the right choice now for it says there, “*See to it that no one comes short of the grace of God*” (*Hebrews 12:15*). May none of us fall from the grace of God and end up like Esau.

The Life of Jacob

In *Chapter 28* we read of how Jacob goes away from his home. He is sent off by Rebekah to her brother Laban’s place to escape Esau’s wrath. Jacob was still unmarried and probably about 70 years old at this time.

It says in *28:11*, “*the sun had set*.” Though that is referring only to a geographical fact, yet the sun had indeed set on Jacob’s life, spiritually speaking too. He had been living for the world, and had grabbed and cheated. And yet God met with Jacob in mercy and told him that He had a great purpose for his life. “*I am the God of your father Abraham*,” God told him, “*I will give you and your descendants the land on which you lie. All the families of the earth will be blessed through you?*” (*verses 13, 14*).

This is called “*the blessing of Abraham*” (*Galatians 3:14*). When God called Abraham, He had told him, “*I will bless you, and all the families of the earth will be blessed through you*” (*12:2, 3*). God repeated it here to Jacob. In *Galatians 3:14*, we are told that this blessing becomes ours, when we are filled with the Holy Spirit.

What then is the purpose of being filled with the Holy Spirit? It’s certainly not that we might speak in tongues! That’s just *one* of the gifts that God gives to some of His children. Unfortunately a lot of Christians have made too much of that. But that’s not the main purpose. The main purpose is not even physical healing. Paul was never healed from a “*thorn in his flesh*”. The primary purpose of the fullness of the Holy Spirit is that *God might bless us and thus make us a blessing to every family that we encounter on the face of the earth* (*Galatians 3:14*).

When God fills us with the Holy Spirit, we *will* be a blessing to all people. No-one will be able to meet us without being blessed in some way! It’s like these heavily-perfumed ladies. You can smell their perfume even when you are a few feet from them! Anywhere they go, people smell their perfume. So will it be with us. If we enter a home we will bless that home, whether we visit it for five minutes or five days. That is “*the blessing of Abraham*” – rivers of living water flowing with blessing to thirsty people everywhere.

God said to Jacob that night, “*That’s My calling for you. I am with you.*” When God fills us with the Holy Spirit, He Himself will be with us (*verse 15*). He told Jacob, “*I am with you, I will keep you, I will bring you*

back and I will not leave you until I have done for you what I have promised." Jacob woke up, and said, "*How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God – Bethel – the gate of heaven!*"

But now see how he responded to this fantastic promise from God. He says effectively (in verse 20), "Lord, I am not interested in all those things. Just take care of me on this journey, give me enough food to eat and clothes to wear, and protect me from accidents and robberies along the way. Bring me safely back to my father's house. That's all I want. I am not interested in being a blessing to all the families of the earth. If you give me these material blessings I have asked for, I will give You tithes of all my earnings, and build a house for You. Bless my business, Lord, and I promise You, I will give you 10% of all my profits."

That unfortunately is the response of many Christians to God today too. God wants His children to be filled with the Spirit and to have the blessing of Abraham so that they become a blessing wherever they go. But what are the prayers of most Christians like? They pray saying, "Lord, give me a comfortable job with a large salary. Heal me of my sicknesses. Help me to build a good house for my family. Get my children married to rich, good-looking partners. And protect us from all dangers. And we will give you a percentage of all our earnings"!!

Is that what God has called us for? Many Christians have missed God's best, because they settle for earthly blessing, when God has called them to "*every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places*". They settle for something material and temporary when God has called them to inherit spiritual and eternal blessings. God doesn't want us to have any regrets in eternity. But many are exactly like Jacob. The sun has indeed set on such believers too.

Jesus referred to the ladder that Jacob saw here as a picture of Himself. Jesus is the ladder from earth to heaven (*John 1:51*). And we can praise God that the foot of that ladder came right down and touched the earth instead of hanging some distance above our heads! Jesus was "*made like us in all things*" so that He might be our High Priest (*Hebrews 2:17*).

But God did not leave Jacob. He was determined to break him in order to bless him. But how does God do that? He allows Jacob to deal with a craftier person than himself – Laban. Jacob who had cheated his father and his brother now finds someone who cheats him.

It's interesting to see how Laban cheated Jacob in getting him married to Leah instead of to Rachel. In those days they used to have a big feast *before* the wedding. So Laban, crafty man that he was, said, "Let's have the wedding *at night*" – so that people's faces would not be clear. Then he got Jacob thoroughly drunk at the feast, so that Jacob would not know what was happening around him. Laban then put Jacob's hand into the hand of a heavily-veiled girl and asked Jacob if he would marry her.

Jacob imagining it was Rachel said “Yes” and got married! The night was dark and he could not see the face of his bride who lay next to him in his tent. When he woke up the next morning he discovered it was Leah! Jacob had met his match in Laban and been outsmarted at last! And he had worked seven years for his wife!

He now tells Laban, “I wanted Rachel.” Laban says, “Sorry. Around here, we have to marry off the older girl first. If you want Rachel, you’ll have to work another seven years for me.” And Jacob had to say “OK”. That was how God began breaking Jacob’s human strength.

There is a beautiful verse here that blessed my heart when I was a young believer. In 29:20, we read: *“Jacob worked seven years for Rachel and it seemed to him but a few days because of his love for her.”* It wasn’t a desk job that Jacob had. It was hard work in the fields, looking after sheep. He had to work in the hot sun during the day and sleep outside in the cold at night. He even lost his health. But yet it says that he felt the seven years were just like a few days for him – because Jacob’s love for Rachel was so passionate and so strong.

And I thought, “If Jacob could serve like that for a woman, how should I be serving the Lord who loved me and gave His life for me?” Today I can testify, after 56 years of serving the Lord, that all these years have been just like a few days for me. Nothing can equal the joy of serving the Lord, when we serve Him out of love, and do not seek for money, or honour, or comfort, or fame.

Do you find your labour for the Lord heavy? It’s because you don’t love the Lord with all your heart.

Chapter 30. Finally Jacob begins to cheat Laban in return and to steal his sheep by crooked methods. When he has amassed enough wealth, he plans one day to leave secretly (*Chapter 31*). Then he hears that Esau is coming to meet him. He is scared, because he imagines that Esau must be coming to kill him. But we see something wonderful in *Chapter 32*. Even though Jacob was still the same old grabber and schemer after 20 years, yet the angel of God met him on his way. None of us would have wasted our time with such a selfish man. Which earthly company would employ a man after seeing him deceive them and ignore their orders for 20 years? Every earthly company would dismiss such a man. But God did not dismiss Jacob. And He doesn’t dismiss you or me either, despite our numerous failures. He still comes and meets us through his messengers. Praise God for that.

The word ‘angel’ can also be translated as ‘messenger.’ When God sends a messenger across your path, it’s a mark of His love for you. When God gives up on you, one mark of it will be that He does not send you any more of His messengers with a message. God sends His messengers to

us to show us His love, especially when we are going to encounter some danger or evil.

When Jacob heard that Esau was coming, he schemed as to how he could escape. He put the three wives whom he did *not* like, right up in front. And he put Rachel and himself right at the back – so that even if all the others got killed, he and Rachel would escape! Jacob is still the same old selfish person he always was. It's a great encouragement for us to see that God picked up such a selfish man and transformed him into an 'Israel'.

We then read how God met with Jacob, wrestled with him and dislocated his hip. He does drastic things in order to bring us to the place He wants us to be. He broke him and said, "*From now on you are going to be a prince of God (Israel).*" (32:28). When could God call him "Israel"? Only after 60 or 70 years of struggling with him and finally dislocating his hip and breaking him thoroughly. Then God says, "*Let me go now*".

And at last Jacob says, "*I will not let You go unless You bless me.*" This man who had spent his life grabbing money, grabbing the birthright, grabbing property, grabbing women and grabbing sheep, now leaves everything and grabs hold of God. He says, as it were, "God, I have lived for money, women, property and many earthly things. But I want You alone now." God is waiting for that day to come in our lives too. Then He will say to us as He said to Jacob, "You will no longer be called a grabber or a deceiver (Jacob). You will be called a prince of God (Israel) because you have striven with God and have prevailed.

When did Jacob become an overcomer? When his hip was broken. This is a great truth that we see right from the beginning of Scripture: *God has to break us before He can empower us.*

It is the broken man who leans upon his staff like Jacob, who becomes the prince of God, and not the great, mighty '*Mr. Universe*.' God has to break you, dear brothers and sisters, before He can make you what He wants you to be.

And then we read these wonderful words in *Chapter 32:31*, "*Then the sun rose.*" Again a geographical fact – but true spiritually in Jacob's life as well. Twenty years earlier the sun had set on him. Now the sun rose.

Chapter 34. Jacob had 12 sons and a daughter, Dinah. And Dinah got him into a lot of trouble, when she decided one day to take a walk all by herself *in an area filled with immoral men.* This chapter has a warning for all young girls, because there are many such immoral men today as well. All young girls should read this and see the problems that Dinah caused for herself and her father. She thought she could take care of herself among immoral people. But someone caught her and raped her. Her brothers then went out and murdered all the men in his city. And Jacob's name began to stink in that area – all because one girl decided to wander off in *an immoral area* on her own. She who has ears to hear, let her hear.

Chapter 35. The Lord now told Jacob to go back to Bethel. In a sense, it was Jacob's fault too that he got into all these problems. Because if he had gone straight back to Bethel after God had met with him in Peniel, this sad and violent interlude (in *Chapter 34*) would never have taken place.

The Life of Joseph

Let us now look at Joseph's life. He was the eleventh of Jacob's twelve sons. We see Jacob making the same mistake here that his father had made before him. He too shows partiality to Joseph! *Chapter 37:3: "Israel loved Joseph more than all his sons, because he was the son of his old age; and he made him a vari-coloured tunic."* The best way to destroy your children is by being partial to one of them, by giving a special gift to one of them that you don't give the others. Jacob had already seen what partiality had done in his own father's home. Yet he repeats it in his own home. The result was that the ten older sons became jealous of Joseph and almost killed him. Partiality can have very serious consequences.

When parents praise one child in the presence of the other children, what is the result? The other children become enemies of the favourite child – sometimes, for life. Whose fault is it? The fault of foolish parents. There are warnings in Scripture for every area of our life.

In *37:18*. We read how Joseph's elder brothers plotted to kill him. And we see the sovereignty of God here in making one of the brothers stop that plan and change it to selling Joseph off to some slave traders who were passing by at that time. Who sent those slave traders there at that time? God. God timed the travel of those Ishmaelite slave traders such that they would land up there exactly when Joseph was about to be killed. And those slave traders were going to Egypt, which was exactly where God wanted Joseph to go!! It is wonderful to see the sovereignty of God at work again and again in Joseph's life. God has a plan and purpose for your life too, and nobody can frustrate it. Not your jealous brothers and not your foolish father, nobody. That's what we see here.

By the time Joseph was 17, God had already revealed to Joseph in dreams that he had a purpose for his life. It is wonderful when a young man is so sensitive to God that at an age when most teenagers have filthy dreams, he has dreams from God! Young people, don't ever complain that older brothers are *not* giving you an opportunity to serve God. If you sincerely submit to God, no-one can mess up God's plan for your life. When I was young, some elder brothers, who were jealous of my preaching-gift, would not allow me to share the Word in the church I attended. So I preached the gospel on the streets where I did not need anyone's permission to preach! In the church meetings, God told me to humble myself and keep quiet, and never to criticise the elders. Those were the years when God broke me like He broke Joseph. But none of those elders

could hinder God's plan for my life. When the time came, God opened doors for me and His plan for my life was fulfilled. I say that for your encouragement. So don't ever complain against people. The only person who can mess up God's plan for your life is you yourself. Remember that.

God used the jealousy of Joseph's brothers to fulfil His plan for Joseph's life by getting them to sell him off to Egypt. God makes the evil that others plan against us to work for our good and for the fulfilment of His purposes. Hallelujah! If God protected us against the evil that other people try to do to us, that itself would be a great thing. But God does something even better! He makes the very evil that others do to us to fulfil His plan for our life! Isn't that much better, when God turns the tables on Satan like that? Just think: If Joseph's brothers were not jealous of him but were good to him instead, Joseph might never have gone to Egypt. How did Joseph go to Egypt? Step One: His brothers were jealous of him. Step Two: They sold him off to some slave-traders. Step Three: The slave traders took him to Egypt and sold him off there. Thus God's plan to take Joseph to Egypt was fulfilled! So, some of the evil things that others are doing to harm you will ultimately only fulfil God's plan for your life – if you love God (*Romans 8:28*). You may face a few trials. Joseph had a tough time as a slave too. But it fulfilled God's plan for his life. Praise the Lord!

A man of faith will say, "The God of Joseph is my God too. If I love God with all my heart, any number of people can be jealous of me, any number of people can plan evil against me. But they will not hinder God's plan from being fulfilled in my life." May you have such faith in our wonder-working God.

Chapter 38 is a slight diversion from Joseph's story. Here we read of Judah committing adultery with his daughter-in-law, Tamar, and of Tamar giving birth to twins (38:29, 30). The interesting thing here is that it was through one of those twins – Perez – that Mary the mother of Jesus was born. So Jesus descended from this line of incest and adultery! Our Lord deliberately chose that genealogical line to come through (*Matthew 1:1–3*). Why did He choose such a sinful line? How many of us would have chosen an incestuous family line to come through? The Lord chose it deliberately from heaven, in order to show that He had come to call sinners – even the incestuous – to salvation. Jesus identified with the worst transgressors in His family line.

Chapter 39 is a wonderful story of a young man who was faithful to God when tempted strongly by an attractive and powerful woman. There is only one way to avoid immorality – and that is to run away from it (See *1 Corinthians 6:18*). And that was exactly what Joseph did. Potiphar's wife pressed him to commit adultery with her (39:7). But Joseph refused. He refused to even be anywhere near her (*verse 10*). He did not just

say, "No." He ran away from the source of the temptation. As soon as that evil lady came near him, Joseph would go off somewhere else. You cannot overcome temptation, if you are always hanging around people who tempt you. God is looking for such men – who will run away from temptation. One day when she was alone with him in the house, she caught him. This time he pulled himself away and left her clutching on to his coat. This angered her so much that she accused Joseph of trying to rape her. Her husband was furious, and locked up Joseph in jail.

Look at the things Joseph suffered – jealousy from his brothers, false accusation from an evil woman, and jail. In those days jails were terrible dungeons with rats, worms and cockroaches crawling all over the place. But it says in *verse 21*, that in addition to all those crawling things, "*the Lord was also with Joseph*". And that made all the difference. It doesn't matter if you are surrounded by every type of inconvenience, if the Lord is with you. That is enough. And that was all that Joseph wanted.

There in the jail he meets Pharaoh's cupbearer and thus gets an introduction to Pharaoh. You see how God's plan begins to work out slowly. It's not just that God protected Joseph from the evil that Potiphar and his wife did to him. He made the evil that they did to him to work out God's perfect plan. How would Joseph have ever met Pharaoh's butler and got an introduction to Pharaoh if he hadn't gone to that jail?!!

If Joseph could have seen all this at the beginning, he would have been praising the Lord all the while when he was in jail – just as Paul and Silas did later. They could praise the Lord in that Philippian jail, because they had seen the sovereignty of God in the Scriptures. If we study the Scriptures, we too will praise the Lord in every tight situation caused by the evil that others do to us. One day, people may put us in jail too, with many false accusations. I am sure the Egyptians believed all the false stories that had been spread about this man who was the most upright man in Egypt. But that didn't bother Joseph. Many false stories are spread about true servants of God today too. What must we do? Keep quiet. Leave it to God to defend your reputation. He will vindicate you at the right time. Nobody can frustrate God's plan for your life, if you honour Him.

I want you to notice how Joseph came into contact with Pharaoh's cupbearer. Joseph had enough problems of his own to worry about in prison. But he forgot about his own sorrows when he saw two newcomers to the prison looking sad one day. Joseph had been appointed by the jailer to be in charge of all the prisoners and so he asked these two prisoners the reason for their looking so dejected (*40:7*). That was how he interpreted their dreams correctly and thus got an opening through one of them (the cupbearer) to interpret Pharaoh's dream one day. God has amazing ways of opening doors for His servants who are faithful to Him and *who can forget their own sorrows and have a concern for others*. That is what we learn from this incident. So let's not be taken

up with our own sorrows. Let us open our hearts to other needy people in this world.

Finally Joseph stood before Pharaoh. But that was in God's perfect time. The Bible says, "*They afflicted Joseph's feet with fetters. But iron entered into his soul during his time in jail. Until the time appointed by God, Joseph was tested. Then God's Word came and set him free*" (Psalm 105:18, 19 - free paraphrase). God is always on time. He is never late. There is a specific length of time fixed by God for all our trials. During that time, He will test us. When that time is over, He will command freedom for us. But by then, if we have been faithful, iron would have entered our soul, and we will have become strong in faith. God turns the tables on Satan and uses the very harm that Satan does to us to strengthen us. *Hallelujah!*

You know the rest of the story, how his brothers were hungry for food because of the famine in the land, and had to come and bow down before Joseph, exactly as God had shown him 20 years earlier. God keeps His Word.

43:1, 2: When the famine was severe in the land, Jacob told his sons to go to Egypt and get some food. Whenever there is a famine anywhere, you have to go and get food from those who were wise *before the famine*. Joseph was wise in the seven years of plenty. He stored up food. Therefore those who were lazy in the times of prosperity had to come to him now. The Bible says, "*Go to the ant, you lazy man, and learn from it – how it stores up its food in summer for the winter*" (Proverbs 6:6–8).

Apply this truth *spiritually*: In times like these, when you have plenty of opportunity to study God's Word and to become spiritually rich thereby, use your time wisely. Then, many years later when you don't have much time to study the Word, because of the pressures of life, you will have plenty of wisdom to fall back on. The wisdom from God's Word that you store up now will not only satisfy you fully, you will also have plenty to share with others as well.

I studied the Bible earnestly, in my bachelor-days, when I was an officer in the Indian Navy. I never went to a Bible school. I studied the Scriptures at the feet of Jesus. That habit also kept me away from many temptations. It was a time of plenty – because I had *plenty of time* as a bachelor. Once you get married and have children you won't have that much free time. So if you are lazy in the years when you have plenty of time, you will regret it in the days of famine. Learn that lesson and apply it to yourself.

Joseph dealt with his brothers in a godly way. In Chapter 45:5 he says, "*It was God who sent me before you.*" Again in verse 7, he says, "*God sent me before you.*" And one again in verse 8: "*God sent me.*" He was telling his brothers, "*It was not you who sold me to the Ishmaelites, it was God. It was not Potiphar's wife who sent me to the jail, it was God.*".

Blessed indeed are we if we can see God in all our ways – even in the evil that others do to us.

Have you seen this glorious truth? Don't ever say, "This person is harming me" or "That person is harming me." It is God Who allows people to do things to you.

Joseph prepared a great feast for his brothers who had once sold him into slavery. He also gave *the best land* in Egypt – the land of Goshen – to these brothers who had once prepared *a pit* for him (46:34)! Such is the attitude of a man of God.

We also see the tremendous respect that Joseph had for his father (46:29). Even though Joseph was the second ruler in the world, he went out to meet his father and showed him respect. A godly man will always respect and honour his parents.

We now see Jacob in the closing years of his life as a prophet of God. In *Chapter 47:10* he blesses Pharaoh, the greatest ruler in the world, and then he blesses his own sons. Joseph brings his two sons, Manasseh and Ephraim to Jacob and says, "Put your right hand on Manasseh's head (the older boy) and your left hand on Ephraim's (the younger one)." But Jacob doesn't do that. He crosses his hands and blesses the younger above the elder. His eyes were also dim now (like his father Isaac's had been). But Jacob had spiritual vision, unlike his father: *He knew whom to bless and whom not to*. Why was that? Because Jacob had been through many a trial in his life, unlike his father who had lived a comfortable life. It is through trials that God sharpens our spiritual vision.

Jacob was the first man to prophesy about the coming of Christ. He tells Judah his son, that the Lion of Judah would come through his seed, and would rule (49:9, 10).

In 50:20, we hear Joseph saying words similar to what Paul says in *Romans 8: 13*: "*As for you, you meant evil against me. But God meant it for good*". This verse is *the Romans 8:28 of the Old Testament*. God makes all things work together for good for those who love Him.

Thus we come to the end of this wonderful book of beginnings – *Genesis*. Let us look now at the last verse of the book. *Genesis* began with the words, "*In the beginning God*" but it ends with the words, "*a coffin in Egypt*." This is the result of man's sin.

But from that coffin in Egypt, God brought forth a wonderful redemption for fallen man!

Hallelujah!!

EXODUS

THE NATION OF ISRAEL IS BORN

If Genesis is ‘*The Book of Beginnings*,’ we could entitle Exodus as ‘*The Birth of a Nation*’ – the nation of Israel. We saw the beginnings of this nation in *Genesis*. Now we see it as a full-fledged nation. In the first 15 chapters we read of their slavery in Egypt and their deliverance from Egypt. The rest of the book deals with the giving of the Law, a little bit of their time in the wilderness and the plan God gave for building His tabernacle.

Redemption from Egypt

In the first chapter, we read that Pharaoh was disturbed by the Israelites, even though they were slaves. They were becoming numerous and he was afraid that they would finally rebel against him and stop working for him. So he passed an order that all male children born to the Israelites must be killed immediately. Now that scheme originated from the devil. Satan has always been after the Jews to kill them – many times in human history. This was just the first of such occasions.

We saw in our last study how God not only protects us from Satan’s plans, but does something even better: He turns the tables on Satan and uses Satan’s work to fulfil God’s purposes. That shows God’s almighty power in a much greater way than if he merely destroyed Satan or merely stopped Satan from working. God shows us His power not only by protecting us from the devil, but by using the very thing that Satan does to destroy him. The greatest example of this is Calvary – where Satan got Jesus’ enemies to crucify Him. But that cross became the very place where Satan himself was defeated!! Satan’s plan backfired on him – as it always has.

God turned the tables on Satan for Jesus. He will do the same for us too, if we live with a clear conscience in humility before Him. Whatever the devil and his agents do to harm us will be turned back on them – and God's purposes for our lives will be fulfilled. *This is one of the main messages of the Bible* – and we see it happening again and again in the Scriptures.

We see here that it was because Pharaoh had passed an order that all male babies should be killed, that Moses' mother put Moses into a little basket and floated it down the river with a prayer to God. If it were not for that evil edict, she would never have done such a thing. But because she did that, Moses was picked up by Pharaoh's daughter, and grew up in Pharaoh's palace – the place where God wanted him to be trained for the first 40 years of his life. That could never have happened if Pharaoh had not passed that evil law, for then Moses would have grown up to be just another slave. Do you see how God's purposes are fulfilled through what Satan does?

There is a great lesson here for all of us – that we see in church history too. Whenever God wants to do something for His people, He always *begins with a man*. He had to find a suitable man before He could deliver the Israelites. The training of that man took 80 years – and it wasn't academic training alone. Moses was trained in the best academies of Egypt, but that did not qualify him for God's work. In Acts 7, Stephen says that Moses was mighty in both word and deed. He was a strong man, and an eloquent speaker at the age of 40. He was a great military leader, a very rich person, and had been educated with the best education that the most advanced country in the world could give – for Egypt was the world's only superpower in those days. At the end of it all, he was unfit to serve God. Stephen says that Moses thought that the Israelites would recognise that God had raised him up to deliver them. But they did not recognise him as their leader. All his earthly fame and abilities could not prepare him for the task God had prepared for him.

Today many Christians imagine that they can serve God just because they have Bible-knowledge, musical ability and plenty of money. But they're mistaken. They need to learn a lesson from Moses' life: *40 years of the best that this world could give him could not prepare him for God's service.*

God had to take him through another 40 years in the wilderness, in a totally different environment from the palace, in order to equip him. He had to be broken of his human strength. And God accomplished this by making him look after sheep and by allowing him to live with his father-in-law and work for him – for 40 long years. Living with one's father-in-law for even one year can be quite humiliating for a man! I know that many married women in India live with their fathers-in-law all

their lives. But it's different when a man has to live with his wife's father and work for him as well. That can be quite a humbling experience for a man. But that's how God broke Moses. You remember that that was how God broke Jacob too. He too had to live with his father-in-law for 20 years. God uses fathers-in-law and mothers-in-law to break His children.

What all the universities in Egypt could not teach Moses, he learnt in the wilderness, looking after sheep and working for his father-in-law. At the end of those 40 years, Moses is so broken that he who was once so eloquent and who thought he could deliver Israel, now says, "Lord, I am unfit. I cannot speak properly. Please send somebody else to lead your people." It was then that God said, "At last you are ready. I will send you to Pharaoh now" (4:10–17).

What is the lesson we learn from Jacob and Moses? Just this: *When you think you are ready, you are not*. When you think you are capable, that you are strong, that you have knowledge, that you can speak and sing and play musical instruments, and do wonderful things for God, God says, "You are unfit. I have to wait until you are broken." With Jacob that process took 20 years, with Moses it took 40 years, with Peter it took 3 years, and with Paul at least 3 years. How long will it take with us? That depends on how quickly we learn to submit under God's mighty hand.

How long does it take to go through school from First Standard (Grade) to Twelfth Standard (Grade)? 12 years – *if you pass each year*. But there are children who take 16 years to complete 12 years of school. Some medical students take 10 years to complete a 5-year medical course! How long anyone takes to finish school depends on how quickly he learns his lessons. It is the same in the Christian life too.

It says in 12:40, "*The time that the sons of Israel lived in Egypt was 430 years*." However when God spoke to Abraham, He had told him that his descendants would be in another land for just 400 years (*Genesis 15:13*). But here we read that they were actually there for **430** years. Did God make a mistake? No. God is very exact in his timetable. God doesn't make any mistakes. When God spoke to Abraham, His perfect will for the Israelites was that they should be in Egypt for *400 years*. Why then did they stay an extra 30 years?

To find the answer to that, let us consider another example. When God brought the Israelites out of Egypt His plan for them was that they should be only 2 years in the wilderness. But how many years did they actually spend in the wilderness? 40 years. (See *Deuteronomy 2:14*). God may plan to break you in 2 years. But it may actually take 40 years. God may want to begin to use you 2 years after you are converted. But He may not be able to use you for 40 years. It all depends on how quickly you are broken. So also, God's plan for Israel was that they should stay 400 years in Egypt. But they had to stay for 430 years.

I believe the reason was that their leader Moses was not yet ready. I believe that when Moses left Egypt at the age of 40, God had wanted to

break him through a 10-year course with his father-in-law in the wilderness, so that he could be ready at the age of 50 to be Israel's leader. But Moses did not learn his lesson in 10 years. His father-in-law had to humble him some more, before Moses was broken enough. It took Moses 40 years to complete that 10-year course! Therefore the Israelites had to wait 30 more years. God is dependent on broken men for His work on earth.

This has a message and a warning for us. God may have a plan for your life. But it will never be fulfilled till you are broken. What He has planned to do in you in 10 years may take 40 years. So, it is good to be quick to humble ourselves always under God's mighty hand – which refers to the circumstances He sends across our path.

Lamentations 3:27 says, "It is good for a man to bear the yoke (humble himself and be broken) in his youth." Allow God to break you when you are young. Don't fight against the circumstances God permits in your life, for that will only delay God's plan. All your Bible knowledge, musical abilities and money cannot equip you for God's service. Brokenness is essential. Jacob could become an Israel only when he was broken. Moses could become a leader and a prophet only when he was broken.

Chapter 2: Here we read of the time when Moses goes out to deliver the Israelites from the Egyptians. He sees an Egyptian beating a Hebrew (2:11) and he beats the Egyptian to death. Can you imagine how strong Moses was to kill a man just with his bare hands? If he had continued killing the Egyptians at this rate – one by one – how many years do you think it would have taken to kill all the millions of Egyptians? Moses would have died before all the Egyptians were killed. But when God had broken him by the age of 80, all Moses had to do was to lift up his rod over the Red Sea, and in a moment the entire Egyptian army was buried under the Red Sea. That's the difference between what a man can accomplish in his own strength and what a broken man with God's power can accomplish.

The message in the Scriptures right from the beginning is this: If you want to build Jerusalem, the true church, you have to be broken. You have to be humbled by God through circumstances and through people. If you don't rebel in those circumstances, God can do a quick work in you. I have seen a lot of zealous young people who know the Bible in their heads and who think they can go out and serve God. And they go out and serve God in their strength. Twenty or thirty years later they are frustrated, discouraged, critical, and blame this person and that person for their failures. They have accomplished nothing and wasted their lives. Why? Just one reason – they never allowed God to break them.

The Bible says that "*the godly man's life is exciting*" (*Proverbs 14:14 - Living*). I am 76 years old now and have been a child of God for over 56 years – and I can honestly testify that my Christian life has been exciting. I have been through many trials, but in all of them I have experienced

God in exciting ways. I am excited to be able to live for God and serve Him. Serving the Lord is the best thing that anyone can do in this world. I don't have a complaint against anyone in the whole world. Nobody has ever succeeded in doing harm to me so far. Many have tried to harm me and some of my co-workers have betrayed me. But *everything they did* has only worked for my good – as it says in *Romans 8:28*. So I actually thank God for them, because God used their evil actions to make me more Christ-like – that was the good that came out of their evil actions. God broke me in my younger days and He is still breaking me today. This is the way of fruitfulness. The more we are broken, the more God can use us to be a blessing to others.

We read in *Chapter 17* that it was only when the rock was *smitten* that the waters begin to flow. If the rock is not smitten, the waters will not flow. When the woman who brought perfume in an alabaster vial *broke it* at Jesus' feet, only then did the sweet odour fill the house. No-one could smell that until the vial was broken. When Jesus took the bread and blessed it, nothing happened. But when He broke it, five thousand were fed. What is the message in all these examples? Brokenness is the way of blessing. When the atom is split what power is released! It can give electricity to a whole city! Imagine the power that is released when a small atom – so small that you can't even see it under a microscope – is broken. The message in nature as well as in the Bible is just this: *God's power is released through brokenness*. May that message grip your life.

God gripped me with that message in 1963, when I was seeking God for the baptism in the Holy Spirit and for His power in my ministry. God showed me then that the way of brokenness was the way of power. And I never want to forget that all my life. I want to encourage you to learn that lesson when you are still young.

God made a promise here through Moses to the people. He told all those elders and leaders of Israel (3:17), "*I will bring you up out of the land of Egypt into the land of the Canaanites*." There were two promises there.

"*I will bring you out of Egypt.*"

"*I will bring you into Canaan.*"

Only the first was fulfilled. The second was not fulfilled for those elders who heard it. Out of all those elders who heard the promise of God, "I will bring you out of Egypt, I will bring you into Canaan," none entered Canaan. Only half of God's promise was fulfilled because those elders did not respond in faith when the time came to enter Canaan (*Numbers 13*). God's *promises* are not fulfilled, until we respond in *faith*. It's like an electric switch. At a switch, two wires are connected next to each other, but not touching each other. The moment you put the switch on, those wires touch and the lights come on. *God's promise and our faith* are the two wires. They may be very close to each other. But if they don't touch,

nothing happens. The moment they touch, power is released. You can hear about God's promise and you can understand it, but it is only when your faith reaches out and says, "Yes, I believe that will be fulfilled in my life," that it is fulfilled. Out there at the borders of Canaan, only Joshua and Caleb believed God's promise, and so only Joshua and Caleb experienced it.

Chapter 4: We read here about God calling Moses. In order to encourage Moses and to teach him some lessons, God gave him three signs. When Moses told the Lord, "They will not believe what I tell them," the Lord asked him, "What is in your hand?" Note that! The Lord always begins with *what is already in our hands*. We don't have to go looking for something that we don't have. Elisha asked the widow, "What do you have in your house?" She replied "Only a jar of oil". Elisha said, "*That's enough. With that pot of oil all your problems can be solved.*" (2 Kings 4:2, 3). Moses had only his shepherd's staff in his hand. That was enough. When God is with you, miracles can happen with even a shepherd's staff.

For the *first sign*, God told Moses to throw the staff down. It became a serpent and Moses fled from it (*verse 3*). The Lord said, "Don't be scared. Stretch out your hand and take it by the tail." He caught it and it became a staff in his hand again. What was the message there?

First of all, that Satan is far closer to us than we think – as close as that staff was to Moses. Do you think Satan is far away from us? No. He is always nearby to cause misunderstandings between husband and wife, and between co-workers, etc. But we can overcome Satan! We are not to be afraid of him, for he is a defeated foe. God will crush him under our feet. One of the first lessons we need to learn when we serve the Lord is *not to be afraid of Satan*. Satan has got his citadels and his forts, but we don't run away from him. We are to run away from temptation (2 Timothy 2:22), but Satan has to run away from us (James 4:7). In Jesus' mighty Name the very thing that Satan uses to try and frighten us, will become a rod of authority in our hand – to split the seas and to lead God's people forward.

As God's servants we need His authority – not Bible-knowledge first, but Divine authority. I would rather have spiritual authority than Bible knowledge any day. The first thing Moses needed was authority over the enemy. It was Satan who was enslaving the Israelites through his servant Pharaoh. And Moses needed to pick him up by the tail, without any fear. Satan should never be able to make us afraid of him.

For the *second sign*, the Lord asked Moses to put his hand into his bosom (*verse 6*). When Moses did that and took out his hand, it was full of leprosy.

The second thing we need to understand as the Lord's servants, is that nothing good dwells in our flesh (*Romans 7:18*). Selfishness and corruption are found everywhere within our flesh. If you think that is not true, just put your hand inside your flesh and see! Ask God to give you light on the leprosy that dwells inside. If you don't learn this important lesson, you will go around condemning people, as though they had a flesh that was worse than yours. Nobody can commit a sin that we are incapable of. If we have not sinned in the same way, it is only because of God's mercy and because we never faced the same intensity of temptation. We are no better than our fellow-human-beings. If you think you are better than any human being on the face of this earth, I want to tell you that you are totally unfit to be a servant of the Lord.

For the *third sign* The Lord asked Moses to pour out some water from the Nile and it would turn into blood (*verse 9*). The River Nile was the precious god of the Egyptians and blood is a picture of death.

So the spiritual meaning of this sign is that all the things of this earth that worldly people worship and run after, we must pour out to death. A servant of the Lord must be crucified to the world and the world must be crucified to him. The world is no longer like water to me (essential for life), but like blood that we are not even tempted to drink. We would rather be thirsty than drink blood. That's the way we need to see everything in this world.

These are the three essential qualifications for any servant of God.

Now Moses agrees to go to Pharaoh. He is equipped with Divine authority and he goes forth as a man whom God Himself has trained over a period of 80 years. Moses was the one man on the face of the earth at that time who was absolutely essential for God's purposes. Today God has many servants. So even if one man fails him, another can do the job. But at that time, God had only one man – Moses. All His purposes depended on that one man. But before that man could meet Pharaoh, he had to learn one more *very important* lesson.

We read in 4:24 that *the Lord tried to kill Moses* as Moses was going to Egypt. Now if it was written there that *Satan had tried to kill Moses*, we could understand that. But why in the world would God Himself want to kill the one man who was most essential for his purposes on earth? Because there was disobedience in Moses' own house. Moses had married a non-Israelite woman; and yielding to his wife's wishes, he had not circumcised his son. Moses' wife must have refused to permit that, and Moses, "*for the sake of peace at home*", must have humbly yielded to her wishes – especially since he was staying in her father's house. Moses' wife was the boss in their home! But God can never permit such misplaced authority in the home of any of His servants. And so God told

him, as it were, “*Moses, you cannot lead Israel out of Egypt, if you cannot lead your own home first.*”

The Bible says, “*If a man cannot run his own home how can he run God’s house?*” (1 Timothy 3:5). We must first be head in our own home before we can lead God’s people. I have seen men who claim to be servants of God who are scared of their own wives. How can such men serve God? If we cannot bring up our own children (when they are living in our home) in a godly way, how can we ever bring up God’s children in the church in a godly way?

This was such a serious matter that God was telling Moses, “Even if you are the most important man for Me on earth, if you don’t obey me, I will kill you. I cannot compromise my principles.” Moses’ wife understood immediately why her husband was dying. So she took a sharp stone and cut off her son’s foreskin and angrily said to Moses, “You are a bridegroom of blood to me.” Moses did one wise thing after that – he sent his wife home and carried on with his ministry! He did not want any more problems with her being around him.

You see how God is strict with His servants. He will permit other people to compromise in many ways. But if you are one of His choice servants, He will require obedience from you in the smallest of matters. He will look into areas of your life that He will not bother about with others. If you have borrowed ten rupees or a book from someone and haven’t yet returned it, if you are a choice servant of God, He will keep on troubling your conscience until you return it. He doesn’t deal like that with everyone, but only with His special servants. Most Christians are compromisers who live for themselves. God just leaves them alone. If you are a choice servant of God, He won’t allow you to write even one false statement in a report about your work. He will not allow you to be unfaithful with even one rupee. Other believers may be unfaithful with millions, and God will ignore them. But not with you. Do you want to be a choice servant of God? Do you want God to watch over you with such a jealous care? Then you must be willing to be rebuked by Him for small matters.

Such was the man who finally stood before Pharaoh. When you can stand before God with a clear conscience, you can stand even before the world’s most powerful men. For what is Pharaoh in God’s eyes, but a pile of dust with breath in his nostrils. God needs men like Moses in India – men who live before His face. Elijah told King Ahab, “*I live before God’s face*”. So he was not afraid of Ahab.

Dear brothers, we don’t have to go buttering Cabinet Ministers, and members of parliament, like many preachers are doing today. They think that is the only way to survive in India today. That’s because they don’t know God. I agree that *if you don’t know God*, then that is the only way

to survive. But that was not how Moses survived or how Elijah survived. They lived before God, and God backed them up.

Do you want to be a servant of God like them? Don't look at the preachers you see in the world today. Look at the servants of God in the Scriptures. God is looking today for men who don't care for man's approval, who don't want any man's money, who don't seek for backing from any earthly authority, but who want to be backed by God alone. That's how Moses stood before Pharaoh. And God backed up Moses completely.

Listen to today's preachers. I have heard many of them. Most of them have bored me to death. Can you say that such preachers are being backed up by God, who have no anointing in their words and no authority in their lives but are wishy-washy compromisers who seek to please men? Paul said, "*If I seek to please a single man I cannot be a servant of Christ*" (*Galatians 1:10*).

Don't ever seek to please man. Seek to please God. Let men treat you like dirt. The apostles were treated like garbage. Jesus was treated like garbage. But they lived before God's face alone, and God backed them up fully. That's the only way I want to serve God.

Moses stood before Pharaoh and God confirmed Moses' word with plagues of blood, frogs, lice, insects, livestock-diseases, boils, hail, locusts, darkness and finally the death of the eldest boy in every house – ten plagues in all. Some of those plagues were duplicated by the tricks of the Egyptian magicians. But their magic tricks failed after a certain point (*7:11; 8:7, 18*).

Religious people (who have a form of godliness without its power) have always opposed godly men in every age, just like Jannes and Jambres opposed Moses (*2 Timothy 3:5, 8*). The religious false prophets opposed Elijah and Jeremiah in their day. And the religious Pharisees opposed John the Baptist and Jesus and Paul in their day.

Throughout church history, professional preachers have always stood against the prophets whom God has raised up in different lands. It has always been the same story: God raises up a man to be His prophet. And the professional preachers (with their titles and their degree-certificates) will oppose him tooth and nail. But their attacks will not make him change his message one bit. Ultimately, after many long years, the prophet will be vindicated by God Himself, like Moses was.

If you want to be a man of God, don't ever seek to please the professional religious establishment that does not know God. The knowledge of God is the most important thing we need. I will respect a man whose life and words demonstrate that He knows God, that he lives before God's face and that he understands God's ways.

In *Chapter 12*, we read about the deliverance of the Israelites from Egypt. They were told to use a bunch of hyssop and to put the blood of an unblemished lamb on the lintel over their door and on their door-posts, to escape the angel of death. That is a picture of faith applying the blood of Christ to our hearts. Hyssop was a common plant that was easily found in Egypt. Faith too is very easy to find. The Israelites left Egypt on the 14th day of the first month of their new calendar – and the Lord Jesus was crucified on *the same date* about 1500 years later. God looked into the future and saw the day on which the Pharisees would crucify Jesus and chose that date to deliver the Israelites from Egypt!

How were the Israelites delivered? Not by their good life or their good works. God did not go checking inside each house to see how each person there had lived during the previous 30 years. No. He only checked to see if they had faith to put the blood of an innocent lamb on their doors. When they dipped that hyssop into the blood and put it on their doors, they were saying, “I am not trusting in my good works or my religious activities to protect me. I am trusting in the blood of this innocent lamb. I believe therefore that the angel of death will not enter my house.” That’s the way of salvation. No man can boast saying, “I was saved because I lived a good life.” No. The man who had lived a good life and the man who lived a bad life were both saved that night in Egypt, by the blood of the lamb. If somebody in Israel had thought, “I’ve lived a good life. So I don’t believe God will judge me,” and therefore didn’t put the blood of the lamb above his door, what do you think would have happened? The angel of death would have come in and killed his eldest son as with all the other homes in Egypt.

I know that many people have taken advantage of the truth of salvation by grace through faith in the blood of Christ, and lived carelessly saying, “It doesn’t matter how we live.” But that does not negate the truth that salvation is still not by works but by grace through faith.

Ephesians 2:9 says, “*Not as a result of works, lest any man should boast.*” But then the very next verse says that after we are saved, God has created us “unto good works”. So the full truth is this:

We cannot be saved by any number of good works that we may do.

But if our “faith” does not produce good works *after* we are saved, that would prove that our faith was not genuine.

That’s what James says: “*Faith without (good) works is dead*” (*James 2:26*).

After putting the blood on the door, the Israelites were all commanded to eat unleavened bread that night. That is a picture of our feeding on Christ Himself, the Bread of Life. It’s not enough that we trust in His blood, we must feed on His life too. We are “*reconciled to God by His death and saved by His life*” (*Romans 5:10*).

They were also told to eat the bread in their travelling clothes – with a readiness to leave Egypt at a moment's notice. That is how we are to live in this world too – always ready to go, as soon as Jesus calls us up to meet Him. This world is not our home. We must be ready to leave at any time.

I want you to see the righteousness of God in 12:35: “*The sons of Israel requested from the Egyptians articles of silver and articles of gold and clothing.*” Why was that? Does God ask His children to demand money like that from unbelievers? It’s certainly not right *for us* to do so. But it was right for those Israelites, because the Egyptians had made 600,000 Israelite men to work for them for four centuries and never paid them their wages. Now God was ensuring that they got their full wages for 430 years, before they left Egypt!! God’s righteousness will catch up with everyone who has cheated others – even if it is 430 years later! No-one can escape the laws of a just God. In these little things, we see the righteousness of God in the Scriptures.

When the Israelites reached the Red Sea, they discovered that they were hemmed in on every side. Behind them the Egyptian army was pursuing after them, on either side they saw huge mountains, and in front of them was the Red Sea. There was only one direction in which they could look – *UP*. When we are in tight circumstances like that, deliverance can come to us only from one place – heaven.

The Psalmist said, “*I lift up my eye to the hills. Is my help going to come from there? No. The Lord who made heaven and earth is going to help me*” (*Psalms 121:1, 2*).

The Lord told Moses, “*Stand still and see the salvation of the Lord which He will accomplish for you. The Lord will fight for you while you keep silent*” (14:13, 14). The Lord split open the Red Sea and the Israelites walked across on dry land. The sea-floor beneath them was not even *wet* – it was *dry* (*Exodus 14:21, 22*)!

1 Corinthians 10:2 says that their going through the sea is a picture of *baptism in water*. A pillar of cloud and fire also came down from heaven enveloping the Israelites and giving them light and protecting them from their enemies. That was a picture of the *baptism in the Holy Spirit and fire*.

Those Israelites had a 3-fold experience in their deliverance. They were redeemed by the blood of the Passover lamb, they were immersed in the Red Sea, and they were immersed in the cloud that came down from heaven. Those were their initial *three* experiences. And it was exactly like that for the early Christians – as described in the *Acts of the Apostles*. They too were redeemed by the blood of Christ, baptised in water and baptised in the Holy Spirit.

Why did the pillar of cloud *and fire* come upon those Israelites from heaven? It was not to give them a thrilling experience that they could testify to. No. It was to lead them to the Promised Land, where they could conquer the giants and occupy their God-given land.

Today many seek for the *baptism in the Holy Spirit and fire* merely in order to have an experience. But God's purpose is that through the Spirit's power we might enter the Promised Land of victory and conquer the giants of lust, anger, dirty thoughts, jealousy, bitterness, love of money etc. that have ruled over us for many years.

Canaan belonged to the Israelites, and not to those giants. God, Who owns the whole earth, had promised it to the seed of Abraham 430 years earlier. Our body too belongs to the Lord and not to the dirty lusts that have ruled over it. Many believers have not understood that the main purpose of the baptism in the Holy Spirit is to recapture our body for the Lord – because Satan has blinded their eyes to this truth. Jesus told His apostles that through the power that they receive from the Spirit they would **be** His witnesses – not just *bear witness* to Him with their mouths, but **BE** His witnesses by their lives (Acts 1:8). Our body is now to be a pure temple for the Holy Spirit where God can be glorified through the Spirit's power (1 Corinthians 6:19, 20). Satan has not blinded the eyes of believers to the truth of redemption through the blood of Christ or to the truth of baptism in water. But he has blinded most of them from understanding *the main purpose of the baptism in the Holy Spirit*.

The Egyptian army was then drowned in that Red Sea. Psalm 106:12 says that when the Israelites saw the Egyptians dead, **then** they praised the Lord. The man who walks by sight can praise God *only when* he gets the answer to his prayer, when he sees his enemies *actually drowned*. But the man who walks by faith says, "*Lord, You have prepared a table before me in the presence of my enemies*" (Psalms 23:5). The enemies are still there. But we sit with the Lord feasting at His table, because we know the Lord will deal with our enemies. Meanwhile, He anoints our head with oil and our cups run over with praise (Psalms 23:5). To praise God *after* we see the answer to our prayers is easy and is an old-covenant life. The new covenant Christian praises God in faith, *before he sees the answer*.

Satan is still alive today, but he has been defeated. So we are not afraid of him. Neither are we afraid of his agents in the world (of any religion) who may try to harm us. *They cannot touch a hair on our heads without God's permission.* God may allow them to kill us perhaps. That's all right, because God allowed Satan's agents to kill Jesus, James, Peter and Paul. All the apostles were killed except John – but only when God's time for each of them had come – after each of them had finished their earthly ministry. We serve the same God and so we are not afraid.

Israel in the Wilderness

We read of Israel in the wilderness in *Chapter 15* onwards. When they came to the bitter waters of Marah (verse 23), they began to complain. This was again a test of their faith in God. God was asking them, “*Can you trust Me when you come to the bitter waters, that I have provided a solution for that too, just as at the Red Sea? Or will you distrust Me again and grumble and complain?*” The Israelites had just praised God for delivering them from the Egyptians. But here we see that they started grumbling again. The man who walks by sight grumbles and complains again and again. The man who walks by faith constantly praises God and thanks Him.

Exodus 15 begins with the Israelites praising God and ends with their grumbling against Him. This pattern was repeated again and again by the Israelites in the wilderness. The “*sine wave*” (in mathematics) that goes up and down forever, is a perfect description of the lives of most believers – praising God when they get what they want, complaining when something goes wrong, thanking God again when they have got over that problem, and then doubting again when the next problem arises. This is because most believers live by sight and not by faith – exactly like the Israelites. On Sunday morning they praise God aloud in their meetings (at times in *other* tongues). But from Sunday afternoon onwards, their speech is different, this time in their *mother* tongue. It is anger, grumbling and complaining – both in their homes and their offices!! Then the next Sunday the sine wave goes up and they start praising God again. After that, the wave goes down again!! This is certainly not how God intended His new-covenant children to live. Cannot the Holy Spirit who gives a person the gift of *other* tongues control his speech in his *mother* tongue as well? He certainly can. The Bible says, “*Rejoice in the Lord always. In everything give thanks*” (*Philippians 4:4; Ephesians 5:20*). That is the will of God for us at all times, in the new covenant. But to do that we must live by faith. *We must believe that God has already planned a solution for every problem that we ever face.*

When the Israelites complained to Moses, he cried to the Lord, and the Lord said, “*The solution to the problem is right there – in front of you*” (verse 25). The Lord showed him a tree. Moses cut down the tree and put it into the water, and the water was made sweet.

Who planted that tree in the wilderness? Was it some man or God? Undoubtedly God! Men don’t plant trees in the wilderness. God had planted that tree near Marah, perhaps 100 years earlier, because He knew that 100 years later His children would come to Marah and find its waters bitter. So He had actually planned a solution for their problem 100 years in advance. Do you realise that the same God has planned solutions for all your problems also, long before you face those problems? To walk by faith is to believe that. No problem can suddenly crop up today that takes God by surprise. Not only does God already know in

advance what problems the devil is preparing for us, He has also made a solution for all of them, in advance! So you can face every problem boldly. I can testify to the truth of this, after having faced numerous problems in my 56 years as a believer. *I have never yet faced a problem for which God had not planned a solution!* He planted seeds for trees, long before I came to the *Marahs* in my life – to make the waters sweet for me. Let me urge you also to walk by faith in our wonderful, loving Father who is always “*silently planning for us in love*” (*Zephaniah 3:17* - paraphrase) – and you will overcome *all* your problems *constantly*. Never again will complaining and grumbling and anger be found in your mouth, but only praise and thanks to God.

In *Chapter 17*, we see the Israelites coming to yet another place where there was no water to drink. The *sine wave* goes down and they start grumbling again. Again the Lord shows them His solution that is right in front of their eyes. He tells Moses, “*Look at that rock in front of you. Smite it*” (*verse 6*). Moses smites the rock and the waters begin to flow. When I first read that passage, I used to picture a little rock and a little trickle of water coming out of it and everybody drinking. But do you know how many people were thirsty there in the wilderness? 600,000 men, between the ages of 20 and 60, alone. Then there were many older men, younger men and women and children? There must have been at least 2 million people there. How much water do you think 2 million people need to drink? Was it just a little trickle? No! It had to be many rivers flowing in many directions, if all those 2 million people had to drink fairly quickly. If those two million people had to stand in line to drink from a small trickle, many would have died of thirst, before they ever got to the front of the line! No. There were rivers there in the wilderness that flowed from the smitten rock. This is the picture that Jesus gave of the Spirit-filled life that flows from a crucified man (“a smitten rock”) in *John 7:37–39*.

When Jesus was smitten on Calvary, that prepared the way for Pentecost. Calvary always precedes Pentecost. When we are baptised in the Holy Spirit, rivers of living water *don't* start flowing from us *immediately*. If we are honest, we will admit that. God has to do a work of smiting and crucifixion in us thereafter to break us, before the rivers can begin to flow from us to bless others. God looks for ordinary, good-for-nothing, weak, stupid people like you and me whom He can make a blessing to millions on the face of the earth. But it all depends on whether we will allow God to smite us and break us or not.

Immediately after the rivers began to flow, we read in *verse 8*, “**Then Amalek came.**” Amalek is a picture of our flesh, throughout the Old Testament. The Spirit and the flesh are in constant conflict. As soon as the rivers began to flow Amalek appeared to fight against God’s people. As soon as Jesus was anointed with the Holy Spirit, Satan came to

tempt Him (*Luke 3:22; 4:1, 2*). Amalek was finally defeated by Moses and Joshua working together. Moses lifted up his hands in prayer on the hilltop and Joshua fought the Amalekites in the valley. It is this combination that will enable us to overcome the flesh too – the sword of the Spirit (God's Word) used directly against the enemy (as Jesus used it in the wilderness) and our hands lifted up in prayer to God (recognising our weakness and helplessness).

When Moses' hands were tired, Aaron and Hur held up his hands (*17:12*). We also need Aarons and Hurs to help us out when we are weak and tired. One of the great truths that I have discovered in my Christian life is this: *I can't make it alone. I need my fellow-believers in the body of Christ.* If I am standing here today without having fallen by the wayside many years ago, and without having compromised on my convictions, one of the reasons is that I have brothers and sisters who have encouraged me, prayed for me and exhorted me, constantly. I have many Aarons and Hurs who have held up my hands through the years and I have learnt to value them immensely. Aaron and Hur were not as gifted as Moses and they did not know God in the way Moses knew God. But Moses still needed them. Aaron was at least a leader. But Hur was an unknown man who never appears again in the Scriptures! But Moses, the great man of God, needed the help of even this unknown man. Don't ever despise the weak unknown brothers in the body of Christ. You need them, even if you are the greatest man of God in the world. Even Jesus asked stumbling Peter, James and John to hold up His hands in Gethsemane! "*Even the Head (Christ) does not say to the feet* (the lowest members in the Body), *I don't need you*" (*1 Corinthians 12:21*).

God's Laws

In *Chapters 19 to 24*, we read of many of the laws that God gave the Israelites. The ten commandments are listed in *20:1–17*. There is only one commandment among them that has a promise attached to it (and this is also mentioned in *Ephesians 6:1, 3*), "*Honour your father and mother that it may go well with you and that you may live long on the earth.*". This is the one commandment that we must teach all our children in our homes.

After giving the Israelites the ten commandments, Moses says to them, "*Don't be afraid. These commandments are only to test you*" (verse 20). The people had already told Moses earlier that they would obey God in everything He commanded (19:8). So the Lord gave them these 10 commandments. The Israelites then spent the next 1500 years disobeying every one of those commandments – thus proving that man can never keep God's laws, even if he wants to. That's why a new covenant was needed. The first covenant (the Law) was faulty (*Hebrews 8:7–13*).

Immediately after giving them the ten commandments, God gave the Israelites a beautiful parable in *Chapter 21* to teach them the spirit

in which they were to keep His commandments. There he speaks of a Hebrew slave who is set free by his master because he has finished his six years of compulsory slavery. God's law had stated that in the seventh year all Hebrew slaves must be released. But if in the seventh year this slave comes to his master and says, "I love you, my master. I don't want to go out free. I want to continue serving you – no longer as a slave in bondage, but now freely out of love" (*verse 5*). And he continues serving his master forever thereafter.

It is interesting to note that this comes immediately after the giving of the ten commandments. It was to teach the Israelites that what God really wanted from them was not slavish, external obedience to the *letter* of the law, but joyful, loving obedience from the heart to the *spirit* of the law. Jesus said, "*If you love Me, keep My commandments*" – implying that if we did not love Him, He didn't want our obedience under the new covenant. The old covenant spirit was summed up in the ten commandments: "*Thou shalt, thou shalt not, thou shalt, thou shalt not...*". The Israelites had no choice. But Jesus came saying, "**IF** any man wants to follow Me, let him...".

In 15:26, God said to the Israelites, "*If you will give earnest heed to the voice of the Lord your God and do what is right in His sight, and give ear to His commandments, and keep all His statutes, I will put none of the diseases on you which I have put on the Egyptians, for I, the Lord, am your Healer.*" This was not, as some understand it, a promise of healing. It was a promise of something even better than healing – **health**. Don't you think health is better than healing? To get healing you have to be sick first! But the Lord told them that if they obeyed all His laws, they would not even get sick. They would be healthy! This was one reason why He gave them many laws on hygiene. If you are a glutton and you fall sick, you have to blame yourself. There is essentially no difference between a drunkard who dies prematurely because of his addiction to alcohol and a glutton who dies prematurely due to his addiction to good food! God's laws can preserve us in health. You won't need to go and ask God for healing so much, if you begin by obeying His laws. He will keep you in health. You will grow old and be a healthy, old man, not a sick, old man full of sickness caused by tensions and overeating.

In 23:9, we read another law: "*Don't oppress a stranger since you yourselves know the feelings of a stranger, for you also were strangers in the land of Egypt.*" We must be kind and merciful to people, because God has been so kind and merciful to us.

In 31:16, 17, we read about the law on the Sabbath. There are many arguments in the scientific community as to whether the six days in which the earth was remade were six 24-hour days or symbolic days representing millions of years. The answer is very clear here. The Lord

made the earth in six days and He instituted the seventh day of the week as a day of rest.

That *sabbath* however has been fulfilled in Christ (*Colossians 2:16, 17*). So we don't keep the physical sabbath any more now, because, as the Lord said very clearly here, it was a *sign* between Him and the *Israelites alone*.

In *Chapters 32 and 33*, we read of the Israelites worshipping a golden calf, and committing adultery in a feast to their idol. Moses had gone to the top of Mount Sinai and was away from the camp for just forty days. That was enough time for the people to go astray. Aaron was powerless to control them. Israel was preserved in the ways of God by just one man – Moses. As long as He was present in the midst, they feared him and obeyed God's laws. The moment he went away, they fell into sin. It was just one man who preserved those two million people in God's ways for 40 years. This is how it has been throughout the centuries in church history too. During the three years that Paul was present in Ephesus, the wolves could not enter the church. The moment Paul left, the wolves entered in (*Acts 20:29–31*). It was so here in the wilderness too. The moment Moses went away, decay set in. God is looking for men like Moses today who can arrest the decay among His people. God can do more through one man like Moses than through a thousand compromisers like Aaron. When Moses came back to the camp, he once again set matters straight and led the people back to God.

It is here that we read of Moses asking who would be on the Lord's side to stand with him against all the sin in the camp (*Exodus 32:26*). The tribe of Levi alone came out and stood with Moses that day. Moses commanded them to go into the camp and kill all the leaders of the idolatry and not to spare their own relatives in the process. And they went into the camp and did that. That was the reason why the Lord gave the tribe of Levi the privilege of being His priests. That was not an arbitrary choice. He chose them because they chose to stand for Him (See *Deuteronomy 33:8–11* and *Malachi 2:4, 5*). Aaron's grandson Phinehas also acted in the same spirit some years later and God made a covenant of priesthood with him too (*Numbers 25:7–12*). Even today, God appoints as His representatives, those who will deal ruthlessly with sin in the church.

It is here too that we see how much Moses had imbibed of the spirit of Christ, through His long talks with the Lord on the mountain. He goes before the Lord in intercession and says that *he is willing to be sent to hell eternally*, if only God would forgive the sin of the Israelites (*Exodus 32:31, 32*). This is the spirit of Calvary's cross.

It is here also that we read of God Himself telling Moses that a person's name can be blotted out of the book of life, even if it was once in it (*Exodus 32:33*). There are different opinions among Christians on this doctrine. But all arguments that anyone may have are silenced when

we see this warning repeated in the New Testament by the Lord Jesus Himself in *Revelation 3:5* – a warning that we will all do well to take heed to.

In 32:34 and 33:14–16, we read of Moses' passion for *the person* of the Lord. This has always been the hallmark of all godly men. They have a passion for *the Lord Himself* more than for His work. Moses tells the Lord that he and the Israelites will not move from that place if a mere angel from heaven were sent with them. The Lord *Himself* must accompany them. God Who is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him granted Moses that request.

Moses' passion for the Lord is seen further in 33:18 where He prays that he might see the glory of God. God told him that it was impossible for any man to see His face and live. But He would hide Moses in a cleft of a rock (a type of our crucified Lord) and then Moses would be able to see a bit of His glory. That glory, God also said consisted of "*His goodness*" (33:19). Yes, it is *the goodness of God that is His glory*. And when that glory comes into our lives, it will make us do good to both good and evil people, just as Jesus did (*Acts 10:38*).

The Tabernacle

A large part of *Exodus* (Chapters 25 to 31 and 35 to 40) deals with the construction of the tabernacle of God. In our study of Genesis, we saw the origin of the two streams of false and true religion in Cain and Abel that finally ends in *Revelation* as Babylon and Jerusalem. The tabernacle is the seed from which the temple of God came later. It is a picture of the ultimate Jerusalem, the church, the dwelling place of God.

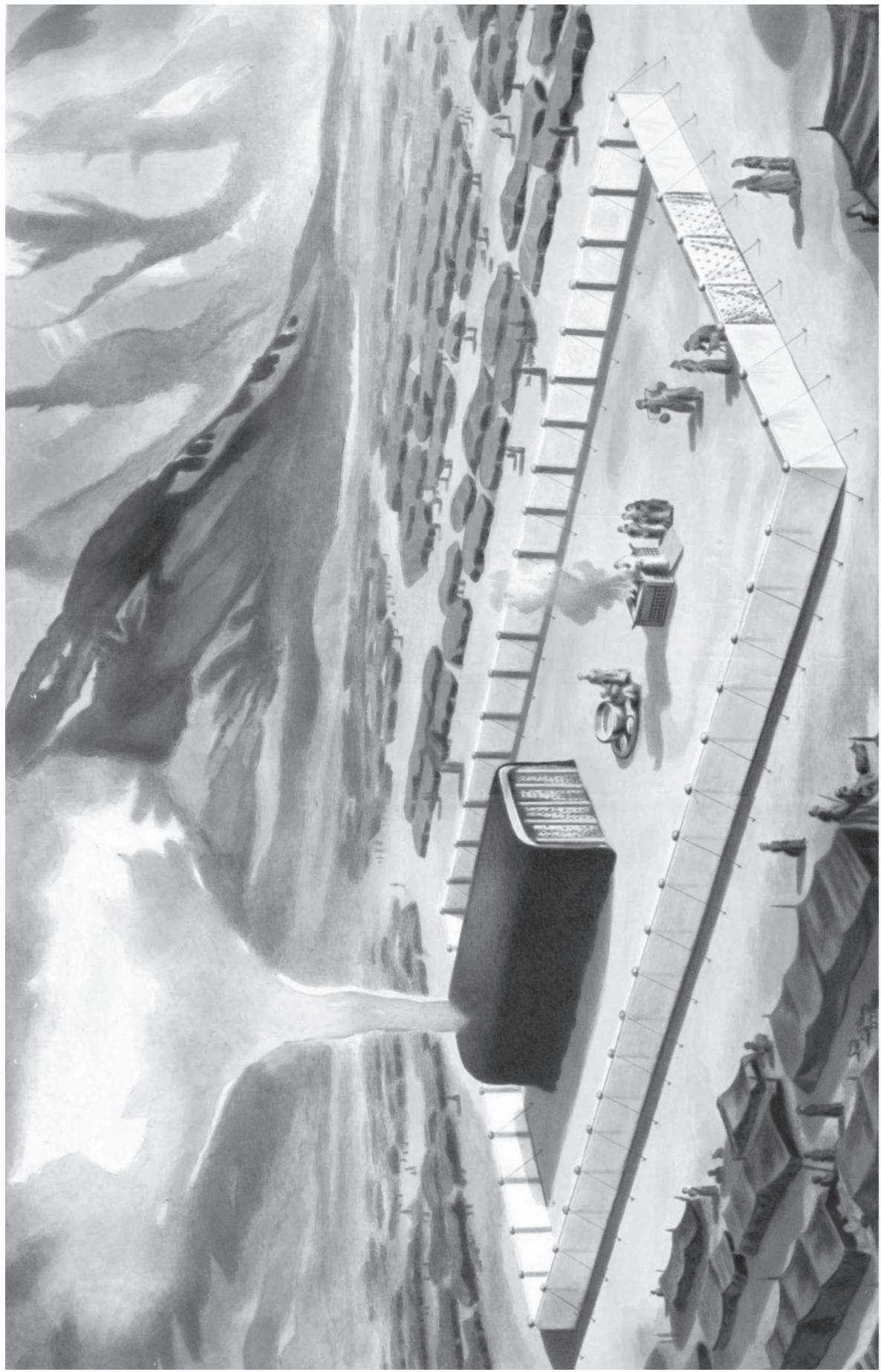
The literal translation of *John 1:14* reads thus: "*The Word became flesh and tabernacled among us*."

So this Old Testament tabernacle was first of all, a picture of Jesus himself, and then of His body the *church*, the dwelling place of God. And also of each of us who are *children of God*, in whom the Holy Spirit dwells.

God was very particular that every part of the tabernacle should be made exactly according to the pattern that He gave Moses (*Exodus 25:9*). God gave Moses specific instructions about the sizes of the different parts of the tabernacle and the materials to be used for each. Many Christians do not realise the need to do everything in the church and in their lives also, exactly as the Lord has commanded in His Word. They allow their human understanding often to decide how far to obey God and where to modify His commands.

Moses had seen the construction of magnificent pyramids in Egypt. But he did not modify God's simple pattern of the tabernacle to make it

The Tabernacle in the Wilderness



more appealing to human eyes. In every detail, he constructed it exactly as the Lord had commanded him (*Exodus 39:1–40:33*). That was why the glory of God filled it. If Moses had been given this pattern when he was 40 years old, he may have tried to ‘improve’ on God’s pattern with his Egyptian wisdom! The tabernacle would certainly have looked more impressive then – but *the glory of God would have been absent*. This is what has happened in many churches that have modified the standards of God’s Word to please their congregations.

God’s thoughts and ways are far higher than ours (*Isaiah 55:8, 9*). Those who do not realise this will always add their human ideas to God’s commandments. Only those who are eager for the glory of God to be manifested in their church will seek God’s perfect pattern and will for their lives. Our Lord lived His entire life on earth fulfilling minute details of Old Testament prophecies that had been made concerning His birth, life and death. He was careful at all times to fulfil everything that was written “*in the Book*” concerning Him (*Hebrews 10:7*). That was why the glory of God was manifest in Him always.

When God gave instructions for the construction of the tabernacle in 25:8, He told Moses, “*Let them construct a sanctuary for Me, that I may dwell among them*”. This is our primary calling – to be a holy dwelling place for God. All other things – even good things – must be treated as secondary. If we lose sight of this calling, it will be easy to be occupied with secondary matters like evangelism, Bible-teaching, charity programmes etc. all of which are good in themselves. But if the church does not become a holy dwelling place of God, we have failed in our primary purpose. Does God feel at home in your heart? In your home? In your church? Those are the most important questions. Not “How much are you doing for God?” or “How much are you helping other people?”

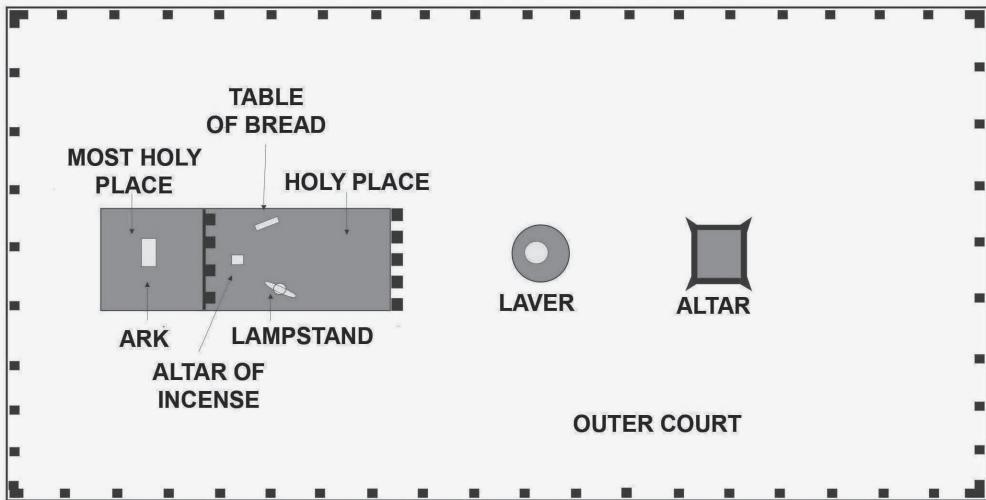
It was when Moses was alone with God on the mountain, fasting and praying for forty days that he saw the pattern for the tabernacle (*Exodus 25:40*). If we are in too much of a hurry to wait on God today, we cannot expect to understand God’s perfect will and pattern for His church.

God called Bezalel and Oholiab to build the tabernacle and we see that He gave them all the supernatural abilities that they needed to do this task – *through the Holy Spirit* (*Exodus 31:1–3*). This teaches us that if God calls us to build His church today, He will give us also the supernatural gifts of the Holy Spirit that we need to complete that work.

The Parts of the Tabernacle

Notice the order in which God gave the instructions for the construction of the tabernacle.

While human wisdom would have started with outlining the dimensions of the tabernacle first, before going into the smaller details, God began first of all by giving Moses the details of *the ark of the covenant*.



The ark was a small piece of furniture to be placed in the smallest room of the tabernacle – the most holy place (*Exodus 25:10*). But that room was where the glory of God was going to be present. And so that came first. In other words God started with Himself. It's just like we saw in Genesis: "*In the beginning God.*"

God's ways are not man's ways. In every church this is where we must begin: *With God*. Not with activity but with God in the Most Holy Place. We must begin with the things that are "*most holy*" in the Christian life.

Adam spent his very first day in fellowship with God and only then did he go to work in the garden. So must it be with us too – God first and *then His work* – whether evangelism, or teaching or social work or whatever. God first and *then doctrinal matters*. It is because we don't follow this order that there is so much strife and disunity among us.

When the Lord taught His disciples to pray, He did *not* teach them to begin by asking the Father to forgive their sins, even though that was so vital for fellowship with the Father. He taught them to first pray that *God's Name* would be hallowed, that *His kingdom* would come and that *His will* would be done. This is what is implied in God starting with the ark. God will always back anyone who gives Him first place in his life, his home and his church.

The tabernacle is a picture of man. The tabernacle had three parts – *most holy place, holy place and outer court*. This corresponds exactly to the three parts of man's being – *spirit, soul and body* (*1 Thessalonians 5:23*).

In the tabernacle, God dwelt in the *most holy place* showing that He seeks to dwell in our *spirit* – the deepest part of our being. He does

not dwell in our soul (*mind* and *emotions*). Understanding this clearly can save us from a lot of deception. For example, we will realise that an *emotional* meeting may not necessarily be a *spiritual* meeting, for God may *not* have been there at all, because God does not dwell in our emotions. Likewise a meeting where we studied God's Word *intellectually* may not have been a *spiritual* meeting either, because God does not dwell in our minds. The soul is as different from the spirit as the ear is from the eye. Just as a man can have good hearing and bad eyesight, a man can have a brilliant intellect and yet be dead in his spirit. Likewise, a man can be very emotional in praising God and still be totally impure in his heart. The soul and spirit are totally different and God does not dwell in our soul. Knowing this truth can also save us from a lot of psychological, emotional, and logical deception being practised by many preachers in their preaching today.

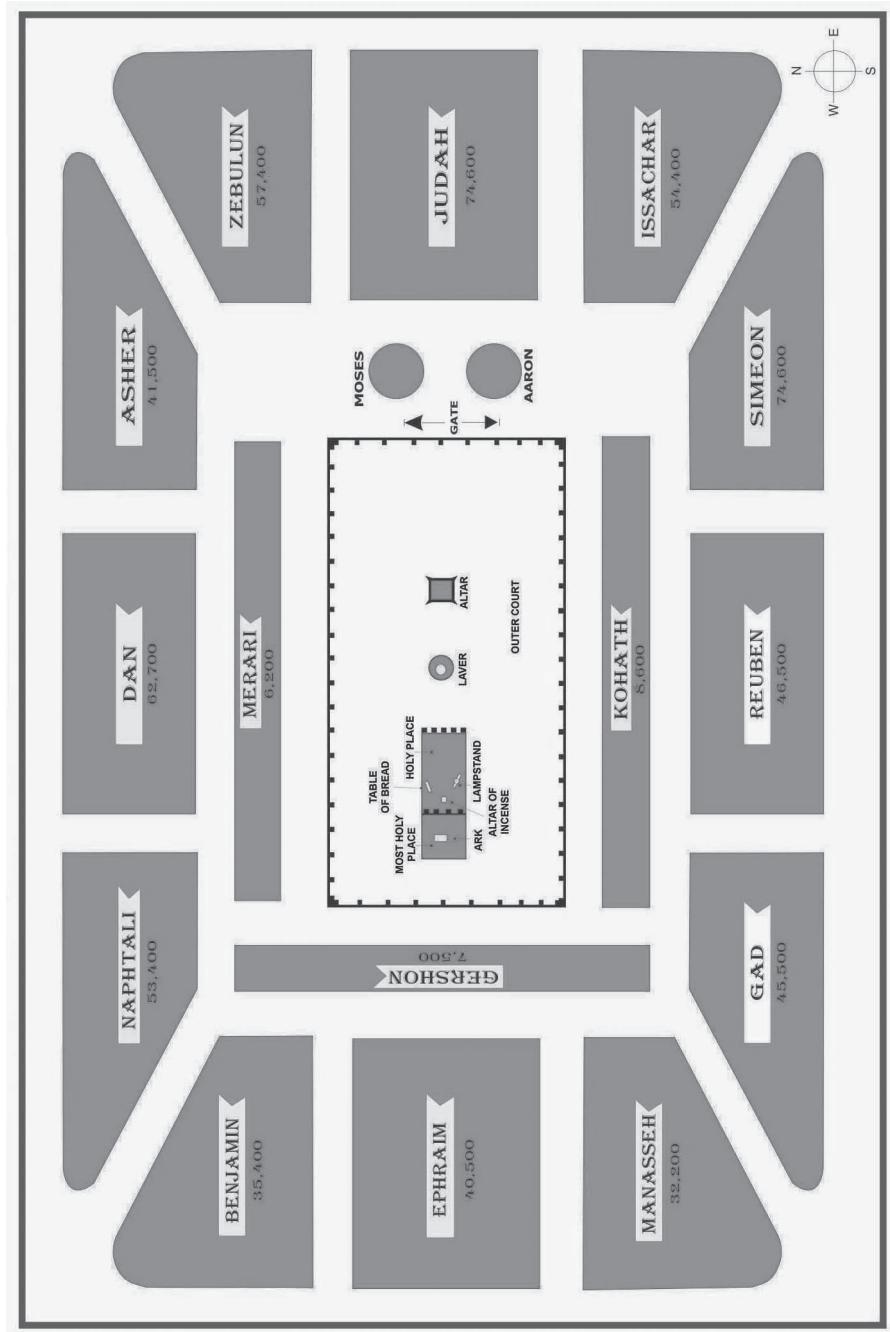
The tabernacle had an *outer court* that was 150 feet long by 75 feet wide. It was very small compared to the rest of the camp, just like the church is a very small fellowship of people, when compared to the rest of the world.

At the far end of the outer court was a tent – 45 feet long and 15 feet wide. This was divided into two parts – *the holy place* (30 feet by 15 feet) and *the most holy place* (a 15-foot square). The height of the tent was 15 feet. This made the most holy place into a cube, having the same length, breadth and height.

In *Revelation 21:16*, we read that the heavenly Jerusalem (the bride of Christ) is also a cube – 1500 miles long, wide and high. This symbolises that those whose depth (inner life) is not equal to their external life – the front that they project to others – cannot live in God's presence. God rejects hypocrites who give an appearance of spirituality to others, but who have no corresponding inner life (depth).

The tabernacle was surrounded by the camp of Israel on all four sides. There was a specific place for each tribe. The three sons of Levi – Merari, Gershon and Kohath – looked after the tabernacle and their tents were closest to the tabernacle. When the tribe of Levi was taken out of the reckoning of Israel's tribes, the tribe of Joseph was split into two tribes – Manasseh and Ephraim. So there were still 12 tribes.

The *outer court* of the tabernacle is described in 27:9–19. A sheet of fine white linen – symbolising the righteousness of Christ – enclosed it. This teaches us that the thing that separates those inside the church from those outside, is not a higher level of *human* righteousness, but the fact that those inside are clothed with the righteousness of Christ. The white linen also symbolises the simplicity that should characterise the church. Babylon the harlot, on the other hand, is depicted in *Revelation* as grandly decked – in contrast to the simplicity found in the bride of Christ (compare *Revelation 17:4* with *19:8*).



The Camp of The Israelites

There was *only one entrance* to the tabernacle – a 30-foot wide curtain on the eastern side, by which alone anyone could enter. This symbolised Christ being the one and only way to the Father. One entered the tabernacle with his back to the sun (in the east), indicating thereby his rejection of the worship of the sun (that was common in Egypt and all over the world at that time). Unfortunately, there are Christians who still face east today, when they pray – and especially at their “*sunrise services*” on “*Easter*” morning! The devil has cleverly brought them full circle back, to worship the sun-god of the Egyptians!

In the outer court, there were two items – the *altar of sacrifice* and the *laver*.

The tent had a curtain at the entrance to the holy place. Between the holy place and the most holy place, was another thick curtain (“*veil*” – *Hebrews 10:20*). This was the veil (duplicated in the temple in Jerusalem) that was rent in two, when Jesus died on the cross, indicating that the way to fellowship with the Father was now open to all.

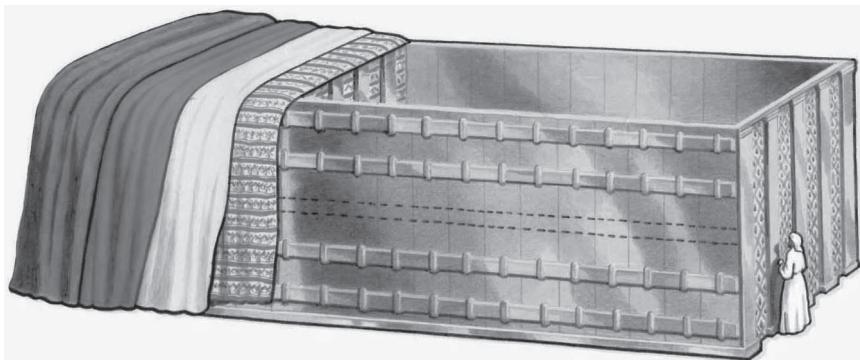
All Israelites were permitted to enter the outer court. But only the priests could enter into the holy place. The *holy place* contained the *altar of incense*, the *lampstand* and the *table of bread*.

Into the *most holy place*, only the high priest could enter – and that too, only once a year, on the day of atonement, with the blood of the sacrifice. There the *ark of the covenant* was kept, covered by the *mercy seat*. The glory of God was visibly present here.

The Tent and its Boards

The tent of the tabernacle is described in *26:1–27*. It was constructed with boards made of cheap acacia *wood* overlaid with *gold*. This symbolised Jesus being both God (*gold*) and Man (*wood*). It also symbolises the members of the Body of Christ today who although human, have been made partakers of the Divine nature (*2 Peter 1:4*).

Each board had *two legs* that sat in two silver bases for stability when resting on the desert sands. The silver sockets speak of the redemptive work of Christ on which we stand securely in the wilderness of this world.



Silver is a picture of redemption throughout the Old Testament (See *Exodus 38:25, 27 and 30:16*). Judas Iscariot also sold our Lord for 30 pieces of *silver*. The two legs symbolise *faith* and *obedience* – that should be found in each believer, for stability in the desert of this world. Those who major on *faith without obedience* will be as unbalanced as a board with just one leg. Those who stress *legalistic obedience without faith* will also be equally unbalanced.

The wooden boards were placed next to each other without any gap between them – symbolising the close fellowship that should exist between the members of Christ's body. Each board had *four* loops through which bars were placed, to hold the boards together. A *fifth* bar was passed internally (from end to end) through the middle of all the boards. These five bars held the boards close together and made them stable. This symbolises that besides faith and obedience, we also need close fellowship with each other in the Body of Christ if we are to be stable Christians.



The Coverings of the Tent

The tent of the tabernacle had *four* coverings. The innermost covering was of *fine linen* with intricate designs woven into it, symbolising the beauty of the righteousness of Christ. The second covering was made of *goats' skins* symbolising Christ as the scapegoat who took our sins far away. The third covering was made of *rams' skins dyed red* symbolising Jesus as our Substitute Who shed His blood for us. The outermost covering was made of *badger's skins* – which had a dirty brown appearance and was always covered with the desert sand.

So the most beautiful covering was visible only *inside* the tent. The true beauty of a Christian must be inward, not outward. *Psalm 45:13* says that “*the king's daughter is all glorious on the inside.*” In other words, there should be more sacrifice in a Christian's inner life than other people can see on the outside. In the world however, things are quite the opposite – people are beautiful on the outside but filthy in their hearts. A tabernacle in which all the glory is on the outside is not the tabernacle of God but a Babylonian tabernacle.

The *badgers' skins* on the outside symbolise “*the reproach of Christ*”. Outwardly, the church will always be misunderstood and dishonoured. Jesus was despised and rejected by the world. Only those who wanted godliness came to Him. It must be the same with the church. People should be drawn to our churches, not by our worldly attractiveness or music, but rather by the godliness of our life and our fellowship. Those who belong to Jesus will go to Him “*outside the camp of this world*” and “*inside the veil*” to fellowship with God (See *Hebrews 13:13* and *10:19, 20*). The vast majority of Christians however, live *inside* the camp of the world and *outside* the veil! To go outside the camp means to be rejected by

the world. If Jesus was misunderstood and called the prince of devils by people in His day, how much more we the members of His family will be called by worse names (*Matthew 10:25*). The reason why many Christians are *popular with the world* (unlike Jesus) is because they have sought to please men and are diplomatic and compromising.

As a young Christian, I was often drawn to certain preachers, because their preaching was wonderful. But when I got close to them I found that they were proud and haughty. Many of them lost their temper easily. Their children were ungodly and they lorded over their co-workers. There was no glory inside. The glory was all on the outside. That I have seen now is one of the clearest marks of a Babylonian preacher. The true tent of God is the very opposite of this. The glory inside is greater than what you see on the outside.

The Bronze Altar of Sacrifice

The first item in the outer court of the tabernacle was the altar of sacrifice, which was a hollow bronze enclosure placed on the ground. The sacrifices had to be placed on the ground inside the altar, for God had said that His altar was always to be one of *earth* (created by God and not constructed by any man – symbolising Calvary’s cross, an altar made by God Himself – *Exodus 20:24, 25*).

The altar was not to have any steps going up to it, but only a sloping ramp (*Exodus 20:26*). This symbolised the fact that there are no “steps to salvation” and that there are no mediators or steps to go to the crucified Christ. You go directly to Him.

The altar was made of *wood* covered with *bronze*. Bronze stands for judgement. When the bronze became hot with the altar-fires, the charring of the wood *inside* could not be seen on the outside. This symbolised



the inner sufferings of Christ that no one could see (*1 Peter 4:1*). Most Christians have seen only the *external* sufferings of Jesus on the cross. They have no idea about the *inner* sufferings that our Lord endured during His earthly life, as He faced different situations and temptations each day (*Hebrews 4:15*).

When we draw near to God, we learn more about the *inner* sufferings that Christ went through. For example, when He was a young boy, people considered Him to be an illegitimate child and must have pointed at Him and said, “His mother is Mary. But we don’t know who his father is.” There were many other inner sufferings that He must have gone through during His life. The greatest of all was the break of fellowship with His Father on the cross. That suffering was far greater than the nails and the crown of thorns. Most of us don’t know the agony of “*a break of fellowship*” with the Father, because we are so used to our fellowship with the Father being broken.

Consider this example: People who live in a slum do not know what perfect hygienic conditions are. But those who have lived in houses where they have never even seen a lizard or a cockroach in their entire lives, will shrink back when they see such things in our houses! It was like that for Jesus. From all eternity He had lived in perfect fellowship with His Father. And then in Gethsemane, He thought of the prospect of being made sin and losing that fellowship when He hung on the cross. He was not afraid of the physical suffering. He would have been willing to go through a hundred physical crucifixions. But when He asked His Father “Do I have to drink this cup?” – that cup was not the physical suffering. It was the fellowship with His Father that would be broken on the cross. That was what He wanted to avoid at any cost. He prayed and prayed, and the Father told Him, “There is no other way.” So our Lord said, “All right, Father, I’ll accept it for the sake of fallen man.” There we see the love of Jesus for us – at Gethsemane.

This altar had *four horns* in the corners to which the sacrificial animals were tied, before they were slain. *Psalms 118:27* says, “Bind the festival sacrifice with cords to the horns of the altar.” That speaks of the steadfastness, of Jesus in being determined to go to the cross. It says in *Luke 9:51*, “He steadfastly set His face to go to Jerusalem.” Nothing would deter Him. We who want to follow Jesus must steadfastly set our face to go that way too.

The Bronze Laver

The laver was a large tub for holding water, that was kept in front of the tent. It was made from the polished brass mirrors that the women of Israel used (*Exodus 38:8*). This symbolised the Word of God first of all. *James 1:23–25* says that God’s word is like a mirror. When the priests came to the laver they could see whether their faces were dirty and they could

wash and be clean to serve the Lord in the holy place. Christ also “*washes us with the word of God*” (as we hear and obey it), so that we can serve Him in holiness (*Ephesians 5:26*).

The laver also symbolises water baptism.

God cleanses us by water first and then by the fire of the Holy Spirit – even as gold is cleansed both by water and by fire (*Numbers 31:21–23*). Washing by the word from *external* sins in the outer court gives us a good testimony before *people*. But if we do not press on into the most holy place and allow the fire of God to cleanse us inwardly, we will never become *spiritual*. We will remain forever as *religious* people.

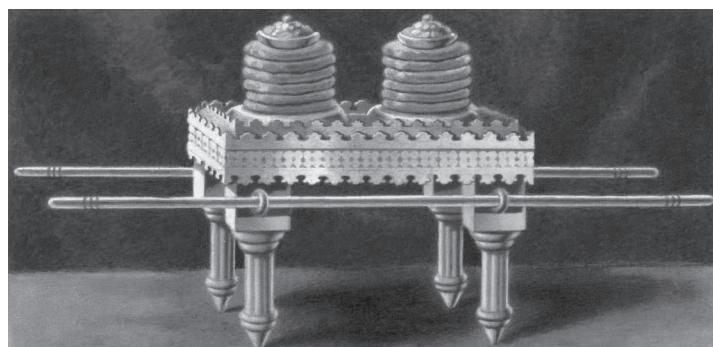


The Golden Table of Bread

Inside the tent, in the holy place, there were three items of furniture. On the northern side was the table of bread, on the southern side the lampstand, and on the western end the altar of incense.

The golden table had 12 loaves of bread on it, representing the twelve tribes of Israel. This represents Jesus as the Bread of life by which we are to live (*Matthew 4:4*). There were twelve separate loaves in the old covenant, because Israel could not become **one** body. Each tribe retained its own distinctiveness. But in the new covenant, we have *only one loaf of bread* representing Christ’s body at the Lord’s table, because we are all one body, even though we are from many different tribes and backgrounds.

Only the priests were allowed to eat this bread under the old covenant, and they ate it *on behalf of* Israel’s tribes. But today, we can *all* partake



of the bread ourselves, because each of us can have a direct contact with Christ our Head, without going through any leader or mediator.

The Golden Lampstand

The lampstand symbolises the testimony of our life as well as of the local church. It is a picture of Christ as the light of the world and also of us as the light of the world (*Matthew 5:14*). The priests were to ensure that this lamp was always kept burning with oil, symbolising our responsibility to ensure that our testimony is burning brightly at all times, by the power of the Holy Spirit.

In the old covenant, the lampstand was only one, with seven branches. This symbolised Israel as one denomination with many branches. But in the new covenant, we see (in the book of *Revelation*) that each church is represented by a *separate lampstand*, and that the Lord walks in the midst of them, as the Head of each separate lampstand (*Revelation 1:20*). This teaches us that new-covenant churches are meant by God to be independent units directly under the headship of Christ, unlike the tribes of Israel. But most churches today still follow the Old Testament pattern of being branches of a large denomination (one large lampstand with many branches).

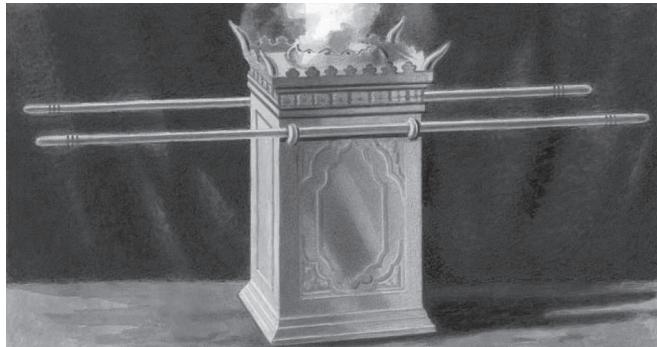


Each of the seven lamps in the lampstand (symbolising each member of a local church) was to burn brightly on its own. Any member of a church who sins (whose light has died out), should set matters right and trim his lamp at the earliest opportunity. Otherwise, he should withdraw from his local church so that the Lord's testimony in that church is not dishonoured in any way, because of him. It is only as we follow God's pattern exactly that His glory can fill our local church.

The Golden Altar of Incense

The altar of incense represents prayer in Jesus' Name (*Revelation 5:8*). Prayer is an expression of our dependence on God. Prayer in Jesus' Name (like this incense) must rise from our hearts to God at all times (*Exodus 30:8; Luke 18:1*). Moses was commanded specifically that this incense was to be prepared in a certain proportion *only for the Lord* and never to be made for any man (*Exodus 30:37*). This symbolises two things.

First of all, it symbolises that *we cannot pray to God in our own merit*. The Name of Jesus is not a magic word (or *mantra*) that we use to come



before God. It implies that we come in the merit of the Lord Jesus alone. If we pray as those who *deserve* to get answers from God because of some imagined merit in us, then such prayers are not being offered in Jesus' Name. Prayer in the Name of Jesus implies that the only standing that we have before God is what we have in Christ. Those who consider themselves better than others will find that God answers the prayers of those others and not their own, because those others go to God *without* any merit of their own.

Secondly, this symbolises that *we must never pray for anything for our own benefit*. Whatever we do, we are commanded to do for the glory of God alone (*1 Corinthians 10:31*). Every prayer that we pray for ourselves should also be for the glory of God. This is the reason why the prayer of a righteous man is powerful – because he seeks God's glory alone in everything (*James 5:16*).

The Veil – The Way into the Most Holy Place

The tabernacle (*the outer court, the holy place and the most holy place*) was a picture of man – *body, soul and spirit* (*1 Thessalonians 5:23*).

The word of God is like a sword that divides between our *soul* and *spirit* (*Hebrews 4:12*). When we read God's Word, it enters our *soul* (mind and emotions) first. It instructs our *mind* and stirs our *emotions*. But if it stops there and does not make us yield our *will* in obedience to God, then the Word cannot enter through the veil into our *spirit* – and we will not grow spiritually. The veil is our human will which must submit to God's will.

Jesus came down from heaven *not to do His own will but the will of His Father* Who sent Him (*John 6:38*). All through His earthly life His attitude to His Father was, "*Not My will but Yours be done*". This is where we are called to follow Jesus too. Many do not become spiritual because even though they *understand* God's will and are *stirred* by it in their emotions, they do not *give up their own will* to do God's will. *Denying one's own will*

and doing the Father's will is the secret of true spirituality. Jesus has now inaugurated this new and living way for us – so that we can walk on it every day (*Hebrews 10:19, 20*). This is not a *door* through which we enter once for all. It is a *way* along which we have to walk every day. Only thus can we live in the most holy place at all times.

The Golden Ark of the Covenant

The most holy place contained the golden *ark* with the *mercy seat* as a lid on it. The ark of the covenant and the mercy-seat were together a picture of Christ as the Mediator of the new covenant between God and Man. The mercy seat was where the blood was sprinkled on the day of atonement. It had two golden cherubs on it. Cherubs were the ones who guarded the tree of life in Eden with a flaming sword (*Genesis 3:24*). That sword first fell on Jesus, when He died on the cross. But that sword fell on us too, for we too were crucified with Him (*Galatians 2:20*). The only way for us to come to the tree of life (Christ) now, is by accepting this sword and allowing our self-will to be slain.

Inside the ark were kept the two tablets of stone (with the ten commandments written on them), a golden pot of manna, and Aaron's rod.

Let us look at the *manna* first. Even though the manna came from heaven, if it was kept overnight, it would breed worms and stink. But when the same manna was kept in the presence of God, *it did not stink for forty years* in the wilderness. The symbolism here is this: If God's truth is held only in our minds, it will stink after a while. But if we hold it in humility *in God's presence*, it will remain fresh *perpetually*. There is an anointing and a freshness when a man who lives *in God's presence* preaches God's Word. But the *same* message, when spoken by another, can be as dry as dead bones. Likewise, you can have an anointing from heaven and preach powerfully one day. If you lose that anointing the next day, and you preach *the very same sermon*, it will be dry and dead. The reason why a lot of today's



preaching is boring is because preachers are *not* living in the presence of God. Their sermons, like the old manna, are breeding worms and stinking. It takes only 24 hours for hardening of heart to begin in any of us, according to *Hebrews 3:13*.

"Exhort (encourage) one another **daily** (24 hours), lest any one of you be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin."

Now let's look at *Aaron's rod*: There was a time when people questioned the authority of Moses and Aaron (*Numbers 16*). God then asked each tribe to bring a dead tree-branch. These rods were kept overnight in God's presence. Aaron's rod alone budded during the night and brought forth fruit (*Numbers 17*). This rod was thereafter kept in the ark as a reminder to the people that God bears witness to His servants by bringing forth resurrection-life out of death. This rod also remained fresh for 40 years (like the manna), teaching us that authority also remains valid *only as long as it is exercised in the presence of God*.

In the days of Samuel, some curious Israelites once lifted this mercy seat to see what was inside the ark and were slain by the Lord immediately (*1 Samuel 6:19*). This shows us how dangerous it is to try to inquire into hidden matters that do not concern us and that God has chosen not to reveal to us (See *Deuteronomy 29:29*).

The High Priest's Dress

Aaron the high priest symbolises Jesus our High Priest. His outward dress consisted of three items. First of all, a *tunic* made of fine white linen symbolising the righteousness of Christ. Over that he had to wear a *blue robe*, with bells and figures of pomegranates alternately hanging all round the bottom of the robe. Blue is the colour of the sky and speaks of heavenliness. The pomegranates symbolised the fruit of the Spirit, and the bells the gifts of the Spirit. Jesus had both the fruit and the gifts of the Spirit in His life – and we need both too, if we are to serve God effectively. On top of this robe, he had to wear a multi-coloured apron called an *ephod*.

The ephod had *three items* that came along with it: Two *shoulder-plates* having the names of the twelve tribes of Israel; a *breastplate* having 12 stones that represented the twelve tribes of Israel; and the "*Urim and Thummim*" placed in a pocket of the ephod. (We don't know what



exactly the “*Urim and Thummim*” were. But they were used by the high priest to find God’s will for the Israelites. They were like traffic lights that told the Israelites when to “Go”, when to “Stop” and when to “Wait”).

These *three items* symbolised Christ’s **power** supporting us, His **love** caring for us, and His **wisdom** guiding us. These three are brought together in *2 Timothy 1:7* as the virtues that the Spirit of God communicates to us today.

The *shoulder-plate* teaches us that we too, as God’s servants must carry other people on our *shoulders*, lifting their burdens, like we carry little children on our shoulders. The *breastplate* teaches us that we too must carry God’s people on our *hearts*, and love them and have a concern for them.

A true prophet, will carry *God’s people* on his heart and also have *God’s word* in his heart.

The high priest also had to wear a golden plate on his forehead (attached to his turban) that had these words engraved on it, “*HOLINESS UNTO THE LORD*”. Thus Aaron was to bear the guilt found in “*the holy offerings*” of Israel (28:36–38). There is sin even in our “*holy offerings*”! Jesus carried not only our filthy sins, but also the sins in our *holy* things. Some examples of the sins in our *holy* activities are: preaching to get honour or money, praying to impress people, doing good things with selfish motives, etc.

On the day of atonement (which was once a year), the high priest took off all these colourful clothes and went into the most holy place wearing only a simple *white* dress. When he came out of the most holy place, he had to put on his colourful clothes once again before going before the people (*Ezekiel 44:19*). This symbolises that when we go before the Lord, we must go in simplicity and humility and brokenness. But when we come before the people, we must anoint our face, and hide our sacrifices and our praying and our fasting from them. Our *holy* white dress must be worn before God alone. We must appear to men as though we have been *feasting*, not fasting!

When I started serving the Lord full-time, I decided that even when I had no money, I would act as if I had plenty. That way, no-one would ever give me any gifts out of *pity or charity*. Many Christian workers give the impression (through their appearance and their prayer-letters) that they are poor, and thus receive



gifts from others just like beggars receive gifts – as acts of charity. But there is a dignity about one who is a servant of the Lord of heaven and earth and he must not make himself an object of charity. He must anoint his face and appear as though he has everything he needs. His Master is well able to supply all His need without any charitable gifts from people! So let us take off our simple white clothes when we go before the people and wear colourful clothes before them always!

Three Levels of Christian Living

The *three* parts of the tabernacle – *outer court*, *holy place* and *most holy place* – can also be taken to symbolise *three levels* at which we can live the Christian life – in the following *seven* different areas:

- (a) Three stages of spiritual growth:
 1. *forgiven* by God;
 2. *serving* God; and
 3. *fellowshipping* with God.
- (b) Three types of Christians:
 1. a *carnal* Christian;
 2. a *soulish* Christian; and
 3. a *spiritual* Christian
- (c) Three ministries of the Holy Spirit:
 1. *born* of the Holy Spirit;
 2. *baptised* in the Holy Spirit; and
 3. *led* by the Holy Spirit daily.
- (d) Three attitudes towards God:
 1. *thanksgiving*;
 2. *praise*; and
 3. *worship*.

In *thanksgiving*, we think of God's gifts that **we** have received and been blessed by. In *praise*, we think of God's greatness and almighty power that are exercised on **our** behalf. But in *worship*, our focus shifts to God Himself, and we adore Him for Who **He** is.

- (e) Three levels of light:
 1. *human reason*;
 2. *the teaching of God's Word*; and
 3. *God's nature*.

All of us live our lives by the understanding that we receive from one or more of the above three sources. The light in the *outer court* and *holy place* was **created** light – *sun* (outer court) and *lampstand* (holy place). But the light in the *most holy place* was the **uncreated** light of *God's own presence*.

- (f) Three levels of fruitfulness:
1. *thirty-fold*;
 2. *sixty-fold*; and
 3. *hundred-fold*.

The *good* ground in the parable of the sower was also of *3 types* – as with the *bad* ground (*Mark 4:1–8*). The measure of fruitfulness in the good ground depended on the measure of wholeheartedness.

- (g) Three levels of Christian maturity:
1. *babes*;
 2. *young men*;
 3. *fathers*.

Babes are *dependent on others*. Young men are *zealous*. Fathers are *full of love and wisdom* (*1 John 2:12–14*).

The way into the most holy place is through the rent veil of the yielded human will. That veil does *not* have to be rent today, *for it has already been rent by our Lord (Hebrews 10:20)*. But we have to walk that way every day, if we are to fellowship with the Father in the most holy place. God's will is that we should live *in His presence* every day.

The way of the cross is a *way* and *not a goal*. *Our goal is not death to self, but fellowship with the Father*.

So we do not major on the message of the cross but rather on the message of fellowship with the Father.

May we live in that blessed fellowship all our days.

LEVITICUS

THE HOLINESS OF GOD

This is really one of the most difficult books to study and to get something for the heart from. But it is the inspired word of God. So God has something for us in it.

Leviticus is a book that speaks of the holiness of God. It's a book that has holiness as its main theme throughout.

Holiness is a word a lot of believers are afraid of. But we must boldly proclaim the standards of God's Word – for they are all realistic and attainable.

Holiness is the very nature of God. The Spirit God gives us is a *Holy* Spirit. When Isaiah got a vision of God, he saw Him in His *holiness* and saw himself as an unclean man.

Holiness is like health. How many of you are afraid to hear messages on being perfectly healthy? Are we afraid of good health? No. Then why should we be afraid of perfect health in our spirit – which is more important than health for our body? Sin is like sickness. We see that in *Leviticus*. The Lord gives rules here concerning holiness and concerning health. The two are similar - one is for the spirit and one is for the body. Holiness for the body is what we call *health*. Health for the spirit and soul is what we call *holiness*. So we need to get rid of this fear of holiness. And we must come to the place where we desire total holiness more than we desire total health. Just like we want to be totally free of all sickness in our bodies, we must want to be totally free of all sin that defiles us.

We must not tolerate sin any more than we tolerate sickness. To tolerate dirty thoughts is like tolerating tuberculosis or leprosy. To tolerate anger by justifying ourselves saying, "That's my weakness or that's my temperament" and thus to permit it in our lives, is like making allowance for AIDS or syphilis in our body. Sin and sickness are very similar.

For example, in *Leviticus*, God tells the Israelites how to deal with a person having leprosy and similar skin diseases. That is a type of sin in this book and the laws given here relate to how to deal with sin.

The words ‘holiness’ and ‘holy’ appear in this book *nearly 100 times*, emphasising that that is the main theme of this book. A book of 27 chapters where holiness is mentioned 100 times must certainly be an important book. But this book has no stories like many of the other books of the Bible. There are not many interesting verses or promises either. But there is a lot of description of offerings, feasts and things like that. I want to bring out some of the important parts of this book and explain them to you. I also want to explain some of the offerings and feasts described in this book and see how they apply to us in this new covenant age. We know from *Hebrews* that God has finished with all offerings and sacrifices. But those sacrifices pointed to Christ and to us, and therefore, it is good for us to see how they apply to us and what they symbolise – just as we saw with the tabernacle in the last chapter.

The Five Offerings

Chapters 1 to 7 of Leviticus describe *five offerings*. All of them picture Christ and His perfect life and His death. God does not want us to think only of Christ’s death, but also of His perfect life, because there are some offerings described here in which no blood is shed. Those offerings obviously do not refer to Calvary, but to Jesus’ perfect life. That shows that God wants us to think much about His life too. Many Christians think only of the sacrifice Jesus made on the cross. But what we learn from *Leviticus* is that He made many sacrifices in His life too. He offered His life day by day to His Father, pouring out His own will and His soul-life to death.

Two of these five offerings were mandatory (*compulsory*) – the *sin offering* and the *guilt offering*.

The other three offerings were *voluntary* – the *burnt offering*, the *grain offering* and the *peace offering*.

The first offering mentioned in *Leviticus 1* is the *burnt offering* – which is a picture of our offering ourselves totally to God. The burnt offering had to be first cut into pieces to ensure that there was no defect in any part of it – and then it was offered. People could offer a bullock or a sheep or a goat or even a dove or a pigeon, according to their financial ability. But each offering had to be without any blemish or defect.

The burnt offering is a picture of the way Jesus presented His body, throughout His earthly life, to His Father – and then finally on the cross as well. All through His earthly life, He kept His body perfectly pure in every temptation before He presented it to His Father as a sacrifice on the cross. God would not have accepted Jesus’ offering up of Himself on the cross if there was a single spot in His earthly life during the previous

33½ years. This was why when He was hungry, He did not turn the stones into bread. That would have been a sin, because the Father had not told Him to do it. His life was one of total dependence and total obedience. Jesus never did anything without the Father's prompting, even if it appeared to be a harmless thing like turning stones into bread to satisfy one's hunger! That is the standard of obedience to which God calls us. That is why Jesus' life was so triumphant, and that was why the Father was so delighted with Him.

Consider yet another example: In *Luke 4:38–42*, we read of a great revival in a town. The next morning, the multitude pressed Him to stay on there and to continue the revival meetings. But Jesus said, "No." Why? Because, before He met the people that morning, He had met with His Father in the wilderness and He had heard the voice of His Father telling Him to go elsewhere. So, He would not yield to the pressure of the multitudes but went where the Father told Him to go. If He had yielded to the multitudes and conducted revival meetings, he would have sinned! Have you got such an understanding of sin yet?

How many of us believe that conducting revival meetings could be sinful!! That was the level of sensitivity to sin at which Jesus lived. We normally think of sins as things like getting angry, having dirty thoughts, being jealous or bitter etc. These are also sins – but at the *kindergarten* level. Jesus was dealing with sin at the Doctorate (Ph.D.) level. Did you know that if God has not called you to go and take meetings at some place and you do that, you are sinning?

But we can't reach this Doctorate level overnight! We have to make gradual progress from one class to the next, year by year. As we progress, we will discover that a lot of things we never considered as sin earlier, now become sin for us. When "*sin becomes utterly sinful*" (*Romans 7:13*), we can be certain that we are growing spiritually!

So, when we look at Jesus' life, we don't think only of His death at Calvary, but also of His whole life where He presented Himself to the Father fully saying, "*A body Thou hast prepared for Me ... and I have come to do Thy will O God* (in this body)" (*Hebrews 10:5, 7*). Jesus never once did His own will in his body but only the Father's. This is what it means to offer oneself as a burnt offering to God.

This is what Paul exhorts us also to do in *Romans 12:1*. "*Present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice to God ... that you may prove what the will of God is*" – exactly as Jesus did. This burnt offering was presented to God and burnt completely. The Bible says this was "*a soothing aroma to the Lord*" (1:17) – meaning something that God was very pleased with – "*This is My Beloved Son in Whom I am well pleased.*"

Paul said that his life's ambition too was to "*please the Lord*" (*2 Corinthians 5:9*).

When we present our bodies to the Lord, it is very easy to say, “Lord, I give my body totally to You.” But we don’t know whether we have offered it all, until we “*cut it up*”. We could be deceiving ourselves. What does it mean to cut it up and offer it piece by piece – as was done with the burnt offering? It means that we offer our bodily parts piece by piece to God.

We say, “Lord, here are my *eyes*. I have used them for the devil and for myself for the past many years, looking at and reading many things that offended You. But I am laying my eyes on the altar now. Never again do I want to use these eyes to look at or read anything that You would not look at or read. I never want to sin with these eyes any more.”

We go next to the tongue and say, “Lord, here is my tongue. I have used this tongue for the devil and for myself for so many years, speaking whatever I liked, telling lies for my own gain, getting angry at people and gossiping and backbiting against others and accusing them. But I never want to do all that any more. Here is my tongue Lord. It is yours from this moment onwards – totally and completely.”

We go next to our hands and our feet and our bodily passions, *one by one*, and say the same thing: “Lord, here are the members of my body and my bodily passions, with which I have sinned and hurt You. Never again do I want to use these to please myself or to satisfy my lusts. They are all Yours.”

It is only as we cut each piece and lay them on the altar one by one, that we discover whether we really are offering our body totally to God or not.

When the offering is cut into pieces and laid out on the altar fully, then you can say, “Now, Lord, let Your fire fall on the sacrifice and consume it.” We read in *Leviticus 9:24* how the fire of God fell upon the burnt offering and consumed it. That fire is a picture of the baptism in the Holy Spirit and fire that comes to consume our sacrifice and to set our bodies on fire for God. But the fire never fell until every last piece of the burnt offering was placed on the altar.

What do Christians do when they *don’t* want to pay the price of yielding their bodies as a burnt offering and yet want to get the fire? They manufacture a *false* fire – a *counterfeit* one. And that is what we see in *Leviticus 10:1, 2*: “*Nadab and Abihu, the sons of Aaron, took firepans and put fire in them and offered strange fire before the Lord which He had not commanded them.*” When we don’t have the real fire of God, and we want to be a part of those who have the real fire, the danger is that we will imitate what they have so as to be able to say, “Yes, we also got the fire. We also spoke in tongues!” God was so angry with Nadab

and Abihu for imitating the real fire that He sent down another fire from His presence – this time not to consume the burnt offering but *to consume these two hypocrites!*

It is dangerous to imitate the real thing in spiritual matters. Yet, multitudes of Christians are doing this, these days. They are being coached by preachers to speak in tongues, to work up their emotions and to experience psychosomatic “healings” (imagining that these are the same as being healed *“in the Name of Jesus.”*).

Those who have obtained the real fire from God have paid a price for it. They laid everything on the altar of God – their money, their eyes, their tongue, their hands, their all. They examined their lives and made sure that every piece of the burnt offering was on the altar; and God sent His fire on them. You watch the life of such a man, and you wish you had the same powerful anointing. But you are not willing to pay the same price for it; you still want to show others that you are anointed. It is then that you can do what Nadab and Abihu did – produce strange fire, work up your emotions, manufacture “tongues” etc. Since more than 95% of believers don’t have spiritual discernment, you may be able to fool them that you have the real fire. But you know better than anyone else that what you have is self-produced and not from God. Beware!

If God were to judge Christendom today in the way He judged Nadab and Abihu, I am sure that a lot of Christians would die.

The second offering is the ‘*grain offering*’ (*Leviticus 2*). There was no blood in this offering. No animal was slain. It was an offering of flour, roasted grain, salt and oil. One of the things the Lord said in connection with this offering was “*Don’t use any leaven.*” (*verse 11*). Leaven is a picture of sin throughout the Scriptures. But The Lord told them to add salt. Salt is a picture of an *eternal covenant*. *Numbers 18:19* reads: “*It is an everlasting covenant of salt before the Lord.*” Whenever you read of salt being offered in the Bible and Jesus mentioning it in the New Testament too, remember it refers to this everlasting covenant mentioned here in *Numbers*. We use salt to preserve things for a long time. That is why the Lord uses it to refer to that which is everlasting. So the salt that was added to the grain offering indicated that the offerer was committing himself to the Lord forever – not just for 5 years or even 50 years! It is like a marriage – an everlasting covenant.

The third offering is the *peace offering* (*Leviticus 3*). The offerer had to bring the animal and lay his hand on its head (*verse 2*). Thereby, he was confessing that through the death of that animal he had come to peace with God. “*Therefore having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.*” (*Romans 5:1*). Peace in our conscience is of vital importance in the Christian life. God does not want any of His children to live in uncertainty about His accepting them. We must be absolutely convinced that our sins are *all* forgiven. There must be no

feelings of guilt in our lives whatsoever. Just like this man laid his hand on the animal, we also lay our hands on the Lord at Calvary, and believe that He paid the price for *all* our sins and cleared our debt *completely* and tore up our certificate of debt at Calvary (*Colossians 2:14*). So now, like our Lord said on the cross, we too can say, “*It is finished.*” God’s promise to us is, “*Your sins and iniquities I will remember no more.*” *Hallelujah!* The New Testament speaks about entering into God’s rest and dwelling there at all times (*Hebrews 4*). Do you know that God has accepted you just as you are – not after you have changed, but just as you are. This is what brings rest into our lives. This is what is symbolised in the peace offering.

The fourth offering is the *sin offering* (*Chapter 4*). It’s very interesting to note that only ‘*unintentional sin*’ is mentioned here. “*If a person sins unintentionally in any of the things which the Lord has commanded...*” (*verse 2*). It may be the anointed priest who sinned (See *verse 3*). He too has to bring a sin offering to the Lord. It may be a leader who has sinned (*verse 22*). Some Christian leaders act as though they don’t sin at all!! When God judges sin, He always begins with the leaders and the priests. They must settle their scores with God first.

If you were one of the ordinary Israelites and you saw the leader of your tribe bringing an offering to the altar, you may be surprised and say to yourself, “*This man is our leader, but he has sinned too.*” That would encourage you to believe that God chooses ordinary people like you to be His leaders. Don’t we all sin? Is there a man on earth who does not sin? Don’t give people the impression then that you are perfect, when you know you are not. One thing that encourages me about the stories of godly men in the Bible is that the Bible does not hide their mistakes. We have seen that in the lives of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. The apostle Paul made mistakes too and he told his co-worker Luke (who wrote the *Acts* record) not to hide any of them. So Luke wrote faithfully that Paul fought with Barnabas, that he circumcised Timothy, that he shaved his head to fulfil a Jewish vow, and that he shouted at the high priest towards the end of his life, etc. These things are written for our encouragement, so that we realise that great men of God also make mistakes and fall into sin. Most modern biographies, however, never speak the whole truth. They make those men look as if they never made any mistakes in their lives. Such biographies don’t encourage anyone. The Scriptures, however, are honest. Leaders do sin and need to settle matters with God and man – just like everybody else.

I am not asking you leaders to confess your sins in public. No. But I am saying that you shouldn’t give people the impression that you never make a mistake or sin. If you never apologise to anybody in your church then that is the impression that you are giving. Personally, I have had to apologise numerous times to my wife, to my children, to people in my church, and even to young people who are younger than my youngest son – all because of one reason: *I am not God.* There is only one person

who never needs to apologise to anyone – and that is God Himself. So humble yourself and ask for forgiveness from those whom you have hurt. They will respect you even more for that.

When an anointed priest sinned, he had to bring an offering to the doorway of the tent (*verse 4*). He could not do it privately or in secret saying, “I am an anointed priest and my reputation will go down if I do this publicly.” He had to confess his sin right there in front of all the people, at the doorway of the tent. He had to lay his hand on the head of the bull and admit that he had sinned, and take some of the blood of the bull, dip his finger in it and offer it to the Lord.

I want you to notice one interesting thing here in 4:13, 14: “*If the whole congregation of Israel commits a sin and it has escaped the notice of the assembly, and they commit any of the things, they also must bring a bull.*” Now there are different offerings mentioned here – for a leader who sinned (4:22), and for a common person who sinned (4:27). When a common person sinned, he had to bring only a *female goat* (4:28), which was not very expensive. But if the whole congregation sinned, they had to bring a *bull* (more expensive). If the priest sinned *he also had to bring a bull*. Notice here that the offering for a *sinning priest* was the same as for a *sinning congregation*. A *leader* sining was not like a *common man* sining. No. It was equivalent to the whole congregation sining. Both had to bring a *bull*.

A lot of people don’t realise that God does not look at all same sins in the same way. When an anointed leader sins in some way, and a common man sins *in exactly the same way*, they are *not* equal sins in God’s eyes. The sin of the anointed priest is *far more serious*. He has to bring a bull, whereas the common man has to only bring a female goat. The more anointed we are and the more we teach others (as the old covenant priests did), the more we are answerable to God for our lives. “*To whom more is given, from him more will be required.*” (*Luke 12:48*).

Notice that the *sin offering* is prescribed only for *unintentional sin* (See 4:2, 13, 22, 27). Look at the warning given in *Hebrews 10:26*. “*If we go on sinning intentionally, there is no more sacrifice for sin.*” This is in keeping with *Leviticus 4*. If you have truly turned to the Lord and have become one of God’s children, you will not *want to sin*. That is one mark of being born again. We *may sin*. In fact, we all do sin unknowingly. But if we are born again, we will never *want to sin again*. We don’t take advantage of God’s mercy and goodness. One who sins against God because he knows that he can get forgiveness easily, is almost certainly *not born again*. A born-again Christian may fall into sin, but he hates sin.

But we must all confess that we have all sinned *deliberately* too, even after we have been born again. What about those sins? *Hebrews 10:26* is

referring to continuing in sin and not to the occasional act: “*If we go on sinning wilfully,*” refers to continuously taking advantage of God’s goodness. Then there is no more sacrifice for sin, but only a looking forward for God’s judgement (*Hebrews 10:27*).

The fifth offering is the *guilt offering* (*Chapter 5*). This refers to sins committed not only against God, but also against other human beings. Certain sins are only against God. If, for example, we have dirty thoughts, we don’t harm anybody else. Such sins are only against God. If we have wrong motives, we sin only against God. But many sins involve other people too. Here in *verse 1*, it speaks of someone who refuses to testify about something he has seen or known, perhaps because it will implicate his friend, and as a result an innocent person is punished, then the first man is guilty of a sin against God and against man. Other similar sins are mentioned in the following verses.

In *verse 16*, restitution is mentioned: “*He shall make restitution for that which he has sinned against the holy thing and shall add to it a fifth part (20%) and give it to the priest.*” – if the sin is against the Lord. That principle applies even to making restitution to man (as mentioned in *Numbers 5:6, 7*). If you have cheated or robbed someone, then when making restitution, you must give him back *20% more than what you took from him*. This will teach you not to do it again to anyone!

The Lord says one more thing, which I want you to notice here, about the guilt offering (*7:30*), “*His own hands are to bring offerings by fire to the Lord*” You must bring your offering personally, whoever you are – big or small. You couldn’t send it through a servant. However great a man you may be, you have to come yourself, humble yourself, admit your mistake and acknowledge that you have sinned. All are equal before God.

Holiness and Health

Now we come to a number of chapters that deal with laws on holiness and health. All of these show *God’s intense interest* in the smallest little details of a person’s life. We may imagine that God is not interested in the small details of our lives. But I find in the book of *Leviticus* that God is interested in every little detail. The Israelites were told here what to do even if a lizard fell into a cooking pot. The earthenware pot into which the lizard fell should be destroyed and none of the food in it should be eaten, for it may produce an infection and bring death. (*Leviticus 11:33*). God also gave them instructions on bathing, when they were defiled in some way – they were to bathe in *running* water (*Leviticus 15:13*). He also told them to wash their clothes when they were defiled (*Leviticus 15:5, 7, 11* and *Chapter 17* also). These are just two examples of the care that God has for His people. Did you ever imagine that God could be so interested

in the food you eat and in your cleanliness – in your bathing habits and in your washing your clothes regularly. I am excited to read such things. Who said that the book of **Leviticus** was boring?

This book also has teaching on sexual purity and a number of other interesting subjects. In *Chapter 10:8–11*, God told Aaron, “*Don’t ever drink wine or strong drink, neither you nor your sons when you come into the tent of meeting so that you will not die. That’s how you make a distinction between the holy and the profane so as to teach the sons of Israel all the statutes which the Lord has spoken.*” God was telling the leaders that they should not consume anything that would pollute their bodies. As leaders, they had to be exemplary in their conduct.

In *Chapter 11* God told them about the animals that were clean and those that were unclean, the type of animals they could eat, and the type of animals they should not eat. What I learn from this passage is that God in heaven is interested even in our eating habits – that we have healthy food habits. The Bible says in *1 Corinthians 10:31*, “*Whatever you do, whether you eat or drink, do all to the glory of God.*” The essential message in *Leviticus* concerning eating and drinking is: “*Don’t eat or drink anything that is not good for your body.*” I am sure that the Lord would have a lot to say to His children about the junk food that many eat and drink today!

There are rules for hygiene too, as for example, in *11:33*: “*If an animal dies and falls into a clay pot, everything in that pot is defiled, and the pot must be smashed,*” and “*If water used to cleanse an unclean object touches any food, all of that food is defiled*” (*11:34*). He is telling the Israelites here to have hygienic habits and a clean lifestyle.

We can’t disobey the rules of health and then pray when we are sick, “Lord, please heal me.” That is foolishness. If you disobey the laws of hygiene that God has made, you have no-one to blame but yourself when you fall sick. We saw what God said in *Exodus 15:26*. “*If you obey My laws, then I will be your Healer.*” God wants to give us the gift of health more than healing! But we must obey His laws for our body.

In *Chapter 11:44*, we read, “*I am the Lord Your God. Consecrate yourselves therefore and be holy, for I am holy.*” This is the main theme of the book of *Leviticus* – and this verse comes right in the middle of the book. Peter quotes this verse in *1 Peter 1:16*, “*We are to be holy, because the One who called us is holy.*”

Holiness and cleanliness are two of the main themes of *Leviticus*.

The Cleansing of Lepers

Chapter 13 deals with the test for leprosy: “If a man has on the skin of his body a swelling or a scab or a bright spot, and it becomes an infection

of leprosy on the skin, then he shall be brought to Aaron the priest, or to one of his sons the priests. The priest shall look at the mark on the skin of the body, and if the hair has turned white and the infection appears to be deeper than the skin of his body, it is an infection of leprosy. But if the bright spot is white on the skin of his body and it does not appear to be deeper than the skin, and the hair on it has not turned white, then the priest shall isolate him who has the infection for seven days” (13:2–4).

I want you to apply this not to leprosy, but to sin. It is a precious passage. When you see something that you think is sin, in a brother or sister, what are you supposed to do? What were the Israelites supposed to do here? They were not to pass judgement on it themselves, for they could have been wrong. *It may not be leprosy.* This is the lesson for us too. It may not be what you think it is. So take the matter first to the Lord (Aaron symbolises Christ here), and then to the elders (Aaron’s sons symbolise the elders in the church here). Let them deal with the matter. If you follow this simple principle, you can be saved from so much that destroys you and others. If an Israelite could only humble himself and say, “I am not a priest. So let me take him to God’s appointed priest”, what a lot of problems could be solved. And if you could humble yourself and do the same, what a lot of false rumours and confusion could be avoided in the church!

We notice here that the priest also does not pass judgement *immediately* on the basis of *what he hears*. Many elders, unfortunately, pass a judgement, as soon as they hear a matter, without verifying whether the matter is true. The Bible says, *“How stupid to decide before knowing the facts” (Proverbs 18:13 - Living).*

The priest here looks carefully at the person, examines every part, asks him questions, and *only then* determines how serious the case is. What peace there would have been in every church if all the elders had followed this simple principle taught here!

The Lord says, *“Be very careful. It may not be **as serious** as you think; or it may be **more serious** than you think. So examine the person carefully, make full allowance for human error, and then decide whether to pronounce him unclean or not.”* If the person has to be put out of the camp as a leper, do so. This is the way discipline should be carried out in any church. After careful examination, finally, if the brother has to be put out of the church, then do so.

Sometimes the priest may not be able to come to a firm conclusion on first examination. Then he says, *“I am not sure whether this is a serious case. Let’s wait for 7 days and I’ll see him again.”* (verse 4). Many of us don’t like to *wait* when we see something we think is wrong in a brother or sister. But God is concerned that innocent people are not punished – both under the old covenant and the new.

We must see another *very important* thing here: *The aim of the priest was always to bring the leper back into the camp healthy, one day.* And so the priest would look at the person again *after seven days.* If he was not happy with what he saw, he would ask that the person be brought back *after another seven days.* And if the infection had gone by then, the priest would say, “*Praise the Lord. He is clean now. He can now have a bath, wash his clothes and come back to the camp once again.*” (verse 4–6). If, however, he was still not clean, then for the sake of protecting the others in the camp, he would be put outside the camp and isolated. No doubt, the priest would examine him once again after some more days. Do you see the attitude of the priest here? His aim was to try and keep the man inside the camp *as far as possible. Only as a last resort would he put him out.*

And that, Jesus said, must be our attitude to an erring brother – “*win your brother*” (Matthew 18:15). Try every method possible to save him from his sin. If nothing succeeds, then put him out (Matthew 18:17; 1 Corinthians 5:13). But even after he has been put out, if he repents sincerely, bring him back into the fellowship of the church (2 Corinthians 2:6–11).

This unfortunately, is so different from the attitude that I have seen in many churches today, where they not only tear believers apart, but also drag them down. If you want to be a new-covenant leader, learn how to deal both in *kindness* and in *strictness* with sinners in the church (Romans 11:22).

There is an amazing truth here in 13:12, 13: “*If the leprosy breaks out further on the skin and the leprosy covers all the skin from his head to his foot, then the priest shall look and if the skin disease has covered all his body,*” – then what? Is the man clean or unclean? The answer may surprise us. He is **clean!** How can that be? If his skin is *all white*, it’s clean. But if the raw flesh appears again, then he is unclean again (verse 14). What is the meaning of this? The application for us is just this: *If a man acknowledges that he is a good-for-nothing sinner, absolutely rotten from head to foot, and admits that there is nothing good in him, then he is clean in the Lord’s eyes.* But if he says, “*No, I am not all that bad. I have some good spots in my life,*” – then he is **unclean.**

You know how most people react when they are told that the Bible says that they are good-for-nothing, rotten sinners who deserve nothing but hell-fire. They reply, “*I am not all that bad. I have some good points in my life*” Such a person is *unclean* in God’s eyes. But if his reaction is, “*God is absolutely right. There is nothing good in my flesh. My best actions come from corrupt motives. I am rotten through and through*” – in other words, if he does not justify himself at all – then he is *totally clean* in God’s eyes. This is the good news of the gospel. This is why wicked murderers and

adulteresses (whose “whole skin was covered with leprosy”) were forgiven by the Lord, but the self-righteous Pharisees were not. The bits of raw flesh in those Pharisees (their self justification) made them unclean.

In *Chapter 14* we read about the cleansing of this leper. We see an amazing thing in *verses 14*. When the leper is cleansed, the priest takes some *blood from the guilt offering* and puts a drop of it on the lobe of the cleansed leper’s right ear, another drop on the thumb of his right hand and another drop on the big toe of his right foot. This symbolises total cleansing of every part of our being through the blood of Christ. Now if you look at *Leviticus 8:23*, you will notice that this was the very thing that Moses did for Aaron the high-priest too! In other words, the same privilege that the high priest had was given to this leper as well! The message of the gospel is this – that we who are such filthy, rotten sinners are loved by God *just as much as He loves Jesus*, and accepted by Him *just as much as Jesus is!* Unbelievable and amazing, but nevertheless true!

In *verses 17 and 18*, we read of two more steps in this cleansing process for the leper. First, the priest put *a drop of oil* on the same three spots where he had earlier put the blood – the right ear lobe, the right thumb and the right toe. This symbolises being *born of the Holy Spirit*. Then the priest poured the rest of the oil on the cleansed leper’s head. This symbolises *the baptism in the Holy Spirit*, the Holy Spirit being poured out on us.

This is indeed an amazing gospel: A leprous sinner is cleansed from head to foot first of all through the blood of Christ, brought to new birth through the Holy Spirit and then has the Holy Spirit poured out upon him. Right here in *Leviticus 14:17, 18* is a foreshadowing of these two vital ministries of the Holy Spirit – bringing us to new birth, and enduing us with His power. So let us, who are cleansed “*lepers*”, not stop with having received the drop of blood and the drop of oil! Let us be open also to receive the outpouring of the oil on our heads.

All this and more are all pictured there in the book of *Leviticus*. What you may have considered to be a boring book turns out to be more interesting than you thought.

There are many little things mentioned also here concerning showing respect for older people, treating strangers with consideration, and rejecting fortune telling and witchcraft etc. that have a lot of application for our daily lives.

In *Chapter 21:16–24*, we are told that anyone who had “*a defect*” could not be a priest, even if he was a son of Aaron. This teaches us that even if a person is a child of God, if there is some defect (“*unsettled sin*”) in his life, he cannot be an elder or leader. God’s servants should be free from such “*defects*”. God has very high standards for those who stand before His people as His representatives. Under the old covenant, those standards were all *physical*, because those leaders had to lead the Israelites into a *physical* kingdom. In our day, those standards are all *spiritual*, because we are to lead God’s people into a *spiritual* kingdom.

The Seven Feasts

In *Chapter 23* we read about the *seven feasts* that God ordained the Israelites. We saw the *five offerings* in the early part of *Leviticus*. God wanted to teach His people that religion was not a boring affair. It was to be an enjoyable and exciting thing – something that they could practice with joy. So He ordained these feasts (or festivals) for them. One of the Hebrew words translated as “*festival*” was the word “*hag*” meaning “*dance*” and that is what God expected His people to do!! The number seven has a significance here. Every seventh day, every seventh month, every seventh year and also the year that came after seven times seven years (50th year) was a festival time. All these feasts were between April and October each year. God also selected a time of the year when the weather would be clear and when the farmers would not be busy in their fields, so that they could all go to Jerusalem for these feasts. The commands of God are all realistic and He is considerate of all our earthly needs.

Here is a list of the seven feasts:

1. *The Sabbath*: This was at the end of six days of work, every week. On this day, no work was to be done. The day was meant to be spent, as Adam spent his first day – in fellowship with God. It symbolises the rest that Christ brings us into in our relationship with God.
2. *The Passover-Feast*: The *Passover* was on the 14th day of their first month, in which they remembered the time when God saved their forefathers from Egypt by the blood of the lamb – a picture of our deliverance from Satan’s kingdom by the blood of Christ.
3. *The Feast of Unleavened Bread*: This followed immediately after the *Passover* – for *seven days* – during which they ate only unleavened bread. It reminded them about the leavened bread that their fathers left behind in Egypt – a picture of our old life left behind when we are converted. This symbolises the cleansed life (free from leaven) that we are called to live in, under the new covenant.
4. *The Feast of Pentecost*: This is also called “the feast of weeks” and was to be held 50 days after the feast of unleavened bread began. (“*Pentekoste*” means “*fiftieth*”). That was a feast expressing thankfulness to God at the end of the barley and wheat harvest. The outpouring of the Holy Spirit took place on this day 1500 years later – and this is what this feast symbolises (*Acts 2:1*). Two loaves of bread were offered to God on this day symbolising that Jew and Gentile would be united on this day many years later. Both the loaves were leavened and salted indicating that there was still sin in those who were born again (*leaven*), but yet God had made an eternal covenant with them (*salt*).
5. *The Feast of Trumpets*: It was the beginning of the seventh month and they used trumpets in Israel to gather people to worship, and for war,

and sometime in the wilderness when they had to move on. It was a time of celebration where it was a time of expressing their joy before God and thanksgiving to God. This feast symbolises the day when the last trumpet shall sound and the Lord will return for His people.

6. *The Day of Atonement*: This was the most important day in the whole year. This was the only day in the year in which the high-priest could enter the Most Holy Place in the tabernacle. He looked forward to this day and would prepare himself for many hours to be ready for it. He wore his white dress only on this day of the year. On the mercy seat, he would offer the blood of the sacrifice upon the altar as an atonement for the sins of the nation of Israel. This feast looked forward to the great day of atonement on Calvary, when our great High Priest offered Himself for our sins.
7. *The Feast of Tabernacles*: This was also called “*the feast of booths*”, when the Israelites lived for seven days in little shelters and reminded themselves of how their forefathers wandered in the wilderness. Thus they expressed their thanksgiving to God for the good houses they lived in now. It may be good for us to live like that for a week every year so that we don’t complain about the little problems we have in our good houses! This feast symbolises the time when the kingdom of God will be on earth with Jesus reigning as King.

The most important of these seven feasts, for which all the men had to go up to Jerusalem were the feasts of *Unleavened Bread*, *Pentecost* and *Tabernacles* (*Deuteronomy 16:16*).

Apart from these feasts there were also many other Sabbaths. Every seventh year was to be a sabbath of rest for the land, in which the Israelites were not to sow their fields or prune their vineyards (*Leviticus 25:4*). The Lord warned them that if they disobeyed this law, He would punish them by allowing enemies to take them away as slaves, so that the land would then enjoy its sabbath rest during those years (*Chapter 26:34, 35*)! The Israelites disobeyed this commandment of God for 490 years and so God sent them into captivity to Babylon for exactly 70 years (*2 Chronicles 36:20, 21*)! If we do not take God’s Word seriously, we suffer the consequences.

In *Chapter 27*, instructions are given for those who want to give a voluntary gift to the Lord, or make a special vow to Him, or dedicate something to the Lord (*verse 2*). Thus far in Leviticus, the Lord had commanded the Israelites to make specific offerings to Him. These were mandatory. But the Lord also gave them the privilege to offer voluntary, freewill offerings to Him, out of gratitude. They could give their house to the Lord (*verse 14*) or a piece of their ancestral property (*verse 16*), or a field that they had bought (*verse 22*), or his animals. If later on, they

wanted to redeem any of these back, the Lord gave instructions as to how this was to be done. They usually had to pay 20% more than its value to get it back (*verses 15, 19, 27, 31*).

In the last three verses of the book (27:32–34), we read something interesting to deliver the Israelites from covetousness. One tenth of their herds and their flock was to be given to the Lord. They were to let their animals pass under a rod, one by one, before the priest. Every tenth animal was to be given to the Lord. But if the tenth animal was a really good, fat one, they were not allowed to exchange it for another sick one!! As they counted the animals one by one, Number Ten was the Lord's, good or bad! They were not to be cold and calculating and stingy in their giving to God. They were to be rich towards God and give to Him cheerfully, because the Lord would give back to them much more than He gave them.

NUMBERS

ISRAEL'S WILDERNESS WANDERINGS AND WARFARE

This is the fourth of the books that Moses wrote, and it deals with Israel's wanderings and wars in the wilderness. This book is called *Numbers* because the people of Israel were numbered twice in it. Moses took a census of the Israelites (*Numbers 1:3*) who were 20 years old and upwards – all who were able to go out to war. They took a census of the families once at the beginning of their journey and again towards the end of their 40-year wandering as well (*Chapter 26*).

Order and Organisation

In *Chapter 2* you have the order in which the camps of Israel were placed. God is a God of order, and one of the things we can learn from this is the *discipline* and *orderliness* that God taught His people. Remember they were a bunch of totally undisciplined slaves in Egypt when God led them out. So he began to teach them order, cleanliness, and discipline. These are very important lessons for a Christian. Many believers don't have any sense of cleanliness or orderliness in their lives or in their homes. There is no discipline in the way they spend their time or their money.

All such matters affect our spiritual growth. Whatever experience of the Holy Spirit you may have had, if you are undisciplined in your life, you can never become a godly person. We see the importance of that orderliness in the details that we read in the book of Numbers.

If there is a lack of discipline in our lives, we cannot be the men and women God wants us to be. Many Christians are ignorant of the Word of God, because they do not discipline themselves to study it. You cannot know God's word if you don't take pains to study it daily, and especially in your younger days.

In *Chapter 7*, for example, where the details of the offerings of the leaders are given, much detail is given: how much a silver dish weighed and how much a silver bowl weighed. There is a lot of repetition too. But what we can learn from that is that God takes interest in each little thing that every person offered. Ten different people may have offered exactly the same thing. But God recorded what each person gave *separately*, because each person was precious to God. This shows us something of the heart of God. He is interested in each individual. In the world of today, it is easy to get lost, feeling that you are just one among the millions. Then be encouraged by the fact that God sees each individual as special.

In *Numbers 3:40, 41*, we read that God told Moses to number all the *firstborn* males from a month old and upwards, the reason being that all these firstborn should have died in Egypt. They escaped because of the Lord's mercy. So they belonged to the Lord. But the Lord said here, "*Take the Levites for Me instead of the firstborn and the cattle of the Levites instead of all the firstborn among the cattle of the Israelites.*" So Moses numbered all the firstborn and they were 22,273 in number (*verse 43*). Then he numbered the Levites and they were only 22,000. For the extra 273 firstborn, a redemption price had to be paid (*verses 46, 47*).

So the Levites replaced the firstborn who should have belonged to the Lord. Now the Levites belonged to the Lord, and the Lord told them, "*You shall have no inheritance in the land. I am your inheritance*" (*Numbers 18:20*). They were to be exclusively devoted to the Lord's service.

Chapter 4: Here we read of the sons of Levi who were given responsibilities in the tabernacle. Levi did not choose his own sons to minister in the tabernacle. It was God Who chose them. God may choose our children to serve Him, but *we cannot*. We may want our children to serve the Lord in some particular form of service. But God Himself must choose them for that and call them individually. It was God Who said, "*The sons of Levi are to have these responsibilities.*" Levi had three sons, Kohath, Gershon and Merari. Earlier we saw how Aaron's sons, Nadab and Abihu had offered strange fire and they were killed. They would have had wonderful privileges in connection with the tabernacle to serve God, but they missed it. The sons of Kohath, Gershon and Merari had the responsibility of moving the tabernacle. The most sacred job in the moving of the Israelites was given to these three families.

What we learn here is that we cannot take God's commandments lightly. When Uzzah (in David's time) touched the ark because he thought it was falling, God killed him – just because he was not a Levite. He had no right to touch the ark. If God has not given us a responsibility in his church, we shouldn't touch it. When I hear believers criticising some other church, I say to them, "You are not a prophet to God's people. So that is none of your business. Leave that ministry to the prophets and

the elders.” In the same way, when I hear people criticising someone else’s children, I ask them, “Are you their father?” If not, then we must learn to mind our own business. When we criticise someone else’s children, we are touching something God has not given us permission to touch. Then we are being like Uzzah who had no right to touch the ark. The ark could be handled only by certain people. That’s what we see here.

Each of these three families was also given a specific task (4:4, 24, 33). In 7:2, we read that the leaders of Israel made an offering to the Lord. All the leaders and their offerings are mentioned in this list. In verse 3 we read that they brought “*six covered carts and twelve oxen*” for the work of moving the tabernacle items. When you divide 6 carts between 3 families – the Kohathites, Gershonites and Merarites – each family should get 2 carts. When you divide 12 oxen among 3 families, each family should get 4 oxen. But just see how Moses divides them. We read that Moses gave 2 carts and 4 oxen to the sons of Gershon for their service (*verse 7*). Then he gave 4 carts and 8 oxen to the sons of Merari (*verse 8*). And he did not give any carts or any oxen to the sons of Kohathites, because they had to carry the ark on their shoulders (*verse 9*).

It would have been very easy for those Kohathites to say, “God has given *four* carts to the Merarites, but he has given us *none*.” Today also we find that God chooses to give *cars* to some of His children and only *bicycles* to others. It is easy for those who have bicycles to question God, to complain, and to covet what their brothers have. But God is all-wise and He never makes a mistake. He does everything perfectly. Don’t bypass these precious verses hidden in the middle of *Numbers*. There is a message here for us that can deliver us from complaining when we see someone else having *four cars* and we ourselves having *none*. How relevant these Old Testament books are for our problems today.

Various Laws

In *Numbers* 5:2, we read, “*Command the sons of Israel that they send away from the camp every leper and everyone having a discharge and everyone who is unclean because of a dead person.*” Some Christians imagine (and teach) that because the Lord said in *Exodus* 15:26, “*I the Lord am your Healer,*” all that the Israelites did whenever they were sick was to pray to the Lord and get healed. But this is not true. Here we read of lepers who were not healed, but put outside the camp. The Word does not say as some preachers would say today: “*Command the lepers to trust in the Lord as their Healer and to claim their healing in Jehovah’s Name*”!! No! They were to be put outside the camp. Could the Lord have healed them? Certainly. But He didn’t. He commanded them to be put outside the camp.

We must be honest and realistic when we talk about physical healing. Otherwise we will bring many weak believers under condemnation and into bondage. We cannot lock God down into a doctrinal box and say: “*God heals everyone who has faith in Him. No-one who trusts in the Lord need ever be sick. Those who are sick, remain sick because they lack faith.*” People who have taken that unrealistic position have ended causing the death of many believers in their churches, who could have been healed if they had been treated in a hospital. A lot of folly is practised by unrealistic Christians who live by logic more than by revelation.

There was a law for the cleansing of lepers, that we saw in *Leviticus 13, 14*. Those Israelites could not dictate to God and say, “*Lord, You said that You are our Healer. Now, Lord, heal this leper. We are not going to put him outside the camp.*” But the Lord said, “*Put him outside the camp.*” It is better to humble ourselves and acknowledge that there are many cases where the Lord does not heal, for some good reason known to Him alone. Jesus Himself said, “*There were many lepers in Israel in the time of Elisha, but none of them were healed*” (*Luke 4:27*) – in spite of God saying “*I the Lord am your Healer!*”

The Bible is realistic. But those who major on one favourite verse here, or one favourite verse there, go astray. We must devote ourselves to the study of God’s Word if we are to avoid going astray and avoid leading others astray. It grieves my heart when I see poor people suffering through being led astray by their leaders who do not know God or His Word.

In *Numbers 5:6–8*, it says that when a man has sinned against another in a matter that requires him to make restitution to the wronged man, “*he shall make restitution in full for his wrong and add to it one-fifth of it and give it to him whom he has wronged.*” This is righteousness – to make up for the interest that the other man lost on his money during the period. If the restitution is made after many years, obviously a higher percentage than 20% should be added. That was why Zaccheus (who was a shrewd accountant) knew that he had to return *four times* what he had taken wrongly from others. He did a quick mental calculation and knew that if 20% had to be added for a debt that was one year old, then over 300% would have to be added for *eight-year-old debts* (at compound interest)! And the Lord did not stop Zaccheus from repaying that, because He also knew that that was righteous.

Soon after I was baptised (in 1961), one of the first things the Lord spoke to me about was to make restitution to the government for cheating it of taxes in the past. As I calculated the amount, I was uncertain about the exact amount I owed – and was considering two figures in my mind – one 20% more than the other. I finally decided to pay the *lower* figure. You know how, in such matters, we always make a decision in our own favour always!! I had never read this verse in *Numbers* at that time.

As I was thinking of giving the lesser amount, I came across this verse in my Bible reading. The Lord gave me a direct answer to my question: “*Add 20% and give it back*”!! If you are in doubt, it is always better to give *more*, as restitution, rather than less. It will be well worth it, to have a clear conscience in the day that we stand before the Lord. I didn’t want to have that extra 20% in my bank account, and not be ready to meet the Lord!

Chapter 5:11–31: Here we read of how God exposes sin in an unfaithful wife. If a man’s wife had committed adultery, God would expose her by making her belly swell and her thigh rot, when the priest made her drink water that contained some dust from the floor of the tabernacle. Then, what that woman did in secret would be revealed. In *Acts 5*, we read that what Ananias and Sapphira did in secret was revealed by God. The difference was that under the new covenant, sin was exposed by God not by “holy water” but by the Holy Spirit. Peter exposed Ananias and Sapphira supernaturally through the discernment of the Spirit. It is very important for Christian leaders to have spiritual discernment so that they can see the true spiritual condition of people.

Numbers 6:1–21 deals with the *Nazirite vow*. (Note that this is not ‘Nazarite’. It has nothing to do with Nazareth. Jesus was called a Nazarene – not a Nazirite – because He lived in Nazareth – *Matthew 2:23*).

A Nazirite was one who took a voluntary vow to be dedicated exclusively to the Lord for a period of time. During this period, he was not permitted to cut his hair or drink grape-juice or wine. Samson was such a Nazirite for life. So we see here, that there were two ways in which Samson could have lost his strength – by allowing his hair to be cut, or by drinking grape-juice or wine. His strength was not in his hair but in his dedication – which was shown by not cutting his hair and not drinking wine. Either of the two would have made him lose his strength. But Jesus did cut his hair and did drink wine, because He was not a Nazirite.

In *Chapter 6:22–27*, we see the blessing with which Aaron was commanded to bless the people of Israel. This was the greatest blessing that God could give those under the old covenant – and it was not just health and wealth. It was far more. The Lord did not tell Aaron to bless them saying, “May the Lord bless you with plenty of money and good health.” No. The blessing was:

- “*The Lord bless you and keep you*” – May He preserve you from all evil.
- “*The Lord make His face shine on you*” – May His glory shine upon you.
- “*The Lord be gracious to you*” – May He be merciful to you and forgive you all your sins.
- “*The Lord lift up His countenance on you*” – May He show you His favour.
- “*The Lord give you peace*” – May you have a peaceful heart, a peaceful life and a peaceful home.

There was nothing greater that they could get than this.

Wanderings and Murmurings

In *Chapter 9:15–23*, we read how the Lord led His people by the pillar of cloud and fire. The cloud provided a shade from the sun in that hot desert and the fire showed them the way at night. Whenever the cloud lifted, the people of Israel would set out, and when the cloud stopped, they camped. Sometimes the cloud would linger for a few days and sometimes it lingered for many months (*verses 19, 22*). If the cloud stopped only for one night, then when the cloud lifted in the morning, they would move on (*verse 21*). *They would settle down in the evening and in the morning they would have to move.* Think of the practical inconvenience of this! Here were people travelling with their little children, their tents and their animals – and they had to set up their tents, when the cloud stopped late in the evening. It would have taken them a few hours to set up their tents before they could go to bed that night. At dawn the next morning, they would hear the cry going through the camp that the cloud was lifting again. I can imagine the irritation that swept through the camp – because they would have to pack up everything and move again. Thus God taught them to learn patience and to obey Him moment by moment!

A true servant of God will never complain when God tells him to do what is inconvenient. God may tell him to go somewhere and then tell him to return. He obeys instantaneously, like the angels of heaven.

The pillar here is a picture of the Holy Spirit. You can be born of the Spirit and baptised in the Spirit, and yet not be led by the Spirit in your daily life. Only those who are “*led by the Spirit*” are the sons of God (*Romans 8:14*).

There is a difference between a child and a *son*. A son is mature and grown up. Those who are led by the Spirit in daily life are the sons.

God was very strict about any murmuring or complaining that He heard in the camp of the Israelites. The Israelites who grumbled in the wilderness “*were destroyed by the destroyer*” (*1 Corinthians 10:10*). And we are told in the next verse that this is written as a warning for us not to grumble and complain (*1 Corinthians 10:11*). We shine as lights in a world full of murmuring and complaining, mainly by living a life in which we “*do all things without murmuring and complaining*” (*Philippians 2:14*).

Murmuring and complaining were characteristic of the Israelites during their 40 years of wandering in the wilderness and are the clearest proof that such a person has not yet entered *the land of Canaan* (the victorious life). A Christian leader who grumbles and murmurs can never lead others into the victorious life. One of the clearest proofs that we have finished with “wilderness wanderings” is that we have stopped grumbling and complaining in our homes and elsewhere, and started giving thanks *at all times and for everything* (*1 Thessalonians 5:18; Ephesians 5:20*).

In *Chapter 12* we read about the grumbling and murmuring of the leaders: Miriam and Aaron criticised Moses concerning the woman he had married. In actual fact, this was because they were *jealous* of Moses' ministry. Aaron was 3 years older than Moses and Miriam was 12 years older, and they saw God using their *younger* brother as Israel's prophet and leader. It's not easy to submit to someone who is younger than you. God chose Moses because he was the humblest man on earth (*verse 3*). That verse is found in parenthesis (brackets) because Moses did not write that about himself. It was added later – probably by Joshua. The only thing they could find to criticise in Moses was that he had married a non-Jew. It says there that "*the Lord heard it*" (*verse 2*). The Lord hears it whenever anyone speaks against His anointed servants. The Lord called them out and told them that whereas He spoke to prophets by visions and dreams, he spoke to Moses face to face, as a man speaks to his friend (*verses 6–8; Exodus 33:11*).

Here the Lord makes it clear that His speaking to us face to face is *far superior* to His speaking to us in a vision or a dream. Yet many believers today imagine that a man who claims to have visions and dreams is more spiritual than one who hears the Lord speaking to his heart. To be led by the Spirit in day to day matters is far superior to mere visions and dreams.

The Lord was angry with Miriam and Aaron for criticising His servant. The cloud withdrew from the tent and Miriam suddenly became full of leprosy (*verse 10*). And Moses whom she criticised had to pray for her healing. The Bible says, "*Pray for those who persecute you*" (*Matthew 5:44*). That is a new covenant command and not an old covenant one. But Moses was a *new covenant man* living in old covenant times. He was an amazing man. Just like there are Christians in this new covenant age who live by old covenant standards, even so there were a few under the old covenant, who lived by new covenant principles. When the Bible says that all who come under grace (the new covenant) will overcome sin in their lives (*Romans 6:14*), that means that those who do not overcome sin are living under the old covenant – and most believers are defeated by sin in their lives.

The Lord said that Miriam must be put out of the camp for seven days so that she learns a lesson (*verse 15*). Otherwise others would not know what happened and would not fear to do such things themselves. God makes an example of those who rebel so that others may fear. Miriam learned her lesson and then came back to the camp – never to speak like that again in her life. But in spite of this, many others in the camp did not learn a lesson – and we shall come to that later.

Rebellion Against God

In *Chapter 13*, we find that the Israelites came to Kadesh-barnea at the border of Canaan – the land that God had promised them. It was now

two years since they left Egypt (*Deuteronomy 2:14*) and God told them to go in and possess the land. The Israelites sent twelve spies to survey the land. All twelve of them came back saying that the land was indeed a wonderful land. Ten of them however said, “But there are huge giants there and we cannot conquer them.” But two of them – Caleb and Joshua – replied saying, “The Lord will help us to conquer those big giants”. But the 600,000 Israelites listened to the majority.

What do we learn from this? First of all, that it is dangerous to follow the majority – because the majority is invariably wrong. “*The way to life is narrow and very few find it,*” Jesus said. The majority still go on the broad way to destruction. So if you follow the majority, you will certainly be along with them on the broad way to destruction. Don’t ever imagine that a large church is a spiritual church. Jesus’ church had only 11 members in it.

When ten leaders say one thing and two say the exact opposite, whose side will you take? God was on the side of the two here – Joshua and Caleb. Unbelief and Satan were on the side of the other ten. But the Israelites foolishly followed the majority – and that was why they had to wander in the wilderness for the next 38 years. They did not have the discernment to see whose side God was on! God plus one person is always a majority against any number of people – and so I want to stand with God always. We saw in *Exodus 32* that God was on the side of just one man Moses, when all the Israelites were worshipping the golden calf. But of all the twelve tribes, only the tribe of Levi could see that then. And now when God was with Joshua and Caleb, even the tribe of Levi could not recognise it!

All of this has lessons for us today. Christendom in general is full of compromise and worldliness. Here and there, God raises up a few who stand for the truth of God’s word without any compromise. If you have discernment, you will recognise that God is with those few, and you will stand with them against the majority. And you will enter the promised land with them.

How do you identify the man with whom God is standing? *He speaks the language of faith.* Joshua and Caleb spoke the language of faith: “*We can overcome*”. “We can overcome the giants of anger, sexual lust, jealousy, murmuring and the love of money. We can overcome Satan. God will crush Satan under our feet” – that is the language of the man with whom God stands. The man who is *not* with God says: “We must not take the Bible so literally. After all, we are only human. We will be defeated until the end of our lives. You have to understand human psychology.” Quite honestly, I don’t care for “human psychology”. I believe God’s Word.

Many Christians go astray exactly like those Israelites – through human reasoning. God has hidden these truths from the clever and the

intelligent and revealed them to babes. If you use your human reasoning and your cleverness to study the Bible, I can guarantee that you will go astray. What you need is the revelation of the Holy Spirit. That's why Jesus picked fishermen to be His disciples, and not professors like Gamaliel and his students. He did pick one of Gamaliel's students later – Paul. But the Lord had to take Paul into the desert for three years to bring down all his pride to nothing before he could get revelation.

God was so angry with those Israelites who doubted His power that He told them "*Surely all these people before whom I performed all these signs will never enter the promised land. They will all perish, these people who have put Me to the test **ten times***" (*Numbers 14:22*). "*Ten times*" was not an exaggeration. They had actually rebelled ten times. Here is a list of their ten rebellions:

1. When the Egyptians chased after them at the Red Sea (*Exodus 14:11*).
2. When the waters were bitter at Marah (*Exodus 15:24*).
3. When they didn't have bread in the wilderness of Sin (*Exodus 16:2, 3*).
4. When they kept the manna overnight (*Exodus 16:20*).
5. When they went out on the sabbath day looking for manna (*Exodus 16:27, 28*).
6. When there was no water to drink at Rephidim (*Exodus 17:3*).
7. When they worshipped the golden calf (*Exodus 32*).
8. When they complained at Taberah (*Numbers 11:1*).
9. When they asked for meat (*Numbers 11:4, 33*).
10. When they refused to go into Canaan (*Numbers 13*).

God gave them *nine* chances. They took advantage of His forgiveness – just like many believers do today – not realising that the ninth chance was their last. God's patience had run out and they were punished when they rebelled the tenth time. There was no way to go back then. They repented when they heard their punishment and asked for one more chance. But it was too late (*Numbers 14:39–45*). Many believers will find one day that the opportunities to enter a life of victory are also not available forever.

In *Chapter 16*, we read of the rebellion of Korah and his fellow-rebels. One would have thought that Korah, Dathan and Abiram would have learned a lesson when Miriam was put outside the camp for seven days for her rebellion against Moses. A wise man learns from the mistakes of others. But a foolish person makes the same mistake himself. Most of the other Israelites had learnt a lesson from Miriam's example, but not Korah, Dathan and Abiram. God punished Korah, Dathan and Abiram by sending them alive to hell.

We read of two people who went to heaven alive – Enoch and Elijah. Here we read of the only people who went alive into hell.

Initially there were four men who rebelled against Moses – Korah, Dathan, Abiram and On (*Numbers 16:1*). Moses told them to come back the next morning (*verse 5*). Overnight, one of these four men – On – came to his senses, repented and backed out. Thus he saved his family as well from destruction. Moses called Dathan and Abiram to warn them privately, but they refused to meet him (*verse 12*). Their pride and arrogance in refusing to meet Moses sealed their fate and the fate of their families. The next morning these three men came to Moses with no change in their rebellious attitudes (*verse 24*).

The Lord then told the people to pull back from the tents of Korah, Dathan and Abiram – and the people did. But now something interesting happened – that is not recorded here in *Chapter 16*, but only in *Chapter 26:11*. There we read that *the sons of Korah did not die*. They must have been grown sons. They had stood outside their tent, with their father initially, in his rebellion against Moses. But when the Lord told the people to pull back from the tents of the rebels, these sons of Korah obeyed. They told their father, “*Dad, we are not standing with you. We’re going to stand with Moses*” – and they ran to Moses’ side. Sometimes children have more sense than their parents! Thus they escaped hell. But the Israelites blamed Moses for the death of these rebels and so another 14,700 people joined the rebels in hell that day (*16:41–49*). To rebel against *a godly man* is a very serious thing in God’s eyes. It is not the same as rebelling against dead religious leaders – which may *at times be necessary!*

The descendants of those sons of Korah (who escaped death), were the song leaders of God’s people in David’s time. They are the ones who wrote *Psalms 42 to 49* and *Psalm 84* etc. *Psalm 46:2, 3* speaks about the earth opening up and the mountains slipping inside, and about God being their refuge at such a time. Undoubtedly they were thinking of the last-minute escape of their fathers, because of which they themselves were alive to praise God in their day and age. Then in *Psalm 84:10*, they wrote, “*I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of God than dwell in the tents of wickedness*” – (the tents of their father Korah! That’s what they meant there). These psalms of the sons of Korah become more meaningful to us when we understand this background of the writers.

God now wanted to prove to the Israelites once and for all that it was He himself Who had appointed Aaron to be the high priest – for it was the priestly ministry that Korah and company had questioned and coveted. God told Moses to tell the 12 leaders of the tribes to bring a rod each. (*Numbers 17*). They were to break off a branch from a tree and to bring it with them. Aaron also had to bring one, representing the tribe of Levi. God told them to put all the rods in the tent, and in the morning the one He approved of would bear fruit. In the morning they saw that Aaron’s rod budded and produced fruit on the dead broken branch (*verse 8*). Thus the Lord put an end to the dispute about whom He had chosen. This is how the Lord identifies the servant whom He has chosen – by

the principle of resurrection – life coming out of a dead branch. What that means for us is that in the midst of spiritual death, God preserves His servants alive. They are not swallowed up by the spiritual death of Christendom around them. Like Aaron's rod, they bring forth fruit in the midst of death. Their anointing is always fresh like fresh fruit. Constant freshness in the ministry is so rare to see in anyone these days – and yet that is the mark of the man God anoints. Aaron's rod stayed fresh throughout the wilderness journey.

We find a lovely verse in *Chapter 18:20*, where the Lord tells Aaron, “*You shall have no inheritance in the promised land when you go there. I am your portion and your inheritance.*” This is what the Lord says to us too. There is nothing wrong in owning a house or land. But if you ever get attached to any of it, you can never be a servant of the Lord. If you want to serve the Lord, your attitude to everything on this earth must be, “I may have these things here – a house or a car or a scooter or whatever. But I am not attached to any of these things. The Lord is my portion and my inheritance. The other things the Lord can take away any time He wants.”

Moses Punished

In *Chapter 20*, we read of Moses being punished for one single act of disobedience. This was the only time Moses slipped up and disobeyed God. He who had faithfully obeyed God in everything made one mistake towards the end of his life – and paid for it by being denied entry into Canaan. This was the second time that the people cried for water. This time God told Moses not to smite the rock, but only to speak to it (*verse 8*). This was because the rock (*Exodus 17*) symbolised Christ Who had to be smitten only once on the cross. After that, we just speak to it to get the benefit of that once-for-all smiting. But Moses was angry and struck the rock twice. The Lord immediately told Moses that he could not enter Canaan (*20:12*).

God gave the Israelites nine chances and denied them entry into Canaan only when they rebelled the tenth time. But Moses was not given *even one chance*. The very first time he failed, he was denied entry into Canaan. Why? *Because God expects more from leaders than from ordinary believers.* This is true even today. To whom more is given, more is required.

Moses pleaded with God. For 40 years he had longed to enter the land of Canaan. And now at the very borders of the land he was denied entry. But God would not relent. Whenever Moses prayed for mercy for others, God always relented. But not when Moses prayed for himself. So Moses humbled himself and accepted the punishment. But God was good to him. 1500 years later, God allowed him to enter the promised land, when

he stood with our Lord on the mount of transfiguration! That was the first time that Moses stood in the promised land. God honoured His servant by giving him a much better entry into Canaan than if he had entered with the rebellious Israelites. If Moses had trusted God, he would have realised that God, even then, had planned something good for him. God is always “silently planning for us in love” (*Zephaniah 3:17* - paraphrase). But at that time, God had to punish Moses publicly so that people would know that God is strict about disobedience in His servants.

But did the water flow when Moses disobeyed? Yes, it did. Even when a man disobeys God, the blessings may still flow from his ministry. What does that prove? That doesn't prove that God is happy with the man. No. It only proves that God loves the people so much that He blesses them, *despite the disobedience of His servants*. It was because God loved the Israelites, that He allowed the water to flow that day. When you see blessing flowing from the ministry of a carnal servant of God today, remember that that only proves that God loves the people. It doesn't prove that God approves of His servant. Even as God dealt with Moses later, He will deal with that servant later. Jesus said that many people would come to Him in the last day and say, “Lord, we cast out demons in Your name, we prophesied in Your name, we healed the sick in Your name.” All of that was true. People were healed and blessed and delivered. But the Lord will still say to those preachers, “Depart from Me, because You did not live a holy life. You lived in sin.” So we see clearly that God uses even carnal, disobedient preachers, because He loves the people.

In *Chapter 21*, we read of a time when God punished the Israelites by sending poisonous snakes into their midst. When the people cried out, God told Moses to make a bronze figure of a serpent and to put it on a pole. Then anyone who was bitten could look at this bronze serpent and be healed. Jesus told Nicodemus that this was a picture of the cross where He would be lifted up to die (*John 3:14*). We have all been bitten by the old serpent Satan and his poison is flowing in our system and killing us spiritually. But we can be healed completely if we look by faith at Jesus hanging on the cross not only for our forgiveness but also to deliver us from the evil effects of this poison flowing in our system. We can be set free permanently.

Balaam – A Warning

In *Chapters 22–24*, we read the story of Balaam. There is an important passage here concerning a number of matters. When King Balak invited Balaam the prophet to come and curse Israel, Balaam sought the will of God. And God clearly told Balaam not to go. But then King Balak said he

would give him more honour and more money if he came. Then Balaam said he would seek God's will again. What was the need to seek God's will a second time, when God Who knows the end from the beginning had already told him not to go? But he was eager to get the money and honour. The Bible says that Balaam "*loved the wages of unrighteousness*" (2 Peter 2:15).

You may find yourself in situations like that, where you seek God and sense very clearly in your spirit that God does not want you to go somewhere. Then you find the salary there to be very attractive and you are tempted "to seek God's will again"!! Whenever you face such a temptation in the future, remember Balaam. God doesn't change his mind, just because the salary is more attractive, or the honour is greater. But where God sees that a man wants to go a certain way, God won't stop him. He will let him go. This is why God told Balaam to go when Balaam asked him the second time. That was not God's *perfect* will. He would not override Balaam's free will and make him into a robot. He saw that Balaam really wanted to go. So God said "Go". This was something like the father of the prodigal son allowing his son to go to the far country. God has given us freedom of choice and He will never override our free will.

But God still sent His angel to stop Balaam. Balaam himself could not see the angel, but his donkey could. What lesson do we learn from this? Just this: *When a man is blinded by the love of money, even a donkey will be able to see spiritual realities more clearly than him!* Because that donkey did not love money, it could see the angel clearly! Balaam could not, because he loved money. Balaam experienced the Spirit of God coming upon him; and he prophesied about Christ's coming (*Numbers 24:2, 17*). But he lost everything, because of his love for money.

That donkey began to speak to its master. This is the first instance of "*speaking in tongues*" in the Bible – a donkey speaking a foreign language *fluently* – a language it had never learnt! It was supernatural. It was from God, undoubtedly. But let us learn from this first instance of speaking in tongues in Scripture that speaking in tongues does not make anyone spiritual – for that donkey remained a stupid donkey even after it spoke in tongues, and even after it experienced the supernatural power of God through its tongue! Remember that always.

Then Balaam suggested a clever tactic to the people of Moab. He told them that the best way to destroy the Israelites was by making their God Himself to turn against them. And the best way to make God turn against His people was by making them immoral. So he asked them to send their pretty daughters into the Israeli camp to seduce the Israeli men. Thus Israel fell not only into immorality but also into the worship of the idols that these Moabite girls brought into the Israeli camp (*See Numbers 25:1 with Revelation 2:14*). And sure enough God punished the

Israelites severely. 24,000 people died of a plague (*Numbers 25:9*). This is the way that Satan has polluted believers today as well. Let us learn Satan's schemes from Balaam and be alert.

As the plague began to spread through the camp of Israel and the people were dying like flies, the whole nation would have been wiped out there by Balaam's tactic if it had not been for the zeal of one man, Phinehas, Aaron's grandson (See *Numbers 25:9* onwards). Phinehas took a spear and went into one of the tents and killed a man and the Midianite woman he had brought into the tent. That stopped the plague. And because of his zeal for God's name and honour, God made a covenant with Phinehas that his descendants would be priests in Israel forever. God honours those who stand boldly for Him – even if they have to take hard decisions against others and become unpopular thereby.

In *Chapter 26* we read of the second census. We see here the persistence of God in bringing them back to Kadesh-barnea and giving them a second chance to enter the promised land. He is *the God of the second chance*. This is a great encouragement for those who have failed. In fact, He is *the God of the millionth chance!!* He forgives us again and again and gives us any number of chances to enter the life of victory.

In *27:15–23* we see Moses asking the Lord to appoint someone of His choice to succeed him as Israel's leader, to lead them into Canaan. Moses had two sons. But he did not hand over the leadership of God's people to them – as many Christian leaders do today. He was a man of God. And he was not interested in starting a royal dynasty of his own!! He sought God's will and God told him to appoint Joshua ("a man in whom is the Spirit" – verse 18) as the next leader of Israel. And Moses did that immediately.

In *Chapters 28 and 29* are some more laws about offerings. Then in *Chapter 30* is a law concerning vows. We read something interesting here – that a father can cancel a vow that his daughter makes foolishly and a husband can cancel a foolish vow that his wife makes. But if the father and husband hear the vow and say nothing then the vow stands. This shows how important it is for us to exercise our authority as fathers over our children that they do not go in foolish ways and as husbands to be the head in our homes, so that our wives do not lead our homes astray by some foolishness.

In *Chapter 32*, we read of the compromise of the tribes of Reuben and Gad. Because they were enormously wealthy in cattle, they were on the constant look out for good pasture land for their herds. So when they saw some good land in Gilead – on the eastern side of Jordan (not within Canaan), they asked Moses for permission to settle down there. They rejected the call of God to enter the promised land. Even after 40 years of wanderings, they had not learnt a lesson. What does God do with such

people who are more interested in their business and wealth than in a life of victory? He lets them go their way. So Moses permitted them to settle there. They are a picture of many believers who have chosen worldly affluence above spiritual values.

Moses' words to them are a stinging rebuke to many comfort-loving believers today: "*Shall your brothers go to war, while you yourselves sit here?*" (*Numbers 32:6*).

They finally agreed to help the other tribes possess Canaan; but said that after that they would prefer to come back to settle in this prosperous land east of Jordan.

In *Numbers 35*, we read of God appointing six "cities of refuge" where people who killed others *accidentally* could flee to escape the wrath of the relatives of the dead man. Accidentally killing man is not in the same category as murder – and God made provision for such people to be protected, while not sparing murderers. In all the laws that God gave, we see Him unsparing against deliberate sin, but always providing mercifully for unintentional sin. We saw that in our study of Leviticus and now here too. It is amazing indeed then that such a holy God should so mercifully forgive us who have sinned *deliberately* so often. Praise God for His grace and mercy toward us.

DEUTERONOMY

REPETITION OF THE LAW AND REVIEW OF GOD'S DEALINGS

‘**D**euteronomy’ means ‘a second law.’ This is because there is a repetition here of many important aspects of the law.

We can divide this book in two ways.

We can divide it first of all, as *three speeches that Moses gave*:

1. First speech (*Chapters 1 to 4*).
2. Second speech (*Chapters 5 to 26*).
3. Third speech (*Chapters 27 to 30*).

And all of this was spoken by the man who told the Lord at the burning bush that he could not speak!

The book concludes with the song of Moses (*Chapter 32*), the blessing of Moses (*Chapter 33*) and the death of Moses (*Chapter 34*).

The second way to divide the book is to see it as looking in three directions:

1. **Looking backward.** Two messages looking back at God’s faithfulness during the 40 years in the wilderness (*Chapters 1–11*).
2. **Looking upward.** Two messages looking up at God – through His laws. Through God’s laws, man sees his need (*Chapters 12–31*).
3. **Looking forward.** Two messages that look forward to the wonderful things that God would do in the future (*Chapters 32–33*).

All of us need these three looks in our life. We should never stop having these three looks, no matter how old we become.

Looking Backward

We need to look back. Many times in my life I have looked back over how the Lord has led me – and that has renewed my faith. When I face a difficult situation and it looks as if there is no way out, I remind myself of the promises in the Bible and listen to the encouragement that other believers give me. But the thing that strengthens my faith most of all is when I look back. The Lord asks me, “*Have I ever let you down even once so far?*” I have to reply, “No, Lord. Not even once.” Then He says, “*I won't let you down now either.*” The *backward look* encourages me more than anything else.

Have you fallen again? *Look back* and see how the Lord forgave you in the past. When He forgave you, didn't He know that you would fall again? Was that a surprise to Him that you fell again? No. Then He will forgive you again. Look back with gratitude. That will strengthen your faith. Be thankful for the Lord's mercy. When you look at your failures in the past, you will learn to be merciful to other believers around you who fail.

But there is another way in which we must *not* look back. Paul said, “*Forgetting the things that are behind.*” (*Philippians 3:13*). If we look back in a wrong way, we will get discouraged and think that we are useless and a failure in life, having wasted so many years of our life.

Let me give a word of encouragement to those who feel they have wasted their lives. Jesus told a parable of some labourers who did not work for 11 hours out of 12 in a working day. At the 11th hour a man called them and asked them to work in his vineyard. They went and worked for just one hour. But Jesus said that they got their wages first! Those who worked for 12 hours got their reward last! I hope that encourages you.

We should not look back in *discouragement*. Neither should we look back in *pride*. “*Forgetting the things that lie behind*” relates to both the things that *discourage* us as well as to the things that make us *proud*. If you can think of anything that discourages you or makes you proud, I would ask you to forget it as soon as possible. But we need to look back with gratitude to God always, for what He has done for us in the past. That's the backward look I am talking about. Peter says that those who don't look back like that, but forget their purification from their sins will be blind and short-sighted (*2 Peter 1:9*).

Looking Upward

We also need to look up. We must never stop looking upwards and seeing more of the glory of the Lord. There is much of the glory of Jesus that we still haven't seen. We must hunger for this, because that's the image into which the Holy Spirit seeks to transform us. As we see the Lord's glory, it will humble us because we will see our own need. This is the secret of remaining in humility till the end of our lives.

It is very easy for one whom God has anointed and used mightily to become proud. I have seen a lot of preachers like that. Because God has used them they are so proud and they are very distant from people. What is it that can keep us in brokenness and humility till the end of our lives? Only one thing. Looking unto Jesus, the Author and Finisher of our faith. When we look at Jesus it is impossible to be proud. A man becomes proud when he starts looking at other people, and imagines himself to be better than them, or more anointed than them, or more used than them etc. If, however, he looked upwards at Jesus, he would fall on his face in the dust in repentance – like the apostle John did on the Isle of Patmos. And if he keeps looking at Jesus, he will keep his face in the dust forever.

All of us need to learn to keep our faces in the dust at all times. That's the place of safety. So if you want God to be happy with you until the end of your days, keep looking upwards.

We should never look inwards *first*. We must always look *upwards first*. We must look at Jesus and as we see His glory, we will see our sin. That's the best way to see our sin; otherwise we will be discouraged.

Looking Forward

We need to look forward too – in faith. God has wonderful things in store for us. He has a great job for us to do. We don't know when we will have to leave this world. But before the Lord comes, we look forward to doing something useful for Him on this earth. Most people in the world look to the future with fear and anxiety. But we look forward in faith.

God told Moses in *Deuteronomy* to tell the Israelites to look forward to the time when they would live in Canaan. He prophesied concerning Israel's far-distant future in *Deuteronomy*.

Repetition

There is one other thing that we see in *Deuteronomy* – a repetition of many matters that were already written in the earlier books of Moses. We should not be disturbed by repetition. Repetition is necessary for us to be gripped by the truth. That is why God has repeated many things in His Word. The history of the kings of Judah are mentioned twice – first in the two books of *Kings* and again in the two books of *Chronicles*. Why does the New Testament open with *four* biographies of Christ and not just one? There is a lot of repetition in the four gospels. Some matters are mentioned four times – in the four gospels. There must be a very good reason for that. Many things are repeated in the letter to the *Colossians* which were already mentioned in *Ephesians*. What we can learn from this is that the apostles were not ashamed to repeat themselves. Some preachers are afraid to repeat a sermon on the same subject lest they

lose their reputation before the people. They are more concerned about what people think about them than about those people's need.

I heard of an evangelist who conducted seven days meetings in a town and preached *every day* on the subject: “*You must be born again.*” An unconverted man who attended all the meetings got tired of hearing the same theme on all seven days and asked him why he preached every day on, “*You must be born again?*” The evangelist replied, “*Because you must be born again.*” That’s the answer. The message had to be repeated until the man was born again. He does not need to hear something else. The patient has to take the same antibiotic until he is cured!

Now if you were to ask me why I keep on saying, “*You must get victory over sin*”, I hope you know the answer: “*Because you must get victory over sin.*”

The Old Testament prophets repeated the same message again and again because Israel needed to hear what God was saying clearly. Jeremiah preached virtually the same message for more than 40 years, until he almost got tired of preaching it. But many a time, people need to hear something ten times before the truth sinks in. So we should never be ashamed of preaching on the same subject again and again to the same audience. If we are anointed, the message will still be fresh each time we preach it.

If we seek the honour of people, we will not repeat. But if we seek their good, we will repeat it until they have understood it. This is one of the lessons we learn from *Deuteronomy – “the second law”*.

Deuteronomy begins with this statement in *Chapter 1:2*: “*It is eleven days' journey from Horeb by the way of Mount Seir to Kadesh-barnea.*” It was only a 11-day journey from Horeb – where the Israelites got the laws of God – to Kadesh-barnea (from where they were to enter the land of Canaan). But they did not enter. That journey of 11 days finally took them 38 years. You can finish 12 grades of school in 12 years or 20 years – that depends on you.

What a difference there is between 11 days and 38 years! We can always ask God to forgive us if we wasted 38 years outside the will of God for our lives – doing what we wanted to do, living for our own pleasure and comfort and for making money. At the end of it all, you may say, “*Lord, please forgive me. I have wasted 38 years of my life.*” Will God forgive you? He certainly will. *But can He give you back the 38 years you wasted?* No. Even Almighty God cannot give time back to any of us. Can God give us last year and its opportunities again? No. He can give us next year. But He cannot give us back any of the years gone by. The opportunities we had in the past are gone forever. That is why it is important, that if God wants to do something in your life in 11 days, you must ensure that it doesn't take more than 11 days. *Chapter 2:14* says that the Israelites

reached Kadesh-barnea two years after they had left Egypt. But it took them 38 more years before they could go into Canaan, making a total of 40 years in the desert.

Qualifications for Leadership

In *Chapter 1:13*, we see Moses giving advice concerning the type of leaders he selected for Israel. I want you to see the three qualities he looked for – *wisdom, discernment and experience*.

The first requirement was *wisdom*. Wisdom is different from knowledge. Knowledge comes by study. So those who have clever brains excel in this. Wisdom comes by going through many trials. So those who are faithful excel in this. Wisdom is the application of knowledge to practical situations in life. You may have a lot of Bible knowledge, but no divine wisdom. The book of *Proverbs* places a great emphasis on acquiring wisdom – not on knowing Scripture, but on *knowing God*. The Bible is a means by which we get wisdom and know God. A lot of people who study the Bible acquire knowledge. But the tree of knowledge brought death. Knowledge puffs up (*1 Corinthians 8:1*). The tree of life brings wisdom that teaches us how to live and how to react to different situations in life. So wisdom is the first requirement for a leader.

The second requirement was *discernment*. This is one of the greatest needs in leadership today – the ability to discern between what is *Godly* and what is *human* – not between what is Godly and demonic, which is easy, but between that which is of God and that which is of man, between that which is spiritual and that which is soulish.

Sometimes people say, “Well, after all we are only human.” But Paul rebuked the Corinthians for “*walking like mere human beings*” (*1 Corinthians 3:3*). We shouldn’t be behaving like mere men. We should be walking like Jesus Christ. “*He who abides in Christ should walk as He walked*” (*1 John 2:6*). It may be easy to discern between a spiritual man and a carnal man – one who is living in sin. But we must be able to discern between a spiritual man and a soulish man – one who lives by his human abilities. When you listen to a man speak, you should be able to discern whether the man is speaking from his *heart* or from his *head*. What comes from a man’s head will only go into other people’s heads. But what comes from a man’s heart will go to other people’s hearts. Jesus always spoke from His heart. We must learn to speak from our hearts. The Bible was written for our *hearts*, not for our heads. The psalmist said, “*Thy word have I hid in my heart (not my memory) that I may not sin against Thee.*” (*Psalms 119:11*).

The third requirement was *experience*. You may acquire much wisdom even when you are young. You may even have discernment. But you still

need experience to be a godly leader – and that takes time. Experience comes through being crushed in different trials and tasting God's power and encouragement in those trials (*2 Corinthians 1:4*). The strength we receive through trials is what gives us a ministry to others.

Moses then warned the judges *not to show partiality* but to hear the small and the great alike (*verse 17*). This is a very important requirement for leaders. Never flatter the rich.

When I was a young believer, I saw in *every* church I went to, that if a man was an influential person in society – such as an important government official or a rich businessman – he was always on the board of the church. I wondered why this was so. Surely every big man in the world was not a spiritual man. In fact, the Bible says that “*God has chosen the poor of the world to be rich in faith*” (*James 2:5*). So these people were obviously being chosen for their worldly influence. No wonder all those churches backslid very soon. They showed the very *partiality* that we are warned against in *James 2*. I decided then that if the Lord ever planted a church through my labours, I would appoint spiritual men as elders, not influential men. And this is what we have done in all the churches the Lord has planted through us.

“*You shall not fear man,*” Moses told the leaders (*verse 17*). If you want to be a leader, you should not be afraid of any man.

A Fresh Repetition of God's Laws

Chapter 2:2, 3: “The Lord spoke to me, saying ‘You have circled this mountain long enough.’” The Lord told them that they were “*going around in circles*”. Does the Lord have to say that to any of us? If we are always in the same place spiritually, that is what we are doing. *Movement* is not the same as *progress!* We shouldn't be defeated by the same sins that defeated us 10 years ago. We shouldn't be losing our temper or lusting like we did 10 years ago. If we are, then we are moving around in circles. The Lord is now calling us to move on.

Chapter 4:2: “You shall not add to the word that I am commanding you, nor take away from it.” Do you know that even the small commandments in God's Word are important? What are the temptations that we face in relation to God's word? Not to ignore the important commandments, but the smaller ones. I have met numerous believers who say that certain commandments are minor and so we can afford to ignore them. But Jesus said “*If anyone cancels the smallest commandments, (he won't go to hell, but) he will be called the least in God's kingdom. But he who keeps the smallest commandments and teaches other people to keep them, will be called great in the kingdom of heaven.*” (*Matthew 5:19*).

How do we test the obedience of our little children? Not in the big matters but the small ones. Suppose when your 5-year-old son was going to school one day, you said to him, “Now son, on your way to school

today, don't murder anyone, don't commit adultery with anyone, don't rob a bank." He will come back every day from school and say, "Dad, I obeyed all your commandments." But is that where you test his obedience – in all those major commandments? No. I'll tell you where you can test his obedience. It's when he is playing outside your house with his friends and you say, "All right, son, you have played enough now. Come in now and help Mummy with some work in the house." His reply will invariably be, "Wait, Daddy. Let me just finish this game." That's where you test his obedience. Now, how do you think God tests your obedience? In the small commandments in His Word.

What does it mean, '*to take away something from the word of God?*' It means to ignore the small commandments.

What does it mean to *add to God's Word*? There are many Christian groups that have rules for their members that are not in Scripture. Some have rules for full-time Christian workers that they should always wear white clothes because that is "*more spiritual*"! I wish it were that easy to become spiritual. But it isn't. Another such rule is that those who serve the Lord should not support themselves. But Paul supported himself and he was the greatest servant of all. Are we better than Paul? Some teach that to become holy, we must not get married. But all the apostles (except Paul and Barnabas) were married (*1 Corinthians 9:5*). Or they teach that we must fast for so many days every year or pray for so many hours every day etc. There are multitudes of rules like this that preachers have made that only bring believers into condemnation and bondage. But none of these rules are in Scripture. These are the rules made by today's Pharisees.

I believe in fasting. But we must not make a law of it. Jesus didn't. There are many things like this which preachers teach – adding to the word of God. They try to be more spiritual than God Himself! The result is that they become carnal and legalistic. When Satan came to Eve and asked her what God had told them, Eve replied, adding to and subtracting from God's word. She said, "God has told us not to eat from and *not to touch* this tree, *lest we die*." God had never told them anything about *touching* the tree, but only about eating. But Eve tried to be more spiritual than God and added "*touching*" as well. What was the result? She both touched and ate! That's always what happens when people begin to add to God's word. They fall into sin. Eve also subtracted the intensity of what God had said by saying, "***lest we die***" – implying that death was not certain but only a possibility! But God had said, "*You will surely die*." If we subtract or add to God's word, we thereby nullify it (*Genesis 2:16, 17; 3:2, 3*).

In *Chapter 4, verses 24 and 31*, we read two statements about God: "*God is a consuming fire*" and "*God is merciful*." God is love, but He is

also a consuming fire. The glory of God was seen in Jesus Christ, full of grace and truth (*John 1:14*). God is merciful and holy. A truly Godly man will be like God – holy and merciful. To be a spiritual leader, you have to be like a *lion* and like a *lamb*, for that is how Jesus was. Jesus' words are like burning fire, and also tremendously compassionate. Don't think that a man who is full of compassion alone is a spiritual man. At the same time, one who is only fiery and strict is not a spiritual man either. Both are unbalanced. The glory of God is full of grace and truth.

In *Chapter 4:29*, Moses said that the Israelites could find God if they searched for Him with all their heart and all their soul. Jeremiah said the same thing in *Jeremiah 29:13*. Many people don't find God because they seek Him with as much earnestness as they would seek for a 10-paise coin that they lost in the grass at night. How long will you search for that coin? You may look for it for some time and if you can't find it, you move on. But if you had misplaced a bundle of ten thousand rupees somewhere, how long would you search for that? Do you seek for God like that? God is a rewarder only of those who diligently seek Him (*Hebrews 11:6*).

How eagerly do you seek for God? How eagerly do you seek for victory over sin? How keen are you to overcome your anger and your sexual lust? How eager are you to understand the Scriptures and to be useful in His kingdom? How eagerly do you seek to be filled with the Holy Spirit – not just once, but daily? How eager are you to be constantly fresh in your Christian life? If you have not received these things that I have just mentioned, all of which are the will of God for you, it must be because you have not sought God with all your heart. Jesus taught us to ask and seek and knock until our Father in heaven answered. It was the same principle that Moses was teaching here.

In *Chapter 5*, we find the 10 commandments repeated. Here, one more reason is given for keeping the Sabbath in *verse 15*: They were to keep the Sabbath in remembrance of the fact that they did not get deliverance from Egypt by their own power. It was **the Lord** Who brought them out of Egypt. They had tried for 430 years to get free, but they could not. Then the Lord set them free in *one night*. That then was the message of the Sabbath: *The man who trusts in God accomplishes more than the man who is busy with activity*. But the Israelites forgot that lesson very quickly. We read, later on in their history, that they disobeyed God and worked on the Sabbath again and again in order to make more money. They tilled their land in the seventh year when God told them not to. But what did they get for all that labour? God sent them into captivity for another 70 years in Babylon. But the one who trusts in God enters into God's rest and rests from his struggling, even as God rested from His

work on the Sabbath day. This is the message of the Sabbath (*Hebrews 4:9, 10*).

In *Chapter 5:29*, we read of one of God's greatest longings for His people. It is rare to find the word "**O**" in Scripture. But here we see God using it: "**O** that they had such a heart in them that they would fear Me and keep all My commandments always that it may go well with them and with their sons forever." God longs for it to go well with us and our children forever. Do you know that? He wants us to have the very best always. And He has given us His commandments so that it might go well with us. The Bible is the "*Manufacturer's Instructions*." If you buy an expensive electronic gadget, you will get a booklet of instructions along with it that tells you how to use it. You will be very careful to follow those instructions exactly, because you don't want that expensive gadget to blow up or be spoilt. In fact, the manufacturer usually advises that the equipment should not be switched on or used until you have read all the instructions. Who manufactured us? God! Here in the Bible are the instructions on how we can function best as human beings. If you don't follow these instructions, you can mess up your life or your marriage. Many have done just that, because they did not do things God's way. Who can they blame for that? No-one but themselves.

Even many believers have messed up their lives because they have not been careful to follow the "*Manufacturer's Instructions*." Even for physical health, I believe the best thing to do is to obey the Scriptures first of all. When the Lord says, "I am your Healer," He means, "I am your health." We need to be healthy in order to serve God. And if you want to be healthy you have to follow certain laws concerning what you eat and what you don't. A glutton can never be healthy. God says, "*Give attention to My words, for they are health to all their whole body*" (*Proverbs 4:20-22*). In the same way, to be spiritual, you must follow certain laws concerning spirituality. You have to humble yourself if you want grace, for God gives His grace only to the humble. You have to believe in order to receive something from God, for God gives us according to our faith. All these are spiritual laws. It will go well with us if you follow these laws.

In *Chapter 6:4*, we read, "*The Lord is our God, the Lord is one!*" We don't worship three Gods. God is one in three Persons. Then in *verse 5*, the first commandment is described in another way. This is what Jesus quoted in *Matthew 22:37*: "*Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.*" That is the first commandment. That means that we don't have any place in our hearts for family, property, job, or money – because **ALL** of our heart is given to God. This is Instruction No.1 in the "*Manufacturer's Instruction*" Manual. Don't operate the human machine before you have obeyed this commandment. What will happen when you love the Lord with all your heart? You will love your wife even better! You will love your neighbour better. You will even love your enemies, because you don't have any hatred in your heart anymore.

Jealousy, hatred, bitterness and all other sins against others are caused by not loving God with all your heart. The part of your heart that should be loving God is filled with jealousy. We overcome sin not by battling sin primarily, but by loving God with all our heart. When we love God with all our heart, the love of money and property and evil lusts will all go away. Consider a girl who is in love with Mr. A, who is not such a good person. Her parents try their best to stop her from loving him but they can't succeed. Then one day this girl meets Mr. B who is far more handsome, richer and a more pleasant person. Suddenly all her love for Mr. A disappears. How did that happen? That can be called "*the explosive power of a new affection*". A new love drove out the first love. Apply this to the Christian life. Here you are lusting after so many evil things that God forbids. You try and try to give up these bad habits but cannot, because you love those lusts. Then one day, you see the glory of Jesus and begin to love Him with all your heart. What happens? This new love has driven out the old affections. Then we have no more interest in the things of this world. It's "*the explosive power of a new affection*". This is the secret of victory over sin. Love God with all your heart and with all your soul – which means with all your intellectual power.

If God gave you a brilliant mind, that was not to enable you to make money, or to get on in this world and become a great man. No. The apostle Paul would have been a success in any field he chose, for he was such a brilliant man, He could have been a top-rate businessman. And if he were living today, he would have been a genius at computers. But he decided to use all the faculties God gave him for God alone. That's how he made good use of his life. What have you used your faculties for?

In *Chapter 6:7*, we read how it is the responsibility of parents to teach the Word of God to their children at all times from morning to night under all types of circumstances.

Chapter 7:1–6 talks about seven nations greater and stronger than Israel that God would enable them to defeat utterly. This is a picture of the victory that God desires to give us over every sin – for seven is the perfect number in Scripture (that speaks of completion). It is clear that it was going to be God Who would deliver the enemies into Israel's hand because the enemies were stronger than Israel. We must recognise that all our lusts are far too strong for us. Only the Lord can enable us to overcome them.

When God Blesses Us With Wealth

Chapter 8 is a very important chapter. When Jesus was tempted in the wilderness, each time He overcame Satan with the sword of the Spirit, the word of God. He never got into a discussion or an argument with Satan. To whatever Satan said, Jesus had only one answer: "*It is written.*" In the three temptations, He quoted from only two chapters in the Old Testament.

Deuteronomy 8:3 was the first: “*Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.*” The other two quotations were from *Deuteronomy 6:16*, “*You shall not tempt the Lord your God.*” And *Deuteronomy 6:13*, “*You must worship the Lord your God, and serve Him alone.*”

This shows us that Jesus had studied the Book of *Deuteronomy*. There is an answer in God’s word to *every* temptation and *every* problem we can ever face in life, if we know where to find it. I have never come across a problem in my life that had no answer in God’s Word. That’s why I want to encourage every believer to be a student of God’s Word. From your earliest youth, study God’s Word, and you will find that when you face mountains and rivers you can go past all of them and fulfil God’s purposes. David says, “*By my God I can leap over a wall*” (*Psalms 18:29*). There is no obstacle that can stand in our way. There is an answer in the Bible if you know where to find it. Jesus studied it intensely as a child and as a young man. So He had an answer for every temptation. He could not be deceived by Satan.

In *Chapter 8:11–15*, Moses warns them: “*Beware lest you forget the Lord your God by not keeping His commandments and His statutes, when you have eaten and are satisfied, and have built good houses and lived in them, and your herds and your flocks multiply, and your silver and gold multiply, then your heart becomes proud and you forget the Lord your God who brought you out of Egypt and led you through the great and terrible wilderness with fiery serpents and scorpions.*”

It is easier to think of God when we are in the wilderness or when we are struggling to obey God than when we are blessed and have become rich.

In the days when Noah was building the ark, he was so busy that he had no time to get drunk. But as soon as he came out triumphantly from the ark as the head of the only family on earth to survive the flood, he got drunk.

When David was running from cave to cave escaping from Saul, he wrote amazing psalms and was very close to God. But when he had plenty of ease and money and didn’t have to go to battle himself, but could send others to do the fighting for him, and he himself relax in the palace, that was when he sinned with Bathsheba. If he had gone to battle that day, he would not have seen Bathsheba (*2 Samuel 11:1*).

Solomon sinned because he had plenty of ease, comfort and wealth.

When did Israel start worshipping idols? They never worshipped idols during the 40 years in the wilderness, after that one incident with the golden calf. But as soon as they landed in Canaan, they started worshipping idols very quickly.

When we have plenty, we are in danger. If you are struggling financially, thank God. That will help you live close to God. But that doesn't mean that we have to forget God when we have plenty. No. I am only saying that it is more difficult. Jesus said it was difficult for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God. He didn't say it was *impossible*. So don't envy the brother who has plenty. It is more difficult for him to be close to God. Be thankful if you have less than him. That can be your salvation. If you don't have as many changes of clothes as others, don't envy them. Actually, you are better off, if you could only see it. Don't envy the person who has a bigger house or who has more money than you. Such people are in far greater danger. Leave it to God to decide what He should give you. Be content with even a little. I have seen how many preachers have destroyed themselves through getting plenty. Take a warning from them. A wise man learns from the mistakes of others.

In *Chapters 9 to 11* Moses gives the new generation of Israelites some warnings from the history of their fathers who disobeyed God and died. He warns them again that God is a consuming fire (9:3).

In *Chapter 11:21* (KJV), Moses told them that God's longing for them was: "*that your days and the days of your sons may be multiplied on the land like the days of heaven upon earth.*" This is God's will for all of us – that our days on earth may be like the days of heaven. God wants us *even now* to have a foretaste of the joy, peace, love, purity and goodness of heaven in our homes and in our churches. I have experienced a little bit of that. So my life and my ministry have not been a heavy burden for me. Not at all. It has been joyful and every day has been exciting, because I have learnt to live by the principles of heaven, and not of earth.

It's easy for you to do this when you start your Christian life. But I hope that 40 years from now, you will still determine to live by heaven's principles and not earth's. Fix your eyes on Jesus Who endured until the end – so that your days can be *like days of heaven on earth*. That is God's will for us.

Chapter 11:24 says, "*Every place on which the sole of your foot shall tread shall be yours.*" God's will is that we fulfil all of His will in every place, and that we overcome every weakness. In every area of our lives we must put our foot down and put the devil under our feet and overcome him.

In *Chapters 12 to 26*, various laws are either repeated or freshly given.

False Prophets

Chapter 13 has an interesting section on false prophets. This is a very important passage for us today, because false prophets abound in Christendom today. We are told here that God allows false prophets to

come across our path – *in order to test us*. False prophets and deceivers are a major means by which God tests our real desires and longings. The Lord says, “*If a prophet or a dreamer of dreams arises, or comes across your path, arises among you and gives you a sign or a wonder, and the sign or the wonder comes true...*” (13:1, 2). God allows what this deceiver prophesies to take place – to test us. There are many such false “prophets” who have their consulting rooms and consulting fees (exactly like medical doctors) in Christendom today. You have to *pay* for their prophecies – for they expect a payment. These false prophets try *one of two methods* to get your money. First, they will flatter you and tell you that you will indeed prosper where you are planning to go – whether to the Arabian Gulf countries or to some Western land, etc. Thus they will make you happy, so that they can receive a handsome gift from you! And then you will do exactly what they have “prophesied” and thus fulfil their “prophecy” *yourself*. This is a psychological gimmick called “*self-fulfilling prophecy*”. It is an old trick of confidence tricksters. What is the net result? *You are happy* because you got what you thought was “God’s approval” from the “prophet” to go where you wanted, in order to make money. *The prophet is happy* because he got a handsome gift. *The devil is also happy*, because he has deceived both you and the false prophet. The only ones who are unhappy are *God and the angels* of heaven! The second method these “prophets” adopt is to warn you of some imminent danger that you are facing, that you are totally ignorant of! They will say that the devil is after you, but they say they will pray for you to free you from the danger. That way also they get your money – because you are thankful for being saved from some (*non-existent*) danger!! Their goal in both cases is your wallet! But they lead you far away from devotion to Christ. The Lord said, “*You shall not listen to the words of that prophet, for the Lord your God is testing you to find out if you love the Lord your God*” (verse 3).

Such false prophets always emphasise the earthly and not the heavenly. They lead people to be occupied with material things and not with spiritual things. “*Let us go after other Gods*”, is their message – the other Gods being ambition, money, comfort, pleasure, etc.

It says in that passage that such a prophet should be put to death (13:5). How can we apply that today? *By considering that person as non-existent* – in other words, by having nothing to do with him. These are the “*Manufacturer’s Instructions*.” Let’s follow them and we will never be deceived.

Various Laws

Chapter 14 lists the animals and creatures that the Israelites were *not* to eat. This is a repetition of what was spoken to the earlier generation of Israelites in *Leviticus 11*. These laws were to *symbolically* teach

the Israelites the importance of being holy and set apart for God. These laws are not applicable for us today. Jesus declared all foods to be clean (*Mark 7:19*). Paul emphasises that holiness does not come from avoiding certain types of food and states categorically that all food is sanctified when we pray and eat it (*1 Timothy 4:1–5*).

Chapter 15 speaks about releasing people in the Sabbath year. If there was a poor man among them, they were not to be tight-fisted and stingy and hard-hearted, but generous toward their brother (*verses 7, 8*). The Lord took great interest in poor people.

In *Chapter 16*, we read of the three feasts for which all male members had to go to Jerusalem.

Chapter 17:14–19: It was not God's will for Israel to have a king, for He was to be their king (See *1 Samuel 8:7*). But God always gives people the freedom to choose His *second-best* if they don't want His best. So He told them that if they chose to have a king, he must read this law every day and fear God and obey it fully. That is another very good passage for Christian leaders today. They must carefully study God's Word, fear Him and obey Him.

Chapter 18:1–7: Here Moses gives them some more laws. He forbids spiritism and witchcraft (*verse 9–14*). Instead of seeking the fortunetellers, the Lord says that He will raise up a Prophet in the future whom they were to listen to (*verse 14–19*) – a clear reference to the coming of Christ.

In *Chapter 18:20*, they are warned against saying something in the Lord's Name which He has not commanded. This is a warning that is very needed by Christians today, for there are many who "prophesy" in certain types of Christian groups saying, "*Thus says the Lord...*" – to give an air of authority to what they are saying. And then they continue to say whatever has come into their minds. This is such a serious sin that God said that such a prophet was to be killed. God says, "*I did not speak to them, yet they prophesied*" (*Jeremiah 23:21*). In spite of all these warnings in God's Word, hardly a voice is raised against this sinful practice. Multitudes of sincere Christians are being led astray by all these false prophecies today.

We have no right to say "*Thus says the Lord*" except when we are quoting something that God has actually said in the Scriptures. *Otherwise we are adding to the Word of God.*

In *Chapter 18:21, 22*, we are told of one way in which to identify a false prophet: *What he prophesies is not fulfilled*. Such a man is a false prophet. In spite of this clear teaching in Scripture, there are multitudes of Christians today who make allowance for the "mistakes" that today's

prophets make – and still continue to listen to them. They ignore this verse completely and twist it so that it no longer means what it plainly says. What this verse is teaching is that a true prophet will have a success rate of 100% in his prophecies – not even 99%. God has given us enough warnings in His Word to avoid being deceived.

*However holy and good and evangelical a man may be, if what he has prophesied has not been fulfilled exactly – even once – he has prophesied **falsely**. And if he does not humble himself and acknowledge his error, he is also a **false prophet**.* God says that we should not bother about such a man thereafter. How many Christians are willing to obey God here?

Chapter 19 is a repetition of the cities of refuge that were to be set apart for those who accidentally killed someone, to escape to.

Chapter 20:1–7: When the Israelites went to war, they were told here to go forth in perfect trust in God without any fear. Those who were afraid or those who were more interested in their wives, or houses or vineyards than in fighting the Lord's battles should go back home, lest they make the other soldiers cool off in their devotion to the Lord. God wants only those who are wholehearted to serve Him even today – those for whom His Name and His Kingdom are more important than personal interests.

In *Chapter 21*, various other laws are given – about marriage matters and stoning rebellious children etc.

In *Chapter 21:22, 23*, we read that anyone who is hung on a tree is cursed by God. This is the verse Paul quotes in *Galatians 3:13* to show that Christ became a curse for us when he hung on Calvary, so that He might deliver us from the curse that should have come on us for not having kept all of God's laws perfectly.

In *Chapter 22:5*, God gave them laws on men's and women's clothing. This was an Old Testament law that was meant to symbolically teach us that the differences God has made between the sexes must be maintained and the different functions that He has ordained for each sex must be respected.

We see God's immense care for His animal-creation in the law that forbade the Israelites from taking a mother bird along with her young, if both were found in a nest (22:6, 7). The compassion of God even for animals teaches us one great truth: *How much more He will care for us, His children.*

In *Chapters 23 and 24*, we read laws on morality, cleanliness, divorce and various laws that made sure that the poor were not exploited but cared for. It is really profitable for all of us to read these laws given in *Chapter 24:6–21*, to see God's intense concern for the poor.

Various other laws are listed in *Chapters 25 and 26*. And in *Chapter 27*, a curse is pronounced publicly on those who commit certain sins.

Chapter 28 is a long chapter that is divided into two parts. The first 14 verses are promises about how God would bless them if they obeyed His laws. The next 54 verses are about how God would punish them if they disobeyed His laws. This was the only way God could get man to obey Him under the law – by *the hope of reward and the threat of punishment*. This is the method we use with little children too. We could call it “*the chocolate and stick*” method – the promise of a chocolate if they obey and punishment with a stick if they disobey. Under the Law, God treated all men like little children. But under the new covenant, God treats us like adults. Jesus said, “*If you love Me keep My commandments*” (*John 14:15*). Adult sons obey their father out of love and reverence – not out of fear. And thereby we can know whether we ourselves are babies or adults. Do you serve the Lord or give money or service to Him or pray to Him or fast – in hope (expectation) of some reward, or perhaps to escape punishment. If so, you still have the spirit of the old covenant.

In *Chapter 31:7, 8*, we see Moses charging Joshua with the responsibility to lead Israel forward. Again we notice how Moses gave that responsibility to the man God chose, and not to any of his own sons. Unfortunately, it has become an universal practice in Christendom today for a man who starts a church or a ministry to hand over the leadership of his work to his own son or daughter. They feel that their own family members must reap the financial and positional benefits that they themselves have worked so hard to build up. But in the church of God, we are commanded not to “*know any man according to the flesh*” (*2 Corinthians 5:16*) – not even our own family members. But then it is rare to find leaders like Moses anywhere in Christendom today.

In *Chapter 32*, we read the song of Moses. Moses also wrote a psalm – *Psalm 90* – which was another song.

In *Chapter 33*, we see God blessing the tribes of Israel. In *verses 2, 3*, we have a lovely statement by Moses that shows how he viewed the laws of God – as an expression of God’s immense love for His people. “*At God’s right hand, there was a fiery law for them*” (*verse 2 - Literal translation*). What did that prove? “*That indeed He loves His people.*” (*verse 3*). It is good for us to recognise that God’s fiery commandments are a proof of His tremendous love for us. A soft, easy law would have proved that He did not love the Israelites.

In *Chapter 34*, we read about the death of Moses. Israel entered the promised land, 30 days after Moses died.

JOSHUA

POSSESSING THE LAND

The book of *Joshua* tells us how Israel possessed the promised land. The book is similar in many ways to the *Acts of the Apostles*. In both books, it was a new beginning and we read of tremendous manifestations of God's power. Joshua was a great leader and he brought the Israelites into the promised land. We also see in the book of *Judges* (immediately after the book of *Joshua*) how backsliding came in very quickly after Joshua's time. In the New Testament too, as soon as the apostles died, backsliding began very quickly in the churches (*Revelation 2, 3*). This teaches us that when God's people don't have good leaders, backsliding begins very quickly.

The book of *Joshua* pictures God as a God of war. That may be difficult to understand. But God is a God of war, because He is a God of love. He hates anything that harms mankind, just like a loving father would make war against the diseases that are in his children.

The Old Man and the Flesh

The land of Canaan is not a picture of heaven (as some believers sing in their hymns) because there are no giants to be killed in heaven! Canaan is actually a description of the Spirit-filled life of victory, where the giants of sin – the lusts in our flesh – are crucified. All the giants were not killed in a moment. They were killed one by one.

The people of Israel had to go across two bits of water on their journey to Canaan. One was the *Red Sea* and the other was the *River Jordan*. Both these speak of death. We see in *1 Corinthians 10* that going into the Red Sea is a picture of water-baptism. The River Jordan is a picture of another kind of death. This was where John the Baptist baptised Jesus 1500 years later.

The Bible teaches that our old self was crucified *by God* on the cross (*Romans 6:6*). We cannot crucify our old man. The *old man* (the mind that wants to sin) was crucified with Christ on the cross. *It was God who did that.* But there is something else that **we** have to crucify – our *flesh* (the storehouse of desires). *Galatians 5:24* says, “*Those who are Christ’s have crucified their flesh with its lusts and its affections.*”

The *flesh* is different from the *old man*. The *flesh* with its lusts is like a gang of robbers that tries to come into our heart to pollute us. The *old man* is like an unfaithful servant who lives inside our heart, and opens the door every time these robbers come to steal. Which of the two does God kill? He kills *the servant*. The gang of robbers is still strong and active. This is why we are all tempted in exactly the same way *after* we are converted as we were *before* we were converted. That proves that the robbers are still alive. They still want to enter our heart – even after we are converted. But something else has died within us – the *servant* who opened the door for these thieves (*the old man*). God killed him and put a new servant within us when we were born again – a servant who does not want to open the door for the thieves. When temptation comes now to us, the new servant says, “*No.*” Then how do believers fall into sin? Because they don’t *feed* the new servant well! Then he is not strong enough to keep the door shut against the robbers. And the robbers push their way in. That’s how a believer sins.

But there is a vast difference between a believer sinning and an unbeliever sinning – because the believer *doesn’t want to sin*, and the unbeliever *wants to sin*. In fact, that’s the test of whether you are really born again or not. The proof of being born again is not whether you sin or not, but whether you *want to sin*. If you still want to sin, I would say you are not converted. When people come asking for water-baptism I ask them one question, “Do you *want to sin* any more – even once?” I don’t ask them, “*Will you sin?*” because nobody can say they will not sin. It is the ‘*want to*’ that is the *old man*.

These are the two deaths the New Testament speaks of. Both of these are pictured beautifully in the history of Israel. The army of Pharaoh was buried in a moment under the Red Sea. That’s a picture of the death of the *old man*. Who did that? God. *The old man was crucified on the cross by God.* Then the Israelites crossed Jordan, which speaks of another death. We accept our co-crucifixion with Christ to our lusts. Those who are Christ’s have taken this attitude towards their lusts. The lusts are still there and the giants are still ruling the land. But Joshua and the Israelites had determined to kill them one by one. *It is **we** who have to kill our lusts – one by one – as we are tempted.* We must put to death the deeds of the body ourselves – by the power the Spirit gives us (*Romans 8:13*). This is very different from the Egyptian army being buried in a moment by God.

Scripture is so exact when it comes to its application in the New Testament. If we open ourselves to the Holy Spirit, He will reveal these hidden things to us. The Bible is an exciting book. It's so perfect and exact in its Old Testament typology of new covenant life. Those godly men in the Old Testament did not understand all this then, but we can understand what these events typified today. The land of Canaan symbolises our body, that has been ruled by the giants of many lusts, for many years. But we have taken *an attitude* towards those giants that says, "I am going to consider myself dead to sin." Jesus said we have to take up the cross every day. That's not killing the old man. The old man has already been crucified. To take up the cross is to put our self-will (which is what the Bible calls our "*flesh*") to death daily, in the power of the Spirit.

If you take a relaxed attitude towards sin in your life, you can put on the old man once again (*Ephesians 4:22*). A person who "*continues to live according to the flesh*" will die spiritually – even if he was alive once. *Romans 8:13 – which is written to believers* – is crystal clear on this point. In *Joshua*, the typology is of the lusts in our flesh being put to death by us. So, the spiritual theme of the book of *Joshua* is: "*Overcoming sin*". The book encourages us to be victorious in the battle against our lusts.

The leader of the Israelites in this battle was Joshua. *Joshua* is the Hebrew word for Jesus. Jesus is the English word. The Hebrew word is *Jehoshua*, meaning "*the Lord is Saviour*". *Matthew 1:21* says, "*You shall call His name Jesus because He is a Saviour Who will save His people from their sins*." Moses could not lead the Israelites into Canaan typifying the fact that the Law cannot lead us into a life of victory over sin.

Our leader who leads us into this battle is Jesus, Who was Himself tempted in all points as we are (*Hebrews 4:15*). Joshua did not sit in a tent himself and tell the other Israelites to go and fight. No. He went in front and fought himself and said, "*Follow me*." That's what Jesus has done too. He is the Captain of our salvation (*Hebrews 2:10*). He has gone ahead of us, and that's why we are told to run the Christian race, "*looking unto Jesus, Who in His earthly life, endured the cross, despising the shame, conquered sin and Satan and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God*." (*Hebrews 12:1, 2*). In our battle today, when we are tempted, we must look at our Captain who has gone in front and say, "Lord, You were also tempted just like I am being tempted at this moment; and You overcame. Give me grace that I can overcome too." There can be no defeat when we follow this Captain. We are defeated only when we *don't* follow this Captain.

Why God Punishes

The people of Canaan, whom God commanded to be killed, were being punished just like Sodom and Gomorrah was punished and like the world in Noah's day was punished. The whole earth had *become corrupt*

in Noah's time with sexual sins (*Genesis 6:11*). The Canaanites too were indulging in degrading sexual sins and Satan-worship. And so "the land itself spewed them out". (*Leviticus 18:24, 25*). *Deuteronomy 9:4 and 18:10–12* give us clear reasons as to why God destroyed the Canaanites. Where there are polluting influences in any nation that defile and corrupt the land, the only thing to do is to punish such a nation by eliminating the people – lest their influence spread and corrupt others too.

A God of love destroys some people just like a kind doctor amputates a man's foot when the gangrene in his foot is so severe that it threatens to destroy the whole body. If you saw a doctor sawing off somebody's leg, and did not understand medicine, you would imagine that the doctor hated that man. But actually the opposite would have been true. The doctor was doing it in love. God also acts in love for the world when He cuts off certain people who would otherwise corrupt it. Wiping out the world's population at the time of the flood was an act of love, so that the human race could be preserved without being totally controlled by demons (*Genesis 6:2* – where the "sons of God" refer to God's creation – the angels who fell). The apostle Paul once smote a man with blindness because he was leading another person astray (*Acts 13:8–12*). I have heard of cases of people who were smitten dead by God because they opposed a revival. So what we read of in *Joshua* is not the *murder* of the Canaanites, but rather a *surgery* to cleanse the land.

Many years earlier, when Abraham was living in Canaan, there were Canaanites there. But God did not destroy the Canaanites then. God waited for over 400 years, because, as He told Abraham, the Canaanites were not "ripe for judgement" at that time (*Genesis 15:16*). We pluck mangoes when they are ripe. God also waits for man's sin to become ripe for judgement, before He judges. He judged Sodom and Gomorrah when their sin was ripe. So too with the Canaanites.

After Israel had occupied Canaan for 700 years, when they committed the same sins as the Canaanites, God drove them out of the land too. The Assyrians came and captured them. 125 years later, when Judah, the southern kingdom, rejected the messages of God's prophets and ripened for judgement, God sent the Babylonians to destroy them too. *God is not partial*. Whether it be the Canaanites or the Israelites or the people of Judah, His standards are the same. If His people keep on violating His standards and ignoring His prophets, He performs the same surgery on them too. God does the same with us too. If God were to excuse your sin, it would prove that He did *not* love you. If a father were to allow his children to live with their diseases, it would prove that he did not really love his children.

Entering the Life of Victory

Chapter 1:1, 2: "After the death of Moses the servant of the Lord, the Lord spoke to Joshua the son of Nun saying, 'Moses My servant is dead.

Now then arise and cross this Jordan." It was God Himself Who exalted and appointed Joshua to be the leader after Moses. Leadership cannot be exercised effectively, if God Himself has *not* appointed us to that position.

The Lord told Joshua that every place on which his feet trod would be given to him (*verse 3*), and that no man would be able to stand before him throughout his life (*verse 5*). This is symbolic of the New Testament promise given us in *Romans 6:14*, "*No sin will be able to master you, because you are under grace.*" The land of Canaan had been ruled by many giants in the past. But they would all be defeated. Not a single sin (however powerful) will be able to overcome us. That is God's will for us. But Joshua had to *actually put his foot down* on a piece of territory and claim it in the Lord's Name. *Only then* would it be his. So with us too. We must *claim* our inheritance by faith. If we do not *lay hold* of God's promises as ours, they will never be fulfilled in our lives.

Paul claimed his rights in the gospel in Jesus' Name, and as a result came into a glorious life. He says in *2 Corinthians 2:14*, "*Thanks be to God who leads us in victory **always**.*" "*Always in victory*" was Paul's song of triumph – and that can be our song too.

But most Christians never enter into this life of victory. 600,000 Israelites came out of Egypt; but only *two* of them – Joshua and Caleb – entered Canaan. About the same proportion of Christians (2 in 600,000) enter into a life of victory today also. Joshua and Caleb entered the promised land because they had this attitude: "*If God has told us to occupy the land, we can do it.*" That is faith. Faith reckons only with the promise of God, and never with the difficulties facing us. The other Israelites said, "This is impossible. The giants are so big and powerful." Today also Christians feel it is impossible to overcome anger and lusting with the eyes, because these lusts are so powerful and have ruled them for so long. Such believers remain defeated all their lives and (spiritually speaking) perish in the wilderness.

The river of the Spirit that flows from heaven through us must *not* find a polluted channel in our heart, to flow through – a channel polluted by dirty thoughts, murmuring, complaining and the love of money. No. It must find a clean, pure channel that is free from sin. Then that river can bless people around us with the clear water of heaven. The great tragedy in Christendom today is that its preachers are not pure inside. They have not overcome sin in their hearts and in their private lives. They have *not* overcome the love of money, the lust of the eyes, bitterness, the spirit of competition with other Christian leaders/organisations, jealousy, telling lies, shouting angrily at their wives, and unrighteousness in many other areas. Yet they preach to God's people. What can they teach God's people? Only what they are practising – namely, how to be angry with one's wife, how to be bitter, how to be jealous, and how to compete with others! Anything else they teach will only be hollow theories. All the Bible-knowledge that you acquire through study is useless if you are not an overcomer in your life.

The Lord assured Joshua "*I will be with you.*" This was why no man would be able to stand before Joshua. We do not overcome sin through believing some doctrine or by having some experience. No. It is the constant presence of the Lord with us, through his Spirit, alone, that can enable us to overcome. God is looking for such leaders in Christendom today whom He can support and endorse, because their hearts are pure.

The Lord told Joshua: "*Be strong and courageous. You will lead these people to possess this land which has been ruled by their enemies for so long*" (verse 6). We are *not to be afraid* of any sin. We are to go out and enable God's people to overcome sin in their bodies – bodies that have been ruled by sin for years. It's not enough merely to bring them to faith and the two baptisms – putting the blood on the doorposts, crossing the Red Sea, and being enveloped in the cloud. That is just the beginning. That is only the kindergarten lesson. Do we stop our children's education once they have passed the kindergarten class? No. But that's what's happening in Christendom today.

The pillar of cloud – the baptism in the Holy Spirit – came to lead them into the promised land. They should have entered in, in 2 years, but they didn't enter for 40 years, because their leaders were unbelieving. "*Faith comes by hearing*" (*Romans 10:17*). If believers are not taught these truths in the church-meetings, how can they believe? Then how can they overcome sin?

The Lord told Joshua: "*Be strong and courageous and be careful to do everything that is written in God's Word. Don't turn to the left or to the right*" (1:7). If God's Word says, "*Sin shall not have the mastery over you,*" (*Romans 6:14*), believe it and confess it. Don't turn to the left or the right. That means: Don't *reduce* the breadth of that promise. Don't reduce it to include *only some* sins. At the same time, don't make it to mean *more than what it says*. Don't say that we can be as perfect as Christ was, on this earth. We cannot be sinlessly perfect on this earth. That is not what that promise says. It is referring only to victory over to what we know to be sin (conscious sin). We can be fully like Christ only when He returns. *1 John 3:2* is very clear on that. So let's not go beyond Scripture, and let's not believe less than what Scripture promises.

Becoming like Christ can be compared to occupying the whole land of Canaan or to climbing a very high mountain. When we are converted, our sins are forgiven and our past is blotted out. But we are still enslaved by many sins. We could compare it to coming to the foot of this mountain. Then we begin to climb this mountain. The top of the mountain is perfect likeness to Christ. We will reach there only when Christ returns. But we don't have to live at the foot of the mountain – defeated by sin – perpetually. No. The Bible says, "*Let us press on to perfection*" (*Hebrews 6:1*). We are

exhorted in *2 Corinthians 7:1* to “*perfect holiness in the fear of God.*” We should not be afraid of the word, “*perfection*”. We must press on to it. Paul said towards the end of his life, “I have not yet reached the top. But I am pressing on” (*Philippians 3:12–14*). The Lord is now saying to many of us, “*You have stayed at the foot of this mountain long enough. Now climb it. Press on.*” So let’s not turn to the left or to the right.

“*This book of God’s Word shall not depart from your mouth*” (verse 8). We have seen already that we should have God’s Word in our heart. Here we see that we also need to have it in *our mouth*. We must confess the promises of God’s Word with our mouths. The trouble with many Christians today is that they are confessing the things they are lustng after. They say, “I confess that I will get a large *house*. I confess that I will get a better *job*. I confess that I will get a good *car*!! Instead of confessing all that, let us confess God’s Word: “Lord, I confess that I will overcome *anger*. I confess that I will overcome *lustng with my eyes* completely. I confess that I will overcome *the love of money*.” These are the things that we should be confessing with our mouths. But the Devil doesn’t want us to confess these. And so he makes us confess our lust for material things.

You can’t build the church with people who are interested in material things. You can build the church only with people who are interested in heavenly things and a godly life. Don’t attract the wrong type of people to your church by offering people earthly prosperity. Does God’s Word promise you that He will give you a house or a car? No. God’s Word promises that you can overcome sin; that you can come into a life where you rejoice in the Lord always – 24 hours a day, without being discouraged or defeated – always triumphant, always rejoicing and always giving thanks, in everything and for all people. This is the new covenant life (Canaan’s land flowing with milk and honey) that the Bible promises. Confess it then and say, “Lord, this is the life I want to live all my days.”

That was the life I wanted to live, when I was a young Christian and saw what the Bible offered me. But when I looked at the Christian leaders around me, I saw that they were defeated by sin. So I said, “Lord, I don’t want to judge them. That’s not my business. But I don’t want to look at them as my examples either. I want to look at God’s Word alone. I want to look only at Your promises. I want to look at Jesus as my only Example.” I was defeated for many years as a believer. But once I saw my inheritance in Christ, I kept on confessing the promises of God in Scripture – that promised me a life of constant joy and constant victory. God finally gave me the desire of my heart. That is how I want to live now, and that is how I want to live until the end of my life on earth.

So don’t let God’s promises depart from your mouth. If you preach this message, you may find at times that you are a lone voice for God in the

midst of popularity-seeking preachers. Don't get discouraged. God will stand by you until the end.

Joshua was commanded to meditate on God's Word day and night. We are not to meditate on the need of the sinners in the world. That may look like a good thing to think about. But you can't help those sinners, if you don't meditate on God's Word day and night. God promised Joshua both *prosperity* and *success*, if he meditated on God's Word (1:8). The real "*prosperity gospel*" is one where our lives become prosperous and successful in a heavenly and spiritual way. '*Prosperity and success*' are the two things that everyone in the world seeks for. But they don't seek for these in the way God says in *Joshua 1:8*.

Rahab

In *Chapter 2*, we see God's concern for a prostitute in a heathen country. Jesus was concerned for the souls of the prostitutes of His day. We see the same concern in God's heart here. Rahab was a well-known prostitute in Jericho. But she was sick and tired of her profession, just like many prostitutes today. Mary Magdalene was sick and tired of her profession. Very few people recognise that. They just despised the prostitutes. Many prostitutes in our cities are not there because they love to be there. Many of them have been deceived and forced into such a life. And many of them are sick and tired of being exploited by men. They need to hear the gospel. I praise God for godly men through the ages who have had a burden for saving prostitutes. They shared the burden of God's heart for these unfortunate women.

Rahab was not a child of Abraham. But she had a longing in her heart for God. And God looks all over the world for those who are hungering after Him – irrespective of their nationality and irrespective of whether they are prostitutes or religious leaders. God saw such a longing in Rahab's heart and was determined to make a way for her salvation. Her name appears on the first page of the New Testament as the great, great grandmother of David and as the ancestor of both Joseph and Mary the mother of Jesus Christ (*Matthew 1:5*). She is listed among the heroes of faith in *Hebrews 11:31*. And James quotes her actions as an example of faith being accompanied by works (*James 2:25*).

Did Rahab ever imagine that she would become an example for generations to come? Or that millions of people would talk about her faith for 3000 years? There is no partiality with God. Some of you may be like Rahab – having lived in sin and made a mess of your lives. You may be in some remote corner of the world, with nobody to care for you. But God sees the longing in your heart, and He has wonderful ways by which to make you His servant and a blessing to millions.

Joshua the Leader

In *Chapter 3*, we read about how the Israelites crossed Jordan. The Lord said to Joshua (*verse 7*), “*This day I will begin to exalt you in the sight of all Israel, that they may know that just as I have been with Moses, I will be with you.*” It was very difficult for Joshua to fit into the shoes of Moses. Moses was a mighty man of God, who had been feared and respected by everyone for 40 years – a man who could solve every problem. Joshua was probably 70 or 80 years old when Moses died. And now he had to lead those 2 million Israelites. He must have wondered how the people would ever respect him.

You too may find yourself called to carry on a ministry started by some great man of God who was respected by everyone. And you may wonder how you could ever do it. The Lord says as He said to Joshua, “*Don’t worry. I will exalt you before them.*” God can exalt you before people in such a way that they respect you. Don’t wait for some man to make you a Director or to give you a title and exalt you. Don’t try to earn respect by getting an honorary doctorate from somewhere. God Himself must let people know that you are His servant. God must be with your mouth. What’s the use of impressing people with titles and human qualifications? There must be an anointing on your life and on the words you speak. Then people will know that God is with you. Jesus had no earthly qualification to impress people with. Neither did the apostles. But they had the anointing of the Spirit and God was with them. That’s the important thing. Seek for that more than anything else.

What was Joshua’s qualification for serving God? Just this, that *God was with him*. What was Jesus’ qualification for serving God? *Acts 10:38* says, “*God was with Him.*” What was Moses’ qualification? God was with him. What was David’s qualification to kill Goliath? God was with him.

What is your qualification for serving God? Is it a degree certificate? Do you think Satan is afraid of degree certificates? He doesn’t care for a man who has even ten degree certificates. Satan will fear you only if he sees that God is with you.

Why did God pick Joshua? There must have been qualities in his life that God saw – especially his faith that God would help him conquer the giants in Canaan. When God saw that, He said, “*That’s the man I am looking for – one who will believe in Me and trust in My promise.*” He picked him and trained him under Moses. God often trains a man for His service by making him work with an older godly man. Elisha worked with Elijah and learnt how to be a prophet. Timothy worked with Paul and learnt how to be an apostle. Joshua worked with Moses and learnt how to be a leader. If God gives you the opportunity to work with an older godly man, that is one of the greatest privileges that God can give you to equip you for His service. Many Israelites would have wanted to be close

to Moses. Many would have liked to take over from Moses as the leader. But God chose Joshua.

Chapter 3:9: "Come here and listen to the words of the Lord your God." Joshua himself had meditated on God's Word day and night, and now he was able to share that Word with other people. Just like Moses listened to God and came out and told the people, Joshua read the law which Moses had written and told the people, "*I want to tell you what God has said.*"

That's our calling – to tell people what we ourselves have heard and experienced from God – not theories and bright ideas, but what we have tasted of God. That's what Moses, Joshua, Paul and Peter did.

When the Israelites crossed the River Jordan, the ark of the covenant went in front of them (3:15). This is a picture of Jesus Christ having gone ahead of us and overcome all sin. We are now called to run the race "*looking unto Jesus*" (*Hebrews 12:1, 2*). When the priests who were carrying the ark approached the river Jordan, it was overflowing its banks. They put their feet into the water by faith, and the water immediately stopped flowing from a long distance away. The Israelites then went across. The priests meanwhile stood in the middle of the river until everyone had crossed. Again, the riverbed was dry beneath their feet!

Chapter 4: After they had crossed over, Joshua said, "*We have now crossed into Canaan. But let's not rush into battle. Let us first of all give thanks to God.*" What a wonderful lesson to learn – to kneel down and thank and praise the Lord first of all. Joshua then told them to go into the riverbed and pick up 12 stones (*verse 8*), and to make a memorial with them – so that in future years, when children asked their fathers what that was, the fathers could tell them of the miracle that God did for their ancestors in parting the river. The things that God has done for us must be shared with our children, so that they too can have faith.

Chapter 5:5–9: The Israelite men were now circumcised at Gilgal. All these men had been born in the wilderness and none of them had been circumcised. There were 40-year-old Israelites among them who had not been circumcised. This was a small thing, but it was a mark of the covenant. It symbolised a cutting-off of all confidence in the flesh (*Philippians 3:3*). Before they went into battle, all confidence in the flesh had to be cut off. That was the first step. They could not overcome the giants in their own strength. At last, the reproach of Egypt was rolled away (*verse 9*).

Chapter 5:13, 14: The Captain of the Lord's army now comes before Joshua. Notice that He comes only after the circumcision is over and "*the reproach of Egypt has been rolled away*" (*verse 9*)! This Captain was the Lord Jesus appearing in a vision. Joshua thinks it's a man and asks, "*Are You on our side or the enemy's?*" The answer the Lord gives is very instructive: "*I'm not on either side. I have come to lead the army. You must come to My side.*"

Sometimes, we say, "Lord, I'm going there. Please come and bless me." He won't. Instead we should ask, "Lord, where are you moving now as the Captain of the Lord's army. Where do You want me to go as Your soldier?" And the Lord will reply, "I am going to such-and-such a place. Come with Me." The Christian life is so simple. I don't have to plan to go here and there and ask the Lord to come along with me. No. God is not our servant. He is our Captain.

Change your way of serving the Lord to this way – and you will see amazing results in your ministry. I know that happened in my ministry. We can serve the Lord more efficiently this way. We will then go where the Lord has already prepared the ground for us, instead of going to some place where the ground is not ready, wasting our time, realising that ten years later, and then going elsewhere. God knows the best place to make use of us. Wait on Him then for His direction – always.

Victory, Defeat and Deception

*Chapter 6:2: "I have **already** given Jericho into your hand."* This is what we need to know when we go to fight against Satan – that He has already been defeated on Calvary, and that the Lord will crush him under our feet (*Romans 16:20*). The Lord did not tell Joshua, "I am **going to give** Jericho to you in another seven days." No. He said, "**I have already given you** the city. Just go in and take it."

All that the Israelites had to do was to march around the city 13 times in seven days and then blow their trumpets on the seventh day. This marching around a city and the shouting has unfortunately degenerated into a technique that some believers adopt. It is only when the Lord commands these things that they have any value. Our calling is to establish the victory of Calvary wherever we go. We must confess that Satan has been defeated. "*They overcame Satan by the word of their testimony to Satan, saying, 'Satan you have been defeated on the cross.'*" – by blowing their trumpets (*Revelation 12:11*). I have great joy in reminding Satan about his defeat very frequently. I know he doesn't like to hear it.

I remember once when a lady was brought to my house for prayer. I asked her to accept the Lord as her Saviour and to tell Satan that he had been defeated on the cross. She suddenly shouted at me with a changed voice saying, "I was *not* defeated on the cross." I then realised that it was a demon inside her that was speaking to me. So I told the demon, "You are a liar. You *were* defeated on the cross 2000 years ago. Get out of her in Jesus' name." The demon left immediately. Then she could tell Satan, "Satan, you were defeated on the cross." I learned one thing that day – *that the devil doesn't like to be reminded that he was defeated on the cross*. And so I resolved to tell him that frequently myself, and also to teach believers across the world to tell him that regularly.

How many times have you told the devil that he was defeated on the cross? Start today. Tell him often that he was defeated on the cross. He will hate you for saying that. But I like it when the devil hates me, because then I know that I am on the right track. Don't be afraid of Satan. You will be able to put him under your feet through the power of God, as you proclaim the word of your testimony to him. I am not teaching you a technique here. If you don't keep your conscience pure and you try to resist Satan, he will laugh at you and say, "*I recognize Jesus, and I know about Paul. But who are you?*" (Acts 19:15). So submit to God first and then resist the devil (James 4:7). "Be strong and courageous," the Lord told Joshua (Joshua 1:7).

Chapter 7: Here we read of Israel being defeated for the first time in Canaan. Joshua asked the Lord why Israel was defeated and the Lord replied saying, "There is sin in the camp." One man had stolen something that was forbidden. God had told them very clearly, "You must not take anything in Jericho for yourselves. It must all be given to the Lord." (6:17). All the Israelites obeyed that command except Achan (7:20) When he was finally caught and exposed, he confessed that he had sinned. He had seen a beautiful Babylonian dress in a house and coveted it ('Shinar' is another word for *Babylon*.) He said, "I saw, I coveted, I took, I hid." (verse 21) – four steps in temptation. This is how we sin too – and then hide our sin. Achan was then stoned to death.

When Achan heard that he would not be permitted to take anything of the spoils of battle in Jericho, he must have thought, "If after killing these giants and capturing their cities, I am not going to get anything myself, during the next 20 years, I will be a poor man. So I better keep a little bit for myself." Little did he realise that the Lord was only testing the Israelites at Jericho to see if they would be covetous. In *Joshua 8:2*, we read that the Lord said to the people, that from then on, they could take all the spoil of battle in Canaan for themselves! What a fool Achan was! If only he had waited, he could have got all the silver and gold and garments that he wanted. But he missed all of that because he failed when God tested him. God will test you too, to see whether you grab something in covetousness. If you do, you will miss God's best that He had planned for you, for the rest of your life. Instead, if you seek God's kingdom first, He will give you all that you need always.

In *Chapter 8:26*, we read how Ai was defeated after Achan had been killed. We have to set right the past before we can move forward; otherwise we will keep on being defeated in the *Ai's* of our life. We see here that Joshua lifted up his javelin over Ai, just like Moses had lifted up his hand on the mountain top. And his soldiers fought and Ai was defeated.

Now, the great danger that all of us face after we have won a victory is the danger of becoming complacent. The moment we begin to relax in the Christian life, we are in danger of being deceived. And that's what happened to Joshua (*Chapter 9*). Some Gibeonites – who were Canaanites

who should have been killed – came and met Joshua (9:4). They acted craftily and pretended they were coming from a distant place, by wearing worn-out clothes and worn-out sandals and carrying old, mouldy bread with them (9:5). They also flattered the Israelites. We are in great danger when people flatter us. Deception is then very close. We read in 9:14, “*The men of Israel did not seek advice from the Lord.*” Joshua believed them and made a covenant with them not to kill them. Three days later they discovered that these people were Canaanites who should have been killed (*verse 16*). But by then they had already made a covenant with them – and they had to keep their word.

What can we learn from this incident? It is a warning for us to be careful that we are not deceived by those who flatter us and who want to join the church with wrong motives. The safest course of action in such cases is to seek the Lord’s advice and not to lean on our own wisdom.

We must be especially careful immediately after winning great victories. We read in the gospels, how, immediately after a time of many miraculous healings, Jesus would slip away into the wilderness to pray, to give all the glory to His Father (*Luke 5:15, 16*). That’s an example for us. When is it that we are in danger of *not seeking counsel from the Lord*? When we have been victorious. Not when we are defeated. *We are in greater danger after a victory than after a defeat.* Usually after a defeat, we draw close to the Lord because we have failed Him in some way. It’s when we have been victorious for a while, that we are in danger of spiritual pride.

Chapter 10: When five kings attacked Gibeon, and the Gibeonites sought Joshua’s help, the Lord encouraged Joshua by saying, “*Don’t be afraid. I have given them into your hands. Not one of them will stand before you*” (*verse 8*). The word was always, “*I have already given*”. Victory was a foregone conclusion, even before the battle started. That is how we must go to battle against Satan too. Satan and his demons will not be able to stand before us. The gates of hell will never prevail against the church of the living God. Joshua came upon them and defeated them and “*no one could utter a word against Israel*” (*verse 21*). Then Joshua called for the men of Israel and said, “*Put your feet on the necks of these kings*” (*verse 24*). The Bible says in *Romans 16:20*, “*The God of peace will soon crush Satan (not on Calvary) under your feet.*” Jesus has already defeated Satan on Calvary. But Satan will be crushed under our feet now.

Joshua's Final Days

Chapter 13:1: Joshua was old and advanced in years and the Lord said, “*There is still much land to be possessed.*” It’s a sad thing that there were no other leaders in Israel to take over from Joshua. In Christendom today too, godly men are dying and so much land is yet to be possessed.

In *Chapter 14:6–15*, we see that although Caleb is now 85 years old, his faith is still as vibrant as it was 40 years earlier. He asks Joshua to

give him a hilly country filled with huge giants and he says that he will drive them all out. So Joshua gave Hebron to Caleb. What a challenge and an encouragement it is to see godly, old men even today, who like Caleb, “*have followed the Lord fully*” (verse 14), and are *overcomers* who are growing stronger in their faith even in their old age!

In contrast to Caleb’s example, we read the sad story of whole tribes in Israel who did not drive out the Canaanites from many areas of Canaan. Thrice we read that the Israeli tribes “*did not (or could not) drive the Canaanites out*” (15:63; 16:10; 17:12). This is a picture of the vast majority of Christians who have not driven out sins like anger, lust and bitterness from their lives – sins that Jesus came to save us from.

The remaining chapters deal with the occupation of Canaan and the tribes settling down to their possessions.

In Chapter 21:44 we read these wonderful words: “*The Lord gave them rest on every side; not one of all their enemies stood before them.*” This is the **rest** referred to in Hebrews 4:8, 9. There it says that the rest and victory that Joshua brought the Israelites into was only a picture of the rest (and victory over all sin) that Jesus seeks to bring us into. We are also told there to be diligent to enter into this rest and not to come short of it (*Hebrews 4:1, 11*).

Chapter 21:45 says, “*Not one of the good promises which the Lord had made to the house of Israel failed; all came to pass.*” This will be our testimony when we stand with the Lord in eternity too. Many believers will discover in that day that they did not experience or enjoy many of God’s promises because of their unbelief, like the 600,000 Israelites who perished in the wilderness. But those who did believe (like Joshua and Caleb) will rejoice in that day that they experienced and enjoyed every single one of God’s promises during their earthly lifetime. What regret there will be in the hearts of many believers in that day for their unbelief. So let us trust in the Lord with all of our hearts and claim every one of His promises, for “**all the promises of God are Yes in Christ; and so we add our Amen to them to the glory of God**” (2 Corinthians 1:20).

In Chapter 22:10–34 we have a beautiful story that illustrates how misunderstandings can be *removed* and conflict *averted*, if we adopt the simple method of talking to the other party face to face before criticising or judging them. The 2½ tribes of Israel who had decided not to live in Canaan but on the eastern side of Jordan, made a duplicate of the tabernacle’s bronze altar and erected it at the border between their land and Canaan. When the other 9½ tribes saw this, they immediately imagined that it was an act of rebellion against God. But they decided to clarify the matter first. Then they discovered that far from being an act of rebellion, it was done only to ensure that succeeding generations of the 9½ tribes do not reject the succeeding generations of the 2½ tribes because of their

living on the other side of the river. And the matter was resolved peacefully. Would that all Christians had the same common sense to hear the other side before coming to their own wrong conclusions!

In *Chapter 23*, we read of Joshua's farewell address to the Israelites. He knew he was about to die. So he warned the Israelites to be very firm in sticking to the Word of God and in being separate from the heathen nations around them. Then the Lord would be with them, and “*one Israelite would be able to put 1000 enemies to flight*” (*verses 6–10*)!! But if they compromised, then the Lord would fulfil His threats just as He had fulfilled His promises – and destroy them (*verses 14–16*).

In *Chapter 24*, Joshua quickly reviews Israel’s history from the days of Abraham and reminds them of God’s care for them. He then exhorted them to “*fear the Lord and serve Him in sincerity and truth*”. And then he said that whatever their decision may be, as far as *he and his house* were concerned, they would only serve the Lord (*verses 14, 15*). We see there that Joshua took a decision not only for himself but also for his house. He was the head of his house and decided that his children were going to worship and serve the Lord alone. He did not offer his children a choice in the matter, like he offered the Israelites. Christian leaders need to lead their families first of all, and must have children who also follow the Lord and serve Him.

God needs many people like Joshua all over the world today.

Approximate Dates of Israel’s Patriarchs

Abraham	:	2166 – 1991 B.C.
Isaac	:	2066 – 1886 B.C.
Jacob	:	2006 – 1859 B.C.
Joseph	:	1915 – 1805 B.C.
Moses	:	1526 – 1406 B.C.
Joshua	:	1500 – 1390 B.C.

JUDGES

BACKSLIDING AND DELIVERANCE

The Book of Judges describes the backslidden state of Israel, immediately after the very powerful triumph they had experienced under the leadership of Joshua for many years. What we learn here is the same lesson as before, that the state of God's people depends on the quality of their leader. Whenever Israel had good leaders, she prospered.

The Importance of Good Leaders

Most of today's leaders in Christendom are not strong enough to keep God's people on the straight and narrow path because the leaders themselves don't know God and are compromisers. They seek to please men and to be popular, like Aaron (*Exodus 32*), and therefore God cannot endorse their leadership. Moses and Joshua never sought to be popular.

"The people served the Lord all the days of Joshua and all the days of the elders who survived Joshua, who had seen all the great work the Lord had done for Israel." (2:7). But by the time Joshua and his fellow-elders died, there were no God-fearing men available to replace them. And so *"all that generation also died and there arose another generation after them who did not know the Lord, nor the work which He had done for Israel"* (verse 10). There was nobody who knew God.

After many years of moving in many Christian groups, I have to say that I have met very few Christian leaders *who really know God*, and who can say like Elijah, "*I stand before the Lord God*." Most people in Christian work today are professional preachers. They study the Bible and get a degree, get someone to support them and then go out to *"serve God"*. There may be some sacrifice in their lives and even zeal. But *zeal, sacrifice and knowledge are of no use, if a person doesn't know God.*

The statistics of their work may be impressive, but the quality of their converts will be poor, because they don't know God. They may say that they have born-again believers in their church. But are these "believers" disciples of Christ? There is a vast difference between *spiritual* believers and *carnal* believers. Any man of God knows that it is better to have a small church of spiritual believers, than a large church of carnal ones. That's like saying that it is better to have a few *1000-watt* bulbs than a hundred *zero-watt* bulbs.

We are to be the light of the world. But the intensity of our light depends upon how much we know God. If the leader doesn't know God, the people won't know God either. You can study the Bible and teach it to your church-members, and they will know the Bible. But that would be like teaching them chemistry in a classroom. That won't help them to know God. People can't come to know God by getting Biblical information. You can know God only as you go through trials and testings. You have to humble yourself in those trials and have to have a yearning in your heart for God. That is how you can know God, not by sitting in a meeting. We certainly need to know the Scriptures, but we need to go beyond the Scriptures and get to know God. "*The people who know their God will be strong*" (*Daniel 11:32*). These Israelites did not know God and therefore "*they did evil in the sight of the Lord and served the Baals*" (*2:11*). That was because Joshua had died, and now there was no God-fearing leader to lead them.

The history of Christianity in the last 2000 years is replete with numerous examples of men whom God raised up to start a church or a movement that brought revival in their lifetime. But once they died, their church (or movement) declined just like the churches and movements before them. The new generation holds the same doctrine as their founder and the same theory of sanctification; but they are not holy as their founder was. Many of them claim to have the same "*baptism in the Holy Spirit*" that their founder had; but their life and ministry *do not have the same anointing*. Something is missing. *The founder knew God, but the followers knew only the founder*. And so God has to raise up another man and start something new.

God has always done His greatest work in the church through individual men whom He has raised up in different generations in different lands. Around such a man God gathers together a few people who are concerned not so much for numbers as for *quality* – for a pure testimony for God in their generation. I believe that India needs many such men and women. In the book of *Judges*, when God could not find a man, He found a woman – Deborah. That's an encouragement to all sisters. Whenever God can find a totally yielded man, He will begin to use him to the measure in which he is surrendered. Not all leaders are of the same

quality, because not all are equally surrendered. The book of *Judges* describes certain leaders whom God raised up; but none were of the quality of Moses or Joshua. Gideon, for example, was a good, anointed man, when he started out; but towards the end of his life he worshipped idols. So we see that the book of *Judges* has a very relevant message for our time.

Modifying God's Commands

Israel failed to conquer the Canaanites; and the Lord said to them, (2:1, 2), “*I have brought you up out of Egypt and led you into the land which I had made a covenant with you. And I told you, ‘You shall make no covenant with the inhabitants of the land, you shall tear down their altars.’ But you have not obeyed Me.*”

The Israelites followed their own reasonings – just like many Christian preachers do today, who don’t preach the whole counsel of God, but modify God’s Word to suit their congregations and the times and the culture in which they live.

The Israelites also modified God’s commands. So God said, “*I will not drive out your enemies.*” You will not overcome sin, you will live with your problems all your life. “*These people will become like thorns in your sides and their gods will be a snare to you*” (2:3). When the sons of Israel heard this, they wept and offered sacrifices, but they didn’t change.

Many Christians get all stirred up when they hear a message like this and weep and fast and pray; but they don’t change. They go back to their old ways very soon, because their leaders lead them in the wrong direction. There are very few who say, “I want to know God and I want to live by the standards of God’s word, not by the standards preached by my leader.” God wants you preachers to be like Moses and Joshua who can lead a number of people in your locality to the whole truth of God. If you want to be such a man, then don’t be like the Israelites here. Be a man/woman of God who knows God.

Seven Cycles of Backsliding and Thirteen Judges

In the book of *Judges*, we read of 13 judges whom God raised up in Chapters 3 to 16. The fourteenth judge was Samuel whom we read about in *1 Samuel*. The names of most of these judges are not so well known.*

The first judge was a man called *Othniel* who was the son-in-law and the nephew of Caleb (3:9). It says here that “*the Spirit of the Lord came upon him and he judged Israel*” (3:10). That occurred frequently in the book of *Judges*. The Spirit of the Lord came upon Gideon and on Samson

* The timeline of the judges is given on p. 154.

to equip them to lead God's people (6:34; 14:6). It was the Spirit's anointing alone that enabled them to rule Israel. That anointing alone can help us to guide and lead God's people today, as well.

We may be born again, and that is certainly the work of the Holy Spirit. But we must still know the Spirit of the Lord coming *upon us* and empowering us to serve the Lord. Don't be satisfied with an emotional experience that you got in some meeting. Don't even be satisfied with speaking in tongues. You can speak in tongues and yet not be filled with the Holy Spirit. You can never, never do God's work without the power of the Holy Spirit. Even Jesus who lived a perfect life for 30 years – Who was born of the Spirit, and Who had lived in obedience to the Holy Spirit for 30 years – had to be anointed by the Holy Spirit before He went out to serve His Father. As He prayed in the river Jordan, the Spirit of God came upon Him. Follow His example. Any amount of knowledge or natural gifts can never be a substitute for this anointing. And we need to live under this anointing constantly. Samson's example is a tragic reminder to us how we can be anointed at one time, and then lose it later.

During all the 40 years that Othniel ruled Israel, there was peace (3:11). But then Othniel died. Again the sons of Israel did evil in the sight of the Lord. And when they did evil, the Lord allowed the king of Moab to enslave them for 18 years (3:14).

In the book of *Judges* we see seven such cycles – backsliding, followed by punishment, followed by God raising up a judge to deliver them. Many believers live in such a cycle all their lives – backsliding, repenting, being delivered and backsliding all over again and so on.... They keep going round in an endless circle. They go to a meeting and get stirred up, and dedicate themselves. When the revival meeting is over, their backsliding starts very soon. Then one day, another anointed preacher comes and holds meetings and they get stirred up again.

Is it the will of God that we should live in this endless cycle? Certainly not! Today we can have the Holy Spirit with us all the time. In those days the Spirit would come upon just one leader, and everyone was dependent on that leader. But not now. Today we can all receive the Spirit and we don't have to be dependent on any preacher stirring us up. We can have the fire of God burning in our hearts all the time.

After 18 years of serving Moab, the Israelites cried out to the Lord (verse 15). And God raised up another deliverer for them – Ehud. He was the second judge. I have wondered why they waited for 18 years before they cried out for deliverance from their slavery. Why didn't they cry out within one month of being enslaved? Why does a person today live defeated

by sin for 18 years (or even 40 years in some cases), before he seeks for victory over sin? I don't know why. But it is happening all around us.

Ehud subdued Moab and the land was undisturbed for 80 years (*verse 30*). But then again they backslid and God raised up Shamgar, who killed 600 Philistines with an ox-goad. That was certainly through the anointing of the Spirit, as Samson would do later.

Then the sons of Israel did evil in the eyes of the Lord again and the Lord sold them into the hand of Jabin the *king of Canaan*. The Canaanites whom Israel was supposed to exterminate, now have a king and are ruling Israel! Believers are supposed to rule over sin; but in most cases, sin rules over them.

Jabin had 900 iron chariots and he oppressed Israel for 20 years. Then they cried to the Lord and the Lord raised up Deborah as a judge for them (4:3, 4).

Women Leaders

Does God appoint women to be the leaders of His people? God's first choice is always a man – as it says in *1 Timothy 2:12–14*, for two reasons. *First of all*, because Adam was created first, and Eve was created to be a helper for Adam. *Secondly*, because Eve was deceived and sinned first. Therefore the Lord says through Paul there: "*I do not allow a woman to exercise authority over the man in the church.*" A woman can lead and teach the children in a Sunday-school class, and women in women's classes. She can also teach her children at home. But she cannot be an elder in the church. That is the perfect will of God. In *Isaiah*, God says that things are indeed in a pathetic state, when His people are led by women (*Isaiah 3:12*).

But what should God do when He finds that all the men in Israel (or in a church) are lazy, sluggish and cowardly! Then God raises up a "*Deborah*". And through the years, He has raised up many "*Deborahs*" in Christendom to be His servants – and I want to praise God for every single one of them. God has used women mightily as missionaries and as writers to save souls and to build the body of Christ. When God cannot find a man, He will use a woman – in any ministry. That is what we learn from Deborah.

The promise in the new covenant age is: "*I will pour out My Spirit on your sons and your daughters and on My bondslaves – both men and women – and they will (both) prophesy*" (*Acts 2:17, 18*). Philip had four unmarried daughters – **all** of whom took advantage of that promise of God and prophesied (*Acts 21:9*).

Even though women are not called to be elders or to teach, they can still *prophesy* ("*build up, encourage and comfort*" – *1 Corinthians 14:3*) and speak forth God's word to build up the church *1 Corinthians 11:5* is very clear on that.

Deborah was a prophetess (4:4). There are no prophetesses under the new covenant. But there were under the old covenant. Deborah was the wife of Lappidoth. He didn't hinder his wife from being a judge. He sat beside her with a meek and quiet spirit and encouraged her in her ministry! Perhaps he helped to look after the children at home. God could not use Brother Lappidoth, but He could use his wife.

In the *Acts of the Apostles*, we read of a couple – Aquila and Priscilla. It appears as though Priscilla knew God and the Scriptures better than her husband Aquila. I say that because in the *five times* that they are referred to together in the New Testament, *four times* they are referred to as "**Priscilla and Aquila**", and not as "Aquila and Priscilla" (*Acts 18:18, 26; Romans 16:3; 2 Timothy 4:19*)! The order there has significance. It is a plain fact that there are many wives who know God and the Scriptures better than their husbands.

Priscilla, however, was a wonderful sister who knew how to submit to her husband Aquila. When she heard Apollos once in the synagogue and realised that he did not understand the truth fully, she invited him home and sat down with her husband and explained the way of God to Apollos, and thus revolutionised Apollos' ministry (*Acts 18:24–28*). She didn't get up in the synagogue and correct him. No. She called him home. That's a beautiful example of a sister who knew her place as a woman, but who had the anointing of God upon her life to bless even men. Apollos finally became a co-worker of the apostle Paul. But the one who set him on the right path first was a woman – *Priscilla!*

Deborah used to sit under a palm tree and the sons of Israel would come to her for judgement (4:5). Perhaps her husband Lappidoth was cooking the food at home, while she was judging Israel. God had to do it like that, because all the men in Israel were so effeminate. Then she called for the bravest man in Israel – Barak – to lead Israel in battle. She recognised her limitations and knew that, as a woman, she could not go to battle. She needed a man, just like Priscilla needed Aquila.

Deborah told Barak, "*Take 10,000 men with you and go and fight against Sisera and the Lord will deliver him into your hand*" (4:6, 7). That was such a clear and specific prophecy from the Lord. But what does the bravest man in Israel reply. Barak said, "*Sister, if you come with me I will go. Please come with me*" (4:8). He was **scared** to go without her! So Deborah agreed to go with Barak. How effeminate the bravest man in Israel was! And he was typical of all the others. But because Barak was so effeminate, Deborah told him, "*The honour of killing Sisera will not come to you. It will go to a woman.*" Finally, it was a woman, Jael, who killed Sisera (4:22).

There is a lesson here for all men. God is disappointed when He cannot find a man to lead His people. But God's work will not be hindered just

because the men fail Him. He will use women instead. God has used many women, through the centuries, all over the world, to do His work. God is not limited to men to get His work done.

After Israel was liberated from Sisera, Deborah and Barak sang a song. It is called the “*Song of Deborah and Barak*.” (*Chapter 5*). In 5:16, we read about the different tribes that came to fight in the battle. And then in 5:23, we read, “*Curse Meroz*.” Why does Meroz have to be cursed? *Because they did nothing*. They did not commit any sin, but they did *nothing*. They did not come to the help of the Lord when the enemy was coming.

Maybe you have not *committed* any sin. But if you don’t go out to spiritual battle, to fight for the Lord, you are sinning. It is a sin to sit back and do nothing, when others are fighting the battles of the Lord. That’s not a sin of *commission*. It’s a sin of *omission*.

There are two types of sins – *sins of commission* and *sins of omission*. Sins of commission are those where we do something wrong. Sins of omission are those where we *did nothing*, when we should have done something. In the parable of the good Samaritan, the priest and the Levite *did nothing*. Theirs was the sin of Meroz. When there was a need for warriors to fight for the Lord, Meroz did nothing. So when you don’t support the Lord’s soldiers and don’t go out yourself and fight, you are sinning.

Gideon and His Army

Then they had peace for 40 years (5:31). But the new generation sinned like their fathers – and this time the Lord let the Midianites enslave Israel for seven years.

Then God raised up Gideon to be the deliverer. The Word of God says, “*The Spirit of the Lord clothed Gideon*” (6:34 - margin). The Holy Spirit came on Gideon like the clothes he wore. Then Gideon was empowered and he blew the trumpet and went out to battle. 32,000 men came out to fight along with him. But the Lord said the people were too many (7:2). God didn’t want all of them, because they were not wholehearted. So Gideon told all those who were afraid to go home.

That’s what the Lord says to us too: “Are you afraid of the devil? Then go home. Are you afraid that somebody will call you ‘Beelzebul’, ‘heretic’, or ‘false prophet’? Then go home. Don’t waste your time serving the Lord.”

22,000 men went home that day. 10,000 were still left (7:3). God said that the people were still too many. They too were not wholehearted. Most of them were seeking their own and had to be removed. “*Take them down to the water and I will test them there*,” said the Lord (*verse 4*). When they came to the water, most of them forgot all about the enemy and buried

their heads in the water and began to drink. Many Christians are like that. When they see the attractive things in the world, they forget all about the Lord and His battles and bury their heads in covetous pursuit of wealth. 9,700 of Gideon's soldiers were disqualified that day.

There were only 300 left. These men, when they came to the water, remained alert looking out for the enemy, gathered just enough water with their hands to quench their immediate thirst. These typify those believers who *use* money and material things, but are not taken up with it. They work at their jobs faithfully to earn their living, but spend the rest of their time doing what they can for the Lord. God says, "*Those are the people I want.*" And there were only 300 left in that army that day – less than 1% of the original 32,000. The percentage is always small, because the way to life is narrow and few find it. Only 2 out of 600,000 – Joshua and Caleb – made it to the promised land. But the Lord is happy with those few.

In 7:16, we read that Gideon divided his army into three companies of 100 men each. Each man carried a trumpet and a pitcher with a light inside. They broke the pitcher so that the light showed and then they blew their trumpets. This is a picture of how our life and ministry should be. We are all earthen pitchers but "*we have the treasure of the glory of God within our earthen vessel*" (2 Corinthians 4:6, 7). But this earthen vessel has to be *broken* through many trials – "*the dying of Jesus*" – before the light can be seen by others (2 Corinthians 4:7–11). Otherwise, the light will be forever hidden within us. When he wrote that, Paul was thinking of Gideon's army carrying earthen vessels with a light inside which became visible only when the pitchers were broken. God seeks to break us through many circumstances, so that the light of the life of Christ within us shines forth. Blowing the trumpet is a picture of our proclaiming the glory of the Lord and His Word unashamedly. God is looking for men and women like that today.

Earlier, before Gideon went to this battle, the Lord had told him, "*If you want a little more courage, just go down at night to the enemy camp and listen to what they are saying*" (7:10, 11). And when Gideon went down there, he heard that they were all scared of him and his band of people. If you go into the camp of the devil today and listen, *you will hear that they are scared* of Jesus and of those who follow Him. That should encourage us to go to battle against Satan. The devil is scared of Jesus Christ – and he is really scared of us too – if we are true disciples. So let us call his bluff, whenever he tries to frighten us.

But even Gideon did not endure in faithfulness to the Lord. This is the sad story of many who started well – both under the old covenant and today as well. The Israelites wanted Gideon to rule over them and he said, "*No, I won't rule. Neither will my son rule. The Lord will rule*" (8:22, 23).

That sounds so spiritual. But listen to what he said in his very next sentence. He said, “*Please give me an earring, all of you*” (8:24). So all the Israelites gave him their earrings and Gideon collected 1700 shekels (about 20 kilograms) of gold plus a lot of other ornaments and expensive clothing (8:26). Gideon became a multi-millionaire in a single day – just like many preachers who become millionaires by collecting tithes and offerings from their flock and taking it all home! Gideon used some of the gold also to make an ephod that became an idol that Israel worshipped (8:27).

Thus, this great man backslid. It is the way a man ends his life that matters and not the way he begins it. The prize in every race is for those who finish well and not for those who started well (*1 Corinthians 9:24*). We are commanded to “*consider how people ended their lives*” (*Hebrews 13:7* - margin). Many a preacher mightily used by God in his early days has backslid like Gideon, and ended his life running after money and property! With the anointing lost, they spend their last days collecting *gold and earrings* for their children! Let me say to those of you who have started well:

Learn a lesson from Gideon, and from these other men, lest the same thing happen to you. You cannot serve God and money. What a blessed contrast we see in people like Samuel who could say at the end of his life, “*Whose ox have I taken or whose donkey have I taken? Whom have I oppressed?*” (*1 Samuel 12:3*). Like him, Paul could also say at the end of his life, “*I have coveted no-one’s silver or gold or clothes...nor did we eat anyone’s bread without paying for it.... We took advantage of no-one*” (*Acts 20:33; 2 Thessalonians 3:8; 2 Corinthians 7:2*). What a testimony for a preacher! Follow the example of men like Samuel and Paul.

After that, in *Judges*, we read of other leaders – Abimelech, Tola, Jair, Jephthah, Ibzan, Elon and Abdon.

Jephthah was one who kept his word and offered his daughter to God so that she remained unmarried throughout her life, because her father made a vow to God (11:35).

Samson and His Failure

Then we come to the 13th judge – Samson. In *Chapter 13*, we read of the family of Manoah that did not have any children. The angel of the Lord appeared to Manoah’s wife one day and told her that she would bear a son, and that he should be brought up as a Nazirite. Then, Samson was born. The Lord blessed him and the Spirit of God began to move upon him (13:25). He was *anointed* – that was the secret of his power.

But, unfortunately, Samson also backslid – very early in his life. Whenever he saw a pretty woman, he just could not control his lusts. He would forget all about his calling to serve the Lord and would go after that woman – whether she was a Jew or a Gentile made no difference to

him, so long as she was good-looking! This was his weakness throughout his life. God used him no doubt; but he had a great weakness for pretty women – like many a preacher today. Samson's behaviour stands in great contrast to Joseph's. Joseph lived before the Law was given and had much less revelation on God's ways than Samson had. Yet he stood true to God repeatedly – and has therefore become an outstanding *example* for young men for thousands of years. Samson, on the other hand has been an equally outstanding *warning* to all men for thousands of years!

In 14:5, 6, we read that “*Samson went down to Timnah and a young lion came roaring towards him and the Spirit of the Lord came upon him mightily so that he caught the lion and tore the lion to pieces.*” He tore that lion to pieces, just like we would tear up a piece of paper. And he was so humble that he didn't tell anyone about it – not even his father and mother. Samson knew that it was the power of the Holy Spirit that had enabled him to do that.

In 14:10, we read that his father went down to meet the Philistine woman whom Samson liked and got Samson married to her. This was in direct disobedience of God's Law that had clearly stated that an Israelite was never to marry a non-Israelite. Samson's was an up-and-down life – sometimes up but mostly down. We read in 16:1 that he went down to Gaza and he saw a harlot there and liked her and committed fornication with her. When he was caught, he pulled out the gates of the city and walked off with them! Later, he met another Philistine woman named Delilah and fell in love with her (16:4). God must have spoken to his conscience many a time. But he would not listen. He probably rejoiced in the fact that God was **using** him – just like many preachers do today. Many will come to the Lord in the last day and remind Him of how He had used them in various ministries. But the Lord will cast all of them into hell, because they lived in sin in their private lives (*Matthew 7:22, 23*). If we keep on rejecting God's gentle warnings to our conscience, we too can destroy ourselves like those preachers.

Samson finally put his head on Delilah's lap and revealed the secret of his strength to her. She cut off his hair promptly and that was the end of his ministry. What a tragedy! A man who was such a mighty deliverer, was enslaved to his own lusts and passions. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 9:27, “*It is possible for me to preach to others and still be disqualified myself, if I don't keep my body in subjection.*” The Living Bible paraphrases that verse as, “*making my body do what it should do, and not what it wants to do.*” That means that we are to make our bodies eat what it *should eat* and not what it *wants to eat*; sleep as much as it *should sleep*, and not how much it *wants to sleep*. We must control our eyes so that they look only at what they *should look at* and not at what they *want to look at*. We must control our tongues so that they speak what they *should speak* and not what they *want to speak*.

If we don't control our bodily passions, we may preach wonderful messages and yet be cast out by the Lord in the final day. So much depends on our disciplining our bodily passions. That is the message we get from the story of Samson who had a wonderful ministry that blessed so many people. But finally he himself was disqualified. So many great preachers have fallen a prey to pretty women. Don't be impressed by the gifts that such men exercise or by the vastness of their organisations!! A leader falling into sin is a far more serious thing than an ordinary believer falling into the same sin – as we saw in *Leviticus*. To whom more is given, from them more is required as well.

If you are not faithful in your relationship with the opposite sex, don't dishonour God's name by trying to be an elder or a leader. Don't fool the people that you are a holy man of God, when you are living in sin. God will expose you publicly one day, if you continue to live like that. You may think you are clever enough to hide your sin. But you are not clever enough for God. He will expose you more than you have ever been exposed thus far.

In *Chapter 16*, we read of how Samson lost his power and how his eyes were blinded. When preachers go after women, this is what happens: *They lose their spiritual vision*. They cannot see clearly any more. They may still be evangelical in their doctrines and be able to preach eloquently. But their spiritual vision would have gone.

Samson became a slave. But praise God, he had enough sense to acknowledge his sin toward the end of his life. He repented and finally destroyed many Philistines in his death (*Judge 16:23–31*).

Samson's story is the story of *two lions* – one on the outside and one inside his heart. He could overpower the *external* lion, but he could not conquer the *internal* one. This teaches us that the *lion of sexual lust* is far stronger and more to be feared than any external lion. What would you do if you saw a lion running towards you in a forest? You would turn around and run. Do you do the same when you see the *lion of lust* coming at you? The Bible exhorts us to “*flee from immorality*” (*1 Corinthians 6:18*). That is the only way to overcome it – don't go anywhere near such temptation. Don't go anywhere near a woman who tempts you. Avoid flirtatious women like you would avoid hungry lions.

Samson lived under the old covenant. So no-one can make Samson's example his excuse for falling into immorality *today*. Samson did not have the New Testament, he lived prior to Calvary's cross, he had no Example as we have in Jesus today, and above all, he could not receive the Holy Spirit as an Indwelling Helper as we can. The way into the most holy place of fellowship with the Father was not yet open in those days. Samson did not have the blessing of godly fellowship either. All of these we have today. So we have no excuse for living in sin.

Whatever was Right in Their Eyes

In *Chapters 17 to 21*, we read about the idolatry, the immorality and the wars among the Israelites, which reveal the degraded state of a nation that God had chosen to be His representatives on earth. They had sunk as low as Sodom and Gomorrah.

In 17:7–13, we see the first case of a paid professional preacher in the Bible, who was willing to go wherever he got the best salary and the best benefits. Here was a Levite who agreed to serve as a priest to the highest bidder. A businessman came along and offered him a good salary, a new set of clothes every year, and free housing and boarding. The preacher signed the contract immediately! The businessman who paid him thought that God would now bless him because he had employed a preacher who had graduated from the school of the Levites!! How very like what we see happening today. One would almost think that that was a 21st-century story! The reason for this pathetic state of affairs is given in the verse immediately preceding the description of this incident, “*Every man did what was right in his own eyes*” (17:6).

And that verse about sums up everything that happened in Israel in the days of the judges. And so this statement is, very appropriately, repeated as the last verse of the book, “*In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes*” (21:25).

That was how the Israelites lived in those days. And that is how many Christians live today. Jesus is not King in their lives and so they do whatever they feel like. They spend their *money* as they feel like and they *live* as they feel like. The preachers *go* wherever they can get the largest salary. They all live without any reference to the will of God or the perfect plan of God for their lives.

God has given us Jesus Christ now as our Example. If we don’t follow Him as our Lord and our King, we too can end up like those Israelites described in the book of *Judges*.

Approximate Dates of Ministry of Israel’s Judges

Othniel	:	1367 – 1327 B.C.
Ehud	:	1309 – 1229 B.C.
Shamgar	:	1248 – 1230 B.C.
Deborah	:	1209 – 1169 B.C.
Gideon	:	1162 – 1122 B.C.
Abimelech	:	1122 B.C.
Tola and Jair	:	1120 – 1096 B.C.
Jephthah	:	1096 – 1090 B.C.
Ibzan, Elon, Abdon	:	1090 – 1075 B.C.
Samson	:	1075 – 1055 B.C.

RUTH

GOD'S SOVEREIGN CHOICE

The book of *Ruth* is an interesting story, because it deals with a woman who was a Moabitess'. Ruth was not a Jew. Moab, as we have already seen, was one of the sons of Lot, born through his committing adultery with his own daughter. From this incestuous relationship came a race called the Moabites. Among these Moabites was a young girl named Ruth. She had a very bad heritage. Yet, she became the great grandmother of King David, and thus in the ancestral line of Jesus Christ. We see here God's love for children born out of fornication and incestuous relationships.

Some of you may have a bad family heritage or lived a very wicked life yourselves in the past. Maybe your mother was not married when you were born. Or she may have been a prostitute. Or you may have been born out of an incestuous relationship. It doesn't matter. Men may reject you and despise you, but not God. You can still be a saint. That's the encouragement we get from the book of *Ruth*. God did not condemn her because she came from a certain race either.

God had given the Israelites a law that said, "No Moabite shall enter the assembly of the Lord; none of their descendants **even to the tenth generation**, shall ever enter the assembly of the Lord" (Deuteronomy 23:3). Yet God bypassed that law when it came to Ruth. God looked at her heart and saw that she sincerely sought for Him – and so God accepted her. God has every right to bypass His ceremonial laws when He sees a sincere heart – and He did. Ruth's great grandson, David, became *a man after God's own heart*. And *the fourth generation* from this Moabitess woman – Solomon – far from being denied entry into the temple of the Lord, actually built that temple!

The Choice Ruth Made

The story of Ruth's marriage is an interesting one. There was a famine in Israel and so Elimelech and his wife Naomi went into the land of Moab along with their two sons. These sons grew up and married Moabite women, violating God's laws. Then Elimelech died and the two sons also died. Naomi, being a kind lady, then told her two daughters-in-law, Ruth and Orpah, to go back to their own land and find new husbands (1:8).

Both Ruth and Orpah wept aloud when they heard this (1:9, 14). Orpah then kissed her mother-in-law and said, "*Goodbye, Mum. I must go back home and find another husband. I have to take care of my own life.*" But Ruth clung to Naomi. She had learnt something about the true God from Naomi, and she wanted to worship and serve this God, more than she wanted a husband. Orpah, however, wanted a husband. There was a fork in the road there and Orpah took the wrong road. Ruth took the right turning – and that made all the difference, for all eternity. We never hear of Orpah again. Wherever she is today, she is undoubtedly regretting her choice.

We also come to forks in the road many a time. You may hear a message that shows you two ways in front of you. Some of you may be facing that choice right now. Forks in the road are important places, because you are compelled to take a decision. Ruth told Naomi, "*Please don't tell me to go back. I will go with you. I will stay with you. Your people will henceforth be my people and your God will be my God*" (verse 16). She took a firm decision that day. And today, in the presence of God, she has no regret.

When Naomi saw that Ruth was determined, she agreed to let her accompany her back to Israel (1:18). Thus they came to Elimelech's hometown of Bethlehem. And Naomi said, "I went out full, but the Lord has brought me back empty." If only Naomi knew what lay ahead of her! Sometimes we complain like Naomi that the Lord has brought us back empty, or that the Lord is against us, or that the Lord Almighty has afflicted us! (verse 21). How foolish it was of Naomi to complain about God like that! But even though her mother-in-law was foolish, Ruth herself did not complain. She was thankful that she had found the true God. She was a very good daughter-in-law and took care of her mother-in-law. People saw this. And God saw it too. God saw this heathen girl not complaining and having a humble spirit of service. Many times, those who come out of heathenism to Christ are much better believers than those who are born in believers' families. This girl Ruth, who came from a heathen background is a challenge to all of us. She had none of the usual attitude of worldly daughters-in-law to their mothers-in-law. She loved her mother-in-law and looked after her very well. This was why God rewarded her.

The Field of Boaz

Now Naomi had a close relative, a man of great wealth, by the name of Boaz (2:1). There was a law in Israel that if a married man died, his closest relative must marry his widow and raise children in the dead man's name (*Deuteronomy 25:5–9*). So Naomi thought, "Well, Boaz is a close relative of mine and he is still single. Perhaps he can marry Ruth."

But Ruth didn't know that law (being a Moabitess) and Naomi never told her, lest her hopes be raised. Ruth in any case, was not interested in getting married again. She did not come to Israel to look for a husband. She came in search of the true God. It was Orpah who went to Moab looking for a husband. But because Ruth sought God first, she not only found God, but found a good husband and a good heritage for the future as well. God honours those who honour Him. Those who seek God's kingdom first, find that God adds all the other things necessary for life on earth, automatically, without their ever seeking for them. Such things fall into their lap.

Naomi and Ruth were poor; but Ruth was a hard-working girl who was not ashamed to do lowly jobs to earn her daily bread. So she told her mother-in-law one day that she would go and pick up the leftovers of the grain from the grainfields of the rich people. Now, there was a law that God had made in Israel that when people glean their grain, they must leave out the corners of their fields, and should not go over their fields a second time to pick up what was left over – but must leave such grains for the poor (*Leviticus 19:9, 10*). Ruth went to pick up such left-over grain. Being a poor girl, she wanted to do what she could to take care of herself and her mother-in-law.

The sovereignty of God led her amazingly to the field of Boaz. It is wonderful to see how God, in His sovereignty, brought together these two, whom He had planned from all eternity, to unite as husband and wife. Boaz saw this woman gleaning there and asked the workers who she was. They replied that she was the Moabite woman who had come back with Naomi. Boaz was a very kind and godly man. He was concerned that Ruth should not be molested by any of the men, and so he told her not to go and glean in any other field, since that would be dangerous. He told his servants not to harm her in any way. Ruth was so touched by this that she fell on her face and asked why he was being so kind to a despised Moabitess. Boaz replied that he had heard about all the kindness she had shown to her mother-in-law and also how she had chosen to follow the Lord, having forsaken her old Moabite idols. Boaz then told his workers to drop some handfuls of grain on purpose so that Ruth could pick them up.

Why God Chose Ruth

Why did God pick such a girl to be the wife of Boaz and the ancestor of David and in the genealogical line of our Lord? First of all, because Ruth was a very humble girl who did not think too highly of herself. She was also hard-working and gracious, a woman of steadfast faith, who had forsaken her home and her relatives in order to follow the Lord, and one who treated her mother-in-law with respect, kindness and love. These are the qualities that God looks for even today in young girls.

When Ruth came home, her mother-in-law asked her where she had gleaned, and she told her. When Naomi heard that, she told Ruth that she would try and find some security for her and told her that Boaz was a close relative. She must have explained to Ruth about God's law that commanded a close relative to redeem the property of a widow and to marry her.

So when Boaz met her, she requested him to redeem her and marry her, since he was a close relative (3:9). Boaz was glad to see that Ruth did not choose the more handsome, younger men who were there. Boaz was a much older man, and young girls are not usually attracted to older men. But he told her that there was another relative even closer than him. Being a righteous man, Boaz said that he would have to ask that man first whether he would redeem and marry her (3:12, 13).

The Kinsman Redeemer

The next day, Boaz promptly went to the gate and asked this other relative whether he would redeem Naomi's property, as her closest relative (4:3, 4). He promptly said, "Yes, I will redeem it." But Boaz reminded him that he would also have to marry Ruth and raise up sons in the name of her dead husband. When he heard this, he withdrew his offer and said he could not do that, since her sons would later claim an inheritance along with his sons, and he didn't want that complication! So he refused to redeem the property. Thus Boaz became first in line to redeem the property and to marry Ruth. He readily agreed to do that.

That was a bold step for a prominent man like Boaz to take – to marry a Moabite girl. But he had seen some outstanding qualities in Ruth and respected her for having come out of her heathen family. Christian boys often hesitate to marry girls who have been saved from non-Christian families. But in most cases, such girls are stronger Christians and more godly than those born in believing families.

Boaz married Ruth and they had a son called Obed who became the father of Jesse who became the father of David (4:17).

Thus God honoured a woman from an incestuous, heathen background, because she honoured God. What we learn in Ruth is the truth of *1 Samuel 2:30*, “*Those who honour Me I will honour.*” There is no partiality with God.

This story shows how God cares for His children who may be despised by others, to find good marriage-partners for them. So we can trust the Lord even for such earthly matters. God cares for us and He wants to meet all our earthly needs – whatever they may be.

This story is also a beautiful picture of our spiritual union with Christ. Ruth is a perfect type of what we are in our sinful state. And Jesus Christ had to become our “near relative”, before He could redeem us and marry us. This is why He took flesh and blood like us and was made “*in all things like us His brothers*” (*Hebrews 2:17*). Thus He became our *Kinsman-Redeemer*. It was God Who planned the union between Ruth and Boaz. And it was God Who planned the union between Christ and us, before the foundation of the world!

Hallelujah!

1 SAMUEL

THE LAST JUDGE AND THE FIRST KING

Samuel was primarily a prophet – the first of Israel’s great prophets in Canaan. He was also a priest and a judge – the last judge of Israel. He lived at about the same time as Samson, but in another part of Israel.*

The Birth of Samuel

The story of Samuel begins with his mother, Hannah, being barren. It’s interesting to see how many women are mentioned in Scripture as having been barren for many years before having children – Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel and Hannah. They all sought God in prayer, and each of them gave birth to a son who had a unique place in God’s purpose. They did *not* accept their barrenness. They prayed to God earnestly for children. God granted them their request and each of them had a child through whom God fulfilled a unique purpose. Many mothers pray for their children while they are still in their wombs. But these women prayed with an unusual *intensity*. It’s wonderful when a child is born into the world through intense prayer like that. That is how Samuel was born.

Hannah had prayed to the Lord for many years for a child. Finally, she made a vow saying, “*Lord, If You will indeed look on the affliction of Your maidservant and remember me, and not forget Your maidservant, but will give me a son, then I will give him to the Lord all the days of his life*” (1:11). There was a shift in her focus now. At first, she thought only of her own need: “*I need a son.*” Then she began to say, “*If I have a son, I’ll give him to the Lord, since the Lord has a need as well.*” When the focus of our prayer shifts from *our* need to God’s need, that’s when we begin to get answers to our prayers. The Lord taught us to pray, “*Hallowed be Thy name*” first of all.

* The timeline of the prophets is given on p. 178.

There was great spiritual need in Israel at that time. God's people had backslidden so badly. Their leaders like Eli, were terribly backslidden too. Israel had never had a prophet since the days of Moses. Hannah was a person who was alert to her surroundings. And she would have recognised Israel's need for a prophet. So Hannah continued to pray, "*Lord, not only will I dedicate my son to You, but a razor also will never come upon his head. He will be a Nazirite, dedicated to You. If You can use him to restore this nation back to You, he is Yours.*" Her whole prayer shifted from her need to God's. Very often our prayers are not answered, because they are focused so much on ourselves. It's wonderful that Samuel was born to such a mother.

When Hannah gave birth to Samuel, she did not forget her promise. She brought her son to the temple and said, "*For this boy I prayed. The Lord has given me my petition which I asked of Him. So I have also dedicated him to the Lord. As long as he lives he is dedicated to the Lord*" (1:27, 28). She was never going to take him back. She taught that little boy to kneel down and worship the Lord there. It's wonderful to have a godly mother like that. Then she sang a wonderful song of thanksgiving to the Lord (2:1–10). It is more than likely that Mary's song of thanksgiving (Luke 1:46–55) was inspired by Hannah's song – for the words are so similar.

Samuel grew up to be a young man who changed the face of Israel through his prophetic ministry – from the chaotic state we saw in the book of Judges, to the glorious state under the reign of David.

Listening to God

The high-priest Eli's sons were worthless, godless men, who had no fear of God (2:12). It is very sad when a leader's children are immoral and godless. The worst part was that Eli permitted them to take part in the ministry in the tabernacle. They would steal from the sacrifices and commit adultery with the women in the temple. And what was Eli's response to all this? He should have called them and told them to get out of the Lord's work *immediately*. Instead, he told them, "*My sons, this is not good what I hear*" (verse 24). He was a spineless and useless leader.

In contrast to those godless men, Samuel grew up "*in favour both with the Lord and with men*" (2:26).

God then sent a messenger to Eli and told him that his ministry was finished because he had honoured his sons more than he honoured God (2:27–29). Then we find these beautiful words that God spoke – that we should remember all through our life: "*Those who honour Me I will honour, and those who despise Me will be lightly esteemed*" (1 Samuel 2:30). If you honour God, you can be certain that He will honour you.

In the midst of these godless surroundings, Samuel grew up pure. That is an example for all young people who find themselves in godless homes or surroundings. You may be in a church that is full of compromise; but don't allow yourself to be influenced by that. If you can be like Samuel, steadfast in your devotion to the Lord, without being corrupted, God can raise you up to be His voice in that situation, just as Samuel was.

One night, when Samuel was asleep, he heard a voice calling him, "Samuel, Samuel." He thought it was Eli and went to find out. But it wasn't. The voice kept calling Samuel, until Eli told Samuel to ask the Lord to speak to him. "*Then the Lord came and stood and called as at other times, 'Samuel, Samuel.' And Samuel said, 'Speak for Thy servant is listening'*" (3:10). Here is an attitude that all of us must have, throughout the day, to the Lord's voice: "*Speak Lord, Your servant is listening.*"

God did not give Samuel a warning saying, "Tonight at midnight I am going to come and speak to you." No. Samuel had to be alert at all times. In the Scripture, we see again and again that God would suddenly call His prophets and speak to them. Then for two or three months they would hear nothing. Then again God would speak. So they had to be in a state of alertness at all times. But God speaks only to those *who are eager* to hear His voice. Your life and ministry can be totally changed if you develop the habit of listening to God, at least from now onwards.

God may speak to you in the middle of the night, or He may speak to you while you are reading His Word or while you are travelling in the bus. He may speak to you through a brother or sister. He may speak to you when you are in the midst of others or when you are alone. There are many ways in which God speaks. But we must always have a listening attitude: "*Speak Lord, Your servant is listening.*" That's what enabled Samuel to grow up to be a prophet of God. When he listened, he could tell others what God told him.

God told Samuel that day, "I am going to judge Eli for his sin." In the morning when Eli called Samuel and asked him, "What did the Lord say to you?" Samuel told him everything (3:18). Even though it was bad news for Eli, Samuel told him everything. A servant of God must be like that. Even though Eli had been very kind to Samuel, Samuel did not hesitate to tell him, "*God said he was going to judge you. Your sons have brought a curse upon themselves, and you did not rebuke them.*"

Samuel as a Prophet

Chapter 3:19 is a wonderful verse and a great challenge for all those who minister the word: "*Samuel grew and the Lord did not allow any of his words to fall to the ground.*" Isn't it wonderful to be able to speak God's Word in such a way that not one word we speak falls wasted to

the ground, but every single word goes straight home to people's hearts? This should be our aim – not only when ministering the word, but also in private conversation. The secret of this was: The Lord was with Samuel. We saw in *Genesis* that this was the secret of Joseph's effectiveness as well: *The Lord was with him*. We must all yearn for such speech both in our ministry and in our conversation. Thus all Israel recognised Samuel as a prophet of the Lord (*verse 20*).

This happened at a time “*when word from the Lord was rare and visions were infrequent*” (*3:1*). Israel never had a prophet for over 300 years, since the days of Moses. Throughout the period of judges there were no prophets. The words in *Psalm 74:9* “*There is no longer any prophet*” (when read in the context of that psalm) seem to indicate that when God does *not* send a prophet to his people, that indicates that *God has given up on them*.

For over 3 centuries, there was no prophet who came forth with a word from the Lord for Israel. But at last Israel knew God had finally raised up a young man – and they listened to him. All of you young people should be encouraged by this: Samuel was a young man when he started to prophesy. So were Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Zechariah (*Jeremiah 1:6; Ezekiel 1:1; Zechariah 2:4*). You don't have to wait till you are 40 years old to serve the Lord. Samuel started serving the Lord when he was 10 years old. By the time he was 20, he was a prophet. What was his secret? He was listening. His attitude was always, “*Speak Lord, Your servant is listening.*”

Chapter 4:3: We read here of a time when the Israelites were fighting the Philistines and they were defeated. The elders asked themselves, “Why has the Lord allowed us to be defeated today? It must be because we have not brought the ark of the covenant here.” They didn't realise that they were defeated because of their sins. The ark was only a symbol. They could have the symbol without God – just like breaking of bread today is a symbol. You can break the bread and drink the cup and yet not have fellowship with the Lord. So they brought the ark down into their midst. When the ark came, they shouted so loudly that the earth beneath them began to shake (*verse 5*). Many Christians even today imagine that it is only when they shout that God is in their midst.

What happened? Before the ark came, the Philistines had killed 4000 Israelites in battle (*verse 2*). After the ark came and Israel had shouted, “Hallelujah, Praise the Lord”, the Philistines killed 30,000 Israelites (*verse 10*)!!

There is something we can learn from this: You can't bring God into a situation by bringing the symbols and the rituals or by shouting and praising Him. There are many churches where there are both symbols and shouting. But the people therein are all defeated by sin. And very often, the ones who shout the most are defeated the most as well – just as above!!

God's presence is found in churches that are free from sin, not in churches that shout and scream the loudest. God looks for people who have a clean conscience, who do not worship the gods of pleasure, money and entertainment. Only then does their shouting and praising Him become meaningful. Wherever God is, there is victory – whether with shouting, emotional stirring and physical manifestations or without these. But if these latter things alone are present and the people are defeated by sin – then God is certainly not in their midst. Understanding this simple truth will save us from a lot of deception in these last days.

Samuel's Failure as a Father

Chapter 7:15–17: Samuel used to go annually on a circuit to Bethel, Gilgal and Mizpah, and judged Israel in all those places. But he was travelling so much that he did not have much time for his family. What was the result? His sons went astray. But Samuel still appointed them to take over from him as judges in Israel. His sons began to take bribes and to pervert justice and made money for themselves (8:1–3). That was the biggest mistake that Samuel made in his life. He should not have appointed his sons as judges, when God had never called them to this ministry.

Many preachers make the same mistake today, of appointing their sons to be their successors. Partiality and love for our sons can deafen our ears so that we don't hear God any more. We can stop listening to God, when it concerns our own family members. Even such a godly man like Samuel became deaf at that point. As a young man, Samuel had preached to Eli how to bring up his children. Now we see him failing in his own house, in the way he brought up his own children. And when he saw that his children were not following the Lord, he should not have appointed them as judges over God's people. He was a prophet and a judge and a man of discernment. He had listened to God from childhood. But when it came to his own sons, he stopped listening to God. Did he ask the Lord, "Whom shall I appoint as the next judges for Your people, Lord? Speak Lord, Your servant is listening." Did God tell him to appoint his sons as judges? No. He was so self-confident that he followed his own partial reasoning and appointed his own sons. And thus he destroyed many people's lives.

This is what has happened to many Christian leaders, who started out so well when they were young. But as they grew older, they stopped listening to what God was saying, because they were partial towards their own children – even though their children were ungodly.

That's a warning for all of us. We don't have to judge anybody else. But we certainly can judge ourselves and learn a lot from that. Here is a question for those who are in a preaching ministry: Are you so busy

in your ministry that you don't have time to bring up your children in God's ways? There are many servants of God today whose children are not following in the ways of the Lord. Don't judge them. You may know nothing of the pressures under which those servants of the Lord are living and working. You know nothing of how much they and their families are the targets of Satan's attacks. I would never judge them. If you want to do something for them, I would say, "Pray for them". If you don't pray for them, at least don't judge them. But take a warning from them for yourself.

1 Timothy 3:5 is clear that a man who cannot control his children (when they are living with him in his home), will not be able to control God's children in His house, and therefore should not be appointed as an elder in any church. Such a person should not preach God's word to others either. For if he cannot run his own home properly, how can he teach others? Once his children have grown up and left home, they have to make their own choice as to whether they will follow the Lord or not. Their condition *thereafter* will not disqualify him from serving the Lord. But when his children are at home, their good conduct there is a fundamental requirement for his being an elder in the church.

Praying for Others

But that was perhaps the only area where Samuel failed. In many other areas, he was an outstanding example of a man who never wavered from God's ways from childhood to the end of his life. Samuel's sensitivity to sin was so great in his own life that he felt that if God had appointed him as the leader for the people and *he didn't pray for them* he would have sinned (*1 Samuel 12:23*: "As for me, far be it from me that I should sin against the Lord by ceasing to pray for you").

How many Christian leaders believe that they are committing a sin if they don't pray for their flock? Many like to be leaders. But do you realise that if you become a leader and you don't pray for those people, **you commit sin?**

We know that murder, adultery, bad thoughts and anger are sins. Here is one more sin to add to your list: *Not praying for those whom you lead.*

Jesus prayed for His 12 disciples regularly. Samuel understood that too. He was a man of prayer. All of God's great servants have been men of prayer. See what God Himself tells Jeremiah 400 years later concerning Samuel. Concerning backslidden Israel, God said, "*Even if Moses and Samuel stand before Me and pray for these people, I will not change my mind.*" (*Jeremiah 15:1*). Doesn't God listen to everybody's prayer? He certainly does. But "*the effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man*

avails much." (*James 5:16*). From among all the Israelites that lived during the 800 year period from Moses to Jeremiah, God picked just two men who were great men of prayer – Moses and Samuel. The two greatest prophets may have been Moses and Elijah. But the two greatest people of prayer were Moses and Samuel.

Moses also had two sons, just like Samuel. But Moses did not make the mistake of appointing his sons to take over from him. He listened to the Lord and appointed the one whom the Lord told him to appoint – Joshua.

We see that even a mighty man of prayer like Samuel could fail to hear God and make a serious mistake. Partiality and love for our flesh and blood are both very close to us. That was why Jesus said that we had to cut off our attachment to our parents, wife and other family members, if we wanted to be His disciples (*Luke 14:26*). A wise man will learn from the mistakes of others. A foolish man will make the same mistakes himself. We find multitudes of Christians making the same mistakes that Scripture warns us of again and again.

King Saul – A Man Who Started Well

Now we come to the ministry of Saul. We see Saul initially, as a humble, young man who had no interest in becoming king. The people of Israel wanted a king. And one day, the Lord told Samuel: "*Tomorrow about this time I will send you a man from the land of Benjamin, and you shall anoint him to be king over My people Israel*" (*1 Samuel 9:15–17*). When Samuel saw Saul, the Lord said to him, "*Behold, this is the man.*" Samuel spoke to Saul and "*took a flask of oil, poured it on his head and said, ‘The Lord has anointed you a ruler over His inheritance’*" (*1 Samuel 10:1*). Saul was absolutely surprised, for he did not expect this at all. He was, after all, just an ordinary man.

But for God to pick him out would indicate that God had seen many good qualities in him. And so Samuel told him, "*The Spirit of the Lord will come upon you mightily, you will prophesy, and you will be changed into another man*" (*10:6*).

This is indeed a wonderful word that describes what happens to a man when he is filled with the Holy Spirit: ***He is changed into another man.*** This is what all of us need to experience continually.

But Saul had to be recognised by the people also as the man whom God had chosen to be their king. So Samuel called all the people together and told them that a king would be selected by God from their midst. Samuel did not name Saul. Instead he cast lots – by tribes first, then by families and then by individual names – believing that the Lord would sovereignly control the lot. The lot finally fell on Saul. But when they looked for Saul, they couldn't find him because he had disappeared. He had hidden himself, because he did not want to become the king.

Notice ten good qualities that Saul had.

1. *He was faithful and thorough in his work.* In *Chapter 9:3*, we read that his father Kish had lost his donkeys. Kish told Saul to go and search for them. Saul conducted a thorough search in all the hill country of Ephraim and the land of Shalishah. His father had given him a job to do, and he did it thoroughly. He didn't just go looking for the donkeys for a few minutes and come back saying, "I can't find them." God picks up people who are faithful in small matters like looking for lost donkeys!
2. *He was wise.* When a long time had elapsed and he still hadn't found any of the donkeys, he told his servant, "*Let's go back because my father will now be more concerned about us than the donkeys.*" (9:5).
3. *He knew how to respect God's servants.* When his servant suggested that they go and meet a servant of God in the city, Saul said, "*Let's take a present for him*" (9:7).
4. *He had a humble opinion about himself.* When Samuel told Saul about God having chosen him, he replied, "*Who am I? Am I not a Benjamite, of the smallest of the tribes of Israel, and my family the least of all the families of the tribe of Benjamin?*" (9:21).
5. *He did not boast.* When his uncle asked him what Samuel had said, Saul told his uncle that Samuel said his donkeys had been found, but he did not tell his uncle about Samuel anointing him as king (10:15, 16).
6. *He stayed in the background.* When they selected him to be the king, he hid himself in the baggage. He was a man who wanted to be hidden (10:22).
7. *He was longsuffering.* When Saul went to his house, certain worthless men said, "*How can this man deliver us?*" They despised him and did not bring any present. But he kept silent even though he was publicly anointed as king (10:27).
8. *He was zealous to help those in need.* When certain people of Israel were attacked by their enemies, they sent messengers to Saul, who immediately gathered people to go and help them (11:1–7).
9. *He was courageous.* Saul went and fought the Ammonite enemies courageously and saved the Israelites (11:1).
10. *He forgave his enemies.* When Saul came back victorious from the battle, some people wanted to kill those who had earlier rejected Saul as king. But he would not allow anyone to be killed (11:12, 13).

This was the man God chose, who had all these wonderful qualities. Yet in a few years he had lost his contact with God, lost the anointing of the Spirit, lost his humility, lost his character, lost his kingdom and lost everything. This is the sad story of many servants of God today too, who started out well.

Why Saul Failed

In *Chapter 13:8*, we see the *first reason* why Saul lost his kingdom. Samuel had told Saul to wait for him and he would offer a sacrifice to the Lord, before Saul went into battle. Saul waited for 7 days and Samuel didn't come. So Saul decided to offer the sacrifice himself (*13:9*). He knew that he was *not* a priest, and that it was against God's laws for him to offer the sacrifice to God. But because he had been so blessed in his ministry as a king, he felt he could go outside the boundary that God had drawn around him, and enter into another ministry. Many preachers have made the same mistake. We must recognise the ministry God has given us and stay within the boundaries that God has drawn around us. Just because God has blessed us in one ministry, does not mean that we can move into another ministry that God has not called us to. God has *not* gifted me as an *evangelist*, but as a *teacher*. And I have stayed within my boundaries, despite the pressure that others have at times, put on me, to go outside my boundaries. I don't want to repeat Saul's mistake. I value gifted evangelists and work with them – and submit to them in the sphere of their ministry. But I stick to my ministry.

Uzziah was another king who tried to be a priest. God struck him down with leprosy (*2 Chronicles 26*). Here we see that God took away Saul's kingdom from him, when he tried to be a priest. Recognise your ministry and stay within your boundaries. And allow other people to fulfil *their* ministries. This is a simple law of the body of Christ.

We see Saul's impatience also here. A few minutes after he had offered the sacrifice, Samuel came as he had promised. What a different story it would have been, if only Saul had waited just a few minutes longer! Because of his pride and impatience, he lost everything. But he still sat on the throne of Israel for another 30 years. There are many who are sitting on their thrones in Christendom today, like Saul, who have lost the anointing of God long, long ago. But because they have got money and human authority, they sit on their thrones directing their organisations. Saul degenerated from a wonderful young man who started out in great humility to become one who was useless to God!

Samuel then told Saul, "*Your kingdom shall not endure now. You have acted foolishly. The Lord now seeks for somebody who is a man after His own heart*" (*13:13, 14*).

See the emphasis here on **the heart**. When Saul was anointed as king, the Bible says that his **head** stood out among the people, for he was taller than everybody else (*1 Samuel 10:23*). He was distinguished by his **head** – his brains. But God was now looking for someone who was distinguished by his **heart**. David was different from others, not

because of his head, but because of his heart! He was a man after God's own **heart** (*1 Samuel 13:14*).

There is a vast difference between a “*Christianity of the head*” and a “*Christianity of the heart*”. Saul represents the first and David represents the second. This is the essential difference between *religious* people and *spiritual* people. The Lord sought out for Himself a man after His own heart and He found David. Our head represents our brains, our intelligence and our cleverness. Our heart represents our devotion to the Lord and our worship of Him. The Father seeks for worshippers, not for scholars (*John 4:23*). If you are not a worshipper, if you are not devoted to Jesus Christ, no matter how clever you may be, you can end up like Saul. David finished his course triumphantly even though he made mistakes, *because his heart was right*.

In *14:35*, we read of the *very first altar* that Saul ever built. And there we see the reason for his failure: *He was not a worshipper first of all*. Saul's ancestor, Abraham, had been a worshipper. Wherever Abraham went, he built an altar to worship the Lord. But Saul was just a smart, clever man, and not a worshipper. Jesus said in *Matthew 4:10*, that we have to worship God before we can serve Him. Beware of a Christianity that only resides in your head, and that does not lead you to a devotion to Jesus Christ and to a worship of God the Father.

In *Chapter 15*, we see the *second mistake* that Saul made. God had told him to kill all the Amalekites and their animals; but he spared some of the good sheep – perhaps wanting to keep them for himself. When Samuel confronted him with his failure, he blamed the people for sparing the good sheep and oxen and also justified it by giving a pious twist to it, saying, “*they wanted to sacrifice them to the Lord*”. He modified God's command according to his own reason. And just like Adam blamed his wife, Saul blamed the people. One who does not know how to acknowledge a mistake and take the blame for his own sin, is unfit to be a leader. It is our attitude to the *small things* that determine whether we are qualified to be leaders of God's people or not. Jesus said that the greatest people in His kingdom would be those who obeyed God in the little things; and the least people in God's kingdom would be those who ignored the small commandments (*Matthew 5:19*). God evaluates us by our attitude to the *smaller commandments* He has given.

Saul could have honestly confessed his sin. But he didn't. He kept on insisting that he had obeyed the Lord. He told Samuel, “*I have carried out the commandment of the Lord.... I did obey the voice of the Lord.*” (*verses 13, 20*). But when Samuel kept on confronting him, he finally admitted, “*I was afraid of the people and I listened to their voice.*”

(verse 24). A man who is afraid of people’s opinions and listens to their voice can never be their leader.

But then he told Samuel, “*I’ll acknowledge privately to you that I have sinned. But please don’t let me down publicly. Please honour me in the presence of the elders. Please come along and worship with me, and act as though nothing is wrong*” (verse 30). He sought honour from the people. He wanted to put up a front of being a holy man. He didn’t want it look as though Samuel had stopped supporting him. He wanted the people to think that God was still with him.

The Spirit of God now left Saul, and an evil spirit entered him. Suspicion, fear, jealousy and evil spirits now occupied the heart that was once filled with humility, wisdom and zeal for God. It is very dangerous to know the power of the Spirit and then to be unfaithful – for your latter end becomes worse than your unconverted state. It is far better then, never to have known the power of the Spirit at all.

The Spirit of God now came upon young David who went in the power of the Spirit and slew Goliath, the enemy of the Israelites. When Saul heard the women praising David for that, he became jealous (18:9), and tried to kill David more than once (18:11; 19:10). Degeneration sets in very quickly, when jealousy is allowed to reign in the heart. Saul’s madness became so bad that he even tried to kill his own son Jonathan with a spear once. Saul was very eager to promote Jonathan to take over his ministry, even though he knew that Jonathan had no anointing from God for that ministry. Many Christians are doing the same thing all over Christendom these days, proving that they too have the spirit of Saul in them.

Saul spent the rest of his life chasing after David, trying to kill him. His anger became uncontrollable. He once killed 85 Levitical priests and their families just because they did not report to him that David had come to their town (*Chapter 22*). But, more than once, when David could have killed Saul, he spared Saul’s life. Yet, in spite of all this, Saul did not repent. Things only went from bad to worse in his life. That is what happens when you become jealous of someone who is more blessed by God than you are. Many Christian leaders seek to push out from their churches, those who are more anointed than they are. But such men go down and down spiritually, until they have destroyed themselves totally.

Saul then got involved in witchcraft (28:8) and finally committed suicide (31:4, 5). What a sad end for a man who had started out so well.

David – The Man After God’s Own Heart

What a contrast to Saul was David – *the man after God’s own heart*.

The Lord told Samuel to stop praying for Saul, because He was now going to anoint someone else to be Israel’s king (*1 Samuel 16*). Samuel was

told to go to the house of Jesse where God would show him one of his sons who was to be the next king.

Jesse had *eight* sons. When Samuel told Jesse to call all his sons for a sacrifice, Jesse called only the first seven. He didn't even bother to call David, the youngest – obviously because nobody thought much of David. He was the baby of the family – perhaps just 15 years old. David was looking after the sheep. The smart, handsome Eliab, the eldest son came to Samuel first (16:6). And Samuel thought, "This is certainly the Lord's anointed". But God said "No". God told Samuel not to look at his appearance.

And then we come to that lovely verse that reads: "*Man looks at the outward appearance, but God looks at the heart.*" (1 Samuel 16:7). Notice the emphasis again on the *heart*, and not on the head.

Then Jesse called the next son. Again the Lord said "No". Thus all seven sons passed before Samuel one by one and the Lord said "No" to all of them. Samuel was surprised and confused. He asked Jesse, "Are these all the sons you have?" Jesse said, "No, there is one more – the youngest. But he is not even an adult. He is a teenager. So we didn't bother to call him. He is not smart like his seven older brothers. He spends his days strumming his harp and singing songs to God! So we appointed him to look after our sheep. But if you want, we'll call him."

Young David was called. He didn't even know what was happening. But God had been watching him and had seen his devotion and love for the Lord. As soon as he came, the Lord told Samuel, "*This is the one.*" And Samuel anointed him, and the Spirit of the Lord came mightily upon that young teenage boy.

God searched all over Israel for someone who loved Him and found one young boy. God is searching all over India today for *young boys and girls* (for in the new covenant, the Spirit is to be poured out on *both sexes*) whom He can anoint and use. There may be many people like the older seven sons of Jesse who have more prominence than you. Don't worry about that. God does not assess as man assesses. Do your job faithfully – even if it be looking after sheep. The Lord may be having His eye on you. Be faithful and He will call you one day and anoint you like He anointed David. The Lord picks up young people in their teenage years and trains them to serve Him. He trains them over a long period of time and then leads them into a ministry.

As soon as the Spirit of the Lord came upon David, the Spirit departed from Saul (16:13, 14).

Victory in Private and in Public

When David sees Goliath threatening Israel, notice his intense concern for the glory of God's name and the honour of God's people: "*Who is*

this uncircumcised Philistine that he should taunt the armies of the living God?" (17:26). While the Israelites were all as unbelieving as their forefathers who had wandered for 40 years in the wilderness, David knew what God had done to the Canaanite giants through Joshua and Caleb. And so he offered to go and fight Goliath.

When Saul laughed at David saying he was just a youth (David was probably about 17 years old now), David told Saul about some incidents in his private life, which he had never told anyone about before – not even his parents. He told Saul, “*When I was tending my father's flock, sometimes a lion or a bear would come and take a lamb from the flock. I would go after the wild animal, rescue the lamb from its mouth and kill the wild animal. I have killed both the lion and the bear.*” (17:34–36). David had known what Samson did when the Spirit came upon him. So after Samuel had anointed him, David felt that God would help him too just like God helped Samson. And God did.

How many shepherds in Israel would go after a lion just to save the life of a wee, tiny lamb? When God saw this care that David had for the littlest lamb in his flock, He decided that David was fit to shepherd Israel. When Satan gets hold of a weak brother, it is the shepherd’s duty to go after Satan in spiritual warfare and to rescue that brother from Satan’s grip. That’s the type of shepherd God is looking for today.

This story also teaches us that we have to slay the enemies in our private life first, before we can face Goliath publicly. If you have not overcome the lion and the bear in your private life, don’t imagine that God will call you to face Goliath in public. Many would like to have a public ministry that demolishes Satan’s fortresses. But they must start with destroying Satan’s fortresses in their own mind first. They must show a concern for God’s name and for the little lambs in private first.

Saul then told David to at least put on his (Saul’s) armour. That would offer some protection against Goliath. Was David to trust in Saul’s armour or in God? Finally David took it all off and went forth trusting in God alone. He told Goliath, “*You have come to me with sword, spear, and javelin. But I come to you in the name of the Lord*” (verse 45). Thus he killed Goliath with a single stone and used Goliath’s own sword to chop off his head.

This is how we are to go against Satan today. And God uses Satan’s own weapons (Goliath’s own sword) to destroy him. “*Through death, He destroyed him who had the power of death*” (Hebrews 2:14). Once Goliath was killed, the other Philistines ran away (1 Samuel 17:51). This teaches us that once we kill the giant sin in our life (“*the sin that so easily entangles us*” – Hebrews 12:1), we will find that many other sins in our lives are conquered too.

In *Chapter 18*, we read of the lovely attitude that Jonathan, Saul's son, had towards David. Jonathan was undoubtedly older than David and also the heir to the throne. So he should have hated David for being so popular in Israel now and thus being a threat to him. But instead, we see a pure love and respect in his heart for David. This indicates that Jonathan was one who was more concerned for the glory of God and the good of Israel than his own personal advancement. Therefore he did not have any of the jealousy that plagued his father Saul. His heart was closely knit to David. He gave David his *royal robe*, his *sword*, and his *bow*, thereby saying, "Here, David. By giving you these, I am indicating that *you are the rightful heir to the throne* (the robe) and *I will never fight against you* (sword and bow). I submit myself to you" (18:4).

What a fine young man Jonathan was. In *Chapter 14*, we read of his faith in God by which he overcame the Philistines. And here we see his total freedom from jealousy and his discernment to recognise whom God had anointed.

It is wonderful when an older brother can recognise the anointing of God upon a *younger* brother, and allow the younger brother to take the lead over him in the ministry. We see a beautiful example of that in Barnabas. In *Acts 13:2*, we read of God calling '**Barnabas** and **Saul**' for His work. Barnabas was both senior and older to Saul, and so it was only natural that his name came first. But very soon, this became '**Paul** and **Barnabas**' (*verse 42*). How? Barnabas graciously withdrew into the background when he saw *a greater anointing* on his younger brother Paul. What a powerful force the church of Jesus Christ would have been on earth, if it had more people like Jonathan and Barnabas in it, who did not seek their own, had no jealousy whatever, but instead, sought the glory of God alone, and were quick to support younger brothers who had a mightier anointing.

David prospered in whatever he did, because God was with him (18:5, 14). God's presence with this young 17-year-old boy enabled him also "*to behave more wisely*" than the other much-older people in Saul's army and palace (18:30). What tremendous blessing comes upon our life and upon others when "*God is with us*."

David's Trials

David had to flee for his life because Saul now tried to kill him. But no-one can kill one for whom God has made a plan, before that plan is fully fulfilled. In *Chapter 22:1, 2*, we read of a few in Israel who recognised that the anointing had departed from Saul and was now upon David. They now gathered together with David and moved with him constantly from cave to cave! Like those men, we too must recognise where God is moving *today* – and not where He moved *yesterday*. We must stand with those upon whom the anointing of God rests *today*.

David lived in daily dependence on the Lord for guidance. He would ask the Lord before going to fight the Philistines and if the Lord told him to go, he would go even against the advice of his own men (*Chapter 23:1–5*). This is how he became a man after God's own heart: *He listened to God more than to his friends.*

After David had delivered the people of Keilah from the oppression of the Philistines, Saul heard that David was in Keilah, he went there, certain that he would catch David at last, because Keilah was a city that was enclosed with double gates and bars. Humanly speaking, David could now have reasoned that the people of Keilah would be so grateful to him that they would *never* betray him into the hands of Saul. But he still decided to seek God about a simple matter like this. And God told him that the people of Keilah *would* betray him. So he listened to God and left Keilah and thus saved himself and his men (23:6–13). “*God did not deliver him into Saul's hand*” (23:14). This was the secret of David's early life – like Samuel, he listened to God daily.

We see David's noble attitude in *Chapter 24:4, 5*, in sparing Saul's life when he had Saul at his mercy. In fact David's conscience convicted him for cutting off just a small piece of Saul's robe, which he had done just to show Saul that he could have killed him if he wanted to. Even though Saul was moved to tears on hearing this and went home then, after a while he started hunting for David again (26:2). Jealousy, anger and hatred have a way of coming back again and again like the waves on a beach, if they are not dealt with thoroughly.

In *Chapter 30*, we see a few interesting things. David found himself in a difficult situation. When he and his men had gone to battle, the Amalekites had come and destroyed the city where the families of his people were staying and taken their families captive. The situation was so bad that all the men began to weep and also to blame David for their problems. They wanted to stone him to death (*verse 6*). And then we read these lovely words: “*But David encouraged himself (and strengthened himself) in the Lord*” (*verse 6*). What an example for us to follow, when even our friends turn against us. David again sought the Lord and the Lord told him to pursue after the Amalekites and assured him that he would recover everything (*verse 8*).

But David did not know in which direction to go to find these Amalekites. It is wonderful to see how God led him to them. It was through a simple act of kindness to a dying stranger. David and his men saw an Egyptian lying in the desert in a coma, half-dead. They cared for him and gave him something to eat and drink. When he revived, they discovered that he had been forsaken by the Amalekites in the desert, because he was sick (30:11–13). He was the one who then led David to the Amalekites. This teaches us how God rewards us when we are kind to strangers.

Thus David found and defeated the Amalekites. Then it is written *thrice*, that “*David recovered all*” that had been stolen by the Amalekites

(verses 18–20) – a beautiful picture of Jesus recovering all that Satan had stolen from us!

When the battle was over and David returned to the camp, there were 200 of his men there who had been too exhausted to follow David into battle, and who had stayed behind to look after David's goods. Some of David's worthless men then said that the spoils of the battle should not be shared with these men who did not fight. But we see the largeness of David's heart there. He said that those who stayed at home to look after the baggage should get an equal share of the spoils of war, as those who went out to battle and fought. And this became a law in Israel from that day onwards.

In *Chapter 31*, we read of how Saul committed suicide. God knows how to deal with those who persecute his children – in His own way and in His own time. David never had to lay a hand on Saul. He allowed God to deal with him. When Alexander the coppersmith troubled the apostle Paul, 1000 years later, Paul's attitude was the same: "*The Lord will repay him*" (*2 Timothy 4:14*). We can rest assured that one day God will make every man reap what he has sown and that God will avenge every one of His servants who were persecuted by others. For revenge belongs to the Lord and He has promised to repay one day (*Romans 12:19*). Until then, our duty is to do good to our enemies, like David did to Saul.

It was through all those difficulties and trials that David faced (over a period of about 13 years), that he finally became a man of God and a successful king. We read these words in *Psalm 66:10–12*: "*You have tested me O God. You have refined me as silver is refined. You allowed me to be trapped in nets. You allowed heavy, oppressive burdens to be laid on my back. You allowed men to ride over my head. You took me through the burning fire and then through icy-cold water. But finally, You brought me out into a place of spiritual abundance and anointing, where my cup is now overflowing with blessing to multitudes of people. Praise the Lord*" (*Psalms 66:10–13* - free paraphrase). It is not known who wrote this psalm. But these words were true of David's experience.

Saul, on the other hand, grew up in a rich home, and went straight from that life of comfort to become a king. He never faced any trials or difficulties. So he never knew God and he was a failure as a king.

Solomon, who came after David, also never faced any trials or difficulties. He grew up in ease and comfort as a prince in the royal palace. He also became a failure as a king.

These examples teach us that it is only through trials and difficulties that we can know God and be effective and successful in our ministry.

This was what made Paul such a successful apostle too (Read *2 Corinthians 1:4–11; 11:23–33*). And this is why many preachers today, who have become rich by preaching the gospel, and who live in comfort, are neither spiritual themselves, nor godly examples to their flock.

God may have called you to be His servant. But don't imagine that you are ready to serve Him, just because you were called. If you don't go through long periods of trial faithfully, you cannot be a spiritual leader of God's people. You will only end up like Saul and Solomon, and destroy yourself finally. So God will have to first take you through long periods of trial and difficulties. He will allow others to misunderstand you and to be jealous of you. He will allow them to suppress you and to oppress you. If you humble yourself (like David did) and trust God, in all these circumstances, God will bring you forth one day, into a place of abundance and blessing.

He who has ears to hear, let him hear.

ISRAEL – PROPHETS & KINGS

Prophets	Period (B.C.)	Israel's Kings	Period (B.C.)	Judah's Kings	Period (B.C.)
Samuel (1 Samuel 3 to 25)	1075–1017	Saul	1050–1010		
Gad (1 Samuel 22:5)	1020	David	1010–970		
Heman (1 Chronicles 25:5)	1000 (Musician/ seer)				
Jeduthun (2 Chronicles 35:15)	1000 (Musician/ seer)				
Zadok (2 Samuel 15:27)	990 (Priest/ seer)				
Nathan (2 Samuel 12:1)	990				
Ahijah (2 Chronicles 9:29)	940–920	Solomon	970–931		
Shemaiah (2 Chronicles 11:2)	920–910	Jeroboam	931–910	Rehoboam	931–913
Iddo (2 Chronicles 9:29)	920–910	Nadab	910–909	Abijah	913–912
Jehu (1 Kings 16:7)	910–887	Baasha	909–886	Asa	912–870
Azariah (2 Chronicles 15:1)	910–887				
Hanani (2 Chronicles 16:7)	910–887	Elah	886–885		
Elijah (1 Kings 17 – 2 Kings 2)	875–850	Zimri	885		
Micaiah (1 Kings 22:8)	875–850	Omri	885–874		
Jahaziel (2 Chronicles 20:14)	875–850	Ahab	874–853	Jehoshaphat	873–848
Elisha (2 Kings 2 to 13)	850–800	Ahaziah	853–852	Jehoram	853–841
		Jehoram	852–841	Ahaziah	841
Zechariah (2 Chronicles 26:5)	840–830	Jehu	841–814	Athariah (Queen)	841–835
Joel	820 (?)	Jehoahaz	814–798	Joash	835–796
Jonah	765–750	Jehoash	798–782	Amaziah	796–767
Amos	767–750	Jeroboam-II	793–753	Uzziah (Azariah)	790–739

Hosea	760–715	Zechariah	753
Oded (<i>2 Chronicles 28:9</i>)	748–730	Shallum	752
Isaiah	745–695	Menahem	752–742
		Pekahiah	742–740
		Pekah	752–732
Micah	735–702	Hoshea	732–722
		Ahaz	732–715
Huldah (<i>Prophetess</i>)	639–608 (<i>2 Chronicles 34:22</i>)	Hezekiah	715–686
Nahum	635–610	Manasseh	697–642
Zephaniah	628–603	Amon	642–639
Jeremiah	627–575	Josiah	639–609
Habakkuk	615–597		
Daniel (in Babylon)	605–534	Jehoahaz	609
Ezekiel (in Babylon)	597–560	Jehoiakim	609–597
Obadiah	586	Jehoiachin	597
		Zedekiah	597–586
Haggai	520–516	Zerubbabel	538–458
Zechariah	520–508		
Ezra	458–	Nehemiah	445–
Malachi	440–410		(432 to 420 in Babylon)

Note: Dates are approximate.
 Prophets between lines were contemporaries

2 SAMUEL

THE REIGN OF DAVID

In this book, we read about the reign of David – how he was made king, how he won a number of victories, how he fell into sin, and how he had problems in his family until the end of his life.

David's Attitude to Saul

Chapter 1: Here we read about the death of Saul. Saul had hated David so much that he had chased him all over Israel, for more than ten years, trying to kill him. Now at last he was dead. If you were in David's place, what would your reaction have been to such news? Notice David's reaction.

We know that Saul had committed suicide (*1 Samuel 31*). But an Amalekite man came to David, and told him a lie, seeking to earn David's favour. He told David that he had killed Saul, at Saul's request and gave Saul's crown and bracelet to David. He expected David to be delighted and to reward him for this action. But instead, David tore his own clothes and wept and fasted the whole day in mourning for Saul (*1:1–11*). Then David asked this man how he was not afraid to kill the Lord's anointed? He then got one of his young men to kill the Amalekite for daring to kill Saul. That man paid quite a price for the lie he told.

But see David's attitude there. This was one of the things that made David a man after God's own heart. We know that Jesus said, "*Love your enemies. Bless them that curse you, do good to them that hurt you and harm you, pray for them that persecute you*" (*Matthew 5:44*). David did that. He had a new covenant attitude in old covenant times. David did not hate Saul. Even though Saul had lost the anointing, David always said, "I will not touch him."

David then wrote a lamentation for Saul and Jonathan and spoke wonderful words of praise about them in all sincerity from his heart. Here is a lesson for us to learn how a man of God should behave towards

a person who is evil towards him. David said “Your beauty, O Israel, is slain on your high places.... How have the mighty fallen!” (1:19, 25, 27). We can understand his praising Jonathan, because he was a close friend of David’s. But he also praised Saul calling him a mighty man who had won many victories. He appreciated the good he saw in Saul and left it at that. He left Saul’s judgement to God and refused to judge him himself. There we see David as a man after God’s own heart. It was such a man whom God picked up and placed on the throne of Israel.

Waiting For God’s Time

Chapter 2:1: “David inquired of the Lord...”. As we saw earlier in *1 Samuel 23:2–4* and *30:8*, David’s constant habit was to seek the Lord’s will about everything. In *2 Samuel 5:17–25*, we read of two battles against the Philistines in which David sought the will of God. The second time, the Lord told him to change his strategy and to attack them from the rear. Each time the Lord changed the strategy. David was a man of war, but he always got his strategy from the Lord and that was why he always won. When there was a famine in the land, he asked the Lord why there was a famine (*2 Samuel 21:1*). There were, however, some matters on which he did not seek the Lord’s will. Three examples of that are:

1. when he got married to six wives (*2 Samuel 3*);
2. when he called Bathsheba to his palace (*2 Samuel 11*); and
3. when he took a census of Israel (*2 Samuel 24*).

And for all these failures, he paid a very heavy price. But whenever he waited on the Lord for guidance, he never went astray. This is a lesson and a warning for all of us.

He was a man after God’s own heart, but he failed badly too. The description of his failures also encourages us because we learn there that God can use people who have failed. The failures of God’s servants described in the Bible encourage us much more than the description of their successes – because we have all failed the Lord on numerous occasions too. We all blunder and fail and do foolish things, especially when we are young – because when we are young, we are full of zeal but have very little wisdom. We do and say so many things in a very unwise way in our youth. But God is merciful. He picks up people like us who have failed, and still makes us men and women after His own heart.

The men of Judah came and anointed David king over the house of Judah first. Later on he was anointed king over all Israel (5:3–5). He was 30 years old when he became king over Judah. And he had to wait for another 7½ years, before he ruled over all Israel. So he had to wait for more than 20 years in all, before God fulfilled His promise to him. His waiting period was almost as long as Abraham’s! But David waited patiently. We are called to follow the examples of such men who *through*

faith and patience inherited God's promises. David never grabbed the throne for himself. He waited for God to give it to him in His own time. If only he had adopted the same attitude of not grabbing when it came to Bathsheba, how different his story would have been.

If you want to be a man after God's own heart, learn not to *grab*. Jacob was a grabber, and as long as he was a grabber he could not become Israel.

Children are born into the world with their fists closed. If you put your finger into a baby's hand, he will grab your finger immediately. As he grows up, he learns to grab toys and many other things. That is man's nature – grabbing things for himself. We spend all our lives grabbing things for ourselves. We grab for position, honour and money and many other things. Jesus was different. He never grabbed anything for Himself. His fists were not closed. His palms were always open towards all people. Finally He opened His palms to be crucified on Calvary too. That is the example for all of us to follow. Yield. Give up your rights. Give to others, and God will give back to you in abundance. God Himself will give you a ministry, a position and everything else you need – if only you can wait for His time. It is far better to get things from God than to grab them ourselves. Jacob did not have to grab the birthright, by deceiving his father. He could have waited for God to give it to him – like David did. And God would have given it to him. We express our lack of faith in God, every time we grab something.

Suppose you are attracted to a young man or woman, whom you want to get married to; you could begin to think like this: "*If I don't grab her/him quickly, somebody else will get her/him.*" That is unbelief. If you trust in God, you won't be impatient and grab. Instead, you will say, "*Lord, what You have reserved for me, I will definitely get. No-one can marry a person whom you have reserved for me.*" The same principle applies to any ministry that God may have planned for you. No-one else can grab that. God will lead you into that ministry, if you wait on Him.

Learn to trust God and never complain against people. If God makes you wait for 20 years, wait. You will become a much better leader at the end of that time. As we saw, Saul and Solomon never learnt to wait for anything. They were born into comfort and lived without any trials and pressures. I feel sorry for anyone whose life is so comfortable and easy, that he has no trials or pressures. It's the one who has faced rejection from men, to whom God gives a ministry.

We see in David's case too, that once he became king and his life became comfortable and easy, he began to make mistakes one after the other. We read in *Chapter 3:2–5*, that six sons were born to him – but through *six different wives!!*

The man after God's own heart also started going astray once he became a king. He sought God's will about many things. But he did not

ask the Lord whether he should marry a second time, a third time and a sixth time! Isaac had only *one* wife, and Moses had only *one* wife. And as far as we know, Joshua had only one wife too. Why then did David have so many wives? Because he decided to be like all the other kings in the world. And he suffered tremendously as a result. What a warning this is for us not to follow the spirit in the world.

But we must not forget that David lived under the *old* covenant, when people's hearts were hard, because they did not have the Holy Spirit. So Moses permitted them even to divorce their wives (as Jesus said in *Matthew 19:8*). So we cannot judge them. God's standards are different now for us who have received the Holy Spirit. We are living under the *new* covenant today. But many Christians who fall into adultery today, still excuse themselves, saying, "Well, David also fell." But David lived under the *old* covenant. He did not have the Holy Spirit dwelling *within* him. The Spirit of the Lord rested only *upon* him. But we can have the Holy Spirit dwelling *within* us. Those old covenant saints could have the Holy Spirit only for their ministry. But we have the Holy Spirit dwelling *within*, to change our character. So we cannot excuse our sins by equating ourselves with David or Samson.

Vengeance Belongs to God

In *Chapter 4:8*, we read of two men who killed Ish-bosheth (Saul's son) and brought his head to David hoping that David would reward them for it. But David was so angry with them that he commanded that they be killed immediately. David believed that vengeance belonged to God, and so he would never take vengeance himself or permit anyone else to take it.

This is an important principle that we must remember at all times. *Romans 12:19* is very clear about this. God does *not* need our help to administer justice or to take vengeance. What would you do if somebody fell down at your feet to worship you? You would do what Peter did – lift him up and say, "Don't worship me, worship belongs to God." Just as much as worship belongs to God, vengeance also belongs to God. So, if we try to take revenge on someone, that's not any different from accepting worship from people. We have no more right to take revenge than to receive worship. Whatever harm anyone may have done to us, we must leave it to God to deal with him in His own way and in His own time. We must not even desire anything evil for that person. When we serve the Lord, we will come across other believers who speak evil of us or try to destroy our ministry. I have discovered that we cannot serve the Lord effectively, without having many people speaking evil of us, spreading false stories about us, accusing us of teaching false doctrine, etc. We may be tempted to take revenge on them. But we must resist that temptation firmly, and leave them in

God's hands. The Bible says that there is only one Judge who has the right to destroy (*James 4:12*). So we must leave their fate in the hands of that one Judge.

If the Lord has anointed you, no-one can destroy your ministry, because it has come from heaven. Many people accused Jesus and Paul of being false teachers. Jesus was even accused of casting out demons by the power of the prince of devils. But Jesus never wasted His time answering them. *The sincere were not led astray by such false accusations either. Only the insincere went astray.*

We read in *James 2:6* that rich believers were oppressing poor believers in those days and *personally* dragging them to court. This is unbelievable. But it is happening today too! One has to be both *rich and wicked* to drag another believer to court. It is amazing how blind believers can be. Paul says in *1 Corinthians 6* that the same thing was happening in Corinth. Such rich believers have not understood that there is only one Judge Who has the right to judge and take revenge. They are sitting on God's throne. So Paul warned them that those who do such things *will never enter God's kingdom* (*1 Corinthians 6:9 read in the context of the first 8 verses*). If someone has done wrong to you, hasn't God seen that? Isn't He able to deal with that person? If you believe that and you believe in an Almighty God, then leave it to God to deal with him.

Man's Way and God's Way

Chapter 6: David had a great desire to bring the ark of God to Jerusalem. The desire was a good one. But he didn't do it the way God had commanded to do it in His Law. The result was calamity – one of David's faithful men died. Once, when the Philistines had captured the ark, God had judged them with sickness and they decided to return the ark back to Israel. So they sent the ark back on a bullock cart. David had heard of that incident. He knew that the law of Moses had said very clearly that the ark should be carried only by the Kohathites, the sons of Levi. But David thought that method was all right for short distances. But since this was a long trip, he decided that the Philistine method was better and more sensible. So he put the ark on a bullock cart. The oxen stumbled on the rough roads and the ark began to shake. Uzzah reached out his hand to hold the ark so that it would not fall. God struck him down immediately for his irreverence and he died.

Uzzah did what he did, with a good motive. But he still violated God's law. Even if our motive is good, if we go against God's Word, we will still suffer. To do a *right* thing with a *bad* motive is unacceptable to God. But it is equally unacceptable to Him if we do a *wrong* thing with a *good* motive. *The end can never justify the means.* Here we see that Uzzah's motive was good – to prevent the ark from falling. But Uzzah also knew that the Law

of Moses had said that no-one should touch the ark. Even the Kohathites who carried the ark were not allowed to touch the ark itself. They had to cover the ark with the veil of the tabernacle before carrying it, so that they did not actually touch the ark (*Number 4:15*). God had clearly stated that the punishment for anyone touching the ark would be death.

We can face this question, when we decide to do evangelism. How shall we do it – God's way or man's way? Shall we imitate the methods of multinational companies when we do God's work?

Many Christians say today that they need money in order to do evangelism. Is your dependence on money or on the Holy Spirit? What you should say is, “We need the *Holy Spirit's power* to do evangelism.” If you have the Holy Spirit's power, whether you have money or not, God's work will be done. Only worldly corporations and organisations need money in order to survive. When churches also come to the place where they say, “Only if we have money we can go on”, we have to say that they too have descended to the level of these worldly organisations. In the *Acts of the Apostles* there is no mention of money at all in relation to evangelism or God's work. Occasionally, they would collect money for the poor believers, but never to pay the apostles! They never prayed to God for more and more money, as so many people do today. They prayed for the power of the Holy Spirit. The methods of the world (the bullock carts) have replaced God's methods today. That's why there is spiritual death. We need to understand what God is trying to say to us here.

Later on, David brought the ark to Jerusalem, the proper way – on the shoulders of the Levites. This time he was so full of joy that he danced before the Lord with all his might (6:14). That was one of the ways in which they expressed their praise to God in those days. They not only used musical instruments and clapped their hands and shouted, they also danced. But as David was coming to the city, his wife Michal (the daughter of Saul) saw him dancing and was very upset (*verse 16*). She despised him in her heart. She despised an anointed servant of God who was praising God in a way that she did not appreciate. There may be people who are praising God today in a way that you don't appreciate. You don't have to imitate them. But you don't have to despise them either. Michal did not have to start dancing like David. But she was not to despise her husband. We should never imagine that the way *we* praise God is the *only* right way.

Many Christian groups feel that the particular way in which *they* praise God on Sunday mornings is the only right way to do it. And then they require everyone to do it their way. In some Christian groups, everyone sits quietly on Sunday mornings as if it were a funeral service. That does not appeal to me, because a Sunday-morning service must not be like a

funeral service. It must be a time of rejoicing, because we are celebrating the fact that the cross is empty, that Jesus conquered the grave and is risen from the dead. But looking at these folk, we would think that Jesus was still dead! Then there are other Christians who go to the opposite extreme. They feel that the Holy Spirit is present in a meeting only when the noise reaches a certain decibel-level – and so they keep raising their voice and working up their emotions, to “bring the Holy Spirit into their midst”. That is a deception. The Holy Spirit doesn’t come to a meeting when the volume is raised on the amplifier. He is with those who have a clear conscience.

I don’t want to despise either of these groups. But I don’t want to imitate either of them. I am free to praise the Lord in my own way. Don’t despise the way another person praises the Lord, and don’t imagine the way you praise Him is the only right way. Give others freedom. God looks at the heart, and not at the outward expression.

Chapter 6:20: “David returned to bless his household.” What a beautiful thing to do – to bless one’s household – especially when coming home exhausted after having danced on the street for many miles! I wish every husband would come home from a tired day’s work to bless their household, instead of coming home in a bad mood and making demands on his wife. David had a nagging wife in Michal but that did not quench his joy in the Lord! As soon as he entered through the door, she started nagging him, yelling at him and criticising him for dancing like the ordinary people instead of behaving with the dignity of a king. What did David reply? He said he would not be bothered by his wife’s opinion, but would continue dancing before the Lord for the rest of his life (*verse 21*). The Lord judged Michal for despising her husband and she was barren all her life.

Chapter 7: David now wanted to build a temple for the Lord. Nobody told him to do it. But he thought in his heart, “*I dwell in a beautiful house, but the ark of God dwells within a tent*” (*verse 2*). I wish more believers would think like that: “*Lord, what a comfortable house I have built for myself. How much money and time I have spent building my own house. How little I have sacrificed for Your work! How little I am concerned about Your work!*” God’s work requires workers who will sacrifice themselves, their ambitions, their time and their money. Many believers work overtime in their factories and make profit for their companies. Can’t we as God’s servants do a little overtime work for Him – without any pay and without any complaining?

David was a man after God’s own heart, and he was concerned about God’s house. May all of us have such a heart as his, till the end of our days – always concerned about God’s house more than our own house. God will take care of your house if you take care of His. Many years ago I said to the Lord, “Lord, I have a house (family) and You have a house (family). Give me grace to look after Your house (family), and You look

after mine." I made that little exchange with the Lord, and I want to say that God has been more faithful in looking after my house than I have been in looking after His.

But God did not permit David to build His house. The reason was that David had been a man of war and only *a man of peace could build God's house* (*1 Chronicles 28:3*).

Notice this principle: *A man of war cannot build God's house*. We have to go beyond the war and enter into God's rest. War is necessary to begin with; but we must enter into rest.

David cleared the ground for Solomon by defeating all the enemies of Israel. He also collected all the gold and silver required for the temple. But Solomon built it. Are we willing to do that? Can we do all the hard work and then let someone else get the honour for doing the work? Or do we want the honour ourselves? *A man after God's own heart will do all the work in the background to make it easier for others and then let them get the honour*.

2 Samuel 8:15: This verse reads in the Living Bible thus: "*David was fair to all the people*". This is a very important requirement in a leader – fairness in administering justice and total impartiality.

In *Chapter 9*, we see his kindness to Mephibosheth, Jonathan's son, who was a cripple. Mephibosheth considered himself to be like "*a dead dog*" who deserved nothing (*verse 8*). But David ordered that Mephibosheth should eat at his table regularly. This is a picture of the grace of God, where Christ lifts us, dead dogs, to sit with Him at His table.

David's Great Fall

In *Chapter 11* we see the story of David's great fall. We can all learn a lesson there from how he fell. "*It happened in the spring at the time when kings go out to battle....*" Kings did not go to battle in the winter when it was cold, but did so in springtime. In every battle, David was always the leader, leading the armies of Israel to fight their enemies. But this time David felt he should relax. It is when we stop fighting and relax in the battle that we start sinning. It's when we're not in the place where God wants us to be, that we fall into sin. David's place was on the battlefield. Instead he was sleeping in the palace. If he had been on the battlefield that day, he might never have fallen thus.

It's when things are going well with us and we stop fighting the Lord's battles and start sending our juniors to do the Lord's work that we have problems. Many Christian leaders are sitting like kings in their palaces and making their juniors do all the hard work in the fields.

I always want to be a *junior* brother in the Lord's church, till the end of my life. I want to be out in the field, working and fighting for the Lord

even if I am 90 years old. I want to be on the battlefield till the end of my life. I hope you want to be there too. There is no spiritual danger on the battlefield. Such dangers are in the palace. David was perfectly safe as long as he was on the battlefield. He was in danger only in the palace.

Do we fall into sin when we are facing trial and pressure and sickness and financial difficulties? No. It is when things became easy for us and we have plenty of money, when our businesses are prospering, and nobody is sick at home – that is when we sin. That's the time you must be more alert.

David stayed at home at Jerusalem (11:1). He was not like Moses who prayed while Joshua was fighting. If David had been praying for Joab who was out on the battlefield fighting, then he would have been safe. But he was sleeping. "*In the evening David rose from his bed*" (11:2). I don't know whether he was sleeping the whole morning and woke up in the evening. He got up from his bed, and instead of praying first, he walked on the roof of his palace. That's when he saw this pretty woman, Bathsheba, and was tempted. If he had nipped the temptation in the bud, right then, and stopped it at the first stage, he would never have reached the final stage.

When he looked and was tempted, he could have turned away saying, "*This is dangerous. Let me be careful*". He could have gone and spent some time in prayer for Joab. Then when he enquired and discovered that she was someone else's wife, he could have stopped himself at least then saying, "*O I can't possibly have her!*" If he had prayed for Bathsheba that God would make her a pure, holy wife for Uriah, that prayer itself would have prevented him from sinning. But in that moment, he forgot all about the God Who had made him a king. He was now a powerful monarch who could have anyone he wanted. And so he committed adultery with her.

Let us not criticise David. Have you admired the beauty of someone else's wife? Because you are not a powerful king, you may not have been able to grab her. So you only looked and lusted! There isn't really any difference between you and David!

When Bathsheba became pregnant, David was in a fix. He had to cover up his sin now. So he called her husband Uriah back from the battlefield and told him to go and stay at home with his wife that night. But Uriah was a man with such a sense of responsibility to his fellow-soldiers that he did not go to his house. He told David, "My colleagues are fighting in the battlefield. How then can I go home and sleep with my wife?" Uriah was a much better man than David at that time. Many junior workers on the field are often far better than their mission leaders. Now David didn't know what to do. So he began to scheme. Once you sin, you are tempted to commit many more sins in order to cover up your first sin. He should have gone to Uriah in all honesty and asked for his forgiveness. Instead of doing that, he tried to protect his reputation. So he sent Uriah back

into the battlefield and told General Joab to put him right in front where the battle was the thickest, so that Uriah would be killed.

What an evil thing David did! I thank God that Scripture is absolutely honest and does not cover up the failures of its greatest heroes. As you and I look into the corruption of our own flesh, we will discover that we are no better than David. We all have the same flesh and are capable of the same sin. May God preserve us.

God's Discipline

Chapter 12: Thank God that there was one brave prophet there, Nathan. It was a very dangerous thing in those days to confront a king and to tell him that he was a sinner. Even today, 99% of pastors would never dare to go to a church member who is rich, or a senior government official, and point out his sin to him. But Nathan was different. He came to David and told him a story: “*There were two men in a city. One was rich and had many flocks of sheep. The other was a poor man who had only one little lamb. When a visitor came to the rich man’s house, the rich man wanted to make a lamb curry for him; but he didn’t take any of his own many lambs. Instead he took that poor man’s lamb, and killed it to make the curry.*” David’s anger burned greatly when he heard that (12:5). It is easy to get angry at the sins of others. Then Nathan said, “**You** are the man. You had so many wives. Uriah had only one, and you took her.” David suddenly realised the truth.

What had David said earlier when he heard Nathan’s story? He was so angry that he said “*As the Lord lives, surely that man who has done this deserves to die*” (12:5). The Law did not say that a man should be killed for stealing another person’s lamb. But David was stricter than the Law when it came to the sin of another. This is how we are too. We don’t see the greater sins in our own life.

David had also said, “*He must make restitution four times*” (12:6). For taking that one lamb, the rich man must give four lambs back. That became the price David also had to pay for killing Uriah. Nathan told David, “*Therefore the sword will never depart from your house. I will raise up evil against you from your own household*” (verses 10, 11). Four of David’s own sons had to die – the baby born to Bathsheba, Amnon, Absalom and Adonijah. We reap what we sow and our judgement will be according to what we ourselves have spoken. Jesus said that we would be judged with the same judgement with which we judged others. So it is wisest to be merciful to others and not to judge them.

And here you see a man after God’s own heart coming into his own again. David said to Nathan, “*I have sinned against the Lord*” (12:13), and he wrote that wonderful psalm – Psalm 51. “*Lord, I have sinned*

against You. Please don't take Your Holy Spirit away from me" (*Psalms 51:4, 11*). He didn't try to cover up his sin like Saul. Saul had said, "*Please honour me. Don't let anybody know my sin*" (*1 Samuel 15:30*). But David didn't say that to Nathan. He wrote a Psalm and told everybody about it. That's the wonderful thing we see about David. He didn't pretend to be a spiritual person when he wasn't. When he sinned he admitted it.

What else can we learn from this incident? However great you may be before the Lord, when someone points out something wrong in your life, admit it. Don't ever become so proud and arrogant that no-one can come to you and tell you that you are wrong, or that you need to change in some area. David humbled himself publicly and wrote *Psalm 51*, acknowledging his sin to the whole world, and asking for God's mercy.

But God still struck Bathsheba's child and it died, despite David's repentance, confession, fasting and prayer. God deals with us in grace, forgiving us. But then He also deals with us in discipline.

Let me give you one example of that: Consider a man who has filled his mind with pornographic literature and movies for many years. He then repents and asks God to forgive him. God forgives him immediately. The blood of Christ cleanses him thoroughly. God justifies him and looks at him as though he had never sinned. Yet, the man will still be plagued with dirty, sexual images from his memory, for many, many years. Why doesn't God remove those dirty images from his *memory*, even though He has cleansed the man's *heart* fully? Because through the recurring dirty images, the man will learn to be careful not to look at dirty pictures again, lest he be plagued with dirty dreams for many more years. If the dirty images were all removed by God, as soon as a man is forgiven, he would be more easily tempted to look at dirty pictures again, knowing that the images could be erased easily. If, however, the man is faithful to resist those dirty thoughts, and to fill his mind with the Word of God regularly, then those dirty images will gradually sink to the bottom of his memory. They will never go away totally. But they would have sunk so low that they don't bother him in his dreams any more. Other pure thoughts would have come to the top of his memory and those will be what he dreams about now.

In *Chapter 13*, we read of Amnon "*falling in love*" with his half-sister Tamar and then forcibly molesting her. Once his lust had been satisfied, he hated her. It says that "*the hatred with which he hated her was greater than the love with which he loved her*" (*verse 15*). How did his "*great love*" for Tamar suddenly turn to hatred? Because what he called "*love*" was actually just "*lust*". Here is a lesson that all young people must learn. Many a young man claims to "*fall in love*" with some young girl. *What both of them don't realise is that in almost all cases, the young man's so-called "love" is actually only lust.* Girls especially must recognise this and beware, lest they be exploited by young men.

Human love always seeks its own gain.

Divine love is distinguished by the fact that it always seeks the good of the other.

David could not rebuke his son Amnon for this sin – because he himself had done the same thing to Bathsheba! This is how many fathers lose their spiritual authority over their children.

Absalom's Rebellion

Absalom then avenged his sister Tamar by killing Amnon. David finally began to reap in his own family what he had sown with Bathsheba and Uriah – adultery and murder. God is very exact in his judgements. Sooner or later, we begin to reap what we have sown.

In Chapter 15 we read about David's son Absalom starting a conspiracy because he wanted to be king. He would stand at the gates of the city every morning and ask those who came in what their problems were. Then he would tell them that they had a good case, but unfortunately King David had not appointed anyone to deal with such matters. And then he would tell them that if only he had been the ruler, he could have helped everyone so quickly. Thus he won the hearts of the people and stole them away from David.

We see that happening sometimes in Christian circles too – somebody steals the hearts of the people away from the leader because he wants to be the leader himself. Paul said to the elders in Ephesus, “*I know that after my departure some of you will draw away disciples after yourselves.*” (Acts 20:29, 30) Absalom did that, but it never went well with Absalom. And it never goes well with anyone who follows Absalom's ways today.

David had to leave his throne and flee for his life. But God brought something good out of that, for David wrote some psalms during this time when he was in the wilderness – *Psalms 55, 61 and 63*. These psalms would never have been in the Bible, if Absalom had not chased David out of Jerusalem. But they have now become a blessing to millions of people for 3000 years. So the trials that God takes us through are the means by which God gives us a ministry to others.

Consider *Psalm 55:22*: “*Cast your burden upon the Lord and He will sustain you. He will never allow the righteous to be shaken.*” David learnt to cast his burden on the Lord, while he was on the run, escaping for his life, and not when he was sitting comfortably in the palace.

Many people switched sides as soon as Absalom began to rule. David had a trusted counsellor called Ahithophel, whose words David had relied on as if it were the word of God itself (16:23). But as soon as Absalom came to the throne, Ahithophel switched sides. Ahithophel was Bathsheba's grandfather (compare 2 Samuel 23:34 with 11:3) and he was

waiting for an opportunity to avenge the evil that David had done to his grand-daughter. So he advised Absalom to commit adultery with David's wives and thus humiliate David (16:21, 22).

Then he began to advise Absalom how to kill David. But David had already asked God in a brief one-sentence prayer to make the advice of Ahithophel foolishness (15:31). It is amazing what a one-sentence prayer can do. God answered it – and Absalom rejected the advice given by Ahithophel and took the opposite advice given by someone else. Thus David escaped being killed. So don't ever stop praying one-sentence prayers! Ahithophel, however, was a proud man and he was so offended by this that he went out and committed suicide (17:23).

When David was running away from Absalom, a man called Shimei came out of his house and threw stones at David and cursed him repeatedly (16:5). Shimei was a relative of Saul and had nursed a grudge against David for a long time, because David had replaced Saul on the throne of Israel. Shimei couldn't do anything as long as David was on the throne. But now he shouted at David saying, “*Get out of here, you murderer and scoundrel. The Lord is paying you back for murdering King Saul and his family. You stole his throne, and now the Lord has given it to your son Absalom. At last you will taste some of your own medicine, you murderer.*” (verse 8 - Living). How little Shimei knew of the real truth. Even so is it with those who accuse the Lord's servants today of many things.

One of David's soldiers said, “*Let me go and chop off Shimei's head*” (16:9). But David said, “*No. If the Lord has told him (permitted him) to curse me, why should I fight against the Lord?*” (16:10). It is wonderful to see David's understanding of the absolute sovereignty of God. He was convinced that no-one could speak against him, without God having given him permission. What rest can come into our lives, if only we understand this truth.

When Joab was going to battle against Absalom, David told him, “*Deal gently for my sake with the young man*” (18:5). These are the very words that the Lord would have us hear from Him, when we have to discipline some young person. The battle was finally won by David's army.

In 18:19–32, we read of a young man named Ahimaaz who wanted to be the first one to give the news of this victory to David, so that he could get some honour from David. But Joab sent a Cushite instead to take the news. But Ahimaaz was persistent and finally Joab permitted him to go. He ran so fast that he outran the Cushite and reached David first. But David was most interested to know if Absalom was alive. Unfortunately, Ahimaaz did not know. So he had to step aside and wait for the Cushite to come and tell David the news. This is a picture of two types of preachers – one who is eager to go and preach, but not sent by

God; the other one sent by God Himself. Only the one sent by God will have the full message – *the full gospel* – even if he comes in later, and is not as humanly “gifted” as the first one. There are many prophets like Ahimaaz today, who were never sent by God, who are “prophesying” and deceiving Christians. As believers, we must judge every “prophecy” and not blindly swallow everything we see and hear.

When David heard that Absalom had died, he wept saying, “*O my son, my son Absalom. I wish I had died in your place*” (18:33). There we see the Spirit of Christ in David, for he wished that he had died in place of those who had rebelled against him. David was a man who had traces of the new-covenant spirit in him, for he did not hate even those who planned to kill him.

Absalom was killed and David was brought back to the throne. God had tested David when he was a young man, to see if he would grab the throne from Saul. And now when he was an old man, God tested him *again* to see if he would grab the throne from Absalom. In both cases, David waited for God to give him the throne. He never grabbed it himself. God will test us when we are young and He will test us when we are old – even after we have followed Him for 50 years. The first time, David had to be on the run for over 10 years. But the second time, he had to run for his life only for a few days. God determines how long each trial should be. And He will never allow us to be tested beyond our ability.

Last Days of David

In *Chapter 21*, we read of a famine in Israel that continued year after year. For the first two years, David assumed that this was just a natural calamity. But when it continued into the third year as well, David began to seek the Lord to find out the reason for this. When we go through financial difficulties that never seem to end, or when we find a lack of the blessing of God upon our lives continuously, it is good for us to seek God’s face and find out the reason for it. There will always be a reason. In this case, God told David that it was because Saul had killed the Gibeonites many years earlier. The Gibeonites were Canaanites whom God Himself had commanded Joshua to kill. But Joshua had been deceived by the Gibeonites, and had made a covenant with them that the Israelites would never kill any of them or their descendants. Saul violated this covenant. God takes it very seriously when we break our word – even to an enemy! Once the matter was set right, God blessed the land with crops again.

Chapter 22: This is a song of deliverance that is repeated word for word in *Psalm 18*. Here is a beautiful picture of our salvation in verses 17 to 20.

Chapter 23:2-4. David had been a great leader of Israel. Before he died, he wrote down a few words about the qualities that should be found in a spiritual leader of men. A leader should be anointed by the Holy Spirit and should have God's Word on his tongue always. He must lead men righteously and in the fear of God. His life must be like a shining light and his testimony must be like a cloudless morning.

In *Chapter 23:8-39*, we have a list of some of the mighty men of David and their exploits. David was a brave man himself and he gathered many other brave men around him. God needs fearless leaders in the church today too, who will fight against Satan and through whom "*the Lord can bring about great victories*" – if necessary, even single-handedly (*verses 10, 12*). The Lord needs men who "*will take their stand*" for Him boldly (*verse 12*). David had a large responsibility as ruler of Israel and he knew how to delegate responsibility to these brave men. He did not work alone.

In *Chapter 24*, we read of the second serious sin that David committed. He decided to count the number of people in Israel – either to find out over how many people he was king or to see how strong his army would be. His general Joab (who knew the Lord less than him) urged him not to do it (*verse 3*). But David was stubborn and went ahead and did it anyway. The Lord punished him for it and 70,000 people were killed in Israel through sickness (*verse 15*). God was telling David that his census was no use, because God could reduce the population in one day by 70,000 people!

David repented and decided to make an offering to the Lord in the place where God told him to go – the threshing-floor of Araunah, which was on Mount Moriah where Abraham had offered up Isaac to God. As soon as Araunah saw the king, he offered David all the bullocks for sacrifice and the wood free of charge. But David refused the offer and said he would pay for it, saying, "***I will never offer to the Lord that which costs me nothing***" (*24:24*). This is a good motto for us to have all through our lives.

Here is a verse that all of you should remember throughout your life. Never give to God that which has cost you nothing.

It was on this very site that God commanded that the temple should be built, a few years later (*2 Chronicles 3:1*). The place where both Abraham and David had offered "***that which cost them something***" was the place God chose to build His house.

It is the same today. God's true house – the church – is built by people who have that spirit of sacrifice. Christendom is full of people who seek their own, who give to God that which costs them *nothing*, or very little. But God is looking for those who will have this attitude every day of their earthly lives: "*I will never offer to God that which costs me nothing.*"

What has it cost you to serve the Lord?

1 KINGS

THE KINGS OF ISRAEL AND JUDAH

This book begins with David, the man after God's own heart, and ends with Ahab, the worst king ever to rule over Israel. Israel begins as a powerful nation and ends as a divided nation, and with many evil kings ruling over both kingdoms – especially over Israel.

As we have repeatedly seen, the condition of God's people depends greatly on the spirituality or the lack of it in their leaders. Whenever Israel had a godly leader, they moved forward in godly ways. When they had a carnal leader, they moved away from God into carnality. The great need among God's people has always been for godly leaders. Jesus looked out at the multitudes in His day and saw them as sheep without a shepherd. He told His disciples to pray that God would thrust forth shepherds into the midst of His people (*Matthew 9:36–38*). When God looks at the churches in India today, He sees the same need for godly leaders. The challenge that comes to us then is to satisfy the heart of God in our generation by being the type of men and women He is looking for.

In every generation God needs godly leaders. We cannot depend on the wisdom of the leaders of previous generations. David could not rule over Israel forever. He would die, and someone else would have to take over. What would become of Israel depended on the type of person that the next king would be.

God raises up a godly man to start a work in one generation. He becomes old and dies. Will the leaders in the next generation have only the founder's knowledge and his doctrines, but not his godliness and his knowledge of God? Then the people will certainly go astray. God needs many "David"s and "Deborah"s in our day.

David's Last Days

As we look at the closing days of David, we see some sad things in his life.

When David was dying, his son Adonijah exalted himself and said, "*I will be the next king*" (1:5). He was not like his father David who waited for God to make him king. Part of the reason was that David had never punished Adonijah even once in his entire life (*verse 6*). He had never used the rod on him and never even rebuked him when he did something wrong.

Can you imagine what will happen to a child who grows up like that – especially if he is a good-looking child? David was a very poor father. We can take a warning for ourselves from that. David was so busy on the battlefield that he had no time for his family. You too can be so taken up with your work or your ministry that you don't see how your children are growing up. It's a sad thing if a man loses his children to the Devil, because he is "*serving the Lord*". That is not the way to serve the Lord.

David was lying on his death-bed and Adonijah was taking advantage of the fact that his father was now helpless; and so he made plans to take over the kingdom. Nathan the prophet went to Bathsheba as soon as he heard of that and told her to remind David about his promise to make Solomon his successor. Nathan also went and told David about Adonijah's wicked plan (*verse 22*). Thus Nathan the prophet brought the mind of God into that situation. A church is so blessed when it has at least one genuine prophet, who can speak prophetically to it in a situation.

David told the priests to anoint Solomon as king, and Zadok did that promptly (*verses 32–34*).

Chapter 2: When David was dying, he charged Solomon with certain matters. But David's last words are very disappointing. God's Word is so honest when it tells us about the failures of His greatest servants.

David should have told Solomon how to be a godly leader and how to honour God. He should have warned Solomon to be careful with women, and not to make the mistake he himself made of having more than one wife, etc. Instead what does he tell him? He tells him to kill Joab who had been David's faithful and loyal general for so many years (2:5, 6). It is a pity that this was how David rewarded Joab. I think the reason for this was that David never really forgave Joab for killing his son Absalom, even though he mentions only Abner and Amasa here.

Then David tells Solomon to kill Shimei, because he had cursed David (2:8, 9). At the time when Shimei cursed David, David had magnanimously said that he didn't want Shimei killed, because it was God Who had allowed Shimei to curse him. And when David came back to Jerusalem, he had forgiven Shimei and promised not to harm him. But now he tells Solomon that the promise he made to Shimei was not binding on Solomon and so Solomon must make sure he is killed! David didn't want to kill

Joab and Shimei himself. But he got them killed through Solomon. He was like those who hire gangsters to kill their enemies.

And what are the next words in 2:10: "*Then David died.*"

So those words of revenge were the last words he spoke before he died! That is sad. David had started his life so well. He had refused to kill Saul again and again (despite the repeated urgings of his friends). But now in the closing moments of his life, he is so eager to kill two people whom he claimed to have forgiven. It is obvious from this, that David had forgiven Joab and Shimei only *externally*. He must have nursed that grudge against them constantly and allowed his mind to dwell frequently on the evil that Shimei and Joab had done to him. As long as his mind was strong, he could keep up that pretence of having forgiven them. But as he grew old and his mind began to weaken, what was in his heart came out: *He had never really forgiven them.* What a warning for us!

But David lived under the old covenant, when God forgave even those who had *not* forgiven others. God permitted many things under the old covenant, because people's hearts were hard (*Matthew 19:8*). They did not have the Holy Spirit within them. But under the new covenant, Jesus taught clearly and repeatedly that there would be no forgiveness for those who did not forgive others right from their *hearts* (*Matthew 6:14, 15; 18:35*). Jesus even taught that sins that God had once forgiven would be put back into our account if we did not forgive all others "*from our heart*" (*Matthew 18:22–35*).

It's quite possible that many people whom you think you have forgiven, you may not have really forgiven. The Bible speaks about the danger of having a root of bitterness (*Hebrews 12:15*). An unforgiving attitude can develop roots of bitterness very quickly. So go through the list of those who have harmed you and make sure that you have radically pulled out every root of bitterness against every one of them; otherwise you will destroy yourself. Pull out those roots now when your mind is strong, and not when you are on your deathbed. One day you may be senile and too weak to do anything about those roots.

Solomon's Initial Years

Chapter 2: Solomon began his reign by killing his step-brother Adonijah (*verses 19–27*), his first-cousin Joab (*verses 28–35*), and Shimei (*verses 36–46*). What a way to start one's reign! And to think that it was David, the man after God's own heart, who had suggested all this to Solomon, and thus started him off on the pathway of destruction! Such is the long-term result of un-cleansed bitterness, by which many are defiled. But Solomon still imagined that God would bless him in spite of all this (*verses 45*). How deceived can a person get!

Chapter 3: Once you start out on the wrong path, you go further and further away from God! The next thing that Solomon did was get married

to a heathen woman – Pharaoh’s daughter. If only David had spent his last days advising Solomon on marrying wisely, instead of teaching him how to take revenge, what a different turn things might have taken in Solomon’s life. What advice do you give your children? What are the things that are most important to you in life?

We read that “*Solomon ‘loved the Lord’, except that he sacrificed and burned incense on the high places*” (3:3). What a contradiction! Solomon finally destroyed himself because of such compromise. He lived a double-life – one in the temple and one in private. Unfortunately, that is also how many Christians live today. They make many loud expressions of love for the Lord; but in private, they live in unrighteousness and sin. Finally their little backslidings become big ones and destroy them.

Yet God was good to Solomon, for He wanted him to change. He appeared to Solomon one night and told him, “*Whatever you want I will give it to you*” (verse 5). And Solomon asked saying, “*Give me an understanding heart. Give me largeness of heart to take in all of God’s people. Give me a heart to judge Your people to discern between good and evil, because it’s so difficult to judge*” (verse 9).

The Lord was happy with what he asked and told him, “*Because you did not ask for long life or for riches or for the life of your enemies, I have given you a wise and discerning heart, so that there is no one like you nor shall anyone like you arise after you. I have also given you riches and honour and there will be no king like you*” (3:10–13).

The great need among Christian leaders today is for discernment, and only God can give it to us. Those who are leaders need discernment about the true state of the brothers and sisters in their church – especially when giving responsibility to any of them. If Solomon got it by asking God, why can’t we get it as well? Doesn’t God love us much more under the new covenant? Doesn’t He have a far greater concern about the church we are building than He had for Solomon ruling Israel? He certainly does. So, if we lack discernment, perhaps it is because, in our self-sufficiency, we have failed to ask Him for it.

Two Women and a Baby

Chapter 3:16–28: Here we have an example of Solomon’s wisdom. Two prostitutes stood before him for judgement one day. They were living in the same house and had delivered babies within a few days of each other. One night, one of them accidentally rolled over her child while sleeping, and killed it. When she realised what had happened, she immediately exchanged her baby with the living one. In the morning, when the other woman realised what had been done, she claimed her living child back.

An argument arose between them then, as to whom the living child belonged to. How was Solomon going to decide in a situation like this? God gave Solomon wisdom. Solomon suggested that the living child be divided into two, and one half given to each woman. The first woman whose child it really was, said, "No, please don't kill it. Give it to the other woman." But the second woman said, "No, kill it. You can have half and I can have half." Immediately everyone knew who the true mother was. Then Solomon said, "Give the child to the first woman." All Israel heard of that judgement and feared the king because they saw how God had given him wisdom.

Here is how we can apply Solomon's wisdom today: Suppose two brothers are working together in a church and they fall out with each other. One of them then splits it into two and pulls out with his group. Is he the true mother? Certainly not. The true mother would say, "No. Don't divide the church. You can have the whole church to yourself."

Don't ever split a church of *believers*. It is far better to leave the church intact, pull out yourself, go elsewhere and start an entirely new work, without causing a split in the first church. God will bless you. If God wants to give you that church to lead, because you are the true mother, He can even kill the other woman one day and give you the child. He killed Saul and gave the kingdom to David. He can do such things today too. But don't ever cut a living baby into two. Don't divide a church. Go and work somewhere else. Let God give you everything from His own hand. Don't ever grab or divide.

That's the principle I have followed, whenever I have disagreed with a church's leadership. I didn't try to split the church, to get some of them to follow me. I went elsewhere and said, "Lord, let me start from the beginning all over again. Give me another child. I won't fight for that one." And I can testify today that God has blessed me abundantly in my work, because of that attitude. So I would recommend that to you.

*In 4:29 (KJV), we read. "God gave Solomon **wisdom** and very great **discernment** and **breadth of mind, largeness of heart**, like the sand that is on the seashore". Remember Solomon was a very young man. So young people can ask God to give them all these four gifts mentioned here. Not only *wisdom, discernment* and *breadth of mind* but also "*largeness of heart, like the sand that is on the seashore*". This means (for us) a large heart that can take in *all of God's people who are like the sand on the seashore* (Genesis 22:17).*

Consider a brother who belongs to another denomination, who disagrees with us about water-baptism or about speaking in tongues. But God has accepted him. Our prayer should be, "Lord, give me largeness of heart to warmly receive him – even if he doesn't work with me or agree with me." *I want as many brothers and sisters as God has children!*

Consider a child of God who has a conviction on some matter that is different from ours. Can we accept that person? I remember once when a sister came to me for baptism and she was wearing some gold jewellery. Now, I have a conviction that gold should *not* be worn by believers. That is my understanding of *1 Timothy 2:9* and *1 Peter 3:3*. And this sister was wearing gold. Would I baptise her or not? The Lord asked me one question at that time: "Would you say that I have accepted her?" And I said, "Lord, as far as I can see, she is truly born again and so you *have* accepted her." Then the Lord said, "How can you reject one whom I have accepted?" So I baptised her – with her gold! She may get light on that matter later. But it is not my business to judge her. I want to accept all those whom God has accepted – even if their convictions are different from mine.

I remember once concerning some issue, the Lord asked me, "How long did *you* take to understand this matter?" I admitted that it had taken me some years. Then why couldn't I be patient with that person who was taking time to understand the issue?

We all need largeness of heart. When we are young, we tend to be zealous and narrow-minded, narrow-hearted, and we accept only those who agree with us on every issue. I am ashamed to say that I was like that when I was young. It was one of the many foolish attitudes I had. But as I grew older and knew the Lord better I discovered that I needed to have largeness of heart.

In 6:7, we read something beautiful about how the temple was built. The temple was built of stones that were cut and shaped far away – in the quarry where they were cut out from the hillside. So when the stones were brought to the building site, they had already been perfectly shaped on all six sides, so that there was no sound of chipping at the temple-site itself. This is how the church must be built too. We must judge ourselves in secret in our private life so that when we come together, there is no sound of conflict or strife!

Solomon's Backsliding

Solomon took seven years to build the Lord's temple (6:38), and thirteen years to build his own house (7:1). So we know which he valued more!! That is a fairly good description of many people who are doing Christian work today. They do "Christian" work all right. But their primary interest is in their own house and the comfort of their own family. God's work and God's house are secondary. Preaching the gospel has made them rich.

Solomon's backsliding was gradual – as all backsliding is. He started off his rule by killing people. He could have easily disagreed with his father David, and refused to kill Shimei and Joab. He could have forgiven Adonijah and not killed him. Once he had started sliding down, the

gradient became steeper. Next, he married Pharaoh's daughter – obviously for her wealth. Then he spent thirteen years building his own house. All this, in spite of the fact that God had given him such wisdom! Many a time, I have seen in Christian workers, a drift towards the world right from the beginning of their lives. They start seeking their own right from the time they begin their ministry. When you see them years later, they have become experts in seeking their own.

But God still loved His people, in spite of the backsliding of their king. So He filled the temple with His glory when it was completed (8:10, 11). It was just like the day when Moses had completed the tabernacle. The temple was built in the same pattern as the tabernacle, but on a much bigger and grander scale.

Solomon prayed a beautiful prayer of dedication (8:22–61). The Lord then appeared to him a second time and told him that He had heard his prayer and again urged him to walk in *integrity of heart and uprightness*, so that his kingdom would be established. He also warned Solomon that if he turned away from following the Lord, Israel would be removed from the land and the temple would become a heap of ruins (9:3–9).

That was exactly what happened when the Babylonians came and captured Judah and destroyed the temple. God had warned them, “*Don't think you can live as you like and that I will just keep on blessing you.*” The Lord warns us long before we start going astray.

In *Chapter 10* we read of the Queen of Sheba coming and meeting Solomon because she had heard of his wonderful wisdom. But despite all his worldwide reputation for wisdom, Solomon was a mixed-up man. He could pray beautiful prayers to the Lord in public, like most Christians. But in his private life, he was as godless as anyone – again like many Christians. He rivalled Samson in lust – for he married 700 wives and as if that were not enough, he kept 300 concubines as well – mostly from the heathen nations around him (11:1–3). He must have seen each of them just *once in three years!* Those wives finally turned him away from the Lord, to the worship of idols.

When you plan to get married, don't just look for a pretty face. See whether the girl has a desire to live a godly life. That is far more important in the long run. A woman who has only a pretty face can ruin your life and destroy it. A godly woman will however do you good all the days of your life. There are many warnings in Scripture. But I don't know whether you will take heed to them when the time comes. Many nod their heads when they hear such things in the meetings. But when the time comes for their marriage, they still choose a worldly girl, just because she is good-looking. And sisters, let me urge you also:

Pray that God will lead you to a godly man to be your husband. Don't yield to the suggestions of your parents, if they suggest an unconverted person. Your partner can lead you astray to the worship of idols – the idols of money, pleasure and godless entertainment, etc.

When Solomon went astray, God was angry with him and told him that He would divide his kingdom into two (11:9–11). But because David was a godly man, God did not do it in Solomon's lifetime (11:12). There we see how much children are blessed because of the godliness of their fathers! God raised up enemies to trouble Solomon, but he still did not repent (11:14). When Solomon feared that Jeroboam was going to rebel against him, he tried to put Jeroboam to death (11:26, 40). Jeroboam later became king of the divided kingdom. Thus Solomon died (11:43).

Solomon wrote three books in Scripture in his lifetime – two of them – *Proverbs* and *Song of Solomon* – are like new covenant books in the Old Testament. *Proverbs* is the finest book in the Old Testament. All young people should read it regularly and frequently. It has 31 chapters. Read a chapter a day and it can preserve you from much evil.

Song of Solomon is a wonderful picture of our devotion to Jesus Christ as His bride.

Ecclesiastes was written after Solomon had drifted. In it, he warns us about the dangers of worldly wisdom.

This man who wrote three wonderful books of the Bible finally went to hell! Don't imagine that everyone who stands up and preaches wonderful sermons will go to heaven.

How do we know that Solomon went to hell? Is it possible that the Holy Spirit would write two biographies of Solomon (*1 Kings* and *2 Chronicles*), and not mention in either of them that he repented towards the end of his life, if he had actually done so? Such silence is very eloquent. It tells us that Solomon *died unrepentant*. Manasseh was a king who did much greater evil than Solomon, and for a much longer period of time. But at the end of his life he repented, and the Holy Spirit mentions it in Scripture (*2 Chronicles 33:12, 13*). It is unthinkable that the Holy Spirit would not have mentioned it, if Solomon had repented.

Why are many Christians so keen on “*sending Solomon to heaven*”? It's because they imagine that anyone who serves the Lord will definitely go to heaven, irrespective of how they live. Jesus said that many would come to Him on the last day and say, “*Lord, we prophesied in Your Name, we cast out demons in Your Name, we did miracles in Your Name.*” But the Lord will say to them, “*Depart from me, you who lived*

in sin" (*Matthew 7:22, 23*). Solomon will come before the Lord in that day too and say, "*Lord, I wrote three books of Scripture that blessed millions of people.*" And the Lord will tell him also exactly what He tells the others, "*Depart from me, you who lived in sin.*" Let Solomon's life be a warning to all of us. Paul said, "*I can preach to others, but be disqualified myself finally*" (*1 Corinthians 9:27*).

The Divided Kingdom

From *Chapter 12* onwards to the end of *1 Kings*, we read about the divided kingdom. Solomon had been a very cruel king who had made people work hard to build his palace and to serve him in many other ways. So when his son Rehoboam came to the throne, some of the people came to him and said, "*Your father has made our yoke hard. Now please lighten our yoke.*" (*12:4*). The king asked them to come back after three days. During those three days, Rehoboam consulted with the elders who told him to be kind to his subjects and they would serve him happily forever. Then he consulted with the young people and they told him to be still harder on the people and to tell them, "*My little finger is going to be thicker than my father's loins. If my father disciplined you with whips, I will discipline you with scorpions*" (*12:11*). Like many other stupid people after him, he listened to the young people and not to the elders. The result was that he lost 85% of his kingdom. Ten tribes broke away from him. What a fool Rehoboam was! *He split his kingdom by speaking one foolish sentence.*

The tribes of Judah and Benjamin (in the south) alone remained loyal to Rehoboam. Jeroboam became the king of the other ten tribes in the north, who called themselves *Israel*. Jeroboam now realised that he might lose his hold over his people if they went to Jerusalem thrice a year as required for their annual feasts, and mingled with the people of the southern kingdom. To stop their going to Jerusalem, he built a place of worship in Shechem, so that the people could have their feasts there. He installed an idol there and got everyone involved in idol-worship.

Chapter 13: Here we read of a young prophet who was given a message of judgement against King Jeroboam. He went and delivered it faithfully and the Lord confirmed his prophecy supernaturally to the king. The king then invited the prophet home for a meal and for a reward. But the Lord had earlier told the prophet not to eat or drink anything until he returned home. The young prophet was faithful to the Lord's command and told the king that even if he were given half the kingdom, he would not go home with him. What a faithful man he was. If only he had continued like that!

But there was an old prophet living in the area, who heard about what happened, and was disturbed that God had picked a younger man to give this powerful message to the king. And he was jealous. He went and met the younger prophet and told him a lie that "*the Lord had told*

him" to invite the younger prophet home for a meal. The young man, like a fool, instead of obeying the Lord's original command, listened to the old prophet and went and ate with him, imagining that the Lord had changed His mind without informing him!! For his disobedience, the young prophet was punished by the Lord. He was slain by a lion.

What lesson are we to learn from this for ourselves? There are many retired "prophets" today, who are jealous of younger prophets, and may often seek to destroy them. Young prophets must beware of such retired backslidden "prophets". Be careful of anyone who says to you, "*The Lord told me to tell you this....*" Don't believe them. If God wants to give you a word, He will give it to you directly – for He has given you His Holy Spirit, unlike old covenant times.

Elijah and His Ministry

In *Chapter 17* we read about Elijah.

The first thing I want you to notice about Elijah are his words to King Ahab: "*As the Lord, the God of Israel, lives, before whom I stand*" (17:1). These true prophets did not fear kings because of one reason: *They stood before the Lord*. Kings were mere specks of dust before God. The great need in India is for young men who can be prophets like that. Knowledge of the Bible is important. But more important than that is this: You must live before God's face. To live before God's face, you must keep your conscience 100% clear – not 99%, but 100%. And you must humble yourself totally. Your face must be in the dust all the time. That's how Elijah lived.

If God can't find young men like that, I hope He will find some young sisters who live before God's face and be a voice for Him in India. You may not stand in a pulpit, but you can influence people from your homes. God needs many brothers and sisters in our land who live before His face.

Elijah was a man who was instantly obedient to every little thing that God said. God told him one day to go and hide himself by the brook Cherith – and he went at once (17:3). There the ravens brought him bread and meat and he drank from the brook (*verse 6*). Every morning and evening a raven would bring him some meat. If the ravens had brought him vegetables, that itself would have been a miracle. But for a raven to bring meat (which it loves) is a greater miracle. That's how God provided for Elijah. But after a few days, Elijah may have begun to depend on the ravens and not on the Lord!

Many servants of the Lord start out trusting the Lord for their financial needs. But after a few years, they are no longer depending on the Lord, but on some ravens – human beings who send them regular support! So the brook dried up and the Lord stopped the ravens. God wanted to

shake off Elijah's dependence on brooks and ravens and to teach him once again to depend on the Lord alone. Thank God when the ravens stop coming – when the promised support doesn't come. Then you will learn once again to trust the Lord alone for your needs. I have been through experiences like that. I thank God for the times when He has turned away my eyes from ravens to Him Who owns "*the cattle on a thousand hills*" (*Psalms 50:10*), and Who has said that He will supply all my needs "*according to His riches in glory through Christ Jesus*" (*Philippians 4:19*).

The Lord then changed His method and told Elijah now to go to Zarephath. Zarephath was outside Israel. Elijah may have imagined that some rich businessman there would take care of him. But when he reached Zarephath, what he found was not a rich businessman, but a poor widow who was just about to have her last meal! And the Lord told Elijah, "She will support you"! God's ways are truly amazing. God does things like that, because He is a jealous God. He wants us to trust in Him, and not in ravens or rich businessmen. He will use a weak person whom you least expect to be able to help you, and use him, so that no flesh may glory in His presence (*1 Corinthians 1:29*).

The widow said, "*We were just about to have our last meal and die*" (*17:12*). Elijah told her, "*Don't be afraid. Make me a little bread cake from it first. The bowl of flour shall not be exhausted nor shall the jar of oil be empty, until the day the Lord sends rain on the face of the earth.*" (*17:13, 14*). And the bowl of flour was not exhausted and the jar of oil did not become empty.

There are many preachers today who use this incident to teach poor people to give them money. But that is a total misinterpretation of this incident. First of all, most of today's preachers are *not* prophets like Elijah. Secondly, most of today's preachers are lovers of money, unlike Elijah. These two facts alone put Elijah in a totally different class from today's preachers who exploit the poor. Further, Elijah asked the widow for just a bare meal to survive in a time of famine; and he ate the same food that the widow and her son ate. Today's preachers are asking for money, not for survival, but to support their grand lifestyles. And finally, while Elijah took only one meal from that widow, he provided meals for her and her son, for many, many months – until the famine ended. So she received a hundred times more than she gave to the prophet. Which preacher does that today? There are multitudes of false prophets around today. Unfortunately, since most of God's people do not know how to distinguish between a true prophet and a false one, they are deceived.

In *Chapter 18*, we read about a man called Obadiah. He was the manager of Ahab's palace and it is written that "*he feared the Lord greatly*"

(verse 3). This only means that he was a *religious* person. It is written of others also in *2 Kings 17:33* that “*they feared the Lord and served their own gods*”. I cannot understand how anyone can truly fear the Lord, and still live as the manager of a wicked idol-worshipping king’s palace. Obadiah was obviously seeking a comfortable life for himself along with his religion. There are a lot of people like that. They don’t want to pay the price of discipleship. Joseph of Arimathea was like that. He didn’t want to leave the Jewish Sanhedrin and become a despised disciple of Jesus. He knew that Jesus was the Messiah but he wanted to follow Him secretly, because he sought the honour of men. Such believers can never become apostles. But they still serve some purpose. When Jesus’ body had to be taken down from the cross, Joseph’s influence in Pilate’s palace was of value. So Obadiah also was of help to some of the Lord’s prophets.

We read then about the challenge that Elijah gave to Israel. “*Call everybody to Mount Carmel,*” Elijah told Ahab (verse 19). Although Ahab was the king, he feared Elijah. So he did what he was told and called the Israelites to Mount Carmel. Then Elijah told the 450 prophets of Baal, “*Let’s choose an ox each and make an altar without any fire under it. Then you call on your god and ask him to send fire. And I will call on my God. The one who answers by fire, let Him be the true God.*” All the people said, “*That’s a good idea. Let’s do that*” (18:23, 24).

Then the prophets of Baal put the ox on the altar and began to jump and shout and scream. Nothing happened. It is good to note here that many “Christians” who jump and shout and scream can be just as carnal or unconverted as these Baal-worshippers! Elijah mocked them and said, “*Shout louder. Perhaps he is asleep and needs to be woken up. Or perhaps he is in the toilet!*” (18:27). They cried louder still and cut themselves and raved for over six hours. But nothing happened.

How many hours they prayed! I sometimes think of these Baal-worshippers when I see Christians who don’t have a good conscience shouting Hallelujahs; when brothers who are not on talking terms stand in the same meeting and praise God with loud voices; when husbands and wives who have fought with each other come to the Sunday meeting and speak in tongues, etc. Many Christian meetings have a lot of noise, *but no fire*. You can shout for six hours, or even have an all night prayer meeting. But nothing happens, because God looks for a good conscience. I always tell Christians, “*Before you start praying, make sure that God has picked up the telephone and is listening. If you have sin in your heart, God will not hear you.*” (*Psalms 66:18*).

Then it was Elijah’s turn. He picked up 12 stones to make an altar. Remember that the people of Israel were divided now – 10 tribes in one nation and 2 in another. But Elijah did not believe in nations or in *denominations* – and so he picked up 12 stones. He believed in the unity of all of God’s people. Some who were there may have been upset with him for

including the tribes of Benjamin and Judah as well. But Elijah didn't care for their opinion.

To prove that there was no secret fire under his altar, he asked for 12 pitchers of water to be poured on the altar. Then he prayed – for less than a minute. "*O Lord let it be known that Thou art God and that I am Thy servant*" (18:36). The fire fell and all the people fell on their faces and acknowledged that the Lord was the true God. With all Israel now on his side, Elijah caught the 450 prophets of Baal and killed them all.

The fire from heaven alone is the identifying mark of a true servant of God. This is what we need today to turn God's people back to him.

Now that the people had repented, Elijah told Ahab that the rain would soon be on its way. There had been no rain for 3½ years. Elijah then went to the mountain top and began to pray. He crouched down to the earth, put his face between his knees and prayed (*verse 42*). He sent his servant to see if there was any rain coming. There was none. He sent his servant back again and again – seven times. At last, there was a cloud.

Here we see Elijah's persistence in prayer. "*Elijah was a man with a nature like ours. And he prayed earnestly that it might not rain and it did not rain on the earth for three years and six months. And he prayed again, and the sky poured rain.*" (James 5:17, 18). The earlier drought too had been the result of Elijah's persistent prayer. And now the rain came also as a result of his persistent prayer. His example of persistence in prayer is a challenge to all of us. Many a time, we have not received what God has wanted us to have, because we have given up praying too soon.

Then he got up from prayer, and in the supernatural power of God, ran six miles to Jezreel, in front of Ahab's chariot, outrunning the horses (*verse 46*).

When Jezebel heard that all her false prophets had been killed, she got very angry and sent a message to Elijah that she would kill him next. The mighty prophet who was not afraid of the king, or of 850 false prophets, or of the whole nation, now cowered in fear at the threat of one woman. How very much like us he was.

Isn't it good that the Bible tells us honestly about the weaknesses and failures of its greatest men? I praise God for that. God did not pick up supermen, but ordinary men to serve Him.

Elijah had lived through 3½ years of famine and was now exhausted. All this made him very discouraged, and he ran away from Israel to the mountains and lay down under a juniper tree (19:5). An angel came from heaven. The angel did not give Elijah an exhortation, but some food. He slept again and woke up. Again the angel gave him food. God is very "*down to earth*" and practical in the way He helps us. Many a time, what a discouraged man needs is some food and sleep. A little encouragement, a little food and a small gift can encourage people far more than many sermons. We need wisdom to be able to help others.

However, Elijah was under the old covenant. His discouragement is not a pattern for us to get comfort from. Today, we run the race, looking not at Elijah, but at Jesus, Who was never discouraged. We need never be discouraged at any time. It all depends on whom we follow.

Elijah imagined that he alone was left in Israel standing for God and asked God to take away his life (19:10, 4). But the Lord showed him that there were others beside him in Israel. In fact, the Lord had already prepared someone to take over as the next prophet after him. Elijah was to anoint Elisha to take over from him (19:16). The Lord also told Elijah that there were 7000 people in Israel who had refused to bow down to Baal (19:18). So God had a remnant in the nation.

There was a vast difference however between those 7000 and Elijah. It is true that they did not bow the knee to Baal. But none of them could bring God's fire down from heaven and turn the nation back to Him. Only Elijah could do that. This is a picture of two types of believers: One group whose testimony is negative – they don't worship idols, they don't smoke, they don't drink, etc. The other, like Elijah, whose testimony is positive: They stand before God and are aflame with the fire of God. One uncompromising prophet can accomplish more for God today than 7000 half-hearted believers.

Chapter 19:19–21: Here we read of Elijah calling Elisha. Elisha was working hard in the fields with his oxen, when Elijah called him.

Notice *first of all*, that God always calls those who are working hard and faithful in their secular occupations. Moses was faithfully looking after his father-in-law's sheep when God called him. David was looking after sheep and fighting with lions and bears. Amos was a hard-working herdsman. Peter, James, John and Andrew were hard-working fishermen. Matthew was sitting at the table working on his accounts. We never see, anywhere in the Old Testament or the New Testament, that God called a lazy man for his service.

We don't find Elijah going to Elisha's house when he was fast asleep and calling him there – because we would have thought he was a lazy man. Jesus also never went to Peter's house in the evening to call him. He called him when he was fishing. All these examples show us that God wants us to be faithful and hard-working in our secular jobs, before He can call us to serve Him. If you are not faithful in earthly matters, how can you be faithful in heavenly matters? If you are young and still living at home, then be a faithful son or daughter at home.

Notice *secondly*, that all these men dropped everything and went, as soon as God called them. We see that with Peter, John and Matthew, and also here with Elisha. God calls those who will respond to His call

immediately and wholeheartedly. They may seek to confirm God's call on their lives through godly people, in order to be certain that they are not acting on their own emotional feelings. But once they are sure, they act quickly. God can use only such people to serve Him, because His service requires instant obedience, total commitment and hard work. So God tests us in our secular occupations, to see whether we are faithful. If you are asked to clean a room and you are careless or slipshod about the way you do it, I doubt if God will ever call you to serve Him. Because, if that's the way you clean up a room, that will probably be the way you clean up your heart as well. How then can God use you to clean up His church? It is faithfulness in the little things that God looks for.

In *Chapter 21*, we read of a man called Naboth who was a neighbour of Ahab. Naboth had a vineyard that Ahab wanted to buy. But Naboth refused to sell it, according to God's law (*Leviticus 25:23*). Jezebel, however, got Naboth falsely accused and killed, and thus Ahab took possession of the vineyard. The fearless Elijah now confronted Ahab at God's direction, and told him that God would judge him for killing Naboth and that the dogs would lick Ahab's blood one day, and his family would be destroyed. Ahab was scared and tore his clothes and fasted (*verse 27*). Then God told Elijah that He would have mercy on Ahab and send the judgement on his family only in the next generation. It is amazing to see how merciful God is. God values humility so greatly that even when Ahab (who was so wicked) humbled himself, God took notice of it and suspended judgement.

In *Chapter 22*, we read about the foolishness of Judah's king, Jehoshaphat. Ahab asked him to join him in a battle against king of Aram. Jehoshaphat agreed immediately and then decided to seek God's will about it, after agreeing (*22:4, 5*). Ahab immediately rounded up 400 false prophets who readily "prophesied" that the Lord would give them the victory (*22:6*). It is amazing to see so soon after God's fire fell, false prophets arising again in Israel! It has been like that throughout the ages. False prophets and preachers have abounded everywhere in every generation to lead people astray. But Jehoshaphat had enough discernment to recognise that none of these 400 were genuine prophets. Ahab said that there was one more prophet Micaiah – but Ahab hated him because Micaiah always prophesied judgement against Ahab. Micaiah was called, and he predicted the defeat of Israel's army. Ahab was so angry with him that he locked him up in prison. Jehoshaphat foolishly still joined Ahab, even though God had spoken. He almost lost his life, because the enemy thought he was the king of Israel. Ahab disguised himself to avoid being killed. But he could not escape God's judgement for a stray arrow that was fired came and killed him – and the dogs licked his blood, as God had said (*21:19; 22:38*).

This book began with David ruling a united Israel and ends with the nation divided into two, and in a backslidden condition – with a wicked

Ahab ruling one part and a compromising Jehoshaphat ruling the other. We also see in this book the tremendous effect that a *single prophet* can have on a nation. God needs prophets today in the church. They alone can arrest the downward trend among the people of God.

2 KINGS

CORRUPTION IN ISRAEL AND JUDAH

This book contains the remaining part of the story of the two nations – Israel and Judah – and the kings that ruled them. In Israel, almost all the kings were bad. In Judah, some were good. We also read here of how both nations went into captivity. The Assyrians came and captured the northern kingdom of Israel in about 730 B.C. Some of the Assyrians intermarried with the Jews in Samaria, and that's how the Samaritans were born, whom the other Jews did not have any dealings with (in Jesus' time).

About 150 years later, the southern kingdom of Judah was captured by Babylon (which became the next world power after Assyria). The tragedy was that Judah did not learn any lessons from the failure of Israel.

A wise man learns from the mistakes of others. A foolish man never learns. God's Word has been given to us so that we can become wise. One way to become wise is by learning from the mistakes of others. We can learn lessons from the examples of failures given in Scripture – of Adam and Eve, Cain, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, Joshua, David, etc. We can also learn from the failures of churches and preachers that we have seen around us. Then we won't have to repeat those mistakes ourselves.

Elisha Takes Over from Elijah

Chapter 1: Ahaziah was the new king of Israel and he was very angry with Elijah for rebuking him for his idolatry. So he sent fifty soldiers to capture him. Elijah told the captain of the army, “*If I am a man of God, let fire come down from heaven and consume you and your fifty soldiers*” (1:12). Fire came down immediately from heaven and killed all of them. This happened a second time with another group of fifty. The third captain

begged Elijah to be merciful to him and then Elijah went with him to the king and told the king that he would die for his idolatry.

It was these incidents that James and John referred to, when Jesus came to this same place – Samaria – and the Samaritans did not receive him. They wanted to call down fire from heaven like Elijah did. But Jesus rebuked them saying, “*You don't realise what spirit you have. I have come to save men's lives, not to destroy them.*” (Luke 9:55, 56). There we see the difference between the new covenant spirit of Christ and the spirit of the old covenant prophets.

Chapter 2: Here we see the persistence of Elisha, when Elijah tested him. When Elijah was about to be taken up to heaven, Elisha went along with him to Gilgal. Elijah told Elisha to stay in Gilgal, as he was going to Bethel. Elisha said, “*No. I am coming with you.*” At Bethel, Elijah again told Elisha to stay there, since he was going to Jericho. Elisha again replied, “*No. I am going with you.*” At Jericho, the same scene was repeated. Elijah then went to Jordan. When they came to the river Jordan, Elijah struck the water, opened up the river and both of them walked across. Then Elijah asked Elisha “Why have you been following me? What do you want?”

What about you? What do you want? Are you looking for a better income, or for a car or a new house?

Elisha however said, “*I want a double portion of your spirit*” (2:9). He did not want anything else in the world. He wanted the anointing of the Spirit that rested on Elijah. That's why he had followed after Elijah.

God will test us too, before He commits a ministry to us. He will give us a certain experience – bring us to Gilgal – and see if we are content with that. Some Christians are content, but others will say, “No, Lord. I am not satisfied.” God will lead these people further and give them a deeper experience – Bethel. He may give you some visions. Some will be content with that. Others will say, “No, Lord. I want more of You.” Maybe He will do a miracle through you. Some will now be content. Others will say, “Lord, I want the Spirit that rested on You to rest on me too to transform me into Your likeness. I won't be satisfied with anything less than that.” Do you have such a longing? If so, then let me assure you that God will not disappoint you.

I have seen many Christians who have settled for something much less than God's best – 25%, 50% or 75%. Be like Elisha who pressed on to God's best in his generation. He got a double portion of the anointing, because he persisted. And he did twice the number of miracles that Elijah had done.

If you go to many preachers today and say, “I want the baptism in the Holy Spirit”, they will say, “O, that's easy. Just let me lay hands on your head.” He will pray for you and ask you to mumble something and will then tell you, “You got it.” But what did Elijah say? He told Elisha,

"Do you want a double portion of the Holy Spirit? That's *not an easy thing at all*. You have asked for *a very hard thing*. But if God allows you to see me going up to heaven, then you will get it" (2:10). Elijah left the matter in God's hands. Elijah is a type of Christ here. And this is what the Lord says to us, "If you can see Me in heaven at the Father's right hand having conquered everything for you, and believe in Me, you can have the anointing."

The double anointing is a *hard* thing to receive. But you can have it if you will look at the Lord alone and not at men. *That's the word of the Lord to you.*

Jesus is the Baptiser in the Holy Spirit even today – not any man. Even John the Baptist said, "I can only baptise you in *water*. But He will baptise you in the *Holy Spirit and fire*." No man can baptise you in the Holy Spirit. Jesus Christ alone is the Baptiser. So go directly to Him.

While Elijah and Elisha were talking, a chariot of fire came and Elijah was taken up. Elisha saw it, took the mantle that had fallen and received the double portion of the anointing. There was an immediate proof of it too. When he came to the river Jordan, he struck the water and walked right across. The anointing will become manifest in our lives. We don't have to shout or scream or even tell anyone of our experience. Our life and our ministry will speak for themselves – even to people who criticise us.

Elisha's Miracles

We read further of the many different type of miracles that Elisha did. In one city, the water was very bad. Elisha asked them to bring him a new vessel full of salt. He poured it on the waters and the waters were healed (2:20).

In Chapter 3:11, we see a beautiful title given to the prophet Elisha by others in Israel: "*He who used to pour water on the hands of Elijah*." Each time, after Elijah had finished eating, Elisha would bring some water and pour it for Elijah to wash his hands. He did that job so regularly and faithfully that others observed it and gave him that title! That is how Elisha started out on his ministry. God will test our faithfulness in little things before He commits a ministry to us. Joshua had served Moses faithfully for many years before he became the next leader. Timothy served Paul faithfully and became an apostle.

Elisha was *not* known as a great *preacher* or a great *prophet* when he started out. He was known only as a servant. Many young people miss God's best because they look for fame in the ministry and not for opportunities to serve others. Jesus taught us by His example that we should wash people's feet *till the end of our lives*. It's not that we begin by washing people's feet for a few years, and then move up to more *senior*

ministries! No. We are called to wash people's feet until the end of our lives. We must always be ready to do the lowly tasks.

Jesus said that He had come to serve others, and not to be served by others (*Matthew 20:28*). Be a servant *always* – till the end of your earthly days. If you want to be a servant of the Lord forever, be a servant of people forever. Always consider yourself a servant of others and nothing else. When you serve the Lord, others will be kind to you and serve you. But don't ever take any delight in that. Don't ever look at them as your servants. They are your brothers. Be willing to serve them and to wash their feet. Most preachers today have become “*lords*”, and that's why the anointing has gone from their ministry.

I want to show you something else here about prophetic ministry. When Elisha wanted to seek the mind of God so that he could prophesy, he asked for someone to play a harp (*3:15*). As the musician began to play, the hand of the Lord came upon Elisha and he prophesied powerfully. There we see the value of *godly music*. I can think of numerous times in my own life when during a time of worship and praise on Sunday mornings, the hand of the Lord has come upon me and given me a word that I did not have when I came to the meeting. There was a power in that *anointed* music, that brought the spirit of prophecy upon Elisha.

Even a prophet needs help at times from the musicians. That's why those who lead the music must be *anointed*. They must not be just good musicians. They must be anointed, and have a good conscience. David appointed singers and musicians, and they had to be anointed. Some of the music-leaders like Asaph, wrote twelve wonderful psalms (*Psalms 50: 73–83*). Two of the music-leaders were called seers (prophets) – Heman (*1 Chronicles 25:5*) and Jeduthun (*2 Chronicles 35:15*).

So God needs anointed musicians to encourage and support anointed prophets. That's how the church is built. Some of you may not be called to be prophets, you may be called to be musicians. Be anointed musicians. I don't think Elisha would have been inspired that day, if the harpist had tried to imitate some worldly style of music. No. There was something heavenly about that music. There is music that is worldly and music that is heavenly. You can sense when music is heavenly, because it will lift your spirit to praise God. Some music only makes you admire the musicians! You are an anointed musician if you can lead people to praise God and can bring the spirit of prophecy into a meeting.

The Jar of Oil

Chapter 4: Here in *verses 1 to 7*, we read of a preacher's widow who was in debt. It's a sad thing when husbands die and leave their wives with a debt. That's something all of us should avoid at any cost. And preachers

especially should avoid getting into debt, because that is a bad testimony. Now the creditor had come to take away her two children as slaves to repay the debt. Elisha asked her what she had in her home. She replied, “*Nothing, except a jar of oil.*” She called the jar of oil “*nothing*” and yet the solution to all her problems lay right there. The Lord asked Moses something similar in the desert, “*What do you have in your hand.*” He only had a shepherd’s staff. That was enough. With that staff, he split the Red Sea, brought water out of the rock and led Israel right up to the borders of the promised land. The widow in Zarephath (whom Elijah visited) had only a small bowl of flour and a little jar of oil. But those contained the solution to all her family’s problems and saved her and her son from death. We too may have some ability that we don’t value and say, “I can’t do anything with that.” But that may be the very thing the Lord wants to use.

This jar of oil here is a picture of the Holy Spirit. Sometimes those who serve the Lord say, “I don’t have much money or knowledge. I am not gifted or clever. I don’t have any supporters to give me money. The needs are so great for the Lord’s work. What shall I do?” So you ask them, “*Have you received the Holy Spirit?*” “Yes.” “*Then what else do you need?*”

This woman did not realise that the solution to all her problems lay in that jar of oil. Elisha told her, “*Go and borrow many large vessels from all your neighbours. Then go into your room, shut the door, and keep pouring from your jar into these vessels. They will all get filled up. Don’t let other people see this miracle. Do it in secret.*” (verse 3). This was similar to what Jesus taught, “*Go shut the door and pray and fast and give your gifts. Don’t let anybody see you do these things.*” (Matthew 6:1-18).

A man of God must have a secret walk with God where he has dealings with God, before he can stand up in public. Shut the door and you can experience the Holy Spirit ministering to all your needs. Then open the door and share that with others. Thus you can clear your debt.

We have a debt to the *whole world – to give them the gospel.* Paul said, “*I am a debtor to Jews and non-Jews, to the cultured and to the barbarians – to everybody – to give them the gospel of God.*” (Romans 1:14).

We also have a debt to the whole church – to every believer – to show them love. The Bible says “*Owe nothing to anyone except to love one another.*” (Romans 13:8).

How are we to clear this two-fold debt – to share the gospel with the world and to love every child of God? Is it money we need or human abilities primarily? No. We need the power of the Holy Spirit. That was what Jesus told His disciples to wait for (Acts 1:8). That is what Paul told Timothy to kindle afresh within him (2 Timothy 1:6).

Shut the door and seek God in secret. Pursue after love and seek earnestly for the supernatural gifts of the Holy Spirit, and especially for the gift of prophecy (*1 Corinthians 14:1*). You can then go forth and clear your debt. That is the message of this passage of Scripture.

That widow filled every vessel she could find. She not only cleared her debt with that oil, but blessed and enriched her neighbours too – for she must have sent those vessels back to them full of oil. That is our calling too – to bless our neighbours and everyone we meet. This is why we need to be filled with the Holy Spirit.

A Child Raised from the Dead

We read in *Chapter 4:8–37* of another woman – a prominent, rich, wealthy and influential woman – who was also blessed by Elisha’s ministry. God does not choose only the *poor* and the illiterate and the uneducated to bless. He has no partiality. He chose an illiterate Peter, but He also chose a highly educated Paul. Peter did not know much of the Scriptures, but Paul was a scholar in the Scriptures. There were some rich women who supported Jesus and His disciples financially, and Jesus accepted their large gifts, because they were *godly* women (*Luke 8:3*).

Here was a wealthy woman who decided to support Elisha. She was a godly woman too, because when she saw this man visiting them occasionally, she said to her husband, “*I perceive this is a holy man of God.*” How did she recognise Elisha as a holy man of God without even listening to a single sermon of his? She just observed the way he conducted himself at the dining table. What an example for us! It is the little things that identify a godly man – the way he sits and talks to people, the way he eats his food and the way he conducts himself in ordinary matters. We don’t have to listen to his sermons.

So this woman decided to make a little guest-room in their house for Elisha to stay in – with a bed, a table, a chair and a light. Elisha had never even suggested that he needed any of these things. But she was a thoughtful, considerate woman – as all godly women are. God takes care of his servants by providing such places of rest for them, without their even expecting it. But a true man of God will never remain in debt to such people. So Elisha asked his servant Gehazi what he could do for her in return. Gehazi said that she had no children. So Elisha prayed for her and told her that she would have a child within a year. And she did.

That child grew up, and one day became sick and died (4:20). Think of the faith of this mother that she did *not* bury the child immediately, but said, “*Let me first contact the man of God*” (4:25). So she went to meet Elisha. When Elisha saw her from a distance, he told Gehazi to ask her, “*Is it well with you? Is it well with your husband? Is it well with your child?*” (verse 26). Listen to the answer of faith that she gave concerning her dead child: “**It is well.**” What faith that was! Elisha went and prayed

for that child and raised him from the dead. It's amazing to see what that mother's faith did for that child. According to her faith she received. That is why she finds mention in the gallery of the heroes of faith: "*Women received back their dead by resurrection and gained the approval of God by their faith*" (*Hebrews 11:35, 39*). If that mother did not have faith, she would have buried her child. What miracles the Lord does wherever He finds someone with faith!

Chapter 4:38–44: Here we read of a time when a poisonous vine was accidentally sliced up and put into the food that was being cooked. They told Elisha about it. He threw some meal into it and the food was made healthy. This was followed by another miracle – the first instance of multiplying of food in the Bible. The loaves of bread were insufficient for the hundred people. But Elisha multiplied the food and there was some left over as well, after everyone had eaten to the full!

Naaman and Gehazi

Chapter 5: Here we come to the story of Naaman. God used a little Israelite slave-girl to lead Naaman to faith in the true God and to be healed of his leprosy. She witnessed to Naaman's wife about Elisha's miracle-working power. That was the first step that led to Naaman trusting in the God of Israel. God could use even a little servant-girl to bless her master with a few words. In *Chapter 4*, we saw the faith of a rich, influential woman. Here we see the faith of a poor, little slave girl. God used both of them. It doesn't matter who you are. Even if you are a slave-girl, God can use you to lead other people to Him. Maybe you don't have the ability to give someone the gospel. But, like the slave-girl, God can use you to lead a person to someone else who can give them the gospel. You can direct that person to a prophet, and then you will have your reward as well.

Naaman first of all went to the king, and the king didn't know what to do. He sent him to Elisha. See how Elisha treated this mighty general. This passage shows us what a true man of God is really like. A true man of God doesn't care whether a man is a great man or a small man. Elisha showed more honour to that poor widow when she came to him with her financial need. But when the great Syrian general (who was used to people bowing down before him) came, Elisha did not even go to meet him. Naaman, the general of the world's most powerful army, had to stand outside the prophet's hut. Elisha couldn't care less who Naaman was. How I wish India had prophets like that. What a different brand of Christianity we would have had in our land, if we had prophets, who don't care for the face of man, but who live before God's face alone. Elisha wanted to help Naaman. But he had to humble Naaman's pride first.

He sent his servant Gehazi to go and tell Naaman, "*Go and wash seven times in the River Jordan*" (*verse 10*). The River Jordan was a dirty, muddy river. Naaman was furious and said, "*I thought he would surely come out to*

me and call on the name of the Lord his God, wave his hand over the place and cure the leprosy. Why should I go to this filthy river of Jordan? Are not Abanah and Pharpar, the rivers of Damascus, better than this? (verses 11, 12). He was so angry that he said, “Let’s pack up and go home.”

A prophet has to *irritate* people at times in order to deflate their pride. God gives some prophets this ministry, because that’s the only way He can reveal a man’s conceitedness and pride to him. Jesus often irritated proud people, to humble them and to show them that they were nothing in God’s eyes. God doesn’t care for a man’s position or honour.

Naaman was irritated with Elisha. But one of his servants had some sense and said, “Master, he has asked you to do such a simple thing. Why don’t you try it?” So Naaman agreed to dip himself in the river Jordan. Imagine the great general taking off his clothes and everyone seeing his leprosy. He had to humble himself and obey. When was he to stop? Only when his flesh had become clean and clear like a little child’s. When you are humbled by some circumstance or person, the word of the Lord to you is: “Go down and humble yourself, *until you become like a little child.*” We must not stop until we become like little children, because the kingdom of heaven belongs to such. Naaman’s flesh became like that of a little child and he was clean. When your flesh becomes like that of a little child, you too will be clean. But not until then.

All of us are too big in our own eyes. We are not like little children. Look into the eyes of a little baby. It has no feeling of self-importance. That’s the place God wants to bring us also to – the place of nothingness. *When you come to the place where you realise that you are nothing, then you too will be clean.* Until then, whether it be seven times or seventy times seven, you must keep *going down.*

Naaman then came back to Elisha, amazed at, and grateful for the miracle-working power of Israel’s God. He brought a lot of money and clothes to give to Elisha. But Elisha said, “*As the Lord lives I will take nothing*” (verse 16). The Bible says that we must receive no money from unbelievers (3 John 7). No unbeliever has the right to support a servant of God. Only God’s people have the right and privilege to support God’s servants. Elisha did receive gifts from godly people. We just saw that a rich woman provided a room for him to stay in. But he would receive nothing from Naaman. This is where many servants of God have missed out on God’s will for their lives.

But whereas Elisha said, “*No*” to Naaman, Elisha’s servant Gehazi, said, “What a fool my master is! He didn’t ask for the money (or send out any prayer letters!). The money was offered freely and he still says, ‘No.’ Well, if my master doesn’t take it, I will.” Greedy Gehazi was not

concerned about the fact that it was an idol-worshipper who was offering money to God's servant. He ran after Naaman for the money (*verse 21*) – just like a lot of preachers today run after rich people. Then Gehazi cooked up a lie and told Naaman, “*Two students have just come from the Bible School (“sons of the prophets”). Can you please give them a talent of silver and two changes of clothes?*” (*verse 22*). Naaman believed the lie and gave him more than he asked for. It is easy to justify false reports about God's work, when covetousness rules your heart.

We see the same type of lying in reports today such as. “50,000 people came for the meeting today. 15,000 people raised their hands to receive Christ. A great revival has started here”, etc. If you could read all the reports sent from India to America, you would think India is blanketed with Christian revivals everywhere! We who live here in India know that nothing of the sort is happening. But many good-hearted believers in America believe these tales and send money sacrificially to these crooks in India who write such reports! There are a lot of Gehazis in our land today.

Gehazi collected the money, hid it in his house and came and stood before Elisha, with an innocent face. But Elisha was a man of God and could not be fooled. Elisha asked Gehazi where he had gone. He gave Gehazi the opportunity to confess his sin. But Gehazi was dishonest and lied. Elisha replied, “I know everything, Gehazi. God showed me in a vision everything you did. I saw Naaman turning around and I saw you collecting the things from him. *Is this the time to receive money from these heathen people, to receive clothes, olive groves, vineyards, sheep and oxen in the name of the Lord?*” What a word that is for today's preachers!

Gehazi was Elisha's servant just like Elisha had been Elijah's. Elisha had obtained a double portion of Elijah's anointing, and Gehazi could have got a double portion of Elisha's. That would have been *four times the anointing that Elijah had!* But whereas Elisha had pursued after Elijah persistently for the anointing, Gehazi pursued after Naaman for his money. Elisha got the anointing Elijah had. And Gehazi got the leprosy that Naaman had!! Not only Gehazi, but his children got leprosy as well. Spiritual leprosy has befallen many preachers today as well, as they have pursued after rich people and Western Christian organizations, telling lies and giving false reports, in order to get money. The children of these preachers have suffered too. *He who has an ear to hear, let him hear.*

Other Miracles by Elisha

We see another miracle that Elisha did in *Chapter 6*. When certain Bible-School students were doing some construction work, an axe that they had borrowed fell into the river. They came and told Elisha about it. He promptly threw a stick into the river and the iron-axe floated up to the

surface! Here again we see the principle of resurrection (life out of death) being manifested – as in the other miracles that Elisha did, such as the raising of the dead Shunammite boy, the healing of the poisonous stew, and the curing of Naaman's leprosy.

Let us look at another incident now that shows us what true prophecy is. The king of Aram was fighting against Israel and he told his servants that he would be setting up his army camp in a certain place (6:8). But God showed the king's plan to Elisha – and Elisha warned the king of Israel about it. Thus the king of Israel protected his army from Aram more than once. The king of Aram wondered how this was happening, and suspected that someone in his camp was spying for Israel. But someone who knew the truth told the king that there was a prophet in Israel who was warning Israel's king about the movements of the Aramean army.

This is the purpose of true prophecy today in the church too. What did Elisha do? He warned Israel that the enemy would be coming to a certain place next week and to prepare for that. This is what prophecy in the church should do too. Week after week, the spirit of prophecy in the meetings of the church should warn God's people where the enemy will come. A church that has such a prophetic ministry is blessed indeed. Wasn't it a blessing to have a prophet like Elisha in Israel? It is equally wonderful to have a prophet in a church who can warn people through the Word what they need to be prepared to face. That is why the Bible says, "*Earnestly desire to prophesy*" (*1 Corinthians 14:1*).

In 6:24–29 we read of a great shortage of food in Samaria, because the Aramean army was surrounding the city. Things were so bad that women were eating their own children. But outside the city there were four lepers (who, being lepers, were not allowed inside the city) (7:3). They decided to go to the Aramean camp and ask for food. They said, "The worst they can do to us is kill us. But we are dying of hunger here in any case. So let's go to them." When they reached the enemy camp, they discovered that the soldiers there had all fled, because the Lord had made them hear the sound of galloping horses! So these lepers found plenty of food there. But then they said, "We must tell others about this. We must not keep this good news to ourselves." So they went and told the good news to the city of Samaria and thus the city was saved from death. This is why we must preach the gospel to others too. We were lepers, spiritually speaking, but God blessed us and gave us food that saved our lives. But there are millions of people in the world who are still dying, because they do not know this good news ("gospel"). We must go and tell them.

In *Chapter 9*, we read of the death of Jezebel, the wife of Ahab. She was someone who had opposed the true prophets of God consistently, and her name has now become a symbol of those who oppose God's servants. In *Revelation 2:20*, the Lord told the elder of the church in Thyatira, "*You are permitting your wife Jezebel to lead my servants astray*" (Literal translation). That elder's strong wife was controlling the church – and

she is called a ‘*Jezebel*’. There are unfortunately many weak elders today like that who allow their wives to be Jezebels who control their church – just like the original Jezebel controlled Ahab. If you are a prophet of God like Elijah, you will have to confront these Jezebels and put them in their proper place. Otherwise your church will be destroyed by such Jezebels. We read here that Queen Jezebel was thrown down from the top of a building and her body was smashed to bits. No woman must be allowed to have power in a church.

In *Chapter 13:14*, we read that Elisha was sick and died of that sickness. Why didn’t Elisha claim *Exodus 15:26* (“*I the Lord am your Healer*”), as many preachers today would have asked him to do. A man like Elisha had enough faith to raise the dead. So if he was not healed, *it was certainly not due to lack of faith!* Why God permits sickness in the bodies of His servants is one of the mysteries that we may never be able to explain fully. But we can believe that it always fulfils a purpose that will glorify God. God had some purpose in allowing Elisha to die of his sickness, even as when He gave Paul a thorn in his flesh. God could have taken Elisha to heaven in a chariot of fire as with Elijah. But He took Elisha to heaven in a more humiliating way. We must submit to God’s dealings with us and never compare our lot with that of others. But the amazing sequel to this story is that when the Moabites were later burying a man in that very same grave, as soon as the dead man came in contact with Elisha’s bones, he arose from the dead (*13:20, 21*). So Elisha had more anointing in his dead bones than many preachers have today when they are alive!! There was certainly no lack of faith in his case.

Assyria Attacks Israel and Judah

In *Chapter 17*, we read about Israel’s captivity, which took place about 730 years before Christ. The Assyrians came, captured Israel and took them away. It is written about these Assyrians in *17:33* that “*they feared the Lord and served their own gods.*” It is this counterfeit “*fear of the Lord*” that is found in much of Christendom today too. Most Christians today have a certain respect for God, but actually serve their *own gods* of money, their job, their own honour, their earthly position, their position in the church, etc.

In *Chapter 18* we read about King Hezekiah of Judah. Hezekiah’s father, Ahaz, had been a very wicked king, who had thrown Hezekiah’s older brother into the fire as a sacrifice to heathen idols (*2 Kings 16:3*). But Hezekiah was different from his father and a good king. Praise the Lord for children who are willing to be different from their fathers because they fear God.

In *18:4*, we read that the people of Judah were still worshipping the bronze serpent that Moses had made in the wilderness more than 700 years earlier. Hezekiah was the one who finally broke this superstition in Judah and destroyed it. Consider the many godly men who had lived

in Israel during those 700 years – Joshua, Samuel, and David (the man after God's own heart). But none of these godly men had understood that this bronze serpent should be destroyed. All of those godly men must have tolerated it saying that it was different from an idol, because God Himself had commanded it to be made. But Hezekiah saw clearly that it was an idol. Praise God for men like Hezekiah.

Do you think that there is a difference between an idol of Jesus (or of Mary) and the idol of some other religion? No. Both are idols that God hates. Even a bronze serpent that had once been made at the command of God, was not acceptable to God as an object of worship. Man is not supposed to worship bronze serpents or any other idol! But even David did not have light on this elementary truth. God gave that understanding to a *lesser* king. Sometimes ordinary believers can have light on truths in Scripture that more well-known Christians don't have light on. Let us never forget this fact.

In *Chapter 19*, we read that after the king of Assyria had captured Israel, he came against the southern kingdom of Judah as well. Hezekiah then cried out to the Lord for help (*19:15*). That night a single angel came and destroyed 185,000 Assyrian soldiers (*verse 35*). Jesus told Peter in Gethsemane that He could call 72,000 angels to help Him, if He wanted. 72,000 angels could have destroyed 13 billion people ($72,000 \times 185,000$) – more than twice the world's population *today!!* Such is God's ability to defend His people against the might of the world. This is why Jesus never had any fear. We need never live in any fear either.

After that, Hezekiah faced another problem. He was mortally ill, and the Lord told him, “*Set your house in order. You are going to die, and not live*” (*20:1*). When God tells us that it's time for us to die, we must be willing to leave the earth immediately. For God alone knows what is best for us. So, when God tells us that it's time to go, we should not want to stay on in this rotten world any longer. To depart and to be with Christ is far better. But Hezekiah was unwilling to go and pleaded for a lengthening of his life. The Lord granted his request and added another 15 years to his life. But what happened during those 15 years? He produced a son, Manasseh. Manasseh was 12 years old when he became king (*21:1*). He was obviously born during those extra 15 years that Hezekiah had been granted. He reigned for 55 years and was the worst king that Judah ever had (*2 Chronicles 33:9*). And he was born, because Hezekiah was unwilling to die, when God told him that his time on earth was up.

In *Chapter 24*, we read that Assyria was defeated by Babylon which became the new world superpower. Babylon now came against Judah and destroyed Jerusalem. Tradition tells us that Isaiah prophesied during the early days of Manasseh's reign, that he was persecuted for his strong condemnation of Judah, and that he went and hid himself inside

a hollow log. He was found, and Manasseh sawed the log into two thus sawing through Isaiah's body too. We read about people who were "sawn in two" in *Hebrews 11:37*.

The *Second Book of Kings* begins with Elijah being taken up to heaven and ends with the people of Judah being taken to Babylon. What a contrast! We too can choose to go, either to heaven, or to Babylon. It all depends on whom we choose to please. Those are some of the lessons that we can learn from *II Kings*.

1 CHRONICLES

THE PREPARATION FOR THE TEMPLE

First and Second *Chronicles* were written, as far as we know, after the children of Israel came back from their captivity in Babylon for 70 years. Perhaps it was Ezra who wrote it. These two books are different from the two books of *Kings*, in that they deal with the history of *Judah alone*.

Israel split into two kingdoms after Solomon's death. Rehoboam headed one and Jeroboam headed the other. The northern kingdom called *Israel* had ten tribes and the southern kingdom called *Judah* had two tribes – Benjamin and Judah. The kings of Israel were generally all wicked. But in Judah, some of the kings were good and some were bad. The books of *Kings* deal with both the nations. The books of *Chronicles* however deal with the kings of Judah alone – starting with Saul and David. There is quite a bit of repetition here of what is found in *Kings* – but that is to emphasise certain lessons – as in the case of the four gospels. Most of what is written in *Chronicles* is history and we have already covered them when we studied *1 and 2 Kings*.

The first nine chapters of *1 Chronicles* give us the family tree of David starting from Adam. One reason why God has given us this long genealogy of Reuben and Simeon and the priestly line and the other tribes is to show us that God is interested in individuals. He is not interested in tribes but in individuals. The entries in God's book of Life are also individual. It doesn't say there, "So many thousands of people from Kerala are born again and so many from Tamilnadu," etc. No. Each person's name is written down individually teaching us that God is personally interested in *each one of us*. He knows all about *your* family tree too – all the way back to Adam. He knows your entire life-history, and He has a plan for your life. That should encourage all of us – to know that we are not lost in the billions on the face of the earth, but individuals whom God knows by name! He knows all about us and our ancestors. He knows

every little detail about our lives. He even knows the number of hairs on our head!!

I want to point out a couple of verses in *Chapter 4*. We read there of a man named Jabez (4:9). “*Jabez was more honourable than his brothers.*” Notice that when God writes down the history of different men, He emphasises the fact that some were more honourable than others! When the apostle Paul wrote a list of his co-workers (*Roman 16*), he also stated that some were more wholehearted than others. Even though we may all be His children, yet He makes a note of those who are “*more honourable*” than others.

He was named Jabez because his mother bore him with much pain. It says there that he called on the God of Israel (4:10). He prayed saying, “*Lord, bless me, enlarge my border, so that Your hand will be with me. And keep me from harm, that it may not pain me.*” And God granted Jabez what he requested.

We can apply that prayer to ourselves spiritually. First of all: Becoming more honourable than others has a close link with the amount of pain and suffering we are willing to go through. One who has gone through pain and suffering and come through them triumphantly is more honourable in God’s sight than others. So we should not despise pain. We should long for the blessing of God on our lives and constantly ask Him to enlarge our spiritual borders. We must never be satisfied with what we have attained at any time. We should ask God to let His hand – His power – be with us always. We must ask Him to protect us from evil and from evil men, so that we don’t get hurt – either spiritually or physically. God granted Jabez what he asked for, and He will grant us our petitions too.

David's Mighty Men

In *Chapter 12*, we read of those who stood by David when Saul was persecuting him. It was easy to join David *after* he had become king. But here we read of people who joined him at a time when he was rejected and being hunted for his life. It’s easy to live totally for the Lord in heaven, but it is quite another matter to follow Him totally here on earth where He is rejected and despised. In the same way, it is easy to join a church after it has become famous and popular, but quite another thing to join it when it is despised, because you see that the anointing is there.

The men who became David’s army generals later were those who followed him at a time when he was being persecuted by Saul and rejected by Israel. In our day also we see something similar. God raises up a man to do a work for Him in a particular place, but only a few have eyes to recognise God’s anointing on him and on his ministry. These few join him

and don't care what 'Saul' or anybody else says about him. Thus they accomplish an eternal work for the Lord in their generation. We need to train our senses to recognise where the anointing of God is today.

A true servant of God will never be popular, even as his Master was unpopular. Jesus said, "*Woe unto you when everyone speaks well of you, because they spoke thus about the false prophets. But blessed are you when all men speak evil of you, because that's how they treated all the true prophets.*" (Luke 6:22, 26). Very few people have understood this fact. A true prophet is almost never fully recognised or valued in his lifetime.

The history of the church shows that even the true apostles were rejected and despised by others in their lifetime. Paul was rejected by the believers in Corinth. He said in *2 Timothy 1:15*, "*All those in Asia have forsaken me.*" Paul was true to God until the end of his life, but most of his fellow-believers forsook him. Jesus was true to His father and most people left Him too.

Some of the sons of Benjamin came to David when he was in a cave (12:16). David met them and told them "*If you have come peacefully, my heart will be with you. But if you have come to betray me to my enemies – my conscience is clear – may God punish you.*" We have to be careful, because even today there are people who can come to us, pretending to be our friends. But if our conscience is clear, God will deal with them.

But look at the wonderful example of Amasai (12:18): "*The Spirit of God came upon Amasai, who was the chief of the thirty valiant men, and he said, 'We are yours, O David. We are with you, son of Jesse. Peace to you and peace to him who helps you. Your God helps you.'* Then David received them and made them captains of his band." People like Amasai recognised God's anointing upon David, despite David's outward circumstances, because the Holy Spirit was upon them.

If you read the history of the church you will find that the truly godly men who stood against the established religious system in Christendom were always persecuted. You have heard of how Martin Luther was persecuted by the Roman Catholic system. Perhaps you have heard of John Calvin too. But there was another group of wholehearted believers at that time called the *Anabaptists*, who were persecuted not only by the Roman Catholics, but also by the followers of Martin Luther and John Calvin!! These Anabaptists were godly people who sought to live godly lives, totally separated from the spirit of this world – and they were persecuted severely for their stand. They met in the forests and many of their leaders were killed. Church history may not have written much about them. But one day when Jesus returns, we will discover that these people were the men who stood wholeheartedly for God in their day. And this is true in our day too.

Look for the anointing of God upon a man – not for supernatural gifts (even Satan has supernatural gifts), but for the anointing and the grace of God – those are the proof that God is with a man. And if God approves of a man, we better approve of him too! Amasai had that much sense!

Notice another characteristic of David (*in 13:1*): “*David consulted with the captains of the thousands and the hundreds, even with every leader.*” A true man of God works in fellowship with others. One reason why David got such tremendous support from the people was because he discussed things with them. His attitude was, “I am a weak brother and I need your opinion. What do you think about this?” He sat down and discussed things with people who were junior to him and together came to a decision along with the other men. And then we read in *verse 4*, “*All the assembly said that they would do so, for the thing was right in the eyes of all the people.*”

David’s Preparations for the Temple

In *Chapter 22*, we read of David preparing material for the building of the temple. God had told David that he would not build the temple, but that his son Solomon would build it. But see what David did in preparation for it. He set stonemasons to hew out the stones for it and made all the necessary preparations for it, so that things would be easy for Solomon later on. He also gave a lot of gold, silver and bronze and arranged for timber and large quantities of iron to make nails for the temple. Even though he knew that he would not have the privilege of building the temple, which was originally his own vision, he still did everything possible to help build it. If God does not give you a ministry, do everything possible to support others to whom God has given such a ministry. That is what we can learn from David’s example.

David was very thoughtful and said, “*My son Solomon is young, inexperienced, and the house has to be a magnificent house. So I will make preparations for it.*” (22:5). It’s a wonderful heritage that we give our children when we make preparations for them to follow the Lord in their generation. David told Solomon “*With great pains I have prepared for the house of the Lord 100,000 talents of gold, 1,000,000 talents of silver, bronze and iron beyond weight, and a great quantity of timber and stone, and prepared workmen and masons. Arise and work, and may the Lord be with you.*” (22:14–16). How easy it became for Solomon when his father had done so much of the work for him. Godly men are like that towards their children.

David then told everyone, “*Set your heart and your soul to seek the Lord your God. Arise and build the sanctuary of the Lord so that you may bring the ark of the covenant of the Lord and the holy vessels of God into the house that is to be built for the name of the Lord.*” (22:19).

In *Chapters 23 to 27*, we have a list of names of the various Levites, the divisions of musicians, the gate keepers, the commanders of the army, etc. David was interested in each one of them, and their names are all listed. Then David told Solomon, “*Be strong and courageous. Don't be dismayed for the Lord God is with you.*” (28:20). If Solomon had endured until the end in the strength of that exhortation from David, his life would have been very different.

In *Chapter 29:3–5*, David lists some of the gold and silver that he gave over and above what he had given earlier, because of his “*delight in the house of my God.*” He had already given so much for the work of the Lord. But after a while he felt he had not given enough and gave some more. God loves a cheerful giver and David was a man after His own heart. How is it with us? Are we cold and calculating in our giving? Do we wonder at times, if we have given too much!!

Then David prayed a prayer of praise to the Lord (29:10–19). All the assembly blessed the Lord God and worshipped Him (*verse 20*). Then Solomon was made king and David died.

One last point: *Chapter 29:29* refers to Samuel and Gad as “seers”. Why were these prophets called seers? Because they could look ahead and see what other people could not see in the future.

The great need in the church today is for seers – men and women who have spiritual vision and who can see into the future, who can understand what will happen in a few years' time, if some particular practice (that looks innocent right now) is permitted in the church. A seer is one who can see when a church is in danger of going dangerously off track. Today the deviation from the straight line of truth may be very small – perhaps just one degree – and the distance from the truth may be very small – perhaps only a few centimetres. But in a few years, the distance could become many *kilometres!* A seer sees the dangers that lie ahead and refuses to permit the slightest compromise.

2 CHRONICLES

THE TEMPLE BUILT AND DESTROYED

The first nine chapters of *2 Chronicles* deal with the rule of Solomon, much of which we have already seen when studying *1 Kings*.

In *Chapters 10–36*, we read of the reigns of 20 kings of Judah: Rehoboam, Abijah, Asa, Jehoshaphat, Jehoram, Ahaziah, Athaliah (queen), Joash, Amaziah, Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, Hezekiah, Manasseh, Amon, Josiah, Jehoahaz, Jehoiakim, Jehoiachin and Zedekiah. These chapters describe five periods of backsliding in Judah and four times of returning to God. Finally it ended in Judah being taken captive to Babylon.

King Asa's Good Beginning and Later Failure

In *Chapters 14 to 16* we read of King Asa who started out as an excellent king (14:2–6). When he was attacked by a million-man Ethiopian army, he called on the Lord with one of the most wonderful prayers for help found anywhere in the Old Testament: “*Lord, there is no one besides Thee to help in the battle between the powerful and those who have no strength; so help us, O Lord our God, for we trust in Thee and in Thy Name have come against this multitude. O Lord Thou art our God; let not man prevail against Thee*” (14:11). That expression of faith was enough for the Lord to rout the enemy. That prayer of helpless dependence on the Lord is a good prayer to pray when we face some trial too.

But after the victory, a prophet came and warned Asa saying, “*If you continue to seek the Lord, He will allow you to find Him; but if you forsake Him, He will forsake you*” (15:2). God knew the danger of Asa becoming more self-confident after his victory and of ceasing to be constantly dependent on the Lord for help. This is the danger that we all face.

Sure enough this was exactly what happened. For the next twenty years things went well with Asa. But then he faced another enemy – Israel – that had a much weaker army than the Ethiopians. But this time, instead of seeking the Lord, he decided to seek for help from a heathen king (16:1–6). His immediate problem was solved thereby, but Asa lost out spiritually as a result. God sent the prophet Hanani to point this out to Asa.

In Hanani's words to Asa, we have one of the most wonderful promises in the Old Testament: "*The eyes of the Lord move to and fro throughout the earth that He may strongly support those whose hearts are completely His.*" (2 Chronicles 16:9). Notice here that the Lord's eyes are *not searching* for the wholehearted – for He already knows who they are. It says here that His eyes are moving around looking for ways in which He can *support* these wholehearted ones. This is a wonderful promise that assures us that if we are wholehearted disciples of Jesus, the Lord will move on our behalf to support us *all over the earth*.

One of the prayers that I have prayed for many years now is, "Lord, lead me to people who are seeking for a godly life in my city, so that we can bless one another. Then lead me to such people in my country, and all over the world as well." If your heart is completely the Lord's, and if your only ambition is to glorify God and do His will on earth as it is done in heaven, then the Lord will lead you to other people of like mind, from all parts of the world. He will bless you through them and bless them through you. That has been my experience through many, many years now.

Many Christians are correct in the doctrines, but their hearts are not completely the Lord's. They have other ambitions. Even many full-time Christian workers have private ambitions. They seek for honour, money and comfort. Therefore they never experience the fulfilment of this promise.

Give up every carnal ambition then and give your whole heart to the Lord to fulfil His purpose alone, and He will work on your behalf miraculously. If you are waiting on the Lord to find a marriage-partner, He will bring someone for you, from the other end of the world if necessary, because His eyes are moving across the earth on your behalf. He will open doors for you across the earth to serve Him, without your having to lift a finger yourself. He will meet every need of yours, even before you ask Him. There are amazing blessings in store for those whose hearts are completely His!

But King Asa did not respond in repentance to Hanani's message. Instead, he was so angry that he imprisoned the prophet. Things went from bad to worse. Asa then began to oppress the poor Israelites (16:10). Three years later Asa faced another crisis – this time in his own body. He had a sickness that affected his feet severely – perhaps diabetic gangrene. Being the king he had enough money to call for the best doctors in the

land to attend on him. But he never did what he should have done first, before calling the doctors in: *Judge himself and seek the Lord*. And so despite the best medical attention, he died (16:12, 13).

Other Kings of Judah

Chapter 18: Here we read of Jehoshaphat joining with Ahab to fight in battle. They wanted a word from the Lord first and so they got the prophet Micaiah to come and prophesy for them. Micaiah was a true prophet of God. But someone told Micaiah, “Please let your message be just like the message of all the other prophets who have already prophesied victory for Ahab.” But the other “prophets” were all *false* prophets. I have had invitations to meetings where I too have been told what to speak and what not to speak. But Micaiah said, “What the Lord tells me to speak, I will speak.” We must not be influenced in our preaching by what others tell us to say. If you listen to God, He will tell you what to speak. Many preachers today read books that come from American preachers and repeat what they read there. But does God speak only to people in America? Doesn’t He speak to people in India too? Be a man of God and be one who listens to God. Because Micaiah spoke only what God told him to speak, they persecuted him. They slapped him and locked him up in prison (18:23). True prophets have always been persecuted, throughout history.

In *Chapter 20*, we have one of the most amazing stories in the Old Testament that illustrates the power of praising God. There are many lessons that we can learn here. A great multitude of enemies had gathered together to make war against King Jehoshaphat. Jehoshaphat, having learnt a lesson from his previous compromise with Ahab, now decided to seek the Lord. He prays one of the finest prayers of trust in the Lord – in the same class as the prayer prayed by his father Asa (in 14:11). Notice seven things that Jehoshaphat reminded God and himself and acknowledged in his prayer:

1. The absolute sovereignty of God (*verse 6*).
2. What God had done for Israel in the past (*verse 7*).
3. The promises of God (*verse 8, 9*).
4. That Israel was God’s inheritance (*verse 11*).
5. Their utter weakness (*verse 12*).
6. Their utter lack of wisdom (*verse 12*).
7. Their utter dependence on God (*verse 12*).

God responded to that prayer immediately by sending a message through a prophet saying, “*Don’t be afraid. The battle is not yours but God’s. Go and face your enemies. The Lord is with you*” (*verses 15–17*).

So Jehoshaphat sent the singers into battle in front of the soldiers! And as these singers began praising the Lord, the Lord defeated all of

Judah's enemies. Judah also became wealthy through all the wealth they got from their enemies.

This story illustrates the way of victory: Through confessing the sovereignty and the promises of God in faith and praising the Lord in advance, even when the enemies (problems) are still there. Our faith is expressed in praise. "*They believed His words – they sang His praise*" (*Psalms 106:12*). The reverse is also true: When we don't sing God's praise, it proves that we don't believe His words!

In *Chapter 26* we read of King Uzziah. Isaiah the prophet got a vision of the Lord in the year that this king died (*Isaiah 6:1*). King Uzziah started out well and "*as long as he sought the Lord, he prospered*" (*26:5*). But "*when he became strong, his heart became proud and he acted corruptly*" (*26:16*). The same story has been repeated in Christendom often in the last 2000 years. God blesses a man and he gets puffed up. It's very difficult to remain humble when God has blessed you and used you mightily. Uzziah became proud because of his successes and decided to minister as a priest too. He had not learnt the folly of doing this from King Saul's experience 300 years earlier. Azariah, a fearless priest, along with eighty other priests, opposed Uzziah (*26:17, 18*) and said, "It is not right for you, Uzziah, to burn incense to the Lord, but for the priests." Thank God for such men who are not afraid even to rebuke kings. We need a few men like that in Christendom today. Uzziah became angry with the priests. But even while he was angry, the judgement of God fell on him and leprosy broke out on his forehead. He ran out of the temple (*26:20*), was cut off from the people, he could never enter the house of the Lord again and died as a leper (*26:21*). It's a very dangerous thing when you try to move into a ministry which God has not given you.

In *Chapter 32*, we read of a miraculous healing that Hezekiah experienced from the Lord. The Lord gave him a sign too (*32:24*) – the sun went backwards in the sky (*2 Kings 20:1–11*). In other words, the earth rotated ten degrees in the opposite direction! In Joshua's time the sun had only stood still. But in Hezekiah's time it went *backwards* (*Isaiah 38:8*). People in Babylon saw this happen and heard that it had some connection with Hezekiah. So some of them went to Israel to meet him (*verse 31*). Hezekiah felt very proud of himself, and showed off all his wealth to the Babylonians. Very soon, the prophet Isaiah came to him and told him that everything he had shown the Babylonians would be taken away by them one day (*2 Kings 20:13–17*). But see what it says in *Chapter 32:31*. When these rulers came to ask Hezekiah about this wonder, "*God left Hezekiah alone to test him*", to see whether he would be humble and give God all the glory, or whether he would be proud and take the glory to himself. *He failed the test.*

Many times after God has done something for us, He will test us, to see whether we take the glory to ourselves or whether we will be humble and give the glory to God. Perhaps God has blessed your ministry in some unique way. And you testify about it or write about it in such a way that the credit comes to you. This is what Hezekiah did. He was such a good king. But how sad that he had to end his life in this way!

In *Chapter 33:12, 13*, we read something about Manasseh that is not written in *2 Kings*. Towards the end of his life he repented after he had been taken captive. When he was in distress, he pleaded with the Lord. Manasseh had done such terrible evil in Jerusalem for 50 years. He had led the people astray, worshipped idols and even offered his own children as sacrifices in the fire. But then he repented and prayed – and amazingly God listened to him! God was moved by his prayer and brought him back to Jerusalem. Then Manasseh knew that the Lord was God (*33:13*). He destroyed the idols, set up the altar of the Lord, sacrificed peace offerings and ordered Judah to serve the Lord.

If Solomon had repented like that, it would certainly have been recorded in Scripture. No such record however is found in Solomon's case. That's why we know that Solomon went to hell. But Manasseh repented. It is how a man ends his life that matters more than how he begins it.

In *Chapter 36:21*, we are given the reason why the Israelites were sent to Babylon as captives for 70 years? The law had commanded that they were to give a Sabbath-rest to the land every seventh year and sow nothing that year (*Exodus 23:10, 11*). But they disobeyed God in their covetousness and were punished, as God had warned them (*Leviticus 26:34, 43*). For 490 years they had disobeyed God, not giving the land its Sabbath-rest. And so God sent them into captivity for 70 years. God's judgements are exact and catch up with us sooner or later.

EZRA

THE REMNANT THAT RETURNED

Ezra lived at the time when the Israelites came back from their seventy years of captivity.

Two journeys of Israel are recorded in the Old Testament. The first journey was *from Egypt to Canaan*, and this symbolises salvation for the individual Christian – redeemed by the blood of Christ (Passover lamb), baptised in water (in and out of the Red Sea), baptised in the Holy Spirit (cloud coming from heaven) and conquering the lusts of the flesh (the giants in Canaan). The second journey was their move *from Babylon to Jerusalem* after the captivity. That speaks about building the church. The first symbolises our personal walk with God. The second symbolises our coming out of dead religious systems (Babylon), and building the Body of Christ (Jerusalem). Many prophets spoke about this movement of God's people from Babylon to Jerusalem. Babylon has a spiritual meaning in the New Testament and refers to a corrupt, harlot Christendom that professes to follow the Lord, but does not actually follow Him (*Revelation 17*). Jerusalem (*Revelation 21*) refers to the true church, the Bride of Christ.

The Return Under Zerubbabel

Ezra was one of the men whom God used in the *second* movement in the Old Testament. His book deals with the return of the Israelites under their leader, Zerubbabel (*Chapters 1, 2*), the construction of the temple (*Chapters 3–6*), and the reformation under his own (Ezra's) leadership (*Chapters 7–10*).

We read first of all, that God moved King Cyrus to order the building of the temple. Cyrus said, “*The Lord God has given me all the kingdoms of the earth and has appointed me to build the house for Him in Jerusalem*” (*Ezra 1:2*). See the sovereignty of God that moved a heathen king to order the building of God's temple in Jerusalem!

Cyrus went on to say, “*Whoever is among you let him go up to Jerusalem and rebuild the house of God.*” (Ezra 1:3). He did not compel any Israelite to go. They were free to choose. Even so today – we are free to stay in dead religious systems or to move away from them to Jerusalem.

And then Cyrus said, “*Let the men support him with a freewill offering for the house of God*” (1:4).

To build Jerusalem, the Body of Christ, the *first* thing we need to recognise is that God is sovereign over all people. He could move ungodly rulers in that day and He can move anyone even today, to fulfil His purposes. If we do not believe that, we cannot build Jerusalem.

The *second* thing we need to recognise is that God never compels anyone to leave Babylon. All are invited to leave. But no-one is forced to do so. We must give people freedom to choose, for God loves only cheerful givers.

The *third* thing we see is that those who don’t go personally can still support God’s work with “*a freewill offering*” (1:4). If we can’t build Jerusalem personally, we can still support its building with freewill offerings.

Why did that Persian king Cyrus support God’s people so much?

The answer perhaps lies here: Nearly 200 years before Cyrus was born, the prophet Isaiah prophesied about him by name: “*Thus says the Lord, ‘When I say of Cyrus, “He is my shepherd,” he will certainly do as I say. He will command that Jerusalem be rebuilt and that the Temple be restored.* This is what the Lord says to Cyrus, his anointed one, whose right hand he will empower. Before him, mighty kings will be paralyzed with fear. The Lord says: ‘I will go before you, Cyrus, I will smash down gates of bronze and cut through bars of iron. I will do this so you may know that I am the Lord God of Israel. And why have I called you for this work? It is for the sake of Israel my chosen one. I called you by name when you did not know me. I have prepared you so all the world from east to west will know there is no other God’” (Isaiah 44:28–45:6).

Daniel, who was still alive at that time, must have shown this Scripture to Cyrus – and Cyrus must have been overwhelmed to know that Almighty God had prophesied about him by name, two centuries earlier. This would have humbled him; and he did what Isaiah prophesied that he would do – command the Jewish people to go back to Jerusalem and rebuild the temple!! God’s ways are truly amazing.

In Chapter 2, we read a list of the people who left Babylon. God makes a note even today of each person who leaves Babylon. Their leader was Zerubbabel. God always needs a man to lead His people out of Babylon.

God makes a note of the name of every person who has left corrupt Christendom and come into the true church of the Living God.

Babylon is of course a more comfortable place to live in than Jerusalem. It was so then and it is so even today. It was difficult, dangerous and expensive to go to Jerusalem those days. Many Israelites would have said to themselves, "Why should we move? We are quite comfortable here in Babylon." Many believers who are in ungodly systems today say the same thing. They can get "married" and "buried" with greater honour in Babylon. But the wholehearted want to be where God is moving in their day and want to be where the anointing of God is. They do not seek their own comfort or honour. Thus a sifting takes place among God's people even today.

In *Chapter 2:40*, we read that only 74 Levites left for Jerusalem. Why was the number so small? The Levites had been commanded by God not to own any property. They were to be supported by the tithes of God's people. They saw here that the people going back to Jerusalem were very poor and felt that those poor people would be unable to pay any tithes at all, and even if they did, it wouldn't amount to much! Therefore most of the Levites decided to stay back in Babylon. It was more secure for them there. Only 74 could trust God to take care of them in Jerusalem! It is the same story today. Preachers still go where there are rich people who can give them handsome gifts!

In *Chapter 2:59–63*, we read of certain people who could not give evidence concerning their father's household to prove that they were true Israelites. These are a picture of those today who are not sure about their salvation. Some who claimed to be from the priestly tribe could not locate their names in the ancestry records. So they were excluded from all priestly functions until a priest could come who could reveal God's opinion (with the Urim and Thummim) whether they were priests indeed. We see there that the leaders were very strict about the ancestry of those who wanted to build Jerusalem. We too must be especially careful to demand high standards of purity from those who are to be leaders in the church. We must be certain of the salvation experience of those who want to be a part of our church. We live in a day when standards are being lowered for people to be baptised and to join the church. This is because of the craze for impressive statistics and numbers today. We must ensure that people are really converted before they are allowed to join the church. John the Baptist did not baptise the Pharisees because they were unrepentant. That is a good example to follow.

The Construction of the Temple

There are a number of interesting parallels in what we read in *Chapters 3 to 6* with what happened in the early days of the church in *Acts*.

We read about the beginning of the construction of the temple in *Chapter 3*. There was a great spirit of unity among the people. “*The sons of Israel were in the cities. The people gathered together as one man in Jerusalem*” (3:1). That was like the 120 who waited as one man in the upper room for the Holy Spirit.

“*Jeshua and his brothers the priests, and Zerubbabel and his brothers arose and built*” (3:2). It was a body-ministry and not a one man show.

They first built *the altar* and offered burnt offerings (3:2). This speaks of the pre-eminent place being given to the message of the cross, to build the Body of Christ. And then they celebrated the ‘*Feast of Booths*’ according to the ordinance. They honoured God’s Word. Then there was a time of praise (3:10) when the builders laid the foundation of the temple. The priests stood and with trumpets and cymbals began to praise the Lord. That’s another thing that must be found in Jerusalem (the true church) – a spirit of praise and worship.

This was followed by a time of “*weeping with a loud voice*” (3:12). Mourning for our sins is also a necessary part of building the church.

Chapter 4:1: The next thing that happened was opposition. No genuine work of God will be without enemies. These enemies pretended that they too wanted to help in building the temple. But Zerubbabel said, “*You have nothing in common with us in building a house to our God*” (4:3). We do not cooperate with unbelievers even if they are nominal Christians. They may say, “We also serve your God. We are also Christians.” But we say “No”. Thank God for men like Zerubbabel and Jeshua who put their foot down and said, “Nothing doing.” Thank God for people like John the Baptist who refused to baptise the Pharisees, saying, “You must repent first.” We need more people like John the Baptist, Zerubbabel and Jeshua in the church.

Then these people got up, joined up with the people of the land, and (4:4) tried to frighten them. There was religious opposition, fear and harassment. They hired counsellors (4:5) to frustrate their counsel – all this opposition to these simple people who just wanted to build the temple! When you try to build the house of God as the Body of Christ you will face a lot of opposition. If you are interested only in coming out of Egypt and living an individual Christian life, there may not be much of a problem. But if you go further to this second movement from Babylon to Jerusalem, you will face many attacks from Satan. But your life will be exciting, because God is sovereign. God permits this opposition, and He overcomes both kings and their decrees. The enemies sent a request to the king, and a decree came from the king (4:17–22). They went with the king’s order to Jerusalem and stopped the work. The king was influenced

by the false reports. You can be sure that there will be a lot of false reports when you try to serve the Lord. Religious people, secular authorities, the police and many other people will turn against us. Thus the work stopped.

So what did God do? He killed that king and raised up another – Darius (4:24)!

In 4:24, we see that even 16 years after returning to Jerusalem, the Jews hadn't got past laying the foundation of the temple. This was because the Jews had a casual attitude towards building the temple and were all busy building their own homes (See *Haggai 1:1–4*). The prophets Haggai and Zechariah then challenged the people to put God first and to build His temple (5:1, 2).

But once again the enemies were stirred up and said, "Who told you to build this temple?" And then we read this wonderful verse, "*The eye of God was upon them, and they could not stop them*" (verse 5). The enemies sent a report to King Darius, and Darius issued another decree, because he found the decree that Cyrus had made. Notice the sovereignty of God in operation here. Darius wrote, "*Leave this work on the house of God alone. I issue a decree that you must do whatever you can to help build this house. The full cost is to be paid out of the royal treasury. Whatever is needed – bulls or rams or wheat or salt – they must be given*" (6:7, 8).

Who was Darius' advisor? Daniel. God has His people everywhere to help His servants. So we see that the opposition only worked for good here, because ultimately God's people got more than what they had earlier: *The government paid the entire cost of the construction!*

The temple was finally completed through a body-ministry – with all working together. It had started in a very small way, as with all of God's works. But finally they completed a building that God was happy with. This is how it is in the building of the church too. Then they celebrated the Passover and rejoiced – "*because the Lord had caused them to rejoice, and had turned the heart of the king to encourage them in the work of the house of God*" (Ezra 6:22).

After this, we have a 60-year gap before *Chapter 7*. It is during this period that we have the story of *Esther*.

The Return and Reformation Under Ezra

From *Chapter 7* onwards, we read of the return of the exiles and the reformation under Ezra. The first group of exiles had Haggai, Zechariah, Zerubbabel and Jeshua as their leaders. Ezra came with the second group. When one servant of God passes on, God raises up another. Praise God that generation after generation, He raises up men to lead His people forward.

Ezra was a teacher – a scribe who was skilled in the law of Moses, a man who had studied the word of God in depth – 7:6). We read that he had set

his heart to *study* God's Word, to *practice* it and then to *teach* it (7:10). What an example for us to follow. God needs men today who will study, practise and teach His Word – in that order! Remember that if you want God to use you.

If Ezra had stayed in Babylon, we would never have heard of him. Heaven recognises those who leave Babylon and move to Jerusalem. Six times in this book, we read that Ezra “*went UP*” from Babylon to Jerusalem. Moving from Babylon to Jerusalem is always a step UP and is the result of “*the good hand of God being upon a man*” (7:9). Those who left Babylon and went to Jerusalem became the ancestors of the twelve apostles of Jesus. Our children and our descendants are all affected by the decisions that we take today.

The king of Persia, at that time, was a descendant of Esther. This made it easier for the Jews.

In *Chapter 7:12*, we read an interesting contrast of titles: Artaxerxes king of kings, and Ezra scribe of the law of God of heaven!! We all know which title is greater.

Chapter 7:18 indicates the tremendous confidence that the king had in Ezra as a man of integrity that he could tell him: “*Whatever seems good to you and to your brothers to do with the rest of the silver and gold, you may do according to the will of your God*”. Every servant of God should be a man of such financial integrity that even the heathen have confidence in him. But alas, how rare it is to find people like that today.

In spite of all that the king did for the Jews, Ezra is careful to give all the glory to God and not to the king. It was God Who had put those kind thoughts in the king's mind. He is equally careful to give the glory to God for giving him the strength to lead God's people out of Babylon (7:27, 28).

In *Chapter 8:1*, we read of another list of people who went out of Babylon. This time we notice that the number of Levites has decreased to just 38 (7:18, 19). The number of those who can trust God and live by faith in Him keeps decreasing!

In *Chapter 8:21*, we read that Ezra proclaimed a fast. This was a way of expressing their humble dependence on God for a safe journey to Jerusalem. Ezra was ashamed to ask the king for soldiers to protect them, after having made such a bold confession before the king of their faith in an almighty God: “*The hand of our God is favorably disposed to all those who seek Him, but His power and His anger are against all those who forsake Him*” (8:22).

In *Chapter 8:24–30*, we see the wisdom Ezra exercised in the handling of the silver and gold that was being transported to Jerusalem. He told the priests, “*This is a sacred deposit. Be careful with it. When you come to Jerusalem you must deliver all of it exactly, to the leaders there.*”

This teaches us the importance of being faithful in the use of money, when building the Body of Christ.

We find the phrase “*the good hand of our God upon us*” appearing a number of times in *Ezra*, indicating how dependent they were, as weak and helpless exiles on God’s help for everything. This is how God’s work is done today as well. There was no pillar of cloud or fire to lead Ezra and his band of exiles back to Jerusalem – only the invisible presence of God.

In *Chapters 9 and 10*, we read of Ezra having to deal with the problem of mixed marriages in Israel. The first thing Ezra did when he heard about it was to mourn for the failure of God’s people himself (9:3). He then gathered some others like him who trembled at God’s Word and had a prayer-meeting along with them, where they confessed their own sins instead of blaming and judging the others (9:5–15). Ezra prayed, confessed his sins, wept, and prostrated himself (10:1). “*He did not eat bread nor drink water, for he was mourning over the unfaithfulness of the exiles*” (10:6). He was an upright man and a scholar in God’s Word. Yet he wept and prayed because his fellow-Jews had sinned. This is the best way to solve problems in the church even today. We must have in the church, the sound of praise to the Lord and also the sound of weeping for our sins.

Ezra and his fellow-Jews had gathered together before God with a sincere concern for God’s Name. You may wonder then why God did not stop the rain for them, for it says that it rained heavily all the time that the people were sitting there in the open square before the temple (10:9). Perhaps it was so that God could test who were wholehearted and who were not!

Ezra taught the people to make restitution, to set things right, and to confess their sins (10:11). A few people opposed him, but the majority supported him. Once again there is a list of the compromisers (10:18–44). God keeps a list of the compromisers even today.

And that’s how the book of *Ezra* ends.

NEHEMIAH

COMPLETING THE WORK IN JERUSALEM

There are two movements of Israel described in great detail in the Old Testament.

The movement *from Egypt to Canaan* symbolises our personal life – coming out of sin, out of Satan's grip, out of the world and out of legalism, through the blood of Christ, water-baptism and the baptism in the Holy Spirit, into a life of victory over sin and a personal walk with God.

The movement *from Babylon to Jerusalem* symbolises our corporate life – leaving counterfeit Christendom and coming into fellowship with others in a genuine expression of the Body of Christ.

Many Christians think that Babylon refers to certain denominations in Christendom and imagine that once they have left those dead denominations, they have left Babylon. This is not true.

Babylon is a *commercial* system. The principle of all commercial systems is profit – gain for oneself. As long as a man is living by the principle of “*personal gain through Christianity*” – *What he can gain by doing something for the Lord, What he can gain by joining a church or organisation, etc.* – he is motivated by the principle of Babylon. A Christian who lives after the flesh and seeks his own, even if he is in the best denomination in the world, is still a part of Babylon. The spirit of Babylon is found primarily *within* a man, and not primarily in a denomination.

Jerusalem however is a city of *sacrifice*. Its spirit is the opposite of the business spirit found in Babylon. It is the spirit found in the words of David when he said, “*I will not offer to the Lord that which costs me nothing*” (2 Samuel 24:24). To build the body of Christ – “*the heavenly Jerusalem*” – requires such a selfless spirit that is concerned about the

glory of God alone, and that does not seek one's own. And a person with such a spirit may be found at times even in a dead denomination. For the spirit of Jerusalem too is primarily an *inward* thing, and not an outward matter.

If we seek to build the Body of Christ, it is important that we gather together those who have understood this *principle of sacrifice*. Otherwise we shall just build another system like the old one. This is what many of the so-called '*separated churches*' have done, and now they are just as dead (or more dead) than the mainline denominations.

Jerusalem's Broken Wall and Burnt Gates

Nehemiah was one of the men God used in the movement of His people from Babylon to Jerusalem. He lived about 70 years after Zerubbabel, Joshua, Haggai and Zechariah. The temple had been built and Ezra had already gone to Jerusalem – about 13 years earlier.

The burden God had given Haggai, Zechariah and Zerubbabel was to build the temple. Ezra's burden was to teach people the Word of God. But Nehemiah's burden was to build the walls of Jerusalem, organise the city's administration, and bring people back to the covenant that they had forsaken. He was a reformer. Spiritually, he was a man of vision and prayer. Practically, he was an organizer and a motivator. So he had all the qualities that were required in a leader of God's people at such a time as this.

Nehemiah was living in Susa, the capital of the world's only super-power of those days – the Medo-Persian empire – and was on the personal staff of its king, Artaxerxes.

Chapter 1:1–3: When Hanani and other Israelites came to Susa from Judah, Nehemiah was concerned enough to find out the state of the exiles who had returned and the state of Jerusalem. This is the primary characteristic of any man whom God uses – he has a concern for people and then God gives him a burden. If you want to serve the Lord, begin with a concern for others. God never uses a man who has no concern for others. Nehemiah asked Hanani, "How are things going on there?" And Hanani told him that the walls were broken down and the gates burned with fire.

In *Isaiah 60:18*, we read that the walls of Jerusalem symbolise salvation and the gates symbolise praise.

The walls speak of separation from the world and of security. God wants the church to be separate from the world. The walls have to be high, so that a worldly-minded person cannot join the church. To be a part of Jerusalem, one has to be a disciple, one who loves Jesus more than anything else on earth. Throughout the last 20 centuries, preachers have lowered the standards that Jesus and the apostles laid down,

so that now the walls are so low, that anyone can jump over the wall and come in. Jesus once said that one who climbed over the wall and came in was a thief (*John 10:1*). There is a way to come in – through the gate – and the gate to Jerusalem is very narrow. But preachers have lowered the standards so that the wall of separation is now very low. In some places, the wall is broken down completely, so that there is no difference between the church and the world. In fact, many worldly people behave much better than many so-called “believers”. That is what a church with broken-down walls is like.

The gates symbolise the spirit of victorious praise that must always be found in the church. The gates are also the place where the elders of the city sit – the place of authority. The church today has lost the spirit of victorious praise and it has very few men with spiritual authority.

Nehemiah was concerned about the broken walls and the burnt gates. When he heard the news, he wept and mourned for many days, and he fasted and prayed. That is the type of man whom God is looking for today – one who has a concern and a burden when he sees the condition of God’s church.

When was the last time you mourned, not for sorrows of your own, but because the church of Jesus Christ is in such a pathetic condition in India today? When was the last time you fasted and prayed because you were concerned that the name of Jesus should be glorified in the church of Jesus Christ in India today? But if we don’t have a concern in our hearts, we will never be the men and women that God wants us to be.

Nehemiah lived under the old covenant. He did not have the Holy Spirit dwelling in him, as we have. He did not have a full Bible, no church-fellowship, books, tapes or conferences such as we have today in such abundance. He did not know anything about the cross. Yet he had such a tremendous burden. He was not a “full time worker”. He was a man who had a secular job. He supported himself and served the Lord. Nehemiah is a great example of a man who was absolutely selfless and who was concerned for the glory of God’s Name alone. If we can be challenged to emulate his example, God may be able to do something with our lives too.

The movement of God’s people from Babylon to Jerusalem began with Daniel. Daniel was a man who *fasted and prayed* in Babylon. The movement continued through Joshua, Zerubbabel, Haggai and Zechariah. All of them had a burden for the building of Jerusalem. *Fasting and prayer* are mentioned frequently in the books connected with this movement out of Babylon. Ezra and Nehemiah also fasted and prayed. Some of us may fast and pray when we need an answer to prayer desperately – to get healing for some family-member or perhaps, to get a job or to find a marriage-partner. That is good. But Ezra and Nehemiah did not fast and pray to get something *for themselves*.

They fasted and prayed for God's name to be honoured in Jerusalem. We should be fasting and praying for that too.

One of Nehemiah's jobs was to taste the wine that the king drank. Kings in those days were afraid of their enemies trying to poison them. So they had someone to taste their wine first before it was given to them. Obviously, such a man would have to be an absolutely loyal and incorruptible man. It is amazing that this heathen king chose for this important task, not one of his own men, but a Jew! That gives us a little indication of the testimony that Nehemiah had as a man of integrity. The king relied 100% on Nehemiah – and as a result, Nehemiah became a man with great influence in the palace of the world's greatest monarch of that time.

The Beginning of Nehemiah's Ministry

Nehemiah had never been sad in the king's presence before (2:1). He was not a gloomy type of person. The king had always seen him happy. And now he was sad. But he was not sad concerning himself or his family. He was sad because Jerusalem was in such shambles. O that there were more people like that today who are sad because they see the sad state of the church of Jesus Christ!

The king said, "Your face looks so sad! This is nothing but sadness of the heart." And Nehemiah was afraid (2:2). It was a terrible thing to ruffle the opinions of a king in those days. I love to see Nehemiah's honesty in admitting that he was afraid. Fear is not something that we can eliminate completely from our lives. *We will feel fear as long as we are here on earth, but we must never act on fear.* Paul said he had fears (2 Corinthians 7:5). But he never acted on those fears. If you are living in a dangerous place, or if you are going to serve the Lord in a place where your life could be threatened – there are many places like that in India today – you will naturally feel fear. You don't have to be ashamed of that. You are human. But you must never act on the basis of that fear. *We can be careful and act with caution, but not with fear.* Fear is the opposite of faith, and when we act in fear, we are acting in unbelief. We should never forget that God cares for us.

Although Nehemiah was afraid, he still told the king, "*My face has to be sad because the city, the place of my fathers' tombs, lies desolate and the gates have been burned with fire.*" So the king asked, "What do you want?" Nehemiah prayed a quick, short prayer (the best thing to do in such situations) and replied, "*If it pleases the king, please send me to Judah to rebuild that city.*" The king said, "*How long are you going to be away?*" A time was fixed and he went (2:3–6).

He went to Jerusalem and stayed alone three days without going anywhere – probably fasting and praying (2:11). Then he rose at night

and took a few men with him. He had not told anyone what God had put into his mind, because he knew that there were enemies who would try and hinder him (2:10). He knew it was no use gathering people together who had no burden for God's work. So he went with just a few and inspected the walls and gates.

As soon as this was known, opposition began, just as in Ezra's time. As soon as someone is concerned that the name of Jesus should be honoured, opposition begins immediately. The devil is alert to such moves among God's people. That is one reason why many people never seek to live wholly for God and serve Him. They are afraid of opposition from the devil.

But actually one way of knowing that you are in the will of God is to find yourself being confronted by the devil frequently. If the devil leaves you alone, you can be fairly sure that you are completely outside the will of God. As far as I am concerned, one of the indications that I am on the right path is that the devil stirs up people against me and creates all types of situations to hinder me. Throughout church history, this has been the experience of all who have sought to serve the Lord in sincerity.

Sanballat and Tobiah mocked and despised the Jews and said, "What is this you are doing? You are rebelling against the king" (2:19). But Nehemiah replied saying, "*The God of heaven will give us success. We are going to arise and build. But you people have no portion or right or memorial in Jerusalem. We do not work together with you*" (2:20).

Nehemiah was a great organizer and a man who could motivate people. The people worked with him happily, because he worked himself. That is the type of leader God needs in India today – one who will fast and pray, who has a concern for God's name, who is good at organising and motivating people to work for the Lord, and one who works with his own hands as well.

We see in *Chapter 3* that Nehemiah organised the work very quickly. That fact is not mentioned here, because Nehemiah was too humble to tell anyone about it. But we can see here that everyone was allotted his own task. Even such leaders as the high priest were given a task to do (3:1). The high priest was the most respected man in the city. But he was not allowed to sit down and supervise the work. No. He also had to take the bricks and mortar and work with his own hands to help rebuild the city. It is amazing to see how Nehemiah could get such leaders also to work with their own hands. There we see something of the greatness of Nehemiah. He gave people the feeling that no-one was too big to do manual work. All of them were brothers and sisters. This is the spirit that we need in the church too.

Notice an expression that occurs often in this chapter: “*next to him*” (3:2, 4, 7, 8). That means that the wall was built without a gap anywhere. They were all different types of people, but they all worked together, cooperating with one another so that there would not be an inch of a gap in the wall. Even the women worked with their hands (3:12). Shallum was a senior official in Jerusalem. His daughters also dirtied their hands working with brick and mortar.

Opposition from the Enemy

In *Chapter 4*, we see Sanballat the enemy becoming furious as he saw the wall coming up. The wall didn’t cause any problems for Sanballat personally. Why then was he bothered? He was instigated by Satan. We see the same thing today too. When as Christians, we do a work for the Lord in some area, we don’t harm anyone in any way. Yet many of the people there oppose us vigorously! We wonder why! We are doing good to all of them and being a blessing to society. Then why are the people angry? The only way we can explain the opposition and anger of such people is that they are being instigated by Satan. Why are people in India angry with Christians who are improving the lot of the poor people? We are not harming them in any way. They are angry because Satan hates anyone who glorifies the Name of Christ in any way. We find this principle throughout Scripture. In Nehemiah’s time, the enemies of the Jews became furious and tried to bring governmental pressure on the Jews. We see the same thing in India today.

Sanballat then tried to influence the rich people to oppose the work of the Jews and Tobiah made fun of the work. What did Nehemiah do? He did not get into an argument or discussion with them. He prayed saying “*O God, we are despised. These people are against us. We are only building the wall and these people are against us*” (verse 4). And the wall continued to be built, because “*the people had a mind to work*” (4:6). Sanballat and Tobiah then conspired to fight against Jerusalem and to cause a disturbance in it (verses 7, 8). Nehemiah, however, continued to pray and set up a guard against their enemies day and night (verse 9). In other words, they both *watched* and *prayed*. They were alert and watched for the enemy, and they also prayed. This is how we must work in our day too.

One of the biggest problems we face in Christian work is that in addition to the enemies who attack us from without, we also face those who murmur and discourage us from within. In the *Acts of the Apostles*, we read that when the disciples multiplied, there was a murmuring among the Greek widows saying, “*We are not getting as much food as the Hebrew widows. There is some partiality here*” (*Acts 6:1*). Murmuring coming

from within the camp was something that Nehemiah had to deal with too. People in Judah began to murmur saying, “*There is a lot of rubbish here and we can’t deal with all this*” (verse 10). And Nehemiah had to handle all that murmuring and discouragement. The Jews who lived near them were terribly frightened and shared their fear with others *ten times* saying, “*They will come against you from every side, be careful*” (verse 12). In the church too, we will find many who seek to put fear and discouragement into our hearts.

But Nehemiah was not frightened. He told the people, “*Don’t be afraid. Remember the Lord who is great and awesome, and fight for your brothers and your sons and your daughters*” (verse 14). “*If we fear God, we need fear nothing else*” (Isaiah 8:12, 13 - Living). If we really believe that God Almighty is supporting us in what we do, it is ridiculous and foolish to fear anyone.

In *Chapter 5:1–13*, we see Nehemiah’s great care for the poor and the oppressed and those who were in debt, in their midst. He spoke to their creditors and got them all released from their debts. In *verse 18*, we see Nehemiah’s wonderful example in not taking any of the money he was entitled to, as governor of the province – even though he was working so hard and feeding 150 Jews and many from other nations at his table daily! He was a hospitable man who served God, like Noah and Paul did, at his own expense. He used all the money available just for building the wall. Here was a man who lived with great sacrifice and did not use any of the money given for God’s work for himself. Wherever God sees a servant of His who is faithful with money, there will be no limit to which God uses him. God forsakes many of His servants, because He sees them taking advantage of their brothers financially.

Chapter 6: Here we read clearly that the wall was completed without any gaps whatsoever. Now Sanballat tried another tactic. He said, “*Come, let us have a discussion together in the plain of Ono*” (6:2). But Nehemiah was not going to be deceived. He sensed in his spirit that they were going to harm him. God takes care of his servants and protects them. Nehemiah gave them a wonderful reply, which we should give as well, in similar circumstances: “*I am doing a great work, and I cannot leave it and come down to you*” (6:3). When God has given us a task to do, we must stick to that, and never waste our time in useless discussions. With that attitude Nehemiah finished the wall in just 52 days (*verse 15*). For 90 years, from the time that the first exiles had come back to Jerusalem, this wall had not been built. God had to wait until he found one man. When that one man was found, he did the job in less than two months. Many things that God wants done today are not being done. Many years go by. What is God waiting for? He is waiting for a man who has a burden, who will not be discouraged by opposition, and who will do the work at

his own cost. Nehemiah also faced problems from the nobles in Judah who had marriage links with Tobiah, the enemy of the Jews. Nehemiah was surrounded by compromising rulers in Judah. But he went forward single-handed and fulfilled the task God had given him.

Revival

Chapters 8 and 9 show us the tremendous revival that God brought among the Jews through the influence that two godly men – Ezra and Nehemiah – had over an entire nation.

In *Chapter 8*, we read what God did through Ezra. He took the Word of God and gathered all the men and women and children who were above the age of understanding. He then conducted a *6-hour Bible study* for them! And it says there that “*all the people were attentive to the book of the law*” (8:3). They began their meeting with a time of praising God (*verse 4*). And then Ezra took pains to explain to the people the meaning of everything that he read from the Word (*verse 8*). Obviously Ezra had spent many months and years studying the Word himself to have been able to explain it all so clearly to all of them. God had prepared him in secret for this time. Revival broke out and the people began to weep for their sins (*verse 9*). They were then exhorted to share with others the good things that God had given them. In doing so, “*the joy of the Lord would be their strength*” (8:10). The people went out and obeyed that exhortation. The next day Ezra had a Bible-study for the leaders (*verse 13*). When they saw that the Word of God had commanded the Israelites to celebrate “*the feast of booths*” every year in the seventh month, they obeyed it immediately. This was the first time this feast was being celebrated in about 900 years – for this command had not been obeyed since the days of Joshua (*verses 14–17*). Even David, the man after God’s own heart, had not got the Israelites to obey this command. Ezra continued to have Bible-studies for the people for the next seven days (*verse 18*).

In *Chapter 9*, we read what God did through Nehemiah. The chapter begins with the Israelites fasting, confessing their sins and separating themselves from the heathen (*verses 1, 2*). Then they had a three-hour Bible-study time and three hours of praising the Lord and confessing their sins. It was revival all over again (*verse 3*). Then the Levites stood up and cried to the Lord with a loud voice (*verse 4*). In *verses 6 to 31*, we have the longest recorded prayer in the whole Bible. The Levites then rehearsed the history of Israel from Abraham’s time, and their failure during the forty years of wandering in the wilderness and during the times of the judges and the kings and acknowledging that every judgement that God had sent was just and right. They repented and signed a document before God, with Nehemiah signing first of all (*10:1*).

All of this came about through the influence of these two God-fearing men, Ezra and Nehemiah. Their joint ministry was almost exactly like

the functioning of a new-covenant church being led by two elders. What an example for us to emulate today.

Chapter 10 lists a number of decisions that they took as a result of this repentance. It was still not popular to live in Jerusalem, for life was difficult there. But some volunteered to come and live there (11:1, 2).

In *Chapter 12*, we read how Nehemiah organised the people to look after the gates and those who were to lead the times of praise. Notice in the movement of God's people from Babylon to Jerusalem, the constant emphasis on fasting, prayer, confession of sin, many hours of Bible-study, long meetings and much praising of God.

In *Chapter 13*, we see Nehemiah's zeal for purity in God's house. He went into the temple and did something similar to what Jesus did when He cleansed the temple in Jerusalem. Nehemiah found that people had allowed their unconverted relatives to stay in the temple. Eliashib the priest was related to Tobiah (13:4) and had prepared a large room for him. Nehemiah chased them all out. He "*threw out all of Tobiah's household goods and cleaned up the house of God*" (13:8). He also noticed that many people were making money by selling things on the Sabbath (13:15). He rebuked them and warned them and even threatened to use force against them (13:21). If people don't fear God then they must fear a man of God. He also discovered that some of the Jews had married non-Jewish women. Nehemiah "*contended with them, cursed them, slapped them, and pulled out their hair and their beards, and made them swear never to give their children in marriage to non-Jews again.*" (13:25). Thus Nehemiah purified the priesthood without any partiality, appointed duties for the priests and even got down to the nitty-gritty of arranging for the supply of wood for the sacrifices (13:30, 31)!

Nehemiah was a fearless man who was not seeking for a reputation as a kind, gentle person. Many Christian leaders are not firm and authoritative when it comes to maintaining God's standards in the church. When God cannot find a man who is strong and authoritative, in a spiritual Christlike way, God's work suffers. That is how Babylon is built.

I have observed through many years that if God cannot find a strong leader, He cannot build the true church – Jerusalem. I have also discovered that the reason why many leaders are not strong is because they are concerned about their own reputation for gentleness. They think, "What will people think about me if I act like that? I want to have a reputation as a humble, gracious, gentle person." Let me say this: If you are concerned about your reputation, you might as well forget about building the church. You will only build Babylon, even if all your doctrines are right.

Nehemiah was *not* a man like that. He was not concerned about his own reputation – and so God could use him.

ESTHER

GOD IN THE BACKGROUND

The book of *Esther* is the only book in the Bible in which the words ‘God’ and ‘Lord’ never appear. But we see the *hand of God* everywhere in the book – invisibly at work behind the scenes, supporting and helping His people.

The books of *Ezra* and *Nehemiah* dealt with those Jews who left the comfort of Babylon and Medo-Persia and went to Jerusalem to do the difficult task of rebuilding it. They did it because they had a burden to establish a testimony for God in Jerusalem. So God openly manifested Himself in support of them.

The events mentioned in *Esther* took place between the 6th and 7th chapters of *Ezra* – after the first batch of Jews had returned to Jerusalem. In *Esther*, we read of the Jews who did *not* want to pay the price of going back to Jerusalem, but who wanted to live in the comfort of Babylon and Medo-Persia. So God did not permit His Name to be associated with them openly. This is why God’s Name is not found in this book.

Many believers imagine themselves to be very dedicated people just because they feel emotionally moved when they sing songs of devotion to the Lord on Sunday mornings. But the human heart is deceitful, and such believers can go from such meetings to live for themselves, and seek their own, without any concern for the Lord’s work or for the building of His church on earth. They do not even get a missionary magazine to read in their homes. They look forward to going to heaven and they seek God for good health and for prosperity. When they face a problem, they are quick to run to God for help. But when the problem is solved, they are back to their old way of life – living for themselves. Such believers drift along in life, useless to God and useless to men.

If you want God to publicly identify Himself with you, you must be totally sold out for Him. You must say, “Lord, I am *not* going to live for comfort,

money, honour or pleasure. I am going to live only for You. I am willing to be what You want me to be." Those are the type of people you read of in *Ezra* and *Nehemiah* and there is a list of their names there.

But when we come to the book of *Esther* there is no list of names, because God did not identify Himself with these people. But He still cared for them. God makes the sun to rise upon the good *and the evil*. He gives material blessings and physical health to both believers and unbelievers. And so He protected the Jews who stayed in Persia too.

The Danger the Jews Faced

King Ahasuerus, who was the world ruler of his time, got drunk one day and told his queen Vashti to come and appear before all the other men (1:10, 11). She was a modest queen and said, "I won't come." The king was angry with her and rejected her for disobeying him, and then began to look for another queen. Esther was a pretty Jewish girl. So her uncle Mordecai encouraged her to apply for the job!

Mordecai was a God-fearing man who had many good qualities. But he was a compromiser. The walls and gates of Jerusalem were broken down at this time. But Mordecai was *not concerned* about all that. Nehemiah who came along 35 years later and lived in this very same country, however *was concerned*. There we see the qualitative difference between Nehemiah and Mordecai. Whereas Mordecai was concerned about *his own safety*, Nehemiah was concerned about the purposes of God.

Mordecai and Nehemiah represent two types of believers – those who stay in Babylonian systems and those who leave those systems and move to Jerusalem. God does not forsake those in Babylon. No. He provides for them and protects them from harm. But if you want to fulfil God's purposes, you have to move out of Babylon and say, "Lord, show me your will for my life."

Mordecai knew that the Scriptures clearly taught that a Jewish girl was never to marry a non-Jewish man. This was a very serious sin. Nehemiah had to deal with this problem a few years later (*Nehemiah* 13:25). But Mordecai encouraged this marriage, just because the bridegroom happened to be the king!

Do you think Mordecai felt he was doing something wrong in encouraging Esther to marry a heathen king? No. Why? Because once a person starts compromising in one area, he gets so used to it that very soon he can compromise in another area, without his conscience troubling him.

Even though what the king asked Vashti to do was wrong, and what Mordecai did was wrong, yet the Lord in His sovereignty overruled their mistakes and brought Esther to the throne in order to save the Jewish people from being slaughtered.

One day Mordecai heard of a plot being formed to assassinate the king. He told Queen Esther and she informed the king. The matter was investigated and those who were plotting against the king were caught and hanged (2:23). After these things the king promoted a man called Haman to be the second-ruler (3:1). All the king's servants bowed down to Haman (*verse 2*). But Mordecai was a God-fearing man and refused to bow to Haman. Haman wondered why Mordecai would not bow down, and discovered that it was because he was a Jew. So Haman became very angry with the Jewish people. He decided to wipe out the whole Jewish race and very cleverly got the king to pass an order that on a certain date all the Jews were to be killed. For this, he promised to pay *one billion rupees* into the king's treasury! He was a rich and influential man.

Haman was the Hitler of the 5th century B.C. But Haman did not succeed. Neither did Hitler, 25 centuries later. Nobody can succeed to exterminate the Jews, because God promised Abraham 4000 years ago that He would bless his descendants. *Hamans* will come and go and *Hitlers* will come and go, but God's purposes will be fulfilled.

Haman was an Agagite (3:1) – a descendant of King Agag the Amalekite. King Saul had not killed all the Amalekites as God had commanded him to (*1 Samuel 15*). Perhaps a baby boy had survived then and now 600 years later his descendant arose to be a troubler of the Jews. Sin that we don't deal with thoroughly in our lives will come back to trouble us years later.

When Mordecai heard about this plan, he sent a message to Esther and told her, "*You have attained royalty for this particular time.*" (4:14). Mordecai told her, "Don't imagine that because you are living in the king's palace you can escape. If you remain silent at this time, what will happen? Deliverance will come for the Jews from somewhere else." We don't find the word 'God' even here – not even the word 'prayer'. Even Esther told the Jews only to fast for her for three days and night. She did not tell them to pray, only to fast (4:16).

The king's authority was such in those days that even Queen Esther could not go before him if she had not been invited by him. The punishment to go into the king's presence uninvited was death. But Esther's attitude was "*If I perish, I perish*" (4:16). She was willing to lay down her life to save God's people and she went before the king. She obtained favour in his sight and she invited him and Haman for a banquet.

At the banquet, God arranged circumstances so that Esther did not get an opportune moment to reveal Haman's wicked scheme to the king. This was so that Haman's full wickedness would be revealed – for Haman had not yet built the gallows that he built later that night. There is a reason why God delays judgement. God told Abraham that the Canaanites would not be judged in his lifetime, because they were not ripe for judgement at

that time. They became ripe for judgement only 400 years later (*Genesis 15:13–16*).

Haman was very proud because he had been invited to Esther's banquet. He went home and boasted about that and about how rich he was (5:11). He boasted about his ten sons (9:10) and about how the king had promoted him. "But", said he, "*all this does not satisfy me as long as I see this man Mordecai not bowing down to me*" (5:13). So Zeresh his wife and his friends suggested to Haman that he make a huge gallows 75 feet high to hang Mordecai. 75 feet high is the height of a 7-storey building. You don't need a 75-foot gallows to hang a man. You need only a 10-foot gallows. Why did he make one 75 feet high? So that Mordecai could be humiliated and so that the whole city would be able to see him hanging there. But while Haman and his wife were planning evil and building the gallows the whole night, Mordecai was sleeping. There was no need for him to remain awake when God was awake and working to protect him (See *Psalms 127:2*). God was watching Haman's actions and He had already planned to do something about it.

The Victory of the Jews

One of the wonderful things we see in *Esther* is the way God worked in sovereign power on behalf of His people.

That night the king could not sleep (6:1). Why was it that the king could not sleep? Because God kept him awake. When people are plotting against us, God works on our behalf to protect us from them. Mordecai was fast asleep and did not know that a 75-foot gallows was being made that night to hang him the next morning.

Because the king could not get any sleep, he asked that the history books of the empire be read to him. Perhaps he thought he would go to sleep as the history books were being read!! So the history books were read – and he still could not get any sleep. God made sure of that. They went on reading the books to the king right through the night. At about 6 o'clock in the morning, they came to the story of how Mordecai had saved the king's life. When the king heard that, he said, "*What did we do for Mordecai for saving my life?*" (6:3). They said, "*Nothing has been done.*" So the king planned to honour Mordecai.

At that very moment – you see the amazing timing of God here – Haman came to the king's palace to get permission from the king to hang Mordecai. Before Haman could speak, the king told him, "*I want to honour somebody. How do you think I should do it?*" Haman, conceited man that he was, immediately thought that the king must be thinking of honouring him. So he said, "*Let him ride on the king's horse and let a prince lead him down the street and say, 'This is how the king will honour anyone who is faithful.'*" The king said, "*Go and do that for Mordecai*

straightaway” (6:10). I would have loved to have seen Haman’s face at this time!

It is wonderful to see how God turns the tables on Satan. But this was only the beginning of Haman’s humiliation.

When Haman went to Esther’s banquet that night, Esther exposed Haman’s plan to the king. Haman fell down before Esther and begged for mercy. He who had wanted the Jews to kneel before him now kneels down before a Jew. The Lord said to one of His faithful churches, “*I will make them to come and bow down at your feet and to know that I have loved you*” (*Revelation 3:9*).

Because Haman had boasted to many about the gallows he had made for Mordecai, others knew about it. Therefore they suggested to the king that Haman himself be hanged on it. How good it would have been if he had kept quiet about it. He who had wanted to humiliate Mordecai before the nation is now humiliated himself.

“*He who digs a pit for others will fall into it himself*” (*Proverbs 26:27*).

“*The righteous is delivered from trouble and the wicked takes his place*” (*Proverbs 11:8*).

In *Chapter 8*, we read how Mordecai was promoted and given Haman’s job.

In *Chapter 9*, the Jews destroy their enemies.

Mordecai became like Joseph and Daniel, an advisor to the greatest king on earth of his time.

God was good to these Jews, even though they stayed back in Persia.

All of this is written for our instruction to teach us that nobody can harm us in any way, until God’s time comes. Twice it is written about Jesus, “*They could not arrest Him because His time had not yet come.*” (*John 7:30; 8:20*). They could not chop off Paul’s head until God’s time for him on earth was over, because God works on behalf of His servants to protect them.

If God worked on behalf of these people who were compromisers, who were seeking their own in Persia, how much more He will do for us today who want to live for Him totally. That is the great encouragement that comes to us from the book of *Esther*. When we are asleep, God works on our behalf to protect us from evil men who may seek to destroy us.

If we have that faith, we can go out and serve God in any situation, however difficult. If the devil can put fear into our hearts and make us act on that fear, then we will never be able to serve God. Remember that when we act in fear, we are glorifying the devil and proclaiming that the devil is almighty and that God cannot protect us. There are

many believers who live with that type of fear. But one who has faith in God will say, “*God is almighty. Everything in Scripture shows me that God works on behalf of His people. He is watching over us all the time. The eyes of the Lord run to and fro throughout the whole earth to work on our behalf. The Lord who watches over me will never slumber or sleep. He is the One who protects me.*”

We need never have any fear, even if multitudes of people scheme against us. When we serve the Lord, Satan will get many people to try and harm us. I have had many experiences where evil people schemed and planned things to hurt me and trap me. But things didn’t work out the way they anticipated, because God in heaven was observing all their evil schemes. He frustrated their plans, turned the tables on them and made fools of them and of the devil whom they served. What did I have to do? Just trust in God – and sleep like Mordecai did!

This is the God we worship and serve.

The Jews were triumphant there in the book of *Esther* and the enemy was defeated.

It will be like that in our lives too.

JOB

THE PROBLEM OF SUFFERING

The book of *Job* is the only one of the 39 books in the Old Testament that is written by someone who has no connection with Abraham. His wealth is mentioned in sheep and cattle just like Abraham's was; and he is the priest in his own family, like Abraham was. He lived longer than Abraham too. All these facts indicate that Job must have lived in the period between Noah and Abraham. So Job is one of the earliest men of God that we know of, after Enoch and Noah.

This book must have been written during Job's lifetime – for the private conversations that Job had with his wife and his friends are recorded in such great detail. That would not have been possible if the book had been written even a few years after the events took place. The book of *Job*, therefore, is the first book of inspired Scripture – written hundreds of years before *Genesis* (which was written by Moses about 1500 years before Christ).

It is interesting to see that when God decided to write Scripture, the very first book He wrote was, not about creation, but about *a godly man*. That teaches us what God always looks for. He looked for a godly man in the time of Enoch, in the time of Noah and in the time of Job. God planned from the beginning to give us 66 books of Scripture. And in the very first of those books, He wrote about what was uppermost in His heart – *a godly man*.

The book of *Job* gives us an insight into some matters that are not found anywhere else in the Bible. We see here what happens in the “*heaventlies*” when one of God's children is suffering on earth. Job himself did not know what was happening there, when he was suffering. If he had known it, he would have been greatly comforted and strengthened in the midst of his trials. But this has now been revealed to us. So we are in a much better position now than Job was.

Job must have discovered this fact by Divine revelation, *after* he had come through his sufferings and been blessed by God. So we can understand why Job complained so much. But *we* cannot find comfort in Job's complaints and imagine that we can do the same thing – because we have been given much more revelation than Job had. To whom more is given, more is required.

Even though it is true that God works through the church corporately, yet He often uses *one* man to influence many others in the church. The apostle Paul is one example. What loss the church would have suffered if Paul had not been available to God as totally as he was. Single-handedly, Paul kept the wolves from entering the church in Ephesus for three years. As soon as he left the scene, the wolves entered in (*Acts 20:29, 30*). God needs godly men (and women) like Job and Paul, even today.

A Godly Man

Notice the first sentence in the first inspired book of Scripture: "*There was a man in the land of Uz, whose name was Job, and that man was blameless, upright, fearing God and turning away from evil*" (*Job 1:1*). Can you see the heart of God in the first sentence of Scripture? It was about *one man* – a man identified by his name – *Job* – and by the place he lived in – *Uz* (so that he is not confused with some other Job living somewhere else). And God gives His testimony of that man – not about his cleverness, or his wealth, or his reputation with other men, but only about his *character*. There we see what God truly values – *uprightness, fear of God and turning away from all evil*. I hope that challenges us.

God is not looking for people with Bible-knowledge primarily. Job did not have any Bible knowledge because there was no Bible then. He had no-one around him to encourage him to live a godly life either. Even the preachers of his day only discouraged him by what they said. But in spite of all this, he lived an upright life.

When we read of Job suffering so much – losing all his property and his ten children in a single day – we can wonder whether this story is only a parable. But 1400 years after Job lived, God said in *Ezekiel 14:14* (repeated in *verse 20*), that Job was one of the three most righteous men who ever lived, Noah and Daniel being the other two. (Amazingly, God included young Daniel also, who was living at that time in Babylon!!). And the Holy Spirit, through James, writes about the endurance of Job (*James 5:11*). That proves that this is a true story.

In *1:4, 5* we see the concern that Job had for his children. The first book of Scripture shows us the importance of having a godly family. A godly man brings up his children in godly ways.

Job had seven sons and three daughters. They had all grown up and were living in their own houses. Job was very concerned that none of them should fall away from God. His sons used to celebrate their birthdays with a few days of feasting in their own houses and would invite their sisters to come and eat and drink with them. When these periods of feasting were over, Job would send for them. He rose up early in the morning (Even that significant habit of this godly man is mentioned in the first pages of inspired Scripture.) Job would then offer *separate* burnt offerings for *each* of his children and consecrate each of them afresh to the Lord. Job did that because he felt that his children may have sinned *in their hearts* during their time of feasting. Notice that he was concerned that they might have sinned *in their hearts*. Job was not thinking merely of external sins like worshipping idols or adultery that they may have committed. He was concerned about sin *in their hearts* by which they may have dishonoured God. And he prayed that God would forgive his children their sins. A man becomes godly by being sensitive to sin in the heart. Such a man shuts the door, gets alone with God, judges himself and has dealings with God over sin in his heart that other people know nothing about.

There were many good things that Job did, like caring for the poor, the blind and the widows (29:12–16). But primarily he brought up his children in godly ways. He prayed for his children – and it is written that he did so *continually*. A godly man has habits that he practises constantly. He practices his faith continually and not in occasional spurts. Many people seek God only when they are in trouble. But Job was not like that. He lived close to God even when things were going smoothly.

Satan's Discussion with God

In Chapter 1:6, we read of the “sons of God”. This refers to the angels. This phrase is used to refer to direct creations of God. We were not born as a direct creation of God like Adam was created. Adam was called a son of God because God created him directly. We were born through our parents. But when we are born again, that is a direct creation of God – the new creation – and so we are called “sons of God” too.

Satan also came among these angels. He was also a direct creation of God. He could not come into the immediate presence of God in the third heaven for he has been cast out from there forever. But he could speak to God from the second heaven where he had his headquarters. Satan told God that he had been “roaming about on the earth and walking around on it” (1:7). Satan is a world-traveller. Don’t imagine that it is a great thing to be a world-traveller. If God calls you to do that for His glory, that is fine. But remember that in Jesus’ entire earthly life, He travelled only within a circle that was less than 100 miles radius from his hometown of Nazareth – because that was the will of God for Him. So don’t ever imagine that those who travel around the world are the luckiest of all people.

There is a difference between the way God works and the way Satan works. Satan is always restless – roaming to and fro. There is a haste about all his works. God however works slowly and patiently.

Satan travels around the world, watching believers especially. He moves about like a roaring lion, seeking whom to devour (*1 Peter 5:8*). When God asked Satan, “*Have you considered My servant Job?*” Satan replied, “*Yes, I know all about him.*” Satan knows the true spiritual state of every person. His demons also move around everywhere, examining people’s lives and reporting back to him. So Satan knows everything about everybody in the world.

The Lord told Satan what was outstanding about Job: “*There is no-one like him on the earth – a blameless and upright man, fearing God and turning away from evil?*” (*1:8*). The fear of God – or reverence for God – is something that is mentioned much in this first book of inspired Scripture. Here we see that God compared Job with other people on the earth. God does that today too.

In *Revelation 12:10* we read that Satan is the accuser of God’s children. When he accuses believers to God, he speaks the truth. For example, he could say to God: “See that man there who calls himself Your son. He loses his temper. He/she yells at his/her marriage-partner at home. He is unrighteous with money. He says he is serving God, but he is only interested in making money for himself through his ministry”, etc., etc. God being a righteous God, will have to admit that what Satan is saying is true. But in the midst of millions of carnal believers who bring dishonour to the Name of Christ, how delighted God is when He finds *one man* who is upright. God is looking for people whom Satan *cannot* accuse in any way. Satan cannot accuse anyone who confesses his sin immediately to God and thus keeps his conscience clean every moment (*Acts 24:16*). Such a person is “*justified (declared righteous by God) because of the blood of Christ*” (*Romans 5:9*) and he overcomes all of Satan’s accusations (*Revelation 12:11*). Will you be one such person?

Jesus said, “*The prince of the world comes and he finds nothing in Me*” (*John 14:30*). That was why the Father could say, “*This is My beloved Son in whom I am well pleased.*” The Father was so delighted because there was one Person on earth at that time whom He could point out to Satan and say, “See how He is walking.”

1 John 2:6 says, “*He who says he abides in Christ must walk as Jesus walked.*”

It doesn’t matter one bit what our fellow believers think about us. It matters everything what God thinks about us. It matters a lot whether God can point us to Satan and say in the midst of multitudes of compromising,

carnal Christians, “*Satan, I know that many who call themselves My children are compromisers and carnal. But have you seen this man who lives on that street in that town? He is different. He is upright and sincere. Have you seen that woman who lives on that street in that town? She is different. She is godly.*” And Satan’s mouth is shut – because he knows that what God is saying is true. Are you one of those who can shut Satan’s mouth, because God can point you out to Satan?

Whether you are wealthy or poor makes no difference. And lest you think you have to be *poor* in order to be spiritual, remember that the very first godly person in Scripture mentioned in the very first book of the Bible was *a very rich man*.

In fact, that was what provoked the jealousy of other people around Job. They couldn’t bear to see somebody who was both rich and spiritual. They would have been happy if he had been poor and spiritual. Some people have the idea that one has to be poor in order to be spiritual. The *amount of money* we have is totally immaterial. It is *our attitude to the money* we have, that matters. Paul and Peter were very poor. So was Jesus. But Job and Abraham were very rich. God decides such matters. It is like the colour of our skin, or our intelligence level. God determines those things too – and they don’t matter. Spirituality has to do with our character and not with the size of our bank account.

It is not surprising that Satan made Job his target, for *Satan hates upright people*. He hated Job in those days – and he hates such people even today. That is why he does everything in his power to prevent us from being *godly*. Satan troubled Job through his wife and through carnal preachers. But none of this made any difference to Job’s devotion to his God. *What a man Job was! What a challenge he is to us!* We can be like him too.

Let us seek for the approval of God and not that of men. Personally, it will not disturb me one bit, even if all 6 billion people in the world accuse me falsely of being a heretic, a false prophet, a deceiver, a gluttonous man, a drunkard, a winebibber, an adulterer, a thief or any other evil name they can think of – *if only God can point me out to Satan and say, “Have you seen Zac Poonen, an upright man who fears Me and turns away from all evil.”* That commendation from God would mean more to me than anything else on earth. I hope you have such a desire for yourself too.

Even Satan’s recognition of us is more important than man’s recognition of us. Satan recognised that Paul belonged to a different class from the sons of Sceva (Acts 19:15).

In the final analysis, when we stand before the Lord, the opinions of all the billions of people in the world will count for nothing. Only God’s opinion will matter in that day. Even the praises of your fellow-believers are fit only to be thrown in the garbage bin. It’s only what God thinks

about you that matters. People may praise you to the skies, while God thinks nothing of you. On the other hand, people may tear you to pieces and God may consider you to be the greatest man in your generation. Few have the spiritual discernment to recognise a man's worth in his lifetime. So don't get discouraged if you find people don't understand the way you are going. If God sees that you are humble, He will give you grace and you will overcome sin and the world.

Satan accuses all godly people! He has many agents (even among believers) to accuse you. He got people to accuse Jesus Himself. Then don't you think he will accuse you as well?

We read in the book of *Job* that even his three friends accused him. The fourth one, Elihu, was milder in his accusations, but he accused Job too. Accusation is part of the character of Satan and of his agents. But a truly godly man will not allow himself to be affected by those accusations. Those who have spiritual discernment will be able to recognise a godly man, despite what people may say about him.

Three Hedges Around God's People

Satan then told God, “*You have made a hedge around him and his house and all that he has* on every side” (verse 10). From what Satan said, we learn three great truths. God has put a threefold hedge around a godly man: *First* around him personally, *secondly* around his family, and *thirdly* around his finances and his property. Satan can see into the spiritual realm and knows that. We cannot see those hedges, but they are there.

Satan is a spirit and recognised that he couldn't get through to attack Job or his family or his possessions. That is a great comfort to me to know that if I live a godly life, there are three hedges around me too. And none of those hedges can be opened up without God's permission. Here we find in the book of *Job*, that Satan had to ask God for permission to get through those hedges.

The Lord Jesus told Peter something similar, many years later: “*Satan has asked for permission to sift you*” (*Luke 22:31*).

God gave Satan permission to go through one hedge at a time. God didn't open up all the hedges at the same time. At first, God allowed Satan only to attack Job's possessions and his family. Later, God permitted Satan to attack Job's body, but even then He told Satan that he could not touch Job's life. So Satan could not kill Job. Satan would have liked to kill Job but he couldn't. He could only give him boils on his body.

When Hedge Number One was opened up, Satan went in and destroyed all of Job's property. Job's wealth came down from millions to zero in one day!

Then Hedge Number Two was opened up. Inside this hedge were Job's wife and children. So Satan killed all of Job's ten children. He could then have killed Job's wife too. But he didn't, because she was more useful

to Satan alive than dead! He could use her to nag Job and irritate him. A nagging wife (or husband) is a very useful weapon in Satan's hand – and so he would be happy to see such people live long!

There are a few things we can learn about Satan also from the very first pages of inspired Scripture.

First of all, Satan *can only be in one place at one time*. God is everywhere. But if Satan is in one place, he cannot be in another, because he is a created being. But he has many demons roaming around on the earth to do his work.

Secondly, Satan *cannot see the future*. If he could have seen the future, he would have known that Job would finally be far more blessed, and would have left Job alone. If he knew what would result from Christ dying on the cross Calvary, that he himself would be defeated thereby, do you think he would have urged people to crucify Christ? Certainly not! If Satan knew that Haman himself would hang on those gallows, he would not have helped Haman to construct those gallows. He knows what people are doing all over the world, and can guess (like we can) what the result of those actions will be, but he cannot predict the future.

Thirdly, Satan *cannot read your thoughts*. He can only see what you are doing on the outside. All he could know about Job was on the outside. He could not see Job's thoughts.

Fourthly, Satan *needs God's permission to attack God's children*.

It is a great comfort for me to know that this enemy that I am battling does not know anything about the future or of my thoughts and is totally under God's restraining control. On top of all that, he has also been defeated on the cross now. That takes away all my fear of Satan.

When the second hedge was opened up, Job lost all ten of his children. Don't ever criticise a godly man if you see his children suffering or facing problems. Pray for them. His children are targets of Satan, in a way that yours may not be – perhaps because you are a compromiser, unlike him. And so Satan leaves you and your family alone!

Now see how Job reacted to all this. He heard that everything had been lost. One after the other, his servants came and told him that everything was gone. And Job arose, tore his robe, shaved his head, fell to the ground and worshipped God (1:20). That's another thing we see on the very first page of inspired Scripture: A godly man is a *worshipper*. More than knowing the Bible and more than serving the Lord, a man of God is primarily a worshipper. You must be a worshipper when you have everything and you must be a worshipper when you have *lost* everything. Jesus said, "God is a Spirit and those who worship Him must worship

in spirit and truth, and the Father seeks for such worshippers” (John 4:23, 24). To worship God is to give Him everything.

Job said, “*I came from my mother’s womb naked, and I shall return there naked. The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away. Blessed be the name of the Lord.’ Through all this Job did not sin, nor did he blame God.”* (1:21, 22). Job was probably referring here to *Mother Earth* from which he came naked and to which he will return as dust, naked. He willingly accepted whatever the Lord permitted in his life.

When I think of Job’s dedication to the Lord, I am amazed. He did not have the example of Jesus and the apostles that we have. He had no examples whatsoever to follow. He did not have the power of the Holy Spirit that we have. He did not have the Bible that we have. He did not have the encouragement or support of fellow-believers or even of his own wife. Job only had God – and God was enough. If Job could come to such a glorious life, why can’t we?

Satan Enters Through the Third Hedge

Chapter 2: The devil was very unhappy because Job didn’t react the way he thought he would. The Lord told Satan, “*Have you considered My servant Job? He still holds fast his integrity even though you incited Me against him to ruin him without any reason*” (verse 3). Satan replied, “That’s because he loves his own life so much. He doesn’t care for his property or even his children. He really loves only himself. Everything that a man has he will give for his life.” Satan knows the selfishness of man and it is true of all those who are not disciples of Jesus that they will give everything to save their own skin. Man is selfish and in a time of pressure, he thinks of himself primarily.

Satan was saying Job was no different. He challenged God, “Now touch his body and let me see whether he still will stand true to You.” The Lord said, “Go ahead and test him. But you can’t take away his life.” Satan went out and smote Job with sore boils from the sole of his foot to the crown of his head. Imagine how terrible it is to get boils from head to foot. Job couldn’t live in his house any more. He went outside the town and sat on a dung heap, scratching himself among the ashes. And his wife came there to nag him saying, “*Do you still hold fast to your integrity? Curse this wretched God of yours and commit suicide*” (2:9).

Right at the beginning of Scripture, we see Satan tempting people to commit suicide, and tempting them through their loved ones. Adam was tempted through Eve. Job was tempted through his wife. Peter urged Jesus not to go to the cross. Satan can tempt us through our loved ones.

Don’t think that every godly man will have a godly wife. But God can use the ungodliness of the wife to make the man’s godliness to stand out even more, just as the stars shine brighter as the night grows darker.

When Job's wife suggested suicide, he replied saying, "You speak as a foolish woman speaks. Shall we accept good from the Lord and not accept adversity?" (2:10). I wish we had more godly husbands like Job who would stand up to their ungodly wives, instead of trying to please them.

It has been said that when calamity hits you, you must never ask the question, "Why does this happen to me?" unless you have asked the same question when some blessing came upon you!! When you are blessed unexpectedly, do you ever ask, "Why did this happen to me? Why was I blessed and not others?"

When Job's three friends – Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar – heard of his adversity, they came to visit him, saying they wanted to comfort him (2:11). But they didn't actually comfort him at all, when we see the way they spoke to him later on. They only criticised and accused him. All three of them were in fellowship with the devil, the accuser of the brethren.

These three men were jealous of Job, because Job was a godly man, and a rich man. and everything was going well for him and for his family.

Many believers are jealous of godly men, when they see their influence and ministry – and are often waiting for some calamity to hit them. We know that the devil is eager for some calamity to befall godly people. But there are believers who wait for that too, and who are *secretly* happy, when it happens.

These three men pretended that they were very sorry for Job. They wept when they saw Job and tore their robes and threw dust over their heads. They were really good actors. But secretly they were delighted, because they were jealous of him. These three preachers only knew about God. They didn't know God personally. That's why God couldn't point out any of them to Satan.

Godly men suffer attacks from the devil, sometimes from their wives, sometimes physically, and at times financially too, as God takes them through many trials to sanctify them. But perhaps their greatest trials are from their friends and brothers who are jealous of them! Unfortunately there is a lot of this in Christian work, where Christian workers hope that something bad will happen to a more anointed worker, so that his ministry will be destroyed. When God's blessing and anointing are on a godly man, and someone else is jealous of him, God may allow some physical calamity to come to that man, in order to expose the other person's wicked jealousy. Once the other man's evil has been exposed, God will heal the sickness and restore the godly man to health.

Four Preachers

All three of these men could not truly understand why Job suffered as he did. They could only find fault with him. That is because they were religious people like the Pharisees later on, in Jesus' time. There is a difference between a *spiritual* man and a *religious* man. Spiritual people

have been misunderstood by *religious* people in every generation. The Bible says that “**all** who live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted” (2 Timothy 3:12). There are no exceptions to this rule. So, if you don’t want to be misunderstood by other people, then don’t be godly!

1 Corinthians 2:15 says that “*a spiritual man cannot be discerned by those who are not spiritual*”. A godly man is therefore a very lonely man – because very few can understand him. His actions are misunderstood and his words are misunderstood, even by those who know the Scriptures well. *Religious* people know only facts about God. They don’t know God *Himself*. In the midst of many religious people, one will find only a few who know God Himself. Job was one of those rare individuals. If you are a person who *knows* God, you will be misunderstood by people who only *know about* God.

Remember that *religious* people could not recognise Jesus and thought He was the prince of devils. How can they recognise a godly man today? There were two *religious* groups in Jesus’ time, the Pharisees and the Sadducees. The Pharisees were the fundamentalists, and the Sadducees were the liberals. But of these two, the *Pharisees* opposed Jesus more than the Sadducees. In the same way, today, it won’t be the liberals who criticise a godly man as much as the fundamentalists.

But even though a godly man may be a lonely person in this world, God does not forsake him. God allows the trials he faces to give him an education. James says, “*We count those blessed who endured. You have heard of the endurance of Job and have seen the outcome or the end of the Lord’s dealings, that the Lord is full of compassion and is merciful*” (*James* 5:11). The testimony of every godly man will be: “*The Lord is full of compassion and is merciful. Even though I could not understand the difficult ways He led me through, it was to fulfil a glorious purpose in my life, and above all, to glorify God in heaven where the conflict was going on between God and Satan.*”

In the very first book of the Bible, we see the beginning of the modern “*health and wealth gospel*”. Three preachers there told Job that he had lost his health and his wealth because he had lost the blessing of God. Their message was that the blessing of God always brings prosperity and health. Note that this health and wealth gospel was first preached by people who did not know God. It is the same today. Remember that. Job who lost all his wealth and his health was in the perfect will of God. But the three preachers who preached the “*health and wealth*” gospel were completely *out of the will of God*. This is clear from God’s words to them: “*I am angry with all of you. Ask Job to pray for you, lest I punish you*” (*42:8*).

The Book of Job is a great encouragement to us because he faced what we face today.

The three preachers are not picture of our enemies or even of unbelievers. They are a picture of believers who trouble us, misunderstand us and criticise us. It is always more painful when a believer attacks us and accuses us than when an unbeliever does the same things. In the last 50 years, I have faced a hundred times more criticism from believers than I have faced from unbelievers. That is also the history of every servant of God in the history of the church. Jesus faced more opposition from the Pharisees than from the Greeks and the Romans. Pilate wanted to release Him, but Annas and Caiaphas wanted to kill Him. So don't be surprised when you find your maximum opposition coming from believers who spread false tales about you. They are the followers of Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar.

Let us see what God told these three preachers before looking at what they actually told Job. God told Eliphaz at the end: "*I am angry with you and your two friends, because you have not spoken of Me what is right*" (42:7). We must remember these words of God, as we study the words of these three preachers. Some of the things they said appear to be right. But God said they were totally wrong.

Why did God say they were wrong? Because the spirit behind their words was wrong. It is the spirit behind our words that matters. We may say the *right* thing, but if our *motive* is wrong, God will say that our words are wrong. We may be able to justify our words even in a court of law. But in God's eyes, we are wrong, if our attitude or motive is wrong. Motive is all-important before God. So, if you plan to say something to hurt another person, whatever you say will be wrong.

One more preacher joined Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar towards the end – Elihu.

These four are a picture of four types of preachers in Christendom today.

The first preacher – Eliphaz – was a man who majored on speaking about visions and angels. There are preachers like that today who are always talking about the angels and visions they have seen, in order to insert some authority into their words. Eliphaz told Job, "*What I am sharing with you was given to me in secret. It was whispered in my ears. It came in a vision at night when others were sleeping. Fear gripped me. I trembled as the power of God came upon me. I shook with terror. A spirit came in front of my face. It sent shivers up my spine. It stood still in front of me. I couldn't see the face but I saw the form. Then a voice said, 'Can mortal man be upright before God? Can anyone be pure before his Creator?'*" (4:12–17).

The words are absolutely right: *Can a mortal man be upright before God? Can anyone be pure before the Creator?* But the spirit was not the

Holy Spirit – because the Holy Spirit doesn't bring fear and terror into anyone's heart. The kingdom of God is righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. And so the Holy Spirit always brings joy and peace. Don't be deceived by people who talk about visions and dreams and spirits. They are like Eliphaz. I am not saying that all such people are liars. Such visions come from three sources.

First of all, a small percentage of visions and dreams do come from God: The Holy Spirit does give visions and dreams – but they will always be in line with God's Word (*Acts 2:17*). Those who receive a genuine vision however will be reluctant to talk about it. Paul was once taken up to the third heaven, but never spoke about it *for 14 years* – and even then told only one church about it – and that too, only to establish his authority to write Scripture as an apostle. But we don't need to establish our authority for such purposes today. And even when Paul did speak about it, he said he was not permitted to tell them what he had heard in the third heaven. Those are some of the marks of a man who has had a genuine vision.

Secondly, a small percentage of visions come from Satanic sources. Those who are desperate to have a vision, in order to get some honour before men by speaking about it, and open themselves to Satan will be given any number of visions by Satan.

Thirdly, the vast majority of visions come from a person's own fertile imagination. All of us are different as human beings – and some have a more fertile imagination than others. All that such people need to do to get a vision is to shut their eyes for a few moments and begin to imagine!! Immediately they begin to "see" and "hear" things in their mind. They may be quite sincere, but they are deceived about their visions too!

The authority in our words must come from the written word of God, and not from any *private* revelations or visions that we imagine that we got from God.

The second preacher – Bildad – believed in following the traditions of the fathers. He said, "*Consider what our fathers taught us. They are more likely to be right than we newcomers. So let us listen to their words*" (*8:8–10*). He is typical of yet another group of preachers found in Christendom. These people do not wish to disturb any of the traditions that have been handed down for hundreds of years in "their church" – whether right or wrong. They don't want visions or dreams – and they don't want any changes either. They don't want to rock the boat. And they don't want to change the direction of the boat either – even if it is going in the wrong direction!!

Bildad was a gentle person, but he still accused Job. There are people who have the ability to say really hurting things in a soft and gentle way! Their words are smooth but they have the poisonous sting of a serpent in them. Husbands and wives can say quiet words to each other that hurt more than loud, angry words.

The third preacher – Zophar – believed in being angry and critical of everything. He was the one who hit out at Job the hardest. He called Job a talkative idiot (11:2, 12). He is representative of some “self-appointed prophets” who imagine that they are modern-day Elijahs and John the Baptists. They are critical of everything they see and constantly hit out at one and all. Jesus also criticised the Pharisees. But there is *anointed* criticism and there is carnal criticism. Jesus called the Pharisees vipers. Paul called a man an enemy of all righteousness. But God bore witness to their words. But if anyone tries to imitate them, God won’t back them up.

James 3:1 (AMP) says, “*Don’t be a self-appointed censor of other people’s actions.*” A censor is one who examines every word that others speak. The Pharisees were like that. They waited like vultures to catch Jesus in something He said in order to accuse him (*Mark 12:13; Luke 11:54*).

I have met people like that too – who listen to my messages or read my books only in order to find something to accuse me of. So such vultures are found today too!! Such self-appointed critics never do anything for God themselves but are only interested in focusing their microscopes on the words of others who serve the Lord, to find fault with them. Preachers who have no anointing on their own ministries often have nothing else to do but criticise other anointed preachers.

Zophar was a self-appointed censor like that. He used harsh, hard words to criticise Job. He sought to project himself as a man radically devoted to righteousness. But there was no anointing on what he said.

The fourth preacher – Elihu – was a young zealot who had no personal experience of sorrow or suffering. He was young and full of words but with zero experience (32:6, 18). He was better than the other three. He taught the truth accurately. And God was not angry with him as God was with the other three, because Elihu’s spirit was not evil. Elihu is representative of those preachers who teach great, wonderful truths but who have never gone through the deep waters of suffering and trial themselves. They are pious people who are ready to give advice to others on matters of which they have no experience themselves.

Paul’s ministry came out of suffering. He said “*I’ve been through pressure, trials, and tremendous distress; and the strength that God gave me in those times is what I can share with you now*” (*2 Corinthians 1:4–8*). That was a different type of ministry altogether. It came from experience. And that is how our ministry should be.

These four preachers that we see in the book of *Job* are *not* the type of preachers that any of us should imitate. They were all “*health and wealth*” preachers – Elihu being just a little less of that than the others. None of them could accomplish anything in their ministry to Job. They just wasted everyone’s time, like most preachers do today!

Three rounds of discussion between Job and the first three preachers are described in detail in *Chapters 3–31*. Eliphaz and Bildad spoke

three times each and Zophar spoke twice. At the end of their discussions, Elihu spoke once (*Chapters 32–37*). Then God spoke in *Chapters 38–42*. That is a broad outline of the book of Job.

We will look at only *some* of the significant verses in all these discussions.

First Round of Discussion

Eliphaz basically told Job, “*You are suffering because you have sinned*”. He didn’t know anything about Job’s private life. But he accused him nevertheless, just like many people do today. “*My experience shows that those who plant trouble and cultivate evil will harvest the same themselves. So you are getting a harvest of the evil that you have cultivated and the trouble that you have planted in your past life*” (4:8). He was totally wrong.

Job replied saying, “*People complain when there is no salt in their food. Your message is like food without salt and like the uncooked white of an egg.*” (6:6, 7). He used expressive terms to tell Eliphaz that his sermon was tasteless and worthless!

Then Bildad spoke saying, “*Your children must have sinned. They obviously sinned against God. So their punishment is well deserved... If you are pure and live in integrity, God will restore your happy home*” (8:4, 6). Bildad acted like a pious, holy man, who knew all about Job’s children (when in fact he knew nothing). Do you criticise other people’s children? Do you pretend to be God, knowing why others are suffering? Then you are like Bildad.

Job replied to Bildad saying, “*I know this is all true in principle. You want me to be perfect before God. But how can a person be perfect in the eyes of God? I need His mercy*” (9:2, 15). There are many preachers today too who preach impractical theories of perfection and sanctification that don’t work in real life. Job knew God so well that he knew that what he needed was not a theory of sanctification but a living mediator who could stand between him and God and bring them both together (9:33). This is what he did not have. Today, we have One in Christ. Praise the Lord!

Then Zophar spoke saying, “*Should I remain silent while you babble on? God knows those who are false and takes note of all their sins... An empty-headed idiot can’t become intelligent any more than a wild donkey can produce human children*” (11:3, 12). What strong words! Zophar dared to call Job (who was the godliest man of his generation) an empty-headed idiot! He was venting his anger on someone he was jealous of. There are preachers today too who use the pulpit to quote Scripture to vent their anger on someone sitting in the congregation, against whom they have something.

Job’s response to Zophar was one of sarcasm: “*I suppose when you die, there will be no more wisdom in this world. Well, I also know a few things myself. And you are no better than I am*” (12:1–3). Then Job makes one of the most wonderful statement of faith to be found anywhere in the

Old Testament: “*Even if God kills me, I will still trust in Him*” (13:15). Such a statement would be remarkable if made at any time. But when you see the circumstances Job was in – not knowing if the next calamity to hit him would be death – the statement becomes even more remarkable.

Job wonders if he is being punished by God for “*sins of his youth*” (13:26). This was something that bothered David too (*Psalms 25:7*). These two godly men – Job and David – had fallen into youthful sins in younger days, and those sins were serious enough to bother them decades later. Today, we have specific promises from God concerning our sins. If we have confessed our sins to the Lord – no matter how serious they were – they have been forgiven (*1 John 1:9*). God also promises us saying, “*I will remember their sins no more*” (*Hebrews 8:12*). We overcome Satan’s accusations against us “*by the blood of the Lamb*” (*Revelation 12:11*). But Job did not have that assurance and lived with the awareness of the sins of his youth even when he was old enough to be a grandfather. How wonderfully privileged we are under the new covenant. May we never forget that.

Second Round of Discussion

In the second round of discussions, we see Eliphaz saying to Job, “*You are nothing but a windbag... Wicked people are the ones who have pain all through their lives. These wicked people may be fat and rich but their cities will be ruined*” (15:2, 27–28). Eliphaz becomes bolder now and follows Zophar’s example of despising Job, and calls him “*a bag of hot air*”. How arrogant he was to say something like that about God’s chosen man.

Job replies, “*You all are a bunch of miserable comforters. I could say the same things if you were suffering in my place. I could come and preach to you like that too*” (16:2–5). Job also recognised that Satan was behind these attacks, for he says, “*My adversary sharpens his eyes against me*” (16:9 - margin). Satan is always looking at us closely to see if we fail in some way so that he can accuse us. His agents on earth (believers especially) also sharpen their eyes to observe us when we fall. But Job recognised that God allowed this, for he says, “*God has handed me over to ruffians, and tosses me into the hands of the wicked*” (16:11). The realisation that God allowed all this would have brought some comfort to Job. So he goes on to say, “*My Advocate is on high. My eye weeps to God. O that a Man might plead with God for me*” (16:19, 20). How blessed we are to know that we have a Man at God’s right hand pleading for us. Job also tasted something of the “*fellowship of the sufferings of Christ*”, for he says, “*I am one at whom men spit*” (17:6).

Then Bildad said, “*How long, Job, before you stop talking? Speak some sense if you want us to answer. Do you think we are cattle? Do you think*

we have no intelligence? You may tear out your hair in anger but do you think that will make rocks fall off from a cliff? The truth remains that the light of the wicked is snuffed out. God snuffs out the light of the wicked. The light in their tent will grow dark. The confident stride of the wicked will be shortened. The wicked walk into a net. They fall into a pit that God has dug for them in their path.” (18:2–8). That was what he was saying, implying that Job was wicked.

Job’s reply to that was “*Ten times you have tried to insult me now. You should be ashamed of dealing with me so harshly. And even if I have sinned, that’s my concern, not yours. God will deal with that. Why are you bothered about that? You are trying to overcome me using my present humiliation as the evidence of my sin” (19:2–5).*

Job goes on to say that God has removed his brothers, relatives, intimate friends, family members and even his wife far from him and made him the object of derision of servant-maids and little children (19:13–18). But in spite of all that, he goes on triumphantly to say, “*I know that my Redeemer lives. On the last day He will stand on the earth. Even after my skin is destroyed, in my flesh I will see God. I myself will see Him*” (19:25–27). Job was speaking as a prophet here. Through suffering he became a prophet. He might never have seen this wonderful vision of the future if he had not gone through this intense suffering. That is God’s way.

This point, we could say marks a turning point in Job’s attitude. Although he still hasn’t come out of the pit of feeling sorry for himself, yet there is a different tone from now onwards. This is what happens to us too, when we think of the future and fix our hope on being resurrected and seeing our Lord and Redeemer face to face.

The Job warns his preacher friends that there will be a judgement on all who accuse God’s servants (19:28, 29).

Then Zophar spoke a second time accusing Job of being a wicked man who “*oppressed the poor leaving them destitute, and turning them out of their homes because they can’t pay their rent*”, and also of “*being greedy and gluttonous*” (20:19, 20). He concludes that that is why Job’s “*prosperity has vanished, disasters have overtaken him and God has given him a stomach-full of trouble*” (20:22, 23). Zophar’s accusations become more vigorous now.

Now listen to the wisdom of Job in his reply. He is calmer now and more courteous too. The result is that he calms his opponents down too, so that the angry Zophar does not speak any more!! (“*A gentle answer turns away wrath*” – Proverbs 15:1).

Job says, “*Actually the truth is that wicked people sometimes live to a good old age. They are prosperous and see their children and their grandchildren. Their houses are safe, their cattle flourish, and they spend their days in merriment and go to the grave*” (21:7–13). That is absolutely right. Job was no prosperity preacher. This is exactly what we see of wicked people around us even today. Job goes on to say that they live like this,

even though they reject God and never serve Him or obey Him and have no faith in prayer (*verses 14–16*). Job goes on to say, “*Their prosperity is not of their doing*” (*verse 16*) – or in other words, their prosperity was not a reward from God for the way they lived. “*I will have nothing to do with that kind of life,*” says Job – a very sensible reply indeed.

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Third Round of Discussion

Now we come to the third round of discussion. In this round, only two people speak – Eliphaz and Bildad.

Eliphaz now pretends to have supernatural discernment – like some Christians today pretend. Eliphaz was the one who had earlier spoken about visions and spirits etc. He now tells Job, “*I know what happened. You loaned money to a friend of yours and then kept the clothing that he gave you as a pledge and didn't return it. You stripped your friend to the bone. You refused water to a thirsty man who came to your house. You refused food to a hungry man who came to your house. Some widows came to your home and you sent them away without helping them. You crushed the strength of some orphans. These are the reasons why you are surrounded today by traps and fears and you are unable to see your way forward as God's waters of judgment cover you. After all, Job, do you think the land belongs to the powerful, and to those who are privileged? Because you are such an influential man, do you think everything belongs to you? And you imagine that God can't see you or judge you?*” (*Job 22:6–13*).

This was all mere imagination. There was not an atom of truth in these words. How easy it is for us to judge people and to imagine the worst about them!

What is Job’s reply? First of all he makes that amazing statement: “*He knows every detail of what is happening to me. When he has examined me, He will pronounce me completely innocent – as pure as solid gold*” (*Job 23:10 - Living*). Or as other translations put it: “*When he has finished testing me I will come forth as pure gold.*” Job was sure that God knew every detail of what was happening to him – which was a great comfort to him. But today we have an even greater assurance: God arranges every detail of what happens to us, making all things work for our very best (*Romans 8:28*). Hallelujah!! Job was also sure that at the end of this period of testing, he would come forth as refined gold. It is amazing to see the light he had even without a Bible.

Job went on to ask, “Why must the godly wait for so long for God to judge?” He lists the injustices and humiliations that poor people and widows face from rich, evil people who exploit them in many ways. He talks about thieves, murderers and adulterers who seem to get away with the sins they commit (*24:1–16*). But he knows that judgement will catch up with them finally (*24:18–25*).

Bildad had very little to say now. He merely asks, “*How can mortal man stand before God and claim to be righteous? Who in all the earth is pure – when God is so glorious that even the moon and stars scarcely shine when compared to Him?*” (25:4, 5).

Job again uses sarcasm in reply saying, “*O how you people have helped powerless people like me! How you have saved people who have no strength! O how you have enlightened my stupidity! What wise things you have said! Where did you learn all these wise things?*” (26:1–3). And then, he asks the most searching question of all: “*Whose spirit is it that speaks through you?*” (26:4). He goes on to speak about the greatness of God Who “hangs the earth on nothing” and has created so many wonders. He then says that all of creation is but “*the fringes of His ways*” and so how little we know about this great God (26:5–14). It is good for all of us to remember that so that we don’t have exalted thoughts about ourselves. He concludes by saying, “*My conscience is clear*” (27:6). That is Job’s final answer.

Job’s Self-Righteousness

Having given his reply to Bildad, Job then goes on to justify himself, giving a list of all the many good things he had done in his life to help others etc. (*Chapters 26–31*). As we read through these chapters, it is amazing to see the tremendous light that Job had about God and His ways and the high standard of life that he lived way back in those days when there was no Bible and without the indwelling Holy Spirit. It is good to look through some things in these chapters, because they put us to shame and challenge us to live at a much higher standard today.

He begins by saying how foolish man is to dig deep for gold but not to seek for wisdom (28:1, 12, 13). He goes on to say that “*the fear of the Lord is wisdom and to depart from evil is understanding*” (28:28). Solomon said exactly the same thing 1000 years later in *Proverbs 9:10*. Undoubtedly he got that understanding from reading the book of *Job*.

In *Chapter 29*, Job goes on to speak about his past, when he lived in friendship with God, helping the poor, the orphans, the widows, the blind, the lame and the needy.

In *Chapter 30*, he complains that in spite of all the good he had done, he was now suffering and had been brought so low by God.

In *Chapter 31*, he speaks of the righteousness of his life. He had been careful with his eyes not to lust after women (31:1). He had light on this sin 2000 years before Jesus spoke about it in *Matthew 5*. He had walked in integrity without any falsehood (31:5, 6), he had never been unfaithful to his wife (31:9–12), he had treated his servants with kindness (31:13–15), he had helped the poor and the widows, and brought up orphans as his own children (31:16–23), he had not trusted in gold or been idolatrous (31:24–28), he had not rejoiced when his enemy was

defeated (31:29, 30), he had cared for strangers (31:31, 32), he had confessed his sin whenever he sinned (31:33), he had not been afraid of the contempt of people (31:34), and had even cared for his land properly (31:38–40). He cries out now to God to answer him (31:35).

We can see in these chapters what a godly man Job was. He had light on so many areas of his life and was an extremely helpful man. Yet, he did not have light on one thing: *Spiritual pride – pride in his righteousness*. God loved Job and was determined that Job should have that one virtue of humility also before he left this earth. And so in immense love for Job, God took him through this deep trial in order to make him both godly and humble.

When the godly apostle Paul was in danger of becoming proud, God took Paul also through suffering. He gave him a thorn in the flesh, which was a messenger of Satan (*2 Corinthians 12:7*). Job had a messenger of Satan too. But Paul knew why he got it. Job didn't know.

That is why God takes many godly people through suffering, misunderstanding, opposition and persecution – to humble them and break them so that He can pour out His grace upon them, for He gives His grace only to the humble.

We cannot blame Job for complaining. He didn't have a Bible, the indwelling Holy Spirit, or a brother to encourage him.

But Paul never complained; and neither need we.

Elihu's Comments

Now we come to the last preacher, Elihu. He was younger to the other three preachers but he was wiser than all of them. But he was unwise in another matter. It says that “*Elihu’s anger burned and he spoke out*” (32:5–6).

My advice has always been: “*Whenever you are angry, don’t open your mouth. Don’t speak to anyone and definitely don’t preach, because the anger of man can never achieve the righteousness of God*” (See *James 1:20*). You can be saved from committing hundreds of sins if you follow this simple rule. But Elihu did not have that wisdom. He was angry and he spoke. He was angry in a self-righteous way because he said Job refused to admit that he had sinned against God.

Basically all of these preachers were saying, “Job, you have sinned. Your children have sinned. God knows that all of you are hypocrites.” But the fact was that none of these preachers had the mind of God. They had a lot of knowledge – and perhaps Elihu had some more than the earlier three. But Elihu was a zealous young man who had never been

through suffering himself. And when such people begin to preach and give advice, all that they say will be mere theory. If Paul had been there, he could have explained to Job the reason for his sufferings – because Paul had experience.

Elihu may have been a better man than the others. But without the personal experience of trial and suffering, his ministry was shallow. Elihu was angry not only with Job but also with the other three preachers (*verse 3*).

Elihu said some good things that all of us can consider seriously:

"I am full of words. The spirit within constrains me" (32:18). Our heart should always be filled with God's Word and we should speak only as the Holy Spirit constrains us.

"Let me not be partial to anyone or flatter anyone" (32:21). God hates partiality and flattery. These two sins must never be found in any of us.

"No fear of me should terrify anyone. Nor should my pressure weigh heavily on anyone" (33:7). No-one should ever be afraid of us or be terrified by our presence. No-one should ever be forced to act by any pressure from us that robs him of his free will.

In *Chapter 33:14–30*, Elihu spoke some wonderful truths about the three different ways in which God speaks to men: *First of all* directly once or twice (*verse 14*). If they don't listen to Him, He then speaks to them in dreams at night when they are sleeping (*verse 15*). If they still don't listen, then He speaks to them by chastening them through sickness (*verses 19–22*). The purpose of all this speaking is to save man from pride and the resultant hell (*verses 17, 18*). But there has to be a messenger to speak and explain all this to man, so that he can pray and confess his sins to God and be totally healed and delivered from hell (*verses 23–28*).

But Elihu's blindness becomes manifest when he makes statements such as this: *"Has there ever been a man as arrogant as Job?"* (34:7 - Living). Or in other words, "From the time of Adam, has there ever been a man on the face of the earth who was as proud as Job is?" But what was God's opinion of Job? *"There is no man like him on the face of the earth, a perfect and an, upright man."* Elihu was so completely out of fellowship with God, that his opinion of Job was exactly the *opposite* of God's.

Elihu was like the Bible scholars of Jesus' time – the Pharisees, Annas and Caiphas – who were sure that Jesus was the prince of devils! Unlearned people like Peter, however, knew that Jesus was the Messiah, the Son of God. It was *not* Peter's cleverness or Bible-knowledge that had taught him that. It was God.

Throughout the ages, many clever, religious people have had the exact opposite opinion about a godly man to God's opinion of that man. So don't be discouraged if religious people think that you are wrong. Only a godly man can assess the true value of another godly man.

Elihu went on to say some amazingly true things about God:

"God is almighty, but He does not despise anyone." (36:5). Because God is perfect, he despises no-one. We who are imperfect despise other human beings. The more perfect we become, the more we will be like God, despising no-one!

"Look, God is exalted beyond what we can understand. We cannot imagine the power of the Almighty. Yet He is so just and merciful that He does not oppress us. No wonder people everywhere fear Him. People who are truly wise will show Him reverence" (36:26; 37:23, 24).

But then Elihu said some wrong things about God too. He said, *"If people listen to God and obey Him, they will be blessed with prosperity throughout their lives. All their lives will be pleasant with health and wealth. But if they refuse to listen to God, they will perish in battle and die"* (Job 36:11, 12). So we see that Elihu was also a "health and wealth" prosperity-gospel preacher. This is the false gospel that we hear from many preachers today too.

What was Job's reply to Elihu? *Nothing!*

God's Questions to Job

Then God replied to Job (*Chapters 38–41*).

Notice the completely different way in which God spoke to Job, compared to the way the four preachers, (who claimed to represent Him) spoke. God did not once accuse Job of having sinned in secret or tell him that he was being punished for his sins, etc. Yet Job was convicted immediately and repented!!

What a lesson we can all learn from that, on how to speak to people and how to preach! God's ways are not our ways. Many preachers try to convict people by telling them about sins that they imagine those others have committed. Nothing results from such an approach, except that the preachers themselves increase their guilt before God for speaking with the spirit of the Accuser. God in His great mercy and compassion, however, speaks to man in quite another way – and the man is so thoroughly convicted of his sins that he says, "O God, I am corrupt, I am nothing. I repent. Please forgive me." God leads people to repentance by His kindness (*Romans 2:4*).

Three basic questions that God was asking Job (in these chapters) were:

1. *"If you can't understand these wonders in creation, how can you understand spiritual realities?"*
2. *"If I control all My creation, do you think that I couldn't control the lightning that struck your sheep, or the Sabeans and Chaldeans who killed your servants, or the storm that struck your children's houses?"*
3. *"If you can't stand in front of a crocodile that I created, how can you stand before Me?"* (41:10).

God showed Job His sovereign power and control over all of creation. That was all that needed to be said. And Job was humbled. Hours of direct attack by the four preachers accomplished nothing. The indirect approach by God accomplished everything in a few minutes. Faith in the sovereign control of God over all of His creation, is what will bring rest to our hearts too, when we face problems, afflictions and enemies.

The Lord asked Job, “*Do you still want to argue with the Almighty?*” (*Job 40:2*). Job, who had a quick reply for every argument thus far is now silenced. He now says, “*Lord, I am nothing and I have nothing to say. I will not speak any more*” (*40:4, 5*).

This first book of inspired Scripture teaches us that God wants us to recognise our nothingness so that He can be everything in our lives. Then our lives will fulfil His purpose and be a blessing to multitudes. Before God can use someone, He has to reduce him to nothing.

Paul said “*What is Paul and what is Apollos? I planted, Apollos watered, but God was causing the growth. So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything*” (*1 Corinthians 3:5, 6*). In other words, the one who does evangelism is *nothing* and the one who does Bible teaching is also *nothing*. God alone is everything and so He alone deserves all the glory. That was the secret of Paul’s life – he was a zero even at the end of his life.

There are preachers who are eager to grab the credit for souls saved somewhere. There are pastors who complain saying, “That other pastor stole *my* sheep from *my* church”, etc. Why do they speak like that? Because they haven’t become zeros as yet. When they say, “*my church*”, which church are they talking about? We know of the church of Jesus Christ. But which is *their* church? Everybody must certainly be taken away from “*their church*” and planted in the church of Jesus Christ!! And “*their church*” must be destroyed.

What a long time it took Job to come to the place where he could acknowledge that he was insignificant and decide never to justify himself any more. Thereafter, for the rest of his life, Job must have been a man who was “*quick to hear and slow to speak*” (*James 1:19*). The long speech that he gave in six chapters (*Chapters 26 to 31*) is the longest self-justification found in the entire Bible. It stinks of self-righteousness all the way through. But Job could not smell his pride himself.

Now at last this self-righteous man had become zero. As a result of whose preaching? Was it through the man who spoke of visions and dreams? Was it through the man who held the traditions of the fathers as sacred? Was it through the self-appointed “prophet”? Or was it through the man who was so correct in what he said? None of these four preachers could help him. It was God Who helped Job to come to this place. He was the *Fifth Preacher*. And He is the One Whom we should imitate. “*Be imitators of God*” (*Ephesians 5:1*).

What a wonderful thing God's brief message did to Job, which the other preachers could not do with all their long and repeated sermons. What was the reason for this? The answer is: *God loved Job*. The four preachers did not. When we love people from our heart, God will give us the right words to give them. When we don't love them, we will only criticise them and accuse them and we *won't be able to bless them*. Let us learn then to love the people we serve, and God will always give us the words to speak to them.

A prophet of God must have *God's word in his heart and God's people on his heart*. Then God will give him prophetic messages for them.

While the other four preachers tried to convict Job of his sin, God sought to make Job a worshipper. And God succeeded. As the Christian church in India, this is what we need to show an unbelieving generation – that our God is the Almighty and Sovereign Ruler of this universe. We are not to be intimidated by the threats of our opponents – for not a hair of our heads can be touched by anyone without our Sovereign, Heavenly Father's permission.

Let us learn to act with compassion, instead of always being ready to criticise. Let us never pass judgement when we do not know the true facts. Even when we think we know the facts, let us acknowledge that there may be other facts that we still don't know. So let us always humble ourselves and say, "*Lord, I am nothing. I'll put my hand over my mouth and keep quiet.*"

Job also said, "*Lord, I had heard about You before, but now I have seen You*" (Job 42:5). There is a vast difference between hearing about God and knowing Him personally. When John saw Jesus on the isle of Patmos, he fell down and worshipped Him. Job fell down and worshipped God too.

Job also repented radically of his accusing God and took back every word he had spoken (42:6). And God forgave him immediately as we see very soon thereafter.

Then the Lord said to Eliphaz, "*I am angry with you and your two friends. Now offer a sacrifice for your sin (of speaking to My servant Job) and ask My servant Job to pray for you. He whom you accused has to be your mediator now.*" Notice how God recognises Job as *His servant* (42:7, 8).

The Lord told the church in Philadelphia, "*I will make them to come and bow down at your feet and to know that I have loved you*" (Revelation 3:9). The same thing happened here with Job and his friends.

Job had said many things against God. But the moment he repented and retracted those, he was forgiven and all those words were blotted out from God's record. Only the good things that Job had said were left on the record!

Those good things were statements such as:

“Even if God kills me, I will trust in Him” (13:15).

“I know that my Redeemer lives and He will stand on the earth on the last day. And after my body has decayed in my body I will see God with my own eyes” (19:25).

“He knows every detail of what is happening to me” (23:10 - Living).

These are a few of the tremendous confessions of faith that Job made. The angry words he had spoken had all been wiped out. This is a great encouragement to us. Today we know that the blood of Christ has such power that there is no record of any of the sins that we have *repented of and confessed to God*. Only the good confessions of faith that we made will be found in God’s record now.

Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar then went to Job and asked him to pray for them. Job readily forgave them and prayed for them. I don’t know whether those preachers actually repented. But in any case they did not want to be judged by God.

As soon as Job prayed for his friends, the Lord restored Job’s fortunes (42:10). Soon he had received double from the Lord of everything he had lost.

He even got ten more children. And that suggests to me that, after his wife saw how good God had been to their family, she also repented and became a godly woman herself and a true helper to her husband.

So, “*love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you and pray for those who persecute you*”. And you will find a miracle beginning to take place in your own life. You will find yourself being doubly blessed by the Lord.

Here then are some of the glorious truths that we can learn from the first book of inspired Scripture:

1. God looks all over the earth for godly men who will worship Him.
2. Godly men and their families become targets of Satan’s attacks.
3. Satan can attack us only after getting God’s permission.
4. A godly man may have a difficult wife. But God can change her.
5. Godly men will be misunderstood by *religious* people.
6. The actions of godly men are closely watched by both God and Satan.
7. The pathway to perfection is through suffering and misunderstanding.
8. Health and prosperity are *not* the marks of God’s blessing.
9. When we *see* God as He really is, we will *see ourselves* as nothing.
10. God plans all things for our ultimate good.

PSALMS

TRUSTING GOD AND WORSHIPPING HIM

The book of *Psalms* is quoted more often in the New Testament than any other Old Testament book. Out of the 150 psalms, quotations from at least 50 of them are found in the New Testament. Jesus quoted often from the *Psalms*.

The Book of Psalms is divided into five sections, each closing with a benediction.

- Book 1 – *Psalms 1–41*
- Book 2 – *Psalms 42–72*
- Book 3 – *Psalms 73–89*
- Book 4 – *Psalms 90–106*
- Book 5 – *Psalms 107–150*

More than 70 of the psalms were written by David, some were written by Asaph, some by the sons of Korah, two by Solomon, one by Moses, one by Heman, and one by Ethan. The other authors are unknown.

The book of *Psalms* is divided into 5 books. The *first* book is from *Psalm 1 to 41*. The *second* book is from *Psalm 42 to 72*. The *third* book is from *Psalm 73 to 89*. The *fourth* book is from *Psalm 90 to 106*, and the *fifth* book is from *Psalm 107 to 150*. Many subjects are covered in each of these five books. But some people compare these five books of the psalms to the *first five books of Moses* – and there is some similarity between them.

Many of the psalms contrast the lot of the righteous with that of the wicked. A theme that is found frequently in many of the psalms is asking God for deliverance from one's enemies. **72** of the 150 psalms have some reference to the psalmist's enemies.

We will look at some psalms in greater detail, but only at the theme or some important verses in the others.

The First Book – The Righteous and the Wicked

Psalm 1 is an introduction to the whole book of *Psalms*. This psalm describes the blessed man who avoids sinful paths and meditates on God's Word. It is not enough to avoid evil. The heart that has been cleansed of evil must be filled with God's Word. To meditate on God's Word *day and night* means to think frequently of the word that we have read and to let it sink into our hearts – just like the food we eat is digested over a period of many hours and converted into blood, flesh and bones. We spend very little time actually eating. It is the digestion process that goes on for hours. So we may spend only a short while reading God's Word. But meditation on it is important. If we do that, we will be like trees planted by a river that are always fruitful and *whatever we do will prosper*. The blessing of God will be upon the work of our hands and the words we speak. This is the way God wants all of us to live.

Psalm 2 is a Messianic psalm that speaks of the reign of Christ. There are at least 18 prophecies about the Messiah (Christ) in 13 of the psalms. This one is about *Messiah ruling as the King*. The King is rejected by the world (*verses 1 to 3* – Peter quotes these verses in *Acts 4:25, 26*). But “*He who sits in the heavens will laugh*” (*verse 4*). And God says, “*Thou art My Son. Ask of Me and I will give You the heathen for your inheritance, the uttermost parts of the earth for your possession. You shall break them with a rod of iron*” (*verses 7–9*). One day, Jesus will rule over the earth. We are urged to “*kiss the Son*” before that day.

Psalm 3 was written by David when he was ousted by his son Absalom and had to escape from Jerusalem. He expresses his trust in God here. He says, “*Lord, You are my Glory and the Lifter of my head*” (*verse 3*). We usually sing that verse in a comfortable building on a Sunday morning. David sang it while he was escaping for his life from Absalom!! Many of these psalms were written by David, not when he was in his palace, but when he was under pressure, running from cave to cave. Many of these inspired psalms would never have been written if David had not faced pressure. Some of the greatest lessons God teaches us are in times of pressure. It is through pressure that God makes us a blessing to others. It is when a tube of toothpaste is squeezed that the paste comes out. God also squeezes us through our enemies, so that His word comes forth from us. The more the pressure, the richer our ministry becomes.

Psalm 4 is an evening prayer (*4:8*). The previous psalm was a morning prayer (*3:5*). Both express faith in God's protecting power. “*The Lord has set apart the godly for Himself*” (*verse 3*). We have been taken out of the world and set apart by God to be exclusively *His*. Then we are warned against the sin of anger: “*Tremble (with anger) but don't sin*,” (*verse 4* - NASB margin). Then it goes on to say, “*Meditate in your heart upon your bed and be still*”. Under the old covenant, they could not overcome anger.

So they were urged to lie down on their beds until they calmed down. And on their beds, they were to “offer the sacrifices of righteousness to the Lord” (verse 5) – and to get up only when their anger had been replaced with gladness, and they could say “Lord, You have put gladness in my heart” (verse 7). That is good practical advice for Christians also, who have not yet overcome anger. In the new covenant, that verse is quoted in Ephesians 4:26 thus, “Be angry but do not sin”. But then we are exhorted to “put away all anger” (Ephesians 4:31). This is our privilege under the new covenant.

Psalm 5 is a prayer for protection from enemies. “In the morning O Lord Thou wilt hear my voice. In the morning I will order my prayer to Thee” (verse 3) – a good way to begin every morning. “Let those who put their trust in Thee rejoice because Thou defendest them” (verse 11).

Psalm 6 is a prayer for God’s mercy. “All my enemies shall be ashamed and greatly dismayed” (verse 10) – a confession of faith.

Psalm 7 is a prayer for God to vindicate. David has a clear conscience: “Lord, if there is injustice in my hands, if I have rewarded evil to those who were at peace with me, then let my enemy persecute me.” (verses 3–5). It is a very serious thing to do evil to others. There are two types of sins – sins where you harm yourself and sins where you harm others. Drug-addiction and smoking are sins by which one harms oneself. Gossiping, however, destroys the reputation of others. So gossiping is more serious. “God is angry with such wicked people every day” (verse 11). But how many Christians believe that?

Psalm 8 compares the littleness of man with the greatness of God. This is yet another Messianic psalm. Jesus quoted from it when the children were praising Him in the temple and the Pharisees were upset with their noisy praise: “Out of the mouth of infants and nursing babes Thou hast prepared praise for Thyselv” (Matthew 21:16). The Pharisees, like many Christians today, believed that they should worship God in funeral-like solemnity and not with noisy praise and worship! But Jesus enjoyed the children’s praise, because it reminded Him of heaven which is full of noisy praise and worship! Notice that where verse 2 here uses the word “strength”, Jesus used the word “praise”. The purpose of this is said to be “to silence the enemy” (verse 2). By praising God, we become strong to shut Satan’s mouth. Sincere praise that comes from the heart is what the devil hates. Verse 4: “What is man that Thou are mindful of him? Thou hast made Him a little lower than the angels” is quoted in Hebrews 2:6–8 – a reference to Jesus having taken a place lower than angels for a while – because He died, whereas angels don’t die. But now Jesus has been crowned with glory and honour, and all things are under His feet. And since we are His Body, everything is under our feet too.

Psalm 9 is a prayer of thanksgiving to God for punishing his enemies. “*Those who know Thy Name* (the Name of Jesus) *will put their trust in Thee because Thou has not forsaken them.*” (*verse 10*). God is the God of resurrection: “*Thou Who dost lift me up from the gates of death*” (*verse 13*).

Psalm 10 is a prayer asking God to destroy the wicked. “*The wicked one through the pride of his face will not seek after God. But God is the One who cares for the fatherless and the oppressed people of the earth so that the evil men of the world may not oppress or terrify them any more*” (*verses 4, 18*).

Psalm 11 is about the Lord protecting the righteous. It says here that God tests both the righteous and the wicked (*verse 5*). And He hates the one who seeks to harm others. When God tests us, He seeks to promote us to a higher class – just as a student writes an examination in order to be promoted.

Psalm 12 is a psalm about the use of the tongue. It begins by saying that faithful, godly people are becoming fewer and fewer. And then it goes on in the next three verses to speak about the tongue – falsehood, flattery, insincerity and arrogance are expressed through the tongue. A primary mark of a godly man is the graciousness of his speech. The ungodly, however, say, “*Our lips are our own. We will speak whatever we like.*” (*verse 4*). It is the man who can control his tongue who is a perfect man (*James 3:2*). A godly man recognises that “*the words of the Lord are pure words, like silver tested in a furnace seven times*” (*verse 6*). So before he speaks, he thinks about what he is going to say. If he is in doubt, he throws the words he is planning to speak, into the furnace of his heart and asks himself a few questions: “Is it necessary for me to say this? Can I put it in a gentler way? Am I speaking the truth? Am I speaking in love?” etc. Then he decides *what* to say and *how* to say it. If he is writing a letter to correct someone, he will rewrite it seven times if necessary, before sending it.

Psalm 13 is a prayer asking the Lord for help in trouble. It concludes with, “*I will sing to the Lord because He has dealt bountifully with me.*”

Psalm 14 describes the wicked man. Every atheist is a fool (*verse 1*). Verses 2 and 3 describe the condition of fallen man and are quoted in *Romans 3:10–12*.

Psalm 15 describes the qualifications for a man to live in God’s presence. He must speak the truth in his heart. He must honour those who fear God. In the church of God, we do honour people – but not as in the world, because they are rich or famous, but because they fear God. Go through this psalm slowly and examine your heart in its light, for it says that those who live like this “*will never be shaken*” (*verse 5*). Many things are going to be shaken in the world soon. But this man will never be shaken.

Psalm 16 is another Messianic psalm where David says that the Lord and the saints are all that he wants. In *verse 3*, he says that he delights in God's people! All men will know that we are the disciples of Jesus when they see that we love one another. *Verse 8*, "*I have set the Lord always before me. Because He is at my right hand, I will never be moved*", was quoted by Peter, as referring to the Lord Jesus (*Acts 2:25*). We are to follow Jesus' example and set the Lord before our face always in everything that we say or do. Then He will be at our right hand to support us too. In God's presence, there is "*fullness of joy*", and at His right hand there are eternal pleasures (*verse 11*). Joy and pleasure are found in their purest form only in God's presence where they are eternal. Earthly joys and pleasures are shallow and short-lived.

Psalm 17 is another psalm where David asks for protection from his oppressors. *Verse 15* speaks of the resurrection morning, when we will "*behold the Lord's face in righteousness, and be satisfied with His likeness.*" That can mean two things: that we will be satisfied when we see Him and also that we will be satisfied when we are like Him. Our blessed hope is *dual* – to *see* Him and *be like* Him (*1 John 3:2*).

Psalm 18 is another psalm of deliverance. *Verses 16 to 19* are a beautiful picture of our salvation. "*He will enlighten our darkness and make our way perfect*" (*verses 28, 32*). This psalm is quoted fully in *2 Samuel 22*.

Psalm 19 speaks of the *works* of God and the *word* of God. There are *two* testimonies to God on earth. One is the heavens (*verses 1–5*), and the other is His written word (*verses 7–11*). In *verses 12 and 13*, David asks God to keep him from four types of sins – *errors, secret sins, presumptuous sins*, and the *great sin* – each progressively more serious than the previous one. And finally, here is one sin that we can *keep ourselves from* – *sins of speech*. "*Lord, let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in Your sight*" (*verse 14*).

Psalm 20 is a prayer for victory over one's enemies. David's confidence is in God alone: "*Some trust in chariots and some in horses* (today, some trust in money and some in man's help) *but we will trust in the Name of the Lord.*" (*verse 7*).

Psalm 21 is a psalm of praise to God for granting deliverance. "*Thou hast given him his heart's desire and not withheld the request of his lips. He asked life of Thee, and You gave him eternal life*" (*verses 2, 4*).

Psalm 22 is another Messianic psalm with prayer and praise. This psalm and the next two are "*Shepherd*" psalms. *Psalm 22* speaks about the *past* (the cross), *Psalm 23* speaks about the *present* (the Lord as our Shepherd now) and *Psalm 24* speaks about the *future* (when Jesus will reign as the King of Glory). *Verse 1* here is what Jesus said on the cross: "*My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?*" On the cross, Jesus was like a worm

and poured out like water (*verses 6, 14*). Dogs surrounded Him and they divided His garments (*verses 16, 18*). But in *verse 22*, we come to the resurrection: “*I will declare Your name to My brothers.*” Jesus called His disciples His brothers directly for the first time on the day of His resurrection (*John 20:17*). This verse is also quoted in *Hebrews 2:12* in this context. It goes on to say, “*I will praise You in the midst of the congregation (church). You who fear the Lord, praise Him*” (*verses 22, 23*). Jesus is the One Who leads us in praising the Father in the church. Only those who fear the Lord are exhorted to praise the Lord, for only their praise will be sincere. We see the result of the work of the cross and the resurrection in *verses 22 to 30*: There we have **three** verses on praising God (*verses 22, 23, 26*) and **two** verses on worshipping God (*verses 27, 29*), followed by **one** verse on service (*verse 30*). So it is *praise, praise and praise*, followed by *worship and worship*, and then *service*. How few have understood the importance of praise and worship as a preparation for effective service!

Psalm 23 is the *Shepherd* psalm. When the Lord is our Shepherd, we will lack *nothing* (*verse 1*). **HE** makes us to lie down. **HE** leads us. **HE** restores us. **HE** guides us. Very often we think about what **we** have to do for the Lord. But here the emphasis is on what *the Lord does for us*. We can be effective for God only as we allow Him first to do a work *in us*. We fear no evil, because **HE** is with us. **HE** prepares a table for us and **HE** anoints our head with oil. Then our cups begin to run over and goodness and mercy follow us everywhere until we reach our eternal home.

Psalm 24 is a prophetic psalm referring to the time when Jesus will reign on earth as King and “*the earth will be the Lord’s*”. It describes those who will dwell with him in His holy hill then (*verses 1, 3*). It goes on to urge people to welcome the Lord, the King of glory, Who has won the battle against the forces of evil.

Psalm 25 is a psalm about guidance and protection. David’s prayer is, “*Lord, show me Your ways. Teach me Your paths*” (*verse 4*). Guidance is promised to those who *acknowledge that they are sinners* (*verse 8*), who *humble themselves* (*verse 9*), who *obey His testimonies* (*verse 10*), who *fear Him* (*verse 12*), and who *look to Him* (*verse 15*). God reveals His secrets to those who reverence Him (*verse 14*).

Psalm 26: Here David proclaims his integrity to the Lord and asks for protection from his enemies. When our conscience is clear, we can boldly ask God to defend us.

Psalm 27 is a psalm of fearless trust in God. Here David proclaims that he will not fear, “*even if a host encamps around him*”, because the Lord is his defence (*verses 1–3*). David desired only *one thing* from the Lord – to see the beauty of the Lord and to dwell in God’s temple at all times (*verse 4*). This should be the only thing that we desire too.

Psalm 28 is a prayer for God's help followed by praise for His quick answer. The Lord is David's strength and shield (*verse 7*).

Psalm 29 is about the *voice of the Lord*. It is mentioned seven times. We have seen the importance of hearing God's voice right from *Genesis 1*. “*Everything in God's temple (church) says, ‘Glory’*” (*verse 9*).

Psalm 30 is a psalm of thanksgiving for being saved from death. “*Thou hast turned my mourning into dancing for me that my tongue may sing praise to You and never be silent.*” (*verses 11, 12*). We should never stop praising God for all His deliverances.

Psalm 31 is yet another cry for help followed by praise. “*How great is God's goodness to those who fear Him, who trust in God publicly before the sons of men. You will hide them in the secret place of Your presence from the conspiracies of men. You will keep them secretly in a shelter from the strife of tongues*” (*verses 19–20*). That is the best place for us to hide ourselves – in His presence – from all the wagging tongues of our enemies around us.

Psalm 32 speaks of the blessedness of being forgiven and having one's sin covered. That is blessed indeed, but not as blessed as it is for us under the new covenant where our sins are cleansed. There was no cleansing of sin under the old covenant. The blood of bulls and goats could only cover sin, whereas the blood of Jesus cleanses us. Sin being covered can be pictured thus: Our sins are all written on a blackboard and then covered with a sheet. But if you lift the sheet, the sins can still be seen. Cleansing, however, is like wiping them all out with a wet sponge! David recognised that his sickness was due to unconfessed sin (*verse 4*). When he confessed it, he was healed. There is “*a period when the Lord can be found*” and we should pray to Him during that time – this present time of grace (*verse 6*). The Lord also promises to teach us and guide us (*verse 8*).

Psalm 33 proclaims the Lord alone as the help of His people. “*The eye of the Lord is constantly on those who fear Him to deliver them and keep them alive even in times of famine*” (*verses 18, 19*).

Psalm 34 describes the Lord as the Helper of the righteous. David wrote this psalm when the Lord delivered him from certain death, as he pretended to be mad in front of King Abimelech. So he says, “*I will bless the Lord at all times. This poor man cried, and the Lord heard him. Taste and see that the Lord is good.*” (*verses 1, 6, 8*). David recognised that “*the angel of the Lord surrounds those who fear Him and delivers them*” (*verse 7*). He also saw that “*the eyes of the Lord are upon the righteous and His ears are always open to their cry*”, and that “*the Lord is near the brokenhearted*” (*verses 15, 18*). David goes on to say from his experience that “*the afflictions of the righteous are many*” (*verse 19*). Don't ever imagine that if you are righteous you won't have problems. You will

have more problems. “*But the Lord will deliver you out of ALL of them*” (verse 19). Then there is yet another Messianic prophecy: “*He keeps all His bones; not one of them will be broken*” (verse 20) – which was fulfilled on the cross.

Psalm 35 is another prayer asking the Lord to fight against one’s enemies. Malicious witnesses had risen up against David, even though he had been good to them in the past (verse 11–21). This was the experience of Jesus too, who had been good to Judas Iscariot. This has been the experience of many saints also.

Psalm 36 contrasts the wickedness of men and the goodness of God. “*Those who trust in Him will drink their fill of the abundance of God’s house*” (verse 8). Verse 9 is a very important verse: “*In Thy light we see light.*” This teaches that we should never look inside ourselves, because that only leads to condemnation. Only as we come into God’s light can we really see our true condition. And then we will never feel condemned.

Psalm 37 deals with the blessedness of the righteous and the destruction of the wicked. The righteous person is described not just as one who does the right thing, but who also “*delights himself in the Lord*”. Such a person gets “*the desires of his heart*” (verse 4). The steps of such a man are ordered by the Lord. And as has been said, “*The stops of a good man are also ordered by the Lord.*” God leads His people forward step by step and at times tells them to stop. When such a man falls, it won’t be serious, because the Lord holds his hand (verses 23, 24). If we wait patiently for the Lord, we “*will inherit the land*” (verse 34). As Jesus said, the meek will inherit the earth.

Psalm 38: Here David asks the Lord to hurry up and help him, because he is sick and also being attacked by his enemies.

Psalm 39 speaks about the shortness of life and ends with a prayer for mercy. “*Lord, make me to know my end. Let me know how transient I am*” (verse 4). David recognises that God chastens people in order to save them from their sin (verse 11).

Psalm 40 speaks of the wonders God does for His servants and asks for deliverance from one’s enemies. This is yet another Messianic psalm. Verses 6 to 8 are quoted in *Hebrews 10:5–7*. But notice one big difference. David could only say, “*I delight to do Thy will, O God*”. Jesus went further and said, “*I have come to do Thy will O God.*” This is the difference between what people under the *old covenant* could achieve and what we under the *new covenant* can attain to. Those saints could only **delight in** God’s will. We can actually **do** it.

Psalm 41 asks for healing and victory over one’s enemies. The Lord blesses anyone who cares for *poor* people – both the *financially poor* (who need money) and the *spiritually poor* (who need the gospel). The Lord promises

to deliver such a man from trouble, protect him from his enemies and heal him when he is sick. In the second half of the psalm, David asks God for help from his enemies – including a close friend who ate with him. This verse is quoted in *John 13:18* as referring to Judas Iscariot. In *verse 11*, David says that the only proof that God is pleased with him is that his enemies are defeated. In our case, this would refer to victory over the lusts in our flesh.

The Second Book – An Oppressed People Delivered

The first eight psalms in this book (*Psalms 42 to 49*) were written by the sons of Korah who escaped death by leaving their father Korah's side, when he rebelled against Moses in the wilderness (*Numbers 26:9–11*). Whether written by the *first* generation or a *later* generation of Korah's sons, none of these psalms would have been written, if Korah's sons had not stood against their father in his rebellion. They stood with God's anointed leader, Moses. What a lot of God's plans people can miss, if they do not stand with *Divinely appointed* authority.

Psalm 42 is about a soul thirsting after God “*as the deer pants after water*” (*verse 1*). When you have that type of longing after God, you can be certain that God will answer very quickly. “*Deep calls unto deep*” (*verse 7*). That refers to something deep in our heart reaching out to the depths of God’s heart. And if we are like that, then even if people around us say, “*Where is your God?*” (*verse 10*), we can still trust God, praise Him and overcome discouragement (*verse 11*).

Psalm 43 is a prayer for guidance and deliverance. “*Lord, send out Your light and Your truth. Let them together lead me to Your holy hill*” (*verse 3*). The psalmist is asking for light (revelation) and not just knowledge of the truth. Only the light of God on His truth will show us the way into His presence.

Psalm 44 is a prayer to God to work now as He did in former times. Verse 22 – “*For Your sake we are killed all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered*” – is a prophetic reference to the way of the cross that we have to walk today and is quoted by Paul in *Romans 8:36, 37*.

Psalm 45 is another Messianic psalm that speaks about the marriage of the Lamb and describes the bride and the Bridegroom. The bride is described as being glorious *within* (*verse 13*) – on the inside. That is where we should be glorious. And in *verse 10*, we have a word from God to all brides as to what to do after marriage. “*Forget your people and your father’s house*” – and cleave to your husband! This is to balance what God says to husbands in *Genesis 2:24*. Then the King (your Bridegroom) will greatly desire your beauty. He is your Lord. Worship Him (*verse 11*).

Psalm 46 describes God as the refuge of His people. It is interesting to read this in the context of what Korah and his fellow-rebels experienced. Korah's sons now sing that they will not be afraid even if the earth opens up and swallows up their parents, and the mountains are carried into the depths. They will be at rest knowing that God is on the throne ruling over all (*verse 10*).

Psalm 47 is a song of praise for the sovereignty of God. Verse 4 is a wonderful verse: “*God will choose my inheritance for me.*” That is what a true disciple says: God will choose my wife for me. He will choose my ministry for me. He will choose the type of house I live in and everything else. I am not going to choose anything.

Psalm 48 speaks about the glory of Zion, a picture of the church. A true disciple of Jesus will not only appreciate the Lord Himself but also His Body, the church, the Lord’s people, as we see in *verse 1*: “*Great is the Lord and greatly to be praised. Beautiful and the joy of the whole earth is Mount Zion.*” The church is the most beautiful thing on earth. “*This God is our God and He will be our guide unto death*” (*verse 14*).

Psalm 49 describes the foolishness of trusting in earthly riches. “*Many people trust in their wealth. But none of them can redeem their brother or give God a ransom for him. But God Himself will redeem my soul*” (*verses 6, 7, 15*).

Psalm 50 was written by Asaph, one of the chief singers appointed by David to lead God’s people in worship. It describes God as the Judge of all men – the righteous and the sinner. God calls to Himself “*those who have made a covenant with Him by the sacrifice*” – of Calvary (*verse 5*). God says, “*If I were hungry, I would not tell you, for the world is mine and everything in it*” (*verse 12*). A true servant of God says the same thing too – he never makes his earthly needs known to anyone but God – Who owns the world. The apostle Paul is a great example in this matter. The Lord gives us a wonderful promise in *verse 15*: “*Call upon Me in the day of trouble and I will deliver you*”. In *verses 19 and 20*, God warns us against the sin of speaking evil of our brothers. Because He is patient with gossipers, they may imagine that their sin is not serious. “*I kept silence*”, God says, “*And you thought I was just like you*” (*verse 21*). God threatens to tear such people in pieces (*verse 22*). Finally, a wonderful promise is found in *verse 23*, for those who instead of using their tongues to gossip, use them to praise the Lord: “*Whoever offers praise glorifies Me, and thereby makes a way for Me to show him My deliverance*” (*Literal*). When we praise the Lord, we thereby express our faith in Him as sovereign God and this expression of faith enables Him to show us His deliverance. We saw an example of that in what King Jehoshaphat did (*2 Chronicles 20*).

Psalm 51 is the prayer of a repentant sinner asking for God’s mercy. David wrote this psalm, after he was convicted of his sins of adultery and

murder. He did not write it immediately after committing those sins. He wrote this only after Nathan the prophet came and spoke to him, nine months later, when Bathsheba bore his child. It is amazing that David took so long to be convicted of such serious sins. This is, however, a beautiful psalm of repentance and shows us why God restored David so quickly. The first thing to note is that he does not make any excuses for his sin, like Adam did (*verses 3, 4*). He proclaims his faith that if the Lord cleanses away his sin, he will be “*whiter than snow*” (*verse 7*). He asks the Lord to give him a new heart that will not commit such sins: “*Create in me a clean heart.*” (*verse 10*). He pleads with God not to take the Holy Spirit away (*verse 11*). David knew the value of being anointed, and how sin could make him lose the anointing. That was what he feared the most. A broken and contrite heart is what God values highly (*verse 17*). David realised that God desired “*truth in the innermost being*” (*verse 6*). But this was not possible under the Law. But what the Law could not do, God has now done by sending His Holy Spirit to dwell inside us (*Romans 8:3, 4; John 7:37–39*).

Psalm 52 contrasts the end of the wicked man with that of the godly man.

Psalm 53 is almost a word-for-word repetition of *Psalm 14*, about the wickedness of man.

Psalm 54 is a prayer for help, deliverance and vindication.

Psalm 55 is again a prayer for protection from the enemy. This enemy had once been a close friend – like Judas (*verses 12–14*). We read in *verse 17* about how often David prayed: “*Evening and morning and noon God will hear my voice.*” The Jewish day began at sunset and lasted until sunset the next day. So “*evening and morning and noon*” refers to the beginning of the day, the middle of the day and the end of the day. David was a man of prayer. *Verse 22* is one of the most beautiful promises in the Old Testament: “*Cast your burden upon the Lord and He will sustain you. He will never allow the righteous to be shaken.*”

Psalm 56 is yet another psalm of trust in God that delivers us from the fear of men who try to harm us (*verses 3, 11*). *Verse 11:* “*In God I have put my trust. I will not be afraid. What can man do to me?*” is repeated almost exactly in *Psalm 118:6* and quoted in *Hebrews 13:6*.

Psalm 57 is another confident prayer to God for help from the enemy. The psalmist says he will stay “*in the shadow of the Lord’s wings*” for that will protect him from the calamities surrounding him (*verse 1*). “*Be Thou exalted, O God, above the heavens,*” is repeated in *verses 5 and 11*.

Psalm 58 speaks about the punishment of the wicked. *Verse 3* tells us that human beings begin to tell lies right from the time they are born. That is the first sin we all commit. A baby begins to lie even before it can speak. For example, it cries, pretending that it is in pain, when all

it wants is to be just picked up and carried. We must earnestly fight against this habit if we are to get rid of lying before we leave the earth.

Psalm 59 is a confident prayer for God's help against the enemies.

Psalm 60 bemoans the fact that God is not supporting His people and asks Him for help to overcome the enemy. “*Thou hast given a banner to those who fear Thee that it may be displayed because of the truth*” (verse 4). God has given us the name of Jesus as a banner. We are not ashamed to display it wherever we go.

Psalm 61 is a confession of David's faith that God will protect him and prolong his life. His prayer is “*Lead me to the rock that is higher than I*” (verse 2). That Rock is Christ.

Psalm 62 also expresses confidence in God as a refuge that can be trusted. “*My soul, wait in silence for God only, for my hope is from Him*” (verse 5). Many are disappointed because their expectation is from man. Those who trust in God will never be disappointed.

Psalm 63 expresses David's total satisfaction with God, even though he was in the wilderness at that time. He says, “*Thy lovingkindness is better than life*” (verse 3).

Psalm 64 again expresses the confidence that David has that God will destroy his enemies.

Psalm 65 praises God for His goodness. Verse 1 (KJV) says, “*Lord, praise is waiting for you in Zion (the church).*” Our churches should be places where *praise* is always waiting for God. When God comes into our midst, He must find *praise waiting for Him*. God draws such people close to Him. Verse 4 says, “*How blessed is the one whom Thou dost choose and bring near to Thee.*” The psalm goes on to speak of the goodness of God to the earth.

Psalm 66: The psalmist praises God here for bringing him into a place of blessedness. But this was through many trials. In *verses 10 to 12*, we read that God took the psalmist through sickness, fire and water and human oppression before bringing him to a place of spiritual prosperity. The Hebrew word translated “*place of abundance*” here, is used in only one other place in Scripture – in *Psalm 23:6*, where it is translated as “*overflows*”. So the way to have an overflowing life of blessing is through trial and suffering. Verse 18 is another important verse: “*If I regard sin in my heart, the Lord will not hear me.*” Prayer is like having a phone conversation with God. But if we have unconfessed sin in our hearts, then God will not even pick up the phone to listen to our prayers.

Psalm 67 exhorts all the people on earth to praise God. This is an evangelistic psalm where the psalmist longs that God's way and His salvation will be known all over the world (verse 2).

Psalm 68 is a song of praise to God for His wonders. Verse 6 is a promise for bachelors and spinsters: “*God make a home for the lonely.*” Verse 11 is about evangelism: “*The Lord gives the command; the women who proclaim the good tidings are a great host.*” God expects women to preach the gospel!! Verse 18 “*Thou hast ascended on high, Thou hast led captive Thy captives; Thou hast received gifts among men*” is quoted in *Ephesians 4:8* and is a prophetic reference to Jesus’ ascension and to the spiritual gifts He gave to the church from heaven.

Psalm 69 is David’s cry of distress, asking God to help him against those who were persecuting him. A number of verses here are prophetic about the Messiah: “*What I did not steal I have to restore*” (verse 4) is a reference to Jesus paying for our sins on the cross. “*Reproach has broken My heart*” (verse 20) refers to the fact that Jesus died of a *physically* broken heart. Blood and water poured out when Jesus’ side was pierced. Doctors have said that that could happen only if his heart was physically broken. Verse 29 is a prophetic reference to the resurrection and ascension.

Psalm 70 is another cry for help against the enemy.

Psalm 71 is a prayer for deliverance by the psalmist in his old age. His days are still spent in praising the Lord (verse 8). And although he is now old and gray-headed, he longs to proclaim God’s power to the new generation (verses 17, 18). He proclaims his faith in the resurrection in verse 20: “*You will bring me up again from the depths of the earth.*”

Psalm 72 is a psalm that David wrote for Solomon his son, as the first verse makes clear. In it, he describes how a king should be and what he should do. Unfortunately, Solomon did not become the type of king as described here. That is a warning for us. It is possible for us too, to study all these wonderful things in these psalms and practice *none of them!*

The Third Book – The Temple and God’s Throne

Psalms 73 to 83 were written by Asaph, one of David’s singers (who wrote *Psalm 50* too).

Psalm 73 deals with a question that many people have asked through the centuries: “*Why do the wicked prosper, and why do the righteous suffer?*” Asaph says quite honestly that he almost slipped into doubting God, when he saw the prosperity of the wicked (verses 2, 3). This led him to wonder whether it was worth living a holy life. But he never shared these thoughts with others, lest he cause them to stumble. He finally found the answer when he went into God’s presence and saw that the wicked stand on very slippery ground and are soon in hell. Verse 25 is perhaps the finest verse in the whole Bible that describes what true consecration really means: “***Whom have I in heaven but Thee. There is no one and nothing on earth I desire beside Thee.***” If we can say that

in all sincerity all through our earthly lives, we will be true worshippers and useful servants of God. Verse 26: “*My heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart*” is a good verse for those who have heart-problems!

Psalm 74 is a cry of concern about the ruined condition of God’s people. This could be applied to the church: “*Lord, Your enemies have ruined things in Your church and are roaring inside it now. They have made it impure*” (verses 3, 4, 7). Two marks are mentioned here of God **not** being in the midst of His people:

1. *He does not do any **miracles** for them.*
2. *He does not send them any **prophets** (verse 9).*

God is a God who answers our prayers in miraculous ways. He is also One Who sends us prophets to correct us. If God is not answering prayers in a church or does not send prophets to that church, that would be an indication that He has given up on that church. We can expect to find both miracles and prophets in a Spirit-filled church.

Psalm 75: The theme here is that God humbles the proud but exalts the humble. We must not expect to be promoted by man (verse 6). Promotion comes from God (verse 7). Don’t imagine that a man can give you a ministry in the church. Only God can do that for you.

Psalm 76 describes the mighty sovereign power of God that can make even the angry actions of men to fulfil His purposes, resulting in praise to Him (verse 10).

Psalm 77 is a recollection of what God did “*in the days of old*”. When Asaph was in trouble, he found comfort in thinking of that (verse 5). Verse 13 (KJV) says, “*Thy way, O God, is in the sanctuary.*” To find out God’s ways, we have to go into the sanctuary – *the most holy place*. We can’t find them in the “outer court”. Most believers know only the forgiveness of their sins. If you fellowship only with such believers who have no hunger after God, you will not know God’s ways, for His way is in the sanctuary. So seek fellowship with “*those who call on the Lord with a pure heart*” (2 Timothy 2:22).

Psalm 78 is a historical psalm that looks back at the way God led the Israelites from the time of their deliverance from Egypt. But they ignored God and sought Him only when He slew them (verse 34). They flattered Him with their mouths and told Him lies (verse 36). But God being compassionate, forgave them *repeatedly* (verse 38). He gave them a shepherd, David, who shepherded them and guided them (verses 70, 72). This psalm reminds us to look back and remember the wonderful things God has done for us and the leaders He gave us, so that we are grateful to Him always.

Psalm 79 is a prayer of concern for the ruin of Jerusalem (the church). This is a good prayer for us to pray who are concerned for the purity of the church.

Psalm 80 is a prayer asking God to save His people from their problems. Verse 17 is Messianic: “*Let Your hand be upon the Man of Your right hand, upon the Son of man whom You have made strong for Yourself.*”

Psalm 81 proclaims God’s goodness and Israel’s disobediences. Verse 10 has a lovely promise: “*Open your mouth wide, and I will fill it.*” Very often, we do not have because we do not ask. The Lord says with a sigh in verses 13 & 14, “*O that My people would listen to Me! I would quickly subdue their enemies.*” God would have solved our problems and delivered us long ago, if only we had listened to Him and trusted Him!

Psalm 82 is a psalm that rebukes the unjust judges of Israel and urges God to come down and judge the earth.

Psalm 83 asks God to judge the enemies who seek to destroy Israel, saying, “*Let us wipe them out as a nation*” (verse 4). Many nations have tried to destroy Israel through the centuries. But they have never succeeded. People have tried to wipe out the church also. They too have never succeeded. The church continues to survive so that all men may know that Jesus Christ is Lord over all the earth (verse 18).

Psalm 84 expresses a longing to worship God in His temple. As the swallow has found a place to make a nest – on God’s altar (verse 3) – even so, those who live in the Most Holy Place too are blessed and will be praising God always (verse 4). When they pass through the valley of Baca (weeping), they will turn it into a spring of blessing (verse 6) and move from strength to strength (verse 7). Verse 10 becomes meaningful, when we realise that this psalm was written by the sons of Korah: “*A day in Your courts (standing with Moses) is better than a thousand outside. I would rather stand at the threshold of God’s house (with Moses) than dwell in the tents of wickedness (with our father Korah).*” They were grateful for having been delivered from the tents of wickedness. “*No good thing does God withhold from those who walk uprightly*” (verse 11). We will get the very best from God if we walk in uprightness.

Psalm 85 is a prayer for God to visit His people. “*Wilt Thou not Thyself revive us again, that Thy people may rejoice in Thee*” (verse 6). There is a lot of grumbling and complaining among God’s people. What is desperately needed is a revival of joy and praise. “*I will hear what the Lord is saying. The Lord will speak ‘peace’ to His godly ones*” (verse 8). What did the Lord say? That “*mercy and truth are met together*” and that “*righteousness and peace have kissed each other*” (verse 10). The demands of God’s truth (law) and His mercy met at Calvary. Peace was established between God and men in a righteous way – on Calvary.

Psalm 86 is another prayer for help and guidance. “*Teach me Thy way, O Lord, and I will walk in Thy truth. Unite my heart to fear Your name*” (verse 11). David’s prayer is that his heart (that is being pulled in different directions) will be united to fear God.

Psalm 87 is about the privilege of being a citizen of Zion (the church). “*It will be said of Zion, ‘This one and that one were born in her’*” (*verse 5*). “*All my springs of joy are in you*” (*verse 7*). This speaks of the great joy that a child of God finds in being a part of the church.

Psalm 88 is a plea for deliverance from death. This is perhaps the most depressing of all the psalms. The psalmist (probably Heman the Ezrahite) complains that he has been afflicted from the time he was young (*verse 15*) and that God had rejected him. He now fears that he is going to die and is filled with gloom at the prospect. He sounds very much like Job. Unlike other psalms about suffering which *end* with a word of hope, this one *ends* in despair.

Psalm 89 is a psalm about God’s faithfulness to his covenant with David, and asks God to fulfil His promises. Its tone is the very opposite of the previous psalm. This psalm was written by another Ezrahite – Ethan. But he has exactly the opposite outlook of his brother, Heman, who wrote *Psalm 88*. Verse 7 says, “*God must be greatly reverenced in the council of the holy ones (church)*.” Verses 27 to 29 refer to Jesus: “*I will make my first-born the highest of the kings of the earth*.”

The Fourth Book – Israel and Other Nations

Psalm 90 deals with the eternity of God and the temporary nature of man. It is the only psalm written by Moses. We read here that “*a thousand years are like one day*” for God (*verse 4*). In *verse 10*, Moses refers to the men around him dying between the ages of 70 and 80. This was because most of the 600,000 men who left Egypt were between 20 and 60 years of age when they left. Although a few of them like Moses, lived up to the age of 120, most of them died before they reached the age of 80, because God had determined that that entire generation should die in the wilderness. And so in *verse 12*, Moses prays, “*Teach us to number our days to know how few they are, so that we can spend our days acquiring wisdom*” – a very good prayer for all of us to pray. *Verse 17* is another good prayer for all of us to pray: “*Let the beauty of the Lord be upon us*.”

Psalm 91 proclaims the blessedness and security of the one who lives in “*the secret place of the Most High*”. For us, that secret place is the wounded side of Jesus. Living in “*the shadow of the Almighty*” implies that God is going in front of us, and we are walking in His shadow (*verse 1*). The safest place in the whole world is the centre of God’s perfect will. The Lord promises to deliver us from both our enemies – Satan (the trapper) and sin (deadly disease) (*verse 3*). He will save us from obvious sins (daytime dangers) and from subtle, deceptive sins (night-time dangers) (*verses 5, 6*). Even if 11,000 Christians around us do not believe in a victorious life, He will keep us from falling into sin (*verse 7*). We may have to face many afflictions, but in them all, **no evil** will ever befall us (*verse 10*).

He has appointed angels to care for us, as long as we walk in His will. Satan (the lion and the serpent) will always be crushed under our feet (*verse 13*). God will answer our prayers and set us on high and give us length of life so that we do not die until we have finished our appointed task (*verses 15, 16*).

Psalm 92 praises the Lord for His goodness to him. “*They will still yield fruit in old age; they shall be full of sap and very green*” (*verse 14*). That means they will be full of the Holy Spirit’s anointing even when they are old.

Psalm 93 speaks of the might and majesty of the Lord. “*Holiness befits Your house, O Lord*” (*verse 5*).

Psalm 94 speaks of God Who chastens His people but destroys the wicked. “*Blessed is the man whom Thou dost chaste, O Lord*” (*verse 12*).

Psalm 95 invites us to worship the Lord and warns us against being hardened. *Verses 7 and 8 – Today if you would hear His voice, do not harden your hearts* – are quoted in *Hebrews 3:7, 8*. *Hebrews* goes on to say that we need to be exhorted and encouraged every day if we are to avoid being hardened (*Hebrews 3:13*).

Psalm 96 is yet another invitation to worship the Lord Who is coming soon. “*The Lord is coming to judge the earth. He shall judge the world with righteousness and the people with His truth*” (*verse 13*).

Psalm 97 describes the power of God. *Verse 10* says, “*You who love the Lord, hate evil.*” We cannot say we love the Lord if we don’t hate evil. There is a lot of difference between *avoiding* evil and *hating* evil. The way to overcome sin is to hate it. Hate is equal to murder. When we hate sin we will kill it.

Psalm 98 invites us to sing praises to the Lord.

Psalm 99 is another call to praise the Lord.

Psalm 100 is yet another invitation to praise the Lord and to serve Him. We are to “*serve the Lord with gladness*” (*verse 2*). I have met people who say they are serving the Lord, but who are complaining about something or the other most of the time. *God doesn’t want anyone to serve Him who doesn’t serve Him joyfully*.

Psalm 101: Here David speaks about the blameless way in which he has sought to live. “*I will give heed to the blameless way. I will walk within my house in the integrity of my heart*” (*verse 2*). Every one of us must be able to say that. It is in our home that we must walk blamelessly first of all. To be blameless does not mean that we never fail. It means that when we fail, we apologise and set the matter right. We must be blameless in our financial dealings too.

Psalm 102 is the prayer of a suffering man for help. He concludes expressing his faith that God will answer and that His children and grandchildren too will follow the Lord (*verse 28*).

Psalm 103 speaks of the numerous blessings David had received from the Lord – all his sins forgiven, all his diseases healed, salvation from the pit (of hell), and material blessings (“*good things*”). David received all this under the old covenant. If all that we preach is that Jesus can forgive us, heal us, bless us materially and save us from hell, then we are only preaching what David preached 1000 years before Christ. What then is the new covenant gospel? It is this: Jesus can give you victory over sin (*Romans 6:14*). He can make you partake of God’s nature (*2 Peter 1:3, 4*). He can enable you to have the devil under your feet (*Romans 16:20*). He can enable you to build the church as the body of Christ (*Ephesians 4*).

Psalm 104 describes God’s wonderful works in creation. “*God makes His servants a flaming fire*” (*verse 4*). All servants of the Lord must be flaming fires for the Lord. When Moses saw a flaming fire in a bush he stopped to listen. When we are like that, baptised in the Holy Spirit and fire, people will stop to listen to us too.

Psalm 105 describes the wonderful things that God did for Israel. Verse 15 says, “*Don’t touch My anointed and don’t do any harm to My prophets.*” God defends His anointed prophets and warns us against speaking against them. It says about Joseph: “*He was sold for a servant until the time came. The word of the Lord tested him and iron entered into his soul*” (*verses 17 - margin, 18, 19*). God allowed Joseph to be put into prison, so that he might become as strong as iron – so that “*iron might enter his soul*”. There was an appointed time for Joseph to be released. God is always on time. Verse 39 tells us why God gave the Israelites a pillar of cloud and fire. The cloud was to cover them from the heat of the sun during the day, and the fire was to give them light at night.

Psalm 106 continues with the history of God’s goodness to Israel. In verses 11, 12 we read, “*When the waters covered their enemies then they believed His words and sang His praise.*” There are two things we see there. *Firstly*, the evidence of faith is *praise*. Out of the abundance of the heart, the mouth speaks. The mouth is the overflow valve of the heart. If we have faith in our hearts, it overflows in praise. When the apostles were filled with the Holy Spirit, they began to praise God (*Acts 2*). If we don’t praise God, it proves that we don’t have faith. *Secondly*, under the old covenant, they lived by sight and not by faith. They could praise God only after they *saw* their enemies drowned. Today, we can praise God, even *before* our enemies are defeated. That is to walk by faith and not by sight.

The Fifth Book – Praise and Worship

Psalm 107 describes the many ways in which the Lord delivers people out of difficult situations. Those who were wandering in the wilderness were led to a city (*verses 4–7*). Those who sat in darkness were brought out of it (*verses 10, 14*). Those who were sick were healed. “*He sent His word and healed them*” (*verse 20*). Those who were caught in a stormy sea were rescued (*verses 25–29*). And so it says in *verse 2*, “*Let those who are redeemed by the Lord say so.*” We must not be silent when the Lord has done something for us, and especially if He has redeemed us from the hand of the enemy. We must testify about it for the glory of God.

Psalm 108 expresses confidence that God will lead the psalmist into victory. He says, “*My heart is steadfast, O God, I will sing, I will sing praises. I will awaken the dawn*” (*verses 1, 2*). He was determined to wake up before dawn every day and praise the Lord first of all – a good habit for all of us to follow.

Psalm 109: Here David asks God to wreak vengeance on his enemies. Verse 8 is quoted by Peter in *Acts 1* referring to Judas Iscariot: “*Let another take his office*”. Judas was called by God, but he listened to Satan who stood at his right hand (*verse 6*). Instead of having God at his right hand, he chose Satan. It is most likely that the ministry that God had planned for Judas was given to the apostle Paul. If we are unfaithful, another can take our ministry.

Psalm 110 is a Messianic psalm that refers to Jesus as King and Priest according to the order of Melchizedek (*verse 4*). This is quoted in *Hebrews 7*.

Psalm 111 is another psalm praising God for His goodness. The earlier psalms were generally cries for help. But as we come to the end of the *Psalms*, we find that there are many more psalms of praise. That’s how our lives should be too. Our Christian life usually *begins* with cries for help. As we grow older, our lives should be filled with praise more and more. Verse 10: “*The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom*”, occurs here before it occurs in *Proverbs*. We don’t know who wrote this psalm. But if it was written by David, then he spoke these words first, before his son Solomon repeated them in *Proverbs*.

Psalm 112 is a beautiful psalm and one my favourite psalms. It describes the blessedness of one who fears the Lord. Such a man’s children will be blessed and he will prosper. He will get light from God when he is in darkness. He is righteous and compassionate and lends to those in need. He will not be afraid of bad news because his heart trusts in the Lord steadfastly. God will honour him and the wicked will be envious of him. “*God’s constant care of him will make a deep impression on all who see it*” (*verse 6 - Living*). That’s how it should be in our lives. People around us should be deeply impressed when they see how God has blessed us.

Psalm 113 praises the Lord Who exalts the poor and needy. God is so great that it is because of His humility that He even looks at what happens in heaven and on earth (*verses 5, 6*).

Psalm 114 speaks about Israel's coming out of Egypt and entering Canaan.

Psalm 115 contrasts God with idols. “*Not to us, O Lord, not to us, but to Thy Name give glory*” (*verse 1*). “*The dead do not praise the Lord*” (*verse 17*). So we should praise the Lord as long as we are alive.

Psalm 116: Here the psalmist thanks the Lord for saving him from death. “*What shall I render to the Lord for all the wonderful things He has done for me?*” (*verse 12*). That is a good question that we should always ask ourselves.

Psalm 117 is the shortest chapter in the Bible – two verses of praise.

Psalm 118 is a psalm of thanksgiving for deliverance. “*It is better to take refuge in the Name of the Lord than to trust in man*” (*verse 8*). Three times we are told that in the name of Jesus we can overcome Satan and his demons (*verses 10, 11, 12*). “*The stone which the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone*” (*verse 22*). The Pharisees rejected Jesus. But He is the chief cornerstone of the church today. People may reject us too. But God will exalt us. “*O Lord, do save (Hosanna)*” (*verse 25*) was the cry with which they waved palms when Jesus came to Jerusalem a few days before His crucifixion.

Psalm 119: This describes the blessedness of the Law of God. It is the longest chapter in the Bible and each of its 176 verses refers in some way to God's Word. It is an alphabetical psalm. The first eight verses of the psalm begin with the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet – ‘Aleph’. The next eight verses begin with the second letter – ‘Beth’. And so on, through the twenty-two letters of the alphabet. Verse 9 says that a young man can keep his way pure by obeying God's Word. Verse 11 says that we can avoid sin by keeping God's Word in our heart. Verse 18 is a prayer: “*Open my eyes that I may behold wonderful things from Thy law.*” Verse 67 says that it was through many afflictions that the psalmist learnt to obey God. “*Thy word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path*” (*verse 105*). “*The unfolding of Thy Word gives light*” (*verse 130*). Verse 133 anticipates the new covenant promise of *Romans 6:14* and says, “*Lord, don't let sin have dominion over me.*” “*Those who love Thy law have great peace*” (*verse 165*). And finally, *verse 176*: “*I have gone astray, Lord. Seek Thy servant.*”

Psalms 120 to 134 are a group of 15 psalms called “*Psalms of ascents*”. This may be because they were sung as the Israelites went to the festivals in Jerusalem. Or it could be songs of musical ascent.

Psalm 120 is a cry for protection from false accusers. We could apply *verses 2 to 4* to taking a radical attitude towards controlling our own tongue: “*Deliver me, O Lord, from lying lips and a deceitful tongue. What shall I give you, O false tongue? I'll shoot you with arrows and burn you up*” (*verses 2–4*).

Psalm 121 celebrates the Lord as our Keeper. “*Where will my help come from? Will it come from the Egyptians beyond those southern mountains or from the Assyrians beyond the northern mountains? No. My help comes from the Lord who made heaven and earth. He is the One who never sleeps. He will take care of me. Day-time or night-time, nothing will smite me*” (*verse 4*).

Psalm 122 is a prayer for the peace of Jerusalem (the church). “*I was glad when they said unto me, ‘Let us go to the church-meeting. My home is in the church, in the midst of God's people.’*” A true disciple of Jesus will value the fellowship of God's people.

Psalm 123 is another prayer for protection from the arrogant. “*Lord, my eyes are looking up to You just like the eyes of a servant looks to his master*” (*verse 2*). Our calling is to wait on the Lord like that and not to run around doing “*something for the Lord*”, according to our own ideas.

Psalm 124 praises the Lord for saving His people from their enemies.

Psalm 125 speaks of the solid security of God's people. “*Those who trust in the Lord will be like a mountain that cannot be shaken. The Lord surrounds His people*” (*verses 1, 2*).

Psalm 126 celebrates the return from the captivity in Babylon. They had sowed in tears in Babylon and now reap in joy in Jerusalem. To build the church, we need to sow in tears even today.

Psalm 127 is a psalm about building the home. Amazingly, this psalm was written by Solomon, who had 700 wives and 300 concubines and never built a home himself (*1 Kings 11:3*)!! That shows how easy it is to preach powerful, accurate sermons and never practise what one preaches. The psalm says, “*Unless the Lord builds the house, they labour in vain who build it. Children are a heritage of the Lord*” (*verses 1, 3*). It goes on to say that our children must grow up in such a way that our enemies' mouths are shut when they see the way we have brought up our children. But the man who wrote that psalm is in hell today!

Psalm 128 is another psalm about the blessed home life of a man who fears the Lord!

Psalm 129 is another Messianic psalm. The psalmist prays that all who hate Zion (the church) be put to shame.

Psalm 130 expresses an eager longing after the Lord. “*There is forgiveness with the Lord that He may be feared*” (verse 4). God forgives us so that we fear Him and don’t sin again.

Psalm 131 expresses a simple childlike trust in the Lord. Verse 1 is a good example for us to follow – not to involve ourselves in matters that we have no experience in and that are outside our ability to understand. There are many things which are outside our boundary which are best left in God’s hands.

Psalm 132 speaks of David’s great passion to build a house for God (verses 4, 5). But he was not given that privilege. We must have a similar passion to build the church.

Psalm 133 has *unity* as its subject. “*How good it is for brothers to dwell together in unity*” (verse 1). Unity is a fundamental requirement for building Zion (the church), because the anointing and the blessing of God flows in its fullness only where there is such unity (verses 2, 3). The Holy Spirit fell upon that first group of 120 men and women because they were “*of one mind*” (Acts 1:14).

Psalm 134: This is the last of the psalms of ascent and invites people to praise the Lord.

Psalm 135 contrasts the greatness of the Lord with the impotence of idols. “*Those who make idols will be like them*” (verse 18). We become like the God we worship. If the God we worship is “*a policeman*” who is always seeking to catch people doing something wrong, then we will become policemen towards others too. But if we worship a loving Heavenly Father who is merciful and compassionate, then we will be like Him to others too.

Psalm 136 is a psalm that gives thanks to the Lord for His loving-kindness to Israel through the years.

Psalm 137 is a psalm about the experience of the Israelites when they were captives in Babylon. There they learnt to value Jerusalem above everything else. We too need to value the church more than anything else on earth. The hatred expressed for Babylon in verses 7 to 9 should be the hatred we have for a religious system built in Christendom by the traditions of men that dishonours God – a hatred, *not for the people in the system*, but for the *system itself*.

Psalm 138 is a prayer of thanksgiving and faith in the Lord. “*Thou hast magnified Thy word according to all Thy name*” (verse 2). God’s Word is as exalted as His Name. To dishonour His Word by disobeying it is as serious as dishonouring the Name of Jesus! David has faith that “*the Lord will accomplish what concerns me*” (verse 8).

Psalm 139 describes the fact that God is everywhere and knows all things. We are in God’s presence everywhere we go (verses 7–12). That is

what makes our life so secure. His foreknowledge has also planned every day of our earthly lives right from the day we were born and written it down in a book (*verse 16*). God will show us that plan one page at a time. If we live in that plan, we will have no regret when we come to the end of our earthly lives. Verse 24 (Living) is a good prayer that we should pray frequently: “*Lord, point out anything you find in me that makes You sad.*”

Psalm 140 is another prayer for protection from evil men. The upright alone will dwell in God’s presence (*verse 13*).

Psalm 141 is a cry for the Lord’s help to be holy in speech and in heart and also for protection. “*Set a guard, O Lord, over my mouth. Do not let my heart incline towards any evil thing*” (*verses 3, 4*).

Psalm 142 is another cry for help.

Psalm 143 is a prayer for guidance and deliverance. “*Teach me to do Thy will. Let Thy good Spirit lead me on to level ground*” (*verse 10*). Level ground is one where we progress steadily and don’t have up-and-down experiences.

Psalm 144 is a prayer for deliverance and for blessing on David’s children. He wants his sons to grow up like strong solid trees and his daughters to be as strong as the pillars of a palace (*verse 12*).

Psalm 145 is a psalm of praise to the Lord for His greatness. “*The Lord is near to all who call upon Him. He will fulfil the desire of those who fear Him*” (*verses 18, 19*).

Psalm 146: The last five psalms are psalms of praise. This one praises the Lord for His creative power and His goodness and urges us not to trust in any mortal man, not even in princes (*verse 3*).

Psalm 147 also praises the Lord for His works in creation. He also heals the broken-hearted (*verse 3*). “He builds the church.” He does many wonderful things.

Psalm 148: Here all of creation is urged to praise the Lord.

Psalm 149 invites us to praise the Lord at all times. “*He will beautify the humble with salvation*” (*verse 4*). If you want the Lord to beautify you, you must be humble. We are called to sing for joy even on our beds and to have the high praises of God always in our mouth and the word of God in our hands to bind the power and activities of Satan and his demons (*verses 5–8*). Praise to God and binding Satan’s power always go together.

Psalm 150: This is the grand finale. Thirteen times we read the word “*praise*” in this psalm, concluding with “*Let everything that has breath praise the Lord*” (*verse 6*). There is only one type of person who does not have to praise God – the one who cannot breathe, the dead. All the rest must keep praising the Lord at all times. May it be so in our lives. Amen.

Authors of the Psalms

Author	Psalm No	Total no of Psalm(s)
David	2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20, 21, 22, 23, 24, 25, 26, 27, 28, 29, 30, 31, 32, 34, 35, 36, 37, 38, 39, 40, 41, 51, 52, 53, 54, 55, 56, 57, 58, 59, 60, 61, 62, 63, 64, 65, 68, 69, 70, 86, 95, 101, 103, 108, 109, 110, 122, 124, 131, 133, 138, 139, 140, 141, 142, 143, 144, 145	73
Asaph	50, 73, 74, 75, 76, 77, 78, 79, 80, 81, 82, 83	12
Sons of Korah	42, 44, 45, 46, 47, 48, 49, 84, 85, 87, 88	11
Solomon	72, 127	2
Moses	90	1
Heman	88	1
Ethan	89	1
Unknown	1, 10, 33, 43, 50, 66, 67, 71, 91, 92, 93, 94, 96, 97, 98, 99, 100, 102, 104, 105, 106, 107, 111, 112, 113, 114, 115, 116, 117, 118, 119, 120, 121, 123, 125, 126, 128, 129, 130, 132, 134, 135, 136, 137, 146, 147, 148, 149, 150	49

PROVERBS

WORDS OF WISDOM

The books of *Psalms* and *Proverbs* describe two aspects of our Christian life. *Psalms* speaks of our trust in God and worship of Him. *Proverbs* deals with the other half of the circle of our life – our daily walk in this world and our relationship with other human beings. These two must always go together. We must not be so heavenly minded that we are of no earthly use. Neither must we be so earthly minded that we are of no use to God. A devotional life with God, a walk with God, a life of praise and worship and prayer and faith must lead to a practical life that manifests the character and the nature of Christ towards others here on this earth. The book of *Proverbs* deals primarily with that. There is instruction here for young people, for our working life, and for our home situations.

Proverbs deals with the subjects of wise and foolish children, laziness and hard work, the use of the tongue, wealth and poverty, telling lies and speaking the truth, being talkative and being subdued in our speech, slandering, justice and injustice, pride and humility, good women and bad women, covetousness and contentment, anger and self control, gloominess and cheerfulness, good company and bad company, the education and discipline of children, the fear of the Lord, the opinion that people have about themselves, warnings against temptations, how to treat servants, bribery, reproof, correction, friendships, sensual pleasures, drunkenness, flattery, money not acquired in righteous ways, revenge etc. You can see that covers many areas of our daily life on earth. That is why it is good for all young people to study this book seriously.

The Beginning of Wisdom

The first nine chapters are directed primarily to young people: “*To know wisdom and instruction, to discern the sayings of understanding*” (1:2). These three words have a distinctive meaning in the book of *Proverbs*.

- *Wisdom* refers to the Divine nature.
- *Instruction* refers to practical knowledge that comes through discipline.
- *Understanding* refers to the knowledge of God and His ways.

The very first thing the writer has to say is this: “*The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge*” (1:7). There are *two types* of fear that we can have of God – one is wrong and the other is right. The wrong type of fear is the fear *that God may hurt us*. The right type of fear is the fear *that we may hurt God*. False religions major on the first type of fear. They teach people that God is angry with them and may hurt them. So the people seek to appease their god and to make him happy by offering him gifts and sacrifices and by going on pilgrimages. That spirit is found in Babylonian Christianity too. But the type of fear the Bible speaks about is the fear that we may hurt God by the way we live. The Holy Spirit can be *grieved* by something we do or say or think. Such a fear is actually a reverence for God.

True wisdom is to have a reverence for God. Many people crack jokes about God and about spiritual things. Humour is a gift of God. But we must never make God and Divine things the subject of a joke. We must never make hell the subject of jokes – because hell is an awful reality. A person who reverences God will never joke about hell – just like we would not joke about a man dying of AIDS.

Reverence for God is terribly lacking in the world today. If we want to become spiritual, we must begin with reverence for God. The knowledge that *Proverbs* speaks about is the knowledge *of God* – *not* an academic knowledge of the Bible. There is a vast difference between knowing the Bible and knowing *God*. Wisdom comes from reverence for God and knowing Him. The more we know Him, the more we reverence Him; and the more we reverence Him, we get to know Him even more.

Every verse in *Proverbs* is of value. This is the best book of practical advice in the Old Testament. It is like a New Testament book in the Old Testament! But we won’t be looking at each verse here. We will be looking only at some of the most important verses.*

He goes on to warn young people to be careful about the type of company they keep. “*If sinners entice you, don’t listen to them. Don’t allow other people to drag you in their worldly ways*” (verse 10). Stand alone if necessary, for the Lord. One of the most important things that young people need to learn is to say, “No. I can’t come along with you.” That may offend many of your friends. But you won’t regret it in the long run.

To all such young men, God gives a promise: “*I will pour out My Spirit on you, and I will make known My words unto you*” (1:23). When we

* If you want to study every verse in Proverbs, you can go to: <http://www.cfcindia.com/verse-by-verse/Proverbs> – where I have explained every verse in the book.

studied *Genesis 1*, we saw there the combined work of the Holy Spirit and the Word of God in the remaking of the earth. Here we see that it is the same combination that produces wisdom in us. If we study God's Word academically, we can't get wisdom. God has to pour out His Spirit upon us so that His words become living to us. Someone studying the Bible without the enlightenment of the Holy Spirit would be similar to a man trying to read a book in total darkness. He can read nothing. But as soon as the lights are switched on, he can see everything. That is what happens when the Spirit gives us *revelation* on His Word. God says, "*I will make known My words*" which refers to His giving revelation on His words. That is how we acquire wisdom.

He goes on to say that if you refuse wisdom's invitation, one day when you are in trouble, and you call for help, you may not find it (1:24–33). You may not find wisdom late in life, if you have neglected it in your earlier years.

So it says in *Chapter 2:4*, "*Seek for wisdom as you would seek for silver and hidden treasures. Then you will discern the fear of the Lord and the knowledge of God*". These are the two essentials that are repeated again and again in Proverbs – reverence for God and knowing God personally. The wisdom the Lord gives will deliver us "*from the way of evil, from the man who speaks perverse things, and from the strange woman*" (verses 12, 16). Young men need to be protected from evil men who try to deceive them and evil women who try to attract them.

Guidance

Chapter 3:5, 6: "Trust in the Lord with all your heart and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge Him and He will make your paths straight." This is a promise of guidance. God will direct our paths if we fulfil the conditions. What are the conditions?

First of all: Trust in the Lord with all your heart and don't lean on your own reason and intelligence. It doesn't say there that we should not use our reason or intelligence, but *not to depend on it*. God created our powers of reasoning and our intelligence. But like God created Eve to be subject to Adam, reason must be subject to the Holy Spirit. A wife is most useful in a home. But if she takes over the headship of the home, there will be chaos – as when Eve took over the headship in Eden and sinned. We have to use our reason (and intelligence) to find God's will, for it is a very capable "*wife*". Without our intelligence we would not be able to study God's Word or even live in this world. But we must depend on the Holy Spirit to *enlighten our reason*. *Faith is not contrary to reason but is beyond reason* – just like multiplication is not against addition but is beyond addition.

Secondly: Acknowledge God in all your ways. That means to obey every single thing that God reveals to you. Give the Lord first place in every area of your life. Then the Lord will lead you in His perfect will.

The Lord has led me step by step over the last 56 years, as a believer. Many a time, I never knew what the next step would be. But the Lord has directed my paths. I pray that you will have the same joy as you look back over your life.

“Honour the Lord from your wealth” (3:9). We must learn to give to God joyfully – from the wealth of our time, our energy, our money, our resources, our talents, our children, and every other area of our wealth.

“Do not reject the discipline of the Lord” (verse 11). Correction is essential for our spiritual growth.

Chapter 4:12 has a very beautiful promise. A literal paraphrase of it would read: “*As you go, step by step the way will open up before you.*” You don’t need to know even what lies two steps ahead of you. Take the first step that you can see. You will then see the next step. This is how God guides us. Doors may look to be closed in front of us. But as we approach them, they will open automatically. But they won’t open until you come near them. That is how our God leads us on. So don’t be hesitant or afraid if you see a door closed in front of you. Take the step God shows you now. “*I have put before you an open door,*” says the Lord, “*which no-one can shut*” (*Revelation 3:8*).

Chapter 4:15 is a good word concerning scenes of temptation: “*Avoid it, do not pass by it; turn away from it and pass on.*”

Chapter 4:18 is another wonderful verse: “*The path of the righteous is like the light of dawn (when the sun rises) that shines brighter and brighter until the full day (noon-day).*” This is God’s perfect will for everyone of His children – that they should become more and more like Christ every day of their lives, from the time that they are born again (when the sun rises), until the day that Christ comes back (noon-day). Along that path, we will get more and more revelation on God’s Word, more and more light on the corruption of our self-life, more and more wisdom for practical situations that we face, etc. If you walk along this path of the righteous, you will never backslide, just like the sun never goes back in the sky. Why then is it so rare to find Christians who live like this? Because most of Christendom lives at a substandard level. We must not let our life sink to the level of the believers around us. Our eyes must be fixed on the Lord alone. We must seek to walk as He walked. Unfortunately, many Christian leaders today are *not* good examples. Look at God’s Word and look at Jesus. If you find a good example, like Paul, you can follow him too. Paul said, “*Follow me as I follow Christ*” (*1 Corinthians 11:1*).

Chapter 4:23: “*Watch over your heart with all diligence for from it flow the springs of life.*” Everything that comes out of our life flows from our heart – our words, our ministry, everything. So we must ensure that our

hearts are kept pure at all times. Only thus will the channel be clean for the living waters to flow from heaven through us, to others.

Chapter 4:25: "Let your eyes look directly ahead and let your gaze be fixed straight in front of you." This has reference to temptations that come through the eyes and is very good advice for young people. Be careful what you allow your eyes to look at. If you are tempted by what you see, look away. Set the Lord in front of you and look straight at Him. As long as we live in this world, we can't avoid being tempted by what we see. But we can avoid the second look. We can destroy our life and our usefulness to God, if we don't control our eyes.

Chapter 5:15: "Drink water out of your own well". This is a warning to husbands to be satisfied with their own wives and not to long after other women – someone else's well. Sexual enjoyment is perfectly right and good within marriage. It is evil and Satanic outside of marriage.

Chapter 6:6–10: "Go to the ant, O lazy man. Observe her ways and be wise". The ant gathers food in harvest-time, because it has forethought for the future. It realises that food won't be available in the winter. How small the brain of that ant is. Yet it has enough sense in that tiny brain to store food for the future. How much wiser we who are created in God's image should be! We should not spend all the money we earn each month, and have no savings at all for the future. I have met some "*super-spiritual*" believers who live extravagantly and say that they trust God for all their future emergencies. But when such an emergency does arise, they end up having to borrow from other believers who have been wise like the ant! Or they wait like beggars, expecting other believers to come to their aid and give them gifts to meet their need. Why do you want to be like them? Be wise and discipline yourself now to save some money each month. The same principle applies in spiritual matters as well: Consider the matter of storing up God's Word in your mind. Once you are married and have children, you won't have enough time to study God's Word. So, study it now, in your single days, when you have plenty of time and store up that knowledge for the future. Then you won't starve spiritually later.

Chapter 6:21 exhorts us to bind God's word continually on our heart, for then, "when we walk about, it will guide us, when we sleep it will watch over us, and when we wake up, it will talk to us" (6:22). God's Word will guide us and keep us, day and night. If we are restless and unable to sleep properly at night, it could be because we have disobeyed God's Word somewhere and have a bad conscience. A good conscience is the best pillow to sleep on. And when we wake up, God's Word will guide us in each step of our daily life. That is how God wants us to live.

Chapter 7 tells the story of a very foolish young man who visits a loose woman without any morals. It is a strong warning to young people to be careful of all friendships and associations with women. One step leads to another very quickly in this area; and if you are not careful, you can have a lifetime of regret. Beware of flirtatious women. Women have ruined

the lives of many fine young believers and robbed them of the ministry that God had planned for them. Young men should read this chapter frequently.

Chapter 8 speaks about Wisdom (pictured as a wise woman) inviting people to listen to her. “*Blessed is the man who listens to me, watching daily at my gates*” (verse 34). We must listen to what God has to say to us every morning and throughout the day. That will protect us from many dangers.

Chapter 9:1: Wisdom builds a house (the church) on seven pillars. These seven pillars are listed in *James 3:17*: Being pure, peaceable, gentle, reasonable, full of mercy, unwavering, and without hypocrisy. The church is built on these pillars.

Guidelines for Godliness

Chapter 10:12 “*Love covers all sins.*” Peter quotes this in his epistle (*1 Peter 4:8*). If you really love a person you will cover his weaknesses and not expose them. That is how God has dealt with us. He has *not* exposed our past sins to anyone. We must treat others in the same way that God has treated us. If you want to be wise, let me give you, my dear brothers and sisters, one bit of advice in your youth. If you know a bad story about someone, let that story die with you. Don’t go around talking about it. God will honour you if you do that, especially if it is a bad story about one of His children. He will love you especially. Think of a father whose child has done something wrong and I know something about it; but I never tell anyone what his son did. Don’t you think that father will love me very much for that? It’s like that with God too, when He sees that we treat His children with love.

Chapter 10:22: “*It is the blessing of the Lord that makes rich, and He adds no sorrow to it.*” Some translations put that last part as: “*Toiling does not increase it.*” The blessing of the Lord provides us with all that we need for our life on earth. So let us always seek for the blessing of the Lord upon our lives.

Chapter 10:31: “*The mouth of the righteous flows with wisdom.*” You can know whether you are righteous or not by the way you speak. A righteous man’s mouth always comes forth with words of wisdom.

Chapter 11:3: “*The integrity of the upright man will guide him.*” God looks for integrity and honesty first of all in us. And if we are honest, we will find that we are guided aright into God’s perfect will.

Chapter 11:24: “*There is one who scatters, yet increases all the more.*” This is one of the paradoxes of the Christian life that one who gives receives more, because God blesses him. And the one who is stingy becomes poor. When a miser gets converted, he becomes generous. Jesus said to His disciples, “*Freely you have received. Freely give*” (*Matthew 10:8*). God has freely given us so many things. We must give to others freely too.

The widow in the gospels, had only two mites. She gave what she had, and I am sure that God honoured her and she suffered no lack.

"He who waters others will himself be watered" (verse 25). If you want God to water you and keep you fresh, you must water others. Why are many Christians so stale and dry? Because God is not watering them. And why is God not watering them? Because they are not watering others. Begin to think about the needs of others and see how you can bless them. You will then find that God blesses you abundantly.

Chapter 12:23: "A wise man conceals knowledge". That means that a wise man is reluctant to display his knowledge. He may know a great deal; but he is modest about it. A foolish man however is ready to give his opinion on anything and everything.

Chapter 13:10: "Through presumption comes nothing but strife." All strife is the result of pride.

Chapter 14:12: "There is a way which seems right to a man, but its end is the way of death." This verse is repeated in *Chapter 16:25*. So, in case you miss it the first time, God gives it to you a second time. What appears right in your eyes is not necessarily God's way. Why is it that many believers do not earnestly seek God's guidance about the decisions they take? Because they feel they know enough about all the factors involved in their decisions. Years later they discover that they were wrong and that they have wasted their lives. It is wise to be humble and to acknowledge that we know almost nothing. So let us seek the Lord for His wisdom. Even in the study of the Scriptures, let us acknowledge that we are stupid and foolish and can go totally astray in our understanding of it if we are not given revelation by His Spirit. God says to us, "*My ways are not your ways*" (*Isaiah 55:8*).

Chapter 15:13: "A joyful heart makes a cheerful face." It is joy in the heart that brings brightness on our faces. *"A cheerful heart has a continual feast"* (verse 15). There is a great emphasis in *Proverbs* on having joy in our life. *"A joyful heart is good medicine"* (17:22). So joy can make us healthy too. The kingdom of God is not just righteousness, but righteousness with joy in the Holy Spirit. In the Old Testament they had righteousness *without* joy. Now we have righteousness *with* joy. There is a spring in our steps, a song in our hearts and a light on our faces as we follow Jesus.

Chapter 16:18: "Pride goes before destruction and a haughty spirit before a fall." The reason anyone falls into sin is because he is proud. When we do something stupid, we can be absolutely certain that the cause was pride. The Lord is able to keep us from falling (*Jude 24*). How does He do that? By humbling us to ground level! If we stand or even sit we can fall. But when we are flat on our faces on the ground, we cannot fall!! So let us keep our mouth in the dust at all times if we don't want to fall. No matter how much God may bless us or use us, let us keep in mind our littleness before God. Thus we will become worshippers of God; and we will never fall.

Chapter 17:9: “He who covers a transgression seeks love.” Did somebody do you some wrong? Did someone hurt you or insult you? Forgive it and ignore it. That is the way of love that a godly man walks in.

Chapter 17:28: “Even a fool when he keeps silent is considered wise.” If you are foolish, but want people to consider you wise, what should you do? Keep your mouth shut!! People will then imagine: “He is a man of deep wisdom. That’s why he’s silent”!! If you had opened your mouth there, everyone would have known immediately that you were a fool. So be quick to hear and slow to speak, especially when you are young and foolish. What blessings there are when we are restrained in our speech.

Chapter 18:12: “Humility goes before honour.” Are you seeking for honour from God? Then humble yourself.

Chapter 18:16: “A man’s gift makes room for him and brings him before great men.” It is through the gift God gives us that He makes room for us to serve in the church. It’s pathetic to see many today who have no God-given gifts, who are seeking and fighting for place and honour in the church. We are urged to “*pursue after spiritual gifts, especially that we may prophesy*” (*1 Corinthians 14:1*). To prophesy is to speak the Word of God in a way that challenges, convicts, comforts, encourages and builds up (*1 Corinthians 14:3*). God doesn’t give His gifts to those who don’t value them. People will travel hundreds of miles to listen to a man who has a message from God. John the Baptist was in the wilderness and the people from all over Judea went out there to hear him, because he had a message from heaven.

Chapter 18:19: “A brother offended is harder to be won than a city.” This is why we need to be careful in what we say to one another, to ensure that relationships are not broken.

Chapter 18:21: “Death and life are in the power of the tongue.” On the day of Pentecost, tongues of fire appeared over the disciples to show that God wanted to set their tongues on fire with the fire of the Holy Spirit. *James 3:6* says that the tongue can be set on fire with the fire of hell too. Given the corruption of our flesh, it is only if our tongue is controlled by the Holy Spirit that we can be saved from spreading death through our tongues.

Chapter 19:17: “He who is gracious to a poor man lends to the Lord. And He will repay him for his good deed”. The poor belong to God and He considers anything that we do for the poor as something done for Him – and that is why He promises to repay us for our kindnesses.

Chapter 19:18: “Discipline your son while there is hope and do not cause him to die.” There are many verses in *Proverbs* about disciplining our children if we want to save them from hell.

Chapter 20:14: “‘Bad, bad,’ says the buyer, but when he goes his way then he boasts”. Most people use this technique in India to get something

at a lower price from a shopkeeper. I have seen believers argue even with poor vegetable-vendors, just to get something for one rupee less. Is that Christlike? That poor man is struggling to support his family. God has given you far more than him. Be generous. Let us be good to the people around us, and especially to the poor.

Chapter 21:2: "Every man's way is right in his own eyes, but the Lord weighs the hearts." God looks at the motive more than the action. We must always remember that.

Chapter 21:13: "He who shuts his ear to the cry of the poor will also cry himself and not be answered." God treats us as we treat others – especially the poor. This is why God does not answer the prayers of many believers.

Chapter 21:19: "It is better to live in a desert land than with a contentious and vexing woman." Here we see what God thinks about a nagging wife.

Chapter 22:4: "The reward of humility and the fear of the Lord are riches, honour and life." Spiritual riches, spiritual honour, and spiritual life come from God and are given on the basis of two qualities that He looks for in man: *Humility* and the *fear of the Lord*. These are the main qualities that we should look for, when considering someone for a position of leadership in the church.

Chapter 22:6, 15: "Train up a child in the way he should go. Even when he is old he will not depart from it. Foolishness is bound up in the heart of a child. The rod of discipline will remove it far from him." To remove the foolishness found in the heart of a child, you have to apply some discipline to his *bottom*. There is obviously a close connection between a child's bottom and his heart! If a child is disciplined wisely *in love*, he will follow the Lord when he grows up and leaves home to face an evil world.

Chapter 22:29: "Do you see a man skilled in his work? He will stand before kings." This is a good verse to apply to the disciplined study of God's Word and to diligence in serving the Lord. God will open many doors of ministry for such a man to serve His children (who are the real kings on earth).

Chapter 23:22: "Listen to your father who begot you and don't despise your mother when she is old." Many children today unfortunately, do not honour and respect their aged parents. This is not only sad, but evil. God takes special note of those who honour their parents and blesses them in special ways.

Chapter 23:31: "Don't look on the wine when it is red, when it sparkles in the cup." This is an exhortation to avoid all highly-fermented wine

(any drink with a high content of alcohol). The wine that Jesus drank and that He made at Cana must therefore have been home-made wine that was not highly fermented – because we know that Jesus obeyed all of God’s Word and so He must have obeyed this verse too.

Chapter 24:11, 12: “Deliver those who are being taken away to death. If you say, ‘See, we did not know this,’ does He not consider it Who weighs the hearts?” This verse can be taken today as a challenge to engage in evangelism. The world around us needs to hear the gospel and we need to give it to them.

Chapter 24:17: “Do not rejoice when your enemy falls.” Even in the Old Testament, they were told not to rejoice over the fall of their enemies.

Chapter 24:27: “Prepare your work outside and make it ready for yourself in the field; afterwards then, build your house.” This is good advice for all young men considering marriage. First get a job, then get married. Earn enough money to support a family, and then look for a wife to build your family.

Chapter 24:30–34: Here we read of a lazy man who didn’t take care of his field and so the field was covered with thorns. He slept while others were working. The warning here is that poverty can strike us if we sleep like that. Henry Longfellow (an English poet) wrote a poem in which he said:

*“The heights by great men reached and kept
Were not attained by sudden flight.
But they while their companions slept
Were toiling upwards in the night.”*

God told Adam that he must earn his bread by the sweat of his brow. God rewards diligence. One who studies the Word and obeys it diligently will have a fruitful life when compared with the believer who is lazy. A diligent man will have a good garden and a blessed ministry. A lazy man however will have many regrets both on earth and in eternity.

Chapter 25:14: “Like clouds and wind without rain is a man who boasts of his gifts falsely.” There are many preachers today, who claim to have gifts of healing and other supernatural gifts, who are only fooling simple-minded believers. That is compared here to a farmer seeing clouds in the sky and hoping that his fields will get rain, and getting nothing! Don’t ever claim to have a gift that you don’t have. If you have a gift, it will be evident to others. If God has given you the gift of evangelism, you will bring many people to the Lord – not just one or two. If God has given you the gift of teaching, many people will be enlightened through your ministry – not just one or two. If God has given you a gift of healing, then many will be healed when you pray for them – not just one or two. If people are not healed in large numbers, that proves that you don’t have the gift.

Chapter 26:4 says, “Do not answer a fool according to his folly”. But the very next verse says, “Answer a fool according to his folly” (verse 5). Which of these two statements is right? The answer is: Both are right, because they refer to two types of fools. Jesus answered the questions that His disciples asked him. But when the Pharisees asked Him questions, He did not give them such clear replies. And to Herod, He gave no reply at all. So when people ask us questions, we must discern which type of fool the person is. We need the discernment of the Holy Spirit to know that.

Chapter 26:27: “He who digs a pit will fall into it; and he who rolls a stone, it will come back on him.” This is a warning that those who seek to harm others will find the evil they plan coming back to harm them. Haman is one example of this.

Chapter 27:1: “Do not boast about tomorrow for you do not know what a day may bring forth.” James tells us that we must recognise that we cannot be certain whether we will live for even a single more day (James 4:15). A constant awareness of this fact should keep us all humble.

Chapter 27:2: “Let another man praise you and not your own mouth.” There is a lot of self-promotion in Christendom today, which is totally foreign to the Spirit of Christ.

Chapter 27:23: “Know well the condition of your flocks and pay attention to your herds.” That is a good word for those who are shepherds of God’s flock. A good elder will know the spiritual condition of every one of the believers in his church.

Chapter 28:13: “He who conceals his sins will not prosper. But he who confesses and forsakes them will find mercy.” That is one of the clearest verses in the Bible that teaches that confessing our sins to God is not enough. We need to give them up too.

Chapter 29:1: “A man who hardens his neck after much reproof will suddenly be broken beyond remedy.” No-one should keep on taking advantage of God’s mercy and goodness, because he will suddenly find one day that he has crossed “the red line” and the Holy Spirit stops pleading with him and he can never be saved thereafter.

Chapter 29:18: “Where there is no vision, the people perish.” The great need in Christendom today is for men and women of vision. God wants to give all of us a vision of what He can accomplish in our land through us at this time. Ask God to give you a burden for India.

Chapter 29:20: “Do you see a man who is hasty in his words (or hasty in his matters)? There is more hope for a fool than for him.” This is the last chapter of the proverbs of Solomon, and we are now seven verses from the end. In all these 29 chapters Solomon has been describing various types of fools. Finally, before he concludes, he says, “Now let me tell you who is the greatest fool of all – The man who is quick to speak and who is hasty in making his decisions. He gets the first prize!” There is more hope for all the other fools mentioned in this book than for the hasty man!

Chapter 30 was written by a man named Agur. In *verse 7, 8*, he says,

"Two things I asked of Thee. Do not refuse me before I die. (1) Keep deception and lies far from me. (2) Give me neither poverty nor riches."

In Old Testament times they had to pray that prayer, because they felt (as it says in the rest of this verse) that if they were poor they would steal and if they became too rich they might forsake the Lord! 90% of believers need to pray that prayer too, because too much money would ruin them. But that is a very shallow level to live at. Paul, however, said, *"It doesn't matter to me whether I am poor or rich. I can handle both"* (*Philippians 4:12*). Riches would not destroy Paul and poverty would not make him drift away from the Lord. There are a number of good proverbs in the rest of the chapter that are worth meditating on.

Chapter 31 was written by a king named Lemuel and he lists some of the things that his mother taught him. After some good advice in *verses 1 to 9*, we come to the last section, *verses 10–31*. This is a very important section for all young men and women, because it tells us the qualities of a godly wife. All young women should seek to be like this and all young men should look for such a woman to marry. Notice the number of things mentioned about this godly wife: She works with her hands and is a very hard working person. She gets up early and cooks the meals. She is enterprising too. She buys a field and plants a vineyard there with her own hands. She spins clothes with her own hands. She gives money to the poor. She protects her children in winter, with warm clothing that she has stitched herself. She supports her husband and her husband trusts her fully. She makes clothes and sells them. She is dignified and she speaks with wisdom. She has the law of kindness on her tongue. So we see that *her hands are hard and her tongue is soft*. Unfortunately, with many young sisters today, things are exactly the opposite. Their hands are soft (because they have never worked hard) and their tongue is hard (they are proud and rude). *"Charm is deceitful and beauty is empty. But a woman who fears the Lord shall be praised"* (*verse 30*). Her husband and her children rise up and praise her as the best wife and mother in the world.

Young men, this is the type of wife you should be looking for.

Young women, this is the type of woman you should be.

And all young people: Read *Proverbs* frequently so that you can grow up to be godly and wise men and women whom God can use.

ECCLESIASTES

THE VANITY OF WORLDLINESS

This is a difficult book to understand, but we will discover as we study it, that there is a reason why God has placed it in Scripture. Solomon begins by saying that *he has found everything in the world to be futile and empty*. Since that is so, “*what advantage does a man have in all the work that he does?*” (1:3).

Solomon was the wisest man that lived – as far as *human* wisdom was concerned. The Lord had told him that he would have wisdom such as no one had ever had before him or would have after him (*1 Kings 3:12, 13*). In the early years of Solomon’s life, he had some fear of God and that was when he wrote *Proverbs*.

Proverbs is *divine* wisdom. *Ecclesiastes*, however, is *human* wisdom – the wisdom of the man who lives “*under the sun*” (1:3). The expression ‘*under the sun*’ comes often in *Ecclesiastes*, because its writer lived under the sun. *Proverbs*, however, demonstrates the wisdom of a man who lived *above the sun*. This is where we are called to live – in the *heavenlies*.

Then why has God placed the book of *Ecclesiastes* in the Bible?

The Bible describes *human* wisdom in order to show how much higher *divine* wisdom is than that. A large portion of the book of *Job* consists of the speeches of three preachers who said much about God with their human wisdom, but which was mostly all wrong (*Job 42:7*). Yet God allowed their words to be recorded in Scripture.

Ecclesiastes has been included in Scripture to show us that even the wisest man on earth can miss finding God when he depends on his human cleverness. Jesus once said, “*I thank You, Father, that You have hidden these things from the clever and the intelligent, but You have revealed them unto babes*” (*Matthew 11:25*). What do babes have that clever and intelligent people do not have? *Humility*. It is very difficult for a clever, intelligent person to be humble. It is not wrong to be

intelligent, but it is certainly ungodly to be proud of one's intelligence. Proud men can never understand God's ways, no matter how intelligent they may be.

Even though Solomon was the wisest and most intelligent man that ever lived, and even though he was the one who was going to build God's temple, yet God gave the plan of the temple to David and not to Solomon. It is really amazing to read in *1 Chronicles 28:11–19* that the wisest man in the world had to be told how much gold he should use for the lampstand and how to make forks! Why was the plan given to David? Because David was a man after God's own *heart*. Solomon was a man who had a clever head, but David had a good heart.

God gave the plan of the tabernacle to Moses not when he was 40, but when he was 80. Why? At 40, he was full of the wisdom of Egypt and would have modified God's plan considerably. Then the glory of God would not have rested on the tabernacle. But by the time Moses was 80, the chaff of human wisdom had been sifted out of his head, and he was willing to submit to God's wisdom. Then he constructed the tabernacle as a simple structure – as God intended it to be.

It was so with the temple too. Solomon was only the contractor who built it. The one who got the plan from God was David – “*the man after God's own heart*”. Even today, God does not reveal His plan for building the church as the Body of Christ, to clever people with *good brains*, but to humble people with *good hearts*. If you are intelligent and *also humble*, that is fine. But the primary requirement for God's work is humility, not intelligence.

1 Corinthians 3:18 says, “*If anyone among you thinks he is wise in this age, let him become foolish that he may become wise.*” Thank God for the intelligence He has given you. That is very useful in the study of science and mathematics. But when it comes to Scripture, it is different. Here you have to become *foolish* in order to be *wise*. That means that you have to come to God in humility and say, “Lord, in spiritual matters I am as stupid as a donkey. Please teach me”. The *cleverness* of this world is *foolishness* with God (*1 Corinthians 3:19*). That is what the book of *Ecclesiastes* demonstrates.

It is written further that “*God catches the clever in their craftiness. The reasonings of the clever are useless*” (*1 Corinthians 3:19, 20*). Take all the reasonings and arguments of the cleverest people in the world and put them all together, and God says that all of it is useless. When it comes to spiritual things it is the one who is humble who has a great advantage. And the person who is proud of his intelligence and cleverness has a tremendous disadvantage.

If intelligence had been the main requirement to serve God, then Jesus would have gone to the Bible school that Gamaliel was running at

Jerusalem, and selected His apostles from there. Why didn't He do that? Why did He go to the lakeside in Galilee, and pick fishermen who had never been to a Bible school? Because He was not looking for clever men but for *humble* men, who were willing to learn.

Are you teachable? If you are offended by what you are reading, that would be the clearest proof that you are proud. Only proud people get offended.

Ecclesiastes demonstrates how one can have a lot of knowledge and yet not be spiritual at all. The human wisdom that is found in psychology today has many good things in it. But it is *not* divine wisdom. And it is more dangerous when divine wisdom is mixed with human wisdom than if you had human wisdom all by itself. If someone wanted to poison you, he would mix a little bit of poison with a *lot* of milk. Things that are totally bad are easy to detect. But psychology has a lot of good in it – and that is why it can be dangerous. It is not divine wisdom. Divine wisdom comes from the Scriptures alone. Many things that psychologists say, who do not submit their minds to God's Word, are wrong. If you follow them, you will go astray.

The Books of *Ecclesiastes* and *Proverbs* can be compared to the offerings of Cain and Abel. Cain's offering was a *religious* offering. Abel's was a *spiritual* offering. Throughout the ages, there has been a constant conflict between religious people and spiritual people. Saul was a religious person – a man of the *head*. But David was a spiritual person – a man of the *heart*. The Pharisees were religious. But Jesus was spiritual. Our brain is important. But it was created to be subservient to the heart and the Holy Spirit, even as Eve was created to submit to Adam. The streams of religiosity and spirituality that began with Cain and Abel, continued on with Nimrod and Abraham, and ends with Babylon and Jerusalem in *Revelation*. We see a similar contrast between *Ecclesiastes* and *Proverbs*.

Ecclesiastes contains the words of a preacher (1:1). Most preachers are interested only in preaching good sermons. And for that, they use only their *heads*. Therefore, their sermons do not go to people's *hearts* – because it does not come from their own *hearts*.

Proverbs doesn't deal with *preaching* but with *practising*. We must preach only what we have already practised. This is the difference between religiosity and spirituality. This was the difference between the Pharisees and Jesus. Jesus said, "*The Pharisees say things but do not do them*" (*Matthew 23:3*). But He said there was nothing wrong with what they taught. The Pharisees were the fundamentalists of their time. But they did *not* live what they preached in the pulpit.

With Jesus it was different: "*Jesus (first) did and then taught*" (*Acts 1:1*). He did not *practise* what He preached, but He preached *what He had*

already practised. He practised for thirty years before He preached. That is true godliness.

The Emptiness of Everything on Earth

The first two chapters of *Ecclesiastes* speak about the emptiness of knowledge, pleasure, achievements and labour. Right through the book, it becomes obvious that the writer does not know God personally. Yet he spoke about God. He never uses the covenant name of God – *Yehovah* or *Yahweh* – even once in the whole book. *Proverbs* uses that word frequently. The writer here has no covenant relationship with his God. He only had an academic knowledge of God, a knowledge about the facts concerning God. It may have been an accurate knowledge of God, but it was not the result of a heart-relationship or a covenant-relationship.

At the end of the book, the writer asks, “*What then is the conclusion of everything?*” And he answers it thus: “*Fear God and keep His commandments.*” There is nothing wrong with that. But why does he say that we should fear God and keep His commandments? Is it because He is a good God and because we love Him? No. It is because one day God will judge everything that is hidden, whether it be good or evil (12:14).

The religious man does good things out of fear of judgement. That is how every false religion operates. They teach you to be good, in order to avoid judgement and to be rewarded in the next life! False Christianity preaches the same thing. Where the *primary* motivation for our obeying God is the fear of being judged, there we have a false Christianity. Jesus said, “*If you love Me, keep My commandments*” (John 14:15).

True spirituality is not motivated by the fear of judgement, but by love. Jesus did not obey the Father because He was afraid that the Father would punish Him, but because He loved the Father. That must be the motivation for our obedience too. But that’s not what the writer of *Ecclesiastes* had. His attitude to life was one of fatalism and indifference. He decided to brace himself to whatever happens so that he would never be surprised at anything. He didn’t know much about eternity, even though he mentions it once. He was afraid of death and he decided to make the most of this earthly life, with a little bit of “*fear of God*” thrown in, just to be on the safe side.

Here was a person who sought to discover God through his senses, his intelligence and his reasoning, without the help of the Holy Spirit. Christians who do that will go as much astray from the truth as those who follow other religions. We can know nothing about God without the help of the Holy Spirit, for He alone can reveal to us the deep things of God. “*The thoughts of God no one knows except the Spirit of God*” (1 Corinthians 2:11).

The people who crucified Christ were those who studied the Bible every day. They studied about the Messiah. But when He came into their midst, they called him “*the prince of devils*”! If the Greeks and Romans had called Jesus by such a name, we can understand it, because they didn’t have the Old Testament. It was not even the liberal Sadducees who called Jesus by that name. It was the fundamentalist Pharisees. They were intelligent. But they were not humble. Their head was right, but their *heart* was *not* right. That happened 2000 years ago and it can happen today. If we don’t live in humble dependence on the Holy Spirit to give us revelation on God’s Word, we will go as much astray as Solomon did.

When Peter looked at Jesus and said, “*You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God*,” Jesus replied saying, “*Blessed are you, Simon, for flesh and blood has not revealed this to you but My Father in heaven*.” That means that it was not Peter’s human cleverness that enabled him to understand this truth. How could an unlearned person like Peter know who Jesus was, when the Pharisees who studied the Scriptures day and night could not? That is because the truths of God can be known only by the revelation of the Holy Spirit. That’s what Peter had and the Pharisees didn’t. So, if you want to understand God’s Word aright, depend on the Holy Spirit.

Solomon tried to find satisfaction through various forms of pleasure, acquiring property, making ponds of water (2:6), having many slaves (2:7), collecting plenty of silver and gold, etc. “*Everything that my eyes desired, I did not refuse them*” (2:10). At the end of it all he says, “*Thus I considered all my activities and there was no profit under the sun*” (2:11). He then talks about the futility of hard work, because “*all the fruit of his labour he would have to leave to somebody who came after him, and who knows whether he will be a wise man or a fool?*” “*Under the sun everything was vanity*” (2:21, 22).

We read something interesting in Chapter 2:26: “*To a person who is good in God’s sight, God has given wisdom, knowledge and joy.*” This is a true statement. If your heart is clear, God gives you opportunities on earth to accumulate divine wisdom, the knowledge of Himself and the fullness of joy that there is in His presence. But what task does God give a sinner? *The task of gathering, collecting and hoarding money and other material things, so that one day they can all be given to the man who is seeking God’s kingdom first!* (verse 26). In eternity, the meek will inherit the earth. There is no doubt about that.

All of us are either pursuing after *wisdom, the knowledge of God and the joy of the Lord*, or we are hoarding, collecting and gathering earthly things. There we see the clear contrast between a spiritual person and a worldly person. Religious people are worldly too. They may know their Bibles, but they do not know God. And so they too spend their time

pursuing after material things and worldly knowledge that will not help them in eternity.

Proof that All is Empty

In *Chapters 3 to 6* Solomon tries to prove that everything on earth is vanity.

Chapter 3:1–8: Solomon was a keen observer of human nature and the world. After many years of observation, he discovered that there was a time and a season for everything that happened. There are true and false statements here. Psychology is a mixture of truth and error. Solomon says that there is a time to give birth, a time to die and a time to plant. All of that is correct. But then he goes on to say that there is a time to kill and a time to hate! For a spiritual man, there is *never* a time to kill or to hate – and there are no human beings he hates. A spiritual man dwells in God and loves all people, all the time.

There are psychologists who teach that if you are angry with your father, the way to get rid of your anger is by beating a pillow, imagining that that pillow is your father! Solomon probably believed something like that when he said that there's a time to hate. But that's *not* God's way. Jesus said, "*Love your enemies.*" So here is an example of Solomon's worldly thinking coming in to this book. Religious preachers add their worldly wisdom to God's Word when they preach. We have got to be careful here. If we don't live in humility and brokenness before God, it is easy to be led astray by human wisdom, because much of it sounds right.

Let me give you one example: A new teaching has arisen in Christendom called "*visualising*". This teaches something like this: "Close your eyes and *visualise* that you are going to have 5000 people in your church, even if you have only 5 right now. *Visualise* that you are meeting in a very large building, even if you are meeting only in a small house at present. If you are lame, *visualise* yourself walking. If you only own a scooter, *visualise* yourself owning a nice, new car. Then you will have the faith necessary to get these things – and you will *get* them." Most of such visualisation is in relation to earthly luxuries and large church-buildings etc. I have never heard anyone teaching people to *visualise* themselves "*taking up the cross and dying to themselves and following Jesus*"!! The teaching of visualisation comes from the modern "*New Age*" philosophy (which is a counterfeit of Divine truth) and from psychology, *not* from the Bible. Yet many believers who don't have discernment imagine that this is how they can increase their faith.

Faith is not based on visualisation. *Romans 10:17* is clear that "*faith comes by hearing and hearing by the Word of Christ*". Faith can be based only on what God has spoken. Abraham could not have got Isaac by visualising that Sarah would give birth to a boy. His faith was based on

God's clear promise. You can't start visualising whatever you want and expect God to give that to you. That's the teaching of psychology, *not* of the Bible. Positive thinking may be good for business people, but it is *not* Biblical faith. *Jesus and the apostles did not do miracles by visualisation or by positive thinking.* It's easy in these days, to be deceived by such counterfeits. The book of *Ecclesiastes*, therefore, has a warning for all of us in these days, of the danger of depending on human wisdom.

The word "eternity" occurs just once in this book – in 3:11: "*He has set eternity in their heart, without which man will not be able to find out the work which God has done*" (literal translation). There is a God-shaped vacuum in every human heart that can never be filled or satisfied by anyone or anything other than God. As someone has put it, "*We are restless until we find our rest in God*". God has put eternity in our hearts so that we will never find satisfaction in money, women, property, honour or position. It goes on to say here that unless we give primary importance to the eternal things, we will never be able to find out what God has done.

For those who live for "things under the sun", "*there is nothing better than to rejoice and to do good in one's lifetime*" (verse 12). Religious people and psychologists don't tell people to do *evil*. No. They tell people to do good. But you can do a lot of good and still have *no contact with God* and *still not live for eternity's values*.

In 3:19–21, we see how human wisdom has no clue about eternity: "*The fate of the sons of men and the fate of beasts is the same. As one dies, so dies the other, and there is no advantage for man over the beast. They came from dust, they go back to dust. Who knows whether the breath of man ascends upwards and the breath of beasts descends downwards to the earth?*" This was Solomon's conclusion, with all his human wisdom. He did not know whether there was any difference between man and beast when they both died.

In this book, we see the wisest man on earth trying to understand God and religion. He got a few things right, and *many* things wrong. Why then did God allow *Ecclesiastes* to be included in the Bible: To teach us that we cannot find Him through human wisdom and psychology, but only through His Holy Spirit. We must beware of the teaching of clever people who do not know Jesus personally. If someone's teaching is not founded on God's Word, we should not waste our time listening to such a man.

Chapter 4:4: "I have seen that every labour and every skill which is done is the result of rivalry between a man and his neighbour". Solomon observed that most people in the world are motivated by the spirit of competition. But sadly this is true of much of Christendom too. Christian organisations grab workers from other Christian organisations by offering them higher salaries. That is the spirit of this world. A godly man will never compete with anyone else – whether man, or church, or organisation.

There are some really good statements in 4:9–12.

“Two are better than one because they have a good return for their labour” (4:9). A husband and wife working together can accomplish much more for God than if they worked separately. They also multiply and have children, and thus more is accomplished than if they had been single. This applies to brothers and sisters in a church too.

Here is a second reason why two are better than one: *“If one of them falls, the other can lift him up”* (4:10). It is wonderful when a church is like that – with brothers and sisters who are eager to lift up one who has fallen into sin or discouragement, etc. But alas, *“the Lord’s army is the only army that shoots its own wounded”*.

“Woe unto him who is alone when he falls and he doesn’t have anybody to lift him up” (4:10). It is dangerous to live the Christian life alone and without fellowship.

Here is a third reason for fellowship: *“If two are together they can be warm”* (4:11). We can keep the fire burning in each other’s hearts when we have fellowship. If you can’t stay on fire for God on your own, then you must seek fellowship with those who are on fire for God.

And a fourth reason: *“If one can overpower him who is alone, two can resist him”* (4:12). Jesus said, *“Where two or three are gathered together in My name (to glorify My Name), and where they are one in spirit with each other, there I am in their midst, and then whatever they bind on earth will be bound in the heavens”* (Matthew 18:18–20). Satanic activities can be bound and restrained by two believers who are totally one with each other. A believer cannot do that alone, because that needs an expression of the Body of Christ – and the minimum for that is two.

“A cord of three strands is not quickly torn apart” (4:12). Three strands are necessary for a strong marriage – the husband, the wife and the Lord. If the Lord is not in the centre of a marriage, that marriage cannot prosper.

Here is a good word about correction: *“A poor, wise, young man is much better than an old and foolish king who does not know how to receive correction”* (4:13). It is easy to become a foolish king. When God has raised us to a position of spiritual leadership, it is easy to imagine that we are always right, and that no-one can correct us any more. May God save us from ever coming to that place of folly. I thank God for young people who have corrected me. I have received their correction and become a better man. If there is a black mark on my face that I cannot see, I should be thankful to anyone who points it out to me, so that I can wipe it off. It doesn’t matter whether that person is 20 years old or 80 years old. He has helped me. Many Christian leaders have become old and foolish kings, because they refused to be corrected. A wise man is always willing to receive correction.

In *Chapter 5:1–3*, we are told not to speak much when we are in God's presence: "*Don't be hasty in word or in thought to bring up a matter in the presence of God because God is in heaven and you are on earth. Therefore let your words be few*" (verse 2). In prayer, we must *listen* more than we *speak*. Prayer is like a telephone conversation with God. A telephone has an earpiece for listening and a mouthpiece for speaking. When you speak to someone far more mature than you, do you speak more or listen more? Only a proud person would talk more than listen to someone more godly than him. Then how should it be when we are with God in prayer? Most Christians never give God a chance to speak to them when they pray. *They do all the talking.* That is insulting God.

Prayer should be 90% listening and 10% speaking. Our heavenly Father already knows about every problem and everything that we need. But He still wants us to express our desires to Him and that is why He asks us to pray. Prayer doesn't have to be only on our knees. Jesus told us to "*pray always*" (*Luke 18:1*). So we must develop the habit of listening to God always. We have all seen police officers with their "*walkie-talkies*". These radio-sets are always kept on, because those officers have to be alert to any message that comes from their headquarters at any time. That is a beautiful picture of how we should also live – always alert to listen to orders from our headquarters in heaven.

"Don't make vows to God that you cannot pay. It is better not to make a vow than to vow and not pay" (*5:4, 5*). We should never make promises to God that we can't keep. We must not tell lies to God when we sing songs of devotion and surrender to the Lord. Don't sing, "*Take my silver and my gold – not a mite would I withhold*," if you don't mean it. Don't sing, "*Take my voice and let me sing always only for my King*", if you also sing worldly songs. Don't sing, "*All to Jesus I surrender*", if you haven't actually surrendered everything in your life to the Lord. Christians tell more lies to God on Sundays than on any other day of the week because that is the day when they sing such songs in their meetings. When you find words in a song that are not yet true of your life, you can sing them as a *prayer* and *not* as a *testimony*. Tell the Lord that that is how you *want to live*. Then you are honest. But if the life described in one line of a song is not even your *longing*, then in all honesty, you must keep quiet when you come to that line. If others are telling lies, let them sing lies to God. But you be honest yourself.

Chapter 5:10: "He who loves money will not be satisfied with money, nor he who loves abundance with income. This too is empty." Someone has said, "God has made enough in this world for every man's *need*, but not enough for even one man's *greed*." A greedy man will never be happy no matter how much money he makes. Even the millionaire wants more. Jesus said that we cannot love God and money (*Luke 16:13*) – because they are opposites. "*When good things increase (when your salary increases), your expenses increase too*" (*5:11*). The undisciplined

man's expenses have a way of keeping pace with his income, so that he is never able to save any money.

"The working man does not earn much, but his sleep is pleasant whether he eats little or much. But the full stomach of the rich man does not allow him to sleep" (5:12). If you eat a lot of rich food at night, you won't be able to sleep properly. Simple food leads to a healthier life.

Chapter 6:1, 2: "There is an evil which I have seen under the sun and it is prevalent among men. A man to whom God has given riches and wealth and honour so that his soul lacks nothing of all that he desires; yet God has not empowered him to eat from them." Here is a man who has made a lot of money, but he loses his health in the pursuit of wealth and then is forbidden by the doctors to eat many things. Many people nowadays spend the first half of their working life ruining their health and accumulating wealth, and then spend the rest of their life spending that wealth to regain their health! What folly! They work hard and ruin their health, destroy themselves to accumulate money and then die.

Give God the best years of your life and the best part of each day. That is the wisest way to live.

How to Live in this World

Chapters 7 to 9 have a lot of good, practical advice on how to live in the world.

"A good name is better than a good ointment and the day of one's death is better than the day of one's birth" (Ecclesiastes 7:1). That is true only if you have spent your life living for God and for eternity's values – not otherwise.

"Patience of spirit is better than pride of spirit" (7:8). The patient man is a far better human being than the proud man.

"Do not say, 'Why is it that the former days were better than these?' For it is not from wisdom that you ask about this" (7:10). For a disciple of Jesus, the future is always going to be better than the past. So we should not look back – ever.

In Chapter 7:16, 17, we have one of those foolish bits of advice that human wisdom offers: *"Don't be too righteous and don't be too wicked, for you will only destroy yourself."* Worldly people will say that it is impossible to live in this world without compromising a little bit on righteousness. So they justify giving a small bribe here and telling a little lie there. That, they say, is the only way to survive! The true Christian, of course, rejects this suggestion. Another way to look at this verse would be to read it as: *"Don't try to be super-righteous or super-spiritual"* – that is by going beyond the requirements of God's Word.

In Chapter 7:28, Solomon says, *"I have found one wise man among a thousand men. But I haven't found a wise woman among a thousand women."* Does that mean that men are wiser than women? No.

God created men and women with equal powers and equal ability to be spiritual. Solomon is referring here, however, to the 1000 women he had in his harem – 700 wives and 300 concubines (*1 Kings 11:3*). Knowing the flirtatious women he had in his harem, it is not surprising that he didn't find wisdom among any of them. But there are many, many godly women who are wiser than men.

“*A man’s wisdom illuminates him and causes his serious face to beam with joy*” (*8:1*). The more wisdom we have, the more our faces will radiate the joy of the Lord. A grumpy, miserable look is one mark of a foolish man who has no wisdom. Jesus was never grumpy or sour. Neither should His disciples be.

“*Because punishment against an evil deed is not executed quickly, therefore the hearts of men are given fully to do evil*” (*8:11*). If God had meted out punishment as soon as anyone sinned in any way, men would have stopped sinning all over the world. But judgement-day is coming. “*Even if a sinner does evil a hundred times and extends his life, I know it will go well only for those who fear God openly*” (*8:12*).

Chapter 8:17 says that there are many things that God does, that we cannot fully understand or explain with our limited human wisdom.

Chapter 9:8 is a beautiful verse that we could apply to our life and ministry: “*Let your clothes be white all the time, and let not oil be lacking on your head.*” That means that we should keep our conscience clean and our hearts pure always. Secondly, we should seek to live under the anointing of the Holy Spirit at all times.

Chapter 9:14–18 tells the story of a small city that was delivered from the enemy by a simple wise man. Yet no one remembered that wise man. “*Wisdom is better than weapons of war*” (*9:18*). We must win people by kindness and not by brutality. There is a children’s fable about the sun and the wind having a competition to find out who was stronger. A man was walking down the street and they decided that whoever could get his coat off him would be the stronger one. The wind went first and blew hard upon the man. But the more the wind blew, the tighter the man clutched his coat to his body. Then it was the sun’s turn. It just made it hotter and hotter. Very soon, the man took off his coat. *Wisdom is better than strength.* God brings us to repentance through His kindness (*Romans 2:4*).

Worldly Wisdom Exemplified

“*Dead flies make a perfumer’s ointment to stink. So a little foolishness is weightier than much wisdom and honour*” (*10:1*). One small act of foolishness can ruin your entire testimony for wisdom, just like one lizard falling into a tasty chicken curry would ruin the whole dish of curry. That’s why we all need to humbly ask God to preserve us from foolish words and actions.

Chapter 10:4 is beautifully paraphrased in the Living Bible as: “If the boss is angry with you, don’t quit.”

“*He who digs a pit (for others) may fall into it*” (10:8). God treats us as we treat others.

“*A serpent may bite him who breaks through a wall*” (10:8). God has drawn boundaries around all of us and we must stay within them. If we go outside them, Satan, that old serpent, can bite us. That is what happened to Adam and Eve in Eden and to King Saul and King Uzziah (*Genesis 3; 1 Samuel 13:9; 2 Chronicles 26:16*).

“*If the axe is dull and he does not sharpen its edge, he must exert more strength. Wisdom has the advantage of giving success*” (10:10). You can finish the job quicker if you first sharpen your axe. We must keep our spiritual edge sharp by keeping our conscience clear always. The sword of the Spirit must also be sharp in our hand, because we know God’s Word well. Preaching with a poor knowledge of God’s Word is like using a blunt sword in war. The enemy is not defeated. Jesus often solved problems with a single sentence like, “*He who is without sin among you, let him cast the first stone*”. His replies to Satan’s temptations also came from a sharp sword: “*Man shall not live by bread alone but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God*”, etc.

Again we see a mixture of worldly wisdom here: “*Money is the answer to everything.*” (10:19). That is exactly what the man of the world says and that is why he pursues after money with all his heart. We who believe that God is the answer to every problem should be pursuing *after God* with all our hearts.

Chapter 10:20 is an exhortation not to gossip in our bedrooms.

“*Cast your bread on the surface of the waters and you will find it after many days*” (11:1). We must do good to others whenever we have an opportunity – and we will reap what we sow. In the measure in which we give, we will receive.

“*Whether a tree falls toward the south or the north, wherever the tree falls, there it lies*” (11:3). Once a person dies, his eternal fate is settled.

“*He who watches the wind will not sow and he who looks at the clouds will not reap*” (11:4). We must not wait for perfect conditions to serve the Lord. We must be ready to share the gospel with others and to serve the Lord at all times – when it is convenient for us and when it is not (*2 Timothy 4:2*).

“*Just as you don’t know the path of the wind, so you do not know the activity of God*” (11:5). Our mind is like a little cup that cannot contain the ocean of God’s wisdom. So we do not have an explanation for many things on this earth. Neither can we fully know how God works in every area. Jesus said that “*the wind blows where it wishes*” (*John 3:5*). Even so, we cannot explain all the workings of the Holy Spirit.

Chapter 11:9–12:7 is a warning to young men that if they “*follow the impulses of their heart and the desires of their eyes, God will bring them to judgment for all these things*”. They must live each day therefore recognising that they are accountable to God for all that we do with our bodies. Since “*life is fleeting*” they should put away anger and everything that will cause eternal grief, and remember their Creator while they are still young, for it will be more difficult to turn to God in later years. Old age is described in *12:2–7*.

Chapter 12:9–11 are three excellent verses that describe many of the qualities of a good preacher. A good preacher is one who not only knows God’s Word but who also knows how to apply it wisely in daily life situations. He will meditate on God’s Word, search through it to find all that it says on any subject, and arrange the results of his study. He will then be careful to present the truth accurately and also in a pleasant and interesting way. His words will be words given to him by the Chief Shepherd and they will nail down important truths in people’s minds and spur them to action.

We are told in *Chapter 12:12* that excessive study of books can become wearisome.

In conclusion we are exhorted to “*fear God and keep His commandments, for God will bring every act to judgment*” (*12:13, 14*). The *religious* person obeys God only because he is afraid of judgement. In contrast, the *spiritual* person obeys God out of love and gratitude (*John 14:15*).

So the book of *Ecclesiastes* shows us that even without knowing God, people can still know how to do right in many areas. But their motive for doing right will always be selfish and they will be self-righteous Pharisees who judge everyone else. They may do many good things, but as we said earlier, one lizard (of spiritual pride) spoils their whole dish of curry.

SONG OF SOLOMON

THE BRIDEGROOM AND THE BRIDE

The *Song of Solomon* is also called “Song of Songs” and “Canticles”. The word “Lord – YHVH” occurs only once in this book (*flame of the Lord* – 8:6 - Hebrew).

Some Christians are embarrassed to read this book, because they have a wrong understanding of the sexual part of married life. This is because their understanding of sex has come from the cinema and the world’s media.

There are two lessons that God clearly wants us to learn from this book.

1. That the sexual relationship in marriage is *very good* and *very essential*.
2. That our relationship with Christ must be as intimate and warm as that of a loving bride with her Bridegroom.

It was God Who created the *sexual function* in Adam and Eve. After creating their sexual organs, He told Adam and Eve to multiply – obviously through their sexual union (*Genesis 1:28*). God then looked at all that He had created (including the sexual function) and pronounced everything as “*Very good*” (*Genesis 1:31*). If God Himself has pronounced *sex between a husband and wife as “Very Good”* on the first page of the Bible, then there is no need for us to hear anyone else’s opinion on this subject. It is very good.

But what we learn in *Song of Solomon* is that an unselfish love for each other is what makes the sexual act pure and holy in marriage. Sexual union *without* love is fleshly.

It was God Who created the *sexual function*. But like many other things, Satan has perverted it by getting people to indulge in sex outside of marriage.

Consider the *atom*. Like sex, that too was created by God. But man has used it for good and for evil purposes. When an atom is split, the energy produced thereby can be used to provide electricity for a whole city. Or it can be used to make a bomb that destroys thousands of people!

Or consider *dynamite*. That can be used to blast a rock to build a foundation for a house, or it can be used to make a bomb that kills people. “Sex” too can be used in a good or an evil way.

God gave Peter a vision once of a sheet coming down from heaven with clean and unclean animals in it and He asked Peter to kill and eat. When Peter refused to eat, because it would have violated the Jewish ceremonial laws, God told him, “*What God has cleansed, don’t consider as unholy*” (*Acts 10:15*). We could use the same words about “sex” as well: *What God calls “holy”, don’t call unclean*. When the world uses “sex” wrongly, then, of course, it is both *unclean and evil*. But within the bonds of marriage, it is both *holy and pure*. It helps to bind husband and wife together in a holy bond.

I would encourage every husband and wife therefore to read *Song of Solomon* to each other. It will teach you to appreciate one another and not to take each other for granted. In our Indian culture unfortunately, husbands and wives do *not* appreciate one another; and in most cases, their sexual union is mechanical.

This book will also teach you the importance of communication in marriage – of speaking to each other in a kind and loving way. This book is also a very *realistic* book. It shows how there are *ups and downs* in every marriage, and how at times there may be no *feelings* of love, and how true love comes out triumphant through every crisis. It also teaches how a dying marriage can be revived. So, this is a very down-to-earth, realistic and practical book on God’s wonderful gift of “*love and sex*” in marriage.

The *Song of Solomon* is also a picture of Christ and the church. All believers – both married and unmarried can study the book in this way and deepen their relationship with the Lord.

Song of Solomon was the first book of the Bible that I studied in detail, immediately after I was baptised – in 1961. I was working on a ship that was out at sea frequently and in remote uninhabited areas of the Indian coastline. As a result, I had no contact with believers for weeks on end at times. The study of this book at that time deepened my devotion to the Lord Jesus as the Bridegroom of my soul. I discovered that I was very precious to Him. And He became very precious to me. I learnt to rest in His infinite love for me, to trust Him fully, to lean upon Him totally, and to love Him with all my heart and soul. My relationship with the Lord has deepened through all these many years since then, and this is what has preserved me from cooling off and falling away. Therefore I value this book greatly.

In *Revelation* 14:3 we read that those who followed the Lamb sang a new song that no one else could learn. The small group of 144,000 people there symbolises the bride of Christ who followed in her Bridegroom's footsteps during her earthly life. The bride alone could learn this song, for it is a song about her Beloved. *Song of Solomon* pictures this song of the bride. You *cannot* learn that song by studying the Bible, but only by following Jesus. The bride learnt this song when she was on earth. The Lord takes us through many trials in our earthly life and it is in those trials that we learn this song.

Ministry should never be the primary focus of our lives. *Love for the Lord must always be primary*. After serving the Lord *full time* for 50 years, I want to say this, that *my devotion to my Lord is the basis of all my ministry*. Our ministry will have no value at all in God's eyes, if our devotion to Christ were to decrease. We see this from the Lord's rebuke to the messenger in the church at Ephesus, when He told him, "*I know your works and your toil and your perseverance. But I still have something against you: You don't love Me as you did at first*" (*Revelation* 2:2-4 - Living). This was such a serious failure that the Lord threatened to take away His recognition of the church in Ephesus altogether (*Revelation* 2:5).

A personal, loving, devoted relationship with Christ is the spring from which all *true* service for the Lord flows – whether it be evangelism, church-planting, Bible-teaching, social work or whatever. We must first learn "*The Song of the Bridegroom and the Bride*" – the song that our Lord sings to us, and that we sing back to Him.

Proverbs speaks of *Divine wisdom* and *Ecclesiastes* of *human wisdom*. But *Song of Solomon* speaks of *Divine love*. Many seek after Bible-knowledge. But the Lord seeks for those who will love Him. Only then will our Bible knowledge be of value.

In *Song of Solomon*, we see a *growth* in the love of the bride.

In the first chapter we see the *beginnings* of love. But this is more akin to *infatuation*. When young people say that they are "*in love with each other*", they are actually only "*infatuated*" with each other.

True love is *selfless* in its motivation, whereas infatuation is *selfish*. The purest expression of love that we see in this world, is *not* that between a man and a woman – as portrayed on the cinema screen, or described in romantic novels. It is seen in the love of a mother for her helpless child. A mother will sacrifice everything for that child of hers. We can see her love for her child especially when it is sick. Young men and women, however, who say they have "*fallen in love*" do not sacrifice themselves selflessly for each other, year after year, like a mother does for her child. Their infatuation with each other lasts only as long as things go according to their own wishes. But a true mother's love is not like that. It is

totally independent of any response from her child. The child may be handicapped or sick, but the mother will keep on loving it – endlessly. This is the closest love to the love of God that we can see on this earth. And that is why God Himself compares His love to the love of a mother for her *newborn* child (*Isaiah 49:15*). When a husband and wife can love each other like that, then only have they really understood *love*. But it takes time for love to grow to such maturity.

In the early stages of a marriage, there is much selfishness in husband-wife relationships. The husband wants something from his wife that will satisfy him, and the wife wants something from her husband that will satisfy her. The man usually wants *sexual gratification* and someone to *serve him*, while the woman usually wants *security* and a *comfortable life*. Both are selfish. But such infatuation can grow into *love*, where there is a selfless commitment to each other.

Our relationship with the Lord may also begin in the same selfish way. We may come to God initially because we want something for ourselves – perhaps salvation from hell, or healing, or money, or the solution to a problem, or an anointed ministry. All such desires are self-centred. But when love matures, we say, “*Lord, I am not seeking for health, wealth or even for a ministry. I have You, and that's all I want. I want You to get the most out of my one earthly life.*” Then we won’t be thinking of what we can get out of the Lord, but of what *the Lord* can get out of us. That is *mature love*.

Jesus’ love for us was like that. When He came to earth He was *not* thinking, “*What can I get from man for Myself?*” No. His thought was, “*What can I give to man?*” That is how Divine love always thinks. And that is the mature love that we finally come to in the last chapter – *Chapter 8* – of this book. Untested love matures finally into true Divine love.

The psalmist said, “*Whom have I in heaven but Thee? There is nothing on earth I desire beside Thee*” (*Psalms 73:25*). That is the expression of one who has matured in love for his Lord. He no longer cares for health or wealth or anything else on earth. The Lord alone is enough for Him.

Beginning of Love

Chapter 1:1: The first thing we notice here is that this is Solomon’s song – the Bridegroom’s song – primarily, and not the bride’s. That means it is *our Lord’s song to us primarily*, and *not our song to Him*. “*We love Him because He first loved us*” (*1 John 4:19*). We did not love Him first. *He* loved us first. It is only because He sang this song to us first, that we can sing a song to Him now. Never ever begin by thinking of *your love* for the Lord. Our starting point must always be *His love for us*. Then we won’t go wrong. And we won’t ever get discouraged or condemn ourselves!

The first part here talks about “*falling in love*” with the Lord. The man’s name is not mentioned here. That is assumed, because there is only one person in the whole world for the bride – and that is her Beloved! The bride is taken up with her Bridegroom *alone* and says, “*Your love is better than all the wine on the earth. How pleasing is your name!*” (verse 3). The Bridegroom is better than all the pleasures (wine) that the world can offer.

She then goes on to say, “*Draw me and we will run after you*” (verse 4). Note that carefully. *Love does not push, it draws*. There is a vast difference between pushing and drawing. Satan pushes us, but God draws us to Himself. Jesus said, “*If I be lifted up I will draw all men to Myself*” (John 12:32). He seeks to draw us just like a magnet *draws* iron filings to itself. *The Lord will never push anyone*. As the Good Shepherd, He goes ahead of us and draws us to follow Him. If at any point, we don’t wish to go any further, He won’t force us to. This is one of the most wonderful things about our Lord. And that is how we can distinguish His leading from the feverish promptings of Satan. This is also how we can distinguish a godly leader from a cult-leader. Godly men go ahead of us and invite us to follow them – as Paul did (*1 Corinthians 11:1*). Cult-leaders, however, are like dictators and force people to go along the path they dictate through their preaching and their advice. What wonderful lessons we can learn from this book that can preserve us even from following false shepherds.

In a family, a husband must draw his wife forward by going ahead of her as an example, and not by pushing her saying, “*Do this now*”. Do you find some area in which your wife needs to improve? Then be a good example to her by going ahead of her in that area – and allow her to follow you *at her own pace and in her own time*. Don’t ever force her. That is the Divine way. This principle applies also to all our relationships in the church.

The bride calls her Beloved, “*My king*” (1:4). We have to know Jesus as our *King* before we can know Him as our *Bridegroom*. Many Christians never enter into this love-relationship with the Lord, because they do not know Him as Lord and King over all their lives. Some area in their lives still remains unyielded.

We read here also about “*the daughters of Jerusalem*” or “*the women of Jerusalem*” (1:5). This phrase refers to halfhearted believers, who do not love the Lord with all their hearts. They are the ones who are taken up with their “Christian” ministry – preaching, teaching, Bible studies etc. – and not with personal devotion to Jesus. They don’t live in sin. But they do not love the Lord fervently either. The Lord is looking for those who have the heart of a bride, who are devoted to Him and whose service comes out of that heart of love.

The bride told these women, “*I am black but lovely*”. What she meant was that although she was unattractive, yet her Bridegroom had chosen

her. The Bible says that God has chosen the poor and the foolish of the world primarily, and not the mighty and the noble and the clever (*1 Corinthians 1:26-29*). Some of us may perhaps feel like that, “I am not capable like other people. I am not intelligent. I can’t speak like others. I am so limited in my abilities.” Yet the Lord has chosen us!

There were prettier women in Jerusalem. But the Bridegroom chose this black one. Jesus does that, because He looks for qualities of the heart, and not for appearance, gift or capabilities. We must learn something here. All our natural abilities, family background and accomplishments are not really of any value to God. It is a heart of devotion that He looks for. This is what the Lord seeks when He looks for someone to be His servant.

The bride knew that even though she was dark, she was beautiful in her Bridegroom’s eyes. Many married women suffer because they don’t feel that their husbands really accept them and rejoice in them. I rejoice in my wife. I hope all of you husbands also will do that. It’s very important that your wife knows that you rejoice in her. In the same way, many believers don’t realise that the Lord rejoices in them. *Zephaniah 3:17* says, “*The Lord your God in your midst is mighty. He shouts over you with shouts of joy.*” God is very happy to have us as His children. Do you know that? We may be ugly in man’s eyes, but we are beautiful in God’s eyes. It is very important that we understand this clearly.

“*Don’t look down on me, you beautiful, fair, city girls*” (*1:6*). She was an uncultured, village girl and the refined city-girls of Jerusalem looked down on her. But the Bridegroom ignored all the smart, charming, city girls and chose that village girl. That is how the Lord has chosen us. Praise the Lord for that! Are other believers looking down on you? Don’t get discouraged, for you are precious to your Lord! *Ezekiel 16* is a beautiful chapter that describes how God picked us up when we were filthy and rotten and neglected, lying helpless by the roadside.

“*They made me the keeper of the vineyards, but my own vineyard I have not kept*” (*1:6*). The other vineyards refer to our ministry. My vineyard is my life and my walk with God. This is a common mistake that many preachers have made. They are busy in the Lord’s work, but have not kept their own vineyard. They are occupied with many activities but have neglected their personal walk with the Lord. They are always thinking in terms of statistics, the number of people they have brought to the Lord, the number of places visited etc. *Song of Solomon* warns us against this danger right at the very beginning. Paul told Timothy “*Take heed to yourself and to your teaching. Thus you will save yourself and those who hear you*” (*1 Timothy 4:16*).

We notice that there were two things that the bride looked for: “*Where are you feeding your flock, and where do you make them rest?*” (*1:7*). These are the two things we need from the Lord too: *food and rest*.

The Bridegroom then praises her saying, “*How beautiful you are!*” We need to hear such words from the Lord – that assure us that the Lord really delights in us. Wives also need to hear such expressions of appreciation from their husbands. A wife looks for assurances of love that give her *security* in a marriage just as much as a husband looks for *sex*. Both of these are of prime importance to have a happy marriage. A wife must satisfy her husband’s sexual needs. And a husband must give his wife the assurance of love that she looks for.

We can talk about such matters unashamedly because these are spiritual matters. Unfortunately, most preachers never talk about sex from the pulpit, and so the only understanding that many Christian young people have of this vital subject is what they get from the world. They only hear the devil’s version. The Bible speaks openly and plainly about sex and tells us what God’s standards are on this matter.

So there, we see the beginning of love – delighting in the fact that God has accepted us and that we are therefore so blessed.

Growth of Love

In *Chapters 2 to 6*, we read about the growth of love that finally culminates in *Chapter 8*. There are ups and downs in the love of the bride and at times no *feelings* of love at all.

In 2:1, the bride says, “*I am just a rose in Sharon. I am just a lily in the valley.*” Those expressions (by the way), do *not* refer to the Bridegroom, but to the bride. Many songs refer to Jesus as the “rose of Sharon” and the “lily of the valley”. But those are un-Scriptural expressions. It is the bride saying to the Bridegroom, “I am just an ordinary rose in Sharon. There are thousands of roses in Sharon and I am just one of them. I am just an ordinary lily in the valley.” But the Bridegroom says, “*Yes, that may be true. But you’re a lily in the midst of thorns*” (2:2). Those fair, attractive women in Jerusalem were good looking on the outside, but they were like “*pigs with golden rings in their noses*” (*Proverbs 11:22*) – attractive, but without devotion to the Lord. So the Bridegroom likens them to thorns. In the midst of those thorns, his bride was like a lily.

The bride goes on to say, “*He has brought me to his banqueting hall so that everyone can see how much he loves me*” (2:4). The father of the prodigal son brought his son to the table. Jesus sat with His disciples around a table. The table speaks of fellowship. At a table, we are not engaged in ministry for our Lord, but in *fellowship with* our Lord. We dine with Him (See *Revelation 3:20*). It is only later that we see the Bridegroom and the bride going to the fields. Don’t ever attempt going to the fields for ministry before sitting at the table and fellowshipping with the Lord first. Adam’s first day was a day of rest and fellowship

with God (for Adam was created on the sixth day). Only after that did God send him to work in the garden.

The bride says, “Feed me with your love. I am lovesick.” That means, “Lord Jesus, You are everything to me. Let me rejoice and be secure in your love. The world is no longer attractive to me.” There are beautiful expressions of devotion in this song which can deepen our relationship with the Lord and detach us from the world.

“Promise me, O women of Jerusalem, not to awaken love until the time is right” (2:7). This is a verse that all young men and women should keep in mind in their relationships. Don’t stir up (awaken) love until the right time. Don’t let your emotions be awakened in loving someone of the opposite sex until God’s time. Be careful. Keep those emotions under control if you want to grow up as a godly young man/woman. You will certainly have feelings. But don’t let those feelings control you and lead you in directions that you will regret later.

Whenever the devil sees some young man or woman becoming zealous for God, he keeps his eye on him/her, for he senses that such a person can grow up to be a threat to his kingdom on earth. And he will seek to destroy him/her, often by getting them married to a carnal, worldly person. India has lost many godly homes because godly young men did not get married to godly women. So don’t stir up love until the time is right.

Infatuation cannot wait. Infatuated young men are usually crazy after sex. Their attitude is, “I must have sex now. I can’t wait until I get married.” But a godly man *can* wait, for the fruit of the Spirit is self-control. Be careful whenever you find your feelings aroused towards someone. Don’t awaken love until the time is right – and the right time is after you are engaged to be married. The reason why many young men cannot study the Scriptures seriously is that they are daydreaming about some girl or the other as a possible life-partner, most of the time. They may not be thinking dirty, sexual thoughts, but they cannot concentrate on hearing the Lord’s voice.

“My beloved is coming, climbing on the mountains, leaping on the hills” (2:8). This refers to the eagerness with which our Lord comes to us and also to the return of our Lord to earth. The Bridegroom then says, “*My darling, come along with me.*” He invites His bride now to come away from the world. “*The winter is past...the flowers have appeared*” (2:11, 12). The approach of summer is likened to the nearness of the Lord’s return to earth (*Matthew 24:32, 33*). We are now living in that time when summer is near. The Bridegroom then says endearingly, “*O my dove in the clefts of the rock, let me see your form, let me hear your voice, for your voice is sweet and your form is lovely*” (2:14). The Rock here is Christ in whose side we are hidden. These words show the intensity of the Lord’s love, affection and care for us. If we believed this, it would remove all insecurity and fear from us totally.

Then the Bridegroom says, “*Catch the little foxes quickly before they ruin the vineyard of your love while the great vines are in blossom*” (2:15). This is a word that we need to hear constantly. It is easy to see the big foxes (obvious sins) that ruin our vineyard. But there are baby foxes that creep into our vineyard and eat up the grapes – and these are more dangerous, because they are less noticeable.

In married life too, it’s not the big dangers that we need to watch out for, like the husband hitting his wife. Most of us may never do such things. The little foxes that destroy a marriage are usually the little irritations, and the raised voice. Catch those little foxes and kill them before they ruin your marriage. Your marriage is like a vineyard. Preserve it like any wise farmer would.

Your relationship with the Lord is also like a vineyard. It’s not the big sins like adultery and murder that drive most believers away from the Lord. It’s the little things – impure thoughts, love of money, an unforgiving attitude, etc. – that come between us and the Lord and ruin our walk with Him. So let us be diligent to catch the little foxes.

In 3:1, the bride speaks about a time when she lost the sense of her Bridegroom’s presence. One night as she lay on her bed, she yearned deeply for her Lord. But He didn’t come. So she decided to get up and go into the city and search for Him (3:1, 2). Here we see the bride seeking for feelings of the presence of her Bridegroom. “And her search was in vain. The watchmen in 3:3 refer to elders of churches and preachers who may have the right doctrines but who don’t know God – like the preachers in the book of Job. They don’t have the devotion to Christ that this young bride who loves the Lord has. She went to these watchmen and asked them, “*Have you seen him whom I love so much?*” But they couldn’t guide her. How can an elder who is not devoted to the Lord himself, guide one who is yearning for the Lord, like the bride here?

It’s a sad testimony to the backslidden state of Christendom that it is so difficult to find elder brothers today who can guide young people into a life of devotion to Christ. There are many who can teach you Biblical truths and how to engage in evangelism – but not how to be devoted to Jesus Christ. It is not enough that an elder brother teaches his flock the Scriptures. He must lead them to be *devoted to Christ*. That is the mark of a good “watchman”.

Finally, the bride found her Beloved herself (3:4). This was my experience in my younger days too. I did not have godly elders who could lead me to a life of devotion to Christ. The Holy Spirit led me into that life Himself. Some of you also may be living in places where you don’t have godly elder brothers to guide you. Seek the Lord wholeheartedly and the Spirit will be your Guide into such a life. “*When I found Him Whom my soul loves, I held on to him and would not let Him go*” (3:4).

We now come to *Chapter 4*. Up till now, it was the bride speaking most of the time. But now we hear a long appreciation of the bride from the Bridegroom. One mark of spiritual growth is that we learn *to listen to the Lord more than to talk ourselves*. The bride is maturing. And as she listens, she finds her Bridegroom expressing his admiration of her. He admires every part of her and then concludes by saying, “*You are altogether beautiful, my darling*” (4:7).

Then he invites her saying, “*Come with Me from Lebanon. Look down from the summit of Amana, from the summit of Senir and Hermon, from the dens of lions*” (4:8). This is an invitation to live in the heavenlies. The Lord says, “Don’t look at things from a low, earthly standpoint. Come with Me to the heavenlies and look at everything from that standpoint. The things of earth will then become small, dim and worthless, as you look at them from there.” The Lord wants to lift us to a higher plane. True, there are lions there – demons, evil principalities and powers. But we will be with the Lord there and together with Him we will overcome all those evil powers. The bride is now being invited to spiritual warfare.

The Bridegroom calls the bride “*a locked garden*” (4:12) – an exclusive garden, exclusively for the Bridegroom. She doesn’t belong to anyone else. She belongs exclusively to her Lord. Is your relationship with the Lord like that? Can the Lord say to you, “You are My private garden, exclusively Mine”? There are many things out in the world that can attract us like opportunities to make more money than we need, to get earthly power and fame and to earn a name for ourselves, etc. Such temptations can be compared to other men trying to seduce the bride. But the bride here is not attracted. She is taken up with her Beloved alone. She belongs to her Bridegroom exclusively.

Very few believers live in such a relationship with Christ and that is why they don’t know Him intimately and don’t understand His word. The secret of understanding the Bible is to have an intimate relationship with the Lord first of all – who better than He can explain to us what His Word means. Walk with Him like the early disciples did and long to hear Him speak to you. Then your eyes will be opened like theirs and your hearts will be set aflame like theirs. This is what I have discovered in the more than half a century that I have walked with my Lord.

The bride then invites the north wind and the south wind to come and blow over her garden (4:16). The north wind is the cold wind of suffering, adversity and trials, and the south wind is the wind of blessing, encouragement, prosperity and happiness. It doesn’t matter which of these winds blow. The result will be the same – a fragrance wafted abroad. Whether we have a comfortable easy life or have a life full of difficulties and trials, the grace of God can make the aroma of Christ to come forth

from us. Thanksgiving, praise and worship to God will come forth from our life, irrespective of our circumstances.

"May my beloved come into his garden and eat its choice fruits" (4:16). Everything that is produced in our life (our garden) is for the Lord – not to impress other people with how spiritual we are. When you give a testimony about your life, don't try to show others what a wonderful person you are. Instead, let them see what a wonderful Saviour you have! Otherwise your fruit will be for men and not for the Lord. Here the bride says, *"Everything in my garden is for my beloved alone."*

Did God use you to bring someone to Christ? Don't rejoice in what *you* did. Rejoice with the angels that a sinner repented. He is the Lord's convert not yours. If you made a sacrifice for the Lord, let no-one know about it. Why should we advertise our sacrifices? Does a wife who loves her husband deeply tell the world about the sacrifices she makes for him? There are so many loving secrets between a wife and a husband. There should be loving secrets between us and the Lord too. You may be spending time alone with the Lord. Good. But why should anyone else know about that? A wife who is in love with her husband will not want *anyone* to know about their times together. That was why Jesus told us to shut the door when we pray. Nobody should know about the times we spend with our Beloved.

But it is rare indeed to find Christians like this. Most of them are eager to let everyone know about their sacrifices and their service for the Lord – in a way that glorifies them! That is the clearest proof that they lack a love-relationship with the Lord. *Song of Solomon* is an important book for all such Christians. I am deeply thankful to the Lord that He led me to study this book first, when I began my Christian life. This love-relationship with the Lord should be the basis of all our service for the Lord.

Paul says in *2 Corinthians 11:3*, "*I am afraid lest as the serpent deceived Eve by his craftiness, your minds should be led astray from the simplicity and purity of devotion to Christ.*" When are we led astray? When we lose that simple devotion to Christ. You don't have to steal, commit adultery, or tell lies, in order to be a backslider. If you have lost that simple devotion to Christ, the devil has already led you astray.

The Bridegroom accepts the invitation of his bride to come into her garden and eat, and says, "*I have come into my garden*" (5:1). He calls it *His* garden now. He came to collect the fruit. And after taking it Himself, He invites others also to come into the garden and eat with him. Our Lord makes our life a blessing to many others.

The scene changes now and the bride now speaks of what happened one night. "*I was asleep, but my heart was awake*" (5:2). Suddenly she heard the voice of her Beloved. The Lord calls us suddenly at times.

He wants us to be alert at all times to hear His voice. We read in the Old Testament that God would call Abraham suddenly at times saying, “*Abraham, Abraham.*” And Abraham would respond immediately saying, “*Here I am*” – even if it was in the middle of the night, when he was fast asleep. In *Genesis 16:16* and *17:1*, we read that after *thirteen* years of silence, God suddenly called Abraham one day. And Abraham responded *at once!* In the midst of his many other preoccupations, he was always alert to hear the Lord’s voice. The Lord called Samuel too in the middle of the night – and Samuel woke up and listened. That’s how we all must be.

But here we see that when the Bridegroom came in the middle of the night calling, “*Open to me, my darling*” (*5:2*), the bride was too lazy to dress up and open the door (*5:3*). She was concerned that her feet (that she had washed) would be soiled. He tried to unlatch the door himself (*5:4*). Then the bride changed her mind and opened the door, but found that her Beloved was gone. He went away because she did not respond *at once*, when He called her.

That can happen to us too. The Lord may say to us, “Now drop everything that you are doing. Stop reading that book. Stop that conversation. Get alone with Me and talk to Me. Let’s go for a walk together.” And we may respond saying, “Lord, just wait. I have something important to do. It will be finished in 15 minutes. Then I’ll come.” And 15 minutes later, when we have finished that important (?) work, we say, “Lord, I am ready now.” But we find that He is gone. We can’t find Him. That is the experience of many believers. The Lord tests us to see if He is more important to us than the conversation we are having with our friends, than the book we are reading, or the work we are doing, etc. He will test us to see if we are willing to drop everything and to listen to Him. Do you want to be an effective servant of God? Develop this habit of dropping everything when the Lord calls you, and of listening to Him. You will never regret it.

The Bridegroom had told His bride “*I have been out in the night and am covered with dew*” (*5:2 - Living*). Because Jesus came to earth to seek and save the lost, He walked the way of the cross (of self-denial) and suffered as He sought after lost sheep in the dark night of this world. He now invites His bride to walk the same way. But she is unwilling.

But later on, she changed her mind and got up and decided to walk that way. But now she couldn’t find her Bridegroom. Then she went to the watchmen (the elders) again. She doesn’t seem to have learnt a lesson from her previous contacts with them, that they cannot help her. They know nothing about the way of the cross. This time they beat her up and hurt her (*5:7*). Those elders were worldly and legalistic and wounded her with their words. They couldn’t understand her fervent devotion to her

Lord. They may have told her words like this: "You have to be realistic. We have to live in this world and we can't be taken up with being so fanatically devoted to the Lord." There are many preachers like that who do not know the Lord, who will criticise you saying that your *only* theme seems to be "*loving the Lord*" – as if that were a crime. The watchmen then tore off her veil (shawl), implying that she did not need to be so modestly dressed! They disgraced her publicly.

After that experience, the bride went to the halfhearted believers (women of Jerusalem) and told them, "*If you find my beloved, tell him I am lovesick*" (5:8). That was a waste of time, because those halfhearted ones could never help her find her Lord. They hadn't seen His beauty and glory like she had. When they questioned her, she went into a rapturous expression of her admiration for Him, describing exactly why she admired Him, and concluding with the words, "*He is altogether lovely. He is my beloved and my friend*" (5:16 - KJV).

Can you say that Jesus is not only your Saviour, but also your Friend?

What about your earthly husband/wife? Is he/she also your best friend on earth? It should be so. Many husbands and wives say that they love one another, but they are not the best of friends with each other. Their best friends are found among others. That is unfortunate.

Jesus is my closest and dearest Friend – closer than even my wife. But among those on earth, my wife is my closest and best friend – and she will be so throughout my life. This has made both my Christian life and my married life extremely happy.

Finally, the bride finds her Beloved in His garden and says, "*I am my beloved's and my beloved is mine*" (6:2, 3). This is different from 2:16, where she had said, "*My beloved is mine and I am his.*" There is progress here. In the initial stages of love, her emphasis was on, "**My Lord is mine.**" Now her emphasis has changed to, "**I am my Lord's.**" When we are young and immature, we are more possessive and think more of the fact that the Lord belongs exclusively to us, and wonder what we can get from the Lord for ourselves. As we grow to maturity, we begin to think more of being surrendered to the Lord totally, and of His getting everything possible *from us*, in our one earthly life.

The Bridegroom then expresses His appreciation for his bride (6:4–10). He says that among all women, no-one is like His bride, His perfect one. I choose her above everybody else." Every husband should look at his wife like this: *There are many attractive women in the world, but there is no-one like my wife. She is Number One in my eyes.* This is what the Lord says about us. He appreciates us more than all the clever people, and the rich people, and the great people in the world.

In 6:10, He compares His bride to “*an army with banners.*” This bride was not a soft sissy. She was a strong warrior, ready to fight Satan and the hosts of hell. She also has a conscience that is “*as pure as the sun*”. In 6:13 she is called a Shulamite, a woman of Shulam, meaning “*a person of peace*”. Shulam is from the Hebrew word “*Shalom*”, which means ‘peace’. Here is a bride who is constantly battling for the Lord, *fighting* the forces of darkness, as a soldier, but who is at the same time, *at peace* with all human beings!

Mature Love

We now come to the mature stage of the love of the bride for her Bridegroom.

In 7:1–9a, we read how the Bridegroom admires his bride. We need to see clearly that despite all our weaknesses, our Lord actually *admires* us and *appreciates* us. Many believers live with constant self-condemnation, just because they cannot believe that the Lord admires them. And when the Bridegroom admires the bride’s lips, she is quick to respond saying that that is actually more true of His lips (7:9b)! This speaks of a high degree of intimacy between the two – the type of intimacy that we should have with our Lord.

In 7:10, the bride says, “*I am my beloved’s and His desire is for me.*” This is a still higher plane of love than even 6:3. Here the bride is not just saying that the Lord belongs to her, but that the Lord is pleased with her as well. It is one thing for the Lord to say, “*I love you.*” It is quite another, for the Lord to say, “*I am pleased with you.*” A husband may love his wife, but he may not be happy with the way she does things. The Lord may love you, but He may not be happy with many things in your life. Mature love seeks to please the Lord.

Now the bride becomes a *co-worker* with her Bridegroom and says, “*Come, my love. Let us go out into the fields*” (7:11). The bride now shares the concern of her Bridegroom for a needy world where the fields are ripe for harvest. But don’t ever go to those fields all by yourself. Go there with your Beloved. Build a relationship with Him and then serve Him. He is the One Who knows the best part of the field in which you can labour for Him.

That is how I have sought to serve the Lord in my ministry. I have never wanted to go anywhere by myself. I have said, “Lord, you lead the way and I’ll come along with You. Let us go to the fields together. Tell me where You are going. And if You’re not going somewhere, I don’t want to go there either.” If we serve the Lord in fellowship with Him and in submission to Him, there won’t be any boastfulness in our lives, nor any comparison of our ministry with another’s.

The bride then shares her Bridegroom’s burden for His vineyards. She wants to rise up early and go with Him to see if there is fruit there (7:12). She doesn’t *only* sit at the banqueting table enjoying His love (as in 2:4). She does that but she does more now. She is also concerned to see how

the young believers in the church are doing. She takes care of her own vineyard (unlike as in 1:6). But she also wants to see how the Lord's work in the churches is developing. She wants to see if "*the blossoms have opened*" and whether "*the pomegranates have bloomed*" (7:12). And she tells her Beloved, "*There I will give you my love.*" In the midst of all her ministry she wants to walk with her Lord and express her love for Him. And everything she has is "*saved up for her Beloved*" (7:13).

Chapter 8 expresses the bride's longing for perfect union with her Beloved one day – in heaven. "*Who is this coming up from the desert of the earth, leaning on her Beloved?*" (8:5) – refers to the day when the church will be caught up in the clouds to lean on her Beloved forever – just like John leaned on the breast of Jesus.

"*Put me like a seal over your heart, like a seal on your arm*", she requests (8:6). She never wants to be separated from her Beloved and wants a permanent place in His heart and on His arm – like the tattoos that people wear on their arms.

8:6, 7 speak of love and jealousy together. True love is always jealous – a "*godly jealousy*" that doesn't want anyone else to own the other (2 Corinthians 11:2). "*The Lord jealously desires our spirit*" for Himself alone (James 4:5). He is very particular that we should not love money and the world, but only Him. He is a jealous Husband Who wants you for Himself exclusively. Such jealous love is likened to the brightest flame there is – "*the flame of YHVH*" (the Hebrew word for 'Lord'). This is the only place in this book where the word '*Lord*' occurs (8:6).

Many floods cannot quench this love and many rivers cannot drown it (8:7). This was the love that our Lord manifested on the cross. When people poured their floods of hatred on Him, he prayed that the Father would forgive them.

The bride now expresses her concern for her younger sisters, who have not grown spiritually (8:8). One mark of maturity is to have a concern for the immature. 8:9 is an interesting verse that tells us that a girl can be either like a *wall* or a *door*. A *wall* refers to girls who are modest and reserved, like God created all girls to be. A *door*, on the other hand, refers to girls who are free with men. An open door is always an invitation to walk right in – and girls should not be like that. If a girl is like a wall, then God can use her to build the church ("*a battlement*"). But if a girl is like a door, then her father has to build "*a barricade*" around her, cutting off her contacts with men.

8:10 speaks of the spiritual maturity of the bride. In 8:12, she says that the *primary* part of the fruit of her vineyard (1000 shekels worth) was reserved for her Beloved alone. Only 20% of that amount (200 shekels

worth) was for others. Her primary ministry was not to people but to the Lord. This is how all our service should be. The Lord must be first and all others second. We are to love God with all our heart, soul and strength first, and only then love others.

In 8:13, 14, she expresses her longing for her Beloved to come to her soon. This is higher than what she said in 2:17. There she was longing to be restored to fellowship with Him. Here she is longing for her final union with her Beloved at “*the marriage of the Lamb*” (*Revelation 19:7*). This is the ultimate height of glory.

And so this book ends as the Bible ends, with a cry from the bride to her Lord to come quickly.

“*Come quickly, Lord Jesus. I am waiting for You.*”

What a beautiful song this is! I want to encourage all of you to live in the good of this song all your days – both in your married life and in your relationship with your Lord.

Amen. May it be so.

ISAIAH

PROPHECIES OF JUDGEMENT AND COMFORT

Isiah is the first of 17 books in the *prophetic* section of the Old Testament (*Isaiah to Malachi*).

The book of *Isaiah* is divided into two parts. *Isaiah* did not divide his books into chapters. It was only a few centuries ago that someone divided the Bible into chapters and verses so that we could refer to the Bible more easily. So there is nothing inspired about the chapter divisions.

But it is interesting nevertheless to note that *Isaiah* has 66 chapters – just like the Bible has 66 books. And just as the Old Testament has 39 books, and the New Testament has 27 books, even so, the first section of *Isaiah* has 39 chapters and the second section has 27 chapters! And *Isaiah*'s first section deals with Old Testament prophecies, and his second section deals with New Testament prophecies.

The most important chapter in the *first* section is *Chapter 6*. There *Isaiah* saw the Lord on His throne first, and only then was he commissioned to serve Him. He saw God there as a holy God Who hated sin and Who had to judge it. If we are to serve God effectively, we too must see this truth clearly.

The most important chapter in the *second* section is *Chapter 53*. There we see the Lamb that was led before the shearers, sheared and slaughtered.

These two truths about the *throne* and the *Lamb* are brought together in *Revelation 5*, where we see the Lamb in the midst of the throne.

As a Man, Jesus lived on earth as a Servant of God and as a Servant of all people *before* He went to the cross. In *Isaiah* too, we see Jesus as the Servant of Jehovah in the chapters in the second section *before Chapter 53 (the chapter of the cross)*. We are to serve God and man as Jesus did.

Two titles of God occur frequently in this book: ‘*The Lord of hosts (Jehovah Tsabaoth)*’ occurs 62 times and ‘*The Holy One of Israel*’ occurs 30 times. The first refers to God as the God of the armies of angels, Who sovereignly rules over all things in heaven and earth. The second emphasises His holiness. Both these truths are emphasised in this book.

Isaiah has more lengthy and clearer prophecies about Christ than any other Old Testament book, and the word “*salvation*” occurs frequently in it.

Isaiah prophesied for about 50 years to the nation of Judah. Tradition tells us that he was finally “*sawn in two*” (*Hebrews 11:37*). He suffered like the Messiah he prophesied about. He had hidden himself in a hollow log, to escape capture. But he was discovered, and they sawed the log in two and killed him. Isaiah was killed because he was a fearless prophet, who spoke God’s truth in strong words. When he spoke to the leaders in Jerusalem, he called them “*rulers of Sodom*” (*Isaiah 1:10*). Those were strong words – and I am not surprised that the leaders sawed him asunder!

A prophet is never popular – and that is why there are very few prophets in the world today. Isaiah did not seek to please people or to impress them (as most preachers do today). He was a prophet who spoke what God wanted him to speak, even if people were offended, hurt, or upset by what he said. They rejected his word and even threatened to kill him. But that didn’t frighten him. He was faithful to his God. And the word he spoke to the people would judge them in the final day.

The very first verse of the book indicates that Isaiah was prophesying primarily concerning the southern kingdom of *Judah*. There are, however, a number of references to Israel too. The northern kingdom of *Israel* had backslidden terribly and was soon to be taken captive by the Assyrians; and Isaiah was sent by God to save *Judah* from a similar fate.

Prophecies of Judgement (Chapters 1 to 27)

Chapters 1 to 12 are prophecies of judgement against *Judah*. *Chapters 13 to 27* are prophecies of judgement against other nations.

In *Chapter 1*, Isaiah describes the backslidden condition of *Judah*. The northern kingdom of *Israel* had had prophets like Elijah and Elisha who had spoken God’s Word powerfully to the people. But *Judah* had never had anyone like that. Even the best of *Judah*’s kings – Rehoboam, Asa, Jehoshaphat, Joash and Uzziah – had started their reigns well, but had turned away from God towards the end of their reigns. Because *Judah* did not have godly leaders, the nation had sunk to a very low level. Isaiah was the first *major* prophet they had. As a result of his prophesying, at last, *Judah* got one good king – Hezekiah. It is amazing the effect a single prophet can have on a nation – or on a church today.

Whenever God sends a prophet to a church, He always has a good plan for that church. But most prophets are rejected and called heretics by the

people. Most of the Israelites preferred to listen to the false prophets with their messages of peace and prosperity. Most Christians have had the same preference too. This was true of Isaiah's day as well. True prophets have always clashed with false prophets. They did so 3000 years ago and they do so today as well.

"An ox knows its owner, the donkey know its master's manger, but Israel does not know" (1:3). Israel did not know her Master and Owner. Even animals knew better. What a tragedy when God's people sink lower than animals.

Israel had not only abandoned the Lord, but despised Him as well (1:4). The Lord describes their condition thus: "*From the sole of the foot even to the head there is nothing sound in it*" (1:6). That is a perfect picture of the condition of sinful man too.

A paraphrase of 1:11–15 would read, "*What is the use of all your prayer meetings? I am not interested in them. I hate your special meetings and your Bible-study meetings. I will not listen to you, because there is sin in your life.*"

A lot of prayer meetings are a waste of time because those who pray do not have a clear conscience. There is unconfessed sin in their lives. When your conscience is clear, a prayer meeting can be very powerful. But if your conscience is *not* clear, it is actually better *not* to pray – for prayer becomes a waste of time, because God doesn't listen to such prayers. In such cases it is better to go to sleep than to pray!

The Lord told the Israelites to do good, to seek justice, to defend the orphans and to plead for the widows, to stop doing evil and to stop exploiting the poor. And then He promised them that if they acknowledged their sin (this is always *the first step*), He would make their hearts "*as white as snow*" (1:18). Jerusalem, the once-faithful city had become *a harlot* (1:21). James used words similar to Isaiah's, when writing to Christians in his day: "*You adulteresses, don't you know that friendship with the world is hostility toward God*" (James 4:4). James too was a prophet like Isaiah telling the church what it needed to hear. We need prophets like James and Isaiah in the church in India today, who will tell believers the truth – not in anger or in hatred, but with love and compassion.

In Chapter 2, Isaiah speaks about the day when the kingdom of God will be established on this earth and "*the word of the Lord will go forth from Jerusalem, and He will judge between the nations*" (2:1–4).

In that day, "*the proud look of man will be abased and the Lord alone will be exalted*" (2:11). God's greatest conflict has always been with the proud. Pride is the very opposite of God's nature and so God resists the proud 24 hours of every day – whether they be believers or unbelievers. Every proud person will be humbled – sooner or later. Pride sends more people to hell than any other sin. If you want to live a wise and useful life on earth, humble yourself before God constantly, and walk in humility towards your fellowmen at all times. Always remember that there is

nothing that you have that you did not *receive* from God. So, be willing to be a nobody on earth at all times, so that Christ alone may be exalted in your life. And whenever God uses you in any way, be sure to keep your head in the dust and to give Him all the glory. The Lord will have a day of reckoning against everyone who is “*proud, lofty and lifted up*” (2:12). Look at the triple emphasis with which God describes the proud in that verse! In that day, the proud of the earth will call upon the rocks to hide them from the wrath of God (as we read also in *Revelation 6:16*).

Man is a creature “*whose breath is in his nostrils*” (2:22). God is the One Who gives man his breath every day. So, if we fear God, *there is no need for us to fear any man*. Whenever you are tempted to fear man, remember this verse. If someone is planning to harm you in any way, remember that God can take away his breath in a moment. As a young man, I was shy and reserved by temperament and found myself nervous whenever I had to preach God’s word. Because I was not secure in God, I wanted to impress people with my preaching. Then the Lord spoke to me through this verse. I then began to look at the people in front of me as *merely dust*, with breath in their nostrils. The colour of their dust was different – some were made of brown dust, some of black dust, some of white dust and some of yellow dust!! But they were all still dust! This revelation set me free from seeking to *impress* people. Thereafter I could love them and seek to *help* them instead of trying to *impress* them.

Chapter 3:10, 11 assures the righteous that it will finally go well with them and warns the wicked that things will finally go badly for them. Although this may not appear to be so immediately, it will be so finally.

Chapter 3:12 speaks of the pathetic state of the people of Israel: They were going astray because their leaders were immature (“*children*”) and effeminate (“*women*”). This, unfortunately, is true of much of today’s Christian leadership as well. *Immature* leaders are those who value the temporal things of earth more than the things of eternity. *Effeminate* leaders are those who are not warriors for the Lord – just as women are not usually found on the battlefield but at home. Such leaders are not bold to fight for the truth or to rebuke sin in the church – especially when sin is found among the rich. If you are called to be a leader, determine that you will always live for the things of eternity and be ready at all times to fight the Lord’s battles.

In 3:14, the Lord says that He is “*going to enter into judgment with the elders and princes of His people*.” The prophets invariably began with a warning of judgement against the leaders – because it was the leaders who had first become corrupt and thus led the people astray. The Lord says, “*The plunder of the poor is in your houses. What do you mean by grinding the face of the poor?*” (3:15). Most preachers today ask people frequently to “give money for the Lord’s work”. They even pressurise people to give their tithes – and many poor people respond and sacrificially give these preachers their hard-earned money. But what do these preachers do

with it? Most of them use it to live in grand style themselves! This is what it means to “*grind the faces of the poor*”. If you are a preacher and you receive a gift of money *for your personal use*, make sure that you use it to live at a lower standard than the person who gave you the money. That was the principle by which Jesus used the money that He received.

Most preachers today (like the false prophets of old) care more for the rich people in their congregations than for the poor. They speak sweet words to the rich and hard words of rebuke to the poor. God has, however, “*chosen the poor of the world rich in faith and to be heirs of His kingdom*” (*James 2:5*). And so true prophets are always concerned for the poor.

The Lord then had something to say to the *women* in Zion – not to unconverted women, but to “*the daughters of Zion*. ” All young sisters should read *Isaiah 3:16–26* and be warned. The Lord says there that He will judge the women “*who mince along with noses in the air, tinkling the bracelets on their ankles, and with wanton eyes that rove among the crowds to catch the glances of the men. The Lord will strip away their ornaments, necklaces, bracelets, veils of shimmering gauze, ankle chains, headbands, earrings and other rings, jewels, party clothes, negligees, capes and ornate combs, their purses (handbags), and the mirrors (in their handbags), their lovely lingerie and beautiful dresses*” (*Living Bible*).

Does the Lord observe such minute details in a woman’s attire? He certainly does. God is very interested in the way His daughters dress. He wants Christian women to dress modestly and never in such a way as to tempt men. The Holy Spirit exhorts women to be “*sensible in the way they dress. Christian women should be noticed for being kind and good and not for the way they fix their hair or because of their jewels or fancy clothes*” (*1 Timothy 2:9, 10 - Living*).

One can imagine how angry the women of *Isaiah*’s day became on hearing such strong preaching. They must have hated him and encouraged their husbands to kill him!

Prophets are different from regular preachers. They speak what God lays on their hearts, even if their message offends the rich people and the women in a church. That’s why prophets are not popular.

In *Chapter 4*, Jesus is called “*the Branch of the Lord*” (*4:2*). This chapter describes the day when the kingdom of God will be established all over the earth and Jesus will reign for 1000 years from Jerusalem. But what will take place literally during the millennial reign of Christ is to be fulfilled *spiritually* in the church even now, because Jesus is already King in the church and the kingdom of God has already come there. So we can apply this passage to the church *spiritually*. “*When the Lord has washed away the filth of the daughters of Zion by the spirit of judgment and the spirit of burning, then the LORD will create over Mount Zion and over her assemblies the brightness of a flaming fire by night; for over all the glory will be a covering*” (*4:4, 5*). The spirit of the world that has got into the church and especially into the “*daughters of Zion*” has to be

cleansed away by fire. Then the glory of God will be seen in the church as it was seen over the tabernacle in the wilderness. If there is one thing that is required in the church today, it is “*the spirit of judgment and the spirit of burning.*” Then everyone in Zion will be called holy, whose names are written in God’s book (4:3). The Lord will also put a covering over His glory (4:5). In the Old Testament tabernacle, the beautiful curtains were on the inside. The outer covering was a dirty, brown covering made of animal-skins. In the church also there should be a glory on the inside that others cannot see. Outwardly, the true church will always be covered with reproach (*Hebrews 13:13*). This will protect the church from spiritual pride (*verse 6*).

In *Chapter 5:8–23*, we find Isaiah pronouncing a “Woe” (a curse) on six groups of people. We see Jesus also using this word “Woe” in *Luke 6:24–26*. Isaiah pronounces a curse on “**those** who exploit the poor by buying up property so extensively so that the poor have no place to live; **those** who spend their time in sensual pleasures (drinking and partying) without any thought for God; **those** who keep on sinning and defy God to punish them; **those** who call evil good and good evil; **those** who are proud of their own cleverness; and **those** who take bribes to condemn innocent people”. All such haughty and proud people will be humbled by God one day. What a need there is today to see that God hates and curses these things.

Chapter 6 is the central chapter of this first section of *Isaiah*. Here Isaiah describes a vision he had of the Lord that humbled him. He saw the Lord seated on a lofty throne and a number of angelic beings called seraphs (‘seraphim’ is the plural of ‘seraph’) worshipping Him. Each seraph had six wings, and they covered their bodies with four wings and flew with two. In other words, they used *four* of their wings to worship God and *two* wings to serve Him. Jesus told the Samaritan woman that the Father seeks for worshippers. He also replied to Satan’s temptation with the words: “*You shall worship the Lord your God and you shall serve Him.*” Notice there that worship must precede service. But we must also worship God *more than* we serve Him. The more we worship God, the more effective our service for Him will be.

Worship means a total surrender of everything that we are and that we have to God, and a total devotion to Christ. Worship is more than *thanksgiving* and *praise*. Worship involves recognising God’s holiness and greatness, and acknowledging Him as Lord of lords and King of kings. These seraphs who had never sinned could not even look at God. They covered their faces before Him. That teaches us something about the “*unapproachable light*” of God’s holiness (*1 Timothy 6:16*). We must not think lightly of God’s holiness. It is a tremendous privilege that we are allowed to come before Him, through the blood and the righteousness of Jesus Christ.

When Isaiah saw all this, he was deeply convicted. The man who had just been pronouncing “Woes” on others, pronounces one on himself

now – “*Woe is me...*” (6:5)! Not one of the “Woes” that he had pronounced on others was in error. But it was necessary for him as a prophet of God, to get alone before God and to see the sin within himself. This is what happens when we see the glory of God. We will still see the wrongs in others and speak against them when led by the Lord to do so. But we will see the sin in our own flesh first.

It is necessary for every prophet and preacher who stands in the pulpit and preaches against sin to see the sin in his flesh first. Otherwise he will soon become a backslider. Many preachers never cry out like Isaiah saying, “*Woe unto me,*” or like Paul saying, “*O wretched man that I am. In my flesh there dwells no good thing*” (*Romans 7:18, 24*).

Isaiah was particularly convicted about his speech. He said, “*Lord, I am a man of unclean lips*” (6:5). Then one of the seraphs took a coal from the altar in a pair of tongs and cleansed Isaiah’s lips immediately. The sin which Isaiah confessed was immediately forgiven. The fire that an angel could not touch (but needed a pair of tongs to take) could touch the lips of Isaiah. Man can receive an anointing from God that no angel can receive.

Isaiah had a vision of both the throne and the altar here. Then the Lord asks, “*Whom shall I send? Who will go for Us?*” (6:8). Isaiah replies, “*Here am I. Send me.*” We need to see both the throne and the altar constantly. We need to be struck down to the dust first with a vision of God’s holiness, and then we need to be lifted up because the blood from the altar has cleansed us. Only then can we go forth and serve the Lord. We can’t go forth if God doesn’t send us. If we go without God sending us, then we will labour in vain. Many “*Christian workers*” in India have not been sent by God. Some organisation or man has sent them to the mission field. Or perhaps they have gone on their own. It is easy to engage in Christian activity in a vast country like India, because the need is so great. But if we want fruit that lasts for all eternity, God Himself *must send us*. Other godly men may *confirm* the call we receive from God – but *they cannot call us*. God called Saul and Barnabas personally to His service. The confirmation of that call came later through other prophets (*Acts. 13:1–4*). And when God calls us, He will also tell us what to preach. He told Isaiah, “*Go. Tell this people...*” (6:9).

God is still the same today as He was in Isaiah’s time. Under the new covenant, the Holy Spirit dwells in our hearts and so we don’t hear God with our physical ears now, as Isaiah heard Him then. We hear His voice today in our hearts. But His voice is just as unmistakable. I have never heard the Lord’s voice audibly with my physical ears and I have never seen Him or an angel with my physical eyes. But I have seen Him and heard Him clearly in my heart many times during the last 56 years. Jesus said that those who believed in Him *without* seeing Him with their physical eyes are actually more blessed than those who see Him and believe (*John 20:29*).

The commission that the Lord gave Isaiah was a very difficult one. He told him, “*Go and tell my people this: ‘Though you hear my words repeatedly, you won’t understand them. Though you watch and watch as I perform my miracles, still you won’t know what they mean.’ Dull their understanding, close their ears, and shut their eyes. I don’t want them to see or to hear or to understand, or to turn to me to heal them’* (6:9, 10). This is the verse that Jesus quoted when He was explaining why He spoke to people in parables (*Matthew 13:15*).

So what do we see here? A vision of God, a vision of self, a vision of grace that forgives, a vision of anointed service, and finally, a vision of fruit (6:13). A holy seed would come forth from the corrupt nation of Judah. A remnant will be raised up for the Lord through our service.

In *Chapter 7:14*, we have this wonderful prophecy about the birth of Jesus: “*A virgin will be with child and will bear a Son and she will call His name Immanuel.*” (Quoted in *Matthew 1:23*).

In *Chapter 8:12, 13*, God gives a word to His people who were terrified by the armies that had joined together and were coming to fight against them. This is a very relevant word for us in India today, where we see anti-Christian forces attacking God’s people in many parts of our land. The Lord says, “*You are not to fear what they fear. But He shall be your fear.*” This verse is quoted in *1 Peter 3:14, 15*. The *Living Bible* paraphrases it thus: “*If you fear God, you need fear nothing else.*” More than 40 years ago, I got this verse written on a large wooden plaque and placed it prominently in the front-room of my house. This verse has strengthened me and many others to be free from the fear of men and of circumstances. And it has encouraged me to fear the one Person I should fear – God. Jesus also urged His disciples saying, “*Don’t be afraid of those who can kill only your bodies – but can’t touch your souls! Fear only God who can destroy both soul and body in hell.*” (*Matthew 10:28 - Living*).

Isaiah 8:18 is yet another verse quoted in the New Testament – in *Hebrews 2:13* – and there it refers to Jesus and us. “*Behold, I and the children whom the Lord has given Me are for a sign and a wonder*”. That should apply to us as families too. We must bring up our children in such a way that they are different from other children in the world in their moral character and in their ambitions. We and our children must be signs and wonders to the world around us, in that we live with eternity’s values in mind at all times. Unfortunately that dividing line between believers and unbelievers has gradually been erased by Satan over the years.

Chapter 9:2 is also quoted in *Matthew 4:16*: “*The people who walk in darkness will see a great light*”. This refers to Jesus visiting the people in Galilee. This verse also applies to us, for it is God’s will that we also should bring light into the darkness, wherever we go.

Chapter 9:6, 7 is a prophetic reference to Jesus. He will be called “Wonderful, Counselor, Mighty God, Prince of Peace and Eternal Father.”

The phrase '*Eternal Father*' here just means '*Father of eternity*' and is not a reference to God the Father.

In *Chapter 9:6*, it says, "*The government will rest on His shoulders.*" This verse has been a tremendous help to me in my ministry. During the past 40 years, we have often faced problems in the churches that the Lord has planted through our ministry in India – problems similar to that which all parents face with growing children. Whenever I am told of a problem in one of our churches that baffles me, I have usually fallen on my face before God and said, "Lord, this is not *my* work. It is *Yours*. These are not *my* churches. They are *Yours*. Their government is on *Your* shoulders. The responsibility is *Yours*. If You want to close down a church, close it down. That's *Your* business. I am only Your *servant*. Tell me what to do and I'll do it." A proprietor has every right to close down his shop if he so wishes. I will never try to keep some work open that the Lord wants to shut down. So many Christian workers are constantly struggling to prop up a work that they started, long after it has become evident that God is not in it. This is because they have taken the governing of God's work on their *own* shoulders. When the government is on the Lord's shoulders, it takes the stress and strain out of Christian work. It will bring rest into your life as it has brought to mine. The responsibility for the Lord's work remains with Him forever. We are only servants.

Chapter 10 prophesies the destruction of Assyria, which was the world's only superpower, at that time. The king of Assyria is a type of the Antichrist. *10:27* reads, "*The yoke shall be destroyed because of the anointing*" (KJV). It is the anointing of the Holy Spirit that breaks and destroys the yoke of sin and Satan – in our life, our home and our church.

In contrast to the reign of the Antichrist pictured in *Chapter 10*, we have the kingdom of Christ pictured in *Chapter 11*. The sevenfold Holy Spirit mentioned in *Revelation* (that will rest on Christ) is called here the Spirit of the Lord, of wisdom, of understanding, of counsel, of strength, of knowledge and of the fear of the Lord. *Verse 3* states that the Spirit would make Jesus so sensitive to the fear of the Lord that He would never judge anything by what His eyes saw or what His ears heard, but in righteousness by the Spirit's voice within. Jesus is our Example here. We too must never judge any person or circumstance by what our eyes or our ears tell us. Instead, we must seek the Lord for discernment through the Holy Spirit, to form a correct judgement in every situation.

The time will come when the lion and the wolf and the lamb will lie down together (*verse 6*) – in the millennium, when Christ reigns on earth; and a little child will lead them all (*verses 6, 7*). This will be literally fulfilled when Christ sets up His kingdom on earth and God-fearing conditions prevail everywhere. But spiritually speaking this is true even now in the church. The wolf-like brother now fellowships with the lamb-like brother without trying to eat him up! The leopard-like sister lies down with the goat-like sister without devouring her! And the leader of this church is a

little child – the brother who is most child-like – for Jesus said that the greatest person in God's kingdom was a little child.

Chapter 12 speaks of the joy of salvation. “God is my salvation. With joy I will draw water from the springs of salvation. Cry aloud and shout for joy, because the One in the midst of you, the Holy One of Israel, is great” (verses 2, 3, 6).

Chapters 13 to 23 are prophecies relating to many of the nations in the Middle-East. Then follows 12 chapters full of prophecies of judgement and blessing – up to *Chapter 35*.

Chapter 13 is about the fall of Babylon – a picture of what is described in *Revelation 17 and 18*.

Chapter 14 continues to describe the fall of Babylon. Who is the ruler of Babylon – of this vast religious and commercial system? It is one who was once in heaven who is called “the shining one and the star of the morning” (*verse 12*). He is commonly referred to as *Lucifer*, because the KJV translation uses that name here. Five times, we read here that he said in his heart, “*I will*.” That is how he became the devil (*verses 13, 14*); and that is how sin first came into the universe.

Sin came when a created being said, “*I will*.” And salvation came when Jesus, the Son of God, came to earth and said, “*Not as I will but as Thou wilt*” – not just once, but all His life – as He Himself said in *John 6:38*: “*I came from heaven not to do My own will but the will of Him Who sent Me*”. Remember this all your life that whenever you do your own will, you are on the path of sin; and whenever you deny your own will to do the will of God, you are on the path of true holiness. That is the way of the cross that Jesus has called us to walk in. The cross cuts out our own will so that we do the will of God. All of us are following either Lucifer or Christ every day. Self-will is what builds Babylon finally.

Chapters 15 to 23 are prophecies against Moab, Damascus, an unnamed country, Egypt, Ethiopia, Edom, Arabia and Tyre. In *Chapter 19, verses 24 and 25*, we have the beautiful picture of the day when Jews and Gentiles will be united together, when people from Egypt, Assyria and Israel will all be brothers and sisters together in one church.

In *Chapter 20* we read that the Lord asked Isaiah to walk around barefoot in his underwear – without a cloak or sandals – to demonstrate to the people of Israel how they would be walking when they are taken captive.

In *Chapter 22:13* we read of people who say, “*Let us eat and drink for tomorrow we die*,” – because they have no thought for eternity. This verse is quoted also in *1 Corinthians 15:32*.

In *Chapter 22* we read of two men:

1. Shebna, King Hezekiah's Finance Minister, a greedy, selfish man and a type of the Antichrist (*verses 15–19*).
2. Eliakim, a godly man, a type of Christ, “*a nail in a sure place, a peg driven in a firm place*” (*verses 20–25*).

Chapter 23 describes the destruction of Tyre.

Chapters 24 to 27 are prophecies referring to the day of the Lord. *Chapter 24* prophesies the destruction of the earth (*verses 1–20*), and of demons (*verses 21–23*). *Chapter 25:8* prophesies that death will be swallowed up one day in resurrection. *Chapter 26:3* is a promise that can keep our minds at peace in the last days: “*God will keep in perfect peace those whose minds are stayed on Him*”. *Verse 13* is a good verse of total surrender to the Lord: “*Lord, other masters have ruled us before. But from now on, only You will rule us.*” *Verse 19* is again a prophecy of the resurrection: “*Your dead will rise, those who lie in the dust will come back to life.*” *Verse 20* refers to the short period of the great tribulation; and *verse 21* to the Lord’s return to earth for His saints. *Chapter 27* then speaks about the destruction of the serpent, Satan, and of how the vineyard of the Lord will be restored.

Prophecies of Judgement and of Blessing (*Chapters 28 to 35*)

Chapter 28 has some verses in it that are quoted in the New Testament. *Verse 11* is quoted in *1 Corinthians 14:21* as a prophecy about the time when people would speak in tongues, which was fulfilled on the day of Pentecost. *Verse 16* speaks about Christ the Cornerstone of the church. “*Those who trust in this cornerstone will never be shaken or disturbed. They will never be in a hurry. They will be solidly founded.*” *Verse 20* speaks in picture language of how human righteousness is incapable of covering man completely. *Verse 21* tells us that judgement is an “*unusual task*” for God. He is reluctant to judge people. *Verses 28 and 29* tell us how God breaks us in His great wisdom, in order to bless us. He assures us that He will never allow us to be tested beyond our ability and He knows when to stop the chastening.

Chapter 29 speaks of Jerusalem (Ariel – “*lion of God*” – Hebrew) that is in a backslidden condition. *Verses 11 and 12* show us the need to have Divine revelation to understand God’s Word. Jesus quoted *verse 13* in *Mark 7:6,7* to expose the hypocrisy of the Pharisees. One day God will pour out His Spirit on the inhabitants of Jerusalem and then it will become like a fertile field (*verse 17*).

In *30:9–11*, we read of the people of Israel telling the prophets and seers: “*Don’t prophesy the truth to us. Speak pleasant words to us. Don’t tell us about the Holy One of Israel.*” We find the same attitude today among many Christians to the messages of the prophets in the church. The Lord waits for all such people to repent (*verses 15–18*). He waits in order to give grace to those who will turn to Him (*verse 18*). And those who turn will see their Teacher, Jesus (*verse 20*) and hear the voice of the Holy Spirit (*verse 21*) correcting them when they go astray from the right path. And then finally we read of the Antichrist being cast into hell (*verse 33 – Tophet is a picture of hell*).

Chapter 31 refers to the curse that lies on those who go to man (Egypt) for help (See *Jeremiah 17:5–8*). *Chapter 32* speaks about the coming reign of Christ. The women Isaiah spoke to in *Chapter 3* are now invited to repent (*verses 9–12*). Again, the Spirit is poured out on those who repent (*verse 15*), and this results in righteousness and peace. In *Chapter 33:14–16*, Isaiah asks this very searching question: “*Who can dwell with God? Who can dwell with a consuming fire?*” And then he answers it himself: “*Those who walk righteously and speak with sincerity.*” But he goes on to say that sinners are terrified in God’s presence and hypocrites tremble before Him. *Chapter 34* speaks of the Lord’s vengeance against the nations. In *Chapter 35*, we read of the new covenant and the highway of holiness where the ransomed will walk (*35:8, 10*).

Hezekiah's Deliverance from the Assyrians and from Sickness

The next four chapters (*Chapters 36 to 39*) are a historical record of events that took place during the reign of King Hezekiah. There are a number of spiritual lessons that we can learn from these chapters.

The first lesson we learn is that we should turn to the Lord, as Hezekiah did, when surrounded by enemies (*Chapter 37*) and when sick (*Chapter 38*). God can deliver us and He can heal us.

We can also learn lessons from Hezekiah’s mistakes. His *first* mistake was to ask God to lengthen his life, when God had told him that his time on earth was over (*Chapter 38:1–5*). Contrast Paul and Peter who when they knew that the time of their departure had come, did not ask for any extension of their life on earth (*2 Timothy 4:6; 2 Peter 1:14*). But Hezekiah asked for this and God granted him 15 more years. “*He gave them their demands but sent them leanness in their souls*” (*Psalm 106:15 - Living*). It was during that extended period of life that Hezekiah produced a son Manasseh, who became the worst king that Judah ever had (*2 Chronicles 33:1–3*). God knows what is best for us and we must accept His will concerning the length of our lives.

The *second* mistake that Hezekiah made was caused by his pride. God healed him of a deathly sickness and gave him a miraculous sign in confirmation – the sun went back in the sky by ten notches on the sundial (*Chapter 38:8*). In other words, the earth stopped and reversed its rotation for a while! When the king of Babylon saw this miracle, he sent messengers to congratulate Hezekiah – and in pride, Hezekiah showed off all his treasures to them (*Chapter 39*). This resulted in all of those treasures being taken to Babylon later. Whenever we take the glory for what God does in our lives, we will, sooner or later, end up in spiritual loss. We also see here that Isaiah’s prophecies were not dependent on current world conditions. He was a true prophet who was in touch with God. Babylon was at that time a weak country struggling for independence from the great world power, Assyria. But Isaiah prophesied accurately

that Hezekiah's treasures would be carried away to Babylon, and not to Assyria. And that was what happened some years later.

Prophecies of Comfort (*Chapters 40 to 66*)

Chapters 40 to 66 form the “*New Testament*” portion of Isaiah and there are many prophecies here about new covenant life to comfort and encourage God’s people..

Prophecies of Deliverance (*Chapters 40 to 48*)

It is significant that this section of Isaiah begins with a prophecy of the ministry of John the Baptist: “*A voice of one crying in the wilderness saying, ‘Clear the way for the Lord in the wilderness. Make smooth the desert.’*” (*Isaiah 40:3–5*). This message has an application for us too. The Lord is coming back a second time. And just as John the Baptist prepared the people for His first coming, the church must prepare people for His second coming.

So our message must essentially be the same as John the Baptist's:

- *First of all, “the valleys must be lifted up”* (*verse 4*). There is no place for discouragement and depression under the new covenant. We are never to say, “I am good for nothing, I am useless.” God is a God of encouragement. He has lifted us up in Christ and given us dignity. We don't have to live in the dumps – in the valleys – any more. We are children of the King and He lifts our heads up.
- *Secondly, “the mountains must be brought low”* (*verse 4*). All pride in us must be brought down.
- *Thirdly, the rough places must become smooth.* There is a lot of coarseness, rudeness and roughness in our lives. These have to be smoothed out and we have to become gracious and gentle.
- *Fourthly, the crooked paths must become straight* (*This is how this verse is quoted in Luke 3:5*). There are crooked areas in our lives such as unrighteousness in money matters. All of that has to be made straight.

This is what true repentance involves – the valleys being lifted up, the mountains being brought down, the rough places made smooth, and the crooked paths made straight. *Then the glory of the Lord will be revealed in our flesh. In our flesh, others will see the glory of Jesus Christ. That is how we are to prepare people for the coming of the Lord. “The mouth of the Lord has spoken it and all flesh shall see the salvation of the Lord”.*

Chapter 40:6, 7 are quoted in *1 Peter 1:24, 25*: “*All flesh is like grass.*” We have already seen that all human beings are like dust without breath. Here they are described as grass. All the honour that you can get from

people in the world is only like some small flower that grows on the grass. The grass withers and the flower fades when the breath of the Lord blows upon it. But Peter goes on to say there, “*But the word of the Lord endures forever.*” So those who have lived by the principles of God’s word will remain when all the glory of man is destroyed one day. We must never forget that. Everything we see around us is going to perish one day. If we live by the word of God, we will have something eternal.

Chapter 40:10, 11 speak of the coming of the Lord. “*The Lord will come. His reward is with Him. And like a shepherd He will take care of His flock. He will carry the lambs in His bosom.*”

Chapter 40:12 to 17 speak about the control God exercises over the whole universe. He created everything from nothing. Verse 13 is quoted in *1 Corinthians 2:16*: “*Who has taught the Holy Spirit, or as His counselor informed Him?*”

All the nations of the earth are as nothing before Him (*verse 17*). All the inhabitants of the world are all less than nothing and meaningless. We must see this sovereign rule of God, if we are to serve Him effectively and fearlessly – especially when we go to difficult places where people appear to be so powerful because they have the authority of the State behind them and oppose us as we seek to serve the Lord. We must remember these verses then and trust in the tremendous power of God to protect us and to preserve us.

Chapter 40:21, 22: “*Don’t you know and have you not heard? It is He who sits above the circle of the earth.*” This was written 2700 years ago and Isaiah clearly mentions here that the earth was not flat, but spherical. That was hundreds of years before anyone else on earth believed this. Solomon also mentions the spherical nature of the earth in *Proverbs 8:27* (NASB). Jesus also implied that the earth was spherical by referring to it being day in some places and night in other places when He returns from heaven (*Luke 17:31, 34*).

Chapter 40:26: “*Look at the One who controls the stars. He has given them all names.*” Isaiah was given a vision not only of God’s awesome holiness (*Chapter 6*), but also of His almighty power. These are the two visions of God that we must always have before us when we serve Him.

Chapter 40:29–31: This verse teaches that this almighty God Whom we worship and serve will give us strength when we are weak. When we lack might, He will give us power. He will give us health and strength to serve Him. Even young people may grow weary and tired and vigorous young men may get exhausted in trying to serve the Lord. But those who wait on the Lord, no matter what their age, will gain new strength. What a wonderful promise! And when young people are collapsing, these older men “*who wait on the Lord will mount up with*

wings like eagles. They will run and won't get tired. They will walk and they will never become weary".

I want to encourage you young people: From early youth, learn to wait upon the Lord in simple trust for all your needs. You will gain new strength, as this verse says. Or as another translation puts it: "*Those who wait on the Lord will exchange their strength*". That means that we give our human strength to the Lord and He gives us His Divine strength in exchange! Hallelujah!! It is wonderful to exchange everything we have with the Lord. Jesus told the Father, "*All that I have is Yours, Father. And all that You have is mine*" (*John 17:10*). In the *Lord's* service you need the *Lord's* strength to see you through. We who serve the Lord really need to trust the Lord to give us supernatural strength from above, His resurrection power - not only in our spirit but in our bodies too. Then we will bear fruit for Him even in old age (*Psalm 92:14*).

Chapters 40 to 46 have been a precious portion of Scripture to me, in my service for the Lord. I would encourage all of you who serve the Lord to meditate on these chapters seriously. There are some tremendous promises here for those who are wholeheartedly seeking to serve God walking in the footsteps of that first true Servant of Jehovah, our Lord Jesus Christ.

Chapter 41:8–18: Here are some promises to encourage you greatly when you face difficult situations! The Lord says, "*I have chosen you, not rejected you. Don't be afraid. I am with you. Don't look anxiously about you. I am your God. I will strengthen you. I will help you. I will uphold you with My right hand. All those who are angry with you, will be ashamed and dishonoured. Those who fight with you will become as nothing. They will perish. You will look for those who quarrel with you. But you will not find them. Those who make war with you will become nothing and nonexistent one day because I am your Lord your God. I hold your right hand. I say to you, 'Don't fear.' I will help you. You are a worm. But don't be afraid. I'll help you. Even though you are so weak, I am going to make you a new, sharp, threshing sledge with double edges* (because the Word of God, the two-edged sword, is in your mouth). *You will thresh these mighty mountains to pieces and pulverise them. You will make the hills like chaff. And you will rejoice in your Lord your God.*" Take these words to heart, you who seek to serve the Lord. Apply them to yourself and claim them in Jesus' name.

Chapter 41:17, 18: When the afflicted and needy (God is always interested in listening to the cry of those who are poor in spirit) are seeking for water (that is the Holy Spirit), when their tongue is parched, and they say, 'O God, I cannot live without the power of the Holy Spirit,' I the Lord will answer them. I will open rivers in their lives, springs in the midst of

their lives. I'll make their life like pools of water. And their dry life will become like a fountain of water. These promises have been a tremendous blessing and encouragement to me for many years – and I pass them on to you.

Chapter 42 speaks of Jesus as the *Servant of Jehovah* Who is anointed by the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is one of the main themes of the New Testament and the Holy Spirit is also one of the main themes in *Isaiah 40 to 66*. “*Behold My Servant whom I uphold.*” A true servant of God is one who is upheld by God, not by money or by an organisation or any human agency. The Lord is the One Who should uphold us at all times. Men may give us gifts. But we must never depend on men or money. The word “*uphold*” refers to that which we are dependent on. We must be dependent on the Lord alone. It is when we come to the place of helplessness that God puts His Spirit on us.

Chapter 42:2: “He will not cry out or raise His voice in the streets.” This is quoted as referring to Jesus in *Matthew 12:19, 20, where it goes on to say, “He will not make His voice heard in the streets. A bruised reed He will not break.”* That means that the Lord will never discourage anyone who has made a mess of his life but will encourage him and heal him. The Lord will not put out the wick of a candle that is about to die. On the other hand, He will blow it into a flame. God is interested in helping weak believers who have failed. He is interested in helping those who are discouraged and depressed and to lift their spirits. A true servant of the Lord will always have a similar ministry of encouragement, lifting the spirits of those who are depressed and discouraged and who feel hopeless and are fed up with life. Let us all seek for such a ministry because people need it everywhere.

Chapter 42:5–7: The Lord tells us: “*I have called you in righteousness. I have called you to open blind eyes, to bring out prisoners from the dungeon.*” This is a great ministry. But remember one thing always: “*The Lord says, ‘I will never give My glory to another.’*” (*verse 8*). We must never take any glory to ourselves in our ministry. To take the credit or the glory to ourselves is a very, very serious crime. It is worse than stealing money. God may bless you and your ministry and use you mightily. But He will never give His glory to anyone. Once you start touching the glory of God you will destroy yourself, like many servants of the Lord have been destroyed. Once you start promoting yourself before people, drawing people to yourself instead of to the Lord, and taking credit for what God did, you are on very dangerous ground. This is how thousands have lost God’s anointing on their lives.

Chapter 42:19: “Who is blind but My Servant? Who is deaf like My Messenger? Who is so blind as the One who is at peace with Me totally, so blind as the Servant of the Lord?” This looks like a puzzling verse, especially since it refers clearly to Jesus (as we can see from *verse 1*). What does it mean? It means that a true servant of God will be blind and

deaf to many things that he sees and hears around him. He sees many things, but he doesn't observe them (*verse 20*). He doesn't go around looking for sin in others. He doesn't go around listening to people in order to catch them in something they said. The Pharisees were like that – always waiting to catch Jesus in something He said in order to accuse Him. Many Christians are unfortunately like that too – always waiting to accuse someone in something he said – very often because they are jealous of his ministry. Don't be like them. Be deaf and blind to many things that you hear and see around you. Did you hear that someone made a false accusation against you? If you were deaf you would not have heard it. Be "*deaf*" then! Isn't it good for a servant of the Lord to be "*blind*" to attractive women? You have eyes, but you don't see. You are "*blind*!" You have ears, but you don't hear! Because you do not judge by what your eyes see or what your ears hear. This is how Jesus lived and this is how we must live too (*Isaiah 11:3*).

Let me share with you now some of the wonderful promises found in these chapters which look forward to the establishing of the new covenant. These are promises of God, and *2 Corinthians 1:20* says, "*All the promises of God are 'Yes' and 'Amen' in Christ.*" So we can claim these promises in Jesus' name:

Chapter 43:1–5: "Do not fear. I have redeemed you. When you pass through the waters, I'll be with you. When you pass through the rivers (difficult situations) they will not overflow you. When you walk through the fire it will not hurt you nor will the flame burn you. I am the Lord your God. You are precious in My sight. I gave Egypt for your ransom." To us He says, "*I gave you the blood of My Son for your ransom. Therefore you are precious in My eyes. Don't be afraid.*" The word "*Do not be afraid*" (or "*Fear not*") were the words that Jesus spoke to His disciples. In the days that we live in, this is the word that we need to hear from the Lord: "*Don't be afraid. I am with you.*"

Chapter 43:10, 11: "You are My witnesses, I am the Lord. There is no Saviour besides Me."

Chapter 43:18, 19, 25: "Don't think about your past life. Forget the things that are behind. I will do something new. I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert. Look to the future. Don't worry about your past failures. I am the One who wipes out your transgressions and I will not remember your sins any more."

Chapter 44:3: "I'll pour water on the thirsty ground. I'll pour My Spirit on you and your children and My blessing on your descendants."

Chapter 44:8: "Don't tremble, don't be afraid. You are My witnesses. Is there any God beside Me? Why are you worried about these people who worship idols?" Then He speaks about the folly of idolatry in the remaining verses.

Chapter 44:21: "You are My servant. I have formed you. You will never be forgotten by Me." It is easy to feel lonely and forgotten when we are faithful to the Lord or when we are serving Him in some lonely place. But God assures us that He will never forget us. This is our comfort. At times when you think that your prayers are not being heard, remember this promise: "*You will not be forgotten by Me.*"

Chapter 44:28 to 45:6 is a prophecy about King Cyrus. Over 100 years before Cyrus was even born and long before his Medo-Persian empire became world-rulers, Isaiah prophesied about him *by name*. God calls Cyrus His shepherd who would tell the Jews to go back and build the temple (we read of this being fulfilled in the book of Ezra).

Chapter 45:9: "Woe unto the man who quarrels with his Maker. Can the clay say to the potter, 'What are you doing?'" Don't argue with God in the way He deals with you. Humble yourself and accept His dealings with you. If He takes you through difficult situations, it is to mould you into a useful vessel for His glory. Don't complain or grumble.

Chapter 45:10 has special relevance to our country of India where most parents don't like to have a girl baby. We all know that there are sad cases where girl babies are left at the doorsteps of orphanages or thrown into garbage bins or even killed. This verse is for all such parents. "*Woe to (a curse be on) the one who says to a father, 'What are you begetting?' or to a woman, 'What are you giving birth to?'* Is it a girl? I wanted a boy. There is a curse on people who question God's gifts like that. Even if it is a mentally challenged (retarded) child, we have no right to kill it. If God decides to give you such a child, it can make you into a person of great compassion. This verse also shows us that there is a woe (curse) on those who abort babies.

Chapter 45:17: "You will not be put to shame or humiliated to all eternity." Jesus was humiliated, and we may be humiliated that way too. But from the eternal standpoint, we will *never* be put to shame, if we follow the Lord.

Here is another lovely verse: *Chapter 45:22: "Turn to Me and be saved, all the ends of the earth. I am God, there is none else."*

Chapter 46:4 is a beautiful verse for older people: God promises, "*Even to your old age I will be the same* (I don't grow old). *Even when your hairs become gray I will carry you. I created you, I made you and I will carry you. I will deliver you.*" God compares himself with idols here. Idolaters carry their gods but our God carries us! *Do you carry your god or does your God carry you?* That is the question.

Chapter 47:8 is quoted in *Revelation 18:7* and refers to Babylon (false Christianity) sitting as a queen and saying, "*I will not sit as a widow.*" It refers to a comfort-loving Christianity that does not know God, and that does not walk in humility.

Chapter 48:10, 11: "Behold, I have refined you, but not as silver. I have tested you in the furnace of affliction. For My own sake I will act for how can My name be profaned." Affliction is a testing process meant to test

our faithfulness. Testing will not be forever. Gold, after it is purified in the fire, is finally made into a crown for a king. One day God will take us and make us part of His crown. He does this for His own Name's sake.

And then we see that word coming a second time: "*My glory I will never give to another person*" (48:11).

Chapter 48:17, 18: "I am the Lord who teaches you to profit, who leads you in the way you should go. If only you had listened to My commandments and paid attention to them, your well-being would have been like a river, and your righteousness like the waves of the sea." Everything that God asks us to do is for our own profit and well-being. And when the Lord leads us, we will "*not thirst even when going through the deserts. He will make water to flow from the rock*" (48:21). But for the wicked there will never be any peace" (48:22).

Prophecies of the Messiah (*Chapters 49 to 57*)

Chapters 49 to 57 are prophecies about Jesus, but we can apply many of the passages to ourselves too.

Chapter 49 was the chapter through which the Lord called me to full-time Christian ministry, as I was reading and meditating on it in my daily Bible-reading, on the morning of May 6, 1964.

Chapter 49:2: "He has made my mouth like a sharp sword." When we speak God's word, it can at times be like a sharp sword and at times as words of comfort. "*In the shadow of His hand He has concealed me. He has hidden me in His quiver.*" Then he speaks of the temptation to be discouraged, "*Lord, I have wasted my life. I have not spent my strength usefully.*" (verse 4). A servant of the Lord can be tempted to be discouraged frequently. Paul was. But he never gave into it. The Lord says, "*Don't worry. I am going to use you. I am going to make you a light to the nations*" (verse 6).

Chapter 49:14, 15: "Zion said 'The Lord has forgotten me'. Can a woman forget her nursing child and have no compassion on the son of her womb? Even these may forget, but I will not forget you." When God wants to show that His love is greater than any human love, the greatest example of human love He finds on earth is that of a mother for her child. He doesn't say, "Can a husband forget his wife?" – because husbands may forget their wives often! Wives will forget their husbands too. But a mother can never forget her newly-born child. And He goes on to say that even if a mother forgets, He will not forget us. That promise is enough to comfort and encourage us all through our earthly lives. God then says, "*I have inscribed you on the palms of My hands*" (verse 16). That is a prophetic reference to the holes that would remain in the palms of Jesus' hands even after His resurrection. Our names have been inscribed in those holes!

Chapter 49:23 has been a tremendous encouragement to me through many years. "*Those who hopefully wait for Me will never be put to shame.*"

Praise God for that wonderful promise. If you trust in the Lord totally and wait for Him alone to act on your behalf, I can assure you that you will never be put to shame in your entire life.

Chapter 49:25: “The captives of the mighty will be taken away. I will contend with the one who contends with you and I will save your sons.” No-one need be a captive of sin or of Satan. If any of our children are captives of Satan, God promises here to save them from that captivity. Let us claim that promise for all our children.

Chapter 50:4 is a prophecy about Jesus. It says here that Jesus would have a disciplined tongue which He would use to comfort weary people with words in season. The tongue is the main part of our body that God uses and so every servant of God must discipline its use. We already saw that Jesus' mouth was like a sharp sword (49:2). God's Word that comes out of our mouths is at times like a sharp sword that cuts the heart open and exposes wrong motives, and at times it is a gentle word that encourages.

We read here that Jesus would wake up every morning to listen to what the Father had to say (*verse 4*). And when He heard something He was immediately obedient. He accepted His Father's will even when that involved allowing other people to slap Him and hit Him and spit on Him (*verses 5, 6*). And when people did all this, Jesus “*set His face like a flint*” (*verse 7*), not to take revenge on them or to threaten them but to forgive them and bless them. He knew that he would not be ashamed because the One who vindicated Him was always near (*verse 8*). Every servant of God can say these words “*Who will fight with me? Let us stand together.*” Have you got a case against me? Do you want to take me to court? “*The Lord God will help me. Who is there to accuse me and condemn me? They will all wear out like a garment.*” (*verse 9*).

Chapter 50:10: Even when you fear the Lord, and obey the voice of Jesus His Servant, there could still be times when the Lord will allow you to grope in the dark without light, in order to strengthen your faith. What should you do at such times? Trust in God totally. “*Never doubt in the darkness what God has shown you in the light.*” If someone gave you a 100-rupee note that you saw clearly in the light, would you doubt in the darkness (when you can't see clearly) whether that was really a 100-rupee note or not? You would not, because you had already seen it clearly in the light. In the same way, there are times in our life when the light of God is bright and He shows us how much He loves us and cares for us. Later on, when times of pressure and trial come upon us, we need not doubt His love.

Verse 11 warns us that at such times, we should not light a human fire to produce light. Those who do so “*will lie down in torment.*” That means that we should not lean upon men in our times of trial. We should not use human methods to defend ourselves or to escape the trials that God

sends into our lives. We must trust Him to defend us and to release us from the trial in His own way and in His own time.

Chapter 51:1: "Those who seek the Lord, those who pursue righteousness, look to the rock from which you are hewn and the quarry from which you were dug." We should never forget the pit we were in, when the Lord found us – the hopeless condition we were in before we were saved. If we remember that, we will never despise other people. We won't be afraid of people either: *"Listen to Me, you who know righteousness. Don't fear the reproach of men nor be afraid of their revilings. I am He Who comforts you. Why are you afraid of man who dies and the son of man who is made like grass and forget the Lord Who stretched out the heavens?"* (verses 7, 12, 13).

Chapter 51:16, 17: "I have put My words in your mouth. I have covered you with the shadow of My hand. Say to Zion (the church), 'You are My people. Rouse yourself.'" It is only when we are encouraged ourselves, that we can encourage others.

Chapter 52:5: The Lord says, *"My name is continually blasphemed the whole day long."* This verse is quoted in *Romans 2:24* as indicating that God's Name was blasphemed among the heathen because of Israel. This is true of Christians too in many places. The Name of Jesus is dishonoured in India, not as much by the heathen as it is by the way most Christians live. *India has not rejected Christ. It has rejected the Christ it has seen in Christians, which is not the true Christ.* But in contrast, *"how lovely on the mountains are the feet of him who brings good news (the gospel), who announces peace and brings good news of happiness, and says to Zion, 'Your God reigns.'*" (verse 7). The good news is not just that Jesus died for our sins, but also that He is now reigning, having all authority in heaven and on earth. That is the *full gospel* we are to proclaim.

Chapter 52:13, 14 teach us that when Jesus died on the cross His face was so disfigured by the beatings that He received that it did not look like the face of a human being at all. The pictures that we have all seen of Jesus hanging on the cross with a beautiful face are not true. His face was beaten and disfigured. Jesus was the most beautiful Person that ever walked on this earth. But when He hung on the cross, His face was so disfigured that it was the ugliest face of all.

Chapter 53 is the central chapter of this section of *Isaiah* and is the chapter of the cross. The chapter begins with a question: *"Who has believed our message?"* Who in Israel would believe what *Isaiah* prophesied that the Messiah would come, not with power, but as a despised person, as a root out of a dry ground? *"He grew up before His Father"* (verse 2). The secret of Jesus' life was that He did not live before the face of men but before the face of His Father. He was not attractive to men when He hung on the cross. We read that *"He had no appearance that we should be attracted to Him"* (verse 2). The message of the gospel is not attractive to man even today. Christ was not accepted by the world in the first century; and He is not accepted by the world in the twenty-first

century either. The Christ that some claim to appreciate today is a *false Christ*, and not the real One Who spoke against sin, against the love of money, and taught people to love even their enemies. The real Christ is despised, forsaken and rejected even today.

And if you follow the real Christ, I assure you that you will face the same rejection by the world that He faced. You will be despised even by much of Christendom, just as Jesus was by most of the religious people of His day. It was not the Greeks and Romans who despised Jesus and rejected Him, but the Pharisees (the fundamentalists of His day). Who has a heart to accept the word of the cross – even today? We can be excited when we hear the wonderful promises of blessing that are found in the Scriptures. But the word of the cross comes along with the promises in the same package. You cannot have one without the other. One reason for the shallowness in the lives of many Christians today is that they have tried to claim the promises without taking up their cross.

Notice that it says three times in *verse 7* that Jesus was silent. “*He did not open His mouth. He was silent. He did not open His mouth.*” As believers, we must know how to open our mouths wide and shout to the Lord at times when we praise and thank Him. We must also know how to keep our mouths shut when we are insulted, criticised and slandered. Jesus knew how to praise His Father and He also knew how to be silent. Unfortunately, it is the other way round with many Christians. They are silent when it comes to shouting God’s praises in the meetings; but they **do** know how to shout and defend themselves when someone accuses them or hurts them. But that is the characteristic of an upside-down world, and Christians must be different.

In *verse 10*, we read that the Father was pleased to *crush* Jesus – and “*therefore He will see His seed and prolong His days.*” Those are the results that come out of the crushing. “*He will prolong His days*” means that Jesus would be resurrected from the dead. And “*the good pleasure of the Lord will prosper in His hand.*”

This is the way for us to go too. And as “*He was numbered with the transgressors*” (*verse 12*), we too will be misunderstood by other Christians and categorised with the wicked.

Chapter 54:4–10 are beautiful verses of comfort for widows. “*The Lord is your husband. Don’t be afraid. You will forget the shame of your youth and the reproach of your widowhood. My covenant of peace and My loving-kindness will not be removed from you.*”

Chapter 54:13 is a promise for our children: “*All your sons will become disciples of the Lord (discipled by the Lord), and the well-being of your sons will be great.*” The Lord gave this promise to my wife and to me *separately*, in June 1968, before we had any children – and we have claimed it for all four of our sons and seen it fulfilled. This is a wonderful

promise for all parents and I want to encourage all parents to claim it in Jesus' name, saying, "Lord, I want all my children to become disciples of the Lord and their spiritual well-being to be great." That does *not* mean that your children will never become sick, or that your children will never have the struggles that many teenagers often go through. But it does mean that they will finally come through to the Lord. Claim it and don't give up.

Chapter 54:15, 17: "If anyone comes to fight you, he will be routed for I am on your side. No weapon turned against you shall succeed. And you will have justice against every courtroom lie. This is the heritage of the servants of the Lord. This is the blessing I have given you." (Living). These wonderful promises are for all who serve the Lord. I praise the Lord that for more than 50 years I have experienced the fulfilment of these promises. Every evil thing that others have sought to do against me has only worked for my good, to make me more like Christ. Jesus was falsely accused – and so were Peter and Paul. If you follow the Lord wholeheartedly, you too will face such false accusations from those who are convicted by your message and from those who are jealous of your ministry. Many may believe their accusations. Let them do so. Don't be disturbed. God will shut their mouths one day and vindicate you. *"Their vindication is from Me,"* says the Lord. You don't have to defend yourself. God Himself will defend you. I have proved the reality of that for more than 50 years now. Whenever people have accused me, the Lord has always told me to keep my mouth shut and to let others believe whatever they want to about me. Even if people believe that you are the Devil incarnate, let them do so – as they believed about your Saviour! Keep your mouth shut and one day God Himself will vindicate you. Wait for the Lord to do that. Live before God's face and leave your reputation in His hands.

In 55:1, we read an invitation: "*Everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you who have no money come ... buy without money and without cost.*" This is an invitation to accept the message of the gospel. The gospel must always be offered "*without charge*", as we read in 1 Corinthians 9:18. It is a great shame that so many evangelists take offerings in public gospel meetings before preaching the gospel. Jesus and the apostles never did that. This is just one indication of how far Christian preachers today have drifted from the true faith. In verses 8, 9 the Lord says, "*My thoughts are not your thoughts nor are your ways My ways,' declares the Lord. As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways.*" This teaches us that our human way of thinking is earthly and we have to learn God's ways from Him through His Word, if we are to serve Him effectively. Verse 11: "*My word which goes forth from My mouth will not return empty.*" After our way of thinking has been renewed and aligned with God's way, then we can speak forth His Word – and that word will never return empty. We must never preach our own ideas or the teachings of psychology – as many are doing in Christendom

today. Our messages must be rooted in the Bible, so that the faith of people can rest on the Word of God and not in human reasoning. In all my spoken and written ministry through these many years, I have always spoken and written from the Bible alone – because God's Word is more reliable than my word. Be a man of the Word in your preaching.

In 56:2–5 the Lord emphasises the importance of keeping the Sabbath. This was a very important commandment for Israel. But it was a sign between God and Israel alone (*Exodus 31:16, 17*) and that is why we don't have to keep it today. But the spiritual application of it, however, is for us. *Hebrews 4:1–11* teaches us that the Old Testament Sabbath symbolised the life of rest that God wants us to enter into, in Christ. Verse 7 was quoted by Jesus in *Mark 11:17*, “*My house should be called a house of prayer for all people.*” Many preachers have turned the church into a place to make money for themselves – just like the sellers of sheep and doves in the temple, in Jesus' time. And the Lord will turn them out one day. The church is a house of prayer and not a place of business. In *verses 10 and 11*, God says that His servants have become blind (without spiritual discernment) and dumb – like watchdogs that do not bark even when the thief comes. The shepherds of God's people have become greedy for money and seek their own at every turn. What a picture of the pathetic state of affairs in much of Christendom today!

Chapter 57:1: “The righteous man perishes and no man takes it to heart.” Godly people are becoming scarce in the world today. But hardly anyone seems to be concerned about it. The greatest need of the hour is for genuinely godly men. *Verse 15:* Here God says that there are only two places where He lives: *in heaven and in the heart of a humble, lowly person.* We can have the privilege of the Creator of the universe living in our hearts, if we are humble and lowly. *Verse 19: “Peace, peace, to him who is far and to him who is near.”* This is quoted in *Ephesians 2:17* as a prophetic reference to the fact that Jews and Gentiles would be brought together in one body by Christ. *Verses 20, 21: “The wicked are like the tossing sea that tosses up mud (from the bottom). There is no peace for the wicked.”* Wicked people never seek for peace in relationships but always bring up old matters that were buried in the past to disturb the relationship. This is often the case with wicked husbands and wives.

Prophecies of the Future (*Chapters 58 to 66*)

Chapter 58 is a beautiful chapter that is worthy of careful study, because it has many wonderful promises. It speaks about the right way to fast. God says that true fasting is not a ritual but something that should lead to our sharing our bread with the hungry, caring for the poor and naked, putting an end to pointing fingers at others (accusing them), and giving ourselves for others (serving them). Those who fulfil these conditions will find light arising for them in the darkness, and the Lord healing their

sicknesses and guiding them continually. They will become like unfailing springs of water, blessing others wherever they go. God abundantly rewards those who have a concern for others.

Chapter 59: The Lord does not hear many prayers because there is unconfessed sin in the hearts of those who pray (*verses 1, 2*). Sin separates man from God (*verse 2*). *Verse 16* says that the Lord was amazed to find at that time that there were no intercessors among His people. This is also the sad condition in many churches today. God looks for intercessors who will pray for others. *Verse 19* (KJV): “*When the enemy comes in like a flood, the Spirit of the Lord will lift up a standard against him.*” God wants the church to be like a banner that always stands against Satan in spiritual warfare. *Verse 21:* “*My Spirit and My words shall not depart from your mouth nor from the mouth of your offspring or your offspring's offspring.*” The anointing of the Holy Spirit is the greatest gift God can ever give us and the ability to speak forth His Word is the greatest privilege that we can ever have. Here God promises that He will give these gifts not only to us but to our children and our grandchildren as well. What a promise to claim.

Chapter 60:1: “*Arise, shine, for your light is come and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you.*” This is a prophetic reference to the glory of God that we can have in our lives in this new-covenant age. “*The Lord Himself will be our Light and our God will be our glory*” (*verse 19*).

Chapter 61:1, 2: These verses are a prophetic reference to Jesus being anointed with the Holy Spirit to proclaim the gospel of deliverance to others. This is the passage of Scripture that Jesus turned to when He preached His first sermon in the synagogue in Nazareth. Notice that Jesus stopped with proclaiming “*the favourable year of the Lord*” and did not proclaim “*the day of vengeance of God*” for that day had not yet come (*compare verse 2 with Luke 4:19*). Notice also the proportion of God’s favour in relation to His judgement. It is a whole *year* of favour as opposed to just a single *day* of judgement. That is a proportion of 365:1 in favour of grace. God is trying to show us here that He would much rather show us favour than judge us. Our attitude to others should also be the same. We should be 365 times more ready to bless others and to be gracious to them than to judge them. God has come to take away all heaviness from our lives and to replace it with a spirit of praise (*verse 3*). *Verse 10* speaks of God clothing us with the righteousness of Christ and making us the bride of Christ.

Chapter 62:3, 4 continue to speak of the bridal relationship that we have with our Lord. In *verses 6, 7*, those who are called to be watchmen on the walls of Jerusalem (the church) are urged to keep on warning and exhorting God’s people and those who have the ministry of intercession are urged not to stop interceding until God makes the church an object of praise and glory on the earth. Since He Himself has promised to do so, we can claim His promise boldly in prayer (*verses 1, 11*).

Chapter 63:8 & 9 speak of our Saviour being “afflicted in all our afflictions” and of how “He saves us by His presence.” But then it goes on to warn us in *verse 10* of those who rebelled against and grieved His Holy Spirit, so that the Spirit turned around and became their enemy! That is a warning for all of us to live in fear. The Spirit seeks to lead us into a life of rest as He led the Israelites into Canaan (*verse 14*), but we must respond to His call.

Chapter 63:15 to 64:1 is a prayer to God to work again among His people and to send a revival. *Chapter 64:1* is a good prayer for us to pray frequently. This is what we need in the church. *Verse 4* is quoted in *1 Corinthians 2:9*, but slightly differently there. In *1 Corinthians*, it is written that God has prepared wonderful things for those who *love Him*, whereas in *Isaiah* it is written that He has prepared these things for those who *wait for Him*. From this we learn that those who *love Him* will always *wait for Him*. We learn many things when we compare Scripture with Scripture. This passage is *not* referring to what God has prepared for His people in heaven, but rather to the wonderful blessings of the new covenant that He has prepared for His people right now. *1 Corinthians 2:10* goes on to say that the Holy Spirit has revealed these wonderful things to us. *Verse 5*: “*You meet him who rejoices in doing righteousness*”. God loves to meet with those who not only *do* righteousness but who *rejoice* in doing it. But then it reminds us in *verse 6* that “*all our righteous deeds are like a filthy garment*.” So our *best* deeds are like the *filthiest* rags imaginable in God’s eyes, for He is so utterly holy. We may call some people *good*, but no-one is truly *good* in God’s eyes. Only God Himself is truly *good* (*Mark 10:18*). Christ’s righteousness must therefore clothe a person if he is to be accepted by God.

Chapter 65:5: Here God expresses His disgust with those who are self-righteous, who have this attitude to others: “*Do not come near me for I am holier than you*.” Such people are as detestable to God as smoke going into one’s nose. He detests all who look down on others. *Verse 17* is a prophecy of the new heavens and new earth. *Verse 24* is a wonderful promise that we can claim when we pray: “*Before they call I will answer and while they are still speaking, I will hear*.” God is more eager to hear us and to answer our prayers than we are to hear.

Chapter 66:1, 2: Here God challenges us by asking who can even imagine that they can build a house (church) for Him, when the entire heaven is just His throne and the whole earth is but His footstool!! Many proudly call themselves “church-planters”!! But then God goes on to say that He *will* enable a certain type of person to build His house – the one who is humble and contrite of spirit and who trembles at His Word. God looks with favour only at those who are broken and humble in their spirits and who tremble at every command in His Word (obeying it immediately). *Verse 5* indicates that those who tremble at God’s Word are often hated and rejected by their brothers. This has been true throughout

church history. But the Lord encourages such people by saying that their enemies will finally be put to shame. So humble yourself and tremble at God's Word and God will always be with you. In *verse 13*, God further encourages such people by saying that He will comfort them "*as a mother comforts her children.*"

Finally in *verses 22–24*, we read of the new heavens and the new earth that will be established when the Lord returns. Those who are Abraham's *spiritual seed* will have eternal life, while others will burn in hell with a fire that will never be quenched.

Indeed *Isaiah* is a wonderful *new covenant* book in the Old Testament.

JEREMIAH

GOD'S LAST WARNING TO JUDAH

Jeremiah preached to the southern kingdom of Judah for more than 40 years. He was the last prophet God sent to save Judah from being sent into captivity. Jeremiah tried his best to turn Judah back from their sins and from facing the judgement of God. But he did not succeed. Zephaniah, Habakkuk, Daniel, and Ezekiel, were his contemporaries.

Jeremiah was not a hard man even though he spoke very strongly. He wept secretly for Judah's sins. He felt very deeply about the backsliding of God's people. He was a very simple man and he started prophesying when he was very young. He was very sensitive in his spirit, and at the same time very strong. These are good qualities for anyone who preaches God's word – to be simple at heart, sensitive to the feelings of others, and yet very strong when it comes to proclaiming the truth. In that sense, Jeremiah was like Jesus. Jesus also lived very simply and was very sensitive to the hurts of others; and He wept over Jerusalem just like Jeremiah wept over Jerusalem.

Once when Jesus asked the people, "Who do people say that I am?" They replied saying, "Some say You are Jeremiah come back again" (*Matthew 16:13, 14*). Why did they say that? Because there was so much similarity between Jesus and Jeremiah. That is a tremendous compliment to Jeremiah – that people mistook Jesus for him!!

Jesus wept and suffered because God wept and suffered. Jeremiah also wept and suffered for the same reason. Though Jeremiah had a great concern for his people and was the mouthpiece of God, yet his people misunderstood him. All the true prophets in previous generations had been misunderstood, persecuted and rejected. But Jeremiah never gave up even after prophesying for 40 years. He is a great example of a man who stood firm and true to God until the end of his life.

He wrote many of his prophecies in dungeons – the prisons of those days. He prophesied during the reigns of many kings. A year before he came on the scene there had been an apparent revival under Josiah who ruled Judah just after the 57-year long evil reigns of Manasseh and Amon (*2 Kings 21:19–26*). But that “revival”, like many “revivals” today, was only superficial.

The prominent phrase that we find in the book of *Jeremiah* is ‘*the Lord of hosts*.’ Other prophets also spoke of “*the Lord of the armies of heaven*”. This phrase occurs about 82 times in *Jeremiah*.

Jeremiah’s Call

The Lord called Jeremiah when he was a young man (*1:5, 6*) and said to him, “*Before I formed you in the womb I knew you. Before you were born I consecrated you and appointed you a prophet to the nations.*” God knew Jeremiah even before his body was formed in his mother’s womb. There is a lot of dispute nowadays about whether an embryo is a human being or not. Here is a verse that should clear that doubt forever – because God says He knew Jeremiah before he was formed. When Jeremiah was a microscopic speck in his mother’s womb, God knew him and consecrated him to be a prophet. That is a great encouragement for us – to know that God had His eye on us even when we were just microscopic specks just conceived in our mother’s wombs. He has a plan for our lives just as He had a plan for Jeremiah.

Just imagine, when Jeremiah went through all those difficulties, how this thought must have encouraged him: “*I am facing a lot of difficulties right now. But God knew me when I was in my mother’s womb and He planned my life then. And that plan will be fulfilled. I am going to yield to God utterly.*” All of us too should think about that whenever we face trials and difficulties. God chose you before you were born and His plan for your life will be fulfilled. So don’t ever get discouraged.

Then Jeremiah said, “*Lord, I don’t know how to speak.*” It is amazing how God picks up people to be prophets who are not good at public speaking. Moses was like that. He also said, “*Lord, I am unable to speak publicly.*” I want to encourage all of you. Don’t think that God cannot use you to preach His word just because you don’t have the ability to speak or the boldness to stand before people. The Lord said to Moses, “*I made man’s mouth. Can’t I then make you speak?*” (*Exodus 4:10, 11*). If you allow God to break you and to fill you with His Holy Spirit, He can make you also His spokesman. It all depends on your walk with God.

I was a shy, self-conscious person as a young Christian. But when God anointed me with His Spirit, He began to speak through me. He can do the same with you. And one more thing: Don’t ever say to God, “*Lord, I am so young.*” If God calls you and consecrates you, your age won’t make any difference. You don’t have to wait until you are an old man before you

start serving the Lord. As soon as you feel a burden in your heart, seek God to be filled with the Holy Spirit, and go forth and proclaim the word of God.

The Lord told Jeremiah, “*Don’t say I am a youth, because everywhere I send you, you shall go, and all that I command you, you shall speak*” (1:7). And then the Lord spoke a word to him that He often spoke to His prophets: “*Don’t be afraid, because I am with you to deliver you*” (1:8). This was the big advantage that all the true prophets had – *the Lord was with them*. Therefore they were not afraid of any man. That is the way we need to serve the Lord in India today as well. We must ensure that the Lord is with us.

The Lord touched Jeremiah’s mouth and told him, “*I have put My words in your mouth*” (verse 9). God did the same for Isaiah too. Notice then the ministry that the Lord gave Jeremiah. Six activities are mentioned here – *plucking up, breaking down, destroying, overthrowing, building and planting* (1:10). Four of these were negative and two – building and planting – were positive. Jeremiah had to tear down the old structure first and then put up God’s structure. That is not an easy thing to do. It is much easier to build a building on an empty plot of land.

Christendom today is in very similar condition to what Judah was in those days. There are huge religious structures in Christendom today that are contrary to the Word of God. A prophet who comes with God’s word to such a situation will have to first pluck up, break down, destroy and overthrow many things before he can build and plant something of eternal value. It is this initial work with the bulldozer that many preachers are unwilling to do. They seek to “*stitch a patch of new cloth on an old garment*”. But the Lord says, “No. You have to throw away the old garment. You have to destroy the old structure completely and start afresh with something completely new” (Matt. 9:16). If you don’t do that, you will not be able to build what God wants you to build. The Lord went on to encourage Jeremiah saying, “*They will fight against you, but they won’t overcome you, for I am with you*” (1:19).

In *Chapters 2 to 45*, we find a number of prophecies addressed to Judah. Then in *Chapters 46 to 52*, we find many prophecies addressed to other nations. We will look at these only briefly – something like my putting in place a few pieces of a jigsaw puzzle. You can complete the rest of the puzzle yourself!

A Call to Repentance

Chapter 2:13: “My people have committed two evils.” The two evils God charged them with were: First of all, they left their God, the fountain of waters. And secondly, they made vessels – idols – that had holes in them and could hold no water at all.

In *Chapter 3*, Jeremiah speaks about adulterous Judah and backslidden Israel. Israel was the northern kingdom that had gone into captivity

100 years earlier. The main burden that Jeremiah and the other prophets of his time sought to communicate to the people of Judah was this: “Your sister Israel did not listen to their prophets and so God sent them into captivity. Have you learned a lesson from that?” Judah did not learn a lesson from that. They kept saying, “We are not like them. We are better. That won’t happen to us.”

What lesson does this have for us today? Protestant Christianity is divided into two groups mainly. One is the regular, mainline, denominational churches. We could liken them to the northern kingdom of Israel. Then we have small non-conformist groups that call themselves “*separated assemblies*”. When these groups separated themselves initially they did so with a good motive – to be separate from compromise and worldliness and to be a pure testimony for the Lord. But did they learn from the failures of the mainline denominations? No.

God said to Judah through Jeremiah, “Israel is better than you!” That is exactly what the Lord is saying to many of the “*separated assemblies*” and their leaders today: “Some of the leaders in those mainline denominations are better than you leaders in the so-called *separated assemblies*.” Why do these newer leaders not learn a lesson? Because they say the same thing that Judah said, “What happened to others will not happen to us!” And so the new groups also backslide and go the same way.

But the Lord said, “I will bring a remnant back here.” That was another burden that these prophets communicated: “A remnant will return from Babylon”. The remnant would be those who “*acknowledge their iniquity*” (3:13). The Lord said, “*I will take you one from a city and two from a family, and I will bring you to Zion*” (3:14). Zion here is a type of the true church of God. One mark of that church is that they have leaders who are “*shepherds after God’s own heart*” who feed God’s people with the knowledge of God and with an understanding of His ways (3:15). You can know that you have come to Zion when you have found leaders like that. And you can be sure that you haven’t found Zion when your church leaders are not like that. Godly leaders do not major on intelligence, but on compassion and love for God’s people. They do not exploit God’s people, they are not interested in people’s offerings but in their walk with the Lord.

Chapter 3:16, 17: “They will never say again, ‘The ark of the Lord,’ but they will talk about the throne of the Lord.” In other words, in Zion, they talk about the reality and not the symbols. This is the last time in the Old Testament that the ark of the Lord is mentioned. The Babylonian people took the ark away, and nobody has ever seen it since.

Chapter 4:3, 4: The Lord says to Judah, “Break up your fallow ground. Don’t sow among thorns. Circumcise yourselves to the Lord. Remove the

foreskins of your heart." That is a call to humble themselves, be broken, confess their sins and stop depending on human resources.

Chapter 4:19: "My soul, my soul, I am in anguish. My heart is pounding because I have heard the sound of the trumpet. The alarm of war." Jeremiah sensed that the armies of Babylon were coming soon to take Judah captive and that disturbed him greatly. Jeremiah had a great burden in his heart because he loved the people. That's why God made him a prophet. It is not enough that God touches our mouths to be His spokesmen to His people. He must also touch our heart so that we love them. Only then will we have a burden.

God then told Jeremiah something similar to what He told Abraham when Sodom was to be destroyed. Abraham had pleaded saying, "If there are ten people in Sodom will You spare the city?" God said, "Yes. If there are ten righteous people in Sodom, I'll spare that city" (*Genesis 18:32*). And here the Lord said to Jeremiah, "If you find one righteous person (not ten but one) anywhere in Jerusalem, I will pardon her." But Jeremiah could not find even one. Can you imagine the condition of a city that does not have even one righteous person in it!

Do you know that one righteous man in a church can bring the blessing of God upon that church? One righteous man can bring the blessing of God upon a fellowship and into a home. One righteous man plus God is a majority anywhere. Be righteous men and women and you will turn the tide against Satan wherever you go, for God will support you mightily.

Chapter 6:16: The Lord said, "*Stand by the ways and ask for the ancient paths, where the good way is.*" This is what the Lord is asking us to do even today. We must seek for the way that the apostles walked immediately after the day of Pentecost. That is "the good way." But the men of Judah said they would not walk in it.

Chapter 7: There had been a so-called revival under King Josiah, just before Jeremiah appeared on the scene. But it was a superficial revival – just like many "revivals" today – that had not changed the people. The Lord told Jeremiah, to stand at the entrance of the temple and to tell the people, "*Change your ways and don't trust in deceptive words saying, 'This is the temple of the Lord'*" (verse 4). In other words, "*God is not impressed with your religious language, if there is no change in your ways. If you steal, murder, commit adultery, tell lies and worship idols and then come and stand before the Lord in His house, and say, 'We are saved,' is it to do all these abominations?*" (verses 9, 10). Jesus quoted verse 11 saying: "*Has this house which is called by My Name become a den of robbers?*" (*Matthew 21:13*). Now, 2000 years later, God needs prophets who will stand in the church and say the same thing: "Are you going to live in sin in your private life, be unrighteous in financial matters, and then come

into God's house and say, 'We are saved, we are eternally secure as God's children?" That is hypocrisy. The condition of God's people today is the same as in Jeremiah's day.

We have already seen the two streams of *religiosity* and *spirituality* originating from the time of Cain and Abel. Here we see *religious* people having a so-called "revival" that does not deliver them from sin. Any revival that does not deliver people from sin is a superficial and worthless revival. These people were coming into the presence of the Lord and at the same time baking cakes to worship the queen of heaven as well (7:18). In Christendom today too, there are millions who worship one whom they call "*the queen of heaven*". This "*queen*" is patterned after that idol "*queen of heaven*" that was worshipped in Jeremiah's day. *There is no queen in heaven*. Jesus Christ is Lord there and He is all in all in heaven.

Jeremiah warned those people that if they went on playing the fool like this – then suddenly one day the harvest would be over and they would remain unsaved (8:20). That is a word that we need to proclaim to people today as well. The Lord has appointed a day when He will come to reap His harvest. Then it will be too late to respond to His word.

See how Jeremiah wept when he thought about this: *Chapter 9:1*: "*O that my head were waters and my eyes a fountain of tears that I might weep day and night for the slain of the daughter of my people.*" Though Jeremiah preached such hard words in public, he wept in private. *All true prophets weep in secret for the sins of God's people*.

Chapter 9:23–24: The Lord warns wise men and rich men here not to boast in their wisdom or their riches. The prophets always preached against people who were proud of their intelligence or their wealth. There is only one thing really worth boasting about, and that is to "*know the Lord*" personally. "*Eternal life is to know God and Jesus Christ*" (*John 17:3*).

Jeremiah's Conversations With God

Chapter 10:24: Jeremiah says, "*Correct me, O Lord, but not with Your anger lest You bring me to nothing.*" That is a good prayer for all of us to pray.

Chapter 13:17: Again Jeremiah weeps. He says, "*If you will not listen to my preaching, my soul will weep in secret for your pride. My eyes will bitterly weep and flow down with tears....*" Jeremiah is called "*the weeping prophet*". He was a strong, bold man in public; But in secret, he wept just like Jesus wept over Jerusalem when the people there did not repent. Jesus never wept in public except at the tomb of Lazarus. But He wept in secret. People weep only when they have a burden. If you don't have any concern for God's people you won't weep. You won't weep when somebody else's child is dying. You cry only when your own child is dying. Weeping arises out of concern and genuine love.

Jeremiah genuinely loved God's people. The Lord anoints and backs up only prophets like that.

Chapter 15:16–21: We see three conditions here to be a spokesman for God.

- *First of all:* “Lord, I found Your words, and Your word has become for me the joy and delight of my heart” (verse 16). God’s word must be the joy and delight of your heart. Just like a businessman has joy in making money, your joy must be in getting into God’s word. Many want to be preachers today, who do not spend time digging into God’s word, and who don’t look at God’s word as the joy and delight of their hearts.
- *Secondly:* “I did not sit in the circle of merrymakers” (verse 17). When other people in Judah were partying and having fun, Jeremiah went away by himself to be alone with God. If you don’t discipline yourself to stay away from the jokers of this world, you can never be a spokesman for God. I am not saying that humour and clean jokes are wrong. But many Christians don’t know where to stop in such matters – they are perpetual jokers. Jeremiah made sure that he didn’t spend time with such people.
- *Thirdly:* Jeremiah made a complaint to God in verse 18 saying, “Lord, why have You let me down? You have been to me like a deceptive stream, like unreliable water. I come to the stream thinking there is water there and there is none. You have let me down.” The Lord said, “Don’t ever say things like that to Me.” the Lord rebuked Jeremiah for speaking words of unbelief (verse 19). God never lets us down. He is not like an unreliable stream. Jeremiah was depending on his feelings and looking at his circumstances. The Lord told him, “If you return to Me, and get rid of the habit of speaking worthless words (like the ones you just spoke – idle, useless words and words of unbelief) and ensure that you speak only precious words (of faith and goodness), then you will be My mouthpiece.”

How many of you want to be God’s mouthpiece? I am not talking about being a preacher of dead sermons that come from some book you read, but being God’s spokesman. If you want to be that, then don’t waste time in useless company, but redeem your time and spend it digging into God’s Word. Let that be your delight. Get rid of useless conversation and speak words of faith always and only good words in all your conversation. Then the Lord will make you *His mouth*. There is no partiality with God.

Then the Lord told Jeremiah: “You must never go back to them. You must influence them. Don’t let them ever influence you” (15:19 - Living). Don’t let the world influence you; and don’t let corrupt Christendom influence you. Don’t let backslidden pastors and money-loving preachers influence you. Let God influence you – and then influence others towards

godliness. God's promise is that He will make us "*a fortified wall of bronze such that people will not be able to prevail over us*" (15:20). Hallelujah!

There is a heavy price to be paid to be God's servant. In Jeremiah's case, part of that price was that he was to remain unmarried all his life. The Lord told him "*You must not take a wife or have sons and daughters in this place*" (16:2). Some like Paul and Jeremiah are called to a single life by God. They must be willing to accept that calling. Jeremiah was not even permitted to go into a house of mourning or into a house of feasting (16:5, 8). Prophets had to discipline their eating habits if they were to serve the Lord. Can you imagine what people said about Jeremiah? They must have remarked that he was a very unsocial person. He was an outcast in society because he didn't have time to fool around like other people. He had to wait before God to get His message. Many people don't want to pay that price but still want to be God's spokesmen. Such preachers not only don't do any good to God's people, they do a lot of harm.

Chapter 17:5–8 is a very blessed passage that tells us about trusting in the Lord and trusting in men. The Lord spoke through Jeremiah and to His people, "*Cursed is the man who leans upon the arm of flesh. But blessed is the man who trusts in the Lord. He will be like a tree planted by the rivers of water. He will always bring forth fruit.*" To trust in the Lord means to depend on the Lord fully, to lean upon Him, and not to trust in our own abilities or in any human source for help. God often uses men to help us but He wants us to *depend* only on Him. Such a man of faith will always produce fruit in his life. He will never be dry. He will always be fresh, any time you meet him, because his inner life is drawing water from the river of the Holy Spirit.

In *Chapter 17:21–24*, Jeremiah rebukes those greedy people who worked on the Sabbath day in order to make more money.

Chapter 18: The Lord taught Jeremiah some lessons in a potter's house, from the way the potter made a vessel out of clay. When the vessel was spoilt, he made another vessel with the clay. This was a word of encouragement to Judah. The Lord could do that with them, even when they had backslidden. And the Lord can do that for you too. Maybe your life has been spoilt because you did not respond to the Lord. Do you feel there is no hope for you? Read *Jeremiah 18*. There is hope for you. The Lord can still make you a vessel for His glory, if He can succeed in humbling you. Why was that vessel spoilt in the potter's house? Because there were some hard lumps of clay there that wouldn't allow the potter to crush it. If you allow God to break your hardness and pride, He can still make you a vessel for His glory.

Chapter 20:7–11: Here Jeremiah complains saying, "*Lord, You have never allowed me to speak a kind word to these people. It is always judgment, judgment*" (Living). Many like to get a reputation as being balanced in their preaching. That may be all right for teachers. But no prophet was ever balanced. The prophets were all imbalanced in their ministry.

They had a message from God and they kept on preaching the same message forever. Jeremiah preached the same message of judgement for 40 years. In the Body of Christ too, God raises up prophets who have a particular burden. Other Christians may not have that burden. But the Lord gives a prophet very often a single burden. Then he must be true to that if he wants to remain the Lord's prophet, and not allow other well-meaning Christians to divert him into a more "balanced" ministry. The day he succumbs to that pressure and becomes "balanced", he will cease to be God's prophet to his generation. God gave Jeremiah a single message of judgement without one kind word to the people of Judah. And for 40 years he faithfully stuck to that task – and he was God's spokesman until the end.

Many people tried to destroy him and denounced him (20:10). Even his close friends waited for his downfall. But Jeremiah was confident that the Lord would stand with him as a Great Warrior and that his persecutors would therefore stumble and fall and would not prevail against him and would end up in everlasting disgrace (20:11). The Lord stood by Jeremiah according to his faith and that was exactly what happened. That is how the Lord protects His prophets.

Christ and the New Covenant

Chapter 23:5, 6: Here we see Jeremiah prophesying about the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ who is called here '*the Righteous Branch*' and '*the Lord our righteousness*.' This title refers to the Lord as the One Who justifies us by imputing His righteousness to us. It is a new-covenant title – and Jeremiah prophesied quite a bit about the new covenant. This chapter is also a wonderful chapter for all preachers to read, because there are many warnings given here for them to take heed to. False prophets are exposed and denounced here. They were false prophets because they did not take time to listen to what God was saying (23:18). They were too lazy to stand before God and wait for His Word. There are many false prophets moving around in Christendom today, who seek honour and money for themselves. They prophesied falsely about imaginary dreams they claim to have dreamt. Jeremiah warns the people not to listen to them. They invented their own messages and spoke them saying "*Thus says the Lord*". But the Lord hadn't spoken to them. There are numerous people carelessly using that phrase even today. It is very dangerous to get up and say, "*Thus says the Lord*", when you are not sure whether God has really spoken. People who have no fear of God whatsoever use that phrase today and say whatever comes into their mind. This is dangerous and evil. I would recommend that all such people read this chapter and learn to fear God. God does speak. But he speaks through humble people like Paul who said, "*I think I have the Spirit of God*" (1 Corinthians 7:40) – and not through people who arrogantly say, "*Thus says the Lord*". Beware of

such false prophets – for there are thousands of them in Christendom today. God says that His word is like a fire and a hammer (23:29). Why are the words of so many preachers unable to break the hard hearts of people and set them on fire? Because their words did not come from the Lord.

Chapter 25:3: This is midway through Jeremiah's ministry. He says that for 23 years he had prophesied, but the people of Judah had not listened. But he still continued to prophesy faithfully that Judah would go into captivity for 70 years – and they did.

In *Chapter 26:20–24*, we see something of the sovereignty of God. There was another prophet named Uriah at that time, who was not so well known. He also prophesied the same message as Jeremiah did. When the king heard of it, he tried to kill that man (*verse 21*). Uriah heard of this and ran off to Egypt. But King Jehoiakim sent people to get him from Egypt and they caught Uriah and brought him before the king – and the king killed him. But God sovereignly protected Jeremiah. “*Ahikam, the king's secretary stood with Jeremiah and persuaded the court not to turn him over to the mob to kill him.*” (26:24 - Living). Both these prophets were preaching the same message faithfully. One was killed and the other escaped. This is something like what happened to James and Peter. James was killed but Peter was freed (*Acts 12*). We may wonder why, at times, God permits one faithful servant of His to be killed and another to escape! This is because God has a different plan for each person. God's planned ministry for Uriah was over. God's plan for Jeremiah's ministry was not. What we learn from this is that if you are a faithful servant of God, you don't have to worry when people are trying to kill you. If God's time has not yet come for you, He will preserve your life in one way or the other! You cannot be killed before God's time. God gave Jeremiah favour with the king's secretary and he saved Jeremiah's life. The God of Jeremiah is our God too – and He will do the same for us as well! Hallelujah!

In *Chapters 29–33* we read about the restoration of Israel in the future and about the new covenant. The people of Judah would be in captivity for 70 years (29:10). This is the prophecy that Daniel read and was stirred by (*Daniel 9:2, 3*). And Daniel did what Jeremiah commanded in the following verses (29:11–14). The Lord said, “*You will seek Me and find Me when you search for Me with all your heart*” (*verse 13*). The movement of God's people from Babylon to Jerusalem began when God found a man who sought Him with all his heart (*Daniel*). And the movement of God's people today from spiritual Babylon to the spiritual Jerusalem (the true church) will also begin when God finds people who seek Him with all their hearts. Those who don't seek God wholeheartedly will never find Him for He is a Rewarder only of those who diligently seek Him (*Hebrews 11:6* - KJV). Jeremiah then named some of the false prophets and warned God's people not to listen to them (29:21–32). He was not afraid of naming the false prophets.

Chapter 31:3: Here is a beautiful word from the Lord to encourage us: “*I have loved you with an everlasting love. Therefore I have drawn you with loving-kindness.*” He draws us to Himself not because we deserve anything, but only because of His everlasting, unchanging love for us.

Chapter 32: Here we read of Jeremiah being imprisoned by the order of King Zedekiah. While he was in jail, the Lord told Jeremiah to buy a plot of land in his hometown. This was an act to demonstrate his faith in what the Lord had prophesied through him. Humanly speaking, it is the most foolish thing to do to buy a plot of land when a war is about to start and you know that the enemy is going to occupy the whole land. But Jeremiah bought this land with his own money to prove to the people that 70 years later God’s people would come back and in that day his relatives would be able to occupy this bit of land. He put his money down on something that would last after the period of judgement was over. This is similar to our putting our lives and our money down for God’s work when we gain nothing in this world by doing so. Humanly speaking, that is foolish. No shrewd businessman will put his money down for something that does not give him some earthly gain. But we do so, believing that we are going to reap eternal returns from our actions. Jeremiah expressed that faith in these words, “*Lord, nothing is impossible for you*” (32:17). He said that in relation to the purchase of this property. And the Lord answered him saying, “*I am the Lord, God of all flesh. Is anything too difficult for Me?*” (32:27). We sing those words in a chorus frequently, but I wonder if we are willing to act as Jeremiah did.

In *Chapter 33:3*, we see another wonderful promise of God: “*Call unto Me and I will answer you. I will show you great and mighty things that you don’t know of.*” What an invitation! We have to call upon God, if we are to experience the miracles that these prophets experienced. In 33:15, 16, we see yet another prophecy concerning the coming of Christ.

The Fall of Jerusalem and Thereafter

In *Chapters 34–45*, we read about the fall of Jerusalem. Jerusalem fell to the Babylonians. In the midst of that, we read a beautiful story about the Rechabite family (*Chapter 35*). The Lord told Jeremiah to call the Rechabite family into the temple and to offer them wine to drink. When he did that, these Rechabites said that they would not drink it!! They said that for generations their forefathers had told their family never to drink wine and they had obeyed that command for 200 years. What amazing obedience! The Lord then said to Jeremiah, “Here is a family that is faithful to their fathers in obeying their word. But Judah does not listen to Me.” The Lord then promised the family of the Rechabites that they would always have the privilege of standing before Him (35:19). Even today, in the midst of many backsliders in Christendom, you will find one family like that standing true to God. Praise God for such families that have been brought up in godly ways by their parents.

In *Chapter 36* Jeremiah was asked for the first time to write down something. The Lord told him, “*Take a scroll and write this down*” (verse 2). It is good for us also at times, to write down what the Lord speaks to us – for so often we forget them. When the king heard about that scroll, he ordered it brought to him. As soon as he heard a small portion of it, he got angry and cut it into pieces and threw it in the fire (36:22, 23). What did Jeremiah do then? (Remember that what the king destroyed was the book of Jeremiah that we have in the Bible today.) “*Then Jeremiah took another scroll and dictated again to Baruch all he had written before, only this time the Lord added a lot more*”!! (36:32 - Living). That is why we have 52 chapters in Jeremiah! If the king hadn’t torn up the first scroll, we may perhaps have had only 36 chapters in the book of Jeremiah! That is how God turns the tables on Satan!!

In *Chapter 38*, we read of Jeremiah being thrown into a well full of quicksand, because he was preaching that Babylon would come and capture Judah – and the king and his officials did not like to hear that. Jeremiah sank into the mud and would have died soon. But again we see the sovereignty of God preserving the life of His servant. An African man named Ebed-melech went and spoke to the king and asked for permission to pull Jeremiah out of the pit and pulled him out and saved his life (38:6–13). God has his agents in the most unlikely places whom He uses to serve His faithful servants. And because Ebed-melech helped Jeremiah, God promised him that when the people were captured, he would escape (39:16–18). God will not forget even a cup of cold water given to help His servants.

Chapter 39:11–14: When Nebuchadnezzar came to Jerusalem, he heard about Jeremiah and gave orders to his captain to look after him, and not to harm him in any way, but to do for him “*whatever he wants*”. It is amazing to see how God gave His servant favour even before the world’s most powerful ruler of that time. God is the same today and He will do the same for His servants today as well. So Nebuzaradan, the captain, told Jeremiah, “*I am freeing you. If you want to come with us to Babylon, I’ll look after you and treat you well. But if you don’t want to come, you can go wherever you like*” (40:4). That heathen man appreciated God’s prophet more than the people of Judah did. The Greeks in Jesus’ day were eager to see Him, while the Jews crucified Him (John 12:20, 21). It has been like that throughout these 20 centuries. Christians have not appreciated sufficiently the prophets whom God has sent into their midst.

Jeremiah could have lived a comfortable life in Babylon. But he chose not to go, and stayed with the despised people of Judah. Later on, when they were planning to go to Egypt they told Jeremiah to find out God’s will for them, promising to obey whatever God said. When Jeremiah told them that the Lord wanted them to stay in Judah and not to go to Egypt, they turned around and told him that God was not speaking through him (*Chapters 42, 43*). There we see the stubbornness of man who wants

preachers to preach whatever they like to hear. The people disobeyed God and went to Egypt and took Jeremiah with them. There Jeremiah prophesied against the temples of Egypt and he prophesied again to the Jews in Egypt. After that we don't hear about him at all (*Chapters 43, 44*).

Baruch was the man who was writing down these prophecies of Jeremiah. The Lord then gave Baruch a warning through Jeremiah – a warning that we can all well apply to ourselves: "*Are you seeking great things for yourself? Do not seek them*" (45:5). We must not seek honour for ourselves in our ministry. Our calling is to be despised and rejected as our Master was. People like Nebuchadnezzar may appreciate us, but most of God's people will never appreciate His true prophets.

In *Chapters 46–51*, we read a number of prophecies of judgement that the Lord gave Jeremiah against a number of nations that surrounded Judah – including Babylon the world's super-power, that had been so kind to Jeremiah. A true prophet speaks the truth without fear or favour.

In *Chapter 48:10* (AMP), we read, "*Cursed be he who does the work of the Lord negligently, with slackness and deceitfully; and cursed be he who keeps back his sword (tongue) from executing (proclaiming) the judgment pronounced by the Lord*". That is a warning that all of us should take heed to.

Chapter 48:11 describes a person who "*has been at ease from his youth, who has never been poured from one vessel to another and whose (selfish) scent has therefore not changed.*" Many young people are like that. God is unable to break them in their younger days and so their scent never changes. They remain hard and stubborn and useless to God.

Finally, in *Chapter 52*, we read about the fall of Jerusalem.

Thus ends this marvellous book of a prophet who faithfully preached an unpopular message to God's people without ever wavering for 40 years. He was a failure in man's eyes but a tremendous success in God's eyes.

May the Lord raise up many men like Jeremiah today.

LAMENTATIONS

THE WEEPING PROPHET

Lamentations is the book that contains the lamentations of Jeremiah. The Hebrew alphabet has 22 letters in it, and in this book, the first four chapters are written like a poem with the verses beginning with different letters of the Hebrew alphabet. *Psalm 119* and *Proverbs 31:10–31* are other examples of this style of writing.

This book is the funeral song for Jerusalem. Jeremiah was weeping. He was lamenting that the streets of Jerusalem once bustling with people (1:1), now sat like a widow broken with grief and alone in her mourning. He identified himself with his people – and that is one of the important things we need to see in this book.

The Sad State of God's People

Chapter 1:9: The people of Jerusalem defiled themselves with immorality with no thought of the punishment that would follow, like many of God's people are doing today. They sin, not realising that one day they will have to answer to God for every single sin they ever committed.

Chapter 1:14: Here is how Jeremiah graphically describes the way the Lord judged Jerusalem. “*The Lord took the sins of Jerusalem, wove them into a rope, and hitched that rope to a yoke of slavery. He sapped their strength and gave them to their enemies*” (Living). It was their own sins that formed the rope that tied them to their captors.

Chapter 2:7: “*The Lord has rejected His altar. He despises the false “worship” of His people. He has given them to their enemies.*” The Lord despises the false worship found in Christian churches today, when there is sin in the camp. The leaders themselves are living in sin. And so He has allowed His people to be enslaved by Satan.

Chapter 2:9: “The law is no more and her prophets find no vision from the Lord”. This also is the condition we find in Christendom today.

Chapter 2:11, 12: Jeremiah says that he has wept until he could weep no more. *“I have cried until the tears no longer come. My heart is broken. Little children and tiny babies are dying in the streets. ‘Mama, we want food,’ they cry, and they collapse upon their mothers’ breasts”* (Living). God’s servants today must weep for the poor, innocent people who are being exploited by corrupt Christian leaders, and for the young people who are being led astray by the bad examples of their leaders. We must stand against the wretched state of affairs in Christendom today.

Chapter 2:14: “Your ‘prophets’ have said so many foolish things false to the core. They have not tried to hold you back from slavery by pointing out your sins. They lied and said that all was well” (Living). What an apt description of the state of affairs in many churches today.

Chapter 2:19: And so Jeremiah exhorts the people, *“Rise in the night and cry to your God. Pour out your hearts like water to the Lord. Lift up your hands to Him. Plead for your children”* – a good exhortation for us today as well.

Chapter 3:22, 23: “The Lord’s loving-kindnesses never cease. His mercies are new every morning. Great is His faithfulness.” The phrase *“His mercies are new every morning”* means that every morning God looks at us as though we had never sinned before – if we have repented of all our past sins and confessed them to Him. He does not remember our sins any more. That is why He can look on us with *new* mercies every day. We must forgive others in the same way as God has forgiven us, and look on them with new mercies every day, not holding their past against them.

There is a good word for all young people in *Chapter 3:27–33: “Submit to the yoke of discipline when you are young. Humble yourself under the authorities God places over you. Put your face in the dust and then there will be hope for you. When people strike you, turn the other cheek.* (Jeremiah said that before Jesus did) *For the Lord, even though He brings grief will also show you compassion.”*

A Call to Return to the Lord

Here is another good word for all of us in *Chapter 3:40: “Let us test and examine our ways and let us turn again in repentance to the Lord.”*

Jeremiah describes how the Lord protected him from his enemies: *“My enemies whom I have never harmed, chased me. But I called upon Your Name, O Lord, and You heard me. You came and told me not to fear. O Lord, You are my Lawyer. Plead my case. Be my Judge to prove me right”* (3:52–59). These words are an encouragement to us too to assure

us that the Lord will be our Lawyer and Judge to defend us from our enemies.

Chapter 4:2: Children of God who were worth their weight in gold once, have now become like earthen pots.

Chapter 5:21: “*Restore us, O Lord, and bring us back to You again. Renew us as in the days of old.*” Jeremiah was a man who not only preached to the people but also had a deep concern for their backslidden state in his heart. It is easy to get up and criticise people in our preaching. But what made Jeremiah great was his weeping behind the scenes for them, his concern and his burden. He rose up at night and prayed to God for them. I want to say this to all of you: If you want to serve the Lord, you must have a secret life like that before God. You must be concerned that the name of the Lord Jesus Christ is being dishonoured in India today. If you weep before the Lord and cry out to him in the night hours because of your concern, you will find that He stands with you when you stand to proclaim His word in the pulpit.

EZEKIEL

THE DEPARTURE AND RETURN OF GOD'S GLORY

Ezekiel was a man who was greatly influenced by Jeremiah. He was in Babylon for at least 25 years. God had tried for more than 40 years, through Jeremiah, to save the people of Judah from having to go to Babylon as a punishment. But they had not listened to Him. Finally, the Lord said, "The best thing for you now is to accept My chastening. You have to be punished. Submit to the king of Babylon and go to Babylon joyfully."

God does not want to chasten us. Jesus *never* had to be chastened. Paul would never have needed a thorn in the flesh unless he was in danger of spiritual pride. Chastening becomes necessary only when God sees that we are going astray or have gone astray. When that happens, the best thing to do is to submit to His chastening.

So God said to Judah, "If you go to Babylon I will bless you there. Accept My chastening and discipline for 70 years." Some obeyed God immediately and went, like Daniel and his three friends – and they were the best of the captives. Some who sought their own in Judah were later forced to go to Babylon. But even in Babylon, God gave them two prophets – Ezekiel and Daniel. This shows God's great love for His people even when they are being disciplined or in a backslidden state. God does not forsake us then, but still sends His prophets to speak to us.

God's Unexpected Call to Be a Prophet

Ezekiel was the son of a priest who was training to be a priest (1:3). But when he was 30 years old, God suddenly called him to be a prophet (1:1).

We may plan for a certain ministry, but God may call us to something totally different. And then, we must be willing, like Ezekiel, to drop everything and to accept whatever God calls us to.

The life of a priest is actually much safer than that of a prophet's. Priests were not usually killed but the prophets invariably were. A prophet also has a very tough time, because not only does he suffer at the hands of the people, but God's hand also is heavy on him most of the time. Ezekiel would not have undergone all that, if he had been a priest. There are certain ministries in God's kingdom that involve more suffering than others. The Lord told Peter, "When you are old, someone will take you where you won't like to go" – indicating how Peter would suffer for the faith. But Peter immediately, pointing to John, asked the Lord, "What about him? Will he also suffer like me?" But the Lord replied, "That is none of your business. You just follow Me." (*John 21:18–23*). If God calls you to a ministry which involves suffering, don't look at anybody else. Don't worry about whether they have an easy time or not. That is none of your business.

Ezekiel responded immediately. Thank God he responded. If he had not responded we might never have heard of him. If Hudson Taylor had not responded when God called him to go to China, if C.T. Studd had not responded when God called him to go to Africa, if Jim Elliot had not responded when God called him to go to South America, we might never have heard of these men. But they responded as soon as God called them.

The thirtieth year seems to be a very significant time in people's lives – both in the Old and New Testaments. Joseph was 30 when he became ruler in Egypt. David was 30 when he became king. Jesus was 30 when He began His earthly ministry. Most of the apostles were around 30 when they began their ministry. And Ezekiel too was 30 when he began his ministry. Even today, it is probably around that age that God wants to begin to lead his children into the specific ministry that He has for them. But prior to that date, God has to spend many years in preparing us for that specific ministry. If you surrender to God totally and allow Him to prepare you during your teens and twenties, then you can be ready by the time you are 30 (or 35), for that specific ministry that God has planned for you. But a lot of young people are impatient and unwilling to wait. I am not saying that you cannot go out and serve God before you are 30 years old. You can start serving God even when you are 16. But in your early years, God has to keep you under authority in order to guide you and protect you. But many young people chafe under such submission to authority and, as a result, are never broken and prepared for the ministry that God has planned for them. Even Jesus needed that training to submit to Joseph and Mary for 30 years before He entered into His ministry. How much more we? Ezekiel must have submitted to Jeremiah, in his younger days. He must have listened to Jeremiah's

prophecies and studied them as a youth. God Who saw the faithfulness of this young man, decided that Ezekiel would be a prophet and not a priest.

One day, God opened the heavens over Ezekiel and gave him visions of Himself and a message for His people. “*On the fifth of the month in the fifth year of King Jehoiachin’s exile, the word of the LORD came expressly to Ezekiel*” (1:2, 3). God wants to speak to us all the time. But because of the limitations of our mind and its warping (caused by sin), we can hear His voice *clearly* only occasionally. Jesus was the only Person Who heard His Father speaking to Him continuously *and clearly*. Even the apostle Paul says in one of his letters that he was not sure whether what he was writing was from the Holy Spirit or not (*1 Corinthians 7:12, 25, 40*).

Nine times in his book Ezekiel records the date when God said something specifically to Him (1:2, 3; 24:1; 26:1; 29:1, 17; 30:20; 31:1; 32:1, 17). It is good for us also to record the dates when God speaks something clearly to us. I have a written record with dates, of a number of statements that the Lord spoke to me specifically in my life. I look through them now and then to remind myself of what the Lord told me.

“*The hand of the Lord came upon him*” (1:3) is an expression that occurs seven times in Ezekiel. It meant that Ezekiel could not do what he wanted to do. It was like God saying to him, “Now, you have to go where I want you to go.” We can all live like this all our lives, if we want to, with the heavens open over us all the time. That will be easy, if you allow the hand of the Lord to be upon you, if you keep your conscience clean, if you humble yourself and fear of the Lord! At times, we are told that when the hand of the Lord was upon him, Ezekiel went “*in the rage of his spirit*” (3:14). He did not *feel like* going, but he went because he had submitted his life totally to God.

A true servant of God does not live *by his feelings*. It’s not a question of whether he *feels like* going, when God calls him to go. Those who serve themselves live by their feelings. But those who serve God go whether they feel like going or not. They move because the hand of the Lord is upon them.

Ezekiel's Visions

Ezekiel then describes the vision that he saw. Four living beings came out of the cloud, each having four faces – faces of a lion, an ox, an eagle and a man (1:5, 10). We don’t know exactly what these meant to Ezekiel, but we see something similar in the book of *Revelation*. These faces could refer to character-traits that should be found in all of God’s servants – the lion symbolising authority; the ox symbolising service; the eagle symbolising heavenly-mindedness; and the man’s face

symbolising compassion. These are all characteristics that need to be found in all of God's servants.

Then Ezekiel saw some wheels within wheels on the earth that moved in the same direction as the spirit of these four living beings (1:15–20). Each wheel had a second wheel within it that turned crosswise, like a gyroscope. These wheels are a picture of the sovereign working of God in the circumstances that we come across on earth – circumstances that seem to go in one direction sometimes and in another direction at other times. These circumstances may appear to us to be haphazard and unrelated, but God is sovereignly working in all of them to fulfil His purposes. The Holy Spirit controls the circumstances of our life. The total and absolute sovereignty of God over all circumstances on earth (whether the wheels are going north, south, east or west) is one of the most important things that we need to believe in, in these last days. Wherever you go, you will find the sovereign working of our God – whether in the north, the south, the east or the west. Notice too the obedience of these living beings – “*they ran like bolts of lightning*” (1:14).

Jesus told us to make disciples in all nations based on His absolute authority: “*All authority in heaven and earth is given to Me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations*” (Matthew 28:18, 19). Today that has been changed by preachers to read, “*People are dying in sin. Therefore go into all nations.*” But that is not what Jesus said and that is one of the main reasons for a lot of shallow evangelism. It is on the basis of Christ’s total authority that we must go. For example, if someone like me (who has a teaching ministry) feels that there is a great need for a teaching ministry in many places and therefore decides to go here, there and everywhere teaching Christians, I will very soon become a nervous wreck like many other Christian workers. But I don’t do that. I say, “Lord, You have authority in all heaven and earth. You have told me to go and make disciples. I’ll do that – *but tell me where to go.*” In other words, I operate under His authority. That is the way to serve the Lord. Then you find that all your circumstances work only for your very best. But if you wander everywhere, doing whatever you like to do, you may find that many things do *not* work for your good. God’s perfect plan will *not* be fulfilled in your life. So what we see here is a picture of a life led by the Spirit. That is the truly spiritual life. It speaks of the rims of the wheels being “*full of eyes*”. This speaks of “*the eyes of the Lord moving to and fro throughout the whole earth supporting His wholehearted servants*” (2 Chronicles 16:9).

Chapter 1:26–28: Ezekiel then saw a figure on a throne surrounded by a radiance like a rainbow shining through the clouds. The rainbow symbolises God’s covenant. There are two things that we must always remember when we serve the Lord – one is God’s sovereignty over all circumstances and the other is God’s covenant with us through Christ. God has made an everlasting covenant with us through the blood of His Son. He has promised us, “*I will never leave you nor forsake you*”

(*Hebrews 13:5*). That is the basis on which we go forward to serve Him. We don't go on the basis of human need, although we look at it. We don't live in fear of human governments or their rules and regulations. We move forward under the sovereignty of God, believing that we are His covenant people. It is so important in these days to remember these fundamental principles.

A Man Under Authority

Chapter 2: What we see here is a man who is totally under God's authority. The Lord said to him, "Stand up. I want to speak to you." The Spirit came into him as God spoke and set Ezekiel on his feet. The Lord said, "Listen carefully. I am sending you to the nation of Israel." As we wait upon God, though we may not hear an audible voice like Ezekiel did, it is possible to have just as real and as certain a sense of calling and a sense of God sending us as Ezekiel had. It may take time. When I started my ministry, I did not know immediately what my ministry was going to be. But as the years went by I began to discover what it was. Now as I look back, I find fulfilment. But I know so many people who have tried to drag me away from the ministry God had called me to. The Lord says, "I am sending you with a particular ministry." It is very important that you learn to wait upon God and hear what God is speaking to you and what He has called you for. Sometimes you can choose God's second best. I remember a time, more than 40 years ago, when my wife and I were in a lot of financial difficulty, having very little money, a Christian organisation invited me to be its director, and offered me a good salary, a free car, free telephone, free house, etc. if I accepted their offer. It was a rich American organisation ministering the gospel in India. I said, "No. I can't do that because even though I am in need, God has not called me to sit behind a desk and be an administrator. God has called me to go around preaching the Word." I am so thankful that I did not accept their offer. It was a temptation – not a temptation to sin, but to choose something God had *not* called me to. When I look back now, I can see that if I had accepted their offer, I may still have been engaged in Christian ministry, but *not* in the ministry that God had planned for me. So from these examples of the servants of God in the Bible that we have been considering, I want you to realise that God has a specific task for you. It is wonderful to realise that truth when you are young. Wait on the Lord and say, "Lord, show me Your perfect plan for me." It won't become clear in one day. But over a period of years, it will become clearer and clearer. And as it becomes clear to you, stick to it at any cost – and you won't have any regret when you stand before the Lord in the final day.

The Lord then told Ezekiel some things that are very important for those who are called to a preaching ministry to remember. The first thing God said was, "*Don't be afraid of them*" (2:6). This word occurs very

frequently: “*Don’t be afraid even though their threats are sharp as thorns, barbed like briars, and even though their threats sting like scorpions. Don’t be dismayed by the dark scowls on their faces.*” (2:6). Israel scowled at Ezekiel when he prophesied, and threatened to kill him. Every prophet has faced such opposition. But God stood by those prophets and He will stand by you if your calling is to speak to people like this. The confidence of these prophets was in the sovereignty of God.

The Lord told Ezekiel, “*You must give them my messages whether they listen or not*” (2:7). Even if they don’t listen, they will recognise one day that a prophet had come to them. Once the message is given, the prophet’s responsibility is over. But if he didn’t give the message, then their blood would be on his hands.

In *Chapter 3*, the Lord told Ezekiel to eat the scroll He gave. The message which we give others must first be eaten and digested by us first. God’s Word was sweet as honey in his mouth. In the book of *Revelation* too, the Lord told John to first eat the scroll (*Revelation 10:9*). Only then were Ezekiel and John permitted to prophesy.

This is a fundamental principle in all ministry of the Word. The Word which God desires to speak to others through you He wants to speak to you first of all. God’s Word challenges preachers with questions such as: “*You who preach that one should not steal, do you steal?*” (*Romans 2:21*). When you speak evil about someone, you are stealing his reputation. Do you recognise that as stealing, or do you recognise only stealing money as stealing? “*You who preach that others should not commit adultery, do you commit adultery?*” Do you lust with your eyes? We must eat the scroll ourselves first, if God is to anoint our ministry. Most preachers today are preaching without first eating the scroll themselves. That is why their ministry is so dead and boring. If you want an effective ministry, eat the scroll first. The word of God is like a two-edged sword – the first edge must cut me, and only then can I use the other edge to cut others. If it doesn’t cut us first, we will be hard and unmerciful in our preaching to others. So eat the scroll.

Chapter 3:14: “The Spirit lifted me up and took me away and I went in bitterness and turmoil. The hand of the Lord upon me was strong.” Sometimes when the Lord tells us to go somewhere, we may not be as excited in our feelings about going, as at other times. There may be feelings of turmoil in our hearts. But we still obey and go. Paul speaks in *2 Corinthians 7:5* of “*conflicts without and fears within*” him. Paul had some fears; but he still went where he had to go. He didn’t go by his feelings. If we go by our feelings, we will never go where the Lord wants us to go. Many years ago, I was waiting at the railway station in Bangalore to take a train to go to a small town for a weekend of meetings. My children were all small and some of them were sick and my wife had to look after them all by herself. I wondered whether I should cancel my trip and go home to help my wife. The Lord spoke a word to me at that time that

was like a fresh revelation. He gave me freedom to make my own choice but said, “*Whatever you do, never take a decision on the basis of fear.*” I learned a lesson that day – never to move on the basis of fear. I didn’t go home. I took the train and went for my ministry. The Lord took care of my children. I entered into a solemn covenant with the Lord long ago. I told Him, “*Lord, You take care of my family, and I will take care of yours*” – and He has done a far better job than I have done.

I am not asking any of you to make such a covenant or to do what I did that night at the railway station. There may be times when you should stay at home and help your wife. But, *whatever decision you take, take it always in faith, and never out of fear.* There may be times, when in faith you may have to say, “I will trust God to take care of the ministry in that place. Right now it is more important for me to help my sick wife at home.” Then go home – and God will be with you. But there may also be times when the devil will try to frighten you and thus prevent you from fulfilling a ministry God has appointed for you. So don’t ever go by feelings. Remember that sometimes when the Spirit lifts us up and takes us away, we may have to go with turmoil in our hearts. But we still go!

Chapter 3:23: “So I got up and I saw the glory of the Lord just as I had seen it first. And I fell with face down in the dust.” Here is another important principle of ministry: *Put your face in the dust always.* Sometimes it is good to do that actually – physically. Lie down on the floor in your room before God and say, “Lord, this is where I rightfully belong. This is what I am – a nobody in your eyes.” We who stand in front of others and preach are in great danger because so many people admire us and exalt us. More than anybody else, we are the ones who need to get alone before the Lord frequently and to lie down flat before Him and recognise that we are nothing in His eyes.

God can take away our breath in a moment. He can take away our anointing in a moment. I fear to lose the anointing more than anything else in my life. I would rather lose all my money and all my health than lose the anointing of God upon my life. It is easy to lose the anointing by being a little careless with money or with our tongue or in some other small matter. When Ezekiel’s face was in the dust, the Spirit came into him and set him on his feet. There – in the dust before God – is where the Spirit will fall upon us. Let Him then lift us up and exalt us. Never exalt yourself.

Chapter 3:24–27: “He talked to me and said, ‘Go shut yourself in your house. There you will be bound with ropes so you cannot go among the people. I will make your tongue stick to the roof of your mouth so you won’t be able to speak. Whenever I give you a message I’ll loosen your tongue and let you speak. And then tell them, “This is what the Lord says.” Some will listen and some will ignore you. It doesn’t matter.’” It’s wonderful to live like this before God! When God tells us not to go, we don’t go. When He tells us not to speak, we don’t speak. The Lord will tell you when to

speak and when to keep quiet. Do you listen to the Holy Spirit, or do you listen to your reason? Reason may say that it is *always* right to speak; but he who listens to the Spirit knows that there is a time to speak and a time to be silent. Sometimes we are called to keep quiet. Jesus never said a word to Herod (*Luke 23:9*). Learn to live by the promptings of the Spirit. This is what we can learn from Ezekiel. He was a man who lived by the leading of the Holy Spirit.

Chapter 4: The Lord taught Ezekiel through a number of signs. He first asked him to make a clay tablet and then to lie down on one side for 390 days and then to lie down on the other side for 40 days. Ezekiel was to be an object lesson to the people of Judah who were in Babylon, showing them how God was punishing Jerusalem and the people of Israel and Judah. He was a living demonstration of his message.

The Lord asked him to do some strange things like cooking food with dung, shaving his head and beard, and keeping just a little bit of that hair with him, to show that only a few people in Israel would be saved (*4:12–15; 5:1–4*). If you become a prophet, you will have to forget about your good looks!! If God tells you to shave your head, you will have to shave your head. You can't say, "Well, Lord, that won't make me look nice." He had to cook his simple food on dung. It would have been far easier for Ezekiel if he had been a priest. But as a prophet, he had to be disciplined in his eating habits and disciplined about his appearance. He could not be bothered by what people thought about him. He had to please only God.

So don't ever complain about your appearance or your food to God, if you want to be His servant. Accept whatever God gives you and obey whatever He tells you to do. God has sovereignly determined every little thing in your life. When I was 23 years old, I was preaching God's word regularly. I had also started losing my hair at that time. I felt there must be some good reason why God allowed that. And as I thought about it, I found a reason. When people saw my receding hairline, they imagined me to be at least 30 years old – and so they were more prepared to listen to me, than if they had known that I was only 23! So I saw that God had a purpose even in something as small as that!

If you are totally sold out to God from your youth and say to Him, "Lord, I am not interested in my food or appearance or anything. I want to be filled with Your Holy Spirit and anointed to serve You. And I want to be true to that anointing until the end of my life. I don't want to follow the example of other preachers. I want to look at Jesus. And I want to look at the example of these prophets. I want to follow you wholeheartedly" – I can assure you that you will have a very exciting life. God Himself will teach you His word and speak to your heart. He will give you words to speak to other people. But you must be totally sold out to Him. You must have no ambition or desire on earth – for honour, or acceptance, or money, or anything. Everything you have must be God's, your body,

your time, your money, your family, everything. If you are willing to be like that, there is no limit to what God can do through you.

Why God's Glory Departed

Chapter 7:9: We see a title of the Lord here that many people may not like to hear: '*The Lord the Smiter*,' the One who punishes with judgement.

In *Chapter 8*, the Lord showed Ezekiel the idolatry that was going on inside the temple which was why He had forsaken Judah. God gave Ezekiel an insight into the secret sins that were going on in the midst of God's people. God will give a true prophet words to expose the secret sins among His people that others do not know about. In *1 Corinthians 14:24, 25*, we read of a church-meeting, where when people speak prophetically, a total stranger walks in and finds the secrets of his heart being revealed to him. And he falls on his face and acknowledges that God is in that meeting. This is how every church-meeting of ours should be. And all of us should covet to prophesy like that.

The people were worshipping idols and the women were weeping for the idol Tammuz which involved engaging in many filthy, licentious rites along with the heathen (8:14). And all this was being practiced in the temple. Much of this idolatry was not evident to people on the outside. Many people who look holy on the outside are quite filthy on the inside. The Lord was saying, "This is supposed to be My temple, and see what is going on inside." They were facing eastwards and worshipping the sun, just like many Christians today face east in order to say their prayers (8:16).

Chapter 9:3: Because of all this sin in God's house, the glory of God began to slowly depart from there. When the glory of God begins to depart from a person or a church, and the anointing, the freshness and the fire have gone, there is always a reason. Many preachers who had an anointing 20 years ago have lost it now. The anointing on our life should increase as we grow older. But with most of the preachers I have met in India, I have only seen it decrease. This is usually because they have corrupted themselves through the pursuit of money, or compromised in some other way, or begun to speak to please the people. God may have called many of you to serve Him. If so, then be faithful and don't let the glory depart from your ministry.

Chapter 9:4: Here is a word that we could apply to the church today, in this way: "*Walk through the churches and put a mark on the foreheads of those who weep and sigh because of the sins being committed in the church.*" If God were to send an angel today (as He did then) to put a mark on the forehead of those who are weeping because the name of Jesus is being dishonoured in the church, how many people would be marked? How concerned have you been that the name of Jesus is being dishonoured in India by Christians? That sacred Name is dishonoured in most

of the churches in our land – in churches of every denomination. Are we concerned about that? God marks out people who are concerned. And here the Lord said, “Kill all those who don’t have My mark.” Even today, all those who have no concern for the Lord’s Name will end up spiritually dead. *“Hallowed be Thy name,”* is the first prayer that the Lord taught us to pray. If you have a concern for that Name, then God can use you to fulfil His purposes.

As the angel began to kill people, the seventy elders were killed first! The elders who were supposed to be the leaders of God’s people were the ones who had the *least* concern of all. To whom much is given, much is required. So when judgement begins, it will always begin with the leaders in the church. The glory of God was departing because the leaders had failed. It is the same today.

Chapter 11:1: Again the Spirit lifted Ezekiel up and took him to another part of the Lord’s house and told him to prophesy. There he saw the glory of God finally leaving the city altogether. It is interesting to see how slowly the glory departed. The anointing of God departs from a person and a church *very slowly*. God does not act in haste. But when someone deliberately continues in sin, then God acts. The glory of God finally went to the Mount of Olives, on the east of Jerusalem (11:23). The glory had departed now. But one day it would come back as we see in *Chapter 43:1–4*. The Mount of Olives was where Jesus ascended to heaven from. One day, He will come back in glory and arrive on the same mount. In that day, the glory of God will fill the earth as the waters cover the sea. While Ezekiel was prophesying, one of the evil leaders named Pelatiah who had been *“devising sin and giving evil advice”* (11:2) suddenly fell down dead (11:13) – just like Ananias died in Acts 5.

Chapter 11:15–17 (Living): “*The remnant left in Jerusalem are saying about your brother exiles: ‘It is because they were so wicked that the Lord has deported them. Now the Lord has given us their land!’* But tell the exiles that the Lord God says: ‘*Although I have scattered you in the countries of the world, yet I will be a sanctuary to you for the time that you are there, and I will gather you back from the nations where you are scattered and give you the land of Israel again.*’” The people in Babylon were the ones who went there in obedience to God. The people in Jerusalem were the ones who had stayed back, disobeying the Lord. The Lord told Ezekiel to comfort the exiles with the promise of his presence and blessing. Those who disobey God may appear for a time to have many earthly comforts. But in the long run, it will be seen that only those who obey God are truly blessed. The people in Jerusalem thought, “Because the temple is in Jerusalem, God is here and he cannot be with those who have gone to Babylon.” Today also there are many Christians who have separated themselves from the mainline denominations (calling them ‘Babylon’) and have gathered together in *“separated assemblies”* imagining that they are the true ‘Jerusalem’. They also imagine that God is with them and not

with the other groups. But the tragedy is that God is with neither group, for there is just as much corruption in the so-called “separated assemblies” today, as there is in the dead denominations. Christians in both groups are pursuing after money, and there is just as much strife and church-politics in one group as in the other. God won’t be with you just because you came out of a dead religious system. No. He watches to see if you are humble and broken, whether you keep your conscience clear, and whether you are free from the love of money and earthly honour, etc.

False Prophets Denounced

Chapter 13:3: Here the Lord rebukes the false prophets who deceive the people with “visions” that they claim to have seen. Destruction is certain for such false prophets and false prophetesses (13:17). Then the Lord rebukes people who have *idols in their hearts* who come seeking to find God’s will through a prophet (14:1–3). False prophets will readily give advice to such people because they get paid for it!! God Himself deceives such false prophets to do so: “*If a prophet is deceived and gives a message anyway, it is because I the Lord have deceived that prophet*” (14:9). Why does God allow these false prophets to be deceived? 2 Thessalonians 2:10, 11 gives us the answer: *Because they do not love the truth so as to be saved from sin.* When God shows you your sin, if you are not willing to acknowledge it honestly and you don’t want to be saved from it, then God will allow you to be deceived. He will allow you to believe falsehoods, and thereafter you will live in a delusion for the rest of your life. This is what has happened to many Christians. If God asks you to apologise to someone (perhaps younger than you), and you don’t do what He says, you are in great danger of being deceived. God is a God of truth and when people don’t love the truth, He allows them to be deceived. This is a very serious warning to all who do not love the truth.

Chapter 14:14: Here God says that when a country sins against Him, “*even if Noah, Daniel and Job were there, they would only be able to save themselves.*” It is interesting to see that God could praise a young man like Daniel, even when Daniel was alive – for Daniel was in Babylon at that time!! And he was much younger than Ezekiel. What a humble man Ezekiel was to appreciate a much younger man. It’s very rare to find servants of God today who can appreciate godliness in a younger person.

Chapter 16 is a lovely chapter that pictures God’s love for us and can be looked at as symbolic of our salvation. God found us when we were in sin, unwashed and naked. He washed us, and clothed us with the righteousness of Christ and then married us. But we have often not been faithful to Him.

In 16:49, 50, God describes the real sins of Sodom that led to the destruction of that city (in *Genesis 19*). Most of us have always associated Sodom with sodomy (homosexuality) and other sexual sins. But sexual

sin was the ultimate result of a way of life. What was it that led them into such depths of evil? Here we are told that Sodom's sins were actually *pride, laziness, gluttony* (love of good food), and *neglecting the poor and needy*. That was why God wiped out that city. It is interesting to note that God does not even mention their sexual sin.

Sexual sin in Sodom was the result of their lazy, comfortable life-style. What can we learn from this? That there is a close connection between *pride* and sexual sin, between *laziness* and sexual sin, between *gluttony* and sexual sin, and between *lack of concern for other people* and sexual sin. Consider just these *four* areas. Many of you who are young have to admit that you are finding it very difficult to overcome your sexual passions. That is an extremely difficult area. But why not begin by overcoming in these four *easier* areas? You may find it easier then to overcome in the sexual area. Begin first of all, by humbling yourself in all situations. Avoid all arrogance. Then begin to be hard-working and diligent in whatever you do. Then try fasting – avoiding food – once in a while. And fourthly, begin to think a little more about the needs of people around you and see how you can help them. Try this prescription for one year and you may discover that overcoming your sexual passions becomes easier. We cannot overcome any sin without grace from God – but He gives His grace only to the humble; and He helps only those who are kind and helpful to others.

Chapter 18: There is a very important verse here that can help remove any confusion in our minds concerning “*generational curses*”. “*What do you mean by using this proverb ‘The fathers eat the sour grapes but the children’s teeth are set on edge’*” (18:2). The people were saying that some children were suffering because of the sins of their parents. That is believed even today by many non-Christians and by Christians too who do not know their Bibles. The false prophets in Israel were misinterpreting Exodus 20:5 and bringing people into bondage and painting a picture of an unrighteous God Who punished children for the sins of their ancestors. But the Lord replied to that by saying, “*You are surely not going to use this proverb in Israel any more. The soul who sins will die*” (18:3, 4). The Lord made this clear 2500 years ago. Yet, there are well-known Christian preachers today who teach that Christians can suffer because their ancestors worshipped idols or engaged in witchcraft. They say that a curse that was on someone's great grandfather can come down to him; and he will have to get rid of it by having it cast out. Such teaching is absolute nonsense!

When we give our lives totally to Christ, we are cut off from our ancestry (and the tree of “*Adam*”) and grafted into another tree – “*Christ*”. Whatever curses we may have inherited from our forefathers are broken

the moment we are grafted into Christ. Now there is no more curse for us, but only “*every spiritual blessing in heavenly places in Christ*” (*Galatians 3:13, 14; Ephesians 1:3*). If your great grandfather worshipped idols or practised witchcraft, that cannot affect you in any way, once you have surrendered your life to Christ. If, however, you have not given yourself totally to Christ, then anything can happen. But once you are truly grafted into Christ, there cannot be any curse on you. Christ cannot be cursed and you are a part of Him. Yet there are many Christians today who believe this false teaching that they can be cursed. Christ became a curse for us on the cross, so that the *blessing* of God might come upon us. It is true that the children of ungodly parents may suffer physically and materially, in many ways. If a man is a drunkard, his children may suffer because there isn’t enough money at home for their needs. But there won’t be any curse on the children because of the sins of their father. The children will not be punished for their father’s sins. Everyone is punished for his own sin. This is what the Lord made clear to Ezekiel. So don’t allow any preacher to frighten you or to bring you into bondage through false teaching.

In *Chapter 22:30*, the Lord says, “*I searched for a man among them who should build the wall and stand in the gap before Me for the land, but I found none.*” Even today the Lord is seeking for men and women who will build the wall of separation from the world in His church and who will stand in the gap (a gap caused by the distance between two of God’s children who cannot fellowship with each other) and pray for peace and fellowship to be restored.

In *Chapter 23*, we read about the apostasy of the two sister-nations Israel and Judah. Both became “*prostitutes*”. The older one (Israel) symbolises the mainline churches. The younger one (Judah) symbolises the “*separated assemblies*”. Both have become spiritual harlots. Both are backslidden. Just because you have changed your pattern of church government, and no longer have priests and bishops, does not mean that you have become spiritual. The new wineskin is different from the new wine. We must learn lessons from the failure of Judah who always said, “*We are better than Israel.*” Ultimately they ended up in the same pit of captivity that their sister fell into.

Chapter 24: Here we read of part of the price that Ezekiel had to pay for his ministry. His wife died suddenly. The Lord had told him, “*Your wife is going to die but you must not weep or shed any tears. Don’t accept any food brought to you by your consoling friends*” (*24:16, 17*). As a prophet, he was under the hand of God and had to obey. There are many legitimate things that others can do that prophets may not be allowed to do. If you are a servant of God you have to live by a totally different set of standards than the rest of the world.

One interesting thing we see here is the intimate, loving relationship that Ezekiel had with his wife. We can see this in the way God refers to her as, “*the desire of your eyes*”, “*your dearest treasure*”, “*your lovely wife*”, “*the delight of your life*”, and “*the person you love most*” (24:16 - in various translations). Ezekiel was not an ascetic, but a great lover of his wife, even though he was a prophet. Can you honestly say about your wife, “*She is the desire of my eyes, my dearest treasure, the delight of my life and the person I love the most.*” That is the way that all of us must look at our wives, at all times.

Judgement on the Nations

Chapter 26:2: Here we read of the city of Tyre rejoicing over the fall of Jerusalem. Tyre had been jealous of God’s blessing on Jerusalem, but now she rejoiced because Jerusalem’s destruction would mean greater business opportunities for Tyre and thus greater wealth for her too. So God warns Tyre that she is going to be destroyed too. This is a warning to all those who rejoice over the fall of others. “*Do not rejoice when your enemy falls*” (*Proverbs 24:17*).

In *Chapter 28:11–19*, we read of “*the ruler of Tyre*”. Satan is the ruler of all the heathen kings of earth and so he was the real ruler behind the human ruler of Tyre. In this chapter, we see God speaking at times to the human ruler of Tyre and at times to Satan who indwelt him. This is similar to what we do when dealing with a demon-possessed person – at times we speak to the person and at times to the demon that is possessing him. Here we read that Satan was first in the original garden of Eden (*verse 13*). This was the Eden that existed before the destruction of the earth mentioned in *Genesis 1:2*, and is different from the re-created Eden that we read of in *Genesis 3*. As the head of the angels, He was perfect in beauty, blameless in every way, wiser than Daniel and anointed when he was created (28:3, 12, 14, 15). But he became proud of his God-given abilities and immediately became the devil (28:17). We saw an earlier description of his fall in *Isaiah 14*. Pride is still his master-weapon with which he destroys men and women today.

In *Chapters 29 to 32*, we read a number of prophecies of judgement on Egypt and Pharaoh.

In *Chapters 33 to 39*, we read messages of hope for the future concerning the restoration of God’s people.

Chapter 33:1–16 speaks of a watchman’s responsibility to warn people about what he has heard from God and of the people’s responsibility to respond to God’s warnings.

Chapter 34 is a chapter that all who are shepherds and pastors of God’s people should read and meditate on, to be warned and challenged. God exposes here the carelessness, the greed and the self-seeking attitude of Israel’s shepherds – something that is alas true of many Christian

leaders and pastors today as well. The Lord finally says, “*I will feed My flock Myself*” (34:15). He then promises that we will “*be showers of blessing*” to others around us (34:26).

The New Covenant Life and the Church

Chapter 36:25–37 is a beautiful prophecy of new-covenant life. This is a description of the Christian life, as God intends it to be. He first promises to cleanse us thoroughly, removing all idols from our heart, and then to remove our hard heart and to replace it with a soft one, and then to put His Holy Spirit within us and then to *make us walk in His ways and cause us to obey His commandments* and thus to save us from all our uncleanness (36:25–29). But all this can happen only when we pray to God and ask Him to do it for us (36:37). If we don’t ask for this life, we won’t get it. And when we come into this glorious life, we “*will loathe ourselves in our own sight*” (36:31), as we think of our past life. This is one of the primary marks of a Spirit-filled man that he detests himself for all the sin he sees in his flesh and cries out saying, “*O wretched man that I am. I am the chief of sinners*” (*Romans 7:24; 1 Timothy 1:15*). A Spirit filled man does not see any sin in others before he sees the same sin within his own flesh and he loathes himself for it. The closer we get to God, the more aware we become of our own sin.

Chapter 37 is a parable of resurrection life. God took Ezekiel to a valley full of dry bones and told him first of all to prophesy to them. The Word of God went forth and the bones came together and flesh covered them. But they needed something more than just the Word of God – they needed the Holy Spirit’s power as well, just as we saw in *Genesis 1*. There we saw that it was the joint operation of the Word of God and the Holy Spirit that brought life out of death. It is the same here, and it is the same even today. When the Holy Spirit came upon these dead bodies, they stood up and immediately became a powerful army of soldiers for the Lord. This is a picture of what God wants to do in the church today. Many Christians are initially exactly like those dry bones, stiff and dead, despite the correctness of all their doctrines. As they respond to the Word of God, they begin to gather together as Christians (bone comes together to bone), and they begin to live decent lives (There is a certain amount of beauty when the flesh covers the bones). But there is one more thing that these Christians need if they are to be a mighty army for God. They need to be endued with the supernatural power of God’s Holy Spirit. That is the message of *Chapter 37*.

Chapters 38 and 39 speak of Gog, the ruler of Magog – the northern enemies of Israel who will attack Israel in the last days just before Christ returns and who will be defeated at the battle of Armageddon.

Chapters 40 to 48 are a picture of new-covenant life and of the church. This is pictorially described as a temple. Our body is the temple of the

Holy Spirit (*1 Corinthians 6:19*) and the church is also the temple of God (*1 Corinthians 3:16*). In *Chapter 43*, we read of the glory of God that had left the temple returning to the new temple – the new covenant church that was established from the day of Pentecost onwards. The Lord calls the church “*the place of My throne*” (*43:7*). The law for this new covenant church is described thus: “*Its entire area shall be Most Holy*” (*43:12*). In the old covenant temple, only a small room at its western end was called “*Most Holy*” – where God dwelt. But in the new covenant church, the *entire* church (temple) is Most Holy. To build the church as God’s temple today, we must follow this one fundamental law – absolute holiness for every member in it. Sin must *not* be tolerated in any form in anyone.

In *Chapter 44:9–19*, the Lord speaks of two types of ministers in His temple – symbolised by *the sons of Zadok* and the *Levites*. The sons of Zadok symbolise the wholehearted disciples of Christ who are permitted “*to minister to Him*”. The Levites symbolise the compromisers who are permitted only “*to minister to the people*”. There is a vast difference between these two types of ministries. Jesus never served the people *primarily*. All His service was done to the Father alone, even when He served people – and that is how we must serve God too. It is when we begin to serve the people that temptations to compromise and to please people enter in.

From such a holy temple (Spirit-filled church or Spirit-filled individual) a trickle of water begins to flow out that becomes a river and finally becomes many rivers (*Chapter 47*). This is the passage which Jesus quoted in *John 7:37–39*, where He spoke of “rivers of living water flowing out” from a man who is filled with the Holy Spirit. This is what began on the day of Pentecost and has been flowing through godly men and women ever since. This life begins as a little trickle before it becomes a big river and many rivers.

In *Chapter 47:3–6*, the Lord gave Ezekiel a little taste of what it means to live a Spirit-filled life. He led Ezekiel step by step into this river. After walking in it for about 500 metres the water reached Ezekiel’s ankles. After another 500 metres, it came up to his knees. After another 500 metres, the water came up to his waist. And after yet another 500 metres, it was so deep that Ezekiel had to lift his feet off the ground and be carried by the current of the river. We can go forward in our walk with God continuously as Ezekiel did; or we can stop at some point. God will never compel us to go further than we want to. When Elisha followed Elijah (*2 Kings 2*), he continually tested Elisha to see if he was hungry for more or satisfied with what he already had. Because Elisha was not satisfied until he got God’s best, he got a double portion of the anointing upon his life. We see Ezekiel also being tested here in a similar way. He also wanted to enter into the river more and more until he had entered into “*waters to swim in*”. You can experience a measure of the Holy Spirit’s workings in your life and still stop at some point that is less than God’s best.

Notice this also: When the water was up to Ezekiel's ankles, or up to his knees, or even up to his waist, his feet were still on the ground. But it is when our feet are taken off from the earth, that we know that we are really filled with the Spirit. At that point, we are "*detached from the earth and from earthly interests and from attachment to material things*" and we begin to be "*led by the Spirit, according to the will of God and not our own will*".

The last verse of the book (48:35) mentions the name of this new covenant church as, "*The Lord is there*" – Jehovah Shammah. This is the primary mark of a new-covenant church: *The Lord is present in its midst at every meeting – and people meet with Him and hear Him*. This is the church that you and I are called to build. But to build it, the Lord needs people like Ezekiel who will obey Him totally.

DANIEL

RESTORATION BEGINS WITH A MAN

Daniel is a book that has a special relevance for times of persecution. It shows us how a man of God should conduct himself in times of persecution.

We also see here the beginning of the movement from Babylon to Jerusalem – symbolically, from corrupt, compromising Christendom to God's new covenant church. It began with one upright, uncompromising man, who was concerned about God's purposes and who fasted and prayed for their fulfilment. Daniel never knew, when he started out being faithful as a young man, what a tremendous ministry he was going to have. He just remained faithful to God in little things and big, and God accomplished a great ministry through him. He was probably around 17 years old when the book begins, and about 90 years old by the time the book ends. He lived through the entire 70 years of captivity, and he was faithful all the way through. That was why God could use him to begin this movement from Babylon to Jerusalem.

One Uncompromising Man

The building of a pure church for God in any place always begins with one man who has a burden of prayer, and who carries that burden before God frequently saying, *“Lord, I want a pure church in this place for You, and I am willing to pay any price for it.”* You must be willing to carry that burden before God again and again in prayer. You may have to carry it for a long time. I had to carry that burden for about ten years before I saw the beginnings of a new covenant church. God will test your faithfulness. Just like a mother carries a baby in her womb, we have to carry this burden in our hearts. That was how Daniel carried this burden in his heart. This resulted in others also beginning to share his burden in

later years – Haggai, Zerubbabel, Joshua, Zechariah, Ezra, Nehemiah and others. God Himself will add others to you who share your burden, and together with them you will be able to build God's new covenant church. Daniel was too old to go back to Jerusalem at the age of 90, to build the temple. But he stood behind the scenes and prayed and started the ball rolling.

Daniel lived in a heathen land. So he is an example especially for us in India, as to how we can stand for God in a non-Christian land without compromising our Christian principles. He could gather only three whole-hearted people, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah (who are better known by their Babylonian names – Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego). But those young men were a powerful witness for God right in the middle of Babylon, the capital city of the world's superpower – a small church of four people. Those four people influenced that country more than all the other hundreds and thousands of Jews who were in Babylon because of one reason: *While the others compromised, these four did not.*

Don't think that you can influence a village or a country by large numbers of Christians. Four people who stood for God influenced the most powerful country in the world and its rulers. The message that comes through that is, "*It is not by numbers, nor by human might, but by His Spirit that God does His work.*" God is looking for men who are upright and who will never compromise.

One of the keywords in the Book of Daniel is "vision". God needs men of vision. That word occurs about 40 times in this book. I also want you to see two phrases that describe Daniel's attitude to God and to man. The first phrase is "*The Lord gave*" (1:2) – referring to Nebuchadnezzar's capture of Jerusalem. Daniel saw the Lord as the One Who gave Nebuchadnezzar victory over Jerusalem, to teach the Jews a lesson. So, Daniel's attitude towards God was one of faith in *God's absolute sovereignty over all matters on the earth*. The second phrase is "*Daniel made up his mind not to defile himself*" (1:8). Daniel's attitude towards man was one of "*No compromise whatsoever*".

These are the two attitudes that we must have too, in times of persecution. Even if a heathen king who doesn't know God is in control of a country, let us remember that it is the Lord who has given him that position. It is the Lord Who allows someone to win an election or a war and to rule a country. Nebuchadnezzar did not know God, but God still controlled him. The rulers of our country also may not know God. But if God has people like Daniel in our land, He can accomplish His purposes there. And when we are tempted to compromise, or invited to compromise or when we see other Christians around us compromising, that is when we must stand unflinchingly for the Lord and refuse to bend even slightly. We must refuse to defile our conscience with any sin.

If we have fallen somewhere, we must confess our sin immediately, have it cleansed in Christ's blood, apologise to the people concerned where necessary and set things right. But we will not compromise at any cost. We will not seek to please any man. We will not seek to please any Nebuchadnezzar or any of his authorities. We will submit to them if they rule our country, but we will not compromise our convictions even if we have to lose our lives.

After Daniel made up his mind to keep himself undefiled, his first test came in relation to food. The first test that came to Adam and Eve was also in relation to food. And the first test that came to Jesus in the wilderness was in relation to food too. What will your attitude be to tasty food, if that involves compromise of God's principles? Esau lost his birthright because of food. Isaac lost his spiritual vision because of his love for the tasty food that Esau could bring him. But Daniel's attitude was, "God has said in His Word that this type of food must not be eaten and so I will not eat it." Daniel had studied the Scriptures as a young man, and he knew that the law of Moses forbade the eating of certain meats and that the book of Proverbs forbade the drinking of alcoholic wine. He decided to obey God, whatever it may cost him.

In the beginning he had to stand alone, while all the other Jews compromised. But when Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah saw one young man taking a stand for God, they got the courage to join him (1:11). If Daniel had not taken a stand for the Lord, we might never have heard about Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah.

I find that there are *three* types of people among God's children: *First*, the compromisers who seek what is good for them and have no principles. There are millions of such people in Christendom today. Then there is a *second* group like Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah who don't have the courage to take a stand on their own, but who are willing to take a stand if they see someone else who is willing to take a stand for the Lord. That is a much smaller number. Then there is the *third* group of people like Daniel, who will take a stand for the Lord, even if no-one else takes a stand. This group is very much smaller. There may be just one person here and another person there, in this category. This division is somewhat like the outer court, the holy place and the most holy place in the tabernacle.

I believe that there are a number of people like Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah in India, who want to take a stand for God, for a pure testimony for the Lord in their locality, but who don't have the courage to stand on their own. They are looking for a Daniel to be their leader. And when a Daniel comes into that village or that town, then these Christians will come and join him. But if a Daniel never comes to their place, these people will live and die without ever being a testimony for the Lord.

So the great need in our country is for Daniels. God is looking for Daniels who will determine in their heart never to defile themselves. And when these Daniels take a stand for the Lord, they will automatically draw the Hananiahs, the Mishael and the Azariahs to them. I have seen this happen in so many, many places in India. God looks for a Daniel first. If He cannot find a Daniel, then nothing will happen. God is looking for men who will not seek their own, who are not interested in anything for themselves and who are willing to lose their lives for Him if necessary. Daniel was only 17 years old. Even today, God can choose a 17-year-old youth and make him a prophet and empower him to take a stand for Him. The other three men may have been older than Daniel; but they submitted to him, because they recognised him as a God-appointed leader.

Faith in God's Power

Daniel also had faith. He told the king's overseer, "You can test us for ten days. We will have only vegetables and water. And we believe that we'll be physically better off than these other Jews who are eating the rich food." God is looking for people who will boldly confess their faith, and not keep their light hidden underneath a bed. At the end of ten days, just as Daniel had said, they all looked healthier and stronger than the others (1:11–15). This self-denial in a simple matter like food prepared them for the greater tests of the fiery furnace and the den of lions later on.

Here we see how God gave them supernatural health for their *body*. Later, we read how God gave them supernatural intelligence for their *mind*. He gave these four young men a special aptitude for learning literature and science. God gave Daniel supernatural understanding in his *spirit* too, to understand the meaning of visions and dreams. So we see God enabling them supernaturally in *body, soul and spirit*. We also need to learn to trust God to give us health for our body, intelligence for our mind and spiritual vision and understanding of his ways by the Holy Spirit.

In *Chapter 2*, we read about a dream that Nebuchadnezzar had. Nebuchadnezzar called his wise men and told them, "Tell me what I dreamt and its meaning." Those wise men are a picture of preachers who have no touch with God, but who are deceivers. Such preachers cannot interpret God's word or the times correctly. Those wise men said, "Only the gods can show you what you dreamt. No human being can do that. It is impossible. But if you tell us the dream, then we will interpret it for you." Now, we know that if someone tells us his dream it is easy to cook up an interpretation and to pretend that we got it from God! That's what a lot of preachers do today. But Nebuchadnezzar was a shrewd man. He said, "If you all are really in touch with God, you will be able to tell me the dream as well."

A true servant of God will experience some supernatural things in his ministry. If you are truly anointed by God, you will have some supernatural experiences. You may go to a place where you don't know anyone, and you preach God's word there. And that word will be so exactly according to the need of some people sitting there that they will think that somebody had come and told you about their problems. It is this element of prophecy that we need to have in our ministry. We must seek for it if we are to have it. The Bible commands us, "*Earnestly desire to prophesy*" (*1 Corinthians 14:1*).

When Daniel heard about this problem, he was calm. He handled the situation with great wisdom (*2:14*). Here was a young man who had great wisdom! Do you *have to* make mistakes when you are young? No. Some people say that young people will have to make many mistakes. Daniel didn't. We don't read in the Scriptures of a single wrong thing that Daniel did in his entire life. He was a unique man like Joseph – who was another young man about whom almost nothing wrong is recorded. Why not make these young people your examples and say, "Lord, I don't have to do foolish things like other young people do. I want to follow the examples of these men who lived in humility and the fear of God right from their youth."

But I must admit that it is very rare to find such young people. Most young people that I know do a lot of foolish things – mainly because they won't submit to their elders. They imagine themselves to be very clever, and thus end up doing a 1001 foolish things. That is the hard way to learn. But there is a better way. If you humble yourself and live in the fear of God and submit to authorities God places over you, you can learn from your youth without doing the foolish things that others do. Daniel is a wonderful example of that.

How did Daniel get the answer to the dream that Nebuchadnezzar had? First of all, he had faith that God would reveal it to him. He went to God. He called his friends (*2:17*). There is a tremendous value in fellowship in prayer when we face a problem that is too difficult for us. Daniel understood the principle of fellowship in prayer. He was a new covenant man living in old covenant times. His attitude was, "Let me not pray about this all by myself. Let me get my three brothers to join me and let us pray together." And they prayed together.

In *2:18*, we read that they prayed to the "*God of heaven*", indicating that Daniel and his friends began their prayer by exalting and praising the "*God of heaven*" first of all. This is how Jesus also taught us to begin our prayers: "*Our Father Who art in heaven...*" (*Matthew 6:9*), whereby we exalt God first, before bringing our requests to Him. Beginning prayer with exalting God was Daniel's habit, as we can see in *Chapter 9:4* also. And this is the habit of every godly man.

It is a good habit to begin every time of prayer with praise. Whenever you can't get through in prayer, start praising the Lord. Think of God's greatness and praise Him – and you will find the atmosphere clearing up immediately.

And when God answered their prayer, they gave Him all the glory and said, *"Praise the Lord for His sovereignty. He is the One who determines the course of all events in the world. He is the One who removes kings and sets others on the throne. He is the One who gives wisdom to the wise and knowledge to the scholars. He is the One who reveals deep and mysterious things. We thank and praise You, God, because You have given us wisdom and strength"* (2:20, 23 - Living).

Once God had revealed the dream and its meaning to Daniel, he went and gave the king the answer, acknowledging, *"This is not due to my cleverness. It is because God revealed it to me"* (2:30). Daniel was a humble young man who was willing to give God all the glory. God reveals His truths to such men.

Nebuchadnezzar saw a statue with a head of gold, chest and arms of silver, stomach and thighs of bronze, legs of iron, and feet of a combination of iron and clay (2:31–33). The head of gold symbolised the *Babylonian* empire that would last for about 70 years. After that would come the *Medo-Persian* empire (chest and arms of silver) which would last for about 200 years. The belly and thighs of bronze symbolised the *Grecian* empire of Alexander the Great (and his father) which would last for about 200 years. The legs of iron represented the *Roman* empire (that would rule the world in the time of Christ) and that would last for about 600 years. The feet of iron and clay represent countries governed by dictatorship (iron) and democracy (clay), and represent the nations of the world in the last days. The ten toes of the feet speak of ten kingdoms that will come together at the end-time (possibly in Europe) that will be headed by the Antichrist, immediately before the return of Jesus to earth.

So God gave Nebuchadnezzar a vision of what was going to happen on earth right until the return of Christ. Then he saw a stone coming down and shattering all these kingdoms to bits. This was a picture of the reign of Christ (2:44). *"The God of heaven will then set up a kingdom which will never be destroyed."*

An Uncompromising Remnant

So when Nebuchadnezzar made a statue entirely of gold, what he was saying thereby was, "I am going to be there until the end. There won't be any silver, bronze, or iron kingdoms after me!! His pride made him so foolish that he thought he would live until Jesus returned. Nebuchadnezzar represents man in all his haughtiness.

Chapter 3:1: Here we read that Nebuchadnezzar compelled everyone to worship his golden statue. Daniel was obviously not in town at this

time. He must have been away somewhere in relation to his work. So Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego were by themselves. All the Jews disobeyed God's commandment and bowed down to the idol to save their lives. God had allowed Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego to be by themselves at this time to test them and to strengthen them.

At times it is good for us, if a man of God is not available nearby, so that we can learn to depend on God Himself. The danger of having godly men nearby is that we tend to lean on them. The danger of always listening to a good Bible teacher is that we may never study the Word ourselves. So it is good if you don't have a fantastic Bible teacher with you all the time. That will make you more dependent on the Holy Spirit to teach you His word and to strengthen you to live the Christian life.

So God in His sovereignty ensured that Daniel was not there at this time. And Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego passed the test. Nebuchadnezzar was furious when they refused to bow before his statue and said "If you don't bow down, I will heat the furnace seven times and throw you in" (3:19). They still did not bow down. I can imagine that some of the other Jews would have come to them and said, "Just compromise a little. Just nod your head a little towards the statue." But they steadfastly refused to do so. The other Jews may even have suggested, "Why don't you bow down, and then go to God and ask Him to forgive you for doing it."

There are Christians who do that today and think they are being clever. They do something wrong and then go to God and ask Him to forgive them. They tell lies to get admission in a college or to get a visa or a job. They think they are clever because they get what they want and then get their sin forgiven too. But if you get an admission or a visa or a job by telling a lie, you cannot possibly end up in the place where God wants you to be – for it can never be God's will for you to get anywhere in His will, by telling a lie. And you will then have problems wherever you may be. You must refuse to compromise if you want God's best. And if, as a result, you lose something, God will make that loss work for your good.

We need disciples of such boldness and integrity in India today. Daniel was like that himself, and he taught Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego to be like that. It was better to have 4 people like that in Babylon than 400 compromisers who ate what the king gave them, bowed down to his idols, and also claimed to believe in Jehovah. The sad situation in India today is that we have a multitude of Christians who are such compromisers. God is looking for Daniels, Shadrachs, Meshachs and Abednegos who will stand for Him without compromise in this day of compromise.

We also see here the total contempt for death that these three men had. They told the king, "Our God is able to deliver us from your fiery furnace. But if He chooses not to do so, we will still not worship your image."

What was the result? When they were thrown into the furnace, only the ropes got burnt. When Satan harasses us, what can he burn up in us? Only the things that bind us!! He cannot burn up anything valuable in us. When we are thrown into the fire, the things that bind us get burnt and we come out free. It is good if a fire has succeeded in freeing you from attachment to earthly things. We could see Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego here as a picture of ourselves tied to earthly things with ropes. Then God puts us into a fire (some difficult trial) and very soon our attachment to the things of earth is gone. Thank God for such fires. Thank God for such trials.

If I were to ask you what the greatest miracle in *Chapter 3* was, you would probably say, "That the fire could not kill them." But I see the greatest miracle here as this, that when everybody bowed down to the statue, these three men did not. I remember seeing a picture many years ago, of this 90 feet high statue with thousands of people down on their faces worshipping it and three people standing up. And I said, "Lord, make me like that. When everybody around me is compromising, help me to stand out and be different, even if I have to die for it." Keep that picture before you always.

Chapter 4:6, 7: Nebuchadnezzar again had a dream that frightened him. He called the wise men again. 32 years earlier when he had his first dream, the wise men couldn't help him. Only Daniel could help him. But he went back to the wise men again. And of course, they couldn't help him this time either. Daniel explained this dream too and told him how God was going to judge him. "The tree is a picture of you," Daniel said, "and because of your pride God is going to cut you down." But Nebuchadnezzar did not listen to Daniel. Daniel urged him to stop sinning, to do what was right, to break from his wicked past and to be merciful to the poor, so that this dream of judgement would not be fulfilled (4:27). But Nebuchadnezzar wouldn't listen.

A year later (4:29) Nebuchadnezzar was walking on the roof of his palace in Babylon and he began to meditate on what he had built. Here was Babylon built by him, by his power and for his glory (4:30). *By man, through man and to man* – that is the essence of *Babylon*. When a church is built with human wisdom, by human power, and for human glory, that becomes Babylon, even if its doctrines are all correct. When Christian work is done by human cleverness and ability, by the power of money, and for man's glory, then whatever doctrines the leaders may believe, what they build will be Babylon. A genuine work of God is always done according to God's plan that is discovered through waiting on God in

prayer. It is done by the power of the Holy Spirit – with supernatural help from God; and it is done 100% for the glory of God. Remember this always and it will save you from building with wood, hay and straw.

God warned Nebuchadnezzar three times (4:31). He did not listen, and so he was punished. He became mad and started eating grass like a cow (4:32). At last he repented. Then God healed him of his madness. Nebuchadnezzar then made one of the most complete statements about the sovereignty of God found anywhere in the Bible. He said, "*His dominion is an everlasting dominion and His kingdom endures forever. All the inhabitants of the earth are accounted as nothing and He does according to His will in the host of heaven and among the inhabitants of earth. No one can ward off His hand or say to Him, 'What have You done?' All His works are true and His ways are just and He is able to humble those who walk in pride*" (4:34–37).

This is what makes me believe that Nebuchadnezzar is probably in heaven today. For if he lived according to that faith that he expressed until the end of his life, he would have entered God's kingdom. Isn't it interesting that Solomon who wrote three books of Scripture is in hell and Nebuchadnezzar could be in heaven!

Daniel

Daniel's Continued Faithfulness

Many years later, Nebuchadnezzar's son Belshazzar had a great feast in Babylon. He suddenly saw someone's hand writing words on the wall of the palace (5:5). There are only two instances in the Bible where we read of God actually writing something. The first is His writing the ten commandments on tablets of stone. The second is here. None of the wise men could interpret what was written on the wall. When the queen-mother heard of this, she reminded the king of Daniel who had interpreted dreams in the days of Nebuchadnezzar. Daniel was brought in and the king offered him purple robes and a gold chain and a place of honour in the kingdom. Daniel told the king to keep his gifts or to give them to someone else (5:17). Daniel's attitude to gifts and honour from the heathen was exactly the same as that of Elisha (who refused Naaman's gifts) and Abraham (who refused the gifts offered by the king of Sodom).

A genuine man of God can be identified by his attitude to earthly gifts and honour. What is your attitude to gifts – especially when ungodly people (like Belshazzar) want to give you large gifts because you did something for them in the Name of Jesus? Be different from the other preachers of these days and say, "No. Thank you. I'll give you God's Word and bless you. But I don't want your gifts." Many servants of the Lord have destroyed themselves by receiving gifts from people from whom they should not have received anything. It is right to receive a gift from God's people – if the gift is given voluntarily, and if those people

are financially better off than you are. But it is totally wrong to receive money for your personal needs from anyone who is poorer than you – even if they are believers.

Daniel then told Belshazzar, “*You know everything that has happened. Yet you have not humbled yourself. You have defied God by taking cups from His temple to drink.*” (5:22, 23). Daniel was a fearless prophet and he warned the king of danger. And then he read the words, “*Mene, mene, tekel, upharsin*” and interpreted them (5:25).

We have already seen the first instance of speaking in a language not learnt – by Balaam’s donkey. Here is the first instance of interpretation of an unknown language. The message was, “*God has numbered your kingdom and put an end to it. You have been weighed on the scales and found deficient. Your kingdom has been divided and given over to the Medes and Persians*” (5:26–28).

That is God’s word to Babylonian religious systems today as well. “*God has numbered your days and they are coming to an end. God has weighed you and found nothing of eternal weight in you. You are full of worldliness, and therefore your kingdom is divided.*” That very night Babylon was conquered by Medo-Persia (5:30).

In Chapter 6 we come to the time when King Darius was ruling the Medo-Persian empire. He too appointed Daniel to be one of his administrators (6:2). Even though Daniel was the Prime Minister in the previous kingdom, Darius still made him the Prime Minister in his kingdom. What a testimony Daniel must have had to earn the confidence of successive rulers in different kingdoms. Daniel was now more than 80 years old – but he was still the same uncompromising man that he had always been – and God honoured him.

There were evil people in that kingdom however who were jealous of Daniel and who wanted to destroy him. They went to the king and got him to pass a law that was primarily directed against Daniel. This is so similar to what happens even today. Evil people seek to destroy God’s servants and get governments to pass laws that forbid people from being converted to Christ. The threat in Daniel’s time was, “*If you pray to any other god, you will be thrown to the lions.*” Today the threat may be, “*If you convert anyone to Christianity, you will be thrown in jail!*”

When Daniel heard that the king had passed this law, what did he do? He knelt down and prayed. He feared God more than he feared any king or government. And like the apostles would say in a future day, Daniel’s attitude too was, “*We ought to obey God rather than men*” (Acts 5:29). So the very thing that the king’s edict said he was not to do, he did. No law was going to stop him from praying to his God. He used to pray always with his windows open towards Jerusalem. He could now have considered praying with his windows closed. But he was not ashamed to be seen praying to the only true God and so he kept the windows open.

We too must never be ashamed to be openly known as disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ.

And he prayed not just once a day, but three times a day – as he had always done. Those jealous officials were just waiting for this moment – and as soon as they saw Daniel praying, they reported him to the king. The king liked Daniel and wanted to save him. But the officials reminded him that “*the law of the Medes and the Persians*” could not be revoked. So he had to throw Daniel into the den of lions. But, as we know, God protected Daniel from the lions.

There are people around us today too who are jealous of the blessing of God upon our lives and who are waiting to harm us in some way. But the Lord will stand by us. In Daniel’s time, the fire and the lions were *not* permitted to touch God’s servants. But under the new covenant, God gives His children the honour to die as martyrs for the faith and so the lions are permitted to eat them up and the fire is permitted to burn them. Millions of Christians have been martyred for their faith in these twenty centuries. But there is one lion that cannot hurt us – Satan. And there is one fire that cannot touch us – the fire of hell. Nothing of the spirit of hell – hatred or bitterness etc. – can ever come into our hearts. Like Jesus, we too will be able to say, “*When the prince of this world comes, he will find nothing in me*” (John 14:30).

Daniel’s life was a testimony to the people of Medo-Persia concerning the true God. God allows trials to come to us too, in order to manifest our testimony to others. When we endure in persecution and love our persecutors, others will see Christ in us. If you are taken to court for the sake of the faith, determine to speak the truth and never to hate anyone. And if we have to lay down our lives for the gospel one day, let us lay it down with our heads lifted up and a spirit of praise in our hearts to the Lord because we know that our God is on the throne.

Prophecies About the Future

The first six chapters of Daniel are historical. The last six chapters are prophecies about the future.

In *Chapters 7 and 8*, Daniel is given a vision of future world kingdoms. He was about 87 years old now, and he was still having visions and dreams just like he had when he was a young man, because he was walking faithfully with God.

In *Chapter 7*, we see the same five kingdoms that Nebuchadnezzar saw in his dream – Babylon, Medo-Persia, Greece, Rome and the final world empire – but from a different perspective. Nebuchadnezzar saw them as precious metals, gold, silver, bronze and iron. Daniel saw them as wild beasts, which was how God saw them! The people of the world see earthly kingdoms as valuable, *precious metals*. It is an honour to be a King or President or Prime Minister of a country. But God sees the kingdoms of

the earth in an entirely different light. He sees all of them as *wild beasts*, because the whole world is under the rule of Satan.

The detailed prophecies given in *Chapters 7 and 11* were fulfilled exactly as foretold here in the coming centuries. In *Chapter 7:4*, we read a prophecy of Nebuchadnezzar's wings being clipped. The second beast which looked like a bear referred to Medo-Persia (7:5). The third beast looked like a leopard with four wings and four heads and represented Greece under Alexander the Great (7:6). When he died, his kingdom was divided into four parts. Finally Daniel saw a beast with ten horns and a little horn that arose from among those ten. This referred to the Roman empire first of all (that ruled the world when Jesus came to earth). The horns referred to an empire that would arise in the last days ending in the rule of the Antichrist (the little horn), just before Christ returns to earth (7:7, 8). At the end of the chapter, we see God sitting on His throne with millions of angels worshipping Him and the dominion of the earth being given to His saints.

In *Chapter 8*, we are given a little more detail again about these kingdoms. The first vision is about the Grecian empire (8:5–8). The goat (the Grecian empire under Alexander) became very powerful and conquered nations with “*great speed*” (8:8). Greece became a world ruler unlike Babylon and Medo-Persia. But at the height of its power, when Alexander the Great was just 33 years old, he died suddenly (the horn was suddenly broken off). When he died, his four generals divided the kingdom among themselves (the four horns of the goat). At the end of their rule, a fierce king, a master of intrigue, rose to power. This refers to the king who ruled Syria – a descendant of one of Alexander’s generals. His name was Antiochus Epiphanes. “*Epiphanes*” means “*God made manifest*” and he is a type of the Antichrist who will “*display himself as God*” (*2 Thessalonians 2:4*).

In *Chapter 9*, we see Daniel praying for his people. It was Daniel’s prayer that started the movement of God’s people from Babylon back to Jerusalem. Daniel was 87 years old now and he was still studying God’s word and fasting and praying, just like he did in his younger days (9:3). It is wonderful to see a man of God at the age of 87, still as much on fire as he was in his teenage years, studying the word as much as he did in his youth, fasting and praying as much as he did in his younger days, and still being a servant of the people as he was when he was young. What a wonderful example Daniel is for all of us.

Daniel didn’t criticise the other Jews. He didn’t say, “Lord, these Jews around me are all backsliders.” Instead he said, “*Lord, WE have sinned, WE have rebelled, WE have refused to listen to Your messages. Lord, You are right and OUR faces are covered with shame*” (9:7). We see there how Daniel identified himself with his backslidden fellow-Jews. He did not say, “*They*”, but “*We*”. That is how we need to pray too: “*Lord, WE Christians have dishonoured Your Name in this land.*

We have not been the testimony for Christ that India needed to see. We have failed. Lord, send us a revival. Lord, You are right, and our faces are covered with shame. Be merciful and forgive us. We have sinned against You." He uses the words, "Thy" and "Thine" ten times.

Then God gave Daniel another vision and told him that 490 years had been determined for His purposes for Jerusalem (9:24, 25). 7 sets of 7 years (49 years) and 62 sets of 7 years (434 years) – making a total of 483 years – would pass from the time the command is given to rebuild Jerusalem until the Anointed One (Christ) comes there. And that was fulfilled exactly. In 445 B.C., the command went forth to rebuild Jerusalem. 483 years later in 29 A.D. Jesus came to Jerusalem and was crucified. So if you had understood the prophecy of Daniel, you would have known the exact year in which Christ would be crucified. Out of the 490 years, a period of 7 years still remains. That 7-year-period would be at the end of time. The Antichrist will rule the earth during that time and Christians will face tremendous persecution and tribulation everywhere, and will be hated by everyone. Then Christ will return.

In *Chapter 10*, we read of Daniel praying for three weeks. During this time a great struggle went on in the heavenlies. Daniel fasted partially during this time. He abstained from eating rich meats and ate simple food. At the end of the three weeks, an angel came to Daniel and told him he was "*highly esteemed*" by God (10:11). He also told him that he had been trying to come to him, but was hindered by the evil spirit that rules over Persia for 21 days. From the moment that Daniel began to pray, his request had been heard. But it took 21 days for the answer to come (10:12, 13). God doesn't always answer our prayers immediately. But if we persist in prayer, the answer will definitely come.

Remember, however, that this incident of an evil spirit resisting Michael took place *before* Jesus died on the cross. At that time Satan and his demons had not yet been defeated. Today we don't need 21 days to overcome a demon. Jesus never took 21 days to cast out any demon. Now that every demon has been defeated by our Lord, we operate from a completely different position than Daniel did. Today, if we resist the devil, he will flee from us immediately (*James 4:7*). His activities can be restrained and he himself will be under our feet very soon (*Romans 16:20*).

In 10:21, we read, "*There is no one who stands firmly with me against these forces...*". Many years earlier, the Lord had told Ezekiel that when He looked for intercessors, He did not find even one (*Ezekiel 22:30*). Daniel was now a lone intercessor and he teaches us how much God can accomplish through just one man.

In 11:2, we read a brief history of the Persian empire. Alexander the Great of Greece is referred to in 11:3. His kingdom would not go to his

descendants but would be divided among his four generals (11:4). The king of the south mentioned here is Egypt and the king of the north is Syria (11:5, 6). 22 wars in the history of these two nations are prophesied in this chapter. 11:6 refers to the Egyptian King Ptolemy's daughter Bernice being married King Antiochus II of Syria. 11:10 refers to Antiochus III. 11:16 refers to Syria's conquest of Palestine. In 11:18 we read of Syria's defeat at the hands of Rome. 11:19 refers to Antiochus being killed. 11:21 refers to Antiochus IV also known as Antiochus Epiphanes (the type of the Antichrist). 11:31 refers to this Antiochus sacrificing a pig on the altar in the temple in Jerusalem.

Many things written in this chapter have a *dual* fulfilment. It was first fulfilled in the time of Antiochus Epiphanes around 170 B.C. It will be fulfilled again in the time of the Antichrist in the last days.

11:32 is a very significant verse that teaches that in the last days there will be compromisers as well as wholehearted disciples of the Lord. The compromisers will, with “smooth words, turn to godlessness those who act wickedly toward the covenant”. But the wholehearted will “know God and be strong and do exploits for God.” In those days, “those who have insight will give understanding to many. Many teachers will be killed by the fire and by the sword and will suffer in other ways too. Some will fall victim to persecution and will be refined and cleansed and made pure” (11:32–35).

11:36 refers to the Antichrist again: “The king will do as he pleases, and he will exalt and magnify himself above every god and will speak monstrous things against the God of gods; and he will prosper until the indignation is finished.” 11:38 refers to the worship of power and wealth that will be prevalent everywhere in the last days. 11:39 refers to the help the Antichrist will get from demons. He will rule in Jerusalem but his end will come very quickly (11:45).

In Chapter 12, we read first of all about the great tribulation in the days of the Antichrist (12:1). Then of the two resurrections – one to everlasting life and one to disgrace and shame (12:2). Those who are wise in this world are assured that they will shine as bright as the noonday sky in the final day. And those who turn many to righteousness in this world will shine as the stars forever (12:3). The book of Daniel will be a sealed book, not capable of being understood until the last days (12:4, 9).

Two significant prophecies about the last days are found here in 12:4: “Many will go back and forth, and knowledge will increase.” Travel will increase considerably in the last days. From the time of Adam until the mid-19th century man's speed of travel was the speed of a horse. And so he could not travel very far. But the 20th century changed all that suddenly.

Now world-travellers number in the millions and man has travelled even to the moon! It is prophesied here that knowledge also will increase in the last days. We see that being fulfilled in our lifetime too. All the scientific knowledge that man accumulated over a period of 5900 years (from the time of Adam to 1939), increased by *twenty times* within 40 years (from 1939 to 1979). And since then it has been increasing at an astounding pace that defies calculation. A graph of man's increase in knowledge would show a very flat gradient for 99% of his history and then a sudden sharp rise upwards to about hundred times the height in this last period of man's history.

Daniel himself could not understand what he prophesied (12:9) but he was told to go his way faithfully until the end of his life and he would then be rewarded with the place appointed for him (12:9, 13).

Do you want to shine like a star forever in eternity? Then turn people to righteousness today. Spend your life turning others to a godly life. And in the end, you will rise again and receive the reward the Lord has kept for you.

HOSEA

SPIRITUAL ADULTERY AND GOD'S UNCHANGING LOVE

Hosea prophesied to the northern kingdom of Israel. The subject of his prophecy was *spiritual adultery* and *God's unchanging love*. His prophecy shows that God's attitude toward His people was that of a husband who kept on loving an unfaithful wife.

Israel was called the "*Bride of Jehovah*" in the Old Testament. The relationship between God and Israel was to be like a marriage relationship – just like our relationship with Christ is today. If a wife loves a man other than her husband, or seeks to please other men, she is unfaithful and could rightfully be called "*an adulteress*". It is exactly the same with our relationship with our Lord. If we are married to Christ and we love money, we are spiritual adulteresses, because money is "*another man*". If we love the honour of this world, that too would be responding to "*another man*" (the world) trying to gain our attention. If we love sinful pleasure, that too is a part of the world. That is why James, speaking to believers, says, "*You adulteresses, don't you know that friendship with the world is enmity with God?*" (James 4:4).

Hosea's Training

Hosea deals with this very important subject. And God taught him this lesson in a very painful way. What we see in Hosea, perhaps more than in any other Old Testament prophet, is God trying to make His servant feel His heart. This is the principle of true prophetic ministry even in the New Testament. We have to feel towards God's people the way God feels towards them. We have to look at God's people the way God looks at them. Otherwise we will be just preachers who are preaching something,

which may be true, but without the feeling that God has towards His people. So God has to take us through many painful trials in order to make us feel the way He feels towards people, before we can effectively minister to them.

For example, in Hosea's time, Israel was like an unfaithful wife. When she worshipped idols she was being unfaithful to the Lord. That was pictured as adultery. Adultery and idolatry were very closely linked in the Old Testament. Even in the New Testament, spiritual adultery is a form of idolatry. Idolatry means worshipping something other than the true God. It may be your business, your property, your money, your good looks. It may even be your ministry. Anything that takes the place of Christ as Number One in your life is an idol. And as soon as something has taken the place of God in your life, you have become an idolater, a spiritual adulteress. All the words that are spoken to adulteresses and idolaters will apply to you at that point.

Hosea

The way God made Hosea feel His heart was by making him marry an unfaithful wife. That was a painful way for Hosea to learn the truth. Which man would be willing to marry a girl who he knows, from the outset, will be unfaithful to him and will commit adultery with other men? It was a heavy price that these prophets had to pay in order to be prophets. When Hosea's wife was unfaithful to him, he was told to keep on loving her. At one point she even went and sold herself as a slave to another man. Hosea then paid money to buy her back. And he still kept on loving her. But even after he bought her back, she still kept on committing adultery. Hosea must have found it very difficult to bear with her. As he went through this struggle, God told him, "Now you can understand how I love my people. Now go and preach to them."

As a result, even when Hosea spoke sternly to God's people, there was a note of compassion in his message of holiness. What did he emphasise? *Holiness and God's unchanging love*. These two themes were the burden of all the prophets: *Holiness in God's people and God's unchanging love for His people even when they are in spiritual adultery and gone astray*. God's desire was always to bring His people back. He disciplines them; but then He wants to bring them back to Him after the discipline is over. Jeremiah said, "*After the discipline is over, God will bring you back.*" Hosea said the same thing. Holiness is what God demands. When He doesn't find that in you, He will discipline you. But His love is so great that He will then speak tenderly to you and bring you back into fellowship with Him, saying, "*How can I give you up? How can I let you go? How can I forsake you? My heart cries out within me. How I long to help you!*" (*Hosea 11:8 - Living*).

This is how true prophetic ministry should function in the church too. *A true prophet in the church today will have the same burden that the*

Old Testament prophets had for holiness among God's people. And He will be moved as they were, by God's unchanging, longsuffering, compassionate love that perpetually desires to bring His backslidden people back to Him and to genuine holiness. There should be a prophetic ministry in every church, if it is to be kept alive and functioning for God as it should.

That was Hosea's basic theme. And so God allowed Hosea to suffer. God told Hosea, “*Go and marry a prostitute. Some of her children will be born to you from other men.*” (1:2). What a price to pay to be a prophet! How many would want to be prophets? God may *not* require you to do today what Hosea did. But the principle remains the same that He has to take us through deep suffering in order to get us to feel His heart. Read the suffering that the apostle Paul went through – many dangers, many beatings, imprisonments, being beaten with rods, robbed, not having enough clothes to keep himself warm, not enough food to eat (*2 Corinthians 11:23–28*). The purpose of all that was to make Paul live close to God's heart so that he could listen to God's heartbeat and feel as God felt. When we go through trials, we come very close to God's heart. We hear His heartbeat and we feel that, as we speak to His people.

There is a lot of difference between such a preacher and a man who has just acquired a lot of knowledge by reading books and by listening to sermons. Do you want to serve God? Do you want to preach the way God wants you to preach? Then ask God to help you to feel His heartbeat. That will not come by just studying the Bible in a classroom. It will come by going through trials. It will not come merely by attending meetings or reading good Christian books – even though all that is good. We all have a great lust for knowledge and we may think, “If only I can get more Bible-knowledge I can serve the Lord.” You may look at some servant of God today and say, “I want to serve the Lord like he does.” Yes, you can do that. But only if you allow God to crush you by taking you through deep sufferings that others may never know about. Every true servant of God has gone through hard trials that others know nothing about, and most of the time he won't even tell others what he has gone through.

Hosea teaches us that the only way to effectively minister is by going through deep suffering in one's personal life. God does this by different methods for different people. He does not have a standard syllabus for all of God's children. He taught Hosea through a difficult wife. But He taught Jeremiah without a wife, by putting him in a deep pit. And He taught Paul without a wife but through many imprisonments. So the procedure is not the same for everyone. But the principle remains the same: You have to suffer if you want to have a ministry from God. Paul said, “*I have gone through many trials – and the strength I received from God in that suffering is what I can now pass on to other people*” (*2 Corinthians 1:4*). Without such experiences, we will only pass on dead knowledge to people.

Hosea married Gomer, but some of her children were born through others. Her first son was Hosea's. The next two were perhaps not his. The names of those children indicated how God was punishing His people. God says, “*This is the way of Israel; When she runs after her lovers she won't be able to catch up with them. She will search for them but won't find them. And then she will say, 'I might as well return to my husband because I was better off with him than I am now'*” (2:7). Hosea's wife went away from him in the same way that Israel went away from God. But when Israel was in trouble, she sought God again. Most people seek God only when they are in trouble. When they find that money doesn't solve their problems and that the people of the world let them down, then they turn back to God and seek His help. And God helps them. So God told Hosea, “Take your wife back even when she returns to you only as a last resort.”

The Lord said, “*She does not know that it was I who gave her the grain, the new wine and the oil, and lavished on her silver and gold, which they used for Baal*” (2:8). This verse can apply to us too. Do you realise that everything you have has come from God? Do you realise that your health is God's gift? The money you have is God's gift. The intelligence you have is God's gift. But Israel used their gold and silver to make idols to Baal. Do you use what God has given you for this world and its pleasures?

Remember the parable of the prodigal son. He took money from his father, and he didn't use it for his father's business. He spent it all on himself. This is the mark of God's backslidden people. They get so many gifts from God, and what do they do with it? They think, “This *body* is mine. I can use it as I like. This *intelligence* is mine. I must use it as much as possible for my own profit. This *money* is mine. I earned it all myself. I can use it as I like.” That is what it means to take the gold and silver that God gives us and to make an idol for Baal through them. God says, “*They do not realise that everything they have is what I gave them.*”

How is it with you? If you recognise that everything is God's, then you will give it all back to Him and say, “Lord, You gave me all these gifts and I want to use them all for Your kingdom.”

But in spite of Israel being so unfaithful, the Lord says, “*I will win her back. I will lead her into the desert. I will make things dry and barren in her life. And when everything is dry and barren she will turn to Me. Then I will speak tenderly to her there*” (2:14).

No husband will speak so tenderly to someone who has been so totally unfaithful to him. But the Lord says, “*I will speak tenderly and I will continue to give her gifts. I will return her vineyards to her. I will transform the valley of Achor into a gateway of hope*” (2:14, 15). Achor was the place where Achan had been put to death for his sin of stealing what was the Lord's in Jericho (*Joshua 7*). It was a place of judgement for sin. And now the Lord says, “I am going to make the place of judgement a door of hope for you. Even though you have failed, and judgement and

chastening have come upon you because of that, yet now because you have confessed your sin, I will open a door of hope for you in this very place so that something beautiful will come forth from your life in the coming days."

That is a wonderful message for those who have backslidden and gone away from God, and for those who have wasted many years of their life. Many are discouraged because they have wasted so many years of their life and done so many wrong things. They wish they had known these truths when they were younger. You have been chastened. You have suffered. Now the Lord says to you, "Don't get discouraged. I will make the valley of Achor a gateway of hope for you."

Then the Lord goes on to say "*In that coming day, you will call Me, 'My Husband' and not 'My Master'*" (Hosea 2:16). In the old covenant they could not know the type of relationship that we can have with the Lord today as husband and wife. This relationship is what the Holy Spirit brings into our lives. Just as Abraham's servant brought Rebecca to Isaac, the Holy Spirit brings us to Jesus so that we can be married to Him. In the Old Testament they knew Him as Master. Now He says, "You won't call Me, 'Master' any more. You will call Me, 'Husband.'"

What type of relationship do you have with the Lord? Do you know that today He does not want to be your Master primarily, but your Husband? For many people their service for the Lord is boring and heavy because it is like a servant serving his master. It is like working for a difficult boss just for the sake of the salary. But a wife does not serve her husband for a salary. A boss will not share his personal wealth with his employee, but a husband does. A husband even takes care of his wife. But the wife doesn't serve her husband for all that. She serves him out of love. The Lord says, "*Even if you are unfaithful, I will be faithful to you and make you Mine*" (2:20). See the tremendous love of God here pursuing relentlessly after someone who has gone away from Him. That is how the Lord cares for each of us.

Hosea's wife sold herself as a slave. But Hosea "bought her back for fifteen pieces of silver and five bushels of barley and a measure of wine" (3:2) and told her, "You must live in my house for many days and stop your prostitution."

This is a picture of God's love.

Since Israel was about to go into captivity soon, Hosea told his wife that during that time she would not have sex with any man and not even with him (3:3). This was to illustrate that even though God had *not* forsaken Israel, yet He would keep Israel away from Him for a period of time. He was going to chasten them by letting them be without any temple priests for a period. But God would ultimately bring His people back to Him. This is always His desire.

From his experience of suffering, Hosea began to preach (*Chapter 4 onwards*). He used some very strong words in his message; but the background for all those strong words came from the sufferings he had been through. Our sufferings don't make us soft. No. We have compassion for God's people, but we will be firm with them.

Israel's Spiritual Adultery

First of all Hosea said, "*This is the case that the Lord has against His people*" (4:1). And then like all the prophets, he started with the leaders. Many years ago I was invited as a special speaker to a large denominational convention in India. There were about 12,000 people there. When I got up to speak I said, "The burden the Lord has given me is not to speak to all of you thousands of people sitting in front of me, but to all the pastors who are sitting behind me on the platform and in the audience." And I spoke on being righteous in money matters. I had been invited to speak for three days, but after two days, they told me, "We don't want you to speak any more." So I sat down quietly on the third day. God always starts with the leaders. If they don't listen to what God has to say to them, then it will go badly with them thereafter.

The prophets always spoke to the leaders first. It is because the leaders go astray that the people go astray. If the children go astray, it is because the parents have not brought up those children properly. If your children misbehave in school, don't blame them. You didn't teach them to behave properly at home. Once a mother brought a young boy to me and said, "Brother Zac, please pray for my son. He doesn't study properly etc." I wanted to pray for the mother because I felt the problem was with her. So I did not pray for the son. I don't do what people tell me to do. But I told the mother privately, "You are not going to help your son if you humiliate him publicly by saying such things."

God's people suffer even today because their leaders are ungodly and don't know God. So Hosea spoke to the priests first (4:4). If you're a leader, don't point your finger at the congregation and say, "What to do? The people in my church are so bad." The Lord says to you, "My complaint is with you leaders. You will stumble in broad daylight, and so will all the false prophets (4:5).

"My people are being destroyed because they don't know Me" (4:6). Why are God's people destroyed? It is not because they don't know the Bible. They don't know God. The Lord says, "*The fault is yours, you priests, because you don't know Me. So I refuse to recognise all of you as priests any more. I am removing the anointing from your life. You have forgotten the laws of your God and so I will forget to bless your children*" (4:6).

"The more preachers there are, the more they sin against Me" (4:7). What a condition! *"They have exchanged the glory of God for the disgrace of idols."* Do you see how relevant this word is for today! Many preachers have lost the anointing of God today because they worshipped the idol of money. Once upon a time they were poorer but had the anointing of God. Today they are richer but have lost that anointing. They have exchanged the glory of God for idols.

The priests were interested only in feeding themselves at the expense of people. God's law had permitted the priests to eat a part of the sin and guilt offerings that the people brought (*Leviticus 6:25, 26; 7:5-7*). So the priests were happy when the people sinned, because the more the people sinned, the more meat the priests got in their curry!! *"The priests get fed when the people sin and bring their sin offerings to them. So the priests are glad when the people sin!"* (4:8 - NLT).*

Hosea went on to say that the people also were like the priests and so both would be punished (4:9). It is because the parents love money (and parents are the priests in a family) that their sons and daughters also turn to spiritual adultery – even today (4:13). So God says, *"Why should I punish them? For you men are doing the same thing. O foolish people! You will be destroyed, for you refuse to understand."* (4:14). *"Their worship is mere pretense"* (4:15).

"Hear this, you priests and all of Israel's leaders! Listen, all you men of the royal family! These words of judgment are for you: You are doomed! For you have led the people into a snare by worshiping idols... But never forget – I will settle with all of you for what you have done. One thing is certain, when your day of punishment comes, you will become a heap of rubble. The leaders of Judah have become as bad as thieves. So I will pour my anger down on them like a waterfall." (5:1, 2, 9, 10). Again it is to the leaders that God speaks of judgement first, because they were primarily responsible for Israel's failures. Even today, Christians fail because their leaders have failed first.

Then the Lord says that He will wait until Israel faces some trouble. Then they will turn to Him (5:15). When Israel heard Hosea's message, they said they wanted to turn back to the Lord – just like many do today when they hear a powerful word of judgement. They said, *"Come, let us return to the Lord! He has torn us in pieces; now he will heal us. He has injured us; now he will bandage our wounds. In just a short time, he will restore us so we can live in his presence. Oh, that we might know the*

Hosea

* This verse is not very clear in many translations. That is why it is good to read these Old Testament prophetic books in *The Living Bible* and *The New Living Translation*. These versions are not translations but paraphrases and so cannot be used to establish doctrine, but they throw light on many verses whose real meaning we may not see otherwise.

Lord! Let us press on to know him! Then he will respond to us as surely as the arrival of dawn or the coming of rains in early spring.” (6:1–3). Many preachers would have been excited to hear such words and imagined that this was a genuine repentance that would lead to revival. They would have probably quickly sent a report to their sponsors saying, “We have had a revival here. Many thousands raised their hands saying they want to turn back to the Lord and signed decision cards”, etc. But the Lord’s response was different. He was not fooled. He knew that this was only a shallow, emotional turning that would vanish like the morning dew in no time at all (6:4). You see the dew on the grass in the morning; but an hour later it is gone.

In 6:5, God describes true prophetic ministry: “*I sent my prophets to cut you to pieces. I have slaughtered you with my words, threatening you with death.*” It’s not an easy ministry to cut people to pieces. But remember that Hosea himself had been cut to pieces by God’s dealings with Him in his married life. And it was from such a school of suffering that Hosea spoke.

If Hosea had not had all that suffering in his private life, he would have spoken these words in a harsh way. Don’t try to imitate Hosea’s words if God hasn’t taken you through the deep valley of suffering. It is very exciting to act like a prophet in the pulpit. You can get honour for that. But if you try to imitate a prophet without God leading you into the sufferings that the true prophets underwent, you will be a false prophet. First of all, ask God to take you through deep experiences whereby you get to know Him – experiences of trials, sufferings and pain. Then God will make you His mouthpiece to many people. Walk with God in secret. Humble yourself under whatever God sends in your life.

And then God said, “*I don’t want your sacrifices. I want you to be merciful.*” This is the verse Jesus quoted in Matthew 12:7. And because they were not merciful to others, God threatened them with judgement (6:11).

God wanted to heal Israel, but its sins were far too great. Samaria, the capital of Israel, was filled with liars, thieves and bandits (7:1). The leaders of Israel told lies and stole. Many Christian preachers are guilty of this today. They tell lies in the reports that they send to Western countries to raise money. And then when they get money they steal it and use it for themselves. If money is sent to India for God’s work, and a Christian leader uses it to live in grand style himself or to buy property for his family, what is he? A thief.

Then God said, “*My people mingle with godless foreigners*” (verse 8). They pick up the godless ways of these godless people. Many believers today mingle with worldly people, adopt worldly standards, worldly methods and worldly business principles in Christian work. In their preaching they adopt the methods used by psychologists. Much of the preaching from Christian pulpits today is pure psychology. It’s not God’s word. It is just a pep-talk to make people feel good. The Lord went on to

say, “*They have all become like a half-baked cake, cooked on one side, not cooked on the other side*” (verse 8).

It is too late to repent of all these after the enemy has come (8:1–4). Israel had become “*a vessel in which no-one delights, because they had despised God’s Word and His laws*” (8:8, 12).

The Judgement of God

“*O Israel, don’t rejoice like other people do*” (9:1). The Bible is full of exhortations to rejoice in the Lord. But here is a verse which tells Israel *not* to rejoice like other people do – because they had been unfaithful to God. They are called a harlot, because they are offering sacrifices to idols. When a person who worships money, man’s honour, sinful pleasure and a comfortable life, comes to a Sunday morning church-meeting and shouts the praises of God, do you know what God says from heaven? “Don’t rejoice. You are a harlot who worships idols”. God says some things that startle us. That’s why prophets who speak forth what God is saying are the most misunderstood men in both Old and New Testaments.

God then criticises Israel for bringing forth fruit for herself (10:1). She has a divided heart that seeks to love God and her own interests and speaks “mere words and worthless promises” to God (10:4). Much that we read about the behaviour of Israel in Old Testament times is being repeated among Christians today. God’s word to them is also His word to us today, “Sow with a view to righteousness. Reap in accordance with kindness; Break up your fallow ground, for it is time to seek the LORD until He comes to rain righteousness” (*Hosea 10:12*). God is inviting us to plough up the hard ground of our hearts and to plant good seeds of righteousness. As we seek the Lord, He will rain showers of righteousness on us.

Hosea

The Love of God for Israel

The last four chapters of *Hosea* are about God’s love for Israel and the restoration of the nation and the ultimate triumph of love over judgement.

“*When Israel was a child I loved him and out of Egypt I called My son*” (11:1). This verse although referring to Israel’s redemption from Egypt is quoted in *Matthew 2:15* as applying to Jesus returning to Israel from Egypt. This shows how Scripture (since it is the inspired word of God) is capable of more than one meaning!

God knows all about the deceit and unfaithfulness among His people (11:12). Yet His tender heart yearns for them saying, “*Oh, how can I give you up, My son? How can I let you go? My heart cries out within me; how I long to help you! No, I will not punish you as much as my fierce anger tells me to. This is the last time I will destroy you. For I am God and not man; I am the Holy One living among you, and I did not come to destroy*” (11:8, 9). This compassionate God is our Father.

"These people are crafty merchants selling from dishonest scales. They love to cheat. They cheat others and then they boast, 'I am rich. I have got it all by myself. No one knows that I got it by cheating'" (12:7, 8). There is a lot of unrighteously-earned money among Christian businessmen today, which they have cleverly hidden from the eyes of others. Financial success has given them acceptance in the eyes of immature believers and many of them are elders in good assemblies. Outwardly they appear righteous and get honour in their churches. They say, "No one knows that I got it by cheating because my outward testimony is spotless." They are clever merchants who have deceived the people. But they can't deceive God or His prophets. One day God will expose every one of them. True prophets also can see through such people. That is why these rich business people will not get close to a true prophet. Let me encourage you to be a voice for God against such corruption, in your generation.

"It used to be when Israel spoke, the nations shook with fear, for he was a mighty prince; but he worshiped Baal and sealed his doom. And now the people disobey more and more." (13:1, 2). This is the history of many who started out as prophetic voices for God. As time went on, they compromised with money and the things of this world and sealed their doom. Now people are no longer stirred when they speak.

"O Death, where are your thorns? O Sheol, where is your sting?" (13:14). This is a beautiful verse about the resurrection and is quoted in 1 Corinthians 15:55.

Hosea finally invites Israel to return to the Lord and even tells them what to say: "*Return, O Israel, to the LORD your God, for you have stumbled because of your iniquity. Take words with you and return to the LORD. Say to Him, 'Take away all iniquity and receive us graciously, that we may present the fruit of our lips'*" (14:1, 2). The fruit of our lips is "*the sacrifice of praise*" as we read in Hebrews 13:15. It is to the place of *perpetual* praise that God wants to bring all of us finally – the place where we become His worshippers, and where our relationship with Him is more important to us than everything else.

The Lord finally promises us, "*I will cure you of idolatry ... and My love will know no bounds, for my anger will be forever gone!*" (14:4). The love of money is the idolatry that is so deeply entrenched within all of us that only the Lord can deliver us from. The love of money is like a big onion. You peel off one layer and there is another underneath and many more layers below that. Only God can show us those layers one by one and free us from them little by little. I once told a carnal brother, "I think your problem is your love of money." But he replied saying, "O no, Brother Zac. I am free from that." I told him, "Well, you must be better than me, because I find that I am still battling it." He did not see his need and so fell away through the love of money later. The one who thinks he stands

is the one who falls away first. Do you think you are totally free (as Jesus was) from the love of money? May God have mercy on you if you think so. Ask God to give you light on yourself.

God then says, "*I will refresh you like the dew from heaven. You will return and rest beneath My shadow. You will be a watered garden and blossom*" (14:5–7). This is a promise of the outpouring of His Spirit that will make our lives like a watered garden.

"Whoever is wise, let him understand these things: The paths of the Lord are true and right, and the righteous will walk along them. But sinners trying them will fail" (14:9).

There are only two categories of people: *Righteous men* who walk along the paths of the Lord – and *sinners* who do not. Those who are wise will recognise this.

JOEL

THE DAY OF THE LORD

Joel was a prophet to Judah, the southern kingdom. His prophecy is a short one and his subject is the day of the Lord. The Lord sent him to Judah at a time when a swarm of locusts had caused a serious devastation of the crops.

Sometimes, in natural calamities we have to see the hand of God – and we need a prophet at such times to tell us why God allowed this to happen.

In *2 Samuel 21:1*, we read that there was a famine in the time of David for three continuous years. This was abnormal. And so David sought the Lord to know the reason for it. The Lord showed him that there was a long-standing sin that had not been set right. When that sin was set right, the famine ceased immediately.

Sometimes sickness is caused by sin, as in the case of the man who was lame for 38 years (*John 5:14*). *1 Corinthians 11:30* tells us that some believers in Corinth were sick and some had even died because they were living in sin and taking part in the Lord's table. *James 5:16* says, “*Confess your sins and pray for one another that you may be healed.*”

So whenever there is a calamity or a sickness, it is good for us to ask ourselves what the Lord is trying to say to us through it. Even if we have an accident, it is good to hear what the Lord is saying to us. Instead of explaining away all these things as natural phenomena or accidental, why not stop and ask, “Lord, is there something You are trying to tell me through this?” Such a prayer may protect you from more serious dangers that lie ahead.

I remember the few times when I fell, while riding my two-wheeler scooter. By the grace of God I have never been seriously hurt or hurt anyone else in the 45 years that I rode it. But I have had little scrapes.

And I have stopped and asked the Lord each time what He was trying to tell me. Very often the answer is, "You are driving too fast. Drive slowly." I have been thankful for such warnings, for they have saved me from more serious accidents that could have happened to me, if I had not slowed down.

The Present Judgement

So when a plague of locusts came to Judah, the Lord sent Joel to tell them what it signified. Notice once again that Joel speaks to the leaders primarily: "*Hear this, O elders, and listen, all inhabitants of the land. Has anything like this happened in your days or in your fathers' days?*" (1:2). In all their life, they had never experienced any such thing. This was God trying to say something to them.

When you listen – and discover that God was chastening you for your sins – you can repent of those sins and set those matters right. Then you can tell your children about it in later years (1:3), so that they can learn and be saved from making the mistakes you made. And in that way God's ways can be made known from one generation to the next – so that all can learn to fear God.

But if people are drunk with self-confidence, they will say, "We haven't done anything wrong." And so Joel asks the drunkards to wake up and weep (1:5). See why there is no fruit in your ministry. Ask yourself why the grapes have all been ruined and the new wine gone (1:7). Is it God's will that we should be unfruitful? No. Jesus taught very clearly that we "*should bring forth fruit that remains*" (John 15:16). It is God's will that we should be fruitful – fruitful in our character, producing the fruit of the Spirit, and fruitful in our ministry too, whatever our particular calling is.

But here Joel says, "The locusts have destroyed your fruit and you don't seem to be bothered by it at all" (1:4 - ff).

Joy itself had withered away from the lives of God's people (1:12). When you lose your joy, you can be sure that you are a backslider. A true disciple of Jesus is always full of joy. He may have many trials and sorrows; but he has joy in them all. Murmuring and complaining are signs of backsliding.

When did the children of Israel murmur? When they were in the wilderness. And God destroyed them for murmuring. *1 Corinthians 10:10, 11* tells us that we are now being warned not to murmur like them. If you complain because the food was not cooked right, you are still in the wilderness. Please remember that. When joy has dried up, you are a

backslider. What should you do then? Go to God and fast and pray and weep – especially the leaders and the preachers (1:12–14). Call the people together. Tell them to fast and pray because there is no fruit in the church – no growth in character and no fruit in the ministry.

Repentance Precedes the Outpouring of the Spirit

Blow the trumpet in Zion (the church) and sound the alarm, because this is a serious matter that must be settled before the day of the Lord arrives (2:1). The day of the Lord will be a day of darkness and gloom for all who have not confessed their sins and settled matters with God now. The day of chastening was only a warning to be ready for a greater judgement that was coming. We need not fear to turn to God, for He is gracious and merciful (2:13). He is filled with kindness and He is not at all eager to punish us. He wants to send us a blessing. So let us seek Him (2:14, 15).

We are encouraged here to call all of God's people to fast and pray as a church – the elders, the children, the bridegroom and the bride, everyone. And let them all pray saying, "*Lord, spare Your people. Don't let us become an object of mockery among the heathen*" (2:16, 17).

Do you know that Christians are an object of mockery among the heathen in most countries of the world? There was a meeting recently in a city in India where a Christian preacher claimed to be able to heal the sick. They had advertised the meetings saying, "The blind are seeing, the lame are walking and the deaf are hearing...", etc. Some anti-Christian people brought a doctor and some sick people (with problems much less than blindness) to the meeting, and asked the preacher to heal them. Of course he couldn't heal any of them. Then they rebuked the Christian preacher and his team and told them not to deceive people with false claims, when they did not have the power to heal anyone. I agree 100% with what those people said. We must not deceive people by making false claims. That is why the Name of Jesus is being mocked today.

Let us not claim to have gifts which we don't have. If you have the gift of healing, go ahead and exercise it – and people will be genuinely healed as Jesus healed people. But don't go around claiming that you have a gift when you don't have one. Jesus didn't go around advertising His healing gift. He did not have to advertise, because He actually healed the sick and soon everybody knew about it, without any advertisement.

"Then the LORD will be zealous for His land and will have pity on His people" (2:18). When we sincerely repent and confess our sins, the Lord will be indignant for the honour of His name and will answer us. And how will He answer us? He will pour out His Spirit upon us. *"I will pour out My Spirit on all the people, and your sons and daughters will prophesy and your old men will dream dreams"* (2:28). This was the verse that Peter quoted as being fulfilled on the day of Pentecost. 120 of them fasted and prayed in the upper room for ten days, repenting, seeking God and

saying, ‘Lord, don’t let Your people be the object of mockery here in Jerusalem’. And the Spirit was poured out on them, and they went forth, and the Lord’s Name was glorified where it had once been dishonoured. So let me encourage you to blow a trumpet and call a fast and get people to seek God – people who are concerned that the Name of Jesus is being dishonoured in the land today. What a word of prophecy Joel has for us today! Seek God now. Very soon the day of the Lord will come.

When the day of the Lord finally comes, there will be many wonders in the sky and on the earth, blood and fire and columns of smoke. Before that day, anyone who calls on the name of the Lord Jesus will be saved (2:30–32).

The Coming Day of the Lord

Chapter 3 describes the day of judgement and the millennial reign of Christ. Before that day arrives, there is something that we need to think about. Multitudes are waiting in the valley of decision (3:14). Millions of people are waiting in the valley of decision, not knowing which way to turn. This is the time we are living in. The day of the Lord will soon come to this valley of decision, when his voice will roar from Zion. But for His people, the Lord will be a refuge and a strong fortress at that time (3:16). Today we have to warn these millions to be ready to face the day of judgement. The Lord will then establish His kingdom of peace on earth (3:17, 18).

“*Egypt will become a wasteland and Edom will become a desolate wilderness*” (3:19). We have three enemies – the world, the flesh and the devil. All three are pictured here – Egypt (the world), its ruler Pharaoh (the devil) and Edom (the flesh). Edom refers to the descendants of Esau. The conflict between Esau and Jacob is a picture of the conflict between the flesh and the Spirit. God will deal a death-blow to these three enemies in that day – because they attacked God’s people for so many years.

“*But Jerusalem will be inhabited ... the Lord dwells in Zion*” (3:20, 21). The Lord will make His home with His people in the church permanently. That is the ultimate goal of all prophecy: *God dwelling in the midst of His people*.

Today, you and I must call God’s people to repentance, to turning from their idols and to seeking God in fasting and prayer. The burden of all the prophets was holiness: *Give up your idols and put God first in your life*. True holiness is to have no idols at all in our life. Holiness is to have God filling our whole heart. Our calling is to proclaim that today so that the church can be a place where God dwells with delight.

AMOS

PRIVILEGE BRINGS DANGERS AND RESPONSIBILITY

Amos is the first of the prophetic books containing a prophecy to Israel, the northern kingdom. He had been preceded in Israel by a couple of miracle-working prophets – Elijah and Elisha. But Elijah and Elisha did not leave any written prophecy behind them. Amos was the first person to put down his prophecies in writing.

Amos started prophesying about 40 years after Elisha. If Gehazi (Elisha's servant) had not chased after Naaman's money and thus ruined himself, it is possible that he may have got a double portion of Elisha's anointing and become the next prophet in Israel. In that case, Gehazi may have written this prophecy instead of Amos. But Gehazi missed that privilege. The Lord warns us to be watchful so that no one takes *our* crown (*Revelation 3:11*). There is a crown that God has kept for you if you will be faithful in the ministry God planned for you. But you can lose that crown if you are unfaithful. And then the ministry you were supposed to fulfil will be done by somebody else and he will get your crown. So perhaps Amos got Gehazi's crown!

Amos had no desire to be a prophet. He was a simple shepherd – just like many of the first apostles were simple fishermen. Elisha had been a farmer. Amos was a man who looked after cattle, sheep and figs. When questioned about his credentials he said, "*I am not a professional prophet. I certainly never got any training to be a prophet. I am just a shepherd. I take care of fig trees. But the Lord called me away from my flock and told me, 'Go and prophesy to My people in Israel'*" (*Amos 7:14–15*).

Why did God pick Amos to be the *first person* to write down a prophetic message? God must have watched him (like He watches all of us) to see if Amos feared God and was faithful in his work. Amos was not a scholar or a priest, but he was very faithful in his work. He was God-fearing, was

kind to poor people and lived in a good way. And one day, God called him and told him, "You are going to be My servant."

God watches us every day to see if we are faithful in our daily life, whether we choose the way of humility always, whether we take time to wait on Him and listen to Him, to study the Scriptures, etc. Maybe Amos had been faithful for 25 years, I don't know. I know that Jesus was faithful for 30 years in Nazareth before He was called to preach. When you continue being faithful in little things for many long years, you can begin to wonder whether God has forgotten all about you. He has *not*. All of a sudden, one day, God will say to you, "You are My servant from today." God calls those who are faithful in their secular work. He did that in the Old Testament. Jesus also called as apostles men who had been faithful in their secular work.

Two expressions that never occur in the book of Amos are '*the God of Israel*' and '*the Holy One of Israel*.' This was because Amos saw God as the God of *all nations*, and not just the God of Israel. He quotes the Lord's words, "*Do you Israelites think that you are more important to Me than the Ethiopians? I brought you out of Egypt. That's right. But haven't I done as much for other nations? I brought the Philistines from Crete. I led the Arameans, that is the Syrians, out of Kir. And I brought you out of Egypt. What is the difference between you and them?*" (9:7).

Amos was a prophet with a "*new covenant*" vision that embraced all people of all nations. He believed that God would gather the Gentiles also along with the Jews and make them all into one body. Amos rose above the petty narrow-mindedness of the Israelites. He had a large heart for people all over the world. He was not exclusive like the other Israelites who felt, "We are the only people whom God has accepted." There are many Christian groups today too that imagine that God has chosen only them to be His people on earth!! In fact, that attitude is one of the identifying marks of a cult. There were people like that in Israel in those days too. But not Amos - he had a large heart.

A true servant of God will have a large heart that accepts God's people in every group and denomination. Babylon is *not* a system that is found in any one denomination. It is the world system that can be found *right inside your heart*. People can sit in the best church in the world and be a part of Babylon – because Babylon can be in their spirit. They may imagine that because they have come out of a denominational system, they are free from Babylon. But that is not true.

For example, if you love money, whichever church in the world you may belong to, *you are a part of Babylon*. If you live according to the lusts of the flesh, whichever church in the world you are in, *you are an adulteress*. You can glory in your pure doctrines saying, "We don't worship Mary or practice infant baptism..." Good. But if you worship money and practise your lusts, you may actually be worse than those others. Theirs is a

head-problem (doctrinal), whereas yours is a more serious *heart*-problem (related to life).

There is a lot of exclusivism in Christendom today that imagines that God cares only for one's own little group!! The body of Christ is larger than any one denomination. God's people are *not* found in *any* one denomination today. God has His people in every denomination. There are born again people in many churches with different doctrines. I don't agree with the doctrines of many churches; but I cannot deny the fact that God has some of His children there. In the same way, there are *unconverted* people who sit as registered members in evangelical churches and who are breaking bread in "separated" assemblies – especially those of the second and third generations in those churches.

We must see something of Amos' vision in these days. God punishes people of all nations and of all denominations. And He gathers people also from all nations and all denominations.

Almost all of Amos' illustrations come from his shepherd life. Even though God gave him the message to speak, yet God used Amos' human personality and intelligence to convey that message. Amos talks about a bullock cart full of sheaves of corn, about a shepherd trying to rescue bits of a lamb from a lion's mouth, about ploughing the fields, and about caterpillars and locusts. He also talks about the stars, showing that as a shepherd in the fields at night, he was a keen observer of God's vast creation.

God gave Amos a message pronouncing judgement on the rich people in Israel and their wives who lived in great luxury and ignored the poor. So Amos was obviously not a popular preacher!!

Amos was living at a time when Jeroboam was king over Israel (790 to 750 B.C.). "*Jeroboam reigned forty-one years and did evil in the sight of the LORD*" (2 Kings 14:23, 24). This was a relatively peaceful time in Israel. Since there was no expense on war, the Israelites expanded their businesses and became very, very rich. Amos mentions the palatial summer houses and winter mansions of the wealthy (3:15). The rich had a house in the mountains (for use during the summer) and another in the plains (for use during the winter). The leaders of Israel lived in luxury, lying on beds of ivory, lazily listening to music, getting drunk, gorging themselves on tender meats and living in gross immorality (6:4; 4:1; 2:7). On top of all this, they also exploited the poor through exorbitant rents and through bribing judges in the courts (5:10, 12). The poor were also being sold as slaves (2:6). The rich businessmen eagerly waited for the Sabbath day to be over each week, so that they could go out and do business once again (8:5). All they thought about was money. And their wives were pampered drunkards (4:1). Nobody cared that the country was being destroyed (6:6). And those who were not rich or influential lost out in this system. This is the type of atmosphere in which Communism

breeds today. Communism flourishes wherever fantastically rich people exploit the poor.

The amazing thing is that along with all this self-indulgence, they also had a lot of religion. They offered sacrifices and thanksgiving offerings regularly and brought their tithes every three days. They had their solemn assemblies, their special meetings and their religious festivals with hymns of praise. They had wonderful times of praise and worship. But the Lord rejected all of this as a lot of empty noise (5:21–23).

All this is very similar to what we see in Christendom today. Many rich preachers live in grand houses today that have been built with offerings taken from poor believers. Rich people are given positions of honour in churches merely because of their wealth. Such rich preachers and rich people do not like to hear the truth. So Amos had a very difficult ministry.

The Israelites had professional preachers those days too. One of them was Amaziah who confronted Amos (7:10–16). Amaziah was a priest who was paid a good salary by the rich board-members of the temple because he preached sermons that kept them happy. And here came this shepherd-prophet, Amos, an untrained man, who began to thunder away at all those rich people. Those rich people became furious and said, “Get this Amos out of here. He is preaching false doctrine and heresies! Throw him out.” Amaziah promptly ordered Amos to get out of Israel to please those rich people. And Amaziah suffered the judgement of God in his own family as a result (7:12, 17).

So we see that prophets like Amos have a message that is very relevant for our time.

In *Chapters 1 and 2* Amos proclaimed judgement on a number of nations. In *Chapters 3 to 6* he told Israel why *they* were being judged. And finally in *Chapters 7 to 9*, like many of the other prophets, he prophesied the restoration of Israel after the judgement.

Amos

Judgement

First, Amos pronounced judgement on Damascus, Gaza, Tyre, Edom, Ammon and Moab (1:3, 4, 6, 7, 9, 11, 13; 2:1). I can imagine how the Israelites must have been delighted listening to Amos thundering away against those nations. They would have said, “Amen. Praise the Lord.” But after that he said, “*Woe unto Judah. Woe unto Israel.*” And then the “Amens” became silent – because now he was preaching to them.

We all like to hear preachers who tell us what is wrong with the world and with other churches! That was how Amos started. He got them all to say “Amen” and then homed in on them. He was a wise preacher. He told them that they (Judah and Israel) were no different (2:4, 6).

Amos often used the expression, “*For three transgressions and for four...*” (eight times in *Chapters 1 and 2*). What the Lord meant by that

was, “I have let you off a number of times. But I am not going to let you off any more. I have forgiven you many times. But you have been taking advantage of My goodness. Now I have to punish you.” This is a word that we all need to hear. Do you take advantage of God’s goodness?

Amos’ preaching condemned the people of various nations mainly for the cruel way they had treated others. Damascus had taken advantage of poor people and “*threshed them like grain*” (1:3). People had been treated like things (grain). It is a common sin among many Christians that they love their material possessions much more than they love people. Tyre had broken their covenant of brotherhood with Israel and sold whole Israeli villages as slaves to Edom (1:9). Edom had chased down their Israeli cousins with swords (1:11). This is another common sin among Christians that they forget that others in Christ’s Body are their own brothers and sisters, and betray them to others. Ammon had ripped open the pregnant women of Gilead (1:13). Christians today rip people up with their tongues. Moab was so angry with the dead king of Edom for something that had happened when he was alive, that they dug up his bones and burned them to ashes (2:1). Christians too often retain anger against others for things that happened many years earlier.

Many of man’s actions are motivated by anger. Angry people tend to be hard on others. We need to take heed to the warning here: “*For three transgressions and for four...*”. God has overlooked our anger many a time and let us go. But now, He says, He will be hard on us if we continue to be hard on others.

When we studied *Genesis*, we saw that God never cursed Adam – because when Adam sinned, *he hurt only himself*. But God cursed Cain, because Cain *hurt another human being*. Some sins affect only us. But some sins affect others too. If you drink alcohol or smoke cigarettes or take harmful drugs, you basically hurt only yourself by such sins. Such sins are not *as serious* as the sins that hurt others. If you commit adultery, you violate a woman’s body and hurt her. This is very serious. *Equally*, if you gossip or speak evil of others, you hurt their reputation. This is also very serious. Any sin that hurts another person in any way is very serious in God’s eyes. So gossiping (that hurts others) is worse than taking harmful drugs (that hurts only yourself). But it is almost impossible to find a church that teaches that a gossiper is worse than a drug-addict!! Unfortunately we don’t have prophets to tell us the truth about God’s Word.

See how hard God was on these people! When it came to Judah and Israel, see what He said to them: “*You have rejected the laws of the Lord. You have disobeyed God’s word*” (2:4). Those other people didn’t have God’s laws. They treated others badly in ignorance of God’s laws. But Israel and Judah did the same thing knowing God’s laws. “*Therefore I will send fire on Judah.*” The people of Israel had sinned again and again (2:6). They had sold poor people for a pair of sandals, trampled helpless

people in the dust, denied justice to those who were oppressed, lived in adultery at their religious festivals, lounged around in clothing stolen from their debtors, and offered wine in the house of God that had been purchased with stolen money (2:7, 8). That was like cheating others and giving that money for God's work. Jesus told us to first give to Caesar what was Caesar's and then to give to God what belonged to God. That is the order. So he warned all these people and condemned them for their attitude.

"I chose some of your sons to be prophets and Nazarites" (2:11). Nazarites were those who were set apart to be exclusively God's – like Samson. *"But you caused the Nazarites to sin by making them drink wine."* "There were a few wholehearted young believers in your church, but you corrupted them by your self-seeking, your worldliness and your immoral behaviour. Thus those young people backslid." I believe this has happened in India. God calls some young man here or there to be a prophet or a Nazarite, separated to God, but he gets corrupted by looking at the example of older preachers who are going in the wrong direction. The Lord says to those older preachers, "You have destroyed these budding prophets. You have destroyed these Nazarites."

My word to all of you young people is this: Don't look at the bad examples among those who are older than you. Follow the examples of Christlike leaders and ignore the rest, even if their doctrines are correct. Don't imagine that just because a man's doctrines are right he is a godly man. It's Christlike character that makes a man a godly man.

Why Israel was Being Judged

In Chapters 3 to 6 Amos told Israel why they were being judged. He asked them, *"Can two walk together, except they be agreed?"* (3:3). How could the Lord walk with them, if they were not in total fellowship with Him? As long as there were sins in Israel that they had not repented of and set right, the Lord would not walk with them. We must agree with the Lord's view of sin in order to fellowship with Him. Amos went on to say, *"When a lion roars it is because he has found a victim. And if the Lord is roaring now in judgment, it is because there is sin in Israel. When disaster comes to a city, it is because the Lord sent it – as a judgment"* (3:4–6).

A few years after Amos preached, Assyria came and brought that predicted disaster on Israel. The Lord told them in advance that that was His punishment to teach them a lesson. But before punishing them, He would warn them through His prophets, giving them an opportunity to repent (3:7). Today, the Lord warns His people in the churches repeatedly through His prophets saying, "Turn from sin. If you don't, then I will chasten you." The chastening may not come immediately; but it will definitely come. The judgement on Israel came about 100 years after Amos prophesied; but it did come. When Noah proclaimed judgement on the

world, it came only 120 years later. Everyone *WILL* reap what they sow. There will be no escaping that. But God will warn people through His prophets before He judges.

When the lion roars, people should fear. When the sovereign Lord speaks, His servants must prophesy (3:8). What the Lord was saying was, “If a lion stood in front of you and roared, you would tremble. But here I am speaking to you, and you don’t tremble. I am speaking to you about the impurity in your thoughts and your eyes, your unrighteousness in money matters, your worship of things other than Me. Yet you do not tremble. You are more afraid of a lion that I created than of Me its Creator.” People may have said, “Well, that is just Amos and he is just an untrained shepherd.” He may have been an untrained shepherd but he was a prophet of God!

God’s people had sinned so much that they had actually “*forgotten what was right*” and what was wrong (3:10).

In *Chapter 4*, Amos called the women of Israel, “*fat cows*.” They were fat through lots of eating and drinking. Yet they were constantly asking their husbands for “*yet another drink*” (4:1). Amos warned them that someone would “*put a hook in their noses (these cows), and drag them away*” (4:2). The Lord was sharp in His rebukes and His prophet Amos did not tone down the Lord’s words to make them more palatable. True prophets are usually sharp in their rebukes. Jesus Himself was like that, because that is often the only way to alert people to the seriousness of the dangers they face.

The Lord went on to tell them, “You can keep on offering all the sacrifices you want, but I don’t care for any of them. I tried to warn you through one calamity after another that I was not happy with you. I brought hunger to one city and famine to another. But you would not listen to Me. I sent a dry spell into the fields where you needed rain desperately and your crops were ruined. Rain fell on one field but not on another. People staggered from town to town for a drink of water but there wasn’t enough water. But you would not return to Me. I struck your farms and vineyards with blight and sent sicknesses and plagues into your midst and even destroyed some of your cities. But in spite of all these warnings, you still did not return to Me” (4:4, 6–11). There was now only one solution left: “*Prepare to meet your God*” (4:12).

Today, the Lord’s word to you may perhaps be very similar: “You are living in sin and loving this world, yet claiming to be My child and thus bringing dishonour to My Name. I have tried My best through the failures and chastening I have sent into your life to tell you that I am not happy with you. Yet you don’t seem to wake up. Then, prepare to meet your God as your Judge.”

“*Don’t go to worship in Bethel, Gilgal or Beersheba*” (5:5). These were places where God had worked in the past. There was a history attached

to these places. In Bethel and in Beersheba, God had met with Jacob, the father of the Israeli nation. Gilgal was the place where their history in Canaan had begun, when Joshua circumcised all the people after they came through the river Jordan. God was saying, “Don’t live in the past.” Don’t say, “The man who founded our church, many years ago was a godly man.” Some of these godly men who founded churches 200–300 years ago, would not join the churches they founded, if they were to return to earth today – because their churches have backslidden so badly. Don’t look back at the past. See where God is working today.

“O evil men, you make justice a bitter pill for the poor. Righteousness and fair play are meaningless fictions to you! How you hate honest judges! How you despise people who tell the truth! You trample the poor and steal their smallest crumb by all your taxes, fines, and interest; therefore, you will never live in the beautiful stone houses you are building. For many and great are your sins. I know them all so well. You are the enemies of everything good; you take bribes; you refuse justice to the poor. I hate your show and pretense – your hypocrisy of ‘honoring’ me with your religious feasts and solemn assemblies. I will not accept your burnt offerings and thank offerings. I will not look at your offerings of peace. Away with your hymns of praise – they are mere noise to my ears. I will not listen to your music, no matter how lovely it is. I want to see a mighty flood of justice – a torrent of doing good” (5:7–12, 21–24 – TLB). When a believer rents out his house to a poor man, did you know that God is interested in the amount of rent he charges? God hates those who exploit the poor.

“How terrible it will be for all of you who lounge in luxury and think that you are secure” (6:1). In 6:4–6, the Lord is quite sarcastic and tells them that they imagine they are as good musicians as David was. But David had a good heart, whereas these Israelites only had good music. They were happy that everything was going well in their homes – they had comfortable houses, good music and good food. But how many of them were concerned about “Joseph’s affliction” – the sad state of the nation? Hardly anyone. In our time, the Lord’s question is “How many of you are concerned about the sad state of the church?”

The Lord said, “I despise the pride and the false glory of Israel. I hate their beautiful homes” (6:8). Does God hate beautiful homes? No. But He does resist people who are proud of their beautiful homes, and especially when they are not concerned that the Body of Christ should be pure and holy.

Visions of Judgement and Promises of Restoration

In *Chapters 7 to 9*, Amos was first shown *five visions* of Israel being judged and then given *five promises* of Israel’s restoration.

In 7:1–6, Amos saw visions of a locust-swarm and a great fire coming to judge Israel. He immediately interceded for Israel saying, “*O sovereign Lord, please don’t do this. There will be no hope for Israel if you judge them like that*” God listened to Amos and gave up His plans to judge Israel – twice. This shows us the tremendous power there is in intercession (7:6). But prayer according to God’s will requires that we stand with God where He stands – and see the seriousness of sin. In Ezekiel’s time later, God did not find any intercessor (*Ezekiel 22:30*). But at this time, He did find one – Amos who pleaded with God, just as Moses had pleaded many centuries earlier when God had wanted to destroy Israel in the wilderness. These prophets were compassionate men and therefore they were great intercessors. It was because of these prophets that Israel was often saved from destruction. But Israel did not value them.

The Lord then gave Amos a vision of a plumb-line and told him, “*I am about to put a plumb line in the midst of My people Israel – to see if they are straightforward, honest and upright – I will spare them no longer*” (7:8). God always tests us by His plumb-line to see if we are honest about our sins.

We then see a confrontation between Amaziah, the priest of Bethel, (symbolising a Babylonian “Christian” leader) and Amos (symbolising one who builds Jerusalem, the true church). Amaziah went to the king and told him a lie about Amos saying, “Amos is hatching a plot against you.” False prophets are quick to spread lies about the true prophets of God saying, “They are preaching false doctrines. If you listen to them, it will lead to confusion in your church,” etc. in order to turn people away from the truth that can set them free. That happened in Amos’ time, and it has happened time and again during the last 2000 years in Christendom. Amaziah told Amos, “You came from Judah to Israel to preach here. Go back to Judah and earn money through your preaching there (“*eat bread and prophesy there*” – 7:12 - KJV). We have more than enough preachers here and we don’t want to listen to any of your prophecies here.”

But Amos replied, “Listen, Amaziah, I am not a professional prophet like you. I didn’t go to any Bible-school to be trained. I am a shepherd and a farmer. I was looking after my flock and my fig trees when God came to me one day and told me to go to Israel and prophesy. That’s why I came here. I didn’t come here to earn my living or to make money as a prophet. And now, Amaziah, since you oppose me, the Lord will judge you. Your wife will become a prostitute in this city, your sons and daughters will be killed, and you yourself will die in a foreign land.” (7:14–17).

It is a dangerous thing to fight against the true prophets of God.

Then the Lord gave Amos a vision of ripe fruit symbolising that Israel was ripe for punishment (8:2). Why was Israel being punished? The Lord says, “*Listen, you merchants who rob the poor, trampling on the needy; you who long for the Sabbath to end and the religious holidays to be over so you can get out and start cheating again – using your weighted scales*

and under-sized measures; you who make slaves of the poor, buying them for their debt of a piece of silver or a pair of shoes, or selling them your mouldy wheat: The Lord, the Pride of Israel, has sworn: ‘I won’t forget your deeds! The land will tremble as it awaits its doom, and everyone will mourn.’ (8:4–7).

In 8:11, 12, we read these prophetic words about the last days: “*There will be a famine in the last days – not a famine of bread but a famine of the word of the Lord – and people will wander here and there looking for a word from the Lord.*” We are seeing that famine today. ‘The Word of God’ refers to the Bible – and there is no shortage of that. The Bible Society distributes millions of Bibles every year and the Bible is still the world’s best-selling book. But here it is speaking about ‘*the word of the Lord*’ – and that refers to the prophetic word that comes from God according to the need of the hour through the mouth of a prophet. The “*word of the Lord*” will be rare in the last days. People will wander everywhere to hear a true prophet – but they will not be easy to find. So, when you do get an opportunity to hear a prophetic word from the Lord, pay attention and listen to it carefully – and take it seriously.

When God judges Israel, those who genuinely fear Him will be saved: “*I have commanded that Israel be sifted by the other nations as grain is sifted in a sieve, yet not one true kernel will be lost. But all these sinners who say, ‘God will not touch us,’ will die by the sword.*” Satan has a sieve with which he seeks to sift God’s children (See Luke 22:31). But our Lord prays for us and our faith will not fail.

The Lord then says, “*At that time I will rebuild the City of David, which is now lying in ruins, and return it to its former glory*” (9:11). This verse is quoted by James (in Acts 15:16, 17), as referring to the building of the church. The church is in a ruined state in many places. But the Lord says, “*I will rebuild it.*”

And then the time will come when “*the plowman will overtake the reaper*” (9:13). What that means is: We have sowed much evil in the past, and although we have been forgiven, yet to some extent we still reap what we have sown. But the time will soon come when the new things that you are sowing in your life (after becoming a wholehearted disciple) will wipe out the things you have been reaping (because of your past). For example: The dirty thoughts and dreams that have been plaguing your mind because you read and saw so much pornography in the past, will gradually be replaced by thoughts and dreams of spiritual things, because you are now filling your mind with the word of God. And your life will be fruitful for God.

What a glorious promise that is! Hallelujah!

OBADIAH

PRIDE AND ITS RESULTS

The book of *Obadiah* is a very small book, with just one chapter. Why did Obadiah write such a small book? The primary reason of course, is that God gave him very little to write. But the interesting fact is that Obadiah was sensitive enough to stop writing when the Spirit had stopped speaking – unlike some preachers who preach long, boring sermons imagining that they are “*led by the Spirit*”!!

Humanly speaking, there could have been another reason too. Obadiah was prophesying at the same time as Jeremiah. And he *may* have felt that he should prophesy very little in the presence of the godly Jeremiah who had been prophesying for 30 years already. I see a spirit of humility there in that attitude of Obadiah’s. This is only a surmise, but that is certainly how it should be in a church meeting, or in a time of fellowship among believers, today. Less mature brothers must give time to godly brothers to speak at length, and speak very little themselves. But unfortunately humble brothers, like Obadiah, are rare to find in our day.

The Judgement of Edom

Obadiah spoke about God’s judgement on Edom. Edom is a type of our flesh. So this prophecy symbolises the destruction of the flesh. It speaks here about the pride of Edom. “*You are proud because you live in those high, inaccessible cliffs. ‘Who can ever reach us way up here!’ you boast. Don’t fool yourselves! Though you soar as high as eagles, and build your nest among the stars, I will bring you plummeting down, says the Lord.*” (verses 3, 4).

The flesh always seeks to exalt itself. But God is determined to destroy that pride completely. If thieves came at night and robbed you they would not take everything. But here, “*every nook and cranny will be searched and robbed, and every treasure found and taken*” (verse 6 - TLB).

The application of this for us is that every little corner that is called “flesh” in us, every lust of the flesh, will be totally destroyed and overcome by the power of the Spirit.

Edom was being punished because of the violence that they did to their close relatives Israel, because in the time of Israel’s greatest need, when they were being taken captive, they “*deserted Israel in their time of need and stood aloof, refusing to lift a finger to help him when invaders carried off their wealth*” (verses 10, 11). They had acted as if they too were Israel’s enemies. Edom *did nothing* to help Israel.

There are sins of *commission* as well as sins of *omission*. Often when we think of sin, we think only of the sins that have been *committed*. Notice in the story of the Good Samaritan that the priest and Levite did not *commit* any sin. They did not beat up the wounded man. Their sin was that they did not lift a finger to help him (*Luke 10:29–37*). Do we realise that *not helping a needy person is a sin*? That is a sin of omission. Edom did NOT do what they should have done – and the Lord took it seriously.

Edom’s second sin was that they gloated over Israel’s capture (*verse 12*). When something bad happens to somebody you don’t like, do you feel happy? That is sin. We are not to rejoice over someone else’s misfortune.

But that was not all. Edom attacked those helpless Israelites and cut them down at the crossroads (*verse 14*). They cooperated with Israel’s enemies.

The Restoration of Israel

Finally the Lord spoke about the restoration of Israel. Almost all the prophets spoke about restoration. “*Jerusalem will become a refuge for those who escape*” one day (*verse 17*). It will be a holy place. And the people of Israel will come back to reclaim their inheritance. At that time Israel will become a flaming fire for the Lord, and Edom a field of dry stubble (*verse 18*). “*Deliverers will come to Jerusalem and rule all Edom (the flesh). And the Lord shall be King!*” (*verse 21*).

Today, God has called us to be those deliverers, proclaiming to God’s backslidden people, “*Behold your King!*” and inviting them to come back to Him.

What was the cause of Edom’s fall? “*The pride of your heart has deceived you*” (*verse 3*). When we are proud, we open ourselves to spiritual deception – because pride is the very nature of Satan, the deceiver. The moment you become proud of something – good looks, intelligence, spirituality, Bible knowledge, anything – immediately the devil holds your hand and says, “*You and I are in fellowship now.*” Jesus Christ,

on the other hand, was the humblest Man that walked on earth; and the moment you humble yourself, you come into fellowship with Him.

Pride is more dangerous than adultery because adultery is an outward sin – and sins that are outward and obvious are not as serious as sins that are hidden. Obadiah warns those who are complacent in their pride that they are deceived. Let us learn from his brief exhortation to be concerned about those who are in captivity to their flesh, around us, and to proclaim to them that Jesus can deliver them completely.

If we do that, then Obadiah would not have written his one page in vain.

JONAH

GOD'S LOVE FOR ALL NATIONS

There are 16 prophetic books in the Old Testament (*Isaiah* to *Malachi*). Out of those 16 prophets, Jonah was the only one who did not prophesy anything either to Israel or to Judah. He prophesied only to Nineveh. The book of *Jonah* is not really a prophecy, but a book of history.

Jonah may have written it himself in the third person. It is a story that illustrates God's tremendous love for all people. *Jonah* is the great missionary book of the Old Testament. It shows the narrow-heartedness of the Jewish people and the large-heartedness of God – and His concern and love for even the most wicked nation on earth – which at that time was Assyria, whose capital was Nineveh.

When God needed a messenger to go to Nineveh, He picked Jonah. That was a tremendous honour – for Jonah would be the first prophet of God to the outside world – to the non-Jewish nations. But he almost missed that privilege by his disobedience.

We see here again how God is dependent on a human channel to convey His message. And if the messenger is not willing to cooperate, God is limited. God has to wait until the vessel is ready – as in the case of Moses. When Israel was ready to be delivered from Egypt, Moses was not ready. And so Israel had to wait for their deliverance until God had finished preparing Moses.

We see something similar here. God wanted to give Nineveh a message. But he had to prepare His servant first to take that message. Jonah was prejudiced against the Assyrians and was unwilling to go to them, just as Peter later was unwilling to go to the Gentiles – to the house of Cornelius. Prejudice is a very strong thing. All of us have certain prejudices. And if God is not able to break down those prejudices, our service for the Lord will be limited. God may still use us, but He will be limited in how much He can use us, because His heart is much larger than ours.

Nineveh was about 600 kilometres east of Israel. That was a long distance for Jonah to travel. But that was not the primary reason why he did not want to go there. Everyone in the world hated the Assyrians, because they were so cruel. And Jonah did not want the wicked Assyrians to repent of their sins, because He knew that if they repented, God would spare them – and then they would come and destroy Israel.

Jonah's First Commission

There are two sections in this book. The first two chapters deal with Jonah's first commission and the next two chapters deal with his second commission.

The Lord told Jonah, “*Go to Nineveh and cry against the city, because their wickedness has come up before Me*” (1:1, 2). But Jonah, instead of going east, went west. He went to Joppa, found a ship, paid the fare, and went down to Tarshish, fleeing from the presence of the Lord (1:3).

Because Jonah had money to travel, he missed the will of God. How blessed it would have been for him if he did not have any money to buy a ticket to Tarshish. When God tells us to go somewhere and we want to go somewhere else, it will be good if we don't have the money to travel to the place of our choice.

Many Christian workers feel that if they have the money to travel somewhere, that indicates that it is God's will. If that argument were a valid one, then Jonah was in the will of God when he left for Tarshish!! Just because you have the money to buy something or to go somewhere, does not mean that that is God's will for you. God may not want you to buy that thing and He may want you to go to some other place. Money is a great deceiver. Never allow the availability of money to be the deciding factor in deciding where to go or what to buy.

When Jonah went away from the will of God, the Lord hurled a great wind on the sea and a great storm, and the ship was about to break up. The sailors were afraid and each cried out to his god but the storm did not subside. While the others were praying to their idols, the only one on that ship who knew the true God was sleeping. They woke him up and asked him to pray too. Then they cast lots to find out whose fault it was that their prayers were not being answered. God sovereignly controlled that lot so that it fell on Jonah. The others in the ship were far greater sinners than Jonah; yet the storm came because of Jonah! Disobedience in a child of God is more serious in God's eyes than multitudes of sins in an unbeliever. “*Of all the peoples of the earth, I have chosen you alone. That is why I must punish you the more for all your sins*” (Amos 3:2).

Jonah then admitted his sin. He told them that he was running away from God. They tried their best to row to the shore but couldn't succeed, since the sea was very stormy. Then Jonah said, “*Please pick me up and throw me outside into the sea and it will stop, because I know this storm*

has come upon you because of me" (verse 12). Then those seamen were afraid that God would punish them if they threw Jonah into the sea. Those heathen men seem to have more of the fear of God here than God's prophet. Finally, since there was no other way, they picked up Jonah and threw him into the sea – and immediately the storm subsided. And "*the men feared the Lord*" (verse 16).

Meanwhile, the Lord had appointed a great fish to swallow Jonah, and Jonah was in the stomach of the fish for three days and three nights. God's word is inspired and I believe it just as it is written. Jesus Himself endorsed this true story when He said, "*As Jonah was in the belly of the great fish, so shall the Son of Man be in the heart of the earth*" (Matthew 12:40). Paradise was located in the heart of the earth before the resurrection and ascension of Jesus – and Jesus was there, in paradise, in the heart of the earth, for three days and three nights – from Thursday evening (yes, He WAS crucified on a Thursday) until Sunday morning when He was raised from the dead.

After three days, Jonah prayed. Notice the word "*THEN*" in 2:1. That word makes it clear that Jonah did not pray during the first three days and nights. So what was he doing during those three days and nights? He was most probably trying to crawl out of the stomach of the great fish. He must have tried again and again and always slipped back into the fish's slimy belly. After three days of futile effort, he finally decided to pray.

That is how it is with us too, when we find ourselves trapped in a difficult situation. The first thing we usually do is to try and get out of it by some human effort. When all our efforts fail, then we pray! And so Jonah prayed after 3 days. Still nothing happened. He says, "*I was locked out of life and imprisoned in the land of death. When I had lost all hope, I turned my thoughts once more to the Lord. And my earnest prayer went to you in your holy Temple*" (2:6, 7). Nothing happened even after his prayer. Finally, he stopped praying and started praising the Lord. He said, "*I will sacrifice to You with the voice of thanksgiving. Salvation is from the Lord* (Deliverance can come only from You)" (2:9). In other words, he was saying, "*Lord, I am going to praise You with all of my heart. You can deliver me if and when You like.*"

As soon as he started *praising God*, the Lord commanded the fish to vomit Jonah out on to the land. Notice the word "*THEN*" again in 2:10. That makes it clear that it was only when he started praising the Lord, that the Lord commanded the fish to vomit him out. There is a principle here. We saw this principle when we were studying Psalm 50:23: "*Whoever offers a sacrifice of thanksgiving (the same phrase Jonah uses here) makes a way thereby for Me to show him My deliverance.*" In other words, the Lord says, "If you start praising Me instead of just complaining, you will make

a way for Me to deliver you.” We have seen how Jehoshaphat followed that principle too. Surrounded by great armies he began to praise the Lord and thus God delivered him from his enemies (*2 Chronicles 20:22*).

Prayer by itself is not necessarily an expression of faith, but sincere praise to God is always the expression of faith (See *Psalm 106:12*). You may pray without faith. But if you praise God, when the situation is not yet resolved, then you are expressing your faith. When you say, “*I praise You, Lord, for I know that deliverance comes only from You*”, you have expressed Your faith in God and made a way for Him to deliver you.

Jonah’s Second Commission

Then the word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time. Praise the Lord that when we fail once, the Lord gives us a second chance. That is one of the great messages that comes to us from the book of *Jonah*. Have you failed the Lord? God is waiting to give you another chance. Have you failed Him a second time? He will give you a third chance. He is not only the God of the second chance – for most of us have blown our second chance long, long ago. He is the God of *another* chance, no matter how many times you have failed! The Lord can restore you even now and enable you to fulfil a ministry for Him, if you repent wholeheartedly.

Jonah had learned his lesson now. He had been chastened and now he went to Nineveh gladly. It took him three days to walk through that huge city, proclaiming in every street that Nineveh would be overthrown in 40 days. Amazingly, the people of Nineveh repented *immediately*. This was the greatest and quickest revival that ever took place in the history of the world – and it took place in a heathen nation. Such a revival has never been seen anywhere. Jonah’s sermon consisted of only one sentence. But it brought conviction to thousands – and they ALL repented.

What do we see here? When God has successfully dealt with His servant and done a work in him, even one sentence from his mouth has such tremendous power. If God has not succeeded in dealing with your stubbornness, your disobedience, your rebellion and your pride, then even long sermons you preach won’t accomplish anything. But if God has succeeded in breaking you, then even one sentence will be powerful.

From the king down to the beggar there was much weeping and repenting. They put on sackcloth and called upon God to forgive them. They knew they would be judged. And when God saw that, He did not punish them.

One of the things that encourages me here is that even when a wicked city like Nineveh repented, God was merciful. God knew that some years later, the city would be so evil that He would have to destroy it. But God treats everyone as they are right now – and not as they were in the past or as they will be in the future. His Name is “*I AM*”, not “*I was*” nor “*I will be*”.

God is more compassionate than we are. There is not a single case in Scripture where a person repented and turned to God, where God

did not forgive. Even if Judas Iscariot had gone to the Lord and asked for forgiveness, he would have been forgiven. But he went to the priests instead – like many do today! You can't get forgiveness by confessing your sins to any priest. Judas Iscariot tried it and was not forgiven. And you won't be forgiven that way either.

When God had mercy on Nineveh, one would have thought that Jonah would have been excited. But he wasn't. Imagine an evangelist who sees an entire city of over 120,000 people (4:11) weeping and repenting – the greatest revival in history – and not being excited! Jonah became angry instead. First of all, because his prophecy was not fulfilled. Secondly, because as a patriotic Israeli, he hated the people of Nineveh and had hoped that they would not repent and that God would destroy them.

Are we like Jonah? Is there anyone on earth whom you do NOT want God to bless? Have we forgotten how merciful God has been to us and how He has blessed us even when we deserved only Hell. But Jonah was now concerned about his own honour and reputation as a prophet.

To teach Jonah a lesson, the Lord allowed a plant to grow up over his head. Jonah was very happy for the plant. But the next day, because God made a worm eat up the plant, it withered up. Jonah was very angry again because the sun was beating down on him and he said, "*It is better for me to die than live*" (4:8). Then God said to Jonah, "*You had compassion on a plant which came up overnight and perished overnight. Should I not have compassion on Nineveh, the great city in which there are more than 120,000 persons who do not know the difference between their right and left hand, as well as many animals?*" (4:11). God expressed His concern for more than 120,000 innocent babies in Nineveh besides many animals. It is amazing to see God's concern here for the animals in Nineveh! "*A good man is concerned for the welfare of his animals*" (Proverbs 12:10 - TLB).

In this verse (Jonah 4:11) – more than in any other verse in the Old Testament – we see God's tremendous compassion for lost souls. God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son that no one should perish. Jonah somehow did not get into fellowship with God in this matter. There are many preachers today too who preach and see revivals (like Jonah did), but who like Jonah, are not in fellowship with the compassionate heart of God. Such preachers do not fulfil their ministry as God wants them to. You may preach and get people saved; and yet at the end of it all, like Jonah, you may have no fellowship with God at all. The proper basis for an evangelistic ministry is fellowship with the heart of God. God has such a great compassion for those who don't have light.

The Bible says God wants all men to repent, to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth (1 Timothy 2:4). He longs for that. The more

we come into fellowship with God's heart, the more we will share His burden. If God has called you to be an evangelist, He will give you a compassion for lost souls. If God calls you to be a teacher, He will give you a compassion for believers who are blinded and deceived, who are not entering into a life of victory. Fellowship with the heart of God in sharing His compassion is essential if we are to fulfil our ministry effectively.

MICAH

CORRUPT LEADERS AND GOD'S AUTHORITY

Micah lived at the same time as Isaiah. He prophesied to both Israel and Judah. He preached primarily to the religious leaders in Israel and Judah who had misused their privileges in serving God and exploited the poor people in their congregations exactly like many Christian leaders exploit poor people today. It is amazing to see how many Old Testament prophets had a concern for these poor people in Israel and Judah who were being deceived and led astray by covetous, selfish, proud leaders.

God's Judgement on Samaria and Judah

In the first three chapters we read of God's judgement on Samaria (capital of Israel) and Judah.

Micah called the people to listen to him because the Lord was coming down to accuse them (1:2).

In *Chapter 2* we see the sins that the leaders were guilty of. Wherever God's Word speaks to leaders, it is good for all of us who are elders and preachers of God's Word to examine ourselves and judge ourselves.

"How terrible it will be for you who lie awake at night thinking up evil plans. You rise at dawn and hurry up to carry out those schemes that you have the power to accomplish. When you want a certain piece of land, you find a way to seize it. When you find somebody's house, you find a way to get it – by fraud. No one's family or inheritance is safe with people like you around" (2:1, 2).

Here were religious leaders who were using their power to exploit the poor and rob them of their money! We could apply this today to preachers who urge poor people and widows to pay their tithes, and then use these gifts to live in luxury themselves.

It is true that the Lord has permitted those who preach the gospel to get their living from the gospel (*1 Corinthians 9:14*). *But it is totally wrong for a preacher to get his living from people who earn less than him.* How can a preacher receive money from someone who is poorer than him and use it to live at a higher standard than that poor person? Jesus would never have done that. Yet, that is exactly what many Christian pastors and preachers are doing today. They receive money from people who live in small houses and use that money to build grand houses for themselves. They take tithes from people who earn so little and live at a standard many times higher than those who gave them the money. This is why God's grace departs from them, even if they are still gifted to preach.

A Christian worker must never receive money for his personal needs, from anyone who earns less than him. Poor people have a right to give money for the Lord's work. But if they give you money, you must put it into the offering box for the Lord's work and *never* use it for your personal needs. If you honour God in this way, He will bless you and provide all your need. But most preachers are not serious about small things like this.

Jesus received money from some who supported His ministry (*Luke 8:1-3*). But He never used that money to live in grand style. There was plenty of money in Judas Iscariot's bag and Jesus could have used it as He liked. But He would not use a poor man's money to live in a hotel (inn) that that poor person himself could not afford. So He slept under the trees in the Mount of Olives at times (*John 7:53 to 8:2*). There is something we can learn from His example.

If you are faithful in the use of God's money, you will retain the anointing of God upon you till the end of your life. But if you, as a preacher, are unfaithful with God's money, you will fall from grace like many other preachers have fallen, all over the world. The Lord says, "*I will reward your evil with evil. You won't be able to escape*" (*2:3*). He who has ears to hear, let him hear.

But the people said, "*Don't say such things. Such disasters will never come our way*" (*2:6*). But Micah replied, "*Will the Lord have patience with your behaviour? You steal the shirts right off the backs of those who trusted you. You evict women from their homes and strip their children of their God-given rights. You have filled the land with sin and ruined it completely. If a prophet full of lies were to say to you, 'I'll preach to you about the joys of wine and drink', that's just the kind of prophet you would like!*" (*2:7-11*).

Throughout history it has been true that the people of God have always preferred false prophets who tickle their ears and say things to make them happy. Most of God's people have never cared to listen to God's true prophets who tell them the truth. So if you are a servant of God who wants to preach God's word faithfully, remember one thing: *You will never be popular. You won't be able to make money.* You will be despised and rejected like these Old Testament prophets were.

In spite of all this, the Lord still told Israel, "*I will gather a few of you who are left and I will bring you together*" (2:12). Most of the prophets prophesied that there would be a remnant of people whom God would bring back to Jerusalem from Babylon.

This is true even today. Even though most of Christendom is in a back-slidden condition, there is a remnant of God-fearing people on earth who are witnesses to the truth. If you are a God-fearing person, you should look for that remnant wherever you go. Look for those who are sincerely seeking after God and who are leaving Babylonian systems. They won't be found in any one denomination. In one town they may be found in one church. And in another town, they may *not* be found in the branch of that first church. There is no "*remnant denomination*" anywhere in the world today – only local "*remnant churches*". So in every place, you must ask, "Lord, where are Your people gathering in this place?" And He will lead you to them.

"Listen, you leaders of Israel – you are supposed to know right from wrong. Yet you are the very ones who hate good and love evil; you skin my people and strip them to the bone. You devour them, flog them, break their bones, and chop them up like meat for the cooking pot – and then you plead with the Lord for his help in times of trouble! Do you really expect him to listen? He will look the other way! You false prophets! You who lead his people astray! You who cry "Peace" to those who give you food and threaten those who will not pay! This is God's message to you: 'The night will close about you and cut off all your visions; darkness will cover you with never a word from God. The sun will go down upon you, and your day will end. Then at last you will cover your faces in shame and admit that your messages were not from God.'" (3:1-7 - TLB).

History repeats itself. 2600 years ago, preachers loved those who gave them large gifts, and prophesied comforting messages to them. The same thing is happening today!! But if someone was poor and could not invite these preachers for a good meal, they threatened them. Such are not servants of God but false prophets.

They prophesied falsely, claiming to have seen visions from God, just like many deceivers do today. But God's message to them was: *"The night will close about you and cut off all your visions; darkness will cover you with never a word from God. The sun will go down upon you, and your day*

will end. Then at last you will cover your faces in shame and admit that your messages were not from God” (3:6, 7).

Micah was filled with the Spirit and fearless in rebuking such false prophets: *“I am filled with power, with the Spirit of the Lord, fearlessly announcing God’s punishment on Israel for her sins.” (3:8).*

That may sound like boasting, but it was not. Micah was drawing a contrast between him and the other preachers of his time. Centuries later, the apostle Paul also drew such a contrast between him and others. Paul said, *“I preached God’s Good News to you without charging you anything. Why? I do it to cut out the ground from under the feet of those who boast that they are doing God’s work in just the same way we are. God never sent those men at all; they are “phonies” who have fooled you into thinking they are Christ’s apostles.”* (2 Corinthians 11:7–13). Paul did not serve God for money like the false apostles of his time and like most preachers today.

Micah had a lot to say to those who preached for money. *“Listen to me, you leaders of Israel who hate justice and love unfairness, and fill Jerusalem with murder and sin of every kind – you leaders who take bribes; you priests and prophets who won’t preach and prophesy until you’re paid. (And yet you fawn upon the Lord and say, “All is well – the Lord is here among us. No harm can come to us.”) It is because of you that Jerusalem will be plowed like a field and become a heap of rubble”* (3:9–12).

The Old Testament prophets spoke a lot about the corruption among the preachers in those days, because that was what was destroying God’s people. It is the same today. The priests and prophets preached only if they were paid. Yet all of them claimed to be depending on the Lord. This is the type of deception being practised today as well.

A servant of the Lord is entitled to receive voluntary gifts given to him. But there is a vast difference between that and being paid a salary for *“serving God”!* What is the difference between a salary and a gift? You can expect a salary but you can’t expect a gift. A true servant of the Lord will continue to serve Him, whether he gets money or not, whether he gets food or not. He is thankful for gifts, but he is not dependent on them. He does not serve the Lord for money. If you follow this principle, God will provide all your needs, in one way or the other, and you will be protected from the snares that many preachers have fallen into.

The Coming of the Kingdom and the King

In the first seven verses of *Chapter 4*, Micah speaks of the millennial reign of Christ. For the first time, Micah prophesies here about the future.

But before that happens, Micah prophesies the Babylonian captivity of God’s people: *“O people of Zion, you must leave this city and live in*

the fields; you will be sent far away into exile in Babylon. But there I will rescue you and free you from the grip of your enemies” (4:10).

Micah prophesied this 100 years before it actually happened – that Babylon which was then a small, unknown country would become a super-power and take Judah captive.

Chapter 5:1, is a dual prophecy – first about Zedekiah, the last king of Judah, who would be taken captive into Babylon: “*With a rod they will smite the judge (Ruler) of Israel on the cheek.*” Secondly, about the true King of Israel – Jesus – Who would be smitten on His cheek. This Ruler would be born in Bethlehem: “*Bethlehem, you are but a small Judean village, yet you will be the birthplace of my King who is alive from everlasting ages past!*” (5:2). After Zedekiah was taken captive to Babylon, there were no kings in Judah for more than 500 years. The next king was One Who was born in Bethlehem. This verse in Micah was what the priests quoted to Herod when the wise men asked him, “*Where is He that is born King of the Jews?*” (Matthew 2:2).

Then Micah speaks about the remnant. The prophets always return to the subject of the remnant, after prophesying judgement. “*The remnant of Jacob will be among many peoples like dew from the Lord, like showers.... They will be among the nations, like a lion among the beasts of the forest.... Your hand will be lifted up against your adversaries and all your enemies will be cut off.*” (5:7-9). That’s how the remnant-church should be today – refreshing others as dew and showers do, dignified in conduct as a lion, and overcoming Satan and fleshly lusts (the real enemies).

God's Controversy With His People

In Chapter 6, we read about God’s controversy with His people. This is like a court scene where God says as it were to Israel, “*Stand up and state your case against Me. Let the mountains and hills be witnesses to your complaints. And I will also state My case against you. What have I done to you that you turn away from Me? I brought you out of Egypt and redeemed you from your slavery. I sent Moses, Aaron and Miriam to lead you. When Balaam tried to curse, I blessed you instead? What have you got against Me then, that you turn away from Me?*” (6:1-5).

And then Micah asks the people what their response should be to God. Do they imagine that God is looking for more offerings from them? No. He doesn’t want their tithes or offerings. Even the offering of a firstborn child (the most precious earthly offering possible) would not be able to atone for even one of their sins.

And then we read one of the most beautiful verses in the book of Micah which tells us what God has required from man at all times – a verse that we should all keep in mind at all times: “*What does the LORD require of you but to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?*” (6:8).

If you are really grateful to the Lord for all that He has done for you, then what He wants from you is not your money or your service, but these *three* things, first of all:

1. Do justice. Be free from all partiality and do what is right in every situation, and never do any wrong to others.
2. Love mercy. *Rejoice* in forgiving others their wrongs and in doing good to them. Treat everyone mercifully. Don't be hard on anyone who makes a mistake. You have made mistakes too and God has forgiven you. So forgive everyone and do *all* the good you can, to *all* the people you can, at *all* the times you can. Make allowance for the fact that they may *not* have all the light you have in many areas and so be willing to accept their doing things differently from you, without judging them. Those who judge others will be dealt with unmercifully by God in the final day (*James 2:13*).
3. Walk humbly with God. This is the secret of it all. A humble attitude will bring the grace of God upon you and will enable you to live the kind of life that God requires. Otherwise you will find it impossible. To walk humbly with God is to recognise that without Christ you can do nothing. It means seeing yourself as a nobody *in your own eyes* – even though you are a very valuable somebody *in God's eyes*.

There are two types of religions in the world – one that majors on religious rituals (6:6, 7) and another that majors on loving God and loving one's neighbour (6:8) – for that is what the three things mentioned above really boil down to. All false religions and most Christians prefer the *former*. True disciples choose the *latter*.

External rituals can often become a substitute for walking humbly with God and walking in love and mercy with our neighbours. If the leaders of Israel had concentrated on these three matters and taught others to do the same, Israel would never have gone as captives to Babylon.

Micah then prophesies against the businessmen who were cheating poor people: “*Is there to be no end of your getting rich by cheating? Your homes are full of ungodly treasures and lying scales. You have become wealthy through extortion and violence; you are so used to lying that your tongues can't tell the truth! Therefore you will eat but never have enough. And though you try and try to save your money, it will come to nothing at the end, and what little you succeed in storing up I'll give to those who conquer you*

” (6:10–14).

If you are rich, God wants to know how you made your money. Did you cheat anyone to get it? Did you cheat the government of taxes that were due to it? Did you do anything unrighteous to earn it? God keeps a close watch on how His people earn their money. Dishonestly earned wealth will only bring the judgement of God on us.

God says, “*It is as hard to find an honest man as grapes and figs when harvest days are over. The godly person has perished from the land, and there is no upright person. They even turn against their own brothers. As for evil, both hands do it well: The judge demands bribes and the rich man pays him and tells him whom to ruin. Thus justice is twisted between the two, as they both weave together*

” (7:1–3). God then warns them that the time of their punishment has drawn near (7:4).

We live in a similar situation today. Godly men are rare to find everywhere. There is a lot of injustice and bribery in society and poor people are being exploited. God is watching all this. He waited a long time in Israel before He judged them. Those who are doing all this today will not escape. One day God will make people account for every single bribe they took to pervert justice and for every wrong they ever did to harm others – especially the helpless poor. No-one will escape. Everyone will have to give an account of himself to God.

Micah’s words in 7:6 was quoted and expanded by Jesus as follows: “*Do not think that I came to bring peace on the earth; I did not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I came to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; and a man’s enemies will be the members of his household. 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*” (Matthew 10:34–37).

When you read *Micah* 7:6, it doesn’t look as if it refers to discipleship at all. But Jesus’ use of it teaches us that the words of these prophets had more than one meaning. Many prophecies have a double fulfilment. And here is just one of those examples.

Micah then spoke some wonderful words which we can use in our spiritual battles with Satan:

“*As for me, I look to the Lord for his help; I wait for God to save me; He will hear me. Do not rejoice against me, O my enemy, for though I fall, I will rise again! When I sit in darkness, the Lord himself will be my Light. I will be patient while the Lord punishes me, for I have sinned against Him; then He will defend me from my enemies and punish them for all the evil they have done to me. God will bring me out of my darkness into the light, and I will see His goodness. Then my enemy will see that God is for me and be ashamed for taunting, ‘Where is that God of yours?’ Now with my own eyes I see him trampled down like mud in the street*

” (7:7–10).

Those are words that we can speak to the devil when we have fallen into sin, or failed the Lord in some way, or when we are being chastened

by the Lord. Don't ever let Satan discourage you by saying, "You have fallen. There is no hope for you now." Memorise this portion of Scripture and quote it to Satan whenever needed.

Micah concludes his prophecy praising God for His wonderful mercy: "*Where is there a god who can compare with You – wiping the slate clean of our guilt, turning a blind eye and a deaf ear to the past sins of your purged and precious people? You don't nurse Your anger and don't stay angry long, for mercy is Your specialty. That's what You love most; and compassion is on its way to us. You'll stamp out our wrongdoing. You'll sink our sins to the bottom of the ocean. You'll stay true to your word*" (7:18–20 - Paraphrase).

That is another passage of Scripture that encourages all who feel they have failed the Lord.

The prophets always had a word of encouragement and hope for God's people after preaching judgement and punishment for sin. And that is an example for all of us who preach God's Word. How should we conclude our messages, when we have to preach a strong word of judgement or rebuke? Always with a word of encouragement, that God is on the side of His people.

Remember that God is always on your side against the devil. He will never be on the devil's side against you no matter how much you have sinned. He waits for you to repent. But He will always stand by you. The moment He sees you turn towards Him, He runs to assist you.

You who preach the word of God are like surgeons in an operating theatre seeking to remove a cancer from a patient. You cut the person open and expose the cancer. What should you do then? Remove the cancer, stitch him up, give him a painkiller, and send him home happy and rejoicing! But a lot of preachers just cut the person open and expose the cancer and then send the person home with his stomach cut open – discouraged and without hope!

Don't ever do that. Complete the job. Even if people have been convicted and have wept for their sins, let them go home rejoicing with hope in their hearts! Let your preaching be always like that of these Old Testament prophets ending with a word of hope.

God is always on your side against the devil.

NAHUM

GOD'S ANGER AND VENGEANCE

Most Christians never read these “*minor*” prophets because they feel they will not get anything out of them. But all Scripture is inspired by God. Every part of Scripture is *not* of equal value. The New Testament is certainly far more important than the Old Testament – but there is something of value in every Old Testament book. These prophets repeated certain things for the sake of emphasis. When a subject is repeated in Scripture, we can know from that, that God considers that subject important. God may speak on ten different subjects, but repeat two or three of those – because those two or three are of special importance. Most preachers, however, are reluctant to repeat their messages lest they lose their reputation for preaching a new message each time. That is why most of today’s preachers can never be prophets! The Old Testament prophets, however, did not seek their own reputation. They spoke whatever God told them to say. God knows exactly what people need, and if the people needed to hear something for the twentieth time, the prophet would repeat it for the twentieth time.

Nahum lived 100 years after Jonah. He was speaking at a time when Assyria was the most powerful nation on earth. For a prophet to say then that God was going to destroy the most powerful nation on the earth was as ridiculous as someone proclaiming today that the USA would be destroyed and reduced to nothing! Nobody would believe that. And nobody believed Nahum then. But as we look back over history today, we see that what the prophets predicted happened exactly. Every word of theirs was fulfilled exactly concerning the great world empires of Assyria, Egypt, Babylon and Tyre. The empires of Assyria and Babylon disappeared. God said that Tyre would be reduced to rubble – and it was. But He never said that about Egypt. So Egypt exists even today. When God says something through His prophets, it happens exactly like that.

These things that we read in the Old Testament assure us that the warnings given in the New Testament will also be fulfilled exactly as written. God has warned us that everyone will have to give an account of their lives to Him one day (*Romans 14:12*). And in that day, everyone will reap exactly what they sowed (*Galatians 6:7*). Jesus said, “*Every careless word that people speak, they shall give an account for it in the day of judgement*” (*Matthew 12:36*). However, 99% of the believers whom I know, do not believe these warnings in Scripture, because I find that they are all very careless with their lives and their words. It is because judgement does not come *immediately*, that many are careless about the way they live and speak. You may be watching pornography in secret, speaking rude words, telling lies and backbiting against others and then saying to yourself, “Nothing has happened to me”, and therefore continue in sin. That was exactly what Assyria also said: “Yes. Nahum is saying all this about us. But nothing is happening to us.” But judgement did come a little later. The Lord’s warnings about judgement will also be fulfilled exactly as He said – one day.

The other thing we see here is this: When God sent Jonah to Nineveh earlier, we could ask why God sent Jonah to Nineveh when He knew that this nation was going to become evil and be destroyed after another hundred years. God dealt with Nineveh in Jonah’s day as it was then. In Jonah’s time, God saw many people in that city who had a desire to repent. That was why God sent Jonah there. Even today, God does not send His servants anywhere, unless He has a purpose for the people there. If you go on your own somewhere, then you had better plan your own message. But if you waited on the Lord, and God led you somewhere, then even if it is a difficult place like Nineveh, you can be absolutely certain that there was a purpose with which God sent you there. Jonah was sent with a purpose. There were many people in Nineveh who repented and who turned from sin in that generation.

But God did not send Nahum to Nineveh, because He saw that the new generation there had no interest in repentance. What we can learn from the example of Jonah and Nahum is this, that if you listen to God, you won’t waste your time going to places where God does not want you to go. You will then go only where something useful can be accomplished for God. That’s why these prophets lived before God’s face and waited for Him to tell them what to do. They didn’t rush around like many Christian workers do today, preaching here and there. They took time to wait on God.

God’s Determination to Destroy Nineveh

The message of Nahum was a message of God’s anger. In *Chapter 1, verses 2 and 6*, we see seven words – *jealous, avenging, wrathful, vengeance, indignation, anger, burning, rage*. These words express God’s intense anger and blazing fury not just against sin, but also

against the people who continue in sin. “*The Lord is slow to get angry, but when He does get angry, you can't stop Him*” (1:3). God is long-suffering and very patient. But finally He will judge. And His anger and judgement are mainly directed against those who exploit others. He will bring justice to all who have been cheated on earth.

There was a difference between Adam’s sin and Cain’s sin. Adam hurt himself, but did not hurt anybody else. So he was *not* cursed. Only *the ground* was cursed (*Genesis 3:17*). But Cain’s sin hurt another person – Abel. So *he himself* was cursed by God (*Genesis 4:11*). When you do something that hurts another person in some way it is a serious sin. It can bring God’s curse on you like it did on Cain, if you do not repent and confess your sin. For example, you may have backbitten against someone and thus spoilt his reputation; or you may have become friendly with a girl and stirred up her emotions and then given her up (you may not have touched her body, but you have still hurt her). God is *jealous, wrathful, angry and indignant*, and His *blazing fury* will take *vengeance and revenge*, on everyone who does such things. This judgement may not have come in you as yet, because He is still waiting for you to repent. But God takes note of the smallest things that we do against others, and He will punish us for it all one day. Many preachers have lost the anointing of God upon their lives because they spoke careless words against others, without knowing the truth – criticising and spreading unverified stories. Then God removes His anointing from such preachers. And if they continue to be careless in their speech, God will one day take away their salvation too.

Why was God so angry with Assyria? It was not because they were smoking and drinking, or taking harmful drugs. We think taking drugs is horrible. It is. But in God’s eyes, it is not as horrible as backbiting – because when you take drugs you hurt only yourself, but when you backbite, you hurt others.

I want to do what those Old Testament prophets did: Give you a proper understanding of what God considers as serious sins. God’s blazing fury against Assyria was *because they hurt other people*. In the same way, one day God will judge every single human being that ever lived, if he hurt anyone in any way by his words or his actions. People find it difficult to believe that. But that is just like people finding it difficult to believe in a real place called “Hell”. There are many who imagine that God will finally save everybody and that even those who go to hell will finally go to heaven!!! Some even go to the extreme of believing that Satan himself will get converted one day! But I believe God’s word. *If you cannot believe in a God full of anger, then you do not believe in a God full of love either. Love demands anger and punishment* – and I’ll explain why.

Suppose you have two children whom you love equally, and one day you see the older boy hitting his younger brother with a stone and making him bleed. That poor younger boy is unable to defend himself against someone stronger than him. What will you do as a father? Will you just stand and watch that? You love both your boys. And because you love, you will be angry. If you don't love your child, you will ignore what is being done and won't be angry. But *love will bring anger against evil, for love demands justice.* You will punish the older boy for hurting his weaker brother. That is exactly what God did with Assyria too. And that is what He will one day do to all people who hurt others in any way. We will see this clearly in the day of judgement.

So I hope our study of Nahum will make us extremely careful in future to avoid words and actions that might hurt others in any way. Do you want to be a servant of God? Then be careful with your words – especially words that you speak about those whom you don't like, or with whom you don't agree.

In 1:7–10, we see God's attitude towards His friends and His enemies. First we see His attitude towards those who respond to His word in repentance. He is good to them. When trouble comes He is a strong refuge. If you humble yourselves and respond to these strong warnings of the prophets God will be very good to you, and when trouble comes He will be like a refuge to you, protecting you like that father protects his little boy from being bullied by others. The Lord knows everyone who trusts in Him. He doesn't forget even one person. You may be weak, poor and hopeless, but God knows you personally, if you are one of those who trust in Him.

Then in the next few verses we see God's attitude towards His enemies. "*He sweeps away His enemies like in an overflowing flood*" (1:8). When a flood comes, it just wipes out everybody in a moment. That's how judgement is going to come upon God's enemies. "*He pursues His foes into the darkness of the night.*" The prophet uses these expressions to show how God pursues those who don't take His word seriously, in order to destroy them. "*Why are you scheming against the Lord? He will destroy you with one blow. He doesn't need to strike you a second time. When God strikes His enemies they will stagger like drunkards and be burnt up like dry straw in a field. Who is this king of yours who dares to plot evil against the Lord?*" (1:9, 10).

What were Assyria's sins that God was so angry with them? First of all their pride towards God, and secondly their cruelty towards others. They took advantage of others and exploited them. These are the two things that the prophets always emphasised – the people's attitude towards God, and their attitude towards other human beings. It is because most believers don't read these prophetic books sufficiently that they too remain

proud towards God and hard towards others. Many believers say that these Old Testament prophetic books are boring. That's exactly what the devil wants you to say, so that you understand nothing of God's anger against pride and hardness of heart.

I want to encourage you to read these prophets, even if you find some of it laborious reading. You can get inside the heart of God as you read these words and understand how God feels towards such issues. By constant repetition, the message will hit home and finally be written in your heart – that God hates sin. Then you will fear and tremble to commit any of those sins.

There is a difference between God's chastening and His anger. Notice here – He says to Israel, "*O my people, I have punished you enough! Now I will break your chains and release you from the yoke of slavery*" (1: 12, 13). But to the Assyrian king, He says, "*I will bury you*" (1:14).

He told the Assyrians. "*You are going to be judged*" (1:14). Then the Lord told Israel, "*Behold, on the mountains the feet of him who brings good news, who announces peace.... Never again will the wicked one pass through you; he has been cut off completely*" (1:15). This is a picture of proclaiming the good news that the devil has been destroyed. This verse is similar to *Isaiah 52:7* where we read, "*How lovely on the mountains are the feet of him who brings good news, who announces peace and salvation and says to Zion, 'Your God reigns!'*" There the emphasis was on the reign of God. Here in Nahum it is on the defeat of God's enemy.

Assyria is a picture of Satan and his kingdom, and the good news we have to go proclaiming to people is, "Don't be afraid, O people. Satan has been defeated. His kingdom has been destroyed." Most people who proclaim the gospel only proclaim that people's sins have been forgiven. That's good. But that's only a part of the gospel. There are many reasons why Jesus died. He died so that we might be forgiven of all our sins. He died so that our old man would be crucified so that we might not serve sin any longer. He died so that the curse of the law might never be upon us. He also died so that Satan might be defeated. Here in Nahum the message is: "Your enemy has been defeated and will never have power over you again." Do you preach this good news that Satan and sin can never have power over God's people?

A few years after Nahum prophesied, there was no hope left for the people of Assyria (whose capital was Nineveh). This generation was different from the one in Jonah's time. Here God gave them no opportunity for repentance, because they had resisted His calls again and again. God had waited long enough and the door was now shut. The Assyrians had kept on sinning, and they had finally crossed the red line that God draws in front of nations and people. The Bible says that there is a sin unto death and that there is no use praying for people who have crossed that red line (*1 John 5:16*). A person can keep on sinning and keep on rejecting God's calls and harden his heart. Then one day he crosses the red

line and then *he will have no more desire to repent of his sins*. Then there is no hope for him (See *Proverbs 29:1*). At that point He sins against the Holy Spirit and there is no more forgiveness possible after that. It is very dangerous, especially for a believer, to keep on sinning and to keep on rejecting God's pleadings.

Assyria had destroyed the land of Israel and hurt the people there in so many ways (2:2). But the Lord would restore Israel's honour and power again. Nahum describes how Assyria would be destroyed and plundered of all its treasures (2:9). That prophecy was fulfilled when Babylon came some years later and destroyed Assyria and took away their wealth. Nineveh, full of fight and boldness, was once like a mighty lion (2:11, 12). They crushed their enemies to feed their cubs. They filled their cities and homes with captives and plunder. That was how they exploited others. They made themselves rich at the expense of poor people. Today, preachers make themselves rich at the expense of poor people. Do you think God's judgement of these preachers will be any different from His judgement of Nineveh? If people want to make money, they should go into business, not into Christian work. That's not the place to make money. Actually, the judgement of those who make themselves rich at the expense of poor believers will be worse than the judgement of Nineveh, because these preachers have more light than Nineveh had.

"You filled your homes with plunder" (2:12). Preacher, is your home filled with what you have taken from poor people? If so, the Lord says to you *"I am your enemy, and you will never again be able to plunder these poor people again, because I will judge you"* (2:13).

The Reason for Nineveh's Destruction

God takes revenge on behalf of those who cannot avenge themselves. His judgement came on Nineveh, because she "*enticed the nations with her beauty and taught them to worship her false gods*" (3:4). Nineveh attracted the nations and then destroyed them. There was something very powerful about her earthly attractiveness, as in the attractions in Western lands today. The warning here is: "*Beware of being attracted to anything earthly if it is not also godly, because when God destroys that, you will be destroyed too.*" There are lots of things on earth that are attractive and the devil will try to tempt you with them. He even tried to tempt Jesus with them saying, "*I will give you all the glory of this world, if You will bow down and worship me.*" The attractive things of earth are still being offered to all those who will bow down to Satan in some area. I have seen many believers do this and suffer the consequences. So take heed to this warning.

The Lord asks Nineveh, "*Are you better than (the city of) No-amon, which was situated by the waters of the Nile, with water surrounding her? Ethiopia was her might, and Egypt too; Put and Lubim were among*

her helpers. Yet she went into captivity" (3:8–10). No-amon was one of those difficult cities in Egypt that Assyria could not conquer because it was surrounded by water on every side, and protected by their allies. But finally Assyria conquered No-amon too. And now the Lord says to Assyria, "The same thing will now happen to you."

God may at times give us a ministry that was originally given to someone else but taken away from him because of his backsliding – just like David replaced King Saul. Beware of thinking then in pride, "I am better than him. God has given his ministry to me." What happened to that other person can happen to you too. Paul, the great apostle, said, "*I am afraid that after preaching to others, I myself might be disqualified.*" (1 Corinthians 9:27). Because Paul lived in that fear in humility, he was never disqualified. The Lord told Nineveh that she would be punished and her troops would become as weak as women. There was no healing now for their wound. And *people everywhere will agree with God's judgement on her* (3:11–19).

One day all men will stand before God for the final judgement. Why would God pull people out of hell, put them back into their bodies, and make them stand before Him for a final judgement (*Revelation 20:11, 12*)? There is a reason. The whole world must know why these people are being sent to hell. In that day, the whole world will agree with God's judgement. No-one will ever have any more doubt as to whether someone who went to hell deserved to go there. Today many people say that so-and-so is a good man and cannot possibly go to hell. But on that day when God reveals everyone's secret life and thoughts, every doubt will be removed and the whole world will agree with God's judgement. Nahum reminds us of that, through his prophecy about the judgement on Nineveh!

HABAKKUK

THE CONFLICT AND TRIUMPH OF FAITH

If Nahum spoke about God's anger and vengeance, Habakkuk spoke about the conflict of faith and the triumph of faith. This is the story of a man who had questions but who made the journey from doubt to certainty. He starts with doubt, "*O Lord, how long must I call for help before you will listen? I shout to you in vain; there is no answer. I cry, but no one comes to save*" (1:2). But he ends with certainty: "*I will rejoice in the Lord. The Lord God is my strength; He will bring me safely over the mountains*" (3:18, 19).

Habakkuk had two questions that he asked God. And God gave him the answers. Even a man of God can have doubts and questions. There is nothing wrong with asking God questions. If little children, as they grow up, do *not* ask their parents any questions, that is a bad sign. A good father will always encourage his children to ask questions. No father is ever upset if his little child asks him questions. God is not upset either if you ask Him questions. When you have a question don't go to people *of your own level of maturity*. They will only confuse you – and your questions may confuse them too. They may not have had any doubts until you asked them those questions. And now you have put some doubt into their minds! Go to God instead.

The First Question

The first question Habakkuk had was a question that all of us have: *Why do wicked people prosper?* This was the question that Asaph had (*Psalm 73*). Jeremiah lived at the same time as Habakkuk and he also had the same question. The Lord replied to Jeremiah saying, "*If you can't run with men how will you run with horses?*" (*Jeremiah 12:5*), meaning, "If you can't solve such a simple problem, how will you deal with major problems in life?" Asaph went into the presence of God and got an

answer (*Psalm 73:17*). Jeremiah also went into God's presence and got an answer. Habakkuk likewise went into God's presence and got an answer. When you have a question, you can certainly ask a godly brother. But Habakkuk went to God, because there weren't any godly brothers living near him at that time. Jeremiah was prophesying at the same time; but he was perhaps not living near Habakkuk.

Habakkuk's cry was, "*How long, O Lord, must I call for help? You don't seem to listen! I am Your servant. Look at what these ungodly people are doing to me. And You are not doing anything to save me.*" (1:2). Have you ever felt like that? For 2000 years many godly Christians have felt like that. "*Lord, why do these godless people prosper? Why do You allow them to harass Your people? Wherever I look there is misery and destruction and violence, and I am surrounded with people who love to argue and fight*" (1:3). Habakkuk looked at Judah and said, "*The law has become paralyzed and useless, and there is no justice given in the courts. The wicked far outnumber the righteous, and justice is perverted with bribes and trickery*" (1:4).

This was written 2600 years ago, but it is so relevant today! If you are a Christian witnessing for the Lord, you may find in many parts of the world, that this passage is true – that the law has become paralyzed and that you get no justice in the courts of your land.

God's Answer

The Lord didn't answer Habakkuk's question directly. Very often Jesus did not answer questions directly either. This is because God's wisdom is far superior to ours. God's reply to Habakkuk was, "*Look at the nations and be amazed, for I am going to do something in your day which you won't even believe if someone told you about it, because it has never happened like that before for Judah*" (1:5).

Israel had gone into captivity, but Judah had never experienced that. It was eight centuries earlier that they had all been slaves in Egypt. But that was now a distant memory. Now the Lord was going to do something with them that they wouldn't believe. It was *not* a mighty miracle of deliverance that He was going to perform. Some people misquote this verse as though it were a promise of some great miracle that God would do. But what the Lord was actually saying was that He was going to raise up an evil nation to enslave His people. It would be difficult for them to believe that their God would ever do such a thing. But God was saying, "I am raising up Babylon to be the new super-power in the world. They will not rise up by accident. I am in control of the world and I am raising them up."

Whenever we have had national elections in India, we have always had times of prayer. We felt we were too small in number as believers to influence the election-results by voting. But we knew we could influence the results *by praying*, because God controls all people. God is the One Who raises up one and puts down another. So we would pray, "Lord, we don't know what is good for India, and for the believers in our land and for the spread of the gospel. We want You to put into power those whom You have sovereignly permitted, for the fulfilment of Your purposes." Sometimes what we think is good for us may not be the best for us. How many of us would have selected the Babylonians to rule over Judah? Nobody. That's why God had to say, "I am going to do something that you won't believe. Your ways are not My ways." When we don't understand God's ways, we cannot believe that God would make a nation like Babylon a super-power.

The idea that many Christians have of God is that of a "*Grandfather*" who sits in heaven always giving us gifts that will make us happy. That is a totally wrong concept of God. Most Christians don't have a proper understanding of God's holiness. That is why they cannot believe that God would use non-Christians to discipline His children. For example, if in a country where elections are to be held, the Christians are fighting with each other, and criticising each other, with each denomination imagining that they alone are God's chosen people, what sort of political party would God allow to win the elections? The Christians may all pray, "Lord, give us a government that gives us freedom to preach the gospel and allows us to receive money from America freely." But God may see that American money is hindering the testimony of His children in that land and may allow a party to win the elections that stops all foreign money and persecutes Christians. Then the Christians who were criticising each other will stop doing that. They will become a little more united with each other. And the Christians who are dependent on foreign money will realise that there is enough money in their country itself to do the Lord's work. As a result, all the Christians will become stronger Christians and the church will be more united. God's way is always the best.

So here the Lord says, "I am raising the Babylonians up." It was God Who raised them up. The Lord told Pharaoh, the greatest ruler of his time, "*I have raised you up to demonstrate My power in you*" (*Romans 9:17*). When Pharaoh rebelled against God, God crushed him and thus manifested His mighty power. At the same time God raised up Moses in the same generation to manifest His power in Him in quite another way. If you cooperate with God, He will use you to manifest His power through you like with Moses. If you don't cooperate with God, He will still use you as a warning to all generations as to what happens to a man who defies

God. So it is best to humble ourselves before God, so that He can make us a good example rather than a bad one. Even if you are a believer but proud, God will resist you and make you a warning to other believers.

The Babylonians were “*a cruel and violent nation, notorious for cruelty and more fierce than wolves*” (verses 6–9). They advanced like the wind scorning the defences of many nations. Yet they were deeply guilty before God, because “*they had made their strength their god*” (verse 11).

Was this the answer to Habakkuk’s question as to why the wicked prospered?

Habakkuk said to the Lord, “You haven’t answered my question. You have just said that the wicked are going to prosper.” But God did answer his question. He said, “I am fully in control, and I am accomplishing My purpose through Babylon, even if you can’t see it fully.”

Today, 2600 years later, we can look back and see that Babylon was raised up by God and then destroyed by God. And we can say, “Lord, it is wonderful what You did.”

Notice the result of Judah being taken to Babylon for 70 years. From the time of the judges (1300 B.C.) to the time of the Babylonian captivity (600 B.C.), Israel worshipped idols frequently. Even during David’s time many were worshipping the bronze serpent (2 Kings 18:4). Idol worship was going on continuously in Israel for almost 700 years. Then God sent them to Babylon for 70 years. When the Jews returned, they never again worshipped idols (for the last 2500 years). God solved that problem permanently through the captivity. Isn’t that amazing? The Jews may have committed many other sins, but they never went back to idolatry again.

God can sometimes teach one final lesson like that to a person and change him forever. He broke Jacob with a once-and-for-all breaking at Peniel – and Jacob was a different man ever after. Sometimes God has to use strong-arm methods to teach us a permanent lesson. We may not always understand why God allows certain things in our lives. It is enough to know that God is in control of all the circumstances of our lives. The people whom God uses to accomplish His purposes may however be evil people like the Babylonians.

God has used people who hate Christians to fulfil His purposes – in ancient Rome and in modern Communist countries. In our lifetime, we have seen how Christians have been persecuted in many Communist lands. How many Christians would ever pray that such Communist governments should remain in power? Yet God allowed those Communists to come to power for a time and then put them down. But what happened during the time they were in power? Some of the finest Christians in the world came forth from those countries – far better Christians than the money-loving, comfort-loving Christians living in countries without persecution. Through the fires of persecution, Christians got purified. That was why God permitted the Communists to

come to power for a while. We don't always know what to pray for. But our Heavenly Father knows what is good for His children at all times and in every land – and He is “*the Blessed Controller of all things*” that happen on this earth (*1 Timothy 6:15* - J.B. Phillips). Hallelujah!!

The Second Question

Then Habakkuk questions the Lord like a lawyer in court: “*O Lord my God, Who are eternal, is Your plan to wipe us out? Surely not! O God, You have decreed the rise of these Chaldeans (Babylon) to chasten and correct us for our awful sins. We are wicked, but they far more! Will You, Who cannot allow sin in any form, stand idly by while they swallow us up? Should You be silent while the wicked destroy those who are better than they? Are we but fish, to be caught and killed? Are we but creeping things that have no leader to defend them from their foes? Must we be strung up on their hooks and dragged out in their nets, while they rejoice? Then they will worship their nets! ‘These are the gods who make us rich,’ they’ll say. Will you let them get away with this forever?*” (1:12–17).

He tells the Lord that the Babylonians will worship their own abilities, if they succeed in capturing Judah.

God's Answer

He decided to climb into his watchtower and wait and see what the Lord would reply to his complaint (2:1). The Lord's reply was: “*Write My answer in large clear letters on a tablet, so that everyone can see it and tell everybody else: The things I plan will not happen right away. Slowly, steadily, surely the time approaches when the vision will be fulfilled. And if it seems slow, be patient, wait patiently. It will surely take place. It will not be delayed. I will judge them finally, and I will make My people prosper. But it won't happen overnight*

” (2:2, 3).

The Lord urged Habakkuk to be patient. God was not in a hurry to judge evil. We want God to work on our behalf immediately. Prayer for us is like pressing a button and we want an instant miracle – just like we make instant coffee!! We seek for instant salvation, instant baptism in the Holy Spirit, instant miracles. But God says we have to be patient. Character cannot be formed in an instant. It takes a long period of time, suffering, and trials for character to be formed. “*Tribulation works patience and patience produces character*” (*Romans 5:3, 4*).

So the first thing God told Habakkuk was to *be patient*.

The second thing He told him was to *live by faith* (2:4). Patience and faith go together (*Hebrews 6:12, 15*). These are the two qualities we need in times of trial.

This verse (“*The righteous shall live by faith.*”) is quoted thrice in the New Testament – in *Romans 1:17*; *Galatians 3:11*; and *Hebrews 10:38*

– and was the great watchword of the Reformation, as the reformers proclaimed, “*Justification by faith*”.

In the context here however, the verse is referring to the Babylonians coming to Judah. What Judah needed in this situation was faith in God. God was saying, “*Look at those proud Babylonians. They trust in themselves. They are crooked. But the righteous one will live by faith.*”

What is the faith that we all need to have? Just this: Knowing that God controls everything and everyone on earth, and that He loves us immensely and will deal with our enemies at the right time.

“Look at the proud! They trust in themselves, and their lives are crooked; but the righteous will live by their faith” (2:4). According to this verse, there are only two categories of people in the world – *the proud who are crooked and the righteous who live by faith*.

So the opposite of faith is not just unbelief, but *pride* as well. A man of *faith* will always be *humble*. Genuine Biblical *faith* and genuine *humility* always go together. So the best way to find out if today’s preachers who talk so much about “*faith*” have *genuine* Biblical faith is by checking whether they are clothed with *humility*! If not, then their so-called “*faith*” is not the Biblical type.

We also see in this verse that a proud person is *crooked*. Crookedness always goes with pride. Whenever you see a proud person, you can be certain that there is some hidden crookedness in his life. An upright man will always be *humble*. God resists the proud but gives grace only to the humble (*James 4:6*).

The next thing we see here is *the treacherous nature of wealth* (2:5). Wealth of any sort – whether it be wealth of money or intelligence or anything earthly – is treacherous in that it can make its owner proud. One other characteristic of such people is that they are never content. “*They are never satisfied. They are greedy – always wanting more*” (2:5). One day justice will catch up with such people (2:6).

Chapter 2:6–19 is a description of how a self-centred life finally destroys itself. A proud person is centred in himself. He does not live by faith, but has total confidence in himself. The Lord says, “*How terrible it will be for you who get rich by unjust means! You believe your wealth will buy security, putting your families beyond the reach of danger*” (2:9). A person whose security is in his wealth will ultimately destroy himself. But in the midst of such arrogant people the man of faith believes that, “*the whole earth will (one day) be filled with the glory of the Lord as the waters fill the sea*” (2:14). He looks forward to that day and has patience to wait for it.

When Habakkuk saw the Lord, his heart was full of praise: “*The Lord is in His holy temple, let all the earth be silent*” (2:20). The conflict of his faith ended in the triumph of faith. He says, “Lord, I am silent before Your majesty. I have no more questions.” When Job saw the glory of God

he also said, “Now I see You. I put my hand over my mouth” (Job 42:5; 40:4, 5). Job had no more questions once he saw the Lord. God will not answer all your 10,000 questions because if He did, you will then have 10,000 more questions! The answer (as in Job’s case and Habakkuk’s case) is to see the Lord Himself. The Lord is in His holy temple. Have you seen Him? Then your flesh will be silent before Him and you will have no more questions!

Habakkuk's Praise

When Habakkuk saw God, he saw the reward of living a life of faith. A life that is God-centred is a triumphant one. Habakkuk who had thought that God was doing nothing to punish evil people now prays that God will be merciful in the midst of His anger (3:2). He who had imagined that God had forsaken His people now sings a song of praise. He says, “I am filled with amazement at the things you have done. When I see God the Holy One, His brilliant splendour fills the heavens. The earth is full of His praise. What a wonderful God He is. He rejoices in His awesome power. When He looks, the nations tremble. You went out to rescue your chosen people, to save your anointed ones. **You crushed the head of the house of the wicked**” (3:2–13).

Habakkuk now saw God first and not the Babylonians. The pure in heart will see God everywhere and all the time (Matthew 5:8). The trouble till now was that Habakkuk saw only the wicked Babylonians prospering. Now He saw that God was in control of everything.

The “head of the house of the wicked” could be applied to Satan, who was crushed by Jesus on the cross.

All of Habakkuk’s questions were answered when he saw God in His glory and in His greatness. He trembled inwardly when he saw God and said, “I will wait quietly for the coming day when disaster will strike the people who invade us” (2:16). When you have a doubt, talk to God about it and not to man. God’s final word to Habakkuk and to us is “Wait!” When Habakkuk waited and listened to God, his complaint was turned into a song. The same will be true of us. The hardest work of all is to wait.

Habakkuk’s wonderful song of praise is one of the most beautiful songs of faith in the entire Old Testament. He sings here like a new-covenant saint: “Even though the fig trees have no blossoms, and there are no grapes on the vine; even though the olive crop fails, and the fields lie empty and barren; even though the flocks die in the fields, and the cattle barns are empty – yet I will rejoice in the LORD! I will be joyful in the God of my salvation” (3:17, 18).

Like Job, his business may be ruined and he may have lost everything. But he will still rejoice because his joy is found in the Lord and not in anything on earth. Even if everything around us fails, we will still rejoice in the God of our salvation.

A song of praise is the outward expression of the inner triumph of faith. “*They believed His words – and sang His praise*” (*Psalm 106:12*).

Habakkuk goes on to say, “*The Sovereign Lord is my strength! He will make me as surefooted as a deer and bring me safely over the mountains*” (*3:19*). This prophet who had so many doubts and fears at the beginning now says that the Lord will take him safely over every mountain of doubt and make him as sure-footed on those mountains as the deer that don’t lose their footing on the rocky crags.

Habakkuk adds an interesting little note at the end: “(*For the choir director: This prayer must be accompanied by stringed instruments*)” (*3:19*). What he is saying is that even though everything is lost, don’t sing this song as a mournful dirge! It must be set to joyful music – and make sure that many musical instruments are used as well!

We must learn to praise the Lord with all of our hearts. Never sing hymns in a drab, monotonous way. The Lord is on the throne and Jesus is Victor, no matter what happens in this universe. Let us therefore use our voices and all the musical instruments God has given us, to praise Him and exalt His Name. Amen.

ZEPHANIAH

THE SEVERITY AND GOODNESS OF GOD

Zephaniah prophesied soon after Nahum, before the Babylonians became the great world power and just before Jeremiah's time. It is possible that Jeremiah was there towards the end of Zephaniah's time of prophecy. Zephaniah also spoke about the destruction of Assyria and the rise of Babylon. But His main theme was *the severity and the goodness of God*. *Romans 11:22* tells us to look carefully at the goodness and the severity of God. We can see that verse emphasised in the whole book of Zephaniah. First of all, he declares the severity of God in His strictness against sin. Then he declares the goodness of God to the remnant of His people.

As we study these "minor" prophets we notice certain themes recurring in many of them – the anger of God against sin, the certainty of judgement, the evils of pride and of exploitation of the poor, the love of money and the immorality found among the leaders, God using the heathen to chasten His people, the need for faith and patience if God does not answer immediately, not being deceived by external manifestations of revival, and promises to the remnant. All the prophets spoke about a remnant among God's people. They spoke about how, in a time of spiritual decline among God's people, there would be a few who would remain faithful to God.

The things written in the Old Testament have been written for our instruction (*1 Corinthians 10:11*). There is a decline among Christians today just like there was a decline in Israel in the past. The two kingdoms – Israel and Judah – are a picture of the two groups in Christendom. Israel, with 10 tribes, symbolises the larger group of mainline denominations. And Judah with 2 tribes, symbolises the smaller non-conformist assemblies. But both these groups are in decline today. In the Old Testament, Judah did not learn from Israel's mistakes. And the non-conformist groups today have not learnt from the mistakes the mainline denominations

have made – and they have made the same mistakes themselves. But ultimately, from both groups, God has chosen a remnant today.

There is spiritual decline today – both among the ritualistic groups and among the independent groups. But in the midst of all this, God has a few who have a heart for Him. They are not all found in one denomination. They are found in all the denominations – men and women who love God and are seeking to honour Him in all things. They are *genuinely* filled with the Holy Spirit and do not get involved in controversies. They are very careful in the use of their tongues and are very faithful with money. God is gathering such people together in these days as His remnant.

The theme of the prophets was always *restoration*. The remnant prepared the way for the coming of the Lord Jesus. When the Lord was born, there was a small remnant – Simeon and Anna in the temple, John the Baptist, the shepherds, and a few wise men from the east. Today also there is a remnant in Christendom who are preparing the way for the coming of the Lord.

Zephaniah first speaks about the coming day of judgement. He speaks more about “*the day of the Lord*” than any other prophet. There was a revival in Judah in King Josiah’s time, about 4 years before Nebuchadnezzar came and took them away as captives. But it was a superficial revival. The prophets like Zephaniah and Jeremiah saw through that and were not deceived. But most people in Israel were deceived. Many Christians today are also being deceived by so-called “*revivals*”, and are unable to see through their hollowness and superficiality.

Much of what is called “*revival*” today in Christendom is merely emotional excitement and psychological gimmicks imposed on a gullible public by clever, money-loving preachers. There is no revival there to holiness, or to humility, or to freedom from the love of money, or to poverty of spirit etc. Any revival that does not lead God’s people to obey the teachings in the sermon on the mount (*Matthew 5 to 7*), is a counterfeit. Don’t be deceived by what is called “*revival*” today. Most of it is not revival at all.

Prophets like Jeremiah and Zephaniah could see through such superficial “*revivals*” in their day immediately. Read their prophecies and see how they exposed the superficiality of the “*revivals*” in their time. The people of Judah, however, felt that these prophets were “*being negative*”. But those prophets were not being negative. They were only speaking the truth. Four years later, when Nebuchadnezzar came and took Judah captive, the people realised that Jeremiah and Zephaniah were right. The true prophets of God can see through the hollowness and emptiness of what everybody else called “*revival*”. One day, God will make it evident to all that His servants who exposed these superficial “*revivals*” were right. Those who are criticised as “*heretics*” are often the true prophets of the Lord.

Judgement in the Day of the Lord

Zephaniah prophesied judgement on the earth, on Judah and on the nations around Judah – Gaza, Moab, Ammon, Ethiopia and Assyria (*Chapters 1 and 2*).

There is a double fulfilment of these Old Testament prophecies. The initial reference was to the coming of the Assyrians, the Babylonians and Nebuchadnezzar against Israel and Judah. The future reference is to the coming of the Antichrist against the church. There was a remnant then and there is a remnant now. The day of the Lord spoken of then was the day of God's judgement through the Babylonians. For us, the day of the Lord is the second coming of Christ.

The Lord said, “*Not only the other nations, but I will crush Judah and Jerusalem too with My fist and destroy every last trace of their Baal worship, because they go up to the roof and bow down to the sun, moon and stars. They claim to follow the Lord, but worship Molech*” (1:4, 5). The Canaanites had succeeded in dragging Israel down to their level. Israel went to Canaan to manifest the true God to them, but they dragged Israel down to their level.

If you stand on a table and try to pull a person who is standing on the ground to the table-top, while he tries to pull you down, it will be easier for him to pull you down. This was what happened to Judah. The Lord warned Judah not to have any dealings with the Canaanites; but they did not listen. What was the result? Judah could not make the Canaanites worship Jehovah. But the Canaanites pulled Judah down to their level – and Judah started worshipping Baal, the sun, the moon and the stars.

This is what happens when a Christian church tries to “*Indianise*” their worship. They end up very often with idolatrous non-Christian practices. I saw a book written by a “*Christian*” priest that had a picture on its cover of Jesus sitting under a seven-hooded snake – the snake was supposed to symbolise the seven fold Holy Spirit!! That is the result of “*Indianisation*”. In other churches, it may be worldliness that is dragging Christians down.

The same thing happens when a believer marries an unbeliever. The unbeliever drags the believer down to his/her level. Asking for a dowry at the time of marriage is another heathen custom that most Christians practice. God hates the dowry system because it treats women as commodities to be sold. The prophets stood against such things and the religious leaders of Israel hated them for it. It is the same today. And so there is hardly a church in India today that takes a bold stand against dowry. Christians have been dragged down to the level of the world! They take the name of Jesus, but live like the rest of the world around them!

“*On that day I will punish the leaders and all those following pagan customs and those who fill their homes with loot.*” (1:8, 9). The leaders

were the ones who followed the pagan customs and loved money and filled their houses with it. The Old Testament prophets always spoke against the leaders of God's people and their love of money – because they were the ones who were primarily at fault. And so, those leaders called the prophets "*heretics*" and persecuted them. If God sends a prophet to the church today, he too will speak against the pastors and the bishops and their compromises and their love of money. And the pastors will call such a prophet a "*heretic*", close their pulpits to him and persecute him. Every single prophet in the Old Testament was persecuted. Not one escaped. Stephen asked the Jewish leaders, "*Name one prophet your ancestors didn't persecute!*" (Acts 7:52). They could not name one. Why were ***all*** the prophets persecuted? Because they exposed the sins of the leaders.

When Jesus preached, do we see Him preaching against drunkards and adulteresses and murderers or even against the cheating tax collectors of His day? No. He never said a word against them. He said, "I came to seek and to save those sinners." But He lashed out mercilessly at the religious leaders who held their Bibles, preached in the meeting-halls, loved money, and lived hypocritical lives. So they killed Him. Do you follow this real Jesus and the true prophets or do you follow the false prophets and "*another Jesus*" who are friendly with worldly Christian leaders, and feast with them? Judgement is coming upon the leaders first.

The Lord said, "*I will search with lanterns in Jerusalem's darkest corners to find and punish those who are content in their sins, indifferent to the Lord, thinking He will do nothing*" (1:12). In the church today also there are leaders living in luxury, who have become rich through their preaching and are indifferent to the Lord's commands. They love their titles and positions as "Director", "Chief Pastor", "Bishop" etc. The Lord is going to expose all of them.

Whenever a church declines spiritually, it always moves towards a life of luxury, ease, comfort, indifference to people's needs and prayerlessness. Many young people started serving the Lord with zeal, sacrifice, prayer and serious study of God's Word. But 30 years later, they have cooled off, "*choked by the deceitfulness of riches*". If you are not faithful to fight against the desires of the flesh and to stand against the corruption in Christendom, you will become like the corrupt leaders around you. You will be a professional preacher dishing out sermons on Sunday mornings, accumulating more and more money, living in luxury and with no anointing upon you – even though you may have started out with great sincerity. This happened in the time of Zephaniah and it is happening today.

The Lord describes those who sin like "*blind men searching for a path*" (1:17). And when the leaders themselves are blind, all their followers can only expect to fall into a ditch.

Then Zephaniah says, “*Beg the Lord to save you. All of you who are humble, seek for more humility*” (2:3). What a word – “Seek for more humility”. Zephaniah understood that God blesses the humble. On one side was *the pride of Babylon* and on the other *the humility of the remnant in Jerusalem*.

As we have seen, from the time of Cain and Abel, there have been two streams in humanity – Babylon and Jerusalem. Babylon is a corrupt, religious system. Jerusalem is the true church of God. This church is characterised not by miracles, signs and wonders, but by *humility*. They are never tired of seeking for more and more humility.

What then is the danger that faces those who belong to the remnant? It is the danger of comparing themselves with other churches and glorying in being superior. That is exactly how the devil wants you to think, because he knows that the moment you start thinking like that, God will become your enemy, and then you will also become like those whom you despise. You see how quickly the remnant can themselves become a part of Babylon. So pursue humility. Keep your face in the dust always. Never compare yourselves with the other people. Compare yourself only with Jesus. That is my advice to all who belong to the remnant of God’s people today.

Zephaniah prophesied that the Philistine cities would be rooted out and made desolate, but a few survivors (again, a remnant) would be cared for (2:4, 7). This remnant would be taunted and made fun of by others (2:8). If you stand up for the Lord, like Daniel and his three friends, and like the remnant spoken of by the prophets, you can be sure that many compromising Christians will taunt you. They will tell you, “What a fantastic ministry you could have had, if you had not joined this little group of fanatics.” Many Christians told me that when I gave up my wider ministry and started meeting with just a few people as a church in our home (in 1975). I am thankful that I didn’t listen to any of them. I said to the Lord, “Lord, I don’t care whether I am with only two or three. I want to be where You are and I want to proclaim the whole truth of Your Word. I don’t care for the opinions of backslidden Christianity and their leaders.” If you take a stand like that, you will face a lot of opposition. But you will finish your course with joy, if you endure until the end. Keep your eyes on the Lord. The Lord says, “Don’t worry about your critics. I’ll deal with them in My own time.” Today, my critics are silent. They marvel at what God has done in our midst. If however you can’t stand being taunted, you will give up the battle and join the compromisers.

Then Zephaniah spoke about the destruction of Assyria (2:13). Assyria had started declining after Nahum had prophesied, but she had not been destroyed fully. This prophecy was literally fulfilled: “*The Lord will destroy Assyria and make its great capital, Nineveh, parched like a desert. All sorts of wild animals will settle there. Owls of many kinds will live among the ruins of its palaces, hooting from the gaping windows*” (2:13, 14).

Then Zephaniah exposes the sin of Judah's leaders once again, “*Their leaders are like roaring lions hunting for everything they can get. Their judges are like ravenous wolves. Their prophets are liars seeking their own gain. Their priests disobey God’s laws.*” (3:3, 4). Every true prophet always spoke against the leaders, princes, judges, prophets and priests. That is one way by which we can recognise a true prophet even today.

Even today, corrupt pastors and preachers are always seeking “*for everything they can get.*” Jesus on the other hand taught that it was more blessed to give than to receive. The Apostle Paul told the elders of the Ephesian church, “*For three years, I have demonstrated to you the truth of what Jesus taught that it is more blessed to give than to receive*” (Acts 20:31–35).

Do you think today’s Christian leaders and pastors are demonstrating the truth of that verse? No. They are all eager *to get*. They are like the ravenous wolves that Zephaniah spoke of, who want to eat the sheep. How then can they be representatives of the real Jesus who taught that it was more blessed to give than to receive?

What do all these leaders seek? Their own profit – money, money and more money from their flock. People ask me, “Brother Zac, why do you speak so much against the leaders’ love of money?” I say, “Because the Bible speaks so much about it. Because the prophets spoke about it. Because Jesus spoke about it. That’s why I also speak about this.”

The Lord has permitted those who preach the gospel to *live from the gospel – but not that they should become wealthy through preaching the gospel!* When they expect God’s people to give them gifts and love money, and long to become rich, then they have become *evil*. The Lord watches everyone. One day He will come down in judgement on every corrupt leader. He says to His people, “*Be patient; the time is coming soon when I will pour out my fiercest anger and fury on them*” (3:8).

Salvation in the Day of the Lord

Notice some characteristics of this remnant.

“*I will purify the lips of the people*” (3:9). The speech of the remnant will be pure. Isaiah was convicted of his speech when he saw the glory of the Lord. I speak often about our *speech* and about our attitude to *money* – because the prophets spoke much about these two subjects. If we are careful with *our mouth and our money*, we can become the Lord’s spokesmen.

“*All of them will call on the name of the Lord and serve Him shoulder to shoulder*” (3:9). The remnant will be united as one body and serve the Lord bearing His burdens – shoulder to shoulder.

"I will remove all the proud and arrogant people from among you. There will be no pride on my holy mountain. Those who are left will be the lowly and the humble" (3:11, 12). The remnant will comprise only of humble people, because the Lord would have removed all the proud ones. That is another question people ask me, "Brother Zac why do you speak so much about humility?" Because that is what the Bible speaks of, from cover to cover.

"Those who are left will trust in the name of the Lord" (3:12). The remnant will be a people of faith.

"The people will do no wrong to each other, never telling lies or deceiving one another. They will live peaceful lives" (3:13). The remnant will be a peaceful people who never tell lies or deceive anyone or harm anyone.

"Sing, O daughter of Zion; shout aloud! Be glad and rejoice with all your heart! For the LORD Himself will live among you!" (3:14, 15). The remnant will be a happy people who have found their perfect security in the Lord's love for them.

"The LORD your God is in your midst, A victorious warrior. He will exult over you with joy. He will rejoice over you with shouts of joy" (3:17). God rejoices over this remnant. He does not find joy over people who live in sin. Can a father rejoice in a child who has cancer, leprosy and tuberculosis? No. Neither can God find joy in people who live in sin and who don't want to be healed. But God does find joy in this holy remnant. With great gladness He shouts over them and sings a song over them. This is the one place in Scripture where it says that God sings over His people. There are many places where *we* are exhorted to sing a song of praise to God. But here it is God Who is singing a song over us. What a challenge it is to be the type of person whom God can rejoice over.

"He is silently planning for you in love" (3:17 – Paraphrase). The Lord plans for us in love and He has pleasant surprises planned for us in the days to come, because He is our loving Father.

"I will save the weak and helpless ones. I will give glory and renown to those who were mocked and shamed. I will give you a name of distinction. They will praise you as I restore your fortunes before their very eyes" (3:19, 20). The remnant consists of a people who are weak and helpless in themselves. The Lord Himself deals with their enemies and gives His people glory and distinction in the final day.

The book of Zephaniah ends on that triumphant note.

HAGGAI

ENCOURAGEMENT TO DO THE LORD'S WORK

Haggai wrote very little - just two chapters. But he had a tremendous burden that the temple should be built. For more than 15 years after the Jews returned from Babylon to Jerusalem, the temple of the Lord had not been rebuilt, because the Jews were afraid of opposition from the people who lived around them. So God sent two prophets to them – Haggai (an older man) and Zechariah (a young man) – to encourage the Jews to start rebuilding the temple.

There are four messages in the book of Haggai - one in the first chapter and three in the second chapter.

First Message – Complete the Temple (1:1–15)

The *first* message was a call to rebuild the temple.

We see here the self-centredness of God's people. They kept on saying, "*The time has not yet come to rebuild the Lord's house*" (1:2). The Persian king had only ordered that the city of Jerusalem was not to be rebuilt (*Ezra 4:21*). He never forbade the building of the *temple*. But the Jews in Jerusalem used his words to justify their selfishness and laziness and said, "The circumstances are not right as yet to build the temple. So we must wait."

The Lord rebuked them saying, "*You feel the time is right to build your own luxurious houses, while My house remains in ruins*" (1:4). Solomon too was selfish. He spent 13 years building his own palace, but he did spend at least 7 years in building the temple – and he built the temple first. But these Jews built only their own grand houses and were not concerned about the Lord's house at all.

There are millions of Christians like that today who seek their own interests and their family's interests first – and not the Lord's. They would be gravely concerned if their own property was encroached upon by a neighbour, but they are not one bit concerned when the Lord's property is encroached upon by Satan.

Jesus told us that if we sought the kingdom of God and His righteousness *first*, everything necessary for our life on earth would be added to us. We won't have to go seeking for them. If we take care of God's family, He will take care of ours. We must be living demonstrations to an unbelieving world that because we honoured God, He has honoured us; that because we took care of God's family, He took care of ours. Is your life such a testimony.

We can apply the questions in 1:5, 6 to ourselves like this: The Lord challenges us saying, “*Consider how things have been going in your life. Has there been spiritual fruitfulness? You have planted much, but have harvested little. You have gone to many meetings, read many Christian books and listened to many Christian tapes. But is your home a godly home and a home of peace today? Have you overcome even a simple thing like shouting at your wife/husband? If not, then although you have sown much, you have harvested little. You wear clothing, but you are still not warm. You earn so much money. But there are holes in your pocket and so most of it is wasted. You ask God to fill you with the Spirit. But you leak, and so all the power goes out. Something is wrong.*

Who will pour water into a vessel that has holes in it? Many believers who come to God asking to be filled with the Holy Spirit, are vessels full of holes. God says, “Close up the holes first.” God is *eager* to fill you with His Holy Spirit. But there are things in your life that need to be set right first. You won't put money into a pocket that has holes in it. Neither will God fill with His Spirit those who have leaky areas in their life. They have not apologised to somebody they wronged, they have not returned money they took wrongfully, etc. These are major holes. With such gaping holes in your life, it is no use praying all night to be filled with the Holy Spirit. Nothing will happen. Instead spend all night fixing those holes. Then the answer will come quickly. One of Haggai's major themes is: “*Consider your ways*”.

In 1:7, 8, Haggai urges them to complete the building. The foundation had been laid many years earlier. But they stopped there. Jesus spoke a parable about a man who laid only a foundation and then did not complete the building (*Luke 14:28–30*). That parable comes right in the middle of a section on being His disciple. What Jesus was implying was that evangelism without disciple-making was like laying a foundation and not completing the building. Is a foundation necessary? Yes, absolutely essential. That is the first work to be done when building a house.

Is evangelism necessary? Certainly. That too is the first work to be done. But if you only evangelise and don't make disciples, that is wasted effort – as useless as a foundation without a building. *Hebrews 6:1–3* warns us of such foolishness: “*Let us not lay again the foundation of repentance, faith, water-baptism, baptism in the Holy Spirit, and teaching about resurrection and the final judgement.*” All of that is just the foundation. The writer says that we must then press on to *perfection* – that is building the house. After we have converted people to Christ through evangelism, we must make those converts disciples of Jesus who follow Him and press on to perfection.

So Haggai's message is not about laying the foundation. It is about perfection – completing the building, the Body of Christ. What is the difference between a congregation and the house of God? If you cut out 50,000 stones from a quarry and bring them to the building site, that is evangelism. These stones symbolise people who are born again. But they are not a building as yet. They are just a pile of stones. That is what most evangelical congregations today are. These stones must now be built up, being placed next to each other, if they are to be an expression of Christ's Body. That is the difficult part – to build them together into the house of God.

Many churches today are mere *congregations*, where one man (the pastor), like a watchman, has to ensure that no-one steals his “*stones*”. When one of his “*stones*” decides one day to join another church where he can receive more spiritual help, the watchman will complain that others are stealing “*his stones*”! But if he had built that stone into a building, it would have been impossible for anyone to steal it. If you build the Body of Christ, you won't have to worry about others stealing your members. When stones are built together and cemented, with stones on top of them, under them, and to their left and right, who can steal them? I have led a church in Bangalore since 1975; but I have never complained that anyone stole anyone from our church. Those who are being built together as a body in our midst cannot be stolen. So let us build God's house and not just lay a foundation and accumulate stones.

Notice the strong rebuke the Lord gives in 1:9–11. There is a great need in our churches for preachers who know how to speak a word of rebuke *in love*. There is plenty of preaching nowadays, but very little rebuke and correction. When God allows defeat or constant failure in your life, you need to stop and listen to what He is trying to tell you. Ask yourself, “*Why is the fruit of the Spirit missing in my life? Why is my family-life in a mess? Why is there no rain from heaven? Why is there a dryness in my life?*” (1:9–11). It may be because you are more concerned about earthly matters and your bank account than about your walk with the Lord!

When Zerubbabel and Joshua the high priest heard this prophecy, they responded to Haggai's message immediately and said, “*We will start*

building God's house straightaway." Or symbolically, "*We will not engage in mere evangelism henceforth. We will make disciples as well. We will build Christ's Body and not a one-man church.*" The church is to be like a functioning body – and not a pile of body parts, as found in anatomy laboratories – where they have many hands, legs, eyes and ears lying around, but none of them connected with each other by life. And so they cannot function *together*. Many churches today are exactly like that.

"Then Haggai, the Lord's messenger, gave the people the Lord's message" (1:13). Haggai was first *the Lord's messenger*, and then he gave people the Lord's message. You can listen to an anointed message on a tape and repeat that – and that may be the Lord's message. But Haggai was first the Lord's messenger. To become *the Lord's messenger*, you have to allow God to do a work of crushing in you first, as He did with Hosea. Haggai doesn't tell us how God crushed him in his younger days and broke him or what deep trials he had to go through. Many servants of God will never tell us all that they went through. But every servant of God, whom God has ever used has had a private history of God's dealings with him, where he was broken, crushed, humbled and taken through loss of money and reputation etc. Only thus does one become *the Lord's messenger*.

There is a difference between *the Lord's messenger* giving the Lord's message and *someone else* giving the same message. There will be an anointing of God in the first case which will be absent in the second – because the anointing comes on the *messenger* primarily, not on the message. The Holy Spirit does not come upon books and tapes. He comes upon people. I know that there are ignorant preachers who lay hands on books and tapes and ask the Lord to anoint them. But what they pray for does not happen. It is people whom God anoints, not books and tapes.

The Spirit stirred these men through Haggai's prophecy to action. "*The Lord sparked the enthusiasm of Zerubbabel, Joshua and the whole remnant of God's people and they came and began the work on the house of the Lord*" (1:14). That proved that there was an anointing on the message. To those who preach the Word, I would say, "Don't be satisfied until your preaching stirs people to act." Don't be satisfied with their shaking your hands and merely saying it was a good message. If your message has not stirred people to turn from their sins and to become disciples of Jesus, then you need to seek God for a greater anointing of His Spirit. Here we see that within 23 days things began to happen that had not happened for 16 years (1:1, 15). That is the difference that one prophet made. The professional preachers among the Jews who preached every Saturday for 16 years did nothing. But one prophet shook everybody up and things began to happen. Be a man like Haggai – be the Lord's messenger.

Second Message – The Temple Will Be Glorious (2:1–9)

The Lord asks the older people among the Jews, “*Is there anyone who can remember this house – the Temple – as it was before? In comparison, how does it look to you now? It must seem like nothing at all!*” (2:3). This new temple could not possibly match the glory of the one that Solomon built. But the Lord said, “*Take courage and work – for I am with you*” (2:4). And then the Lord said “*The ‘Desire of all nations’ shall come – and (then) the glory of this latter house shall be greater than of the former*” (2:7–9 - KJV). The “Desire of all Nations” refers to the Lord Jesus. He was the brightness of God’s glory and when He entered this new temple (500 years later), then the glory of this latter temple would be greater than anything in Solomon’s temple.

This last statement also shows that the glory of the “*new covenant temple of God – the church*” would be far, far greater than that of the “*old covenant temple*”. Solomon’s temple had an external glory that was temporary. The new covenant church does not have any external glory, but it has something far better – an inner glory that is eternal! What happened on the day of Pentecost far surpassed anything that you read of in the entire Old Testament.

They needed a lot of money to rebuild the temple. The Lord knew that, and so He says, “*The silver is Mine, the gold is Mine*” (2:8). God Himself would provide all the money they needed. Doesn’t the Lord know that we need money today also – for His work? Then why do we ask men for money? Why not go to the Owner of all the silver and gold in the world and ask Him? After all, the work is His and not ours. Then why not trust Him to provide for all the needs of His work? Why then do most pastors and preachers beg from men for God’s work?

Jesus needed money to live. He had to take care of His own expenses as well as that of His 12 apostles and their dependent families. God knew that, and so He arranged for some rich families to give money to Jesus for His work (*Luke 8:2, 3*). Jesus received their gifts, but He never asked anyone for money or made His financial needs known to anyone. He trusted His Father, the Owner of all the silver and gold in the world, to provide all His earthly needs. The apostles followed Jesus’ example and made their needs known only to God. No servant of God under the new covenant ever mentioned his earthly needs to any man. They all trusted their heavenly Father to provide.

We also need money today to rent a house, to buy food and clothes, to educate our children, and for the work of the Lord. The Lord says, “I know it all.” He is not unsympathetic to our need. Let us then follow the example of Jesus and the apostles and do what they did. Our heavenly Father says to us, “*The silver is Mine. The gold is Mine. Everything that you need for your family and your work, I will provide abundantly, if you trust in Me. Don’t go begging from man.*”

Third Message – The Obedient Will Be Blessed (2:10–19)

Now we come to the third message. The first message was about completing the temple. The second was about the glory of the temple. The third message is about holiness and sin. Whenever any prophet spoke about building God's house, the very next thing he spoke about always was holiness. You cannot build the house of God, if you do not emphasise holiness. This is the mistake that numerous preachers and pastors are making today.

The Lord says, “*Ask the priests this question about the law: ‘If one of you is carrying a holy sacrifice in his robes and happens to brush against some other food, will that also become holy?’ The priests replied, ‘No.’ Then Haggai asked, ‘But if someone becomes ceremonially unclean by touching a dead person and then brushes against any food, will it be defiled?’ And the priests answered, ‘Yes.’*” (2:11–13).

The message here is just this: *Holiness cannot be transmitted from one to another, but sin can.*

A more modern illustration will perhaps help us understand this better. In a hospital's operating theatre, the equipment is all sterilised and free from germs. If you take one of those sterilised knives and touch a dirty cloth with it, will that cloth become sterilised and free from germs? No. On the other hand, if you reverse the process and take the dirty cloth and touch that sterile knife with it, that knife will immediately become infected with the germs on the cloth.

So what do we learn from this parable? Just this that *sin is very contagious, but holiness is not.*

It takes a lot of time and effort to make a knife in a hospital sterile. But how long does it take to pollute it? Just a moment. Even so: It is very easy for someone to make you sinful. But it is very difficult for anyone to make you holy. Sin is communicated very easily, but not holiness. Remember that.

Then the Lord went on to say, “*Therefore whatever you offer is defiled*” (2:14). Even if the offering itself was ceremonially pure, their hands were defiled by sin, and so their offerings were defiled too. This is what the Lord is saying to the church today too. The prayers that believers pray may sound fervent and “*holy*”. There may be loud *Amens* and *Hallelujahs* from others too. But if there is sin in a person's life, his prayers are sinful. If you fight with your wife, how can you offer a pure prayer to God without setting matters right with your wife first? Your unholy life communicates sin to your prayer. People may be impressed by your prayer; but God rejects it, because there was “*sin in your holy activity*” (Exodus 28:38).

The Lord then urged the people to set right their sins and concluded with this promise, “*From this day onward I will bless you*” (2:19). He desires to bless us. It is only our sin that robs us of that blessing.

Fourth Message – Zerubbabel Will Be Honoured (2:20–23)

The final message was a personal one for Zerubbabel “*I will overthrow royal thrones and overturn their chariots and charioteers. But when this happens, I will honor you, My servant. I will treat you like a signet ring on My finger, for I have specially chosen you*” (2:22, 23). The ring here symbolises the anointing of the Holy Spirit. When the prodigal son came back, the father put a ring on his finger – a picture of God anointing repentant sinners with the Holy Spirit.

Haggai was a real prophet. He exalted Zerubbabel and hid himself. He said, “Zerubbabel, you are going to lead these people in building God’s house. The ring will be on your finger. My ministry was just to encourage these people and then to disappear.” True prophets never got any honour from men. Kings like David got honour. And governors like Zerubbabel got honour. But the prophets fulfilled their ministry and disappeared. Their honour will come to them when Christ returns. Be a servant of God who proclaims His words and seeks no honour from Christendom or from anyone on this earth. Encourage others, push them forward. Let them be the leaders and the elders. Let others have their titles and be the chairman and the directors of the Board and have the honour and the money. As for you, proclaim God’s word and then hide yourself. Jesus has given us a wonderful example in this area. Follow His example and be a true servant of God.

ZECHARIAH

THE ‘*REVELATION*’ OF THE OLD TESTAMENT

Zechariah was a young man who prophesied along with Haggai when the people came back from Babylon as a remnant to build the temple. Haggai and Zechariah prophesied together. We never see two prophets working together anywhere else in the Old Testament. Elijah, Elisha and Jonah all worked alone. Even though Jeremiah and Habakkuk lived at the same time, we never see them working together. They prophesied separately.

In that sense, Haggai and Zechariah were different from all the other Old Testament prophets. Towards the close of the old-covenant period, God was preparing people for the new covenant – in which nobody works by himself. As soon as Jesus started His ministry, He sent out His disciples *two by two* – preparing them for the new covenant. Fellowship is a fundamental necessity in the new covenant. So, as we approach the end of that old covenant period, here we find a wonderful example of an older man like Haggai and a much younger man like Zechariah working together.

Although Zechariah was younger than Haggai, God gave him much more to prophesy. God is no respecter of age. He began to give Zechariah visions and prophetic messages when he was very young (2:4). Jeremiah too was a young man when God called him to prophesy. This is a great encouragement for all who are young. God can pick you up when you are young, anoint you with His Holy Spirit, team you up with an older, godly brother like Haggai, and finally, give you a wider ministry even than him. Haggai was a gracious, godly, old man who not only pushed Zerubbabel forward (as we saw earlier), but also pushed young Zechariah forward. A true man of God is always like that. He pushes younger people forward and pulls back himself. In India, where the need is so great, we need

older men like that – who will train younger people to take over their ministry and then pull out and move elsewhere where the Lord has need of him. This is how it should be with every prophet. It's not God's will that a man called to be a prophet should settle down in one ministry forever. Haggai was a wonderful example of a true prophet.

Zechariah had a blessed ministry of encouraging discouraged people. These Jews had just come back from Babylon where their fathers had been slaves, and they were poor, fearful and discouraged. They were a beaten lot. They were not cultured, refined or rich like their forefathers of 200 years earlier. Zechariah was called to encourage them. Because they received Haggai's message, God sent them more messages through Zechariah. If you receive the message of one prophet, then God will send you another. But if you don't receive the message of one prophet, then God will not send you any more of His servants.

The Lord begins by telling His people through Zechariah that He was very angry with their ancestors who had been taken captive 70 years earlier (1:2). He warned them not to be like those ancestors but to listen to the prophets and to return to the Lord (1:3–5). The things that God had spoken through His prophets to their ancestors had all been fulfilled exactly. It was only after they were taken captives that those ancestors repented and said, “*We have received what we deserved from the Lord. He has done what He said He would do*” (1:6). It is a pity that most Christians too repent only when they are chastened by the Lord and not when they hear God's Word through his servants.

We can divide the book of Zechariah into three parts: First of all, in *Chapters 1 to 6* Zechariah was given eight visions – each of which had a spiritual meaning. Then in *Chapters 7 and 8*, he is given messages on different topics – such as hypocrisy, disobedience and Israel's restoration. The final section (*Chapters 9 to 14*) is about the Messiah – the Messiah rejected and finally returning in glory and reigning over all the earth.

Zechariah's burden is the movement of God's people from Babylon to Jerusalem. Jerusalem was the burden of all these prophets. Haggai's burden was the temple. Zechariah's was not just the temple, but the city of Jerusalem itself which symbolised the church of God.

Zechariah's Visions

The first vision Zechariah sees is of a man sitting on a red horse among some myrtle trees (1:7–17). Myrtle trees are low trees and symbolise humility. Behind the man were red, brown and white horses. “*And I asked, ‘What are these for?’ And they said, ‘We have patrolled the earth.’ They reported to the angel of the Lord, ‘The whole earth is at peace.’*” This is a picture of God watching everything that happens on the earth. “*Then the angel said to me, ‘Shout this message for all to hear: “This is what the*

Lord Almighty says: ‘My love for Jerusalem and Mount Zion is passionate and strong. I have returned to show mercy to Jerusalem. My temple will be rebuilt and plans will be made for the reconstruction of Jerusalem. The Lord will comfort Zion and choose Jerusalem as His own.’” (1:9–17). ‘Jerusalem’ and ‘Mount Zion’ symbolise the church, the body of Christ on earth that will be built, despite all the opposition of Satan and his forces.

The message that comes to us from this is that even though the church is small and in a low place, she has the God Who runs the universe watching over her as she seeks to build His house. When you are in a lonely place, you can feel weak and helpless. But remember that the eyes of the Lord are always going across the earth, working on your behalf. The Lord’s love for the church is “*passionate and strong*”. That was how Zechariah encouraged the people to build God’s house.

The *second vision* was of four animal horns and four blacksmiths (1:18–21). The horns represented at that time, the world powers that had ruled Judah and Israel at some time – Egypt, Assyria, Babylon and Medo-Persia. In our time, they represent the forces of darkness that attack the church from all four sides – north, south, east and west. Horns in the Bible are a picture of strength. So these horns represent the gates of Hades, the forces of spiritual death. These horns had “*scattered*” God’s people (1:19). The work of the devil is always to scatter and divide believers – separating them by gossip, slander, misunderstanding and false report. Satan is in this business perpetually.

“*Against these four horns the Lord showed me four blacksmiths*” (1:20). These blacksmiths would destroy the horns. Blacksmiths are strong people who hammer iron into shape. The blacksmiths had come to *terrify* the four horns that had scattered and humbled Judah. They would throw those enemies down and destroy them. These represented God’s servants – Haggai, Zechariah, Joshua and Zerubbabel. Today God raises up prophets in the north, south, east and west, to terrify Satan. You must be one of those servants of God who *terrify Satan* (1:21).

Most believers are themselves terrified by Satan and demons! Once, when I encountered a demon possessed man, he looked so fiercely at me, that I was taken aback momentarily. I immediately asked myself one question to strengthen my faith: “*Was this demon conquered on Calvary, or did this one escape?*” I knew the answer immediately. Satan and every one of his demons were conquered on Calvary. None of them escaped. Faith rose in my heart immediately and I cast out that demon in the Name of their Conqueror, the Lord Jesus Christ. So we need never be afraid of Satan or of his demons. When you see Satan working intensely in your home or in your church, or when he stirs up people against you, ask yourself this question: “*Was Satan defeated on the cross?*”

We are to terrify Satan. How was it when Jesus walked on this earth? Wherever He went, Satan was scared. The demons would scream to one another: "Jesus is coming. Jesus is coming here. Let us run away." The Bible says that, "*as Jesus is, so are we in this world*" (1 John 4:17). If you are walking with a clear conscience, in humility and have no desire on earth but to glorify God, then wherever you go the demons will say the same thing that they said about Jesus, "Hey, he is coming here. She is coming here. This person is not like the other Christians. This one is living in humility and with a clear conscience. We're in danger. Let's get out of here."

Isn't it wonderful that we can be like those blacksmiths in God's hands to hammer the devil's work and to destroy it? And we must become stronger and stronger as we grow older – and not like many preachers nowadays who become fatter and richer and less anointed as they grow older! Fast, eat less, live more simply and give away what you don't need to those who are poorer, and seek a greater anointing, as you grow older! That is how a true servant of God must live. Don't go the way that Christendom and its leaders are going today. Go in another direction – the way Jesus and the early apostles went. They went from strength to strength as they grew older.

There is a lovely promise in *Deuteronomy 33:25* that says, "*As your days, so shall your strength be*" (KJV). I want to claim that all the days of my life. You young people should claim it from your youth onwards. Say, "Lord, I want to be one who terrifies Satan."

In the *third vision*, Zechariah sees a man going to measure the length and breadth of Jerusalem (2:1–13). This vision symbolises man determining the strength of a church by the number of its members. But the Body of Christ has only *one* membership list – the Book of Life. And the Lord teaches us here how to really measure the church.

Another angel comes and tells Zechariah, "*Jerusalem will someday be so full of people that it won't have any room for everyone. Many will live outside the city walls. Yet they will be safe.*" This was a small group of people and they were thinking, "Who will come and join this despised group of ours? The other Jews are all living so comfortably in Babylon. But here we are, a small, despised group trying to build God's temple. Who is interested in what we are doing?"

The angel came to encourage them and said, "Don't worry. People from here and there will hear about you and will come and join you one day. Today you may be small. All of God's work starts very small. But if God can find leaders who will stay true and not compromise His principles, then even if they are small, one day from north, south, east and west those who have a hunger for godliness and reality, will gradually hear of your group, and come and join you because they will recognise that God is in your midst and that you have *life*."

The Lord then told them, "*I myself will be a wall of fire round about Jerusalem (the church)*" (2:5). The church does not have any earthly, denominational walls. You can't come inside it by signing a doctrinal statement. Everyone has to come through that wall of fire if he is to become a part of the true church. That fire will burn up all his earthly ambitions and his desire to live for himself. Only then can he become a part of the Body of Christ.

Picture a city surrounded by a wall of fire. How can you enter that city? Only by going through the wall of fire. Everything that can be burnt will be burnt up by God as you enter through that wall. Only what cannot be burnt will go through the fire. "*Our God is a consuming fire*" (Hebrews 12:29). "*Who can dwell with the consuming fire?*" (Isaiah 33:14).

Preachers, through the years, have thrown water on that fire and quenched it so that nowadays anyone can walk in and join the church, while still retaining all their worldly ideas, their worldly ambitions and their love of the world. You can be certain that God is not in such a church, because wherever He dwells, He will be a wall of fire around that church.

And then God goes on to say, "*I will be the glory in the midst of it.*" If you want the glory of God to be in your church, then you must allow Him to be a wall of fire around your church. The two go together. If you say that God's standards are too high and you throw water on the fire, then God's glory will not be in your church either. When the wall of fire goes away, the glory goes away too. Doctrine is important. But no doctrine can be a wall of fire. God Himself has to be the wall of fire. The *most important* thing in a church is not right doctrine but the glory of God. If that is there, right doctrine will follow. If that is not there, mere rightness of doctrine is useless.

"Come away from Babylon. Escape to Jerusalem" (2:6). What a word that is! We need to proclaim it to God's people even today! Every believer has to make a choice to come out of Babylon. God will not catch anyone by the scruff of his neck and pull him out. The responsibility is the individual's. You have to make that decision. But personally speaking, I never want to be part of any religious system that does not honour God and His Word. I want to be with the wholehearted people of God who gather within this wall of fire and have the glory of God in their midst.

If you are seeking to build a church, then build a church like this. Any other type of church is useless. But you have to pay a price to build a church like this. You can't just imitate a pattern that you have seen somewhere and try and reproduce that. God has to burn up everything that can be burnt up in your life first, before you can build a church that

pleases Him. So make sure that *every* earthly ambition in you is burnt up. Make sure that you don't love anything that God does not love, and that you hate everything that God hates. Then you can be a man/woman whom God uses to build His church.

The Lord then says, "*Shout and rejoice, for I am coming to live among you*" (2:10). As a result, many nations will come and join themselves to the Lord because they see that God is in the midst of his people (2:11).

Then we come to the *fourth vision* (3:1–10). This was a vision of cleansing and crowning – the cleansing and crowning of Joshua the High Priest. There are two great movements in Israel's history – one from Egypt to Canaan, and the other from Babylon to Jerusalem. And in both of these, there is a Joshua! There is a Joshua who led Israel to Canaan and there is a Joshua who is the High Priest in Jerusalem. This is not just a coincidence. '*Joshua*' is the Hebrew word for '*Jesus*', meaning '*Saviour*'. Jesus is the One Who leads us to victory over every giant of sin, and He is also the One Who intercedes for us as our High Priest.

But I want you to look at Joshua here as a leader among God's people. This leader had sin in his life, but not deliberate, known sin. If it had been deliberate sin, it would have been a very serious matter. Paul could only say, "*I don't know anything against myself. My conscience is clear. But the One who judges me is the Lord. There are many things that He sees which I cannot see. As and when God shows me some sin, I confess it and forsake it and He cleanses me*" (1 Corinthians 4:4 - Paraphrase).

We can sin *consciously* and *unconsciously*. All of us will sin unconsciously and accidentally until the day we die. Leaders too can sin in these ways. No leader anywhere in the world is perfectly Christlike. Even the apostle Paul had not reached that degree of perfection. Consider one proof of this: When they slapped Paul in the court of the high priest, Paul got angry and told the high priest, "*God will smite you, you whitewashed wall*" (Acts 23:3). But when they slapped Jesus, He did not threaten the high priest. This was the difference between Christ's reaction and Paul's. (However, Paul confessed his sin and asked for forgiveness, and thus set the matter right immediately).

No-one can be sinlessly perfect on this earth. We can become like Jesus only when He returns. So even the leaders among God's people will have some defect or the other in them. There are defects in the greatest of prophets in the church. But we should not allow ourselves to be disturbed by those defects. I am not referring to sins like committing adultery and loving money. Those are serious matters and are certainly not *unconscious* sin! I am referring to small defects that are not serious, but that are still un-Christlike.

Joshua the high priest was standing before the Lord and Satan stood there to accuse him. Satan is always seeking to accuse and harm the

leaders. He targets them and their wives and children. Don't be harsh in judging a leader, because he is a bigger target of Satan than you are. His wife and children are bigger targets of Satan than your wife and children. Satan stood there to accuse Joshua to the Lord. But the Lord replied saying, "*I the Lord reject your accusations*" (3:2). We have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous. Sometimes we are so taken up with the accuser that we forget all about our Advocate Who is praying for us.

There are two ministries going on in heaven right now. One is Satan's, accusing. He accused Job and Joshua. At the same time, there is another ministry going on in heaven. "*Jesus ever lives to make intercession for us*" (*Hebrews 7:25*). The two ministries are a ministry of accusation and a ministry of intercession. Those who are in fellowship with Satan will accuse other believers. Every time you gossip or speak evil against another believer, whether you know it or not, you are holding hands with Satan saying, "I agree with you, Satan. He is like that." And every time you pray for a brother who is weaker, you are holding hands with Jesus and saying, "Lord, I agree with You. We have to pray for that brother and deliver him from that problem." How many times have you held hands with Satan and how many times have you held hands with Jesus? You know. Let it be different in the coming days.

When Joshua was being accused, the Lord said, "*I reject your accusations*." This is what I say too, when people come to me with accusations. When people come to me in my house and accuse a brother, I tell them, "Let me call that brother immediately and tell him what you have told me." Invariably the accuser says, "No. Please don't do that." I reply, "I must. I am faithful to all my brothers. If someone had told me something about you, I would have called you immediately and told you. So when you tell me something about somebody else, I must call him and tell him too." Do you know what the result of my approach has been? My house has been protected from being a place of gossip. I would encourage you to do what I have done.

The Lord replied to Satan saying, "I reject your accusations. This man is a child of God. He is a burning stick that I snatched out of the fire." Since Joshua's garments were filthy, the angel said, "Take away his filthy clothes." This is a picture of Jesus our Advocate pleading for us saying, "Take away his filthy clothes. Put new clothes on him." And Joshua stood there clothed now in the righteousness of Christ. That is how we must see all of God's children – *clothed in the righteousness of Christ*. And now we come to the best part. Zechariah was so excited seeing all this that he joined the Lord in spirit and said, "Lord, this is wonderful. Now put a nice turban on his head as well." He joined Jesus in making his filthy brother glorious.

Do you want to share in this ministry of “*making your brother glorious*”?

What does this mean in practical terms? It means that when someone comes along and accuses a brother to me, I reply saying, “But you know he has some good qualities too.” And I name some of them. All of a sudden the accuser’s mouth is shut. This is a wonderful ministry to have – even when we pray. John Hyde (known as ‘*Praying Hyde*’) was a great American missionary in North India in the early 20th century. He relates an incident where he was praying and began to tell the Lord about the weaknesses of a certain pastor. All of a sudden, he felt as if he was being choked. The Holy Spirit told him not to get into a ministry of accusation, but to intercede for that man. He learned that day not to accuse people even in prayer!

Don’t join the devil in criticising God’s people. Instead pray for them. Whenever the Lord reminds you of a sincere servant of God, pray for him. He may be facing some Satanic attack at that very moment. Ask the Lord to protect his family and to bless his ministry.

This does not mean that we should ignore error or overlook sin. Sins and errors in doctrine need to be exposed ruthlessly, as the prophets of old did. But there must be no smell of the spirit of the Accuser in our words.

In the *fifth vision*, the Lord showed Zechariah a gold lampstand with a bowl on top of it, to hold the oil (4:1–14). On each side of the lampstand was an olive tree with a pipe coming from it to the bowl. In the Old Testament temple, the priests had to pour oil into the lampstand each day to replenish the oil used up. But here the oil flowed from the trees directly to the lampstand. This lampstand is a picture of the church and the flow of oil symbolises the continuous ministry of the Holy Spirit anointing the church (*Revelation 1:20*).

The *two trees* symbolise anointed servants of God whom the Lord uses to keep the church fresh and Spirit-filled at all times (4:14). They are filled with the Spirit themselves and in touch with the Spirit always. Every time you meet them, oil flows out of them to bless you. The church needs many servants of God like that.

Haggai and Zechariah were two such men who could work together. Every servant of God needs to have his ministry balanced by the ministry of another servant of God. One tree pours oil from one side and the other tree from the other side. One person emphasises grace and the other emphasises truth. But together, they manifest the glory of God that was seen in Christ and the lampstand of the church burns brightly (*John 1:14*).

Where two brothers can work together like that for the building of the church – both filled with the Holy Spirit, without competition, jealousy, personal ambition, or any desire to show oneself better than the other

– but only desiring that the lampstand should burn, they can build a church against which the gates of hell will never be able to prevail. This could be Joshua and Zerubbabel, or Haggai and Zechariah, or any two brothers or a husband and wife working together for the Lord. This is new covenant ministry.

This was what the Lord said to Zerubbabel, “*It won't be by human might or power, but by My Spirit. Every mountain will be flattened in front of you*” (4:6). When the church moves forward in this way, filled with the Spirit, the gates of hell will not be able to prevail against it.

In *Chapter 2*, we saw the ministry of God the Father being a wall of fire round about the church. In *Chapter 3*, we saw the ministry of God the Son as the Advocate of God's leaders and God's people. In *Chapter 4*, we see God the Holy Spirit filling and anointing the church. So we see the whole trinity in these three chapters.

Then we come to the *sixth vision*. Here Zechariah sees a flying scroll, 10 metres long and 5 metres wide (5:1–4). The Lord said, “*This scroll contains the curse of the law on all those who tell lies and who steal. I am sending the curse into the house of every thief and every liar, and My curse will destroy that house completely*” (5:3, 4). This is a picture of judgement on those who disobey God's Laws, that enters every house and exposes sin wherever it is hidden.

In the *seventh vision* Zechariah saw a basket for measuring grain (a symbol of business) with a heavy lead cover on it. When the cover was lifted, Zechariah saw a woman named “*Wickedness*” sitting inside. Two women then came to take the basket to Babylon to build a temple there for it (5:5–11). This vision symbolises the false church in which Christianity has become a means of financial profit – where religion and business go hand in hand (See “*Babylon*” in *Revelation 17 and 18*). The woman *hidden* inside the basket indicates that the hidden motivating force behind much that is called Christian work today is the desire to make money. But most people do not have the discernment to see through this. Many Christians have a lid that covers their own unrighteousness in financial matters. But the Lord shows His prophets the corruption that is found among His people.

We have to ensure that this Babylonian spirit is not permitted to come into the church. In the days of Jesus, people did business inside the temple and made money in the name of religion. The Israelites could not see what was going on. They needed sheep and doves for their offerings and felt that these sellers were serving them. But Jesus could see what was going on under the lead cover – the motive behind the selling of those doves and sheep. They were out to make a neat profit for themselves. We see the same thing happening today. Many a preacher makes money in the name of religion, quoting verses like, “*The labourer is worthy of*

his hire”, and “*The Lord has ordained that those who preach the gospel should live by the gospel.*” But if you look underneath this lead cover, you will see the woman Babylon hiding underneath. Jesus saw this and drove those religious racketeers out of the temple.

In the *eighth vision*, Zechariah sees four chariots coming between two bronze mountains (6:1–8). Bronze in the Bible symbolises the judgement of God on sin. The altar in the tabernacle where the animals were sacrificed, was made of bronze. These four chariots came from between bronze mountains. They looked like uncontrolled horses. But God had control of their reins. There were red, black, white and grey horses, as in *Revelation 6*. Zechariah asked, what these represented. The reply was, “*These are the four spirits of heaven who stand before the Lord of all the earth. They are going out to do his work*” (*Zechariah 6:5*). Some were going north, some to the west and some to the south. They went across the earth and ministered God’s judgement. Maybe God sent a flood in one place and an earthquake in another as a judgement. When these spirits returned, the Lord said, “*Those who went north have vented the anger of My Spirit over there.*” (*6:8*). That means God’s anger was exhausted after His judgement on those people.

Then the Lord tells Zechariah that certain people would bring him gifts of silver and gold from the Jews in Babylon. Zechariah was to accept their gifts and make a crown from it for Joshua the high priest (6:10, 11). When godly people (who are richer than us) give us gifts, we can receive them. Elisha accepted the gift of hospitality regularly from a rich, God-fearing lady (*2 Kings 4:8*). But he refused to receive any gifts from heathen Naaman (*2 Kings 5:15, 16*). Jesus also accepted gifts from certain rich, godly women (*Luke 8:2, 3*). The apostles however never accepted money from unbelievers (*3 John 7*). But when God gives us gifts through others, they are not always for ourselves. We are to use them to bless others too. Here Zechariah was told to use all the gold and silver to make a crown for Joshua. He was also to encourage Joshua by putting the crown on his head and telling him that the LORD says, “*Here is the man called the Branch. He will build the Temple of the Lord. He will rule as king. He will also serve as priest from His throne, and there will be perfect harmony between the two*” (*6:12, 13*). This was a prophecy about Christ Who would build the true temple of God – the church.

Christ would also be the first King-Priest. Under the old covenant, no-one was allowed to be a king and a priest. King Saul tried to be both and lost his kingdom thereby (*1 Samuel 13:9–13*). King Uzziah also tried to be both king and priest and got leprosy (*2 Chronicles 26:16–23*). Jesus was the first One who was to be a King and a Priest. Now He has made us king-priests along with Him (*Revelation 1:6*). The prophecy went on to say that people from many countries would come and build the church (*6:15*).

Zechariah's Messages

The Lord then gave Zechariah some messages on fasting, hypocrisy and disobedience in *Chapters 7 and 8*. The Lord told him to tell the people and the priests, “*During those seventy years of exile, when you fasted, was it really for Me that you were fasting? Even now in your holy festivals, you don't think about Me but only of pleasing yourselves*” (7:5, 6).

The message that the Lord had proclaimed through all the prophets was the same: “*Be fair and honest. Show mercy and kindness to other people. Don't oppress the poor, the widows, the orphans and the foreigners. Don't harm each other. Only then will your fasting (and breaking of bread) etc. be of value. Otherwise it is of no use.*” (7:9, 10). God cares greatly for the poor and the weak and the oppressed. But most of the well-known preachers in the world preach only in the big cities, where the rich people are – and they preach “the prosperity gospel” to them. Jesus however came to preach the gospel to the poor (*Luke 4:18; Matthew 11:5*). God cares specially for the poor, for the widows and orphans, and for the helpless. Every true servant of God will care for them too.

The ancestors of the Jews did not listen to this message but turned away from it. That was why the Lord punished them and scattered them (7:11).

God is a jealous God. He says that His love for Mount Zion (the church) is passionate and strong. He is jealous that Jerusalem (the church) should never become corrupt. The Lord wants to keep His bride “*faithful and holy*” – pure and uncorrupted for Himself (8:1–3).

He goes on to say that in the church, there will be old men and women and young boys and girls (8:4, 5). There will be no generation gap in the true church of Christ. However old I may be, I want to be able to come down to the level of the youngest boys and girls in the church. I love to speak to the little boys and girls in every home I visit. Many brothers talk only to the older folk when they visit a home. Let us learn to talk to the children too. A godly man will always talk to children at their level. Jesus was like that.

The other thing we see here is that in the church, the boys and girls will be playing games (8:5). They will not be *praying* all the time. There needs to be a time for *praying*. But there should also be a time for *playing*. We must encourage games in the church, because that is how it will be during the millennial reign of Christ. I am a little too old to run around on a soccer field now. But in my spirit, I still love to play games. A fellowship is built up between people when they play games together. It builds a bond between people. Praise God for a balanced gospel!

The Lord goes on to say, “*All this may seem impossible to you now, a small and discouraged remnant of God's people. But do you think this is impossible for Me, the Lord Almighty? I will bring My people home again to*

live safely in Jerusalem (the church). They will be My people, and I will be faithful toward them as their God” (8:6, 8). So God tells us to take heart and to work until his church is completed and perfected. “*So don’t be afraid or discouraged, but instead get on with rebuilding the temple (the church)!*” (8:9–13). It was such a message of encouragement that stirred people in Zechariah’s day to work hard to build the temple. And it is the word of encouragement that will stir people to build the church today. The Lord went on to say that people from all over the world would come and seek to be a part of the church because they will recognise that God is with the church (8:20–23).

Zechariah’s Burdens

The last section can be divided into two parts: The rejection of the Messiah (*Chapters 9 to 14*) and the reign of the Messiah on earth (*Chapters 12 to 14*).

Zechariah first expresses the Lord’s burden of judgement against a number of nations for their pride and arrogance (9:1–8). In contrast to the “*pride of the Philistines*” (9:6), the King of Jerusalem would come in great humility riding on a donkey and not on a horse (like earthly kings did). “*Behold, your king is coming to you.... Humble, and mounted on a donkey.... I will remove the battle chariots from Israel and the warhorses from Jerusalem, and I will destroy all the weapons used in battle. Your king will bring peace*” (9:9, 10). The spirit of battle would be replaced by the spirit of peace by this humble King. It is in this spirit of humility and peace alone that the church can be built.

Then comes a prophecy of salvation from hell through the blood of Christ: “*Because of the covenant I made with you, sealed with blood, I will free your prisoners from death in a waterless dungeon*” (9:11).

After this comes a prophecy about the second coming of Christ: “*The Lord will appear above his people ... the Sovereign Lord will sound the trumpet; He will go out against his enemies like a whirlwind.... The Lord Almighty will protect his people, and they will subdue their enemies.... When that day arrives, the Lord their God will rescue (rapture) His people, just as a shepherd rescues his sheep. They will sparkle like jewels in a crown. How wonderful and beautiful they will be!*” (9:14–17). Zechariah speaks much about the second coming of Christ and about the defeat of the enemies of the Lord and of the triumph of God’s people at that time.

Zechariah therefore urged God’s people to “*ask the LORD for rain and He will give it*” (10:1). This is the great need in our time – to ask God to pour out His Spirit upon us exactly as He sends rain on the parched ground. He will certainly give us that outpouring, just as Zechariah prophesied!

Then Zechariah warns us against false prophets whom he calls “*diviners (fortune-tellers)*” who speak about false visions that they claim to have seen (10:2). They claim to be able to predict the future but actually tell lies. There are such so-called “*prophets*” today in many places to whom believers go seeking for advice. Invariably they seek advice concerning material things and financial prosperity. Do these “*prophets*” tell them about their sins, like the Old Testament prophets did? No. They tickle their ears with words that make them happy. There are such “*fortune tellers*” in every religion and they all do it for money. So also do the Christian “*fortune-tellers*”. Don’t be deceived by these false prophets in Christendom. Don’t be frightened by their threats or their warnings. And don’t be deceived by their promises of prosperity either. The very fact that they want your money proves that they are false prophets and agents of Satan. If they were true representatives of Christ, they would not be expecting you to give them any money. That is how you can distinguish a “*fortune-teller*” from a true prophet of God. If you want to find a true prophet, look for one who will tell you about your sin and who will lead you into a Christlike life of humility and self-denial.

It is because people listen to these false prophets that they “*wander like lost sheep without any shepherd to protect them*” (10:2). Therefore the Lord says, “*My anger burns against these shepherds, and I will punish these leaders. The Lord Almighty will look after His flock Himself*” (10:3).

“*From Judah will come the cornerstone, the tent peg, the battle bow, and all the rulers. They will be like mighty warriors in battle, trampling their enemies in the mud under their feet. Since the LORD is with them as they fight, they will overthrow even the horsemen of the enemy*” (10:4–5). The Cornerstone, tent peg and battle bow are all pictures of Christ. The mighty warriors are a picture of the saints of God. The enemies are Satan and his hosts and the lusts in our flesh. When the Lord is with us, every one of these enemies will be overthrown and trampled under our feet (*Romans 16:20*). “*I will strengthen Judah and save Israel; I will reestablish them because I love them*” (10:6). The Lord will unite the groups of His people who are separated from each other (like Judah and Israel) and bring Jews and Gentiles together and establish them into one Body.

In *Chapter 11*, we read again about good shepherds and evil shepherds. The evil shepherds are the ones who are interested in making money. They weep when the Lord exposes them and their means of making money is gone (11:3). They had oppressed their flock and slaughtered the sheep for profit (11:4–7).

We read then about grace and unity. “*I took two shepherd’s staffs, naming one Grace and the other Union, and I fed the flock as I had been told to do*” (11:7). The two most important messages required in the

church today are concerning “*Grace*” and “*Unity*”. Grace will lead us to victory over sin (*Romans 6:14*). Overcoming sin is the clearest proof that we have come *fully* under grace. When we get forgiveness of sins, we receive a little bit of grace. But when we come under grace fully, sin cannot rule over us. The first is like a cup of water, the second like a river of water. This is one of the most important messages to be proclaimed in the church today. Those who experience this grace and the Holy Spirit being poured on them must then come to *unity* with each other. It is not unity with everyone who calls himself a Christian, but with all those who have received grace and live in victory over sin.

Then comes a prophecy about the betrayal of Christ by Judas, “*Give me whatever I am worth.... So they counted out thirty pieces of silver. And the Lord said to me, ‘Throw it to the potters – this magnificent sum at which they valued me!’ So I took the thirty coins and threw them to the potters in the Temple of the Lord*” (*11:12, 13*).

God then promises to pour out the *Spirit of grace and prayer* – or the Spirit of grace and groaning – upon His people (*12:10*). In *Romans 6*, we read about the Spirit of grace. In *Romans 8*, we read about the Spirit of groaning. The Holy Spirit comes as a Spirit of grace helping us to overcome sin. He also comes as a Spirit of groaning, making us pray and cry out to God to build the church.

In that day a fountain will be opened for cleansing from sin. But for that fountain to be opened, the Shepherd will have to be struck down (*13:1, 7*). The prophecies here refer to some things that happened at the first coming of Christ and some things that will happen at His second coming. When Christ returns in glory, God will “*remove all the false prophets and the unclean spirits that inspire them. No one will boast then of a prophetic gift! No one will wear prophet’s clothes to try to fool the people. They will say. ‘I’m not a prophet.’*” (*13:2–4*).

And then, Zechariah, like most of the prophets, prophesies about the remnant that will stand true to the Lord in the last days (*13:8, 9*). The Lord says concerning this remnant, “*I will bring them through the fire and make them pure, just as gold and silver are refined and purified by fire. They will call on my name, and I will answer them. I will say, ‘These are my people,’ and they will say, ‘The Lord is our God.’*” (*13:9*).

In the last chapter, Zechariah speaks about the coming day of the Lord when Jesus will return and stand on the Mount of Olives and that mountain will be split into two (*14:3, 4*). The nations will be gathered for battle around Jerusalem at that time (*14:2*). The conflict for Jerusalem that is raging today is but the first stages of that battle that will erupt there just before the return of our Lord. In the day the Lord returns, the normal source of light will stop shining and the Lord Himself will be the light (*14:6, 7*).

The enemies of the Lord will be defeated. Their flesh rotting away and their eyes shriveling in their sockets seems to indicate exposure to some type of nuclear explosion (14:12). The Lord will then reign from Jerusalem as King over all the earth (14:9, 16).

In that day, there won't be any businessmen in the church (14:21). The church will be cleansed of all those who sought to make profit for themselves in the name of Christ. The principle of *profit* (to *gain* as much as we can through Christianity) is the principle of Babylon. But the principle of *sacrifice* (to *give* as much as I can) is the principle of Jerusalem.

MALACHI

FORM WITHOUT POWER

Malachi was the last prophet that God sent to Israel before John the Baptist the forerunner of Christ. He prophesied about 430 years before Christ, towards the end of Nehemiah's time. Some of the sins Malachi mentions in *Chapters 2 and 3* are similar to the sins mentioned in *Nehemiah 13*. Nehemiah's warnings do not seem to have had much effect on the Jews in Jerusalem. After Nehemiah left Jerusalem, the Jews seem to have gone back to their old sinful habits. Things were in a really bad state by the time Malachi came on the scene.

God's people have always been dependent on godly leaders for their spiritual survival.

The Burden of the Lord

The word '*Malachi*' means '*My messenger*'. Like the other prophets, Malachi also had *a burden*. Each prophet had a unique burden given to him by God – but all of them were concerned about the lack of holiness among God's people. The burden God lays on your heart is almost always an indication of the ministry He has planned for you. So wait on the Lord to receive a burden from Him. If you serve the Lord without a burden, you will get bored with the Lord's work after a while, and you are likely to end up seeking after money, man's honour or earthly comfort. It is unfortunate that many who claim to be serving the Lord today have no God-given burden for their ministry.

God may give one man a burden to work among children and another a burden for evangelism. Yet another may be given a burden to teach God's people. God gives different burdens to different members of Christ's body. We must not imitate someone else's ministry or try to have *his* burden. Don't force others to have *your* burden; and don't allow anyone else to

give you his burden. Let God Himself give you a burden – the one He has planned for you.

Many people have urged me to have a burden for *their particular* ministry – usually evangelism. But I have always resisted such pressures. I am *not* interested in having the burden God has given to another. God has given me a specific burden and I am determined that that is the only ministry I will fulfil. The prophets never allowed anyone to sidetrack them from the burden and the ministry God gave them.

If you don't have any burden at all, you must go to God and ask Him to give you a burden. He has a definite task for you to fulfil in the body of Christ and you must know what it is. Many preachers wander from one ministry to another – joining whichever Christian organisation offers them the highest salary. For example, they may start with an *apparent* “burden” for a radio ministry. But if some child-evangelism organisation then offers them a higher salary, they suddenly develop a “burden” for child-evangelism! A little later, if a Christian literature organisation offers them a still higher salary, their “burden” suddenly shifts to a literature ministry!! Such preachers are not serving the Lord. They are religious men who are engaged in Babylonian “businesses”. When God gives you a burden, you cannot give that up just because some organisation offered you better earthly benefits.

The Lord has a complaint here against His people: “*I have loved you deeply. And you say, ‘Wherein have You loved us?’*” (1:2). In Malachi’s prophecy, we observe that whenever the Lord said something to His people, they questioned Him (like they did here) *seven times*.

Here they questioned the love of God. That is one way by which Satan makes us fall. When Satan tempted Eve, he first planted a doubt about God’s love in her mind. The implication of the temptation was, “God doesn’t really love you. If He did, He would have allowed you to eat this beautiful fruit.” That made Eve doubt God’s love. She began to think, “Perhaps God doesn’t love me”. And then she fell into sin easily.

When the Lord prayed for Peter, He said, “*Satan has demanded permission to sift you like wheat. But I have prayed for you that your faith should not fail.*” (Luke 22:31, 32). The Lord prayed that, even after Peter had fallen into the depths of sin (denying the Lord thrice), he would still believe that God loved him. That is faith – and that is what the prodigal son had. After he had messed up his life and lost everything, he still believed one thing – that his father loved him.

You may have messed up your life too. If so, remember that God still loves you. Don’t ever lose faith in that fact. When you have lost everything else in the world, hold on to this one unchangeable fact – that God still loves you. That is the most important thing to remember in life.

In 1:2–5, God speaks about the sovereign way in which He chose Jacob. He said, “*I showed My love for you by loving your ancestor Jacob. Yet Esau was Jacob’s brother, and I rejected Esau. But I have chosen you.*”

How do we know that God loves us? First of all, because He sent Christ to die for our sins. He picked us out from many millions of people in the world to be among the few who would find the way to life. Why did He choose *us*? Was it because *we* were more righteous than others? No. We all have unconverted friends and relatives – who are, humanly speaking, better people than we were. God accepted us because we recognised that we were sinners. Jesus came to call sinners and not the righteous. We were sinners whom God picked up from the gutter.

That is one proof of God's love for us that we should always remember. Never forget this fact that out of all the millions of people in the world, God picked you out and wrote your name in the Book of Life before He created anything in this universe. That was His sovereign choice. It says in *Romans 9:11–13*, “*Before they were born, before they had done anything good or bad, she (Rebekah) received a message from God. (This message proves that God chooses according to His own plan, not according to our good or bad works.) She was told, ‘The descendants of your older son will serve the descendants of your younger son.’ In the words of the Scriptures, ‘I loved Jacob, but I rejected Esau.’*” Here we read of the sovereignty of God in choosing us. It does not have anything to do with good works. And if you think you chose the Lord first, that is also not true. In *John 15:16*, Jesus states very clearly, “*You didn't choose Me, but I chose you.*” Never forget that.

The Backslidden Leaders of Israel

In 1:6, we read, “*The Lord Almighty says to the priests....*” Notice again how God speaks to the *leaders* first. Throughout Israel's history, it was always their leaders who led them into sin. And in the 20 centuries of church history too, it is the leaders who have led the church into compromise and worldliness. Every now and then in the Old Testament, God would send a prophet to speak to the leaders of Israel. The prophet would tell them of their failures. And almost always the leaders would hate him and persecute him and not allow him preach to the common people. They would denounce him as a false prophet. But the prophets did not care for any man's opinion, because they had God's approval. And they didn't want anyone's money either, like the false prophets did. The true prophets proclaimed the truth even if their message offended the leaders. *It has been the same story throughout church history.* Leaders of many churches in Christendom today don't even know God and they certainly do not know how to speak a prophetic word from God. Therefore, like blind leaders of the blind, they have led their churches into the ditches of compromise and worldliness. But every now and then, as in olden times, God raises up a prophet, to proclaim His word to these churches.

And invariably such a prophet is rejected by the leaders of these churches – because they feel threatened by such a man of God.

What the Lord said to the priests and the leaders was (as it were), “*A son honours his father and a servant respects his master. But the Lord says, ‘I am your Father and I am your Master. Where is the honour and respect you give Me? You have despised My name. You care more for the rich people in your congregation than for Me. You don’t care for My word. You just want to please those rich people and get their money. Where are you honouring Me? Am I really your Father? Am I really your Master? What sort of offerings have you given Me? You have given Me offerings that are defiled.’*” (See 1:6–8).

These leaders wanted honour from the people, but they themselves did not honour God. They wanted authority over the people, but they would not allow the Lord to have any authority over them. A Roman centurion once said to Jesus, “*I am a man under authority and I have authority over the soldiers. I tell a soldier, ‘Go,’ and he goes; to another, ‘Come,’ and he comes*” (Luke 7:8). To have authority we must be under authority. If we want our children to respect us, we must first reverence God. If you want your wife to submit to you, you must submit to Christ yourself. That’s what the Lord was saying to His people. “How can you demand respect from your wives if you don’t respect Me? Am I not your Husband? Only in the measure in which you respect Me, can you expect respect from your wife.”

If however you seek to please people, how can you say that you reverence God?

“*If you offer God sacrifices which are defiled that is an insult to God*” (1:8). These people did not fear God. How was that manifested? In that they offered blind and lame and sick animals as sacrifices to God. The Old Testament law clearly taught that every animal offered for sacrifice was to be totally free from blemish. But these Jews kept the good animals for themselves, and offered the diseased ones to God. They picked out the worst animals in their flocks and gave them to God.

Don’t Christians do that today? What do many believers give to the Lord? The left-overs. They retire from government service and then want to join a Christian organization to “*serve the Lord*”! They have already given the best part of their life to the world to make money and now they want to give the dregs of their life to the Lord – to make some additional money in their retirement years!!

The Lord said, “*Try and give that to your Governor and see how happy he will be*” (1:8). When you give a gift to an earthly governor, do you pick out the worst thing available in your house? Suppose the Governor of the State came to your house and you wanted to give him a cup of tea. Would you make a cup of tea, drink most of it yourself and then give him the dregs? No. You would not offer that even to a beggar. But that is what many believers are offering the Lord. They live for the world for most of

their lives, and then give the last bit of their lives to the Lord. That is a disgrace. Give the best to the Lord. Give Him your life when you are young.

Many believers do the same with their time. After they have spent most of their time pursuing all their own interests, they give a little bit of time to the Lord. No wonder such believers are not anointed and are spiritually poor.

What about your intelligence? Do you use that to glorify God?

You cannot expect God's anointing to be upon your life until you have learnt to honour Him by giving Him the very best in every area. Give Him the full cup of tea before you touch it. Let Him give you the dregs, after He has taken what he wants. That is how we must live every day. The best part of our life and our time must be for the Lord.

Giving our lives fully to the Lord does not mean becoming full time workers. It means *putting God first* – whether God calls you for full time Christian work or to a secular job.

The Jews in Malachi's day gave the Lord that which cost them nothing. They did not know how to *worship*. To worship God means to give Him the very best. Malachi has a message for our time because he prophesied towards the end of the Jewish age. And the state of affairs among God's people then was very similar to the state of affairs among God's people now at the end of the church age. We need prophets today in Christendom with Malachi's message, to prepare people for the coming of the Lord.

*"But My name is going to be honoured, and in every place around the world, there is going to be a **pure** testimony for My name"* (1:11). This is what God desires today – in every part of the world from east to west. He is *not* looking for a *large* offering but a **pure** offering, in every part in India. Speaking in old covenant terms, what is the use of a big bullock if it is sick. Let it be a small lamb, but let it be healthy and spotless, a lamb without blemish. The Lord looked for quality and not for size or weight in those days. Even today, He looks for a pure church and not a large one.

So, if you are building a church, make sure it is a *pure* church, whatever its size. Worldly ways of thinking make most Christians to be impressed by size rather than purity. We certainly want many millions to come to the Lord. But they must all be *disciples* and not just people who signed a decision-card or who came forward in an evangelistic meeting. God would rather have a small, healthy turtledove than a large, sick bullock!!

We read the word "*cursed*" in 1:14. This word occurs seven times in Malachi – and it is the last word in this book – the last word in the Old Testament. [The phrase '*the Lord of hosts*' however occurs 24 times. The Lord who is the Ruler of heaven and earth is the One Whom we serve.]

It is easy to become discouraged and disappointed when you see compromise and worldliness in Christian leaders today. And then it is easy to backslide.

I faced many, many, many disappointments with Christian workers, Christian churches and Christian organisations in my younger days. But it never altered my desire to serve the Lord faithfully until the end of my life. I am not here to judge others. But I have decided to give my all to the Lord.

In 2:1-3, Malachi's message is again to the priests. It was like saying, "I am not speaking to the congregation. I am speaking to the leaders who are sitting on the platform." "*Take it to heart*", the Lord says, "*Honor my name or I will bring a terrible curse against you. I will curse even the blessings you receive. Indeed, I have already cursed them, because you have not taken my warning seriously. I will rebuke your descendants and splatter your faces with the dung of your festival sacrifices, and I will add you to the dung heap.*"

These prophets were not gentle, nice preachers who stood behind ornamented pulpits and said pleasant things to make people happy. They used strong words. How would you feel if a preacher came and told you, "I'll splatter your faces with dung"? These prophets spoke strongly because things were so bad in Israel. Being nice and gracious and kind is all right in personal conversation. But when you stand up to speak God's word you have to be as a lion. You must be a *lion* in the pulpit and a *lamb* outside. That is what I would recommend to all preachers. That's how Jesus was. He used strong words. And then Malachi said, "*You will know that I was sent by God with this warning*" (2:4).

Qualities of True Servants of God

In 2:5, 6, Malachi compared the Levites of his time with the Levites of old. And today, the Lord reminds us of how the first apostles were, how they left everything to follow the Lord. "*Compare yourself with them,*" He says to us. The Lord says, "The purpose of My covenant with the Levites was to bring life and peace. This was what I gave them; and this called for reverence from them – and they did greatly revere Me."

Notice in *verses 5 and 6*, *seven* qualities that characterised those early Levites – characteristics that should be true of every servant of God.

1. *They revered God.* Reverence for God is the ABC of wisdom.
2. *They had a concern for God's name.* Our Lord taught us to pray, "*Hallowed be Thy name.*" We must have a great longing for the name of Jesus to be honoured and respected in our land.
3. *They preached all of God's truth.* Many preachers do *not* preach the *whole* counsel of God, because that would make them unpopular. So they become compromisers. I was once invited for meetings to a place

where I was to be the sole speaker. A week before the meetings were to commence, the organisers wrote to me and requested me *not* to speak on the topic of water baptism at any of the meetings, lest it offend some of the people. I wrote back saying that in that case they would have to find another preacher. I told them that I could not accept an invitation to speak anywhere, if I was going to be told what to speak and what not to speak. As a servant of the Lord, I would have to speak whatever the Lord laid on my heart.

4. *They hated sin.* They did not lie or cheat. There was a hatred for sin in their hearts.
5. *They walked with God.* They safeguarded their daily walk with God.
6. *They lived uprightly.* In everything in their life – the way they handled money, the way they conducted themselves, etc. – they were upright, without any crookedness.
7. *They turned many from sin.*

In those two verses, we have a beautiful description of what a true preacher should be like.

"The priests' lips should guard knowledge, and people should go to them for instruction, for the priests are the messengers of the LORD" (2:7). We must go to the Lord first and receive His Word and only then go to the people and give them His Word. A messenger must have God's word in his mouth. But those Levites, like many today, had left God's paths, corrupted His covenant and caused people to stumble by their preaching (2:8, 9).

God's Servants and Marriage

In 2:11, Malachi rebukes the people for marrying unbelievers and then bringing offerings to the Lord. A servant of God must have a godly home. He may not have a godly wife. Many servants of God through the centuries, like Job, have had ungodly wives. But that need not hinder them from being godly husbands at home. If you are not yet married, then you must be careful about the wife you choose. Ask the Lord to show you whether the girl you are considering is interested in going the same way as you are?

And don't ever marry someone just because she has a pretty face!! The people of Judah had married idol-worshipping women, perhaps because they were good-looking (2:11). If you marry a woman who loves money or who is miserly and tight-fisted, you have married an idol-worshipper. When you want to give money for the Lord's work, you will have to give it secretly, without your wife knowing about it. If you want to help others secretly, you'll have to hide that fact from your wife. So ensure that you marry someone who has the same goals as you have, someone who loves the Lord like you do.

And once you are married, be totally faithful to your wife – irrespective of whether she is spiritual or not. The people here were fasting and weeping and praying but they were unfaithful to their wives. They appeared spiritual on the outside with all their religious activity. But God Who saw their private lives, was not listening to any of their prayers.

Someone has said that what we need today is not more *prayer*, but more *answered prayer*. Baal's prophets prayed for hours, while Elijah prayed for less than a minute. In the first case, there was plenty of prayer. In the second case there was *answered prayer*. It is easy to find satisfaction through prayer and fasting – and even to glory in it. Many measure their fellowship with God not by the purity of their hearts but by how many hours they pray! That is the clearest proof that such people do not love God at all. Consider a young woman who claims to love a young man deeply. Yet, while spending time with him, she constantly looks at her watch to see how much time has passed and is satisfied when finally an hour is up and then she says, "OK. I'll go now". That would clearly prove that she doesn't really love the man at all. If she really loved him, she would say, "Forget time. I just want to be with my beloved." It is the same when we spend time with our Beloved Lord. If you love the Lord, you will not be looking at your watch when you talk with Him. I have never done that in my whole life. Fellowship with God is a love relationship.

Malachi told the people, "*The Lord is not listening to your prayers, because He has witnessed your unfaithfulness to your wife. You have not been true to the vows you made to her*" (2:14). Preachers are in great danger, because they stand in the pulpit so much and certain types of women can be attracted to them. Such women are *religious* women and not *spiritual*. Such a woman may come up to the preacher with a coy face and say, "Brother, I have a question for you." All she wants is to get close to the preacher. I've had women come up to me like that after I have preached somewhere, and the Lord has warned me, "Be careful now. This is the old serpent." So, if the woman is married, I tell her, "Sister, go and ask your husband that question." But she will reply, "Brother, he is not a spiritual man." She doesn't realise that she herself is not spiritual but just *religious*. So I tell her, "Never mind if he is not spiritual. Ask him, for the Bible says, '*Let a woman ask her husband at home*' (1 Corinthians 14:34, 35). If he cannot answer your question, then ask him to come and see me and I'll explain it to him." Most women get offended when they get a reply like that – and they never bother me again!

Do you want to protect yourself? Then follow that example.

But some preachers actually love to have pretty women come up to them, tossing their heads and blinking their eyes and asking questions. Such preachers are the ones who finally fall into sin. If you want to keep

from falling, keep such women at a distance. I am not saying you should not talk to women at all. But be careful of the flirtatious types. Watch how a woman is dressed and how she moves her head and her eyes – and you will be able to identify the flirtatious types quite easily.

You can be unfaithful to your wife even by the way you talk with other women. You may not touch a woman's body and yet commit adultery in your heart. Nowadays, men and women work together in close proximity in offices. Test yourself by asking this question, "If your wife were to suddenly walk in to your office, would you have to stop all that laughing and joking with that other woman?" If so, there could be impurity in your conversation.

There is a lot of impurity in the world today promoted by television, video tapes, filthy movies and cinema posters. And if we are not careful, this evil can get into our system. If you want to be a servant of God in these days, avoid all such temptations and be totally faithful to your wife. *God has given her to you to protect you from temptation (1 Corinthians 7:1, 2).*

Here the wife is called "*the wife of your youth*" (2:14). That means, that even when your wife is old and white-haired, you must see her the way she was when she was young and attractive. That's the way I look at my wife. My wife has got gray hair. But I see her today just as I saw her on our wedding day – and she is just as pretty and attractive to me today as she was then. Be faithful to your wife. Don't break your marriage vows. If you have slipped and fallen, repent deeply, and say, "Lord, I want to come back to you. I want to be totally faithful to You and to my wife in future."

The Lord says He *hates* divorce (2:16). Unfortunately, divorce has reared its ugly head even in evangelical Christian churches – especially in Western countries. And sadly, many churches endorse it. Even many of their pastors are divorced and remarried. I am not saying that divorced, remarried people should be rejected. They may have been unconverted and without light when they did those things. We must now lead them to become disciples of Jesus. But when the church itself conducts the marriages of divorced people, it is leading them into sin and disobedience to the teachings of Christ! Unfortunately, these influences are now corrupting many churches in India too.

God says, "*I hate divorce. I hate the violent dismembering of the 'one flesh' of marriage*" (2:16 - MSG). So, if you are a servant of God you will hate divorce too and you will proclaim everywhere that God hates divorce. "*If a man does not live in an understanding way with his wife, God will not listen to his prayers*" (1 Peter 3:7).

In India, most husbands do not respect their wives. They do not recognise their wives as "*fellow-heirs of the grace of life*". One proof of this is

that they don't share spiritual matters with them or pray with them. They pray mostly only with other brothers.

The way you bring up your children is also important. Why did the Lord make you one with your wife? *"Didn't God make you one body and spirit with her (your wife)? What was his purpose in this? It was that you should have children who are truly God's people"* (2:15 - TEV).

It is easy to *produce* children. But to raise them up as godly young men and women is the task of a lifetime. So be loyal to your wife and work together with her to raise a godly family. Seek God with all your heart for His help to raise your children in a godly way. After many years of having observed the waywardness of the children of many preachers, I have developed the highest respect for those preachers who have brought up their children in a godly way. Godly children are a tremendous testimony in a godless age. I am not saying that a preacher's children should all be preachers. Preaching is a calling from God – and no man can give that calling to His children. God Himself has to call them. What I am talking about is Christlike character. Our character is a million times more important than our ministry. Many preachers today promote their children into their ministry. But there is no precedent for this in Scripture. If the children are anointed and called by God then that is all right, but not otherwise.

In 3:1, the Lord says, *"Behold, I am going to send My messenger (John the Baptist), and he will clear the way before Me. And the Lord (Christ), whom you seek, will suddenly come to His temple; and the Messenger of the covenant, in whom you delight, behold, He is coming."* The prophecy goes on to say that the Lord will come into His church (temple) like a blazing fire to refine everyone. He will sit down to refine the people, because this is going to take a long time (3:3). We stand for jobs that we can finish quickly. But we sit, when we know that the work is going to take a long time. The Lord refines until all the dross of worldliness and sin is burned away from our lives. Thus the Lord purifies His servants, refining them as gold. And He will stop only when that gold is so pure that He can see His face reflected in it – when the likeness of Christ is seen in us. Until then we have to be refined. This is the work of a lifetime.

In 1 John 3:3, we are told that everyone who has the hope of the second coming of Christ will purify himself as Christ Himself is pure. Our calling is to cooperate with the Lord as He puts us into the fire and burns away the dross. The fire is formed by the difficult circumstances, trials, sicknesses and other thorns in the flesh that the Lord permits Satan to send our way. God may allow us to lose money and property in order to free us from the dross of the love of money. He may allow people to accuse us falsely and to ride over our heads to deliver us from the dross of seeking man's honour. His ultimate purpose is that we become like Christ in

every area. Only then will we be able to offer Him a *pure* sacrifice. If you allow the Lord to take you through the fires of testing, persecution, tribulation, trial, misunderstanding, false accusation, etc. and you respond in each of those with submission to God and love to your persecutors, then you will be so pure that when you give God's Word to others, there will be a rich anointing on your words and the power of God in your ministry. You won't be merely repeating what you heard others preach. Your words will come from your life. That is the type of ministry God wants all of us to have. That is the *pure* offering that He is seeking.

"I, the LORD, do not change; therefore you, O sons of Jacob, are not consumed" (3:6). This verse is found at the close of the Old Testament to correct the false views of those who imagine that the God described in the New Testament is a gentler God than the One in the Old Testament. That is just *not* true. And so, in the last page of the Old Testament, God emphasises that He is unchanging. He hates sin today just as much as He did in Old Testament times; and He was just as merciful and compassionate then, as He is now. He has not changed – *and He never will*.

God's Servants and Money

The Lord says, “*Will a man rob [or cheat] God? Yet you are robbing Me! But you say, ‘How have we robbed You?’ In tithes and offerings. You are cursed with a curse, for you are robbing [defrauding] Me, the whole nation of you! Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, so that there may be food in My house, and test Me now in this, if I will not open for you the windows of heaven and pour out for you a blessing until there is not room enough. Then I will rebuke the devourer for you, so that it will not destroy the fruits of the ground; nor will your vine in the field cast its grapes*

Did you know that *tithing is not mentioned even once, after the day of Pentecost* (when the new covenant was instituted)? Tithing is not commanded under the new covenant at all – yet multitudes of covetous pastors still preach it today and exploit poor, ignorant believers. Jesus did *not* teach His disciples to tithe *but to give*. What do we have to give to God first of all? *Romans 12:1* states, “*I beseech you, brethren, by the mercies of God, present your bodies (not your tithes) as a living sacrifice to God.*”

Just as paying the tithe was emphasised under the old covenant, presenting our bodies to God is what is emphasised in the new covenant. Tithing was meant to be a *type*, just like the Passover lamb and the Sabbath day. The lamb was a type of Christ, and the Sabbath was a type of the inward rest that Christ gives us. These Old Testament rituals were all *shadows* of what was finally fulfilled in Christ (as *Colossians 2:16, 17* makes crystal clear).

Concerning tithing, God had said, “*The purpose of titheing is to teach you always to put God first in your lives*” (*Deuteronomy 14:23 - LB*). Under the old covenant, they offered their *tithes* to prove that God was first in their lives. In the new covenant, we present our *bodies* to God and thus prove that He is first in our lives.

What does it mean to offer our bodies? It means giving our eyes to God so that we never use them for ourselves again. Is that easier or is it easier to give 10% of your income to God? You know that it is far easier to give 10% of our income each month to God than to keep our eyes pure each day of that month. That is why preachers teach titheing more than keeping our eyes pure. Many pastors are lovers of money and they want their congregation to tithe so that they can become rich from those tithes. Since there is no justification at all for titheing in the new covenant, they use this verse in *Malachi* to frighten ignorant believers into paying their tithes every month.

The early apostles were poor, as we can see clearly from *1 Corinthians 4:9-12*: “*God has exhibited us apostles last of all.... To this present hour we are both hungry and thirsty, and are poorly clothed, and are roughly treated, and are homeless; and we toil, working with our own hands.*” But consider the mathematics of how a covetous pastor today becomes wealthy. If 10 people give him one-tenth of their income, he gets one man’s average salary (because $10 \times 10\% = 100\%$). This is reasonable. But well-known pastors receive tithes from *hundreds* of God’s people. If even 100 people give their tithes to a pastor, his income will become *ten times* that of the average man – and very soon he will become a millionaire, at the expense of his supporters! And then in order to justify his becoming wealthy, he will begin to preach *prosperity* as the mark of God’s blessing (from the Old Testament – *Deuteronomy 28:5, 8, 11*) – and his flock is deceived. This is the deception flooding Christendom today, all over the world, and it is all being done in the Name of Jesus. The money-changers are back in the temple of God – and there is no-one to drive them out, as Jesus did; and there is hardly any preacher who is bold enough to expose these *confidence tricksters*.

Then how much money should we to give for God’s work? Only what we can give *cheerfully* – for God *does not* love those who give money under pressure, or who give *in order to get* something from Him (See *2 Corinthians 9:7*). First give your body to the Lord and then give whatever money you want to give cheerfully, but never as an obligation and certainly not out of fear. I hope this understanding of God’s Word liberates you from false teaching.

The Remnant in the Last Days

In *3:16*, we see some characteristics of God’s remnant of the last-days. They fear God. They are careful with their speech. They are concerned

about the glory of God's name. And the Lord puts their names down in a book called the *Book of Remembrance*. This is not the Book of Life which has the names of all those who are born again. This book contains only the names of those who reverence God, who love to think about Him, who are concerned about His name and who speak to each other about the Lord. No gossiper's name or backbiter's name is found in this book. *My guess is that this book contains less than 5% of the names found in the Book of Life!!* The Lord says that these saints will be His special treasure. One day He will reveal them to the world – and only in that day will we see who really served God and who pretended to be His servants but in fact sought their own.

Chapter 4 tells us of the day of judgement that is coming. The first people to be judged will be the proud. "*All the arrogant and every evildoer will be chaff and the day that is coming will set them ablaze, so that it will leave them neither root nor branch*" (4:1). See how God hates pride.

And then the Lord says, "*But for you who revere My name, the Sun of Righteousness will arise with healing in His wings; and you will tread down the wicked, for they will be ashes under the soles of your feet on the day which I am preparing*" (4:2, 3). When Christ returns, Satan will finally be crushed under our feet (*Romans 16:20*).

Malachi finally prophesied that the Lord would send "*Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and terrible day of the LORD*" (4:5). John the Baptist came to Israel "*in this spirit of Elijah*" (*Luke 1:17*). But Jesus told the Jews of his day that John would be the prophesied "*Elijah* only if they accepted John and his message" (*Matthew 11:14*). But Israel did not accept John. And so he was *not* the prophesied Elijah. As we approach the last days now, God will send an Elijah-ministry to the world. This will not be through any *single* individual (as in Old Testament times), but by the last-days "*Body of Christ*". The church and its ministers have to go forth now in the spirit of Elijah and proclaim (as Elijah proclaimed on Mount Carmel), "You cannot serve two masters. If Christ is your God serve Him. If Mammon (money and wealth) is your god, then serve it. But you cannot serve both."

Malachi's final statement is that Elijah "*will restore the hearts of the fathers to their children and the hearts of the children to their fathers*", so that the Lord does not smite the land with a curse (4:6).

In the book of *Zechariah*, we saw a prophecy that the generation gap between parents and children would be broken and parents would be in glorious fellowship with their children. We see a similar prophecy here. This is God's will and this is what the church must emphasise

in these last days. We must build family relationships, emphasise home-values and bring fathers and children closer together. Cults separate children from their parents and break up homes. Here it says that God will curse all who do that. God wants to bring parents and children together in these last days.

It is significant that the last word in the Old Testament is ‘curse’. Christ became a curse for us so that that curse is removed (*Galatians 3:13*). And so, the last phrase in the New Testament is “the *grace* of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you” (*Revelation 22:21*). The curse on the earth will be totally lifted when Christ returns.

Today we are called to prepare people for the coming of the Lord.

THE NEW
TESTAMENT

MATTHEW

JESUS CHRIST – THE PROMISED MESSIAH

We now come to the New Testament. The very first thing we read here is the genealogy of Christ. It doesn't go all the way to Adam (as in *Luke 3:23–38*). Here it goes only as far as Abraham. Jesus is called the Son of David and the Son of Abraham – indicating that Matthew was writing his gospel primarily for the Jewish people of his time, seeking to convince them that Jesus was the promised Messiah. That's why there are more than 40 quotations from the Old Testament here to prove that Jesus was the Messiah. There are altogether about 53 quotations from the Old Testament in *Matthew*.

The Kingdom of Heaven and the Church

We see a phrase in this gospel that does not occur anywhere else – “*the kingdom of heaven*.” It occurs 31 times in this gospel. Since the Holy Spirit inspired this book, there must have been a reason why He used this phrase so often here. John the Baptist came preaching, saying, “*Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand*” (3:2). After his time, Jesus preached exactly the same message in 4:17. When He began the sermon on the mount, the very first words He said were, “*Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven*” (5:3). So we see an emphasis on “heaven” right from the beginning of the New Testament. “Heaven” is mentioned 17 times in the sermon on the mount alone.

The old covenant which God made with Israel related to a kingdom on this *earth*. Israel was given Canaan’s land and promised *material* prosperity, *physical* healing and other *earthly* benefits. Later, they had an *earthly* king, *earthly* riches and other *earthly* blessings. But Jesus

came to lift man to another realm altogether – to *heaven*. So when we read the New Testament, we must remember that the good news here is primarily about *heaven* and *not* about this earth. If we understand this, it will save us from much of the confusion found in Christendom today.

We say we are “*saved*”. That is a very common expression among believers, But what are we “*saved*” from? Have we been saved from earthly ways, or have we just had our sins forgiven? Have we been saved from an interest in earthly things, from an earthly way of viewing people and circumstances, and from earthly ways of behaving?

The new covenant is the gospel of the kingdom of *heaven*.

Many people around the world are eager to become citizens of the United States of America, because the USA is a very attractive place to live in. But nobody would be interested in becoming citizens of some backward country in Africa. Why is it then that so few in this world are interested in becoming citizens of the most attractive place of all – *heaven*? Because they have not seen the real glory of heavenly citizenship. And this is because the gospel has not been preached properly. And so we find a multitude of “*so-called believers*” sitting in the church who are not interested in the kingdom of heaven. They want to go to heaven when they die, but they don’t want the kingdom of heaven now.

The word ‘*kingdom*’ is not a word that we understand clearly today, because we have very few kings ruling kingdoms now, unlike as in the first century. The equivalent word we use today is ‘*government*’. We speak of the ‘*government of India*’ and not the ‘*kingdom of India*’.

That’s what the kingdom of heaven means – the government of heaven. It means God governing your life. When you live in India, you have to live under the rules of the Government of India. If you come into the government of heaven, you have to live under the rules of the government of heaven. Have you changed your citizenship from earth to heaven?

Salvation means being saved from the kingdom of earth to the kingdom of heaven. But the salvation of many believers has not gone that far. They want to go to heaven when they die. But they don’t want the rule of heaven in their lives now. They want to live now as full citizens of this earth. That is why their Christian life is so shallow.

There is yet another word used in Matthew that is not found in any other gospel. It is the word ‘*church*.’ It occurs thrice – once in 16:18 and twice in 18:17. Put this word alongside the phrase we have been considering, and we will see that *the church is meant to be the kingdom of heaven on earth*. In heaven everybody lives under the government of heaven, the rule of God. But here on earth it is different. Everyone runs his own life. In the midst of such people, God has a group of people who do not run their own lives. They are under the government of heaven. That is the church.

Are the churches in the world living under the absolute authority of the government of heaven? No. This has grieved my heart for many years. I hope it grieves your heart too. I am not blaming others. I am not saying '*They* are like that'. I am saying, '*We* are like that.' We are the church and we have failed to show the world the blessedness of living under the rule of heaven. And so I pray, "Lord, forgive us for our failure. Help us to show the world what it means to live under the rule of God."

Matthew shows us in his gospel how the Ruler of this government of heaven lived on earth and what He taught. Matthew's emphasis is more on what He *taught* than on what He did.

There are more parables of Jesus in this gospel than in any other gospel. *Chapter 13* is full of parables of the kingdom of heaven. *Chapter 23* deals entirely with religious hypocrites – the Pharisees. Jesus' ministry brought Him into constant confrontation with the Pharisees. There are more confrontations with the Pharisees described in *Matthew* than in any of the other gospels. *Chapters 24 and 25* deal with the kingdom of heaven being established on earth, when Christ returns. *Chapters 5, 6 and 7* deal with the principles of the kingdom of heaven, teaching us how the members of this kingdom are to live on earth.

This book can be divided into three parts: *Chapters 1 and 2* are about the birth of Jesus. *Chapters 3 to 18* are about His ministry in Galilee. And *Chapters 19 to 28* are about His ministry in Judea.

The Birth of Jesus

Chapter 1 gives the genealogy of Jesus Christ. The Jews mentioned the names of men only in their genealogies. However, here we find four women mentioned as well – teaching us that Jesus had come to raise the level of women from the low position that Jewish and heathen society had given them. Further, these four women had a sinful history, teaching us that Jesus came to save the worst of sinners.

The first woman mentioned is Tamar (1:3). Tamar was Judah's daughter-in-law through whom Judah had a son Perez, who was an ancestor of Mary, the mother of Jesus. Jesus was in heaven when this incest took place (*Genesis 38:12-29*), and decided that this sinful line would be his earthly family-line. How many of us would choose such a sinful family-line and have an incestuous relationship mentioned on the very first page of our biography?

The second woman mentioned here is Rahab (1:5), who was a well-known prostitute in the "red-light" district of Jericho (*Joshua 2:1*). A Jewish man named Salmon married this Gentile. Jesus saw this marriage of a Jew with a Gentile prostitute from heaven – and decided to come through that line.

The third woman is Ruth (1:5). Ruth was a Moabitess. Her ancestor was Moab, who was born through Lot's adultery with his daughter

(*Genesis 19:30–37*). Once again, Jesus saw this incest from heaven, and Ruth descending from this incest, and decided to choose that line.

The fourth woman is Bathsheba – the wife of Uriah (*1:6*). She was the woman with whom David committed adultery and whom he later married. Once again, we have a woman whose history is one of sin. She was not the ancestor of Mary as the first three women were. She was the ancestor of Joseph. (We can see that when we compare this genealogy with the genealogy of Mary in *Luke 3*). Joseph was of the royal line of David, and Matthew was proving through this genealogy that Jesus was rightfully the true king of Israel.

Why did Jesus choose such a sinful family-line? To show His identification with the race of sinful men and to make it manifest that He had come, not to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.

So we see that no-one needs to be ashamed of his/her family line. In India, people boast about their family-tree. When a Christian does that, he shows thereby that he has not understood the Spirit of Christ at all.

When Joseph heard about Mary being pregnant, and not knowing that this was a supernatural work of God in her womb, it says that since he was a *righteous man*, he did not want to disgrace her but wanted to cover what he thought was her sin (*1:19*).

There is something we can all learn here about *righteousness*. The message of the gospel is essentially how an unrighteous man can become righteous. The first person to be called a righteous man in the New Testament is Joseph. And his righteousness is mentioned in connection with wanting to cover another person's sin and not shame that person. This is the spirit of a truly righteous man.

When you hear that somebody has sinned, what is *your* immediate reaction? If you are a righteous man, you will want to cover it. If you are an unrighteous man, you will talk about it to others. There we see that Joseph, who did not have the Holy Spirit and was not under the new covenant, was far more righteous than millions of believers who claim to be born again. With the standards of the *old* covenant, Joseph decided to cover what he thought was sin. Thank God he never scandalised Mary. For if he had, can you imagine the regret and remorse he would have had, when he discovered the truth – that that she was 100% pure and innocent!! These things are written for our instruction.

How can you take back stories that you have circulated about others if you later discover them to be false. For the one you told them to would have circulated it further to perhaps ten other people who in turn would have spread it even further. So here is a warning and an example for us from the very first chapter of the New Testament. Cover the sins of others. Learn from Joseph's example. Love covers a multitude of sins.

In *1:21*, we read the very first promise in the New Testament: "*He shall save His people from their sins*". This is the meaning of the name, "Jesus".

This is not a promise that Jesus would *forgive* our sins, but that He would *save* us from our sins. Forgiveness is merely the removal of the guilt of our past sins. To be *saved* from sin is to be saved from anger, the lust of the eyes, covetousness, bitterness, jealousy, etc. It means that He will save us from being enslaved to sin.

The second promise in the New Testament is found in 3:11: "*He shall baptize you in the Holy Spirit and in fire.*"

These are the first two promises in the New Testament – and in these, the message of the gospel is summed up. We need to experience the fulfilment of both these promises. We need to be saved from our sins and we need to be baptised in the Holy Spirit and fire.

In *Chapter 2*, we read about the wise men who came to see the newborn Jesus. We read there of one *foolish* thing that those *wise* men did – and that is a warning to all of us. Even wise men do foolish things at times! They had followed the star for many hundreds of miles from their eastern lands all the way up to Jerusalem. That star is a picture of the word of God that leads us always to Jesus. But once they reached Jerusalem, where the king's palace was located, they became foolish. They assumed that the King of the Jews would naturally be born in the palace – and *they stopped following the star*. So they went to King Herod's palace to see the newborn king!! But the people in the palace knew nothing about any newborn king. So those wise men had to come outside and follow the star once again (2:10).

The star finally led them, not to a palace but to a little hut – and the King was there. If you follow the Word of God, it will always lead you to Jesus. Even today, God can lead you to a church where Jesus is found. He won't be found in the palaces of the high and the mighty, but in the simple dwellings of those who love Him and want to follow Him.

But see what great harm these wise men did to hundreds of people by their one mistake. Because they told Herod about the birth of a king, he sent soldiers to Bethlehem who massacred all the baby boys that were under two years of age there. When we do not obey God's Word, a single act of foolishness of ours can cause much harm to many others.

An angel then spoke to those wise men in a dream and told them not to go back to Herod, but to go back home by another route. Thank God they obeyed the angel this time!! Joseph also was led by a dream to go to Egypt, and later by another dream to return to Israel. Guidance through dreams occurs a number of times in the first two chapters of the New Testament. God guides thus, occasionally, today too.

In *Chapter 3*, we come to the ministry of John the Baptist. The word '*baptism*' is a word that was introduced into the English language by the translators of the King James Version of the Bible (KJV) in 1611. History tells us that when King James of England ordered this translation, he gave certain rules to the translators, one of which was that they should not disturb existing church traditions. In the Anglican churches of those

days, they used to sprinkle water on newborn babies and “christen” them. When the translators came to this Greek word ‘*baptizo*’ (or ‘*bapto*’) in *Chapter 3* here, they faced a dilemma. The word meant “*immerse*” in Greek and that is how they should have translated it. If they had been honest and done that, we would never have heard of baptism or of Baptists! But they realised that if they translated it accurately, it would disturb the existing church tradition of christening – and they did not want to be beheaded by King James! At the same time, they could not, in all honesty, translate the word as “*christen*” or “*sprinkle*”. So they (very cleverly) introduced a new word into the English language – ‘*baptism*.’ (This was somewhat like the way Indian words such as ‘*dhabi*’ and ‘*Sahib*’ were introduced into the English language). When the common people of those days read this new translation and read the word ‘*baptism*’ they didn’t know what it meant, for it was a totally new word. So they assumed that this must be what the priests do to newborn children in the Anglican church. Thus christening came to be known as ‘*baptism*’.

The correct translation for ‘*John the Baptist*’ would be ‘*John the Immerser*.’ But I have never found a single translation of the Bible that has had the courage to translate that Greek word accurately, because if they did, the millions of “Christians” who practice child baptism would not buy it. So we see that even the best Bible translations today are determined by economic factors and not by truth alone!

When Jesus came to John for baptism, John said, “I can’t baptise You. You need to baptise me.” Jesus did not need to be baptised – because John’s baptism was for those who had repented from their sins, and Jesus had never sinned at any time, consciously or unconsciously. He was born holy and did not have a sinful nature as we have. Why then did He stand in line with the people who were getting baptised? He looked just like any other Jewish carpenter and nobody but John knew who He was.

Many reasonings could have entered Jesus’ mind at that time, such as: “People will misunderstand You if You get baptised. They will think that You have committed some sins that you are repenting of now. Your testimony will be affected,” etc. But He would not listen to such reasonings. He had heard His Father tell Him to identify Himself with the sinners who were getting baptised – even though He had never sinned. And He obeyed His Father.

We don’t like to be identified with sinners! We look down on others who we think are greater sinners than we are. And that’s why our ministry is so limited and so shallow. Jesus identified Himself with sinners totally, even though there was not a spot of sin in Him. Let us humble ourselves and follow His example. We are not better than anyone else. And our group is not better than any other. May God have mercy on us if we think otherwise.

Jesus told John, “You have to baptise Me because that is the only way I can fulfil all righteousness.” Righteousness, for Jesus meant doing the will of His Father, whatever it was.

The Three Temptations

In 4:1–11, we read about the temptation of Jesus. The Bible says in *Hebrews 4:15* that Jesus “*was tempted in every point exactly like us, but did not sin*”. Some “clever” Christians seek to analyse this and ask the question. “Could Jesus have sinned or was it impossible for Him to sin?” Some say “He was *not able* to sin”, while others say, “He was *able not to sin*”. But we don’t have to get involved in this discussion at all. We find it difficult to analyse the psychology of ordinary men. How then can we analyse the psychology of Jesus? It is enough for us to know that He was tempted just like we are and *did not sin*. And in that, He is an example for us. We know He was God and we also know that He did not use His abilities as God when He came to earth as a man. God cannot be tempted, but Jesus was tempted. I believe exactly what the Bible says that He was tempted exactly like we are, and did not sin. This is what gives me the faith that I too can overcome as He overcame (*Revelation 3:21*).

Jesus was tempted by the devil for 40 days (*Luke 4:2*). He resisted the devil for all those 40 days. What we read here is just the last three temptations. Jesus overcame each temptation with the sword of the Spirit – “*It is written.*” When the devil saw that Jesus quoted the Word, he also quoted a Scripture and said, “*It is written that He will give His angels charge over You. So jump down from the top of the temple*” (4:6). To that Jesus replied, “*It is also written that you shall not tempt the Lord your God*” (4:7). The whole truth is not found in one Scripture alone but in the whole of the Scriptures – one verse balanced out by another verse. If Satan could quote Scripture to try and lead Jesus into sin, you can be certain that He will quote Scripture to lead you astray as well. And if you don’t know the Scriptures well, you *will* be led astray. Jesus had a word from Scripture to resist each temptation that Satan brought against Him.

It is good to see what was inherent in the temptations Jesus faced, for Satan tempts us in the same way too.

1. *Selfishness* (4:1–4). Turn the stones into bread to satisfy your hunger.
 - a. Place your physical needs above your spiritual needs. Jesus replied that man has to live by every word that proceeds from God’s mouth and not merely by bread.
 - b. Use the power God has given you for your own personal gain. Jesus refused to do so. He would use this power to multiply bread for 5000 men later, but never for Himself. Many preachers have fallen a prey to this temptation, by using the power and gift God gave them to make money for themselves.
2. *Presumption* (4:5–7). Jump off the temple-roof and claim God’s promises for protection.
 - a. Take a step that God has *not* told you to take – and claim God’s promises. Jesus replied that we should not tempt God by doing risky things. Some foolish Christians when they are sick, won’t

take medicines but expect God to heal them supernaturally. That is not faith but presumption. It is suicide! Medicines are made from God's creation and we should use them. If there is a staircase coming down from the temple-roof, we should use that and not jump down!! God will not protect us if we jump. If, however, we are in a jungle where medicines are not available, then we can ask God to heal us without medicines, and He will heal us – but not when He has provided medicines.

- b. Do something spectacular to show others that you are a man of God. A temptation to seek man's honour. Jesus refused to do spectacular things and miracles, for man's honour.
3. *Compromise* (4:8–10). Get the kingdoms of the world and their glory by bowing to Satan.
 - a. Get a right thing in a wrong way – by an unrighteous shortcut! An unrighteous action amounts to bowing to Satan. Jesus chose the long arduous way of the Cross and refused all short-cuts.
 - b. Pursue after the glory this world offers – money and honour, position and power (in the world or in the church). Jesus said that only God was to be worshipped, not Satan or money or anything else that he offers. Many preachers seek for a wider ministry by keeping silent about some things (that God wants them to preach about) and thus pleasing everybody. They do get a wider ministry thus – but it is by bowing the knee to Satan.

Satan comes to us in all these ways, just like he came to Jesus. Jesus drove him away with a word of God, and we can drive him away with a word of God too.

The Sermon on the Mount

In Chapters 5, 6 and 7 we read the sermon on the mount. Jesus began that sermon by saying, "*Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven*" (5:3). The primary requirement for entering the kingdom of heaven is poverty of spirit. That is the master key that opens every door in this palace called "*the kingdom of heaven*". All the riches of heaven can be ours if we have this master key.

What does it mean to be poor in spirit? As an illustration, consider what it means to be poor *materially*. Think of a beggar who comes to your gate one day – and you give him a few rupees. He will come back again the next day, and the next day, and the next day – forever. Why? Because he is perpetually in need. He is always aware of his need, and he is humble enough to keep coming to your gate unashamedly, and to beg for more money – because he knows you are a generous man.

This is what it means to be poor in spirit too. We go to God and say, "Lord, I am a needy person spiritually. If You don't give me what I need,

I won't understand anything in Your Word and I'll be defeated by sin today." The next day we are back at the Lord's door again begging for more. And the next day, and the next day – perpetually. Because we are constantly aware of our need. Jesus said that such people would possess the entire kingdom of heaven. If you want to possess the kingdom of heaven, keep this attitude all your life.

When God uses you mightily to bring many to Christ and to build churches, don't forget to remain poor in spirit. Keep going back to God again and again and say, "Lord, I am poor. Give me power. Teach me. Give me the fullness of Your Spirit. Give me love for people. Give me purity...." It is such "*needy spiritual beggars*" who become holy and whom God uses mightily. It is such "*beggars*" who become spiritually rich and get God's best. To beg from men may be humiliating, but to beg from God is the most spiritual thing you can do. God has already made me quite rich spiritually. But I know He has got more to give me, and I want all that He has. Let me encourage you to be this type of '*beggar*' forever.

"Blessed are the pure in heart for they shall see God" (5:8). A pure heart is different from a clean conscience. A clear conscience only means a heart that is free from *all known sin* – where every sin has been confessed and cleansed. A pure heart, however, is a heart that is free from *all things* and has place only for God. A man can have a good conscience and still have many lawful things in his heart other than God. He may have worldly ambitions, even though his conscience is clear. But a man with a pure heart has only one ambition – to please God. His whole heart belongs to God.

When your heart is pure, you will see God – everywhere. You will see God in your circumstances, when people help you and when people curse you and harm you (as David saw God when Shimei cursed him). When your heart is *not* pure, however, you will only see the people who are troubling you, perhaps your difficult wife or husband or neighbour. A person with an impure heart has many problems. But one with a pure heart, Jesus said, would be blessed, because he sees only God everywhere and in everything!

The Lord's main emphasis in 5:20 to 6:18 was on the inner life. The righteousness of the Pharisees was on the outside, and our righteousness is to exceed that (5:20). True holiness begins on the inside. It is quality the Lord seeks in righteousness, not quantity. The quality of our righteousness must be fundamentally different than that of the Pharisees. They had an *earthly* righteousness that was outward and brought them honour from men. But in the kingdom of *heaven*, the important thing is the *inner* life. Everything in our lives must flow from within us. Our freedom from murder and adultery must be on the inside (5:21–30), for the kingdom of heaven is *within* us.

In 6:1–18, Jesus spoke about practising our giving, our praying and our fasting *before God alone*. Consider first the matter of fasting. Most of

the Christians I have met in India who fast, invariably talk about it. Jesus gave only one command about fasting – “*When you fast, don’t tell anyone about it*” – and that is what they disobey. God gave only one command to Adam – and he disobeyed that. God has given only one command to children – “Obey your parents” – and they disobey that. We find the same disobedience among most of those who fast. Let us now raise up another generation of Christians who will fast and pray and give – but who will never tell anyone about these actions. There is a great lust within us to get honour when we do these things and that is why we talk about it. But the Lord says that thereby we will lose our reward in heaven. We will lose our anointing on earth too.

While Jesus warned us in *Chapter 7*, not to judge others, He also warned us to discern “*false prophets who come in sheep’s clothing*” (7:15). The sheep’s clothing refers to correct evangelical doctrine. A false prophet may have the correct doctrine, but he will be a wolf inside. Wolves are only interested in devouring the sheep. False prophets are out to exploit simple believers for their own gain. If you listen to his doctrine alone, you will think he is a sheep or even a shepherd!! But if he seeks to exploit you financially or to control you in some way, he is a wolf. Such a man is only out to gain something for himself in the name of Christ – your money or your submission.

Unfortunately, the understanding of many today is that a false prophet is one whose doctrine is wrong. Jesus however said that the way to detect false prophets was not by their doctrine, or by the results of their ministry, but by the lack of the *fruit of the Spirit* in their character (7:16). We must not be deceived by a preacher’s gifts – even by supernatural gifts. Ask yourself, “Does he have the Spirit of Christ? Is he a humble brother? Is he free from the love of money? Does he ask people for money? Does he emphasise holiness in his preaching? Is he pure in his relationships with women? Are his children and closest co-workers godly?” It is by asking these questions that God has protected me from being deceived by false prophets. Many in Christendom are deceived because they evaluate preachers merely by their doctrine.

After talking about the fruit of the Spirit throughout the sermon on the mount, Jesus finally spoke about the gifts of the Spirit. He said that in the final day, *many* would come to Him and say, “*Lord, we prophesied in Your name, we cast out demons in Your name, we did miracles in Your name,*” etc. (7:22). And the Lord will say to them, “Depart from Me, because you lived in sin.” They preached to others, cast out demons, and even did miracles in Jesus’ Name, but they still went to hell!

When you look at a modern-day “*healing crusade*” being conducted under the floodlights, with hundreds of thousands of people in attendance, and the correct doctrine being preached, how many of you have thought of this warning of Jesus and considered the possibility that the preacher may go to hell finally? My guess is that 99.9% of believers would

never consider that as a possibility. In spite of Jesus' clear warning, most believers still evaluate a preacher by his gifts and not by his character. We must never allow ourselves to be impressed by anyone's prophetic gifts or by his casting out demons or doing miracles.

May those who have ears to hear, hear. I have preached this truth for many years now, but I still find very, very few believers who believe what Jesus said. This is because our pride makes us trust in our own judgement rather than in Jesus' warnings. "*Let God be true and every man a liar*" (*Romans 3:4*).

Consider now the reverse scenario to what Jesus said. Suppose, in the day of judgement, a believer were to say, "Lord, by Your grace my sins were forgiven. And by Your grace I lived an overcoming life. But I never prophesied or healed the sick or cast out any demons." Will the Lord say to him, "Depart from me, you who never did miracles and never cast out demons"? No. That is impossible.

If you have *gifts* without *fruit*, you can end up in hell. But if you have *fruit* without *gifts*, you will certainly enter God's kingdom. We live in a time of tremendous deception, and so we must be discerning of all preachers.

Appreciation and Encouragement

In *Chapter 8*, we read of some of the miracles that Jesus did. He not only preached, but He cared for people as well. He touched lepers whom no-one else would touch. He not only healed them thereby but gave them a sense of worth. We read here of a Roman centurion who was so *humble* a man and so full of *faith* that when Jesus said He would come to his house to heal his servant, said, "Lord, I am not worthy that You should come to my house. Just speak the word and it will be done." *Faith* and *humility* always go together. Jesus immediately said "*I have not found such great faith in anyone in Israel*" (*8:10*).

Jesus was a master at appreciating and encouraging people. He publicly praised Peter once saying, "*Blessed are you, Simon Barjona, My Father in heaven has revealed this to you*" (*Matthew 16:17*). He praised Nathaniel saying, "*There is a man in whom there is no guile*" (*John 1:47*). Jesus was lavish in His appreciation of people, even though none of them were perfect. The Roman centurion, Peter and Nathaniel were all imperfect people. But yet Jesus found something to appreciate in all of them. He did not hesitate to praise the good that He saw even in an unconverted, idol-worshipping, military captain, who knew nothing about the Bible or the true God. Do you think that Roman centurion ever forgot that word that Jesus spoke, for the rest of his life? No. He must have been so encouraged by those words, that it is more than likely that he became a wholehearted disciple of Jesus.

We can learn something from this about true godliness and about the kingdom of heaven. The children of Adam are misers at *appreciating* people and masters at *criticising* them. We are hesitant to publicly appreciate people, for fear that they might get puffed up thereby. We cannot even appreciate genuinely godly people. Most believers have not learnt this habit from Christ. We certainly must not flatter anyone, for flattery is Satanic. But genuine appreciation is a Divine characteristic. If a godly man gives a word of appreciation to another brother, that single word could encourage him to follow Jesus wholeheartedly.

In 9:27, we read of two blind men who came to Jesus. But before Jesus healed them, He asked them a question. “*Do you believe that I am able to do this for you?*” They said, “Yes, Lord”. Then Jesus told them, “According to **your** faith be it unto you” (9:29). This is a Divine principle: We receive according to the measure of **our** faith – no more and no less. Did those blind men need a miracle? Yes. Did Jesus want to do a miracle for them? Yes. But yet the miracle would not take place if they did not have faith.

Now apply that to yourself. Do you need a miracle from God? Yes. Does God want to do a miracle for you? Yes. But you still may not get it, if you don’t have faith.

Suppose one blind man had said, “Well, Lord, I am sure You can open at least one eye of mine. Actually that would be more than enough for me” The Lord would have said exactly the same words to him, “According to *your* faith be it unto you,” – and he would have got just one eye opened! If the second man had said, “Lord, I believe You can open *both* my eyes”, he would have received according to **his** faith – and would have got both eyes opened.

The one-eyed man would then have started the “*One-eye*” denomination, proclaiming that Jesus can open one eye. And the other man would have started the “*Two-eyes*” denomination, proclaiming that Jesus can open both eyes. And so today, some proclaim half a gospel saying that Jesus can only forgive us our sins. But a few proclaim the full gospel saying, “Jesus can not only forgive us our sins. He can also give us victory over sin.” The first will call the second a heretic saying, “No, that is not possible, because Jesus opened only one eye, in my case.” But that was because he had faith only for healing in one eye. The other man had faith for healing in both eyes. He trusted the Lord not only for forgiveness, but for victory too.

Which of these two denominations do you belong to? If you believe that Jesus can only forgive your sins, then that’s all you’ll get from Him. But you will remain defeated by your anger, lust, pride, jealousy, etc. Another believer, however, may say, “But Romans 6:14 says further that sin cannot rule over me any more because I am under God’s grace. So I am going to trust the Lord to fulfil that in my life.” He gets both his eyes opened! Don’t call him a heretic. He got something more than you, not because he was better than you, but because he trusted Christ for more.

Sheep Among Wolves

In *Chapter 10*, we read about Jesus selecting 12 apostles and giving them authority for their ministry. He told them that they would not only have His authority in their ministry, but persecution too.

"I send you as sheep in the midst of wolves. Be shrewd as serpents and innocent as doves" (10:16). God sends us as sheep into the midst of wolves in the world. We must not become like the wolves that surround us. That means that we must *never* take revenge or harm others in any way. We must trust God to protect us from the wolves. But at the same time we must be shrewd as serpents. We should not be foolish. We should not say things that will *unnecessarily* provoke the non-Christians around us. We must be wise in the way we present the gospel. To be wholehearted does not mean, for example, that we have to go around denouncing the idolatry we see in our country. Our message is positive. We are to lift up Jesus Christ, without denouncing anyone else's religion or culture (See the example of Paul in *Acts 19:37*, where the town-clerk in Ephesus testified that Paul had *not* spoken against the goddess they worshipped. We are to proclaim that all men (including ourselves) are sinners and that Jesus is the Saviour of all men. People can give up their sin and their idols only when they surrender to Christ, not before. We must also be wise as serpents in the way we handle money – especially God's money. We must also be wise in not revealing information to people who don't need to know it. We must not make enemies unnecessarily.

Jesus went on to say that our enemies would be members of our own family (10:36). When we follow the Lord, we can expect to be misunderstood by our relatives. A prophet is usually never accepted by his own relatives. And if we love our earthly parents more than the Lord, then we are not worthy of Him (10:37). But if being rejected by men does not disturb us and we are willing even to lose our life for Jesus' sake, then we will find it (10:39). And if we give even a cup of water to a disciple of Jesus, He will give us a reward (10:42).

The mind of the Israelites who lived under the old covenant was set on physical and material blessings in the land of Canaan – on property, healing and prosperity. *Any believer whose mind is set on these earthly things is living under the old covenant.* The gospel of *Matthew* was written for all such people. You may say, "We're not Israelites." But you may still be living under the old covenant. We may call ourselves "*Christians*". But that does not mean we are living under the new covenant. It depends on where our mind is set. Conversion to Christ should bring a change in our way of thinking. The word "*repentance*" means "*a change of mind*". What is to change in our minds? *Colossians 3:2* says, "*Set your mind on the things that are above and not on things that are on the earth,*" for "*the things that are seen are temporal while the things that are unseen are eternal*" (*2 Corinthians 4:18*).

Matthew is the first book in the New Testament and it seeks to introduce us immediately to this heavenly new covenant life. That's why it begins with the sermon on the mount (*Matthew 5 to 7*). That is describing a heavenly life on earth, where we keep the commandments of God not just externally but inwardly, as we are made partakers of His nature through the Holy Spirit. A Christian who lives by the ten commandments – avoiding external sins like murder, adultery and theft – and who prays and fasts to impress others is really living under the old covenant like all the Israelites. We can enter the new covenant only when we understand the inner life of the kingdom of heaven.

John the Baptist in Prison

In 11:2, 3, we read that John the Baptist began to doubt whether Jesus was the Messiah, when he was in prison. John the Baptist had seen heaven opened and the Holy Spirit descending on Jesus and had heard a voice from heaven saying, “*This is My beloved Son in whom I am well pleased*” (*Matthew 3:16, 17*). We would imagine that if we had seen and heard something like that once, we would never again have any doubts left at all. But here we see that the best person under the old covenant (John the Baptist) also began to doubt.

How did doubt come into the heart of one, whom Jesus called the greatest human being ever born? Because when John heard about the wonderful things Jesus was doing (opening blind eyes and healing the sick), he began to wonder, “If He can do all that, why doesn't He kill Herod and release me from this prison?” The old-covenant mindset has no room in it for being in prison. Notice, however, that when those under the new covenant like Paul and Silas were in prison, they did not doubt God but praised Him instead – even at midnight. That is the difference that being filled with the Holy Spirit and entering into the new covenant makes. When a Christian gets into a difficulty, if he begins to think, “Why doesn't God kill this difficult person who is troubling me and deliver me from this?” – he is thinking exactly like an old-covenant person.

The vast majority of believers live under the old covenant. When they commit adultery they say, “O well, David also committed adultery – and he was a man after God's own heart, and God forgave him.” When they get depressed they say, “Well, Elijah also got depressed – and he was a mighty prophet.” When they get angry and break something in their house, they may say, “Well, Moses was a great leader of God's people and he also got angry and even broke the tablets of stone that God Himself had given.” They find a justification for every sin of theirs in the life of some old-covenant person. But did Jesus ever get angry and break anything? Did Jesus ever get depressed and sit under a juniper tree? Did Jesus ever commit adultery? No.

Old-covenant Christians run their race looking unto Moses and David and Elijah as their examples; whereas new-covenant Christians run their

race looking unto Jesus. Old-covenant Christians don't however follow the examples of Moses selflessly praying for others, or of Elijah forsaking everything and living wholeheartedly before God's face, etc. They look at these men only to find excuses for their own sins.

The Bible was written to deliver us from sin. But if you read it to find an excuse for your sins, then God will allow you to be deceived. Don't ever go to the Scriptures to find an excuse for your anger or your adultery or your depression. The New Testament has been given to show us the life of Jesus that we are to partake of – and He was never depressed or angry or impure. I want to encourage all of you to look at the New Testament in this way from now on (Read *2 Corinthians 3:18*).

John the Baptist doubted God when he was imprisoned. But what did Jesus do when He was caught by the Roman soldiers? He said that He could have called 72,000 angels at that very moment to deliver him. But He didn't do that. So Jesus sent this message back to John the Baptist, "*Go and tell John that the blind receive sight and the poor have the gospel preached to them*" (11:4, 5). The new-covenant gospel is the good news of deliverance from sin – not deliverance from prison by killing Herod, Caesar or the Pharisees – and accepting whatever God permits as being the very best for us.

However none of us can blame John the Baptist for his doubts, for he did not have the Holy Spirit living within him, as we can have today, under the new covenant. He was not under grace but under the law. What shall we say, however, of Christians today who claim to be filled with the Holy Spirit but yet live lives defeated by sin and doubt?

We also see a beautiful example here of Jesus expressing appreciation for people publicly. He said, "*Among those who are born of women there has not arisen anyone greater than John the Baptist*" (11:11). According to Jesus, who was the greatest human being born before Him? It was John the Baptist – not Mary, the mother of Jesus, as some Christians imagine!! Those who adore Mary should adore John the Baptist even more!!

And then Jesus went on to say, "*Yet the one who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he*" (11:11). That means, the least person who has entered into the new covenant will not ask questions like John asked, "Lord, why aren't You releasing me?" He will know that God causes everything to work for his good. Who is your example today? We find many good qualities in Abraham, Moses, Elijah and John the Baptist that we can follow. But, we don't have to follow them in their failures. Our example today is Jesus alone.

In 11:12, Jesus said, "*The kingdom of heaven suffers violence, and violent men take it by force.*" What does it mean to be a violent man? *Externally*, a Christian must always be a man of peace. But *inwardly*, he must do violence to everything that stands in the way of his following the Lord – he must stand strongly against the lusts in his flesh, against sin

and against Satan. Only such can possess the kingdom and enter into the new covenant.

If you are half-hearted, you will never be a disciple of Jesus and you won't possess the kingdom of heaven either. If you don't do violence to every attachment that prevents you from loving God with all your heart – whether that attachment be to your parents, to your job, to your money, to a girl, or to anything else – you will remain a third-rate, mediocre Christian, and really no better than the old covenant Israelites – because your mind too is set on earthly things, as theirs was. The Lord is seeking to lift us up to the new covenant – to be *heavenly-minded*.

Revelation and Rest

Then Jesus went on to say, “*Father, I praise You that You hid these things from the wise and the intelligent and revealed them to babes*” (11:25). The great truths of the new covenant have been hidden by God. You cannot discover them by study. You can read every commentary in the world, but you won't discover them, because they are hidden from the clever and the intelligent. You need *revelation*, and God gives that only to those who are like babes – who have, a *pure heart*. Whether they have a clever head or not doesn't matter. *Intelligence* gives us no advantage whatsoever in God's kingdom. It's a *pure heart* that gets God's revelations.

Children are also *teachable*. A little child is ignorant and gladly acknowledges its ignorance. For example, he will ask his father, “Daddy, why are yellow lines drawn on the road?” We adults know that those lines are drawn to divide the road for the traffic. But a child doesn't know even a simple thing like that. Very few believers come to the Holy Spirit in that way, saying, “Lord, You wrote this Book. What does this mean? I am foolish in spiritual matters. Please explain it to me.” In the new covenant, we have the privilege of being filled with the Holy Spirit and to have Him Himself teach us the Scriptures that He wrote.

Christ has appointed teachers in the church. But when listening to those teachers, if you stop with what you receive from them, you will never know God. What they teach you may be true, but you get it second-hand from them. You have to take that second-hand stuff before the Lord and say, “Lord, make this first-hand knowledge for me. Make it my own experience.” Then those truths will be yours forever. If you don't do that, then even the truths you receive from heaven will become stale – like the manna sent from heaven began to breed worms within 24 hours. But the manna that was kept in God's presence in the most holy place remained fresh at all times.

In 11:28, Jesus said, “*Come to Me, all you who labour and are heavy laden and I will give you rest.*” This is the fulfilment of the Old-Testament

Sabbath. The new-covenant Sabbath is not a day of physical rest, but an inner rest that Jesus gives us. He gives it first of all, to those who come to Him acknowledging that they are weary and heavy laden. I have had people come to me saying, "Brother Zac, I want to join your church." I ask them why they want to join our church and they reply, "Because I am sick and tired of my present church." I then tell them, "If you are sick and tired of your present church, after a little while, you will become sick and tired of us too. So don't join us. We are actually a bunch of people who are sick and tired of *ourselves*, not sick and tired of others. If you are sick and tired of *yourself*, then you are welcome to join us; and we'll have wonderful fellowship together."

Many pastors are constantly seeking to increase the numbers in their churches. But Jesus invited only those who were sick and tired of their defeated lives to come to Him. Are you sick and tired of your depressed, gloomy life and of the failures in your family life? Are you fed up of the lack of freshness and anointing in your ministry? Then the Lord invites you saying, "*Come to Me and I will give you rest.*"

It is not God's will that we should ever be agitated or upset. He wants us to be at rest 24 hours a day, 7 days a week and 52 weeks a year, whatever may happen around us. But we can live such a life only if we acknowledge our defeated state first and come to the Lord and say, "Lord, give me this Sabbath-rest at any cost."

In 11:29, Jesus said, "*Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me – for I am gentle and humble in heart*". A disciple is a learner and he comes to Jesus to learn from Him, like a teachable child. What does the Lord want us to learn from Him first of all? Many want to learn how to preach, how to heal the sick, and how to prophesy, etc. But the Lord wants us to learn gentleness and humility from Him first of all. In fact, those are the only two things that He ever asked anyone to learn from Him. But there are not many Christians who are eager to learn these two virtues. And that is why they do not experience His Sabbath-rest either.

When you see a godly man with an anointed and effective ministry, you may long to have a ministry like his. But that is the wrong thing to pursue after. What you need to emulate first is his godly life.

The Lord may call us to be fishers of men or teachers in His church. But He wants us to live "*in rest*" first. If we are not at rest in our own hearts, we will have many problems ourselves and cause problems for others too.

Significantly, immediately after Jesus spoke about this rest, He went on to demolish the false Jewish understanding of the Sabbath (12:1–13). First, when His disciples were picking some grain on the Sabbath day and the Pharisees questioned it, Jesus immediately defended His disciples quoting the example of David and the Levitical priests (12:1–8).

Then He healed a man in the synagogue on the Sabbath day and stopped the criticism of the Pharisees by saying, “*If a sheep of yours falls into a pit on a Sabbath day, won’t you pull it out immediately? Isn’t a man more important than a sheep?*” (12:9–13). Legalistic people are very narrow-minded and selfish. They take good care of themselves, but are very uncaring about the needs and sufferings of others.

In 12:24, 31, 32, we read that the Pharisees said that Jesus was casting out demons by Beelzebul the prince of demons. Jesus replied, “*Have you spoken against Me? It’s forgiven.*” When Miriam criticised Moses saying, “Why did you marry that woman?”, she got leprosy (as a judgement from God). But when the Pharisees criticised Jesus saying He was in league with Satan, *they got forgiveness!!* That is the difference between the old covenant and the new covenant. The blood of Abel cried out for judgement. The blood of Jesus cries out for mercy (*Hebrews 12:24*). If you want God to *judge* those who hurt you, then you are still under the old covenant. But if you want God to *forgive* them, then you are a disciple of Jesus Christ.

In 12:36, 37, Jesus taught about the importance of our speech: “*Every careless word that men shall speak, they shall give an account in the day of judgement.*” After observing believers in many parts of the world for more than 50 years, I am convinced that 95% of believers do *not* believe these words of Jesus. They do *not* believe that they will have to give an account to God one day for every useless word they ever spoke. That is why they continue to speak evil of others, gossip, backbite, crack filthy jokes, etc. They hurt others with their jokes too. Humour is a good thing. But humour that hurts others is not godly. You can get a reputation for humour thereby, but it is a careless word for which you will have to give an account in the day of judgement.

Most people don’t believe that God has a record of every word that we have ever spoken. It is recorded in our memory. There is a video tape that has been running in our memory ever since we were born. Like a computer’s memory, it has recorded every thought, word and deed of ours. In the day of judgement, God will display all that for everyone to see. If you believe God’s Word, you will be careful with your speech.

We all believe in justification by *faith*. That is Scriptural. But if you are a *balanced* Christian, you will also believe in justification by *works* – for that is also Scriptural. *Romans 4* speaks about justification by *faith*. But faith without works is dead. So, *James 2* speaks about justification by *works* – works of faith. Here in *Matthew 12:37*, Jesus said that we would be justified or condemned in the final day, by the words we spoke. On the day of judgement, when the words you spoke are played back from your memory, will you be justified or condemned? That is a question we must all consider now – before it is too late.

In the new covenant we are to have *a tongue of fire*. On the day of Pentecost a tongue of fire came on people's heads, symbolising a tongue under the permanent control of the Holy Spirit. Many Christians mistake this to refer to speaking in unknown tongues. It is more than that. It is a tongue under the control of the Holy Spirit all the time. Many speak in other tongues as led by the Spirit and then speak in their mother-tongue led by the devil. I am thankful that the Holy Spirit has given me, not only the gift of speaking in unknown languages, but above all the ability to control my speech in my known languages as well. In the old covenant they could not control their tongues, because they did not have the Holy Spirit dwelling within. But today we can live on a higher plane.

In 12:40, Jesus refers to Jonah staying in the belly of a large fish for three days and three nights. Then He said, “*So shall the Son of Man be in the heart of the earth.*” When Jesus died, He went immediately to *Paradise* (which was located in the centre of the earth at that time). There, the converted thief joined Him a little later. Jesus' body alone was in the grave. (When Jesus ascended, He took Paradise up with Him to the third heaven). Jesus died at 3 o'clock on the afternoon of the Passover day – which fell on a Thursday that year, and not on a Friday (as is commonly believed). The Friday that followed that day was the first day of the feast of unleavened bread – and this was “*a special Sabbath*” (See John 19:31). The day following that was the weekly Sabbath-day. So there were two consecutive Sabbaths that followed Jesus' crucifixion. That was why the women could come to the grave to anoint Him only on Sunday morning. Jesus was alive for three days and nights in the heart of the earth exactly like Jonah was alive in the belly of the sea-monster. Then He came back into His body and “*arose from the dead*”.

Seven Parables of the Kingdom

In 13:1–52, we read seven of the parables that Jesus spoke. They are called parables of the kingdom of heaven. The first was the parable of the sower. Notice throughout this chapter that Jesus spoke of the kingdom of heaven in its *outward expression* – the way people of this world see “*the church*”. That was why He said that in the kingdom of heaven there were people with *good and bad ground* in their hearts. He also said that the kingdom of heaven was like a field in which *wheat and tares* were both found. He explained later that the field was the *world, not the church* (13:38). Some Christians misquote this parable and say, “Since Jesus said that both wheat and tares must be allowed to grow in the church, we should not separate them. So we must allow unconverted people and converted people to be in the church. They say that because they haven't read the Scriptures properly. The field is the *world* – and it is there that God allows believers and unbelievers to grow together – *not in the church*. In the local church, we must ensure that

(as far as is humanly discernible) only those who have repented of their sins and have been born again through faith in Christ, are allowed to be members. The others are welcome to attend and listen to the messages. But it must be made clear to them that they cannot become a part of the local church – the body of Christ – until they are born again.

13:31–32 is a parable about a mustard seed that normally grows to become only a small plant. But in this case, it grew up *unnaturally* and became a huge tree. This is a parable of how God does *not* intend a local church to grow. God intends that each local church be a small group of brothers and sisters (like the small mustard plant) who know each other, love one another and manifest His life to others in their locality. But gifted preachers have built mega-churches (like the large tree), contrary to God's plan – where people come only to listen to sermons, just like they go to watch football matches and movies. Jesus said that only *a very few* would find the way to life (*Matthew 7:13, 14*). But clever preachers can easily gather large crowds, by lowering the standards of holiness, avoiding all preaching about repentance, about self-denial and about taking up the cross. Thus, one can get a crowd of people who are not at all interested in being disciples of Christ, but only in listening to good sermons on Sundays. When you increase the size of your church this way, what happens next will be what Jesus spoke of in this parable: The birds of the air (which Jesus said in an earlier parable represented the agents of the evil one – 13:4, 19) come and sit on the branches of the tree. If, however, you had sought to make disciples alone, your church would have been smaller in size, but purer and free from Satanic influences and the problems that such influences bring!

In 13:33, Jesus spoke about the kingdom of heaven being like leaven. This is a prophecy about how corruption would spread in the local church. Again and again, Jesus warns about the dangers that would face the church – bad ground, tares, demons sitting inside the church, and leaven. If Christian leaders had paid attention to these parables, they could have saved their churches from spiritual death – and they would have emphasised discipleship.

Then Jesus spoke two parables where He explained what it meant to be a disciple. In 13:44, He said that the kingdom of heaven was like a man who had found a field with a treasure hidden in it. The man sold *all that he had* and bought that field. This is a picture of a person who is willing to give up everything that is precious to him, in order to be a disciple of Jesus – and thus possess God's kingdom. The second parable, about a man who bought a very expensive pearl after selling *all that he had*, emphasised the same truth. Notice in both cases, the expression '*all that he had*.' Jesus said, "*No-one can be My disciple unless he forsakes all that he has*" (*Luke 14:33*). That is the only way to be a disciple and possess God's kingdom.

In 13:47–50, Jesus spoke about the outward expression of God's kingdom on earth having two types of fish – the good and the bad. But at the end of the age, the angels come in and separate the righteous from the wicked (*verse 49*).

In 13:52, we have a good word for students of the Bible. A *scribe* is one who carefully studies the Scriptures. But it says here that the scribe must become a *disciple*. Then, when he preaches, he can bring forth from his treasure, new truths as well as the old truths with freshness. If you remain a scribe, however, your ministry will be dead.

In 14:25–31, we see Jesus walking on the water. But the greater miracle here is that Peter also walked on the water. This is a picture of the overcoming life. What is it that prevents us from walking on water? It is the law of gravity that pulls us down. The law of gravity pulled Jesus down too. But by the power of God He overcame it and walked on the water. The law of gravity was not negated or destroyed, but overcome. As long as Peter looked at Jesus and trusted Him, Peter also would be able to overcome the law of gravity. Otherwise it would overcome him, as it did a few moments later.

The law of sin is also like the law of gravity. Temptation seeks to pull us. Jesus too was tempted exactly as we are (*Hebrews 4:15*). But He overcame the downward pull of temptation by the power of God – and so He never sinned (*Matthew 4:1–10*). If we look to Him for the same power, we too can overcome as He overcame – but only as long as we keep looking to Him (*Revelation 3:21; Hebrews 12:1, 2*). If, however, we look at the sub-standard level that other Christians live at, or even at the old-covenant examples of Moses and Jeremiah, we will not overcome.

To have “*faith*” is to look at Jesus. And “*grace*” is the supernatural power of God. When we are “*under this grace, sin cannot rule over us*” (*Romans 6:14*). The moment Peter looked away from the Lord, he went down – and so will we. And if we do go down, what should we do? Do what Peter did. He cried out saying, “*Lord, save me*”. He didn’t wait until he reached the bottom of the sea. No. He cried out *as soon as he was beginning to sink*. And so must we. The moment you find temptation’s pull to be too strong, cry out to the Lord to save you. Say, “Lord, I am about to fall into lust (or anger, or whatever). Please save me.” He will give you grace at that very moment and make you stand. “*He is able to keep you from falling*” (*Jude 24*) – for *He is the same yesterday, today and forever* (*Hebrews 13:8*).

In 15:13, Jesus said, “*Every plant which My heavenly Father did not plant will be rooted out.*” The question here is not whether it is a good plant, or a big plant, or one that others appreciate. The question is “*Who planted it – you or God?*” We can have our own bright ideas to do God’s work and produce something thereby that looks very impressive in the

sight of men. But in the final day the Lord will see whether this idea originated with God or in your own brain. Listen to this statement very carefully: *God is the only legitimate originator of anything in this universe.* Anything that originates with you or me is doomed to be destroyed one day. The first words in the Bible are, “*In the beginning God....*” That’s how it must be in every area of our life. That is why we need to pray and wait on God and seek his leading in every step of life – if we are to live a worthwhile life by eternity’s standards.

You can have a good desire to go somewhere to serve the Lord. But where did that idea originate from? Did someone urge you to go? Or perhaps you yourself wanted to go. But did you wait on the Lord and seek His will? Did He put a burden in your heart for that work? If the burden was His, then there will be eternal fruit – not otherwise. Are you trying to build a church in some place, just like you saw someone else do? It won’t be the church of Jesus Christ. It will be *your church*.

In a country like India, it is very easy to gather people together anywhere, because there are so many poor people who want material benefits. Such people don’t come to you to become disciples of Jesus Christ, or to deny themselves and hate sin and become overcomers. No. They come for some earthly gain. I have lived all my life in India – and I know the reality of much so-called “*Christian work*” here. Did you wait on the Lord and seek to know His calling for your life before going out to serve Him? Are you seeking money (or perhaps your own honour) in doing God’s work? These are the important questions you must ask yourself. You may not take heed to these words now, but in the day of judgement you will wish you had. It is best to humble yourself now and say, “Lord, I don’t want anything in my life that did not originate with You”.

So we should never rush into doing things for God – either by the promptings of our own reason or that of others. “*He who believes will not make haste*” (*Isaiah 28:16 - KJV*). “*Do you see a man who is hasty in his matters? There is more hope for a fool than for him.*” (*Proverbs 29:20 - NASB margin*). Wait on the Lord and allow Him to put His thoughts into your mind. His thoughts are as much better and higher and more productive than your thoughts, as heaven is above the earth (*Isaiah 55:8, 9*). But make sure that you are not seeking your own glory or depending on your own resources for the Lord’s work. Do things according to His bidding – and all your plants will remain forever.

The Church that Jesus Builds

In 16:15, we see Jesus asking Simon, “*Who am I?*” Simon replied, “*You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.*” Jesus immediately praised him publicly saying, “*Blessed are you, Simon, son of Jonah, because you did not understand this through your own intelligence or cleverness. My Father revealed it to you.*” Notice the word ‘*revealed*’ here. This is a

new-covenant word. Under the old covenant, people *studied* the law and *meditated* on it. The *blessed* man was the one who meditated on the law of the Lord day and night (*Psalm 1:2*). But under the new covenant, the *blessed* man is *the one who gets revelation*, like Peter. Paul's prayer for the Ephesian Christians was, that they may get "*the spirit of revelation*" (*Ephesians 1:17*). The Holy Spirit opened Peter's heart to see something that he could never have discovered with any amount of human intelligence. There were cleverer people than him in Israel at that time, who had studied the Bible much more than him. But they thought Jesus was the prince of devils!! God reveals the Scriptures to those who come to Him in humility like little babes (*Matthew 11:25*).

In 16:18, Jesus said to Simon, "*You are Peter (petros – Greek), and upon this rock (petra – Greek) I will build My church.*" He called Simon "petros" ("a small stone") and said that *the church* would be built on the "petra" ("a large rock") that Simon had just confessed by revelation – *Christ the Son of the living God*. Simon Peter was not the rock-foundation. Jesus used two completely different words here, as we have just seen (in the Greek), which doesn't come through so clearly when translated into English.

In 16:18, 19, Jesus said, "*Upon this rock I will build My church; and the gates of Hades will not overpower it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; and whatever you bind on earth shall have been bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall have been loosed in heaven.*" This was the first time that Jesus spoke about the church – and He spoke of the church facing battle with the forces of spiritual death – "*the gates of Hades*". When I first read this, I pictured the church being attacked by Satan on all four sides, and the church managing to hold on and survive until the Lord returns. But that was not what Jesus said. He did not say that the gates of Hades would attack the church, but that *the church would attack the gates of Hades* and overpower those gates. In those days, a city was surrounded by walls and could be entered only through its gates. If you got through the gates, then you had overpowered the city. So Jesus spoke of an attacking church that would be engaged in spiritual warfare and overpower the forces of evil – binding Satan's activities and loosing people who were held captive by him.

This is not a defensive battle, but an attacking one. We go against the fortresses of Satan in the world and register the victory of the cross in one place after another. We don't sit in a corner and say, "O Lord, help us to hold on until You come".

There is a well-known Christian hymn that I have never liked to sing. It says, "*Hold the fort for I am coming,*" says the Lord. That presents a picture of a church struggling inside a fort, with the devil attacking it on every side, and the church somehow seeking to hold on until Christ comes. But it is not like that. It's the devil who is inside a fort and we are attacking him at his gates. The picture we must always keep in our

mind is that of a triumphant church following a triumphant Captain and attacking the devil. If we are totally submitted to God and we resist Satan, he will flee from us (*James 4:7*). He doesn't just *walk* away, he will *run* away.

We are to walk as Jesus walked on this earth. Wherever Jesus went, demons trembled and Satan was scared. We are to walk on earth in the same way. “*Every place that the sole of our foot treads on, God has given to us*” (*Joshua 1:3*). So we don't live in fear of Satan or what he can do to us. No. He is the one who has to be afraid of us. We will never be able to build the church of Jesus Christ if we don't take that attitude against Satan. Our Lord Jesus has already bound the strong man. We can now go in and take the strong man's goods! Hallelujah!

In *18:3*, Jesus said, “*Unless you become converted and become like children you shall not enter the kingdom of heaven.*” Jesus was speaking about humility here. “*Whoever humbles himself like this child...*”. In other words, Jesus was saying here that *humility* is the first and foremost requirement for entering God's kingdom.

I have often told people that there are three secrets for living a godly Christian life. *First, humility. Second, humility. Third, humility.* That's it. Humble yourself, and acknowledge that you are foolish and ignorant when it comes to spiritual matters, even if you are clever in worldly matters.

As human beings, we are so full of self-confidence, because of our pride. Little babies are not self-confident. A 6-month old baby will cry if you take it away from its mother's arms. It feels insecure outside its mother's arms, because it is so helpless. Just as the Lord wants us to be bold when confronting Satan, He wants us to recognise our helplessness and depend on Him totally. This is the *dual* picture of the Christian: *A fearless warrior* when facing Satan and his evil forces, but *a little child* before Almighty God. Keep that dual attitude always. In spiritual matters, we are ignorant and foolish and don't even know our A,B,C. That is why we cling to the Lord always – and then we will be perfectly safe and will also be protected from saying and doing many foolish things.

In *18:18–20*, we see the second time that Jesus spoke about the church. Here he speaks about the authority of the church to bind Satan and to loose believers held in his grip. But this authority can be exercised only by a minimum of two believers who are united. When two believers are one in their spirit, the Lord comes into their midst (*18:20*). Only then can they bind Satan's activities. We cannot bind Satan himself. The Lord will do that Himself one day in the future (*Revelation 20*). But we can bind his activities – if two are united in spirit. A husband and wife can keep Satan out of their home forever if they are united. Two elders can keep Satan out of their church forever if they are united. Satan knows this and that is why he always seeks to separate husband and wife and separate elders in a church.

In 18:21–35, Jesus spoke the parable of the unmerciful servant who did not forgive his fellow-servant. He was teaching here that even if our sins are once forgiven by God, they can then be “*un-forgiven*”, if we don’t forgive just one other person!! This king forgave the slave a huge debt. But when that slave did not forgive his fellow-slave, his own forgiveness was cancelled. And then Jesus said, “*So will My heavenly Father do to you if you don’t forgive your brother from your heart*” (verse 35). All the sins God forgave you will be put back to your account if you don’t forgive somebody else, and you will go right on to hell. Not only that, Jesus also said that that slave was handed over to the torturers. This means that God will withdraw His protection from believers who do not forgive others, so that demons can then torment them. This is *one reason* for *some sicknesses* among believers.

More Parables

In 20:1–16, Jesus spoke a parable about labourers who came to work for their master at different hours of the day. In this parable, there were five groups of workers. The first four groups – who worked for 12 hours, 9 hours, 6 hours and 3 hours – all worked on the basis of a contract, for pay. The last group alone – who worked only for one hour – worked without any contract, with no assurance of any pay. At the end of the day, that last group got the same wage as the first group. In other words, they received 12 times the hourly wage of the first group!! What the Lord was teaching thereby was that those who served the Lord for reward, would get their reward last, even if they laboured for Him for many, many years. But those who served the Lord out of gratitude and joy, without expecting any reward, would get the highest reward in heaven, even if they laboured only for a very brief time. It is the *quality* of our work that matters to God and not the *quantity*. It is the *motive* with which we serve the Lord that matters most. “*Why*” we did what we did, will matter much more in the final day than “*What*” we did. It is good to realise that now.

In Chapter 22, we see three important truths: **(a)** We can enter God’s kingdom only if we receive the free robe of the righteousness of Christ (*verses 1–14*). **(b)** We must clear our debts to man *first* (“Caesar” represents today, the government and all human beings), before we give any money to God (*verse 21*). **(c)** The message of the entire Bible can be summed up in two statements: Love God with all your heart, and love your neighbour as yourself (*verses 37–40*). These are great truths worth meditating on – for many people go astray in these areas, following the teachings of men rather than of our Lord.

In Chapter 23, Jesus exposes the hypocrisy and counterfeit religion of the Pharisees, and He condemns them severely. They fasted, prayed and tithed, their doctrines were all correct, and they even had a missionary programme (23:15). They resigned their jobs and travelled to distant

lands to make converts. But Jesus said that their converts were double the children of hell. That is what every legalist is – and when he converts another person to his legalistic version of Christianity, he makes that person twofold a child of hell. So don't imagine that all missionary activity is of God. It is only when we make disciples and teach them to love Jesus supremely, and to love others as Christ loved us, that we deliver them from hell.

If, on the other hand, we make converts who just “*look Christian*” on the outside and follow all the rules we make for them, then we have deceived them and will only populate Hell thereby. It is easy to get people to change externally and to follow a form. I visited a village once where some missionaries had “converted” some of the people to their version of “*Christianity*” many years ago. But there was no holiness in any of their lives. The only difference was that they now sang songs to Christ instead of to other gods. Some of them may have changed their names to “*Christian*” names. They had just been made twofold the children of hell by those missionaries.

Jesus denounced the Pharisees with very strong words, calling them “*vipers*” (23:33). He had the right to do that, because He was going to die for the sins He denounced in them. He had sought for years “*to gather them as a hen gathers her little chicks under its wings*” (23:37). We too can have the right to denounce sin in others only if we are willing to lay down our lives, if necessary, to save them from their sin. If we denounce sin, without loving people like that, we are merely “*self-appointed prophets*” – and hypocrites.

Christ's Second Coming

In *Chapter 24*, Jesus spoke of His final return to earth. The first sign of the last days (that He spoke of repeatedly) was that there would be a great deal of deception in the last days (*verses 4, 11, 24*). Then He spoke of the fig tree (a picture of the nation of *Israel*) that was cursed by Him for having only leaves (religion) without fruit (spirituality) (*Mark 11:13–21*), putting forth its leaves (religion without spirituality) once again (*Matthew 24:32, 33*). The nation of Israel was scattered 40 years after Christ's crucifixion, but they have come back to the land and repossessed Jerusalem for the first time only in our lifetime – in 1967. Thus we know that our Lord's coming is very near. Jesus also taught here that He would return to take His children up to be with Him, **AFTER** the great tribulation is over (*verse 29*). He also said that when He comes, everyone would see Him, for He would come like the lightning that everyone can see (*verse 27*). He also told us not to believe those who taught that He would come secretly (*verse 26*). He said here that He would come in the clouds with the angels and with a loud trumpet and gather His children

from all parts of the world. The rapture of the saints is described here by Jesus exactly as Paul also mentions it later in *1 Thessalonians 4:16, 17*. Jesus made it crystal clear here that this rapture would take place only **after** the great tribulation is over (*verse 29*). We must not believe the traditions of men on this matter but the clear teaching of our Lord.

In *Chapter 25*, Jesus expanded on His teaching (in the closing verses of *Chapter 24*) that people should be ready for His coming, with three parables. The way to prepare for the coming of Christ is not by understanding the timetable of His coming and by studying prophetic charts, but by being *spiritually* ready. Our *heart* is more important than our mind. The first parable was about heart-purity. The ten virgins represent Christians who are clean on the outside. The five wise virgins who had “*extra oil in their vessels*” represent those whose hearts are filled with love for Christ by the Holy Spirit (*verses 1–13*). If love for Christ is not the *motive* for all that we do for the Lord, then even if we are pure externally, we are *foolish*. The church in Ephesus became like these foolish virgins, having lost its “*first love*” (*Revelation 2:4*). The second parable related to being faithful in using the gifts God has given us, for His kingdom (*verses 14–30*). God has given us different degrees of abilities and opportunities to serve Him. And He expects us to produce fruit only according to the measure of what He has given us – not more. That was why the person who produced *five* talents received the same reward and commendation as the person who produced only *two* talents (*verses 21, 23*). The third parable (of the sheep and the goats) shows us that we will be rewarded by God according to the way we treat our fellow-believers who are in need (*verses 31–36*). This is the proof that our faith is living and genuine (*James 2:14–17*).

In 27:3, we see how even “*repentance*” can be hollow and insincere. Judas had some sort of repentance (feeling of sorrow for his sin), but instead of going to the Lord and confessing his sin to Him, he went to the priests (like many do today). So he went to hell. The Lord alone can forgive us our sins – no-one else.

In the first few verses of *Chapter 28*, we read of the resurrection of Christ. Without His resurrection, His death would have been in vain, for there would have been no proof that He was Who He claimed to be – the Son of God. Christianity rests on this twin unshakeable foundation – the death of Christ for our sins and His resurrection. This is what makes it different from all religions. Notice that Christ had left the grave *before* the angel rolled away the stone (*verse 2*). The angel rolled away the stone, not for the Lord to leave the grave, but for His disciples to go in and see that He had risen.

The Great Commission

In 28:18–20, we read of the great commission that Jesus gave His disciples – and to us. The *basis* of the great commission is that all authority

in heaven and earth has been given to our Lord. We should not go out to make disciples if we are not convinced that our Lord rules heaven and earth with absolute authority. We don't go to make disciples because there is a need somewhere or because someone urged us to go, but because Jesus Christ has all authority in heaven and earth and He commands us to go.

What are we to go and do in every nation? We are to make **disciples** – not mere converts. We are not to just get them to “*accept Christ into their hearts*”. A disciple is a learner and a follower of the Lord Jesus. This is what we are to make people into in every nation. Only those who are willing to become disciples should be baptised.

Baptism in the threefold Name is not optional. It is essential. We are not to be like the inter-denominational groups that say, “We won't preach on baptism because that will disturb our unity.” We will preach all that our Lord told us to preach. Then after that, we are to build all those disciples into local churches, where we teach them to do *every single thing that Jesus commanded*.

The great commission is very clear. First: Go. Then, make disciples. Then baptise them. Then, spend the rest of the time teaching them to obey every single thing that Jesus commanded. This great commission is surrounded on either side by a statement and a promise. First, “*All authority is given to the Lord Jesus.*” And at the end, “*I am with you always unto the end of the age.*”

Many like to claim that promise of the Lord, “*Lo, I am with you always.*” But to whom was it given? It was given only to those who go and make disciples, and then teach them to obey ALL that Jesus commanded (28:19, 20) – and not to believers who go here and there to make money. Such believers cannot claim that promise. But if you seek to make disciples everywhere you go, then you can claim the promise that the Lord will be with you always.

MARK

JESUS CHRIST – THE SON OF GOD

There must be many good reasons why God allowed four biographies of Jesus Christ to be written by four different people instead of one consolidated biography by one person.

Matthew begins his gospel by calling Jesus “*the Son of David, Son of Abraham*”, and quotes numerous Scriptures, to show the Jews that Jesus was their promised Messiah. Mark, however, begins by saying: “*This is the gospel of Jesus Christ the Son of God.*” He wants to emphasise the Deity of Jesus. In Mark’s gospel there is a greater description of Jesus’ miracles; but not as much teaching or as many parables as in Matthew’s gospel. Matthew was laying down the teaching of the kingdom of heaven on earth. Mark was demonstrating that Jesus was the Son of God on earth.

Learning and Following

“*When Jesus was going by the Sea of Galilee, He saw Simon and Andrew, the brother of Simon, casting a net, for they were fishermen. Jesus said to them, ‘Follow Me, and I will make you fishers of men’*” (1:16, 17). There were hundreds of fishermen along the coasts of Galilee. He did not call all of them. He called only four – Peter, Andrew, James and John. We are *all* called to be witnesses for Christ. But to enter into full-time ministry for the Lord, one must be specifically called by God. You cannot say, “I want to be an evangelist or a teacher.” God has to call you for that ministry and equip you for it. God sovereignly calls His servants even today. Every ministry in the Body of Christ is important, just like every part of the human body. Some parts like the face can be seen, whereas others like the kidneys and liver are unseen. In the Body of Christ too, some ministries are more visible than others.

In *Matthew 11:29*, Jesus said, “*Learn from Me.*” Here He said, “*Follow Me.*” These are the two things that a disciple has to do. A disciple is a learner and a follower. All through his life he has to learn from Jesus and follow Him. In the army they march saying, “Left, right, left, right.” We have to say, “Learn, follow. Learn, follow” – until Christ returns.

If you are only learning but *not following*, you will be like a man who tries to walk *only* with his left foot, marching to the command, “Left, left, left, left”!! But the true disciple of Jesus learns and then practices what he has learnt. If you don’t practice what you learn, you will only produce others like yourself – who march on one foot. We can never say that we have learnt enough. Until the end of our life we have to learn from Jesus.

The second part of that verse is a promise. “*If you follow Me, I will make you....*” Think of that expression, “*I will make you.*” This is like a potter making a vessel. Potters don’t make all vessels of the same shape. God also makes us in different shapes. Don’t ever ask God to make your ministry in the shape of some other brother’s. God will never do that because He makes each vessel in a unique shape. If you seek to have someone else’s ministry, you will hinder the shape God is trying to make out of you.

I’ve repeatedly told people in my church, “Don’t ever try to imitate my ministry – because God wants you to be unique. He wants you to be **you**.” God wants only one person like me in His church – and He wants one person like you.

If you follow the Lord, He will make you what you are supposed to be. That is the Lord’s responsibility. In the case of these men, they were to be shaped into fishers of men. In your case it may be something else – perhaps a help in the church. Some are called to be apostles, some prophets and some evangelists. Evangelists are the fishers of men. Some, like Paul, are everything: apostle, prophet, teacher, shepherd and evangelist. But it is rarely that God gives one person all of these special gifts. Most of us usually have only one gift. In the early days the apostles had to have so many gifts, because there were so few gifted people in the church. But with the expansion of the church, God has distributed the gifts more widely. But whichever your gift is, the principle is still: “*I will make you.*” We must allow the Lord to make us what He wants us to be. We cannot make *ourselves*.

Don’t ever try to make yourself into an evangelist or a teacher or an apostle – for you will be a total failure. Don’t ever try to do a ministry that God never called you to. Humble yourself, wait on the Lord, and let Him show you what He has called you for. I’ve seen numerous people in this country who have tried to make a ministry for themselves. They get money from America and start a ministry. But one day God will pull it all out and destroy it. Remember that you have only one life. Don’t waste it by trying to impress people that you have some great ministry. Fulfil the task God has called you to fulfil in the body of Christ. “*Take heed*

to the ministry which you have received in the Lord, that you fulfil it." (*Colossians 4:17*). Wait on the Lord and He will make you into the vessel He desires. He doesn't call everybody for the same thing. All those fishermen by the Sea of Galilee could become *disciples* of Jesus. But they could not all become *apostles*. Apostles have to be called specifically. We need to distinguish between the calling for our life and for our ministry. So don't try to force people to have your ministry. That is foolish.

When Jesus was dealing with demon-possessed people, some of the demons would cry out, "*This is the Son of God*" (*1:34*). Wouldn't it thrill you if others heard that a demon recognised you as a man of God? But Jesus told the demons to be silent, because He did not want a testimony from any demon. Demons are liars in any case. So what is their testimony worth? Nothing! We should do what Jesus did. Some people carry on a conversation with demons, before casting them out. This is always foolish. Jesus never did that. He just cast them out.

Doing His Father's Will

In *1:35*, we read of a habit that Jesus had, that is good for each of us to have – getting up early and listening to God (See also *Isaiah 50:4*). Even though he was busy ministering late into the previous night, He still woke up before the sun rose and got alone with His Father. In which area would you like to follow Jesus primarily? In healing the sick? Why not start with what is written here? He lived each day listening to His Father from morning till night. Somebody said that just as tourists enquire about the sights to be seen whenever they come to a new place, Jesus always looked around to see where the lonely and deserted places were, where He could be alone with His Father. Some Christians don't like to be alone. They always want to be with others. And that is why their lives are so shallow. Jesus wanted to spend time talking to His Father daily, because that is where He got His strength and His wisdom from.

When the people came and urged Jesus to stay on there for some more time, because a revival had broken out, He said He could not, because He had already heard His Father telling Him that morning, to go elsewhere. Human reason would suggest that one should stay on in a place where revival has broken out. But Jesus was not moved by the need of the people *primarily*, but by the voice of His Father. If Jesus had woken up late and not waited on the Father that morning, He would have followed His reason and stayed on in the same place and missed the will of God for one day. We may say, "What does it matter if we miss the will of God just *for one day?*" But for Jesus every day was important in order to complete the task His Father had assigned to Him. He was as careful with His time as we are with our money.

We must have this attitude: "Lord, I don't want to waste a single day of my life. Arrange my circumstances so that I will always be in the place

where You want me to be – every single day of my life.” That is a good prayer to pray. Even if we don’t hear a voice from heaven to direct us, God can still arrange our circumstances such that we are where God wants us to be every day of our life. Don’t go to a place because it is a comfortable place to live. Ask yourself whether God wants you there. Then you won’t miss the will of God. And when you come to the end of your life, you won’t have any regrets over the way you lived.

Jesus Loved People

In 2:3, we read about a man who was paralysed being brought to Jesus’ house. Four people carried him there and when they found they couldn’t get in because of the crowd, they decided to break open the roof. How did they dare to think of doing such a thing? Because the house belonged to Jesus (*compare verse 1 with Matthew 4:13*) and they knew that He loved people so much that He would not mind His house being damaged if it would result in someone being healed!!

Jesus saw the faith of those who carried him in (*verse 5*) and healed the man (*verse 11*). Generally speaking, we receive from God “according to **our own faith**”. Jesus always worked on the basis of faith, But here we see someone else’s faith bringing God’s blessing to the man. This man may have had no faith at all. But the faith of his friends still brought him healing.

A father’s faith once brought deliverance to his demon-possessed son (*Mark 9:24*); a Canaanite mother’s faith brought deliverance to her daughter (*Matthew 15:28*); and a centurion’s faith brought healing to his servant (*Matthew 8:13*). So today, we too can bring people who are paralysed and hounded by discouragement and fear, to Jesus in prayer, and see Him delivering them through *our* faith. We can pray down God’s blessing on others.

We also learn from this incident our interdependence in the Body of Christ. We are not to live the Christian life all by ourselves, but along with others. It is certainly more convenient to work on our own, because we can do what we like, when we like and we are answerable to nobody. But those who work like that will finally destroy themselves. Seek for fellowship – and that will be to your salvation. Find a godly brother, particularly when you are young, and be subject to his authority. When you are weak, their faith will carry you through.

In 2:18–22, we read that Jesus was asked why His disciples did not fast when many other religious groups fasted. The Lord told us to fast secretly and so, strictly speaking, it is none of our business to know whether someone else fasts at all. Jesus however told them that His disciples would fast once He (their Bridegroom) had left them and gone

back to heaven. Jesus never gave us a command to fast. But the Bride of Jesus will fast and pray – in secret – voluntarily.

Then Jesus explained that in the new covenant, everything (including fasting) was different from what it was under the old covenant. There are no rules now. Everything is voluntary. He illustrated this by saying that if you stitched a piece of new unshrunk cloth on to an old cotton garment, the old garment would tear when washed. The application of this was that you couldn't take a little bit of new-covenant truth and attach it to an old-covenant system. You can't run a church 75% according to old covenant principles and add a 25% new-covenant patch on it. A church must be run 100% by new-covenant principles. Otherwise it will have serious problems.

He then illustrated the same truth by saying that new wine needed new wineskins (2:22). In those days, wine was stored in animal skins. When the wine inside began to ferment and its volume expanded, the skin would also expand. But the skin could not stretch beyond a certain limit. So if you put new, unfermented wine into an old stretched wineskin, it would burst the old skin when it fermented. The old wine is life under the law and the old wineskin is the old covenant system. The new wine is the life of Jesus and the new wineskin is the new covenant church. If we take the life of Jesus, and put it into an old covenant system with priests and tithes and rituals and rules, the life of Jesus will burst out of it. If you want to retain the old covenant system of laws and regulations, then you must also choose to live under the Mosaic Law. You can't mix the old and the new covenants. The life of Jesus must have a new covenant church to express itself in. You have to get rid of the old covenant rules totally from your church. The vast majority of Christians however live in church-systems that follow the old covenant. They try to put the new wine into their old wineskins and find it bursting here and there, just as Jesus said would happen.

In 3:1–6, we read that Jesus went into a synagogue on a Sabbath day. There was a man with a paralysed hand there and the Pharisees watched to see whether He would heal him. This is the one place in Scripture where we read that “*Jesus was angry*”. I am sure He was also angry when He made a whip in the temple and chased out those who were making money in the Name of God. Jesus looked at them with anger here, because He was grieved to see the hardness of their hearts. He healed the man ignoring what the Pharisees thought of Him. The evil nature of the Pharisees becomes manifest here in that instead of rejoicing over the healing of that man, they began to plan to “*destroy Jesus*”.

Why did they want to *destroy Jesus*? That man with the paralysed hand had sat in their synagogue for so many years and those Pharisees could not heal him. But here an unlearned carpenter comes from the despised town of Nazareth and He heals the man immediately. They became jealous of Jesus and realised that the people would know that

this Preacher could help them more than the Pharisees could – and they would then follow Him. So they planned to destroy Him and His ministry. They would call Him a false prophet or a heretic. There are Christian Pharisees today who can become jealous of God using you, and who can try to destroy your ministry or even your life. They may try to destroy your ministry by scandalising you or calling you a false prophet. They are jealous because they cannot do what God is doing through you. Beware of being jealous of another man's ministry.

Let me say something about anger here. *Ephesians 4:26* says, “*Be angry but do not sin.*” There is an anger that is sinful and there is an anger that is not sinful. We can observe anger without sin in Jesus' life. When was He angry and when was He not angry? He was angry when people were hard-hearted towards other poor people as we see here. He was also angry when He saw people exploiting the poor and making money in the temple in God's name. But He never became angry when people called Him a devil, or spat on His face, or crucified Him. So, anger is sinful when it is a reaction to what others do or say to us – as when Paul shouted at the high-priest for commanding someone to slap him (*Acts 23:3*). Anger is righteous when we see God's Name being dishonoured in the church.

With many Christians, however, it is exactly the opposite. They are angry when people harm them. But they are not angry when God's Name is dishonoured. There are so many preachers in India making money in the Name of Jesus from poor people. Are Christians angry with them? No. Why? Because they are *not* like Christ. Jesus says, “*Learn from Me and follow Me.*”

In 4:38, we read of Jesus sleeping on a *cushion* in the boat. A cushion speaks of comfort. It blesses my heart to read that Jesus did not sleep on the hard wooden floor of the boat but on a cushion. He was *not* an ascetic who would refuse to use a comfortable bed when it was freely available. Many Christians think that one is more spiritual if he sleeps on a hard floor. That is not spirituality – nor is it following Jesus.

In *Chapter 5*, we read about a demon-possessed man being delivered. The demons requested that they be permitted to enter some pigs and Jesus permitted them. This man must have had at least 2000 demons in him because they entered into 2000 pigs! When the people of that area saw this man totally delivered and sane, instead of being excited and saying, “Lord, this is wonderful. Come and minister in our land,” they urged Jesus to leave immediately (*verse 17*). That tells us something about their sense of values: They valued pigs more than human beings. Whereas Jesus taught that one soul was worth more than the whole world (*Mark 8:36*). Jesus respected their wishes and went away but told the saved man to be His witness in that land (*verse 19*).

In 6:3, we read that Jesus had four brothers – James, Joses, Judas and Simon. He had sisters also – which means at least two. So Mary had at least seven children. Since we don't hear of Joseph, it is most likely

that he had died by now. So, for many years of Jesus' life He had to work as a carpenter and support a family of eight members. God allowed His Son to go through that experience so that Jesus could be an example to parents who have to struggle through difficult circumstances to bring up a large family. He can sympathise with their struggles (*Hebrews 4:15*).

In 6:4, Jesus said, "*A prophet has honour everywhere except in his hometown and among his relatives in his household.*" That was true in the 1st century – and it is true in the 21st century too. A prophet is despised by his own relatives and generally not appreciated in his home-town. He is valued by the few godly people who know him and in other towns more than in his hometown. *Familiarity breeds contempt.* And so Jesus could not do many miracles in His hometown (6:5). If you don't value a man of God, his ministry won't bless you as much as it blesses others who value him. Because of the unbelief of the people in His hometown, Jesus could not do all that He wanted to do for them. We tie the hands of Jesus when we are unbelieving. Then He cannot do for us all that He wants to do.

Denouncing the Traditions of Men

In *Chapter 7*, Jesus denounced the Pharisees for valuing their traditions above God's Word. This is true of most religious Christians today as well. This was the great conflict that Jesus had with the people of His time: Jesus stood for God's Word while the Pharisees stood for the tradition of the elders. And this is the great conflict that we find in Christendom today as well. Most Christians value what their forefathers have believed and practiced for many years and do not bother to check whether God's Word teaches that or not. Jesus warned here of three steps downward if we hold on to religious traditions that are not found in the Word of God: First, it will lead to neglect of God's commandments (*verse 8*). Then, we will set aside God's commandments (*verse 9*). Finally, we will cancel out the Word of God altogether (*verse 13*). That is the danger. So check every religious tradition you hold with the word of God. If it is not according to God's Word, throw it away, no matter how many people tell you to keep it. It is religious traditions that breed legalists and Pharisees even today.

Consider our attitude when it comes to *earthly* matters. When we are sick, we *don't* go to the hospital that our great-grandfather went to – because there are better and more modern hospitals today. When it comes to education, we *don't* send our children to the school that our great-grandfather went to – because there are better schools today. But when it comes to *spiritual* matters, many so-called "believers" choose the church their ancestors went to! Why don't they look around and choose the best in *spiritual* matters too? Because, despite calling themselves "*born-again believers*", they are still earthly-minded and not spiritual. They want the best of all earthly things, but not spiritually. If they were as interested in their spiritual life as in their health and education, they

would have looked around for the most spiritual church and joined it – even if it was *not* the one their parents went to. But how many believers have the courage to do that? Perhaps one in a hundred. All the rest follow the traditions of their elders and ancestors, just like the Pharisees did in Jesus' time. And that is why they stagnate and miss the will of God for their lives. I want to challenge at least the young people in this generation to be bold and to break with all human traditions that are contrary to God's Word. Then only will you be able to follow Jesus *all the way*. I am not here to tell you which church you should join. I would only urge you to join the best group of disciples that you can find in your hometown – whatever its label may be.

That's what I would do. My loyalty is to Jesus Christ, and not even to the group of churches that the Lord has planted through us and given me responsibility for. I don't believe in denominations but in individual local churches as we read in *Revelation 1 to 3*. I tell the folks in our church that if they move to another town and find a more spiritual church than the church that is in fellowship with us, in that town, then they should join that other church and not the one linked to us. In every locality the quality of a church depends on the quality of its leadership.

In 7:10, 11, Jesus spoke of the importance of helping our parents when they are old. Some people in those days (and even now) think that the spiritual thing to do is to tell their parents, "*I am sorry. I am serving the Lord. I can't help you in any way.*" Jesus said that that amounted to cancelling out the word of God (*verse 13*). We must help our aged parents. You can't tell them, "I have given my money to God and have nothing left to help you with." Your service to God must include helping your parents. You don't have to obey your parents after you have left your home and you must not allow them to hinder you from serving the Lord. But you must help them financially and in other practical ways when they are in need. You must care for them.

Three Types of Christians

Jesus warned His disciples against three types of leaven. In *Matthew 16:11*, he warned against the leaven of the Pharisees and the leaven of the Sadducees. Here He warns them against the leaven of Herod as well. What are these three leavens?

The Pharisees were the *evangelicals* of Jesus' time, who had all their doctrines correct. (Jesus Himself gave them that certificate in *Matthew 23:3*). The Sadducees were the *liberals* of Jesus' time, who did not believe in miracles, angels, resurrection etc. The Herodians were followers of Herod and were thoroughly *worldly*. Herod could enjoy listening to a powerful message by John the Baptist and also enjoy a sensual dance by a scantily-clad Salome (*Mark 6:20, 22*). He was like the Christians who

can enjoy a good sermon or a time of praise and enjoy sensual scenes in a movie equally wholeheartedly!!

These three types of Christians exist today too: *Evangelicals, liberals and worldly Christians*. Note however, that the ones who opposed Jesus the most were not the Herodians, or the Sadducees, but the Pharisees. The evangelicals of His time were the biggest hypocrites; and that is true today as well. The biggest *hypocrites* today are not found among worldly and liberal Christians, but among evangelical, fundamental Christians. Many fundamentalists who are proud of having all their doctrines correct, don't realise how legalistic and hypocritical they are. They do not respond to the promptings of the Holy Spirit, and so they never become free from their legalism. The Lord is in conflict with such people even today – just as He was when He walked on earth 2000 years ago.

In 8:23–26, we find a very important teaching on healing. There Jesus prayed for a blind man and the man was not fully healed. Jesus asked him, "Do you see everything clearly?" He said, "No. I see men like trees walking." If Jesus were like some preachers today, He would have told him, "No. You must make a positive confession. Believe that you are fully healed and ignore the symptoms. Confess that you are healed and only then will you be healed". But Jesus didn't tell him to say that, because Jesus doesn't want anyone to tell a lie. What Jesus did was He prayed for him again and completed the work of healing. Why did Jesus heal him in this way? In every other case, He healed people with a single touch or word. Why was there a need for a second touch here? The Lord did this because He knew that in the 20th century, "*healers*" would go around teaching people that even when they are not healed they must confess that they are healed. Jesus did not teach us to tell lies under the pretext of positive confession. We are not to say that we can see clearly when we still see men like trees. Don't be confused by the false teaching about faith that is found in Christendom today. Faith is *not* positive confession. It is confessing what God has specifically promised to me. If we are not healed, let us be honest and say so – and seek God for healing..

In 8:33, we see Jesus rebuking Peter with the strongest words He ever used to anyone: "*Get behind Me, Satan.*" Why did He say that? Would Jesus ever have to say to any of us, "*Get behind Me, Satan?*" We are not better than Peter, are we? Peter had forsaken everything to follow Jesus. Yet he was deceived by Satan. Who is the one who is deceived by Satan? If we know the answer to that question, we can be protected from deception. What is the mark of a man who is influenced by Satan?

Here is the answer – in the same verse. "*Your mind is set on your own interests and not God's interests.*"

The Christian worker who will be deceived by Satan is the one whose mind is set on his own interests and not God's. You may be born again

and baptised in the Holy Spirit. But if your mind is set on your own interests and your own gain, Satan will deceive you thoroughly. His deception will make you imagine that you are serving God when you are not serving God – but only yourself. There were many people like that in Paul's time who sought their own. Timothy however was one who did not seek his own (*Philippians 2:19–21*). So the way to escape deception is to ensure that our mind is not set on our own interests, our own gain or our own profit – but on God's interests alone – all the time.

The Kingdom of God Coming With Power

In 9:1, Jesus said, “*I say to you that some of you standing here will not taste of death until they see the kingdom of God after it has come with power.*” This happened on the day of Pentecost – and some who were standing there when Jesus spoke those words, experienced it. The *power* of God came into 120 hearts on the day of Pentecost (*Acts 1:8*) when the Holy Spirit brought the *kingdom of God* to earth (*Romans 14:17*). Jesus defined the day of Pentecost here as the kingdom of God or the government of God coming to earth with power. That is what the church is supposed to be – a small pocket of the kingdom of God manifesting the power of God, in the midst of the kingdom of the devil.

In *Chapter 9*, we see three disciples with Jesus on the mount where Jesus was transfigured. When Peter saw Moses and Elijah, he was excited and said “Let's make three tabernacles here for Jesus, Moses and Elijah” (*verse 5*). Immediately a cloud covered all of them and God spoke from heaven saying, “*Don't put My Son on the same level as Moses and Elijah. This is My Son. Listen to Him.*” What is the message here for us? However much we are blessed by a man of God, we must never allow him to come between us and the Lord. Our vision of Jesus must always be clear. The moment a man comes between us and the Lord, a cloud will come in our relationship with Christ. Why is it that the vision of so many believers is so cloudy today? Because they are looking at a man of God and not at Jesus. They are listening to a man and not to Jesus. We must certainly respect men of God, but we must run the race “*looking at Jesus alone*” (*verse 8*).

In 9:20–29, we see how a father's faith brought deliverance to his son who was demon-possessed. The disciples asked Jesus why they couldn't cast out the demon. Jesus replied and said, “Because you did not have faith; and you did not have faith because you did not fast and pray.” (*Matthew 17:20, 21*). There are different degrees of strength in the demons and some demons can be cast out only if we are strong enough *in faith* through fasting and prayer. I can't explain that. I've never been able to explain the logic of prayer or of fasting. But I know it works. I simply believe what Jesus said and obey Him.

The Seriousness of Sin

In 9:43–48, Jesus said, “*If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life crippled, than, having your two hands, to go into hell, into the unquenchable fire.... If your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life lame, than, having your two feet, to be cast into hell.... If your eye causes you to stumble, throw it out; it is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye, than, having two eyes, to be cast into hell.*” Jesus spoke about Hell more than anyone else, because He alone had seen the reality of Hell. He said that Hell was a place where the fire and the worm never die. If anyone asks, “How can worms not die in a fire?”, my reply is, “I don’t want to find out. Those who go to Hell can find out for themselves.” Jesus warned those who sinned with their hands and their eyes that they could go to hell if they didn’t stop sinning. He knew the dangers sinful people faced more than anyone else did. Every true servant of God will preach about Hell, because Jesus did. We don’t have to understand everything about Hell. It is a reality and so we must warn people against it.

In 9:49, Jesus said, “Everybody must be salted with fire.” I understand that verse to mean that everyone must have one of two fires – either the fire of *heaven* or the fire of *hell*. You can have your choice. I’ve chosen the fire of heaven. John the Baptist said something similar when He prophesied that Jesus would baptise people with fire and also burn up the chaff in unquenchable fire (*Matthew 3:11, 12*).

In 10:17, we read of a rich, young ruler who wanted to follow Jesus. Jesus diagnosed his case as a serious lover of money and told him, “*You must first give away all your money to the poor.*” Jesus didn’t say such words to everyone. Zaccheus gave away only half his money to the poor and Jesus accepted that (*Luke 19*). Mary and Martha had a house and Jesus never told them to sell their house (*John 12*). Why this difference? Because the love of money is like a cancer. In some people, the cancer has spread so widely that a whole bodily organ has to be removed. In others, chemotherapy can remove the cancer. In Zaccheus the cancer had not spread as much as in this rich ruler. And in Mary and Martha the cancer was minimal. The Lord doesn’t tell everyone to give away all their money – but only where He sees that the cancer is deeply-rooted. Then Jesus told His disciples, “It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter God’s kingdom” (10:25). The kingdom of heaven and the kingdom of earth are poles apart. We cannot choose both. We have to choose one. Jesus went on to say that only God could save a man from the love of money (10:27).

Faith

In 11:22–24, Jesus taught about faith. When we see a mountain in our way, that is not necessarily an indication that we should turn back.

It could be a challenge to our faith. God may want us to remove that mountain and move forward to do His will (*verse 23*).

There are two amazing statements in Mark's gospel. When put together, the truth is staggering:

"All things are possible **with God**" (*Mark 10:27*).

"All things are possible **to him who believes**" (*Mark 9:23*).

All believers believe the first of these two statements. But it is faith in the second statement that brings the power of God into our life and ministry. We have all got to confess that we lack faith tremendously. It is faith that we need to seek for, because "*without faith it is impossible to please God*" (*Hebrews 11:6*). Faith can make all the difference in our life and ministry.

Jesus then mentioned one of the greatest hindrances to faith – an unforgiving spirit (*11:25, 26*). If there is even one human being anywhere on the face of the earth whom we have not forgiven, that will rob us of faith and even our salvation.

In *12:17*, Jesus taught that we must clear our debts to man before we can give anything to God: "(First) Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and (**then**) to God the things that are God's." God doesn't want us to give Him Caesar's money or anyone else's money. We must clear our debts to man first.

In *12:42–44*, we read of a widow who put two copper coins into the offering-box. Jesus was sitting near the treasury watching how people were giving money (*12:41*). He was not watching how much they put in, but **how** they put in. In the old covenant the important question was how much. Ten percent. In the new covenant, however, it is **how** we give that matters. Do we give cheerfully and sacrificially as this widow did? That is what the Lord looks for.

In *14:34–36*, Jesus tells Peter, James and John in Gethsemane, "*My soul is deeply grieved to the point of death*". He then fell down to the ground and prayed saying, "*Abba! Father! All things are possible for You; remove this cup from Me; yet not what I will, but what You will.*" What was the cup that Jesus shrank from? It was not physical death, for He was braver than any Christian martyr. What Jesus dreaded was the break of fellowship with His Father that would take place when He took the punishment for our sins on the cross. He had had unbroken fellowship with His Father from all eternity. But now for three hours that fellowship would be broken on the cross. In His human weakness, He asked His Father if there wasn't any other way. He prayed for perhaps three hours, sweating great drops of blood, for His agony was so great. He could have gone back to heaven from Gethsemane, for He had never sinned. But His love for you and me prevented Him from doing that. And so He went to the cross.

Then we read in 15:33, 34 that He faced the wrath of God for our sin – being forsaken by His Father and enduring the pains of an *eternity* in hell concentrated into *three hours*. This was the only time He ever addressed His Father as God – because He was now hanging before the Judge of the universe. And then the work was finished – and His last cry was His committing Himself again to His Father with whom fellowship had been restored (15:37). And the veil of the temple was torn indicating that the way was now open for us to enter into the Father’s presence too (15:38). Hallelujah for such a Saviour!

In 16:7, we see the angel sending a message from the Lord to “*His disciples and Peter...*”. Why does he say “*and Peter*”? Wasn’t Peter also one of Jesus’ disciples? This is very precious. Peter would never have believed that any message sent to Jesus’ disciples could possibly include him, because he was certain that because he had denied the Lord, he was permanently disqualified from being an apostle. That was why the Lord very tenderly included that phrase “*and Peter...*” – to assure him that the invitation to meet with the Lord was for him too. And that is how the Lord speaks today also to those who have failed Him. He calls you especially to come to Him. The invitation is for you as well.

In 16:14 we see Jesus again reproving His disciples “*for their unbelief and hardness of heart*”. Seven times in the gospel records we see Jesus rebuking His disciples for their unbelief. He reproved them for unbelief more than for anything else. What he longed to see in them was faith. And that is what He longs to see in us too.

In 16:15–18, we see the Lord commanding His disciples to go into all the world and preach the gospel to every human being. We have already seen the commission He gave them in *Matthew 28* to make disciples in every nation. These two commissions are like two sides of one coin. Here the emphasis is on evangelism and the Lord promises to confirm the word of the evangelist with supernatural miracles. And He is doing that even today wherever the gospel is being preached for the first time (as in *Acts*). In *Matthew 28*, the emphasis was on making disciples and teaching them to keep all His commandments. That refers to building the church as the Body of Christ. The great tragedy today is that Christians have separated what God has joined together – these two commissions. Evangelism without disciple-making is a one-sided coin – and therefore a counterfeit coin.

God intended evangelists to bring their converts into local churches where they could be made into disciples. That is why the *evangelist* must work along with the *apostle, prophet, teacher* and *shepherd* to build the Body of Christ (*Ephesians 4:11*). That is how they worked together in the first century. But unfortunately, it is rare to see that type of cooperation in today’s Christendom. And that is why the Christian church has so many shallow converts today.

The evangelist is like a person who goes to the quarry and cuts out stones and brings them to the building site. The other four ministries are to then build these stones into a holy temple for the Lord to dwell in. Which of these ministries is more important? All five are required. No-one can do it all by himself. The evangelist's ministry is a difficult and dangerous one – and so you should not enter into this ministry unless God has called you for it. But you should not criticise the masons who are building those stones into a building, imagining that they are having an easier work than you. If they also join you in the quarry, the temple of the Lord will never be built. Each of us must fulfil the task God has assigned to us. If all the emphasis is given to evangelism, we will have piles of stones everywhere without any temple, without any living expression of Christ's Body. So let us ask the Lord to help us to fulfil our specific calling in relation to these two great commissions. Amen.

LUKE

JESUS CHRIST – THE SPIRIT-FILLED MAN

Luke's burden is to give us, as far as possible, an accurate record of everything right from the time of Jesus coming into Mary's womb all the way to His resurrection, and to some extent what followed after His resurrection (1:3).

Luke was the only writer in the New Testament who was not a Jew. He wrote the *Gospel of Luke* and the *Acts of the Apostles*. The other 25 books of the New Testament were all written by Jews. (In the Old Testament, except for the book of *Job*, all the other 38 books were written by Jews). Luke was a Greek who wrote these two books to Theophilus who was also a Greek. It was a Greek man writing to a Greek man trying to show how Jesus came to earth as a Man and how He lived and fulfilled God's purposes.

The Ministry of the Holy Spirit

Luke speaks much about the ministry of the Holy Spirit in the two books that he wrote. In fact, this is one of his major emphases. Look at these examples in this gospel: John the Baptist would be *filled with the Holy Spirit* from the womb (1:15). Mary would have the *Holy Spirit come upon her* (1:35). Elizabeth and Zachariah were *filled with the Holy Spirit* (1:41, 67). Simeon had the *Holy Spirit upon him*, he got *revelation from the Holy Spirit* and was *led by the Spirit* to the temple (2:25–27). Jesus *baptises in the Holy Spirit* (3:16). Jesus was praying when He was baptised (obviously for the anointing of the Holy Spirit) and the *Spirit came upon Him* immediately (3:21, 22). Jesus was *full of the Spirit* and *led by the Spirit* into the wilderness and returned in the *power of the Spirit* (4:1, 14). Jesus proclaims that the *Holy Spirit was upon Him* (4:18). The *Holy Spirit is given to those who ask for Him* (11:13). Jesus commands His disciples to *wait for the power of the Holy Spirit* (24:49).

In the *Acts of the Apostles*, Luke mentions the Holy Spirit *more than 50 times*. Luke was undoubtedly a Spirit-filled man and was excited about this new-covenant life that was made possible through the gift of the Holy Spirit. I wonder how many Christians are as excited as he was.

The baptism in the Holy Spirit is mentioned at the beginning of each of the first five books of the New Testament. This teaches us the tremendous importance of the ministry of the Holy Spirit in this new covenant age. So, if there is one thing that the devil will seek to counterfeit, it will be the baptism in the Holy Spirit; and we see plenty of those counterfeits today.

How does the devil ensure that believers will never get baptised in the Holy Spirit?

First of all, by giving some of them a physical or emotional experience. They lack the power to overcome sin and to serve the Lord. But Satan assures them that they have been baptised in the Holy Spirit. Such believers will never again seek for the baptism in the Holy Spirit, because they are convinced that they have already received it. There are millions of Christians like this everywhere. They are defeated by sin, they love money and they live for the world. But they speak some gibberish which they call “tongues” and claim to be getting unusual physical and visual experiences.

Secondly, Satan gets some other believers (who are at the opposite pole doctrinally on the baptism of the Spirit) to react against these obvious counterfeits and to stay away from the baptism of the Spirit altogether. Thus he succeeds in ensuring that both groups of believers (and that constitutes the vast majority of believers) never receive the genuine power of God and the baptism in the Holy Spirit.

Be careful and avoid both these groups.

How was John filled with the Holy Spirit from his mother’s womb? Did he tarry for the Spirit in his mother’s womb as a foetus? Did somebody exhort him inside the womb to pray? No. God filled him. It is God’s work to fill you with the Holy Spirit. If we submit to Him, He will fill us. Here is something that will stimulate your faith: *If God can fill a helpless foetus in a mother’s womb with the Holy Spirit, why can’t He fill you?*

Don’t be satisfied with any cheap counterfeit. I told the Lord when I was a young man that I would never be satisfied with a counterfeit and would be willing to wait ten years if necessary to get the genuine experience. It was worth waiting. When you are genuinely baptised in the Spirit, it will change your whole way of life.

When John was filled with the Holy Spirit, he became great in the sight of the Lord (1:15). This is what the Spirit wants to make us too – great in God’s sight, not man’s.

In 1:34, 35, we read that when Gabriel came to Mary, she quite naturally asked him, "How can this be? I am a virgin. How can a virgin have a baby?" The angel replied, "*The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you.*" The Holy Spirit always brings the power of God to us (See Acts 1:8 and 10:38).

As the Spirit of God came on Mary to produce Jesus in her, so the Spirit comes upon us primarily to produce Christ in us. That is the clearest guideline you can have to understand the ministry of the Holy Spirit in our life and in our service for the Lord. As it took time for that body to grow inside Mary's womb, it will take time for Christ to become manifest in our lives too.

In 1:37, we see a lovely promise, "*Nothing will be impossible with God.*" ("*No word that God speaks will be without power.*") If God has spoken a word, you can be sure that there is power in it. When God said, "*Let there be light*", something happened. We see that throughout *Genesis 1*. No word from God is powerless. This is why it is important that we study God's Word and claim its promises. Here is a powerful promise: "*Sin shall not rule over you*" (*Romans 6:14*). That will become true in your life, if you believe it, for no word from God can be powerless.

God wants us to believe that everything is possible for Him. That was why He stated this at the beginning of both the Old and New Testaments (See *Genesis 18:14* and *Luke 1:37*). When we begin our Christian life our faith in the Bible as God's Word may be *blind* faith. But it should not remain as blind faith. If we claim the promises of Scripture, we can prove in our life that nothing is impossible with God. Then our faith that the Bible is God's Word will become a *proven* faith, for we would have tasted and experienced that no word of God is powerless.

Jesus never questioned the Old Testament. He was not bothered by what all the critics and theologians said. He believed it and He experienced its power. Today, the devil is leading so many people astray from such simple faith. Instead of believing God's Word and thus experiencing power, they go use their cleverness, and try to analyse Scripture and waste their entire lives without once experiencing the power of God. How do you want to live? Do you want to live analysing Scripture or experiencing the power of God through it? The choice is yours.

Mary submitted to God's Word and said, "*Let it be done to me according to Your word.*" (1:38). I am a great admirer of Mary (even though I am not a Roman Catholic) because she was such a godly young woman. God looked all over Israel to find one young woman who was really godly; and He found Mary, who was probably only about 18 years old at that time. Read *Luke 1:46–55* and see how mature she is and how steeped in Scripture her song is. It is amazing how mature one can become even by the age of 18, if a person is God-fearing. God doesn't make any mistakes in the persons

He chooses. Mary knew that everyone in Nazareth would spread scandalous stories about her when they knew she was pregnant. No-one would believe that this was the work of the Holy Spirit. And she was willing to suffer that reproach – to bring forth the body of Jesus from her body.

Now apply that to your life. Do you want to build the body of Christ in your town? Do you want honour for that or are you willing to suffer “*the reproach of Christ*”. God does not support those who seek for honour in His work. Such people will only build a congregation, not the body of Christ. Building the body of Christ will always bring reproach, misunderstanding, wagging tongues and gossip – as Mary faced in Nazareth. But all that didn’t bother her. She still brought forth the body of Christ. And so it is even today. The body of Christ will come forth where people are willing to “*go outside the religious camp of denominational Christendom and bear His reproach*”.

Luke

The Remnant in the First Century

Notice here that Zacharias and Mary asked the angel almost the same question: “*How can this be?*” (1:18, 34). Why then was Zacharias struck dumb as a punishment and not Mary? Because of two reasons. First of all, Zacharias had an example before him of an older couple who had a child – Abraham and Sarah. So there was no excuse for his unbelief. Mary, however, did not have any example before her of a virgin conceiving and giving birth to a child. Secondly, Zacharias was a leader who had studied the Scriptures for many years. Mary was a young girl. To whom more is given, from them more will be required. If you are an older person and a leader, God will expect more from you than from a young person. If you have even one example in front of you and you have not followed him, you will be more guilty than someone else who has no example to follow. The people under the law had no example to follow. But today we have an example in Jesus. So more will be required from us.

In 1:74, we read Zacharias prophesying saying, “*Now the Lord has come to grant that we will be delivered from the hand of our enemies and serve Him without fear.*” Those enemies are our sins which enslaved us. Now Jesus has come to deliver us from all of them. The Holy Spirit has come to deliver us from all our enemies and to enable us to serve God *without any fear*. Throughout the 1500 years of the old covenant, Israel served God out of fear – a fear that if they didn’t obey God, He would punish them with sickness, madness, poverty, etc. (*Deuteronomy 28:15–68*). Zacharias prophesied that a new age was dawning where people would serve God out of love and not out of fear. Have you entered into that life? Do you serve God out of love alone?

God announced the birth of His Son to only four groups of people who came to see the baby Jesus – some poor shepherds, some wise men from Persia, an old Spirit-filled man (Simeon) and an old praying woman (Anna). These were all very different types of people, of different ages and from

different countries – but they were all humble, God-fearing people. And they are a picture of the remnant that God is preparing all over the world today for the second coming of His Son. The great Bible-scholars and the proud preachers of today remain ignorant of the times in which we live, just like Annas, Caiaphas and the scribes and Pharisees, 2000 years ago.

It is interesting to note that out of these four groups of people, three of them are significant for their activity *at night*. The shepherds were watching their flocks *at night*. The wise men travelled *at night* watching the star. (They could not travel during the day, because the stars are visible only at night). Anna was fasting and praying at night. Those who are a part of the remnant today are also people who seek God in the night seasons. When others are sleeping, they are seeking God. God reveals things to them that He never reveals to lazy Christians who are looking only for a comfortable life on earth.

If you want to be a part of God's powerful remnant who have understanding of the times in which they live, who get revelation from heaven, then seek God wholeheartedly, study His word, and break with human traditions. The Lord will then show you (like He showed Simeon) things that others never see. You may be a non-Christian. God will give you revelation too just like He gave to those wise men. Jesus revealed Himself to Sadhu Sundar Singh in a vision, because he sought God earnestly as a 14-year-old boy. He was like one of those wise men from the east who had no knowledge of Christ or the Scriptures, but who sought God and found Him. God is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him even today.

The Birth and Baptism of Jesus

We read in 2:7 that Jesus was born in Bethlehem. This was prophesied in the Old Testament. And so when the time for His birth came, God made Caesar, in Rome, to pass an order that everyone in Israel should go to their hometown for a census. So Joseph and Mary went to Bethlehem. This was no doubt inconvenient for them, for they had to travel the 100 kilometres from Nazareth to Bethlehem on a donkey. By the time they arrived in Bethlehem there was no room in any of the inns there.

Would it have been difficult for almighty God (who had all eternity to plan the birth of Jesus) to keep a room empty for them when they arrived in Bethlehem? Not at all. He who runs the universe could easily have arranged that. But He wanted His Son to be born in a cowshed and to be laid as a baby in a manger (the little trough that cows eat from). God might even have delayed them on their journey so that by the time they reached Bethlehem, all the rooms in the hotels were full. God's delays are all part of His plan – Jesus had to be born in a cowshed.

Think of the shame of being born in a cowshed. I have never met a human being who was born in a cowshed. But Jesus had come to serve all humanity. And so He had to go *underneath* all men – so that no-one would ever feel that he was too low for Jesus to lift him up.

We must understand a principle here – because this is how we are to serve the Lord too. *He who goes to serve others in Jesus' Name must go below them if he is to serve them effectively.*

But many of today's famous preachers are quite different. They seek to live at a higher standard than others and collect money from people to do so. To meet them, one has to go through their secretaries first. Did Jesus have a secretary through whom you had to go, if you wanted to meet Him? No. Jesus was a servant of all men – and servants don't have secretaries. It is kings who have secretaries. Jesus was accessible to all people at all times. You could go to Him directly any time you wanted. Nicodemus could go and see Him at night.

If you want to serve God, make Jesus your example – and don't follow the examples of the preachers of today. Go below everyone and remain there. Jesus started there at birth and that is where He was at the end of His life too – washing the feet of His disciples, as a servant. He was born in a dirty cowshed and died on a shameful cross. May the Lord help us to go the way our Saviour went, all our life. No matter how much God uses you, remain a servant, ever ready to wash the feet of others, till the end of your life.

I am certain that Mary did not complain about the difficult circumstances she found herself in, in that cowshed. Imagine if Mary had been like some of the spoilt teenagers today. She would have been yelling at Joseph saying, "I told you we should have started our journey two days earlier. Here we are now without any room available. I have no privacy at all – and I have to deliver my baby in this cowshed with all this filth around me. What an irresponsible husband you are," etc. Can you imagine Jesus being born into an atmosphere of complaining and grumbling like that? God would not have permitted that. So He needed a girl who would *not* complain. That was why He chose Mary to be the mother of Jesus – one who had learnt in her youth to be content with poverty and difficult circumstances. And that was why God could not choose any of the other girls in Israel.

In 2:34, 35, we read Simeon's prophecy: "*This Child is appointed for the fall and rise of many people in Israel and for a sign to be opposed. A sword will pierce your own soul to the end that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed.*" He was revealing the type of ministry that Jesus would have. That is important for us to see also, because the church has to have a similar ministry. The church is called the body of Christ, because it is to continue the ministry that Jesus began in His earthly days. As He was a servant of all men, we too are called to be servants of all. Church-leaders must be the greatest examples of servanthood on earth. Simeon said that Jesus would be *a sign that would be opposed*. If you are a leader in the body of Christ today, you too will be opposed as Jesus was. And it is religious people like Pharisees who will oppose you. But, as they oppose you, the thoughts of their hearts will be revealed (*verse 35*). Those Pharisees

will discover what a lot of jealousy there is in them, when they see Jesus' ministry. When God blesses a man's ministry today, many others will see what a lot of jealousy there is in their hearts.

In 2:47–52, we read of the time when Jesus went to Jerusalem, and Joseph and Mary left Him behind in the temple. At the age of 12, Jesus knew the Scriptures better than all the scholars in Israel. They were amazed at His explanations of the Scripture. Jesus did not have a Bible at home. There were no printed Bibles in those days and it was very expensive to have a handwritten scroll of the Old Testament. No-one had one at home. How then did Jesus know the Scriptures by the age of 12? He listened carefully when it was read in the synagogue and in the school.

Today, we have the printed Bible in our homes – and many of us have many versions of it too. Yet, most Christians today know so little of the Bible. You can't build the body of Christ if you don't study God's Word. Even Jesus had to study the Scriptures from childhood in order to serve His Father.

If you are too lazy to study the Scriptures, I am sure that God will never use you. But if you are diligent to study the Scriptures and seek to be filled with the Spirit, God will use you mightily. So from your earliest days when you are converted get into the habit of meditating on God's Word. Thus you will know God's mind and God's ways. People study so diligently to pass earthly examinations! They also work diligently to promote their business! If Christians had even 5% of that diligence to study the Word of God, their lives would have been so effective for God. Don't study the Bible as a text book in an academic way. Seek to know God through His Word.

In 2:49, we see something else in Jesus which is as an example for us. He had a great burden and passion for "*the Father's business*" (KJV). Many preachers study God's Word to gain honour as preachers, and not to do the Father's business. We must know God through His Word and we must have a passion for His work. Otherwise, we will waste our life on earth. We were sent to earth to do a work for God. It doesn't matter if we have to live in a hut or a palace. It doesn't matter whether we get martyred for Christ's sake or whether we die a natural death. We *must* complete our Father's business before we leave this earth.

In 3:1, 2, we read of the ministry of John the Baptist. It is interesting to read what is written here; Tiberius Caesar was the greatest man in the world at that time. Pontius Pilate was the greatest man in Judea. Herod was the greatest man in Galilee. Philip was the greatest man in Ituraea and Trachonitis. Lysanias was the greatest man in Abilene. Annas and Caiaphas were the greatest men in religious Israel. But the word from God bypassed all of them and came to an unknown man in the wilderness called John the Baptist.

It is the same today. The word from God will bypass all the great men of the world and all the great theologians in Christendom and will come to you, if you will be like John the Baptist – longing to decrease so that Christ might increase (*John 3:30*), willing to be an unknown voice in the wilderness (*3:4*). John the Baptist was not in a hurry to preach. He waited until God's time came. "*He was in the desert until the day of his public appearance*" (*Luke 1:80*). One day God said, "All right, John. I've taught you enough. Go and preach now." And he went forth and preached. He never did a single miracle (*John 10:41*). Yet all Judea went out to the wilderness to hear him, because God was with him (*Matthew 3:5*). People will come from everywhere to hear a man who knows God and who speaks His mind.

In *3:8–13*, we see that John the Baptist's ministry was fiery and very practical. He did not baptise everybody who came to him. He had discernment, and when he discerned that some like the Pharisees had not really repented, he refused to baptise them. He kept the standards high in his preaching, because he was not interested in numbers but in *quality*. He was not enslaved to any mission board by having to send reports to them. He gave some "down-to-earth" practical advice to all who asked – whether tax collectors or soldiers. "Don't exploit people", he told them. His preaching was not theoretical, analysing Old Testament verses. It was practical. The teaching of Jesus and the apostles too was always practical. Many preachers have been taught in Bible-schools that the best preaching is *expository* – explaining the whole Bible verse by verse. But we never see Jesus or any of the apostles, prophets or teachers in the Bible doing that. They always preached *topically* with occasional explanations of some Old Testament verse. Let me encourage you to follow the example of Jesus and the apostles in your teaching – and not the opinions of today's Bible-scholars.

In *3:21, 22*, we read about the baptism of Jesus and how the Holy Spirit came upon Him. If John the Baptist was filled with the Holy Spirit from his mother's womb, Jesus was too. He overcame temptation for 30 years through the Spirit's power. Yet we read here that the Holy Spirit came *upon Him* when He was 30 years old and anointed Him for His ministry (*See Acts 10:38*). Many argue saying that since we are born of the Spirit, there is no need of any second experience of the Spirit. But Jesus was born of the Spirit too in Mary's womb. He had the Holy Spirit in Him for 30 years. Yet He needed to be anointed with the Holy Spirit before He began His ministry.

The Holy Spirit is God, and so we cannot fully explain His work in us, by using theological terms. To try and explain the ministry of the Holy Spirit *fully* would be as foolish as one dog trying to explain human behaviour to another dog!! All that a dog may be able to say to another is this: "I don't know anything about human psychology. But I do know that my master is very kind to me. He takes good care of me – and I am very happy."

That dog can *experience* his master's goodness, but he cannot *explain* his master's psychology. So it is with us and the Holy Spirit. We cannot *explain* His activity *fully*. But we can *experience* His love, His goodness and His power – and that is enough. The distance between God (the Creator) and man is far greater than the distance between two created beings – man and a dog. So it is *impossible* for us to be able to explain *all* of the Spirit's workings.

We read that Jesus was praying when He was being baptised (3:21). What for? Obviously, to be anointed with the Holy Spirit. We know that, because His prayers were always answered immediately – and we see the Holy Spirit coming upon Him as soon as He came up out of the water. So we see that even Jesus received the anointing only in answer to prayer. This is the way for us too. If we acknowledge that we do *not* have God's power (Acts 1:8) and that rivers of living water are *not* flowing out through us (John 7:38) and seek God in prayer, He will fill us also with His Spirit (Luke 11:13) – and then we too will be able to accomplish a mighty ministry for God on earth.

In 3:28–33, we have the genealogy of *Mary*. In *verse 23*, it says that Jesus was *supposedly*, “the son of Joseph, the son of Eli”. The word ‘son’ in italics indicates that the word is not in the original Greek. We know from *Matthew 1:7, 16* that Joseph's father's name was Jacob, *not* Eli. Eli was obviously his father-in-law – Mary's father. Further proof of this is seen in the fact that the genealogy in *Luke* traces the line from David's son *Nathan* (3:31) and not from his son *Solomon* (see *Matthew 1:7*). Luke's genealogy goes all the way to Adam because Luke is writing to non-Jews.

In 4:1–14 we read that *after* Jesus was tempted (see *Matthew 4:1–10*), He came in the *power* of the Spirit and preached. Overcoming temptation equips us to preach God's Word with power. In the synagogue, Jesus read *Isaiah 61* and said that the prophecy was now fulfilled.

The Spirit of God anointed Him to bless *others* – to preach the gospel to *others*, to release *others* from prison, to open the eyes of *others*, and to set *others* free. Every result of the anointing was for others.

The *fruit* of the Spirit is for *ourselves* – love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faithfulness, meekness and self-control. But the *gifts* of the Spirit are *all* for *others*. If God gives you the gift of preaching or healing, it is to bless others with – and not for you to make money or get honour for yourself. Even the gift of tongues is meant to enable you to be constantly fresh so that you can bless *others*. If you use a gift of the Spirit for yourself, you will only build Babylon with it. Remember that always.

Miracles and Teaching

In 5:1–11 we read of a miraculous catch of fish. Jesus told Simon to go out into the sea and cast his nets for a catch. Simon had already tried all of the previous night and caught nothing. But He decided – without

much faith – to obey the Lord. And he caught the biggest catch of fish he had ever got in his whole life. When the Lord tells us to do something, we may say, “Lord, I’ve tried that so many times. But it didn’t work.” But the Lord says, “But do it now because I tell you to do it.” You will be surprised at the results you see. It is best to go to places the Lord tells you to go to and not elsewhere. If you go where you like, you will not see *eternal* fruit. But if you go led by the Lord, you will see fruit *that lasts forever*. So let God tell you where to go – and when.

In 5:15, 16, we read that large crowds came to hear Jesus and to be healed of their sicknesses. (When studying the Scriptures, it is good at times, to place ourselves in that situation and consider what we would have done there). If you had seen such results in your ministry, what would you be in danger of? Pride. Jesus was tempted like us. What did he do? “*He would often slip away into the wilderness to pray*” (5:16). While other people were sitting around and talking, He would slip away to get alone with His Father and to pray. Develop that habit in your life. Get alone with God. It’s good to be with people. But you need to have plenty of times when you are alone with God. The more your ministry spreads, the more you need time to get alone with God. This was something He would often do, not just once in a while.

In 5:27–29, we read of Matthew (Levi) being called by Jesus and arranging a big feast for the Lord. If you compare this with what Matthew himself wrote about this feast in his gospel, you will see that he doesn’t say a word about the fact that it was he who arranged this great feast (*Matthew 9:9, 10*). If you do something good, let other people report on it, and not you yourself.

In 6:12, 13, we see how Jesus called His disciples. He prayed all night – because He wanted to be clear in His mind as to whom to choose. Even a sinless Jesus needed to pray to know the Father’s will. Let me also point out here that Judas Iscariot was *not* a crook when Jesus chose him. It says in 6:16 that Judas Iscariot “*became a traitor*.” He was not a traitor when he was chosen. He **became** a traitor later. When he was selected, he was as wholehearted and sincere as Peter, James and John. Jesus chose a wholehearted sincere man who later became crooked and went to hell.

In 6:20–49, we have the sermon on the mount in condensed form. Those who are serving the Lord in difficult situations where they are persecuted, misunderstood, criticised, harassed, humiliated, insulted and physically assaulted can remember these words of our Lord and be comforted: “*Blessed are you when men hate you, and ostracize you, and insult you, and scorn your name as evil, for the sake of the Son of Man. Be glad in that day and leap for joy, for behold, your reward is great in heaven. For in the same way their fathers used to treat the prophets*

relatives, other Christians, non-Christians, your neighbours or anyone. If they reject you because you are a disciple of Jesus, and proclaim the whole counsel of God, you are so blessed that Jesus said that you should jump for joy. That is the time to "*dance in the Spirit*". Why is it then that many Christians seek for popularity and honour? Jesus your Bridegroom was hated, insulted and ostracised. Why is His bride not willing to stand with her Bridegroom?

If, on the other hand, all the people praise you and say nice things about you, that probably proves that you are a false prophet – because false prophets in the Old Testament were always honoured and praised. False prophets are always praised and honoured, and true prophets are always criticised and rejected – in every century.

How should we treat these people? 6:27 says, "Love them and do good to them. Pray for them". I pray for my persecutors like this: "Lord, please give me an opportunity to serve them and to do good to them, so that they will know that for all the evil they have done to me, I love them in return with the love of God. I am even willing to help them financially if they are in need. I want to show them that my kingdom is not of this world." We belong to a kingdom which is full of love. There is not an atom of hatred there and so we can bless all who curse us (6:28).

You cannot live this life if you are not filled with the Holy Spirit. When people mistreat you, it is not enough if you just forgive them. That's good. But you have to pray for them too. We refuse to fight with the one who slaps us on the cheek. If they take away our coat, we say that they can have our shirt too. This is a completely different way of life from the way of this world where everybody is seeking to push others down and get up higher. If you want to build the body of Christ, you must teach these words to the people in your church.

Jesus went on to say that if we did good only to those who did good to us, we won't get any marks for that (*verse 33*). If we give gifts to someone who gave us gifts, we get 0% from God for that. But if we do *good* to someone who did harm to us, then we get 100% from God.

In 6:31, Jesus said that we must treat others in the same way as we want to be treated ourselves. Do you want others to speak evil about you behind your back? No. Then don't speak evil about others behind their back. Do you want people to forgive you when you have made a blunder? Yes. Then forgive others when they commit blunders. It is as simple as that.

In 6:36, Jesus said that in one area we must be as perfect as our heavenly Father is – in the area of mercy. Compare this with *Matthew 5:48*: "*Be perfect as your Father in heaven is perfect*". We cannot be as holy, as loving, as wise or as powerful as God. But we can all be as perfect as He is, in forgiving others. That means that if we have ten enemies, we forgive all ten. "*Be merciful as your Heavenly Father is merciful*."

Don't judge others (6:38). Leave it to God to judge them. He doesn't need your help to do that.

Don't be tightfisted but give generously to the needy (6:38) – and God will give generously to you. A rich businessman who reportedly used to give 90% of his income to the Lord, once said, "I shovel out the money, and God shovels it back to me – but God has a bigger shovel!"

In 6:40, Jesus assured us that if we allow Him (our Teacher) to train us fully, one day we will be like Him. Praise God for such a wonderful promise. Let us then allow Him to train us through the difficulties and trials He takes us through.

Luke

Women Who were Blessed

In 7:13, we see again how Jesus was moved with compassion whenever he saw human suffering. When the Lord saw this widow in Nain having just lost her only son, He was moved with compassion for her. We read in the gospels that it was compassion that moved Jesus to heal the sick, feed the multitudes and even teach the Scriptures. Every ministry in the church must flow out of the compassion of Jesus filling our hearts. Think much about the people around you who are suffering, deceived, and led astray by the devil. Allow God to move your heart with compassion for them and then, from that compassion, go out and serve, preach, teach and pray for them.

In 7:36, we read of a Pharisee who invited Jesus for a meal. Jesus wasn't so proud that He wouldn't go to the house of Pharisees. He'd go anywhere where He could bless people. He didn't go only to the houses of sinners. He went to the houses of Pharisees as well. A converted prostitute came there and anointed His feet with an expensive vial of perfume as an expression of her gratitude for her sins being forgiven and for being saved. She had no doubt bought that perfume from her earnings as a prostitute. There was an express command in *Deuteronomy 23:18* that the wages of a prostitute must never be offered to God. Didn't Jesus know that Scripture? He certainly did. But He was not a legalist like his host. His host, Simon the Pharisee thought, "If this Man were a prophet He would know who is touching Him." Jesus then told the parable of a man who had forgiven two people – one of 500 denarii and the other 50 denarii. Both could not repay and he forgave them both. Who would love him more? Simon said, "Naturally, the one who was forgiven more." Jesus then pointed out that it was because Simon thought he did not have many sins to be forgiven that he did not love the Lord as much as this converted prostitute who knew that she was a great sinner who had been forgiven much. Our love for the Lord depends on how much we realise we have been forgiven.

Many Christians have a false humility that makes them say, "I am the greatest of sinners." If you really believe that about yourself, then you

should be loving the Lord more than anyone else. He who is forgiven much should love much. But many who claim to be the chief of sinners are often in the pursuit of more money and not living for the Lord. They are then just using pious language to get a reputation for humility! Don't ever say you are "the chief of sinners" unless, like Paul, you are willing to forsake everything for Christ's sake. If you have been forgiven much, you will love much. If you have given up only little for the Lord, it proves that you believe that you have been forgiven only very little.

In 8:1–3, we read that it was certain rich women who were the chief financial supporters of Jesus' team and of His ministry. Jesus was not against rich people. He was only against the proud. But rich or poor, if they were humble, they could be His disciples and support Him financially. Up to the age of 30, Jesus was a carpenter supporting Himself. Thereafter as a full-time worker, He was supported by the voluntary gifts of some of His disciples. He never made known His needs to anyone and He never asked anybody for anything. And He never promised His disciples a salary. His Father provided all their needs by moving people to give. Here we see that rich people can also have a ministry – of supporting God's work financially.

The Lord talked about being a light in 8:16–18. When you put a lamp in your room you don't cover it with a bucket or put it under a bed. You always place it where all can see it. This is how we are to let our light shine for the Lord too. I have seen in banks and government offices in India, how non-Christians hang pictures of their gods near their tables. But I have almost never seen a Christian officer hanging up a Bible verse. Most Christians are ashamed. Some are afraid that their promotion prospects will suffer thereby – and so they hide their light. What a tragedy! Jesus was not ashamed to hang openly on a cross for us. Let us never be ashamed to confess Him boldly. When I was working in the Navy, I could not witness openly. But I would keep a Bible on my table and some tracts. Those who wanted a tract could take one. There are many ways of letting our light shine. It is more important to confess Christ outside a church building than inside it. Our light must shine brightly where there are no other lights.

In 8:43, 44, we read of a woman who touched the hem of Jesus' garment. Many were crowding around Jesus at that time but only she got healed. In church meetings too, many crowd around Jesus. But only those who have faith – one here and one there – touch the Lord. At every meeting, we should seek to be like that woman, reaching out and touching the Lord in faith.

Enlarged Hearts to Bless Others

In 9:16, we read about the feeding of the 5000. God wants to use each of us to be a blessing to others in this way. The first step is to *surrender all*

that we have to the Lord. That little boy had 5 loaves and 2 fish and he gave all to the Lord. He didn't keep anything back for himself. Jesus then *blessed* the loaves and fish. That is the second step – God has to put His blessing on what we give to Him. He has to pour out His Spirit on us. But the multitude is still not fed. The third step is to allow the Lord to break us. Jesus broke those loaves. And he breaks us too - through people and through situations. Then He fed the multitude. I have seen many Spirit-filled believers who do not fulfil God's purpose for their lives – because they have not allowed the Lord to take them through this last step of being broken. They have surrendered everything to the Lord and been anointed by the Spirit. But they are self-confident and unbroken. They may have large numbers in their ministry. But the quality of their work is poor. Even the cults have large numbers. So don't glory in large numbers being added to your church. What is the quality of those people? Are they disciples or just converts?

Here is a parable: A doe-rabbit once boasted to a lioness that she had 20 little ones born that year and asked the lioness how many she had given birth to. The lioness replied, "I had only one, but *it was a lion.*" It is better to get one disciple, than twenty converts.

9:23 is one of the most important verses in Luke's gospel: "*If anyone wishes to come after Me let him deny himself, take up his cross every day and follow Me.*" You cannot follow Jesus unless you are willing to deny yourself and die to Self daily. To deny Self means to say, "No," to everything that your Self-life wants. What does "taking up the cross" mean? We could put it like this: The cross comes in at the place where your will crosses God's will. Your will is like the horizontal arm of the cross and God's will is like the vertical arm. To take up the cross means dying to your will and doing God's will. It means giving up your choices, your ambitions, your reputation, your preferences and the way you would like to react to people, etc. It means to reckon yourself *dead with Christ* every day.

In 9:49, 50, Jesus teaches us what to do when we find someone having a ministry that is totally different from ours. Someone was casting out demons, but he didn't join the disciples. John asked Jesus to stop him. But Jesus told John to leave him alone and to let him continue that ministry. You stick to your calling and let them fulfil theirs. Many Christians are so taken up with the importance of their *own* ministry that they feel that everyone should be doing that. "*But if the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be; and if the whole were hearing, where would the sense of smell be?*" (1 Corinthians 12:17). A mature Christian realises that God gives different ministries to different people. If one wants to do evangelism, and another wants to do social work, let each fulfil his own ministry. Something of Christ can be manifested through both. But let us not criticise one another. There is variety in creation. God did not make every flower the same colour, the same shape or the same size.

The rainbow has so many different colours. So also is the body of Christ. Some people feel that *nobody* should go to a Bible-college because they themselves did not. Others feel that *everybody* should go to a Bible-college, because they went themselves. Both are wrong. God can use both methods, according to the calling of each one. Narrow minded people however never see anything other than their own ministry. Here is a word for such people: "*Thank God for every ministry, and stick to your own.*"

In 9:52, we see Jesus coming towards Samaria. This was the city where a year earlier there had been a great revival. Through one sinful woman who was converted, the whole city had been drawn to Jesus (*John 4*). So Jesus sent messengers ahead of Him to make arrangements there. But this time, they did not receive Him (*verse 53*). Perhaps many who were converted in Samaria, had decided to get rid of their prejudices against the Jews and leave their dead religious systems and follow the Lord. This must have disturbed their religious leaders; so they decided not to let Jesus into the city again. So James and John wanted to call down fire on the Samaritans. Jesus rebuked them saying that He had not come to destroy men's lives but to save them (*verse 55*). If some church kicks you out, just humble yourself and go somewhere else. That is what I have done more than once.

In both the above examples, Jesus was trying to enlarge the hearts of His disciples. In many Christian groups, I have seen that the leader often has a large heart, but his followers are narrow-hearted, because they don't know God like their leader. John Wesley and George Whitefield were two great preachers in England in the 18th century. John Wesley and his followers believed and preached that one could be lost after being saved. George Whitfield and his followers preached that once a man was saved, he was saved forever. But Wesley and Whitfield were good friends and when Whitfield died, it was Wesley who conducted his funeral. One of Wesley's followers then asked him, "Will you see George Whitfield in heaven?" John Wesley replied, "I don't think so, because he will be so near the throne and I will be so far back that I may not be able to see him there." Wesley's followers were narrow-hearted. But Wesley himself was a humble, large-hearted man who esteemed Whitefield above himself.

In 10:5, Jesus told His disciples, "*Whenever you enter a house, first of all say, 'Peace be to this house'. If a man of peace is there, your peace will rest upon him. If not, it will return to you.*" Our homes must be islands of peace in the restless sea of this world. The man, as the head, must especially be a man of peace – even if the woman is not a woman of peace. The man must be one who will never quarrel, fight, argue, lose his temper, or get into controversies. Every Christian home must have a man like that to lead it.

In 10:19, we read that Jesus gave His disciples *authority* over all the *power* of Satan, and promised them that nothing would hurt them. There is a difference between authority and power. A truck may have a lot of

power but when a small policeman lifts up his hand and tells it to stop, it stops – because the policeman has *authority*. This is a picture of the *authority* we have over *ALL* the power of Satan. The Bible says, “*Submit yourself to God and resist the devil – and he will flee from you*” (James 4:7, 8). Satan will flee from us at the speed of lightning – 300,000 kilometres per second – for that is the speed at which Jesus saw Satan fall (10:18)! But we do *not* rejoice over the fact that Satan is subject to us, but that we are God’s children. We rejoice **not in what we have done for God** but in **what God has done for us** – He has written our names in the Book of Life.

Luke

Parables With a Message

In 10:30–37, we read the parable of the good Samaritan. The Levite and the priest belonged to a respected denomination that had its doctrines right. But they *did nothing* for the needy man here. We *can sin* even by doing *nothing*! The Samaritan, however, belonged to a despised denomination (whose doctrines were wrong in many areas). But it was he who helped the needy man. Jesus was teaching that often it is those whose doctrines are not correct, who do more for the poor and needy than the evangelicals. The Levite and the priest were more interested in going for their meeting in Jerusalem than in helping a needy man along the way. The good Samaritan missed the meeting, but he helped this man. We may discover at the judgement-seat of Christ that many whose doctrines were wrong in some minor areas get a greater reward than those of us who have all our doctrines right. So let us not despise those in other denominations who may be doing things differently from us. God values those who serve the poor with compassion in Christ’s Name. He will say to them, “I was hungry and you fed Me, I was sick and you came to visit Me, I was thirsty and you gave Me something to drink. When My people (whose doctrines were right) were attending meetings, you (who had some wrong doctrines) came and helped Me.”

Some who hear this parable, can now imagine that the most important thing in life is to serve the Lord by helping the poor. And so the Holy Spirit gives us a balance here by describing another incident immediately thereafter. In 10:38–42, Jesus tells us what the *most important* thing in life really is – *it is not to serve the poor but to listen to Him and do what He tells us to do!* Here we see Martha feverishly serving the Lord, and Mary attentively listening to Him. Mary’s activity looked like laziness and inactivity, but Jesus rebuked Martha for serving Him and told her that what Mary was doing was “*the one thing needful*” (verse 42). We are not called to spend our life “*doing something or the other for God*”, but to “*do the will of God*”. “*The most important thing about a servant is that He does just what His Master tells him to do*” (1 Corinthians 4:2 - Living).

In 11:1–13, we read that Jesus was praying in a certain place and His disciples heard Him. And they were amazed, because they had never heard anyone pray like that. They heard Jesus talking intimately to a loving Father and not giving an impressive lecture to God (as they had heard the Pharisees praying in the synagogues). So they asked Him to teach them also to pray like He did. So Jesus taught them to talk to God as their Father. This was revolutionary, because no-one in Israel's history had ever addressed God as "Dad" (which is the real meaning of the Hebrew word "Abba"). We are not to pray to God or sing to Him addressing Him as Jehovah today, but as "Father". Then Jesus told them a parable to complete answering their question on prayer. A man had a visitor come to his house at midnight and he had no food to set before him. So he went to his neighbour's house and kept banging away at his door until he got some food from him. That, Jesus said, was how they were to seek for the power of the Holy Spirit (11:13). The point here is that you must, first of all, have a compassion and a burden for the needy people you encounter. Then you must recognise that God alone can give you what is required to meet their need. So you must seek God for His Spirit's power. If your calling is to preach the word, then ask God first of all to give you a love and compassion for those you have to preach to. Then *keep asking* Him for the anointing and revelation of the Spirit for a specific word to meet their particular need. We can ask God in the same way, if we have to pray for someone's healing or we have to cast out a demon from someone. We are not called to serve *everyone* in the world, but *only those whom God sends to us*. This man did not want bread for all the hungry people in the countryside, but only for the one person who came to him. That needy person could be your son or daughter. Jesus said that *everyone* who asks and knocks (like this man did) will get what he asks for (*verses 9, 10*). But those who knock only two or three times and give up will receive nothing. God is a better Father than any earthly father. So He will not deny us anything that is good for us (*verse 11*). So let us "*pursue after love – and earnestly desire the gifts of the Spirit*" (*1 Corinthians 14:1*).

In 12:1, Jesus told His disciples to "*beware of the leaven of the Pharisees which is hypocrisy.*" The word 'hypocrisy' is not an English word but a Greek word – "*hypokrisis*". If the translators had *translated* it (like they did the rest of the New Testament) and not *transliterated* it, the translation would have been "*acting*" or "*playacting*". In ancient Greece, a "*hypocrite*" was an actor. So what Jesus was warning against was *acting* like holy people. A Hollywood actor may act as John the Baptist (a holy man) in a movie. But after the film-shooting is over, he goes back to his normal life of drinking and adultery and divorce. That is his real life. Then the next week when the film-shooting begins again, he becomes "*a holy man*" once again.

Many Christians are exactly like that. When they come to the Sunday services, they are “*holy*” people, talking spiritual things and praising God in “*other tongues*”. But when they go home they are back to their “*mother-tongue*”, getting angry with their wives and telling lies. They are also back to the pursuit of money the whole week. Then, when Sunday comes along, they return to their “*acting*” as *holy* men. The Hollywood actors are actually more honest, in that they don’t pretend that their act is real or that they are really holy men all the time. These Christians, however, pretend that they are really holy always! This is what Jesus was warning His disciples against. We are to be the same on Sunday as on any other day of the week. That is why we must hate hypocrisy.

In 12:3–12, Jesus tells us not to be afraid of persecution, because the very hairs on your head are numbered by our Father. He knows the state of every sparrow in the world, and we are of more value to Him than many sparrows. God may allow people to take us to court or even to kill us. But we are never to be afraid of men. We don’t even have to think what we will reply when questioned. The Holy Spirit will teach us in that moment, exactly what to say (*verse 12*). That is *not* a promise that we can claim when we are preaching, but when we are standing in a court being persecuted for our faith. Don’t try to claim this promise when preaching, because it won’t work. You have to prepare in advance for preaching sermons. Preaching is like serving a meal for honoured guests. An Indian housewife spends many hours in her kitchen to prepare just one meal. We must also take pains to prepare a message for God’s people.

In 12:13, we read of a man who came to the Lord and said, “*Lord, tell my brother to divide the family property with me.*” Even though his request may have been a genuine, righteous request, Jesus refused to get involved in such a dispute. Jesus came here only to help those who wanted to get property in heaven – not earth!

“*Seek God’s kingdom first and these other things will be added to you*” (12:31). Every Christian must live his life on earth in such a way that he is a living proof of the truth that those who seek God’s kingdom first will find all their earthly necessities added to them.

In 12:35 we are urged to be in readiness for the coming of the Lord. If the Lord has given you charge over other believers, be faithful not to beat them but to give them their food in due season (12:45). There are some preachers who instead of feeding the sheep, flog them. When they preach, they don’t give the people food to grow spiritually. They hit them with one Bible-verse after another. The Lord says that He will come one day and punish all those who flogged His children.

In 13:34, we see the tremendous compassion that Jesus had for Jerusalem that He wept over the city.

In 14:13, 14, we find one of the commands of the Lord that very few believers obey. He said that when you give a luncheon or a dinner, you should invite those who cannot repay you. A true disciple of Jesus will

care much for the poor in the church. If you are a preacher, don't go to the rich primarily (for many go to them), but go to the poor who cannot reward you. And the Lord Himself will reward you one day. Spread a banquet of God's Word for those who cannot give you any offerings.

Disciples and Backsliders

In 14:25–34, the Lord laid down the three essential conditions of discipleship.

1. You must love Jesus more than anyone else (*verse 26*).
2. You must take up your cross every day and follow Jesus (*verse 27*).
3. You must not possess anything on earth (*verse 33*).

You can *have* many things, but you must not *possess* any of them. What is the difference between *having* and *possessing*? You may have a house; but you must treat it as a house that belongs to God, in which He has allowed you to live freely. And so with all your property. You must recognise that everything you have belongs to God. Only disciples are the salt which has not lost its taste (*verse 34*). Today, we have a lot of salt that has no taste, because evangelists have preached forgiveness of sins without making people disciples.

In the three parables in *Chapter 15*, we see pictures of *four types of backsliders* – a lost sheep, a lost younger son, a lost elder son and a lost coin – and also of the Triune God. The lost sheep is a picture of a believer who went astray accidentally or through carelessness. The shepherd is a picture of Jesus, *the Son of God*. The prodigal son is a picture of a believer who went away in rebellion against God and the church. The father is a picture of *God the Father*. He does *not* go seeking for such a one as in the first case. He waits until the son reaches the level of the pigs and comes back on his own. The older son is a picture of those who are lost in legalism and self-righteousness and pride. The woman who seeks for the lost coin is a picture of a church filled with the *Holy Spirit*. She lit a lamp and swept the house (15:8) and searched carefully until she found it. When she lost the coin, she was a careless church which was what caused some to backslide (the coin being lost). Then she lit a lamp (she was filled with the Holy Spirit) and began to seek and she found the lost backslidden ones and brought them into the fold. There are many believers who have no burden at all for the lost and for backsliders. They are only interested in themselves. Such believers are completely out of touch with God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit. A prayer that I have prayed for many years is this (and I have encouraged all the elders in our churches to pray this too), “*Lord, if there is anyone in this area seeking for a godly life, please bring him in touch with us, or bring us in touch with him. And if You don't do either of these, tell us what is wrong*

with us, so that we can set it right, so that we can be in tune with You and find the lost." I would encourage you to pray that prayer.

The type of fold we bring a lost sheep into is also very important. If the fold contains 99 sheep who are full of sicknesses and who are biting and tearing each other apart, then that lost sheep is better off in the wilderness than inside such a fold. So we need not only a ministry that goes after the lost sheep, but also a ministry that keeps the 99 sheep healthy and peaceful. Jesus said: "*There is more joy in heaven over one sinner that repents (that's the lost sheep) than the 99 righteous persons who need no repentance*" (verse 7). What a wonderful church (fold) this is, which has 99 righteous people *who don't need to repent of anything!* How is that? It is because they are judging themselves and repenting every day. This has been my own habit for many years. As a result, I have discovered some un-Christlikeness in my life almost every day in the past few years – and repented of it and cleansed myself from it. If you are like that, you won't have time to find fault with other people – because you will be so busy cleaning yourself. Then you can build a church of people "*who need no repentance*" where the lost sheep can come and be healed. And so in our churches we must preach repentance constantly. Gradually, over a period of time, we will have a church, where people have learned to judge themselves, and not judge other people.

When the shepherd lost a sheep, the loss was *the shepherd's*. When the woman lost the coin, the loss was *the woman's*. And in the case of the lost son, the loss was *the Father's*. In all these parables, Jesus was teaching that it was God who lost something when man sinned. Our work in the church is to bring back to God what He has lost.

One thing that the lost son knew was that his father loved him. That was why he decided to come home. How did the father know that his son was returning that day? Because he was looking out of the window every day to see if his son was returning. And one day, he saw him – and he ran to welcome him. The older son, however, did not share the passion of his father's heart. He worked hard for his father and always obeyed him (verses 28, 29). But he had *no passion for the lost*. He had no fellowship with the heart of his father. Never once did he tell his father, "Let me go and look for my younger brother and find him".

There are two types of Christian workers and elders. One is like the father in this story, full of love and compassion. The other is like the elder brother, hard and rigid and professional. Each of us can make a choice which of the two we are going to be like. In that story, at the beginning, the elder son is inside the house and the younger son outside. But when the story ends, the younger son is inside and the elder son outside. Many who are first now will be last in God's kingdom. Many Christians will be outside the kingdom, because they had no fellowship with the heart of the Father. Every brother and sister in the church must be a servant of the Lord and must share fellowship with the Father's heart for those who are lost.

I had a great longing when I was young to be an evangelist and to spend my life in North India. I told the Lord that I was ready to go anywhere He sent me – and I still am. But He never told me to go to North India – and I wouldn't ever go where the Lord did not send me. God then gave me the gift of teaching and not of evangelism. But I still have a very keen interest in the work of the Lord in North India. So I read missionary magazines to know what is happening in North India. Even if you are not a missionary, I hope you have some desire to know what others are doing for the Lord in the difficult places of the world.

Teaching on Money

Chapters 16 to 21 deal with the subject of money. Jesus spoke a lot about money. In the gospels, you will find that 16% of His teaching refers to money – one in every six verses. That's the amount of importance that Jesus gave to the subject. Whereas Jesus spoke about being free from the love of money, most preachers only urge people to pay their tithes – which Jesus never taught His disciples to practise (He only told the Pharisees who were under the old covenant to do that – Matthew 23:23).

The first parable Jesus spoke here was about an unrighteous steward. The essence of that story is that he planned for his future. He knew he was losing his job, and so he did some cheating, so that when he lost his job, he would have friends who would give him another job. Then Jesus said, “*Make friends for eternity through money.*” For that steward, his future was only on this earth. For us, our future is in eternity. He prepared for his future using the power over money that he had. We must also make friends for eternity by using our money to spread the gospel and win souls. Then one day people will meet you in heaven and say, “Because you gave your money for the spread of the gospel, I was saved and I am here” (16:9).

And then Jesus said these very strong words, “*If you are not faithful with earthly wealth, who will give you the true riches?*” (16:11). The true riches are the Divine nature, the anointing of the Holy Spirit and revelation on the word of God. Why is it most believers never become more Christlike in their speech or get any fresh revelation from the Spirit on the word of God? Because they are not faithful with money.

Jesus then said that no servant could serve two masters. You cannot serve both God and money (16:13). You have to make a choice. The Pharisees had missionary programmes but they were also great lovers of money (16:14). Jesus said to them, “*You justify yourself in the sight of men* (You try to appear very spiritual before men). *But God knows your hearts. That which men value highly is an abomination in the sight of God*” (16:15). I have kept this verse before me always and sought to remember it all my life. Make a list of all the things that man esteems greatly and recognise that God considers all of them as detestable. Never glory in

anything that man values highly. You may have some such things; but place the value on them that God places on them – **zero**. Don't meditate on them or gloat over them. Are you good-looking or intelligent or rich or highly qualified? There is nothing wrong with any of these. But don't imagine that God places any values on these – because many of the most godly people in the world were not good-looking, not highly intelligent, not wealthy and not academically qualified. What God values is humility and reverence for Him, which the world does not value. If you value the things that God values, your service for Him will be far more effective.

Then Jesus told the *true story* of a certain rich man and a beggar named Lazarus (16:19). This is not a parable for Jesus never used any names (like Lazarus and Abraham) in any parable. This is the true story of a man who was entrusted with a lot of money by God, but who used it all selfishly for himself and did not use any of it to bless his needy brothers with. He did not care for the poor beggar, Lazarus who sat at his gate. Lazarus was his own brother – for they were both children of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. But that rich man did not care for Lazarus. That proves that he did not have any living faith in God. James says, “*What use is it, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but has no works? Can that faith save him? If a brother is without clothing and in need of daily food, and you say to him, ‘Go in peace, be warmed and be filled’, but you do not give him what is necessary for his body, what use is that? Even so faith, if it has no works, is dead, being by itself.*” (James 2:14–17). Salvation is by faith – and that rich man went to hell because he had no living faith. When Lazarus died, nothing is said about him being buried (16:22). Perhaps his body was thrown into the garbage dump. But what did that matter to Lazarus, when he himself was in paradise. The rich man, however, got a grand burial. The chief-priest (equivalent of an archbishop) must have been there (because religious leaders usually attend the funerals of the rich), and he must have said many good things about this rich man. But the man was in hell while his funeral was going on! [Some people remain in a dead denomination only because they want a decent burial – or a grand wedding in a cathedral!] The rich man could see that Lazarus whom he despised was in heaven. With all his money and his religion, the rich man himself couldn't get there. “*God has chosen the poor of the world rich in faith*” (James 2:5). If God has given you money, He expects you to use it to bless others. There was one more reason why the rich man went to hell. He discovered it when he reached hell – he had not repented (16:30). And he discovered that if Lazarus was in paradise, it was because Lazarus had repented and believed.

In 17:3, 4 Jesus spoke about the importance of forgiving others, even if they sin against us seven times *in a single day*.

In 17:10, He said that even after we obey *every single* command of the Lord, we can still consider ourselves only as “*unworthy servants*”, because we only did what we should have done. In a world, where even

Christians are hankering after *theological degrees*, here is a good degree to get: “U.S. – *Unworthy Servant*”! How many are interested in placing that degree after their names? But when can we get even this lowly degree? *Only when we have obeyed every single command of the Lord!* Some of us imagine that we are very *useful* servants of the Lord. We haven’t taken our Lord’s words seriously enough. Just because the Lord blessed us a little bit here or there, we begin to think that we are very important and useful to God! How easy it is to deceive ourselves. At our very best, we will still be only *useless* servants. We are what we are only by the grace of God (*1 Corinthians 15:10*). Have a sober estimate of yourself at all times – and you will keep on receiving grace from God for greater and greater things in your life.

In *17:12–19*, we read of 10 lepers who *with a loud voice asked* the Lord to heal them. They were all healed. But only one of them came back to the Lord and *with a loud voice gave thanks*. And because he gave thanks, he got something more. “*Your faith has saved you*” (*verse 19*). The other nine got only physical healing. This man was a despised Samaritan, but he got what the other nine respectable Jews did not get – salvation. You get more from the Lord when you thank Him for His blessings.

Christ's Second Coming

Then Jesus spoke about His second coming. What we read in *Matthew 24* is repeated by the Holy Spirit here, because He does not want anyone to be deceived. Don’t believe those who say, ‘Look, He has come here or there (*secretly*).’ His coming will be seen by everyone, just as the lightning that flashes from one part of the sky to another. Jesus made it clear again and again that ***He will not come secretly***. There will be only one second-coming. All believers will be on earth during the great tribulation that precedes His return – because the Lord will not take away His best soldiers from earth at a time when He needs their witness the most – during the reign of the Antichrist. We shall no doubt suffer. Many will no doubt fall from the faith. But some will stand true to the Lord and glorify His Name. So when people preach, “*He will come secretly here or there*” (*verse 23*), the Lord told us not to believe them. So I don’t believe them. None of the apostles taught or believed this strange doctrine. And nobody preached it for over 18 centuries since the day of Pentecost. The doctrine of a secret rapture arose for the first time in England in the mid-1800s – and its echoes are now heard all over the world. I am not surprised that this doctrine was invented by comfort-loving Christians in a country (England) that had not faced persecution for centuries.

And when the Lord does finally come, a few will be raptured to meet Him in the air and to welcome Him to earth. Many will be left behind.

Two will be in a bed (husband and wife obviously); one will be taken and the other will be left behind (17:34). Two will be working together in the same place; one will be taken, the other will be left behind (*verse 35*). So the Lord told us to be perpetually ready. For example, if you are on the roof of your house, you should not have to go down to your house. If you are out in the fields, you should not have to go back. Those days people worked in fields. Today, we work in offices. Let me explain what the Lord was implying: If you are in your office when the Lord comes, you should not have to say, "Lord, please wait. I quarrelled with my wife this morning and I have to go home and ask for her forgiveness." Perpetual readiness means that you have settled all matters at all times. If you are on the housetop you must be ready to be raptured from there. You should not have any attachment to any material things inside your house. The way to be ready for the coming of the Lord is by keeping an absolutely clear conscience and being thoroughly detached from everything of earth – at all times.

In 18:1–7, Jesus again spoke about persistence in prayer. The only two parables that Jesus ever spoke about prayer emphasised persistence. In *Chapter 11*, the need was for power to serve others. Here the need is personal deliverance from the oppression of Satan. The widow is a picture of a believer. The Lord always pictured believers as weak and helpless – a widow or a sheep. This was so that we would seek for help from God and not depend on our own abilities. When we are fearful or defeated by sin, we are being harassed by Satan. We must seek God **until** we are freed from this oppression. The widow persisted in asking the judge **until** she got freedom from harassment by the enemy. We must do the same. Jesus concluded the parable, however, by stating that when He returns to earth, He will find very few who have faith for such a life of perpetual victory (18:8). We are living in those days now. Many Christians spend their time only in theological argument as to whether victory is possible or not. Jesus, however, said that only those who mourn (for their sins) will be strengthened. The more we recognise our helplessness, the more we will go to God in prayer and weep on our pillows at night for victory. And then we will get it!

The next parable that Jesus spoke (18:9–14) was to expose the pride of self-righteous people – the parable of the Pharisee and the tax-collector. The Pharisee here wasn't even praying to God. He was praying to himself (*verse 11*). He himself was his god! A proud man worships himself, and boasts about his praying, fasting, tithing, missionary work etc. The poor tax-collector prayed saying, "*Be merciful to me the sinner*". He called himself "the sinner" as if he was the only sinner on earth. Therefore he went home justified. The first will be last and the last first.

Then comes two more incidents related to money. In the first one, a rich young ruler was unwilling to pay the price to follow Jesus and turned away from Him (18:18–27).

The second incident is about Zaccheus, a rich tax-collector who had cheated many people in his life (19:1–10). But Zaccheus being eager to meet the Lord climbed up into a tree to see Him. As Jesus walked along that road, the Holy Spirit prompted Him to stop and look up into that tree. The Lord then told Zaccheus that He would like to visit his house. Zaccheus was thrilled. But as the Lord came in front of the house, “*Zaccheus stopped*” (verse 8) and said (as it were), “Lord, You are holy. You can’t come to my house because I have built it with unrighteous money that I got by cheating many people. But Lord, I’m now going to give half my money to the poor and I am going to return four times the money I took from all those whom I cheated.” How did Zaccheus change? Jesus never preached a sermon on righteousness there. It was the Light that went out from Jesus that convicted Zaccheus.

The Old Testament law had stated that when you make restitution you must add 20% to the amount (*Numbers 5:7*). But here Zaccheus was adding 300%, because he had cheated people many years earlier and he wanted to return the money with interest. As soon as Jesus heard that He said, “*Salvation has come to this house*” (19:9). When a man is willing to do what Zaccheus did, you can be sure that he is saved.

In 19:11–20, we read yet another parable related to money. A nobleman who was going on a long journey called his ten slaves and gave them each some money and told them to do business with it. One slave was so faithful in investing it, that he produced ten minas with that one mina. Another man produced five minas, while yet another wrapped up the mina in a handkerchief, buried it under the ground, and gave it back to the master when he returned. He didn’t commit any sin. He just wasted his one life. In the parable in *Matthew 25*, the amounts given were different. That parable was about gifts. One may be an apostle and another a mother. An apostle has more opportunity to travel and serve than a mother. So God expects more from the apostle. But in the parable here, the amount given to each person is the same. This refers to two things. First of all, to our time. We all have the same amount of time every day – 24 hours. But what we do with our time differs. Some use their time profitably to study the Word while others waste it in gossip. Secondly, this refers to our body. We all have the same body and are tempted in exactly the same way through our lusts. But our reactions to those lusts vary. Some fight against it and overcome temptation, while others yield to their lusts and sin. So one brother who uses his time and his body for the glory of God acquires ten minas, whereas another produces only five.

In 19:30, we read of Jesus entering Jerusalem on a donkey. Kings rode on horses, but Jesus chose a donkey. He did it to show that all that is big and great in the eyes of the world is desppicable before God. In the Old Testament, God even spoke through a donkey once – to Balaam. It’s a great encouragement to know that even if we are as stupid as donkeys, the Lord needs us and wants to use us for His purposes. That donkey got

a lot of honour that day – and so may you, when the Lord uses you. But if that donkey imagined that people were appreciating it, then it was sadly mistaken. They were honouring the Lord. The moment Jesus got off, it reverted to the same old donkey it was before – and nobody honoured it any more. That's a good lesson for us to keep in mind. When people appreciate us, it is Christ in us that they are appreciating.

In 20:25, the Lord spoke about money again: “*Render to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's.*” Give to everyone what is due unto them.

Luke

In *Chapter 21*, we read about the second coming of the Lord. There will be persecution and even our relatives may betray us. But we need never fear, because no-one can touch even a hair on our head without the Lord's permission (*verse 18*).

The Last Supper and the Crucifixion

In 22:24, we see that even after all those years of listening to the Lord, the disciples were still discussing who was the greatest among them. The Lord did not select perfect people as His disciples – and He was very gentle in correcting them. He knew that when they were filled with the Holy Spirit, they would all be changed – and they were. Once they were filled, they no longer fought with each other for position or honour.

In 22:31, we read of Jesus warning Simon Peter that Satan had asked God for permission to sift him like wheat – and God had given Satan that permission. This reminds us of the story of Job, where too, Satan had to take God's permission before he could trouble Job. God will never allow Satan to tempt us beyond what we are able to bear (*1 Corinthians 10:13*). Satan has to take permission from God each time he seeks to trouble us or tempt us or attack us or persecute us. This fact should comfort us immensely. And Jesus told Peter that when Satan tempted him, he would fall – not just once but three times. Yet *Jesus never prayed that Peter would not fall*. He only prayed that *Peter's faith would not fail*. Why did Jesus *not* pray that Peter would not fall? Because Peter was so proud that nothing less than falling into sin would humble him. It is only when we fall – repeatedly – that we recognise that nothing good dwells in our flesh and that we can never overcome sin on our own. And when we have made a mess of our life and hit rock bottom – when we have come to that zero point, to an end of confidence in our own ability – then we must not lose faith. God still loves us and He will make us overcomers. Failure accomplishes a purpose in God's plan.

Peter's failure and his weeping bitterly for his failure was all preparation for Pentecost. If he had not fallen so deeply into sin that night, he would have stood up on the day of Pentecost as a proud man looking down on all the sinners there. But as a broken man, he looked at them as

sinners just like him. He felt that he was the biggest sinner of all. That's the type of person God picks up, fills with the Holy Spirit, and uses in His service. And when God used him mightily that could not go to Peter's head any more, for he knew what a failure he had been. What a wonderful purpose there was in Peter's failure.

In 23:40–42, there are two lessons that we can learn from the thief on the cross, who was saved.

First of all, he recognised that Jesus had done nothing wrong. How did he know that? Because he saw the way Jesus conducted Himself when He was accused. That thief had seen so many people who, when they were being crucified, would curse and swear. But here he saw Someone saying, *"Father, forgive them for they do not know what they are doing."* That opened his eyes. That was what opened the eyes of the Roman centurion too – who acknowledged, *"Truly this is the Son of God."* It is when others see a forgiving nature in us, that they too will be convicted of their sin.

The second thing we see is that while the other thief wanted to be taken down from the cross (believing that he did not deserve to die), this thief admitted that he deserved to be crucified. Adam blamed his wife for his sin and was turned out of paradise. This thief acknowledged his sin and was admitted into paradise immediately (23:43). Paradise has been prepared for those who are honest enough to acknowledge that they have sinned and deserve hell.

In 24:13–33, we read of two disciples walking to Emmaus and the risen Jesus joining them. It was a seven mile journey and that would have taken two to three hours of a leisurely walk. And for all that time, they had a Bible study from *Genesis* to *Malachi*. He showed them "Christ" in all those Scriptures (24:27). And their hearts burned within them as He spoke (24:32). That's how it is when Jesus speaks. Those who preach the Word must long to preach like this – where people's eyes are opened and their hearts burn within them as they hear the Word.

Finally, after appearing to His eleven disciples, He told them to wait in Jerusalem until they were "*endued with power from on high*" (24:49). They obeyed Him and spent the next ten days praising God (24:53). It was in that atmosphere of praise that the Holy Spirit fell on all of them in the upper room. The Spirit falls on people even today in a similar atmosphere! Hallelujah!

JOHN

JESUS CHRIST – THE ETERNAL GOD

John 1:1 goes back to the real “beginning”, before the “beginning” mentioned in *Genesis 1:1*. The “Word” refers to Jesus Christ and He is called “God” here. John emphasises the Deity of Christ. Jesus was God from all eternity. One day, “*the Word became flesh*” (1:14). He was God when He walked on this earth in our flesh, and He is God today. That is why we worship Him and pray to Him. Jesus Himself said that “*only God can be worshipped*” (*Matthew 4:10*) – and when people worshipped Him on earth, He accepted their worship.

Why is He called “*the Word*”? There is nothing philosophical or complicated about its meaning. The Bible is a simple book whose meaning has unfortunately been complicated by scholars. It doesn’t require a clever *mind* to understand it but a pure *heart* like a “babe’s” (*Matthew 11:25*). John, who wrote this gospel, was not an educated philosopher but an uneducated fisherman. Today people go to Bible seminaries and write long theses on what this fisherman wrote and get a doctorate in theology – a doctorate which John himself would never have been able to get!

A spoken or written “*word*” is an audible (or visible) expression of an inaudible (or invisible) *thought*. It is only when we put our thoughts into *words* that others can understand us. If God had remained in heaven or if He had come to earth only as a Spirit, we would never have been able to understand Him. But He came in the form of Jesus – and so we can understand Him. That is why Jesus is called the Word. He is the visible and audible expression of the Invisible God. No-one but He can have that title.

“*In Him (Jesus) was life, and the life was the light of men*” (1:4). Light always drives away the darkness. And that is what the life of Jesus does everywhere. When the life of Jesus comes into us it will drive away all the

darkness, if we allow it. When you live in a room with all the windows and doors closed, even though the sunlight is bright outside, there is darkness inside. But if you open even a small ventilator, the light comes in immediately. Even if there is a little crack in the window, the light will come in. Light has a longing to enter even through the slightest, little crack. That's how the life of Jesus is – eagerly waiting to enter your heart and flood it. But He stands at the door and knocks. The measure in which you open your heart will be the measure in which He floods it with His life.

Jesus told his disciples (and us): “*You are the light of the world*” (Matthew 5:14). In the Old Testament, God’s written word was the light. “*Thy word is a lamp unto my feet and a light unto my path*” (Psalm 119:105), God’s Law was the only light they had in those days. But today, God’s light is not primarily the Bible. It is the Word that has become flesh. Jesus is the light. He didn’t say, “My teaching is the light.” He said, “I am the light.” And He didn’t say, “Your teaching is the light.” He said, “You are the light”. So the light is our life, and not the wonderful things we may teach. If your life is not a light, then if you speak fantastic truths, you are a hypocrite – and that leaven will destroy you. Everything we teach must be backed up by our life. The life of Jesus must influence our thoughts, our financial dealings, our home-life, the way we talk to our wives, the way we bring up our children, the way we deal with other people in our offices, and the way we deal with our co-workers and the youngest brothers in our church. The life of Jesus is the light. This is the great lack in our country today.

“*As many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name*” (1:11, 12). We become God’s children when we receive Him as our Lord. There is a difference between children and sons. A son is grown up and mature. A child is just a baby. When you receive Jesus as your Saviour you don’t become a mature son, you become a baby. You have to grow up to become a mature son.

Grace and Truth

When Jesus came as the Word to earth, the disciples saw the glory of God in Him “*full of grace and truth*” (1:14). There was a balance in the glory that Christ revealed – there was *grace* and there was also *truth*. Truth speaks of reality as well as the truth proclaimed in God’s Word. Jesus said “*Thy word is Truth*” (John 17:17). We find the word “*truth*”, “*true*” and “*truly*” occurring over 70 times in this gospel. It is one of John’s major themes.

But that truth (consisting of commandments, laws, and principles) must be covered over with grace, if it is to be attractive to people. In our body we have bones (a picture of truth) and physical flesh (a picture of

grace) to cover the bones. If we were only bones, how attractive would we be? If you saw a bony skeleton walking up to you one night, you would run. That is why people ran away from the Pharisees. They had quite a bit of truth but they had no grace. Some Christians are so legalistic, emphasising truth and rules and commandments all the time, that people are repelled. Jesus had bones too – but the bones were covered over with flesh. Truth was covered with grace in Him, and so even the worst of sinners were drawn to Him. Many of us have driven away our unconverted relatives from the Lord, because of our emphasis on truth. They see us as skeletons and run away from the “*false Christ*” that we present.

On the other hand there are people who overemphasise grace. How would we be if we had no bones in our bodies? We wouldn’t be able to stand, because we would be like jellyfish that have no bones. There are some advantages however in having no bones. We can squeeze through any opening – of any shape!! Some Christians are like that. They have no convictions on any doctrines. They can compromise and fit in, into any group, because they are “*evangelifish*”! Like chameleons they can change their colour to suit their surroundings.

So we see that both truth and grace are necessary if we are to present Christ adequately to the world.

None of us can be perfectly balanced in this area. And that is why God has given us the Body of Christ. If we are strong on “*truth*”, God will give us brothers to work with, who are strong on “*grace*”. They can’t manifest the glory of God without us and we can’t manifest the glory of God without them. But together we can show forth Christ fully. Until the end of our lives, we must recognise that we are imbalanced – towards one side or the other – and that our salvation can be found only as we work together with other members of the Body of Christ. Jesus alone was perfectly balanced, because He was the full Body of Christ in Himself. We however are only *a part* of His Body. That is why we must accept those who have a different emphasis from ours, in Christ’s Body.

“*The law was given through Moses, but grace and truth were realized through Jesus Christ*” (1:17). That verse teaches us that there was *no grace in the world until Jesus came*. The law came through Moses. That was the old covenant. There was no grace under the old covenant. The word “*grace*” is never found in the Old Testament. It is found only in the New Testament. The word “*grace*” found in the King James Version of Genesis 6:8 is a *mistranslation*. The NASB translates it correctly as, “*favour*” What is the meaning of grace? The most commonly accepted definition of “*grace*” as ‘the unmerited favour of God’ is incorrect. All human beings have got unmerited favour from God – and that is *mercy*,

not *grace*. They had mercy under the old covenant. Through God's mercy they received the *forgiveness* of sins (*Psalm 103:3*). But with *grace*, we can get *victory* over sin. *Mercy* deals with our past life, the guilt of our sin. *Grace* deals with our future, giving us *victory* over sin. When the Lord says, "*My grace is sufficient for you*", it means *grace* can meet our every need in the future.

As in all the other gospels, John also begins with the promise that Jesus will baptise (immerse) people in the Holy Spirit (1:33). There are two ways to be immersed – one by being immersed in a river or a tank and the other is by standing under a waterfall. Baptism in water is done in a tank or a river. To be baptised in the Holy Spirit is to be immersed by this waterfall of the river of God which has been flowing from His throne to earth ever since the day of Pentecost. The waterfall falls in a place called "*Humility*". If we remain in *humility* all the days of our life, this river will keep falling on us and immersing us and flowing through us to others.

John

Come, See and Follow

When two disciples of John the Baptist asked Jesus, "Where do You live?" He said, "*Come and see*" (1:39). The old covenant servant of God would say, "*Come and hear*." But the new covenant servant of God says, "*Come and see*." In the old covenant, the invitation was, "*Moses has come down from the mountain with a message from God. Come and hear*." But in the new covenant the message is, "*Jesus has come from heaven. Come and see the way He lives*." Under the old covenant, the emphasis was on the message. Under the new covenant, the emphasis is not on the message, but the messenger. We are the message. So we say, "*Come and see how I live with my wife, how I behave with my co-workers in my church, how I treat the youngest brothers in my church, how I keep my accounts, how I bring up my children. Come and see every area of my life. You can follow me as I follow Christ*" (1 Corinthians 11:1).

Nowadays we have so many preachers coming to India from America. But if we don't know how that man lives with his wife in his home, whether he is a divorced man, how he has brought up his children, and what type of church he has built there, then I, for one, would not ask him to speak in my church. I am not going to be impressed by powerful preaching. The only man I will respect is the man who can say, "*Come and see how I live*." If however you can only say, "*Come and hear how well I can preach (or heal the sick)*", then I am not interested. Such a man is an old covenant servant – and he will build only an old-covenant church. Babylon is built by those who can only say "*Come and hear*." They may emphasise correct *doctrine* and even fight for it. But they do *not* show the truth by the way they *live*. If their doctrine is really the truth, it should produce truth (reality) in their *life* as well. If their doctrine doesn't produce a holy life, then their doctrine must be *wrong*. Jesus had life, and that life was

the light of men. John's theme is *life*, throughout his gospel and in his epistles as well. For thousands of years this life was hidden. Man could only get *words* from God. But then *the Word became flesh*, and now we can experience that eternal life. This is the real *gospel*. That's why Paul said, "*Follow me as I follow Christ*" (*1 Corinthians 11:1*). Every servant of God today should be able to say that too.

Some preachers say, "Don't follow me. Follow Christ." That sounds very humble, but it is *not* scriptural. Why does he say that? Because he knows that his life is a bad example. In that case, he shouldn't be preaching at all. He should go home and straighten out his life first. When we ask others to follow us as we follow Christ, we are *NOT* claiming to have become like Christ. No. We haven't reached the top of that mountain yet. That will happen only when Christ comes again. But we are not sitting at the bottom of the mountain either. We are saying that the gospel has begun to change our way of life, our thought-patterns, our manner of speech, the way we handle money, and the way we behave in general. And we are asking others to climb this mountain of total transformation into the likeness of Christ, along with us.

I heard of a brother from the West who was visiting India who bought a first class train-ticket and got into the train. He saw that someone was sitting in his seat, who seemed to be reluctant to get up. Instead of fighting with him, he spread a newspaper on the floor near the toilet and sat there. When the ticket-inspector came along, he asked this brother why he was sitting on the floor. He replied, "Because someone else is sitting on my seat." The ticket-inspector was amazed that a foreigner would do this and asked him why he did that. The brother replied, "Because I am a Christian, I don't fight with people." The ticket collector got converted! Did that man get converted through listening to a powerful sermon? No. He SAW a powerful sermon in that brother's conduct. That is what it means to be the light of the world. It is when we travel in trains and buses that we often see selfish human behaviour at its worst. It's there that we have to manifest the beauty, humility and patience of Christ to an ungodly world.

In *1:47*, we see Jesus saying about Nathaniel, "*Behold a man in whom there is no guile.*" What a wonderful testimony to receive from the Lord. He did not say that Nathaniel was sinless or perfect – because Nathaniel was neither sinless nor perfect, and the Lord does not tell lies. Jesus only said that the man was honest and transparent like clear glass! Many Christians are like frosted glass – they are not transparent. There are many things they hide on the other side of the opaque glass. On the front side they look very holy. But behind the frosted glass they live another life. To have no guile is to be like clear glass where we have nothing in our inner life or private life that we want to hide. We may still be defeated by anger etc., but we are honest about it. We don't pretend. In *Revelation 21*, we are told that the new Jerusalem (the church of Jesus Christ) is like clear glass. That's how our life must be if we want to be in that church.

The First Sign

In *Chapter 2*, we read about a marriage in Cana that Jesus and His disciples attended. In 2:11, we read that “*this beginning of His signs Jesus did in Cana in Galilee.*” John calls Jesus’ miracles as *signs*. That means that every miracle was a parable too. It had a spiritual message. What is the message here? First of all: Your own wine of joy in earthly things will run out one day. Jesus can give you heavenly wine – a life of “*righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit*” (*Romans 14:17*). When your earthly wine runs dry, be honest about it and go and tell the Lord – just like Mary did. That’s all that you have to do. You don’t have to go to the vineyard and collect grapes, crush them and make wine. No. Just go to Jesus and say, “*Lord, I have no joy or peace or victory in my life. I am unable to ‘rejoice in the Lord always’, as you have told us to.*” The Lord will give you His new wine – His life.

Jesus could have created wine from nothing in those empty pots. But He didn’t do that. He called the servants in the house to work with Him. The Lord uses lowly people even today as His co-workers. Have the spirit of a servant – and the Lord will do miracles through you. The servants here filled the pots with water. Jesus turned it into wine. We have to do only the easy part and the Lord does the difficult part. The Lord wants you to be a partner with Him in His work. When the servants served out the wine, the people were amazed for they had never tasted such good wine in their life.

In my own ministry, I have often brought my tasteless water (my own thoughts) to the Lord and He has converted it into wine and asked me to preach it. And as in Cana, people have wondered where I got such good wine from!! It was from the Lord. Through this the beginning of His signs, the Lord teaches us how to serve Him. There is no place for laziness here. We have to work hard and study the Scriptures first of all. It was hard work to fill those pots with 600 litres of water (2:6). God never does His work through lazy people.

In 2:14–17, we read of Jesus chasing out from the temple those who were bringing the spirit of the market-place into the house of prayer. He made a scourge of cords first. Can you see this picture in your mind: Jesus sitting in a corner and collecting various bits of string and twisting them into a rope. That would have taken some time and His disciples must have wondered what He was doing.

In these two incidents in *Chapter 2*, we see *grace* and *truth*. Jesus served first-class wine at a wedding. And then He made a whip and chased out of the temple those who were making money in God’s Name. Our ministry must have both the *wine* and the *whip* in it – ‘*wine*’ to the needy and a ‘*whip*’ to Christian racketeers.

When we stand in the pulpit, we have to stand there as a man of God – as a representative of God on earth. In my own church, I have told people: “The *best* thing for you to do is to *fear God*. But if you *don’t* fear God,

then you better *fear me*, because I am not going to allow any nonsense in this church. I am not going to allow you to come here to make profit, or to gossip, or to draw people after yourself, or to try and get a name for yourself. If you come here and you don't want to be a servant, if you don't want to humble yourself, if you are unwilling to clean the toilets in this building, then there is no place for you here in this church. Here we are all equal – no-one is senior or junior. We all sweep the floor and we all clean the toilets. We are all brothers. No one is greater than another. If you are seeking for honour, then you must go and find some other church, not this one." That is how we have driven out the "*sellers of sheep and doves*" from our midst. If we are not firm, we will produce only wishy-washy churches, like the many hundreds of churches that have brought dishonour to God's Name in India.

In 2:24, 25, we read that "*Jesus did not commit Himself to everyone.*" Many people believed in Him, but He did not believe in everyone – because He knew what was in each man's heart. It is only if we are totally committed to the Lord that He will be totally committed to us.

In *Chapter 3*, we read about Nicodemus coming to Jesus by night. Jesus Christ was the most important Person that ever walked on the face of this earth. Yet Nicodemus could come to His house, even late at night, without fixing an appointment. I don't know whether it was midnight, but Jesus took time to talk to him. There were times when Jesus didn't have time even to eat His food (*Mark 3:20*) or to sleep (*Luke 6:12*). If you serve the Lord, you must be willing to be inconvenienced. If you are more interested in food and sleep, it is better to do some other business than serving the Lord.

Jesus spoke here about being born of water and the spirit (3:5). Water is a symbol of the Holy Spirit. Fire is another symbol. In John's gospel we see a description of how we grow in life in the Holy Spirit. When we are born again (*born of water*), we have a cup of water ("*the cup of salvation*" – *Psalm 116:13*). This cup of water must then become a "*well of water*" (*John 4:14*), and finally, "*rivers of water*" (*John 7:38*).

When we are *born of water*, the Holy Spirit comes in and produces a new life in us. Then the Lord leads us on to have a *well of water*. If you have a well in your house, you won't be dependent on any outside source for your water – our joy and peace and victory will not be dependent on circumstances or how people treat us. Then the Lord leads us to a third stage, where this water flows out like rivers in many directions to bless many people. We should not be satisfied until we have reached the third stage.

No Condemnation

In 3:17, we read, "*God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved.*" We can learn

three things from that verse. First of all, any voice of condemnation that we hear in our hearts is always from Satan. The Holy Spirit convicts us of specific sins, but He never condemns us saying that we are useless or that there is no hope for us, etc. Secondly, we must never preach God's Word in such a way that people feel condemned after they have heard us. They must always feel encouraged and believe that there is hope even for the worst of them. Thirdly, when we witness to non-Christians, it must not be to condemn them but to save them. In my younger days, I used to give out many tracts on the streets and in the trains and buses. I did this to clear my hands of their blood. I wasn't aiming to save them; and I certainly wasn't willing to die for any of them like Jesus did. Each time I gave a tract, I was (silently) saying, "Now I have given you a tract. Your blood is not on my hands." I gave them tracts to ease my conscience so that they could not point to me and say that I did not give them the gospel. I didn't want them to say to me in the final day, "*You never told me about Jesus*". But I've discovered that that is *not* the way to evangelise. God sent His Son to save people, not to condemn them. Now I would rather give out *one* tract and save *one* person than give out 1000 tracts and save none.

John

In 3:30, we read John the Baptist's life-motto: "*He (Christ) must increase but I must decrease.*" We do well to make that our life's motto as well.

In Chapter 4, we read of Jesus' visit to Samaria. Jesus and His disciples were walking and came to Samaria and they were all hungry. If we went as an evangelistic team into a town and were hungry, what would we do? We would *all* go together to a restaurant and eat some food. But here we see Jesus feeling a prompting from the Holy Spirit to stay there by the wayside and *not* to go to the restaurant. So He told His disciples, "You go and eat and bring some food for me." While He was waiting there a woman came, and through her the whole city came to hear about Jesus. Jesus listened to the promptings of the Holy Spirit. So did the apostles. Philip was told to leave a revival in Samaria and to go to the desert. When he obeyed, he met an Ethiopian eunuch who got converted and took the gospel to Ethiopia where thousands got converted. There have been Christians in Ethiopia for 2000 years, because Philip listened to the voice of the Holy Spirit that day. And because Philip faithfully walked those many hours into the desert, God gave him a free trip back to his home, by lifting him up and transporting him (Acts 8). Peter was prompted while praying to go to Cornelius' house (where he had no plans to go) (Acts 10).

Jesus asked the Samaritan woman to call her husband (4:16). The woman said she didn't have one. Jesus replied, "*That's right, you don't have any husband. You have had five husbands, and the one you are living with now is not your husband*" (4:18). Now she was really embarrassed and immediately changed the subject and began to ask Jesus about worship (*verse 20*). And here we see the graciousness of Jesus.

He sensed her embarrassment and changed the subject Himself. He was full of grace and truth. If you allow the Holy Spirit to show you the glory of Jesus here, He will change you into His likeness.

It is amazing that Jesus spoke the elementary truths of salvation to a bishop (*John 3*) and the most profound truths on worship to a 5-times divorced sinful woman (*Chapter 4*). Obviously Jesus saw more hunger in her for the truth than in the bishop. The Father in heaven is seeking all over the world for true worshippers “*who will worship in spirit and in truth* (reality)”. Under the old covenant, people could worship only in their body and soul – with hand-clapping and emotions etc. Many worship God only like that even today. But Jesus said that the time was coming when the real worshippers would worship in their spirit as well. This time has now come after Jesus’ death when the veil in front of the Most Holy Place was rent and man could go right into God’s presence and offer his body as a living sacrifice which would result in “*worship in the spirit*” (*Romans 12:1* - NASB).

Doing the Will of God

Jesus then told His disciples two things. First: “*My food is to do the will of Him Who sent Me and to finish His work*” (4:34). His food was *not* to run around and do “something for God”, but to do exactly what His Father wanted Him to do. Secondly, He told His disciples to lift up their eyes and look at the harvest that was ready for reaping (verse 35).

Some are called to sow and some to reap (4:36). My ministry has basically been *reaping*. Jesus said, “*I sent you to reap where other people have laboured.*” (4:38). William Carey came to India 200 years ago and suffered much and sowed much. Other godly missionaries have come since then and worked hard and sown and sown and seen very little fruit. But today, when I go to the remote villages of Tamilnadu, I reap a harvest from what these missionaries sowed. They will get a far greater reward than I will ever get, because they worked for years and saw very little or no fruit. The evangelist goes forth and brings people to Christ. He must then hand over his converts to a teacher and shepherd to build them into a body. There is no competition here. Some pastors say, “You are stealing *my sheep*.” They are *God's sheep*, not yours or mine. If they are *your sheep*, they will all go to hell. Only the Lord’s sheep go to heaven. I remember hearing the story of an evangelist who met a drunkard on a street once. The drunkard said, “Do you recognise me? I am one of your converts.” The evangelist said, “You must certainly be my convert, not the Lord’s convert, if you are in this drunken state!” Nobody has ever stolen *my sheep* because *I don't have any*. They are all the *Lord's sheep*. And if they can find better pasture in some other church, I won’t stop them from going there. Neither should you. Don’t ever be possessive of the Lord’s sheep as if they were your personal property.

In 4:46–54, we read of a royal official from Capernaum whose son was sick. He came to Cana to meet Jesus. Jesus told him, “*Go your way. Your son lives.*” When he went home and asked the servants when the child got better, they said, “***Yesterday*** at 1 o’clock in the afternoon.” So the official actually reached his home only the ***next day***. Being a royal official, he would undoubtedly have come to Cana in a chariot. Since the distance to Capernaum was only 25 kilometres, he could have easily reached home in 2 or 3 hours at the most. But he didn’t go back the same day. He slept the night in Cana and went home the next morning! Who would do that when a child is seriously sick at home? There we see his faith in Jesus’ words that his child had been healed. So he did *not* need to rush home. Do we have such faith, that when Jesus says “Your son is well”, you believe it and don’t have to rush home to confirm it?

In Chapter 5, we read: “*In Bethesda lay a multitude of people who were sick, blind, lame and withered*” (5:3). That is a description of many churches today: In them are a great multitude of spiritually blind, sick, lame and withered believers. Jesus has to come and heal them. One man had been lying there for *38 years*. The period of 38 years was the length of time that God punished the Israelites with wandering, for not entering Canaan: “*The time it took to come from Kadesh-barnea (the border of Canaan) until we crossed over was 38 years, until all the men of war perished, as the LORD had sworn*” (Deuteronomy 2:14). This lame man symbolises believers who are defeated and unable to walk in victory over sin. He had tried for 38 years to get into the pool as soon as the angel stirred the water. But he failed every year and finally gave up. This is a picture of life under the law. You try and try for victory but always fail and finally give up. Then Jesus comes, and you enter into victory in a moment. This miracle is a sign and a parable. In the wilderness, during those 38 years, *all the men of war died*. Man’s efforts and energy have to die. The Lord waits until we reach a zero point, before He comes. In 5:14, Jesus warned this man not to sin again lest he get a worse sickness. So this man’s sickness was caused by sin. Some sicknesses are caused by sin and cannot be healed until the sin is confessed and set right and cleansed.

When the Jews asked Jesus why He was healing people on the Sabbath day, He replied, “*Because My Father is working on the Sabbath*” (5:17). God the Father does not have any Sabbath-holiday now. The only Sabbath God ever had was the one mentioned in Genesis 2:2, before man fell into sin. Ever since, God has been working, because man has fallen. And so Jesus said, “I don’t have any Sabbath either. My Father works and I work.” Jesus was a full time worker – He worked 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Satan works “*day and night*” too – accusing the saints (Revelation 12:11). God wants every child of His to be equally wholehearted and available to Him – even if they are working in a secular job.

In 5:30, Jesus said, “*I never do anything on My own initiative.*” That means that He always waited on His Father to know what to do. He did

things when His Father told Him to. That was why He never turned stones into bread, even though He was very hungry – His Father had not told Him to do that. This is how we are to live too. This does not mean that we wait for vocal commands from heaven all the time. The Holy Spirit within us speaks to us by prompting us in our spirit to do something and also by restraining us in our spirit from doing something else.

In 5:34, 41, Jesus said, “*I do not receive testimony from men.... I do not receive glory from men.*” Jesus was satisfied with the testimony that His Father gave about Him. He didn’t want anyone else’s testimony. In 5:44, He said that it is the desire to receive glory from man that hinders us from having a living faith. Do you want to be a man/woman of faith? Then decide once for all that you will never again seek for honour from any man. Don’t seek for *theological* degrees to impress people. Satan is not scared of anyone with theological degrees. In the secular world, you need those degrees because it is only thus that you can get a job. But in the Lord’s work, it serves no purpose at all. It is faith that you need in the Lord’s work.

In 6:37, Jesus said, “*All that the Father gives Me will come to Me, and the one who comes to Me I will certainly not cast out.*” Two statements in this verse helped me greatly – one in my life and the other in my ministry. The *second half* of this verse gave me perfect assurance of my salvation in July 1959. I had been tossed about, unsure of my salvation, for about 6 years prior to that time. But on that day, I believed this word from the Lord and it was like dropping an anchor. I never doubted my salvation after that.

The *first half* of that verse helped me in my ministry. I realised that all those *whom I am called by God to serve* will come to me. So I don’t have to go around grabbing people from here and there. God has many servants on earth and He allots who all each servant is to serve. I should not grab someone who was allotted by God to someone else. That would be stealing. If God has determined that a brother should be shepherded by another leader, then if I am in fellowship with God, I should support that and encourage him to go to that church, and not to mine. This has brought great rest to me.

In 6:38, we have the clearest description (in a single sentence) of why Jesus came to earth: “*I came from heaven not to do My own will (that is, “to deny My own will”) but to do the will of Him who sent Me.*” That shows us that as a human being, He had a will of His own that needed to be denied. To take up the cross means to deny one’s own will. In heaven He could always do His own will because it was the same as His Father’s will. But His coming in our flesh basically means that He thereby got a human will that was different from His Father’s will – and which therefore had to be denied all the time. This becomes very clear in Gethsemane.

There Jesus' own human will was *not* to drink the cup. But the Father's will was that he should drink the cup. So He denied His own will and did the Father's will. That is what He had done all His life prior to that moment, as well. He did not come to earth merely to die for our sins. He came to deny His own will (as a man) and to do the will of His Father. One part of the Father's will was to die for our sins. Another part was to be an Example for us to follow for 33½ years of His life. He said "No" to His human will and "Yes" to His Father's will every single moment of His earthly life. That was why He never sinned.

All temptation is essentially *to make you do your own will*. If you say "No" to your own will, you deny yourself and die to your self-life (you take up the cross). Then you overcome temptation and get the victory. Then you will do the Father's will. It is here that we all need the power of the Holy Spirit – to put our own will to death. To "*crucify the flesh*" (*Galatians 5:24*) means just this: to "put your own will to death". You cannot do that in your own strength, but you can do it all the time in the power of the Holy Spirit. David couldn't kill Goliath without God's power and Samson couldn't kill the lion without God's power. And you can't put your flesh to death without God's power either. But with God's power *you can*. And that is why you need to be filled with the Holy Spirit.

John

Improving Quality and Decreasing Quantity

Chapter 6 begins with a great multitude (*verse 2*), and ends with 11 people (*verse 70*). If you want to know how to *improve the quality* of your church and *reduce its size*, you can learn from Jesus in this chapter. Of course, most preachers and pastors would not be interested in that, because they are always interested in increasing their numbers. Jesus was a great Master at improving quality and decreasing quantity. God reduced Gideon's army by 99% from 33,000 to 300, before Gideon could have God's presence with him that assured him of victory. God has always accomplished His purposes with a chosen few. Here we see how Jesus did it. He preached being *crucified with Him* (= eat My flesh and drink My blood – *verse 56*). This offended most people in this great multitude and most of His disciples left Him saying, "*This is a difficult statement*" (*verses 60, 66*). And Jesus never asked any of them to stay. He even turned to the 12 who were left and asked them if they also wanted to go. Jesus' attitude was, "*If anyone is offended with the message of the cross and wants to leave Me, he can go. I won't stop him. But I am not going to lower the qualifications for discipleship to suit anyone's tastes.*" What powerful churches we would have had on earth if every preacher had that attitude.

Today, preachers invite people to come to Jesus to be blessed financially and to be healed physically. Who will not want to come to a "*Jesus*" who offers you such things. But that is "*another Jesus*". Many believers who don't preach prosperity still believe that that is the mark of God's blessing

on them. This is a deception. Look at the multitudes of crooked business-men of every religion who are making money and imagining that God has blessed them! There is only one mark of God's blessing – that you are becoming more and more like Christ. The *real Jesus* invites us to "Come and die." Not many are attracted to such a message. That is not surprising, because Jesus said that only few will find the way to life (*Matthew 7:14*). But those few will build the church. They may face a lot of suffering and misunderstanding and tribulation on earth, as Jesus said (*John 16:33*). But they will do a work for God on earth that lasts for all eternity.

In 7:1, we see how we must use our commonsense. Because people wanted to kill Jesus in Judea, He did not go there. We should not go unnecessarily to some place where there is a risk to our life. Yet a few verses later, we read that Jesus went to Judea, because He sensed that His Father wanted Him to go there. We must be willing to go anywhere, if God leads us there. Then we can trust Him to protect us.

In 7:5 we read that Jesus' own brothers did not believe in Him. They despised Him. But after He was raised from the dead, James and Jude believed in Him and even wrote two epistles. Here we read Jesus' brothers asking Him whether He would be going to Jerusalem for the feast. He replied that He could not, like them, go anywhere any time He felt like. He had to wait for His Father's prompting. Since He had no such prompting as yet, He was not going. Jesus also told them that the world hated Him because He spoke out against its sin, whereas those who did not speak out against sin would be popular with the world. That is a word for all preachers. You can be a popular preacher if you don't preach against sin. Jesus was unpopular because He spoke out against pride, hypocrisy, the love of money, immorality, impure thoughts, greed, anger, and jealousy. The world will hate anyone who preaches against these sins today as well.

After His brothers had left, He suddenly decided to go for the feast Himself. Did He tell them a lie when He said a few moments earlier that He was not going. No. Jesus waited for orders from the Father and He got those orders only a few minutes after His brothers had left for Jerusalem. Then He went – and He was not bothered by the thought that his brothers would now think he was a liar! They couldn't understand that He lived by moment-by-moment leading from heaven. He lived His life like policemen who have a radio-phone with them – with which they are constantly connected to their Central Control Room. That phone is always on. And they can go to any place only when ordered to do so by headquarters. The Father did not want Jesus to go with His brothers to Jerusalem, and waste the time in useless gossip and conversation along the way. At times the Lord may tell you not to go with some brother, because he will waste your time with useless talk. Then it is better to travel alone.

In 7:24, we see a balance where Jesus said, "*Don't judge...but judge*". We must not judge anyone by their outward appearance. But we must

judge righteously. We are permitted to judge only those over whom the Lord has given us authority – for example a parent over his children, a supervisor over his workers, an elder over the members of his church. If we go outside those boundaries and judge others, then it is unrighteous judgement. We must also *not* judge merely by what our eyes see or our ears hear (*Isaiah 11:3*). We must make careful investigation before making a judgement (*Deuteronomy 13:14; 19:18*). Jesus also told us to judge a person's fruits (outward conduct) to see whether he was a false prophet or a true one (*Matthew 7:15, 16*). So we see that the Lord did not put a blanket ban on all judgement. If He had done that, we would be deceived by false prophets and never be able to discipline anyone in the churches.

In 8:1–12, we read the beautiful story of the woman caught in adultery whom the Pharisees wanted to stone. There are many Pharisees today too whose pockets are always full of stones to be thrown at others. Many preachers fling stones at people when they preach. Jesus never has any stone to throw at anyone. He always had compassion on people who sinned. We never see Jesus in the gospels criticising murderers, thieves and adulterers. But we do see Him condemning the Pharisees and religious hypocrites in the synagogues to hell. But to the woman caught in adultery, He said, “*I don't condemn you. Don't sin again*” (8:11). In those two sentences we have the *full gospel* – justification and sanctification. Jesus had told the Pharisees, “*He who is without sin, let him cast the first stone*” (8:7). So whenever you are tempted again to throw a stone at someone, remind yourself of two things:

1. The pit from which God pulled you out; and
2. The sin that still dwells in your flesh today.

Then you will empty your pockets of all your stones. You will never be able to throw a stone at anyone thereafter.

You may then ask, “But what about those who are deceiving poor people and swindling them of their money. Shouldn't we expose such preachers or is that also throwing stones?” The Bible says, “*Speak evil of no man*” (*Titus 3:2*). So we must not speak evil of anyone. But we can certainly say that *his teaching and practices are un-Scriptural and that Jesus would never do such things*. We can point out the serious errors in his doctrine or his ministry without ever speaking evil of the man himself. If you want to preserve yourself and keep your mouth holy for the Lord to preach His Word through, then be careful not to speak evil of people. At the same time, be discerning about the ministry of everyone.

The Truth Shall Make You Free

In 8:32, the Lord gave us a guideline to find out whether what we are hearing is the truth: “*You shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free.*” If what you have received is the truth, it will set you free. Anything that leaves you in bondage or brings more bondage or fear or guilt or condemnation into your life is not the truth but a lie. Don’t receive it. The context here is about being free from sin (8:33, 34). We must belong to a church where the word of God is setting people free from sin. I want to listen to a man whose preaching sets me free from sin – in my thoughts, words, actions, attitudes and motives. That’s how I know if a man is preaching the truth. That’s the way to test the truth, and not just by checking his doctrinal statement.

In 8:44, the Lord told the Pharisees (whose doctrines were all correct) that they belonged to their father, the devil. Jesus said that the devil was a murderer and a liar. If you tell a lie, Satan is the father of that lie and you are the mother of that lie.

Jesus said, “*We must work the works of Him who sent Me as long as it is day; night is coming when no one can work*” (9:4). This is an important word for us who live in India today. We must make use of every opportunity while there is the opportunity to preach the gospel and make disciples. The night is coming soon, when we will not be able to work. Jesus then went on to say what that work was. As long as He was in the world, He was the light of the world (9:5). But now that He has gone away from the world, our task is to be the light of the world (*Matthew 5:14*). We have to manifest the light (meaning *His life*) to the world.

In 10:9, Jesus said, “*I am the door; if anyone enters through Me, he will be saved, and will go in and out and find pasture.*” After a person has entered through the door and been saved what should he do? He must go into God’s presence and out into the world to serve, and then come back into God’s presence and go out again to serve Him. That is the balanced Christian life. It’s not that we ever lose God’s presence. But we must take time to be alone with God and not be busy “*going out*” all the time. That would be like walking on just one leg all the time. A balanced Christian has two legs. He worships God and he serves, as Jesus said in *Matthew 4:10* also.

In 10:28, 29 we have the verses that those who preach eternal security misquote. Jesus said, “*And I give eternal life to them, and they will never perish; and no one will snatch them out of My hand. My Father, who has given them to Me, is greater than all; and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father’s hand.*” That is a beautiful picture of perfect eternal security – and I believe in it with all my heart. But notice that verse 28 begins with the word “*And*”. So it is connected to the previous sentence which tells us clearly who are the ones to whom Jesus promises this eternal security. It is *not* to everyone who claims to be a believer. “***My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me; and I give eternal life to***

them." I believe this also with all my heart that eternal security is promised only to *those who are His sheep, who hear His voice (meaning that they obey it) and follow Him.* What about those who don't listen to Jesus and don't follow Him? *There is certainly no eternal security for them.* This is another example of how many Christians preach wrong doctrines by taking half a statement in Scripture or by quoting verses out of context. It is true that no-one can pluck us out of the Father's hand. But we can jump out of the Father's hand ourselves. God doesn't force anyone to go to heaven or to follow Jesus.

Dead to the World and Alive to God

In *Chapter 11*, we read the story of Lazarus of Bethany. When Jesus heard that Lazarus was sick, He waited for some days and finally arrived at Bethany four days after Lazarus had died. God's ways are not our ways. Jesus moved in implicit obedience to His Father and so He did not go anywhere until He had freedom in His spirit to go. This miracle also was a sign. What is the spiritual lesson here? God empowers us only when we come to a zero point. A sick man can still do certain things. So the Lord waits until Lazarus dies, and cannot even lift a little finger. And then Jesus came. Some of us are so strong that the Lord does not come to help us. He has to wait. You may ask Him to help you. And He will help you – but not yet, for you are still too strong. Paul said, "*When I am weak, then I am strong.*" We have to come to an end of trusting in our own abilities. Do you want to understand the Bible? Acknowledge that you are stupid in spiritual matters. Do you want spiritual power? Acknowledge that you are weak. Don't just acknowledge it. Recognise it.

Why do we get angry so easily? We think that it is because we are so *weak*. But that is not true. It is because we are too *strong*. If we were really weak, we wouldn't get angry at all. Consider a sick man who is taken to a hospital. The first day he loses his temper and complains about the nurses and the doctors and the food. The next day, he is a little more sick and his voice becomes weaker, and so he doesn't shout in anger so often. A week later, with tubes in his veins and his nose, he loses his temper only once in a while. Finally, when he becomes totally weak, he never loses his temper at all. He shouted in anger when he was *strong*. And he stopped shouting in anger when he became *weak*. This is what we can learn from the story of Lazarus too.

Again we see the Lord asking the people in Bethany to do the easy part – roll the stone away. Then He did the difficult part – raising Lazarus from the dead. After that, the people were again asked to do the easy part – remove his grave clothes and set him free. The new covenant is a partnership with Jesus Christ. We take His yoke upon us and work together with Him. We do the easy part and He does the difficult part. This is the secret of effective ministry.

In 12:24–26, we see the secret of fruitfulness. We have to fall into the ground and die as a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies. If it does not die, it will be alone. If it dies it will bring forth *much* fruit. Jesus Himself has given us an example in this area. This is the way of the cross which is hardly spoken of in Christendom today. We must take up the cross every day and proclaim this way to others as well – the way of dying to our reputation, our honour and our own choices. The secret of overcoming sin is also here. Dead people can't sin. If you kick or insult a dead man, he won't respond in any way. Even if you praise him, he won't respond. This is how we are called to live: "*Consider yourself dead...*" (*Romans 6:11*). This is a very blessed place to be in – where the praises and criticisms of men don't affect us in any way, because we are dead to the world and alive only unto God.

Bible-knowledge is good; but that alone will not bring forth fruit. Even Satan knows the Bible. If you are filled with the Holy Spirit as well, then that is even better. But that also won't bring forth *much* fruit. It's good for the rain to fall, but any amount of rain will not produce a crop. There has to be a seed in the ground that has died. This is the most oft-repeated statement of Jesus in the gospels. It is repeated *seven times* in the gospels in one way or the other: "*He who loves his life will lose it and he who hates his life in this world shall keep it to life eternal.*" (12:25). If you seek to save your earthly life, your reputation, your ambitions, etc. then at the end of your life you will be a frustrated, discouraged man. But if you are willing to give it all up for the Lord and for the gospel's sake, you will find eternal fruit waiting for you when you end your life on earth.

In 12:42, 43, we read the reason why many today do not proclaim the whole counsel of God and stand for Him: "*Many of the rulers believed in Him, but because of the Pharisees they were not confessing Him, lest they should be put out of the synagogue; for they loved the approval of men more than the approval of God.*"

In 13:5, we see Jesus at the end of His life, at the feet of His disciples, washing them. That is a good example for us to keep in mind and follow, because we hardly see any examples like that today. Most Christian leaders want to sit on people's *heads* and not at their *feet*!

In 13:7 is a word that we can receive comfort from in situations where we cannot understand why God has permitted us to face some difficult situation. The Lord says to us, "*You don't understand now why I'm doing this. But you will understand later.*"

What is the identifying mark of God's people? It is not carrying a Bible, speaking in tongues, having a cross on our church building or any such thing. It is love. Jesus said, "*All men will know you are My disciples when you love one another*" (13:34, 35). If you cannot love, you have disobeyed the one and only new commandment that Jesus gave. I am not talking here about loving believers who speak your language,

or who agree with you or who have the same ministry as you have. That is easy. Your love will be tested when you have to love a believer who is born again, but who is from a different community, or who disagrees with you, or who has a different ministry from yours. We must learn to love people who don't love us, who don't give us gifts and who don't praise us but criticise us. Then we will know whether we have the love of God or not. Human love requires a response from the other person. But divine love is unique in this way that it does not require a response. God keeps on loving whether man responds or not. And God can flood my heart with His love.

Greater Works

In 14:12, Jesus said, “*He who believes in Me the works that I do he will do also.*” Can every believer do the works that Jesus did? Yes – if we understand what Jesus meant. He was *not* saying that all believers would raise the dead or walk on water. He was saying that all believers would be able to do the will of God (whatever it was for their own lives) – because all the works Jesus did in His entire life on earth could be summed up in one phrase: “*The will of God*” (John 6:38). When His mother told Him to bring her water from the well, He went and brought back a full bucket of water immediately. He worked hard in the carpenter’s shop and earned His living and helped the poor people around him. He loved His brothers who irritated Him for more than 20 years in His home. We can do these works too. When He was a little boy, He helped Mary look after His younger brothers and sisters. As a mother, you can do the works Jesus did by looking after your children. If God calls you to preach, He will give you the power to preach. And if one day, God calls you to raise the dead, He will give you the power to raise the dead too.

Then Jesus said, “*Greater works than these shall he do*” (14:12). Does this mean that each believer will raise 25 people from the dead, when Jesus raised only 3? No. Jesus did not say “*more works*,” but “*greater works*”. What was the *one thing* that Jesus could not do during His entire 3½ years of His ministry? He could not make two disciples one with each other. All twelve of them were fighting to be the leader at the last supper. This was not due to any fault in Jesus. It was because they did not have the Holy Spirit dwelling within them. Only after the Holy Spirit came, could believers become one. This was the greater work Jesus referred to – the building of the church as one body. Albert Einstein was a great scientist. Compared to him, we are all quite ignorant. But we can do mathematical calculations today faster than Einstein could – because we have access to computers. We have greater facilities than he had in his day. In the same way, we are not greater than Jesus. But with the Holy Spirit having come to dwell within us now, we have greater resources to bring believers to oneness than Jesus had. Of course, it was because

Jesus laid down his life that we have the Holy Spirit Who enables us to do this greater work.

In 14:15, Jesus tells us the right motive for obedience under the new covenant. Under the old covenant the motive for obedience was the fear of punishment and the hope of reward (see Deuteronomy 28: “*If you obey God, you will be blessed. If you don’t obey God you will be cursed.*”). That is the way we make our children obey us: “If you obey Daddy you will get a chocolate. If you don’t obey Daddy, you will get a stick.” But we don’t make our grown sons obey with a chocolate and a stick. We want them to obey us out of love. In the new covenant, the Lord treats us like grown up sons and not like little children. So He says, “*If you love Me keep My commandments*” (14:15). If we don’t love the Lord, then our obedience becomes mere dead works.

The Coming of the Holy Spirit

In Chapters 14 to 16, Jesus speaks at length about the coming of the Holy Spirit and about His ministry. In 14:16, He called the Holy Spirit a “*Helper*” and “*Friend*” (MSG). This is our greatest need – a Helper and a Friend. Jesus said that when the Spirit is come, we will no longer be orphans (14:18). In 15:26, 27, He said that the Holy Spirit would back us up as we witness for Him. That means that when we get up to preach, the Holy Spirit will speak to people’s hearts and say, “Listen to that. That is from God.” What a difference that can make in our ministry. It is the Holy Spirit’s job to convict people in the world of their sin – as we preach (16:8). Then in 16:13, Jesus said that the Spirit would guide us into all the truth – that refers first of all to the truth about God and Jesus revealed in the Scriptures; and secondly to all the truth about *ourselves* – our sin, our self-righteousness, our selfishness, our pride and every area of un-Christlikeness that there is in us.

Then in 16:33, Jesus said, “*In the world you have tribulation, but take courage; I have overcome the world.*” He made it clear that His disciples would face tribulation, persecution and suffering from the world. He did not promise us prosperity and ease. But He said He had overcome the world and so we need not be afraid. What was “*the world*” that Jesus overcame? The world is defined in 1 John 2:16 as “*the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes and the pride of life.*” This is what Jesus overcame – because He was tempted in all points as we are and yet did not sin (Hebrews 4:15). Now we can follow in His footsteps and overcome as He did (See Revelation 3:21).

In Chapter 17, we have the longest prayer in the New Testament – and in it we see the burden of Jesus’ heart. In verse 2, we read, “*Father, You gave Me authority over all flesh, all mankind, to give them eternal life.*” This is a good word for leaders to meditate on. Why does God give us authority over other believers? It is not to rule over them, or to make

them serve me, but to lead them to eternal life – the life of God Himself – to make them partake of the Divine nature. And then in *verse 3*, He tells us that we can partake of that eternal life only through knowing God and Jesus Christ personally. In *verse 9*, He says, “*I don’t pray on behalf of the world, but for these whom You have given Me.*” There we see that our primary burden of prayer must be not for the world but for God’s children. Many people think it is a very spiritual thing to pray for the world. But Jesus did not. He prayed for His disciples because He wanted to bless the world through them.

God Loves Us as He Loves Jesus

In *17:10*, we see a beautiful exchange – that we can also do. Here we see the reason why Jesus had such tremendous authority in His life. He said, “*Father, all that I have is Yours.*” And the Father said (as it were), “*All right. In that case, all that I have is Yours.*” It is when we give our all to God that He commits His all to us as well.

17:23 is one of the loveliest verses in the whole Bible. “*God loves us as He loves Jesus.*” This is the greatest truth in the whole Bible and it revolutionised and changed my life when I was a young man. It delivered me from my insecurity, my inferiority complex, my jealousies, my spirit of competition, my fears, my depression, my timidity and every other wretched complex that I had inherited from Adam. This verse taught me that God would care for me as much and as tenderly as He cared for Jesus. Many verses tell us that God loves us. But this is the only verse that clearly tells us *how much* He loves us.

In *18:11*, we see the way Jesus looked at His being betrayed and captured in Gethsemane. Peter saw it as the work of Judas and decided to attack with his sword. Jesus however saw it as a cup that *His Father had sent* to Him. Judas Iscariot was only the messenger who brought the cup from the Father. It is wonderful to see this truth that the worst thing that someone can do to you if you love God, will only be a “*cup from the Father*”, because God is powerful enough to control everything that happens to His children (*Romans 8:28*).

In *18:36*, Jesus told Pilate, “*My kingdom is not of this world. If My kingdom were of this world My servants would fight.*” Every believer who fights for something earthly (including position in a church) thereby proves that his kingdom is of this world. A spiritual man fights spiritual battles “*in the heavenlies*” with Satan and his evil spirits, and not with human beings (*Ephesians 6:12*). Paul reminded Timothy about this “*good confession that Jesus made before Pontius Pilate*”, when he told him to run away from the love of money (*1 Timothy 6:6–14*).

In *19:10, 11*, when Pilate threatened Jesus saying, “*Don’t you know that I have power to crucify you and power to release you?*”, Jesus replied with a calm dignity, “*You can have no power over Me except what My Father*

gives you." This is the dignity with which we can face our enemies and persecutors on earth as well, for the Father loves us as He loved Jesus and cares for us as He cared for Jesus. Even if you are falsely accused and taken to court, remember that no magistrate or judge on earth can write a verdict against you as a child of God without your Heavenly Father's permission. Only what your Father permits can happen to you. This is why we can be at perfect rest in our hearts at all times and conduct ourselves with dignity everywhere.

In 19:30, Jesus cried out saying "*It is finished*". The entire work of our salvation was finished at that moment. The wrath of God against sin was finished because Jesus had taken our punishment and endured three hours of being forsaken by God on the cross. Immediately thereafter He went to paradise for three days. There are some Bible-teachers nowadays who teach a false doctrine that Jesus went down to Hell for three days after He was crucified. This is heresy. They equate *Hades* with *Hell*, because of a faulty translation of the word in the King James Version in Acts 2:31. Hades had two sections – Paradise and Hell (Luke 16:22, 23). Jesus went to the Paradise section along with the converted thief.

In 19:31, we are told that the day after Jesus died was a "special Sabbath" and *not* the ordinary Sabbath. Jesus was crucified on the Passover day. The day after that was always a special Sabbath day – being the first day of "*the feast of unleavened bread*" (Leviticus 23:5–7). The regular Sabbath (Saturday) came on the day after that – making it two Sabbaths in a row that week. So Jesus was actually crucified on a Thursday (and not on a Friday as most Christians believe). It is only thus that He could have spent three nights (Thursday, Friday and Saturday nights) in "*the heart of the earth*" (where Paradise was located at that time), as He had said (Matthew 12:40).

In 20:11, we see Mary Magdalene waiting outside the tomb of Jesus. She was given the privilege of being the first human being to see the resurrected Jesus and the beginning of the new creation. Mary Magdalene had been a demon-possessed sinner, and she was chosen so that it might be evident to all that "*Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners.*" In a world that values men, God chose a woman for that honour. Praise the Lord!

Many of us may wish that we could have seen the physically resurrected Jesus. But Jesus told Thomas in 20:29, "*Because you have seen Me, have you believed? Blessed are they who did not see, and yet believed.*" I don't know why this is so. But I believe the words of Jesus that I am more blessed than Thomas and all those apostles because unlike them, I have believed in Him without ever having seen Him physically.

In 21:3, we see Peter saying "*I am going fishing*". Peter felt that he had been a failure as an apostle and so was saying that he was going back to his fishing job permanently. Some of the other apostles also joined him. But if God wants you to be an apostle, then you will be a failure at

every business that you put your hand to. So Peter failed that night as a fisherman too. They must have tried to catch fish for 11 hours – from 6 pm to 5 am the next morning. They caught nothing. Then Jesus came and filled their boat with fish miraculously. This is the closing “sign” in John’s gospel. What is its significance? Just this that we have to come to an end of ourselves and finish with all confidence in ourselves before the Lord will come and meet our need – for victory over sin or whatever. We have to be defeated again and again, numerous times, until we are convinced that “*without Jesus, we can do nothing*” (John 15:5). This was the most important lesson that the Lord wanted to teach His disciples through all the signs in this gospel. If the Lord were to give us victory before we came to that zero point, we would

1. be proud of our victory and
2. look down on others who are defeated (imagining that we got our victory by our own ability).

John

It is no use being pulled out by the Lord from a 100-foot pit called “*Anger*” only to fall into a 1000-foot pit called “*Spiritual pride*”. That would not be victory at all. The Lord wants to give us victory in such a way that we will not be proud of it nor look down on others who are defeated. To accomplish that, He allows us to fail repeatedly many hundreds or thousands of times before leading us into victory and “*filling our boat with fish*”.

In 21:15–17, we see the Lord re-commissioning Peter for His service. Peter had been amazed at the catch of 153 fish (*verse 11*). He may have been calculating in his mind how much money he could get for all those fish. He may have thought that if the Lord blessed Him like this every day, very soon he would be the richest fisherman in Galilee – and of course He would give 10% of His earnings for God’s work! As he was musing on the blessings of this “*prosperity gospel*” (!!), Jesus asked him, “*Do you love Me more than these (fish)?*” That question pierced his heart like a sword. He responds saying that he loved the Lord – but he used a weaker word for “*love*” (*phileo* – the love of a man for his friend) than the one Jesus used (*agape* – the supreme love that a man should have for God). The Lord asked him the same question a second time. Again he replied that he had *phileo-love* for the Lord. The third time the Lord descended to his level and asked him if he had at least *phileo-love* for Him. Peter is no longer the proud, boastful man he was a few days earlier. He is so broken and uncertain that all he can say (as it were) is, “*Lord, I really don’t know whether I love you even with phileo-love. You alone know my heart. You know all things. I think I love You, but You know.*” Peter is not sure at all of his love, but he is sincere. And the Lord commissions him for His service right there, charging him to look after and feed His lambs and His sheep.

New-covenant service is based on love for the Lord. The Lord wants only those *who love Him with all their hearts* (more than everything else), to serve Him. And that is the question He asks of us today as well.

In 21:18–23, the Lord told Peter that when he becomes old, he will suffer and die for his faith. As soon as Peter heard that, he looked at John and asked, “*Lord, what about this man? Will he also suffer and die like me or will he have a cushy time?*” Jesus replied, “*That is none of your business. I have called you to follow Me. You mind your own business.*” We need to hear that word from the Lord. When you face difficulties and hardships in your ministry, do you compare your lot with that of other servants of the Lord? If so, the Lord’s word to you is: “*Mind your own business and don’t compare your lot with that of others. You follow Me.*”

All we have to do is follow Jesus – and we will finish our course with joy. May it be so for all of us. Amen.

ACTS OF THE APOSTLES

THE BIRTH AND OUTREACH OF THE CHURCH

The *Acts of the Apostles* is a continuation of what was begun in the gospel of Luke. Luke is the author of this book too. He describes the gospel he wrote in these words, “*The first account was about all that Jesus began to do and teach.*” (1:1). The subject of Luke’s Gospel therefore was “*All that Jesus began to do and teach*”. By implication, the subject of the *Acts of the Apostles* is therefore “*All that Jesus continued to do and teach – through His disciples*”. And that has continued through 2000 years right up to the present time. The story of Acts is an unfinished story. There is no “Amen” at the end of Acts. And the last word in Acts is ‘*unhindered*.’ The gospel of Jesus Christ has gone forth unhindered, despite all the opposition of Satan and evil men, for 2000 years and will continue to do until Christ returns.

There is a principle we see in *Acts 1:1* that we must bear in mind in all of our ministry: Jesus first *did* and only then did He *teach*. He preached only what He had already practised. He first did and then taught. This is the principle of all new-covenant service.

Under the old covenant, a man could preach what he had not lived out. But not under the new covenant. Even David (who wrote Scripture) would be disqualified for new-covenant service. Under the new-covenant, once a Christian who holds eldership in a church falls into adultery like David, although his sin can be forgiven and he can be restored to fellowship with the Lord and with the church, he cannot become an elder again. The standard of leadership in the new covenant is very, very high. So it’s important that we follow this principle. Jesus continues to do and teach today through us. If we want to understand *Acts*, we must understand the new covenant that God has established.

The Baptism in the Holy Spirit

In 1:5, we have a promise, “*You shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit.*” When John the Baptist said, “You shall be baptised in the Holy Spirit,” they immediately thought of an earthly kingdom. The mind of an old covenant person is always on earthly things. Even when many Christians say, “God has blessed me” they usually mean that He has blessed them materially – with money, or a good job, or a house. That is characteristic of old covenant people. If you find that your thinking is like that, it would indicate that you are an old covenant Christian. If you imagine that earthly blessing is the primary mark of God’s blessing, just think of the millions of people who are atheists who have got much more blessing than you – and you will see the folly of that way of thinking. The mark of new covenant blessing is that we become more and more like Christ.

The apostles were earthly-minded before the day of Pentecost. So when they were told by the Lord that they would soon be baptised in the Holy Spirit, they immediately thought that they would be getting an earthly kingdom. And so they asked, “*Lord, is it at this time You are restoring the kingdom to Israel?*” (1:6). The Lord replied, “*No. That’s not what I meant. It’s not for you to know times or the seasons on such matters. The Lord has put all that in His own power*” (verse 7). There are many who study the book of *Revelation*, seeking to discover the times for various end-time events. It’s not for us to know exactly when Jesus will come and set up His kingdom. But what we do need to know is the power of the Holy Spirit.

What is the identifying mark of being baptised in the Holy Spirit? Jesus made it crystal clear in Acts 1:8 that it was *power*. He never said a word about tongues being the evidence of the filling of the Holy Spirit. Neither did the apostles say a word about this. Yet many Christians today proclaim “*speaking in tongues (an unlearned language)*” as the “*initial evidence*”, even though there is not a single verse in the Bible that teaches it.

We should never use the historical sections of the New Testament to determine any doctrine. *Acts* is basically a historical book. Doctrine must be determined from the teachings of Jesus and the epistles only. Otherwise we can go wrong – because *Acts* tells us about a number of things that the apostles did that were wrong – Paul circumcised Timothy (*Acts 16:3*), Paul offered money for sacrifices and probably shaved his head too, to fulfil a religious ritual (*Acts 21:23–26*) and Paul and Barnabas had a sharp disagreement and separated from each other (*Acts 15:39*). We also read of all believers selling all that they owned and having “*all things in common*” at one time (*Acts 2:44, 45*). Many Pentecostal preachers loudly proclaim that since “*all spoke in tongues*” then (*in Acts 2:4*), therefore all must speak in tongues today. But they do *not* preach something else written *in the same chapter* that since “*all sold their property and had all things in common*” then (*Acts 2:44*), therefore all must sell everything they own and have all things

in common today as well. They selectively choose from *Acts* what suits their own views and thereby prove that they are dishonest in their handling of Scripture. So, as you can see, there can be a lot of confusion if we get our doctrines from *Acts*. *Our doctrines must come from the teachings of Jesus and the epistles alone.*

It is certainly God's will that every Christian should have *power*. To have power does not mean that you will become a fiery evangelist. You will have power to fulfil your own ministry in the Body of Christ. Consider the human body. To be a member of our human body, blood must flow through that member. An artificial hand cannot be a part of a body because the blood doesn't flow through it. In the same way, only where the blood of Christ has cleansed someone can that person be a part of Christ's body. But even if the blood flows in an arm, it could still be paralysed – and therefore be a useless member. If the paralysis is healed, and the arm gets power, will it become a tongue? No! It will become a powerful arm. In the same way, if a paralysed *tongue* receives power, it won't become an arm. It will become a powerful *tongue*. So if God has called you to be a mother and you get filled with the Holy Spirit, you won't become an evangelist; you'll become a powerful, Spirit-filled mother.

In 1:15, we read that 120 men and women gathered in the upper room waiting for the Holy Spirit. But we know that more than 500 believers saw Jesus after His resurrection (*1 Corinthians 15:6*). But out of the 500, only 120 waited! Not every believer was interested in the power of the Holy Spirit – even then. They were all happy to meet Jesus after He rose from the dead, but they had no interest in being baptised in the Holy Spirit. Less than 25% of those believers waited for the Spirit's power. We see such a disinterest in the Spirit's power among believers today as well.

In 1:22, we see the apostles looking for a replacement for Judas Iscariot. They looked for someone who could be "*a witness of Jesus' resurrection*" along with them. Notice that – they wanted a witness of Jesus' *resurrection* and *not of His crucifixion*. Never once do the apostles say that they are witnesses of Jesus' *crucifixion*. They always say that they are "*witnesses of His resurrection*." The gospel is incomplete without the resurrection of Christ. Most evangelists do not preach the resurrection as primary. They preach the crucifixion as primary. But the apostles preached the resurrection primarily. The reason why many Christians are gloomy is because even though they believe that Jesus rose up from the dead, they are not confessing it. Like those disciples on the road to Emmaus, they are gloomy and wear long faces. What a difference there was when they realised that Jesus had risen from the dead.

The Birth of the Church

Chapter 2: When those 120 people waited for the Holy Spirit, they did not know how long they would have to wait, because Jesus never told them.

If they knew it would be only ten days, it would have been easier for them to wait. When God keeps us waiting for something, He does not usually tell us how long we have to wait for an answer. God wants us to live by faith, because that is the only way to grow spiritually – and waiting is one way by which our faith is strengthened. If we knew how long we had to wait, then there would be no faith there. It is only afterwards when we look back that we can say, “I had to wait for three days (or three years)” for that.

If you had gone to those waiting disciples and asked them, “How will you know when you have been baptised in the Holy Spirit?” – they would *not* have said that they would speak in tongues. They would have said that Jesus had told them that they would receive *power*. You may ask “How will I know that I have received this power?” God can assure us of that, just like He assured us that our sins were forgiven. The Holy Spirit, Who bears witness with our spirit that our sins have been forgiven will also bear witness that we have been endued with power. Ask God to give you the assurance for both these important matters.

So they were waiting for power. But when they got power they also received the gift of speaking in unknown languages (*tongues*). The tragedy today is that many who claim to have the gift of tongues do not seem to have any power. Tongues *can* be imitated, whereas power to overcome sin and to be a bold witness for Christ *cannot* be imitated. Consider this illustration: You go to a shop to buy a computer (*power*). The shopkeeper tells you that a free CD (*tongues*) is also being offered with every computer. You didn't go to the shop to buy a CD but a computer. But since the CD is being offered freely, you take both the computer and the CD. But now your friend sees your CD and goes to the same shop and *pays for the computer* but brings home *only the free CD!!* How foolish! That is a picture of those who received the gift of tongues but not the power.

We read that a noise and a wind filled the house where they were praying and tongues as of fire rested on everyone's head. These were only the externals. The receiving of an anointing and power were the major events. The externals were different when Jesus was anointed. In His case, there was no wind or fire but a dove and a voice. But the power and anointing He received were the same as these apostles received. We all need to be “*anointed with the Holy Spirit and power*” as Jesus was (Acts 10:38). The physical and emotional experiences may vary with each of us. If someone were to give you an expensive diamond as a gift, it wouldn't make any difference if it came wrapped crudely in ordinary brown paper or in a shiny paper with fancy ribbons. It is the gift inside that is important. Only babies are taken up with the wrappings, the externals – the wind, the fire, the noise, the tingling sensations, etc. Adults are taken up with the gift – the anointing and the power of the Holy Spirit. When people

testify about and glory in the wrapping in which they got the gift, you know that they are still baby-Christians.

The tongues of fire that sat on everyone's heads indicated that the most important part of our body that God would be using in the new covenant age would be the tongue – a tongue set on fire by the Holy Spirit and under His total control all the time. This is also part of the symbolism of the gift of tongues. God wants to use your tongue to bless others with, not only if you are a preacher, but also in your ordinary conversations with people every day. But for this, you must let the Holy Spirit have full control of your speech, 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

In 2:14, we see one wonderful result of the Spirit indwelling all the apostles. We read here, “*Peter stood up, backed by the other eleven*” (MSG). What Jesus could not accomplish in His entire lifetime is now accomplished at last: The twelve are all one body now. They did not compete to have the honour to preach. They supported Peter and were 100% behind him as he spoke. This is the greater work that Jesus had said they would do after the Spirit came – the Holy Spirit had baptised them into one body.

In 2:17, Peter said that the outpouring of the Holy Spirit was the fulfilment of the prophecy of Joel. All men and women could now have the Spirit poured out on them and they could prophesy. This was a privilege reserved only for kings and priests under the old covenant. But under the new covenant, all can receive the Spirit. We need to recognise what a tremendous honour this is.

In 2:22, 23, we see the Spirit-filled Peter proclaiming the Lord Jesus as a Man, “*Jesus the Nazarene, a **Man** attested to you by God.*” In the very first gospel sermon ever preached, Jesus is proclaimed as a *Man*.

Jesus was always God and still is. That can never change. But once He became a Man, **He is always a Man too. He never ceased to be God when He came to earth and He never ceased to be Man when He went back to heaven. He is fully God and fully Man even today.**

In 1 Timothy 2:4, 5, we are told that “*there is one mediator between God and man, the **Man** Christ Jesus.*” The Bible never calls Him the “God-Man”, as some Christians do. The Bible calls Him “**the Man** Christ Jesus.” And Peter, filled with the Spirit, is inspired by the Spirit to call Jesus “*a Man*” – because our Lord has identified Himself with our humanity completely and permanently. Hallelujah!

In 2:23, we read that Jesus' crucifixion was according to “*the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God*”. The *worst thing* that ever happened on this earth was the crucifixion of Christ – because there never was a greater crime committed on this earth than that. And the *best thing* that ever happened on this earth was the crucifixion of Christ – because that alone brought redemption to man. God in His foreknowledge turned the worst into the best. And this God is our God.

By His almighty power, He can make the worst things that the devil does to us (either directly or through his agents) to be turned into the very best things for us – because God has a predetermined plan for us, His children, too.

In 2:38–40, when people were convicted of their sins when the first gospel sermon was preached, Peter exhorted them to “**repent and be baptized to receive the gift of the Holy Spirit... and be saved from this perverse generation.**” These were the four things Peter preached – *repentance, water baptism (which implied faith), baptism in the Holy Spirit and separation from the spirit of this world*. Today’s gospel preaching does not include any of these four matters – and that is why there are so many “half-converted believers” sitting in churches. Most of today’s evangelists *don’t preach repentance*, because if they did, they won’t get so many people to raise their hands to be “saved”!! They *don’t preach water-baptism* because that would offend the bishops who sit behind them on the platform, who baptise infants in their churches. They don’t preach the baptism in the Holy Spirit because that would sound too “*Pentecostal*”! And they don’t preach separation from the spirit of the world, because many of them are lovers of money themselves!! Peter, however, preached the whole counsel of God, because he was only interested in pleasing God. Be like Peter.

In 2:42, we see the beginning of house-fellowships where the Body of Christ began to be built. Those who were saved continued in the apostles’ teaching, fellowship, breaking of bread and prayer – obviously in small groups in different homes, because they did not have any buildings to meet in. And the Lord added to their number every day those who were saved (2:47). It’s the Lord who adds to the church. Our part is only to proclaim the undiluted, full gospel.

Working Two By Two

In 3:1, we see Peter and John working together. This had never happened before the day of Pentecost. They were diametrically opposed to each other in personality and were in competition with each other before this – as we saw in Peter’s closing comments about John in *John 21:21*. This was the unity that Jesus longed to see in them but never saw, because the Holy Spirit was not indwelling Peter and John then. In those days, John would always be with his brother James. Peter was also a part of the inner trio of Jesus, but John and James tried to get Peter pushed out, and asked Jesus to reserve the two seats on either side of His future throne for both of them alone! But things have changed now – for the Spirit had come. No-one is seeking his own now, or trying to promote himself. Peter and John who never fellowshipped together before, go to prayer together now. In that unity there is power.

In *Chapter 3* we read of the healing of a lame man. He was over 40 years old (4:22), lame from birth, and was brought to the Beautiful Gate of the temple every day to beg. He must have sat there every day for the previous 20 years at least. Jesus would have seen him frequently. And Jesus would have given him money each time – not healing. Why didn't Jesus heal him? Because He had no leading from His Father to do so. Some people imagine that Jesus went around healing everybody. He didn't. He went to the pool of Bethesda where multitudes of sick people lay and He healed only one lame man. He never healed this man at the Temple gate even though He saw him frequently. If Jesus had healed him, the revival that broke out in *Acts 3 and 4* through this man's healing, would not have taken place. We can hinder God's work if we act according to our own reason without seeking the will of God in prayer. This is why Jesus told Martha that the most important thing was not to do some service for Him but to listen to Him first (like Mary did) and then to do what He tells us to do. The Father's time for that man to be healed was after the day of Pentecost through Peter. That teaches us a lesson. Even if we have a spiritual gift, we must exercise it only as God leads us to – and not as *we* think best. Otherwise, we will hinder God's purposes. But who understands this nowadays?

Most believers are not in touch with the Holy Spirit. They live by rules such as, "*Everybody can be healed supernaturally*", or "*Nobody can be healed supernaturally*" – depending on whether you are Pentecostal or anti-Pentecostal. Jesus however did not live by rules but by the leading of the Holy Spirit. Those who live by rules are legalists, and can never fulfil the will of God. Jesus was in touch with the Holy Spirit – and the Holy Spirit never gave Him the liberty in His spirit to heal this man. So, every time Jesus passed him by, he gave him only money. Thus Jesus fulfilled the will of God. Later on when Peter came by and the man asked Peter for money, Peter said, "I don't have money to give you, but in the Name of Jesus stand up." The result was that 5000 people were saved. 5000 people were born again, because Jesus obeyed the Holy Spirit for 3½ years, and did not heal this man.

This is a big warning to me – how I can hinder God's work if I "*lean on my own understanding*" (*Proverbs 3:5*), if I act without a leading from the Holy Spirit. It may be a good work that I am doing (what could be better than healing a lame man??), but it could hinder God's plans. God's ways are not our ways. The clever man, the man who lives by rules, will be a hindrance to God's purposes. Many Christians who live by upright principles and rules are the biggest hindrance to God's work. The man who is most useful to God is the one who listens to the Holy Spirit.

In 4:8, we see that Peter was filled with the Holy Spirit a second time. And then in 4:31, we see him filled a third time. So between *Acts 2* and *Acts 4*, Peter was filled with the Holy Spirit three times. This teaches us that the fullness of the Holy Spirit is something we need to experience

again and again and again. We have to keep on being filled. Yesterday's fullness is not good enough for today. Many who claim to have been baptised in the Holy Spirit in the ancient past are dry as a desert today. All they can do now is quote a date many years ago when they were filled. But God wants rivers of living water to flow through us always.

In 4:28, we again find the expression that we saw in 2:23, "*to do whatever Thy hand and Thy purpose predetermined to occur.*" When they were beaten by the religious authorities, they said, "Lord, this also is according to Your predestined plan."

In 4:32, we see that "*the congregation of those who believed were of one heart and one soul.*" The secret of the power of the early church was not only the fullness of the Holy Spirit, but also the fact that they were of one heart and one soul. They submitted to the apostles and they were completely united. They were not critical of everything like many Christians today. "*And they did not claim that anything belonging to them was their own.*" This does not necessarily mean that they sold all their property. But they did not say that anything they had could be used only by them – it was available for other believers in the Body who needed it. Nobody was in need, because those who had much helped those who had less.

The Sin of Ananias and Sapphira

In a situation like that, one can imagine how some people would take advantage of it. In *Chapter 5*, we see that Ananias and Sapphira tried that. Many people want to join our churches in India, because they see many hospitable, generous people in our midst. But if we are not careful to weed out such people *immediately*, very soon every poor person in India will want to join our churches, and we will have remarkable "*church-growth*"!! We will get "*converts*" who are interested in money, not in righteousness. In the old days, they talked about '*rice Christians*', who came to the missionaries primarily to get free food, free education, free medical treatment, and possibly a free trip to the United States as well. That attitude is still there today. For many Christian workers in India today, "*serving the Lord*" is a *profession* and not a *calling*. Many people have prospered financially by joining the church. If their prosperity came because God honoured them for being righteous in their life, that is all right. But if their prosperity has come because of the wealthy contacts they got by joining the church, then they have missed the will of God completely – because Christianity is not a way of making financial profit. The church is a place to sacrifice and give – not a place for profit and gain. It is a sad fact that many "*Christian workers*" in India today earn five to ten times what they would have earned if they had been in a secular job. Many "*Christian workers*" have never worked a single day in a secular job. Jesus never called anyone to be His apostles who were not

already working in a secular job. Christian work has become a source of immense profit for many in India today. Non-Christians look at them and say, "This person has become a Christian worker to make money." And they are right! How shall we shut their mouths? Only when Christian workers can show that they could have made more money in a secular job than what they get in Christian work.

At a time when everyone was selling their property and giving it to the apostles to distribute to the poor, Ananias and Sapphira thought, "How can we appear spiritual while still keeping our money?" So when they sold their land, they did not give all of their money. Their sin was *not* that they did not give all their money. God loves cheerful givers and doesn't want anyone's money. Peter said to Ananias, "*When your land was not sold, it was yours to do what you liked with it. And even after it was sold, the money was yours. But why do you tell a lie?*" (5:4). Ananias' sin was hypocrisy – pretending to be wholehearted. If he had said, "We sold that land for 50,000 rupees. But we feel we should give only 20% of that. We want to keep the rest for our own needs. So here is 10,000 rupees." Peter would have blessed Ananias – and he and his wife would have remained alive. Ananias never said anything. He told a lie without opening his mouth, by just standing in the line with all the other wholehearted people. But Peter was a man of discernment. Both Ananias and Sapphira were exposed by him and they died for their hypocrisy.

Why doesn't God act like that today? Because very few will be left alive in the churches then! Ananias and Sapphira were in the midst of a very pure and powerful church – and that is why they died. If they had been in some dead, carnal church (like the one in Corinth), they might even have been elders there. It is dangerous to join a church that is pressing on to perfection, if you are proud and a hypocrite. God will smite you and remove you from their midst, in one way or the other. But there are not many churches like that nowadays. So you will survive in most churches today. If you want to remain alive and be proud and a hypocrite, then choose a dead church to join.

In 5:29, we read these bold words that the apostles spoke to the religious leaders, "*We must obey God rather than men.*" In 5:41, we see that when they were persecuted and imprisoned and beaten, "*they rejoiced that they had been considered worthy to suffer shame for Jesus' Name.*" Their persecutors had the apostles whipped and flogged. The apostles didn't go away after this, with their heads hanging down. They lifted up their heads and said, "*Praise the Lord, we got flogged for Jesus' sake.*" They considered it a great honour. It was as if they had been given a gallantry award by a king. As Jesus had told them to do, they "*leaped for joy*".

These apostles have set us a good example to follow. ***We will have a lot of persecution in India in the days to come.*** So let us be ready for those days and get others ready too. And when it comes, let us also rejoice that we are counted worthy to suffer shame for Jesus' Name.

In *Chapter 6* we read about the disciples increasing in number and complaints beginning. This has been the problem in all churches, when they grow in size. When a church starts, it is small, and one can be fairly certain that everyone is a disciple. But when it becomes large, murmuring, grumbling and complaining start very easily, because many of the newcomers are relatives of the original disciples – and they may not be disciples themselves. But then something must be done about this problem to prevent it from spreading. It's like someone in a group getting a highly infectious disease. If you don't isolate that person, it will spread to others. Most complaints in churches are related to earthly things. The complaint here was about food. The Greek widows complained that the Jews were favouring their own widows in the distribution of food. It was a problem on communal lines, just as it is in many churches in India today.

The apostles were wise. They said, "We can't go into the food-distribution business, because that is not our calling. *We will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the Word*" (6:4). If you are called and gifted by God to preach the Word of God, don't ever backslide from that calling to become the director of some Christian social service organisation that offers you a good salary. Stick to being a teacher/prophet. Let others fulfil the other ministries. So the apostles selected seven men full of the Holy Spirit and appointed them for this task. Stephen and Philip were among them, but they became great preachers too. Stephen became the first martyr and Philip went to Samaria and brought a great revival there and became God's channel to send the gospel to Ethiopia by bringing the Ethiopian finance minister to the Lord (Acts 8). Like Elisha, who started by serving Elijah and later became a prophet, these two men also faithfully served the widows – and later, God gave them a wide preaching ministry.

Stephen – Full of God's Grace and Power

It is written about Stephen that when he preached to the Jewish religious leaders, they could not refute the wisdom and the spirit with which he spoke (6:10). That can be our experience too, when we speak. Stephen went on to ask them, "*Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute?*" (7:52). Every single prophet in Old Testament times was unpopular and persecuted. A prophet is different from a teacher. A teacher may be accepted by many, but a prophet is usually rejected and unpopular. A teacher is a non-controversial figure. A true prophet however is *always* controversial. So prophets are always persecuted, but not teachers and evangelists. Stephen preached in such a way that they were convicted. This made them so angry that they killed him. He was the first martyr in the Christian church (7:54, 55).

In the words written about Stephen in 7:55–60, we see some marks of a truly Spirit-filled prophet:

1. His mind is steadfastly set on heavenly things.
2. He sees the glory of God in all situations.
3. He is unruffled by the opposition of men.
4. His vision is fixed on Jesus at the right hand of God.
5. He testifies boldly about this Risen Christ.
6. He is persecuted and at times killed.
7. He forgives his persecutors and prays for them.

God allowed Stephen to be killed for many reasons – one of which was the conversion of Saul of Tarsus. I wonder if Paul would have been converted if he had not seen Stephen’s attitude when he was being killed. When the Roman centurion heard the way Jesus prayed for those who crucified Him, he was convinced that Jesus was the Son of God. When Paul heard the way Stephen prayed, his conscience began to prick him and he began to think, “This cannot be a false religion. Maybe I am wrong.” Later, on the Damascus road, the Lord told him, “*It is hard for you to keep on kicking against the pricks of your conscience*” (Acts 26:14) – and he was converted.

The way you react to people who do evil to you could trigger a reaction in someone watching you that could result in his salvation. Paul was just the first of many thousands who have been converted in the past 2000 years by seeing the godly reaction of Christians to persecution. But to react like that, we must be filled with the Holy Spirit.

In *Chapter 8*, we read of a great revival in Samaria that came through the preaching of Philip – a man who had started his ministry by serving food to poor widows. Many were saved and Philip baptised them. But he could not lead them into the baptism in the Spirit – just like many preachers today. So Peter and John came and prayed for them and they received the Holy Spirit (8:17).

We see the phrase “*baptized in the name of Jesus*” occurring four times in *Acts* (2:38; 8:16; 10:48; 19:5). But Jesus commanded His apostles to “*baptize in the name of the Father, and the Son and the Holy Spirit*” (*Matthew 28:19*). How do we explain this *apparent* difference? Many who read the Scriptures carelessly are puzzled by it. Here are three principles to be borne in mind when interpreting the New Testament:

1. When two Scriptures *appear to* contradict each other, both are true – the contradiction is only apparent.
2. Whenever in doubt as to which of two *apparently* contradictory passages of Scripture to obey, always obey the clear command of the Lord Jesus.
3. Never make a historical passage of the New Testament a basis for any doctrine.

The explanation in this case is this: Non-Christian religions also had a trinity – for example, Hinduism had Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva; and the Egyptians had their trinity too. So when the apostles baptised, in order to identify the Trinity as the Christian trinity, they baptised “*in the name of the Father, the Son the Lord Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit*”. This was called “*baptism in the Name of Jesus*” because it identified the Second Person as Jesus Christ.

When Simon the magician in Samaria saw people receiving the Holy Spirit through Peter laying hands on them, he offered Peter money for this power. Here we have the first example in the Christian age of someone trying to buy God’s blessing with money. Non-Christian religions have always encouraged people to give money to their god to get his blessings. Unfortunately nowadays, many Christian TV preachers and pastors are also preaching that you can get God’s blessings by giving money to God – through His servants; and millions of Christians are being deceived. But you can never get God’s blessings that way. Peter refused to receive such money – unlike most of today’s preachers. He told Simon, “*Your money perish with you, because you thought you could buy the gift of God with money. Your heart is not right with God*” (8:20, 21). Many rich people try to bribe preachers today by giving them money for their ministry. If we sense that a man’s heart is not right, we must refuse to receive his money. But where are the preachers like Peter today? Most ministries and preachers love money so much that they receive money from anyone and everyone. Some of them go from house to house with receipt books collecting money “*for God’s work*” from even unconverted nominal Christians. Neither Jesus nor the apostles ever did that (3 John 7).

Saul’s Conversion

In Chapter 9, when Saul met the Lord on the Damascus road, he asked the Lord two questions: “*Who are You, Lord? What will You have me to do?*” (verse 5 - KJV). These were two questions that he kept on asking the Lord all through his life. At the end of his life he says that his passion is to “*know Christ more*” and to “*press toward the mark to fulfil the will of God*” (Philippians 3:10, 13). The Lord did not show him the whole plan for his life initially. He showed him step by step. “*Go into the city and I will tell you what to do*” – was the first step (verse 6).

There was a man called Ananias in Damascus who was sensitive to the Holy Spirit, and who heard the Lord tell him to go to the place where Saul was staying and pray for him. When the Lord tells you to go somewhere, you can be certain that He has prepared people at the other end to receive your ministry. If, however, you go on your own, you may go to places where no-one is ready. Ananias was a humble, unknown brother whom God used to pray for Saul to be filled with the Holy Spirit so that Saul could become the mightiest apostle in the first century. All the

disciples those days realised that it was not enough to be converted, but one had to be filled with the Holy Spirit too.

In 9:25, we read how Paul had to be lowered in a basket through a window to escape being killed. In 2 Corinthians 11:32, 33, Paul related this humiliating incident to the Corinthians to show how God humbled him. In Acts 8, we saw how God lifted Philip up and transported him to another place. God could have easily done that for Paul here too, when the people were trying to kill him. But God's ways are not the same always. At times, we have to go through humiliating ways to escape from our enemies. But He saves us one way or the other.

Cornelius – A Non-Jew Who Feared God

In *Chapter 10*, we read of the gospel going to non-Jews for the first time. The Lord had told His disciples that they would be His witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and then to the ends of the earth. In *Chapter 2*, they started with the Jews in Jerusalem and Judea. Then in *Chapter 8*, they went to the Samaritans. And now it was moving to non-Jews for the first time. Peter was given the privilege to open the doors to the Jews and also to the non-Jews.

Cornelius was a man who knew nothing of the Bible or of God. But he was a devout man who prayed to God continually and helped the poor generously (10:2). An angel appeared to him and told him that both his prayers and his alms had been accepted by God (verse 4). So we see that God listens to the prayers of non-Christians too, if they are God-fearing and sincere, and He leads them to Christ Who is the only way to the Father (*John 14:6*). Many Christians, like Peter, imagine themselves to be superior to non-Christians. But some non-Christians, like Cornelius, are more God-fearing than many Christians. Peter also felt that he was purer than non-Jews. But God had to change Peter's opinion and to enlarge his heart. And God may have to change our opinions about non-Christians too. Peter was so stubborn in his opinion that God had to give him a vision to change his opinion (verse 11). In this vision, Peter saw a sheet containing clean and unclean animals and he heard a voice asking him to kill them and eat them. Peter refused to do so saying he had never eaten anything unclean – because certain animals were unclean according to the law of Moses and Jews were forbidden from eating them (*Leviticus 11*). But God told him not to call anything unclean that God had cleansed. This vision was repeated three times. Peter was perplexed as to the meaning of this vision when the messengers from Cornelius reached Peter's house with the message that an angel had told Cornelius to send for Peter. Then Peter understood that God was telling him to go to the house of this non-Jewish man whom the Jews considered unclean.

The angel who came to Cornelius certainly knew the facts of the gospel – that Christ died for the sins of the world and rose again from the dead.

Why didn't he then preach the gospel himself instead of asking Cornelius to call for Peter to come and preach the same message to him? What was it that Peter had that the angel did not have? I am sure the angel could have explained the gospel ten times better than Peter. But Peter had the experience of salvation which the angel did not have. Only a sinner saved by grace can tell another sinner about salvation. That is what we saw in the very first verse of *Acts*: Jesus did and then taught. If you don't have an experience you should not speak about it. Even the angel respected that Divine principle. So never preach what you know but only what you have practiced or at least seeking to practice.

When Peter came to Cornelius' house, he said, "*Now I understand that in every nation the man who fears God and does what is right is welcome to Him*" (10:35). (And not only in every *nation*, but in every *denomination* too). God welcomes those who fear Him, in every religion and leads them to Christ so that they can be saved. What if Peter had refused to go to Cornelius' house? Would Cornelius have been lost if Peter disobeyed? That would be very unrighteous of God to make Cornelius suffer for Peter's disobedience. If Peter had not gone, God would have sent James or John or someone else to him. If Ananias had not gone to Saul of Tarsus, God would have sent someone else. If you don't go where God tells you to go, God will give your ministry to someone else.

In 10:38, Peter describes Jesus' ministry thus: "*Jesus of Nazareth – God anointed Him with the Holy Spirit and with power, and He went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with Him.*" Even in Jesus' life, it was *power* that was the evidence of the anointing of the Holy Spirit. And with that power, Jesus did good and delivered people from Satan's oppressions. God fills us with the Spirit so that we too can do good to others and deliver them from Satan's oppression. We are surrounded by people who are oppressed by Satan – people who are discouraged, unhappily married, harassed by their marriage-partners, neglected by their parents, and some even contemplating suicide. God has placed us in the midst of such people so that we can help them to be free from sin and from Satan – and thus happy. If even Jesus needed to be anointed by the Holy Spirit to fulfil this ministry, how much more we! We read that when Jesus was anointed, "*God was with Him.*" And when we are anointed with the Holy Spirit, God will be with us too. When we stand in the pulpit to preach God's word or when we go to cast out a demon from someone, God will be with us to bless people.

In 11:28, we read of a prophet Agabus prophesying that there would be a famine all over the world. He didn't say exactly when it would happen, because Jesus said that "*the times and epochs are in the Father's hand*" (*Acts 1:7*). But it did take place soon thereafter.

Old Covenant and New Covenant Prophets

There is a difference between *old-covenant* prophecy and *new-covenant* prophecy. Under the old covenant, people would ask the prophets for guidance as to what to do and the prophet would *direct them* telling them what God had told him to tell them. This was because the people did not have the Holy Spirit to guide them. Only the prophet had the Holy Spirit. But under the new covenant the Lord says, “*They shall not teach every man his neighbour, saying, ‘Know the Lord,’ but all shall know Me*” (*Hebrews 8:11*). Now that the Holy Spirit can dwell within everyone, there is no need for any prophet to give ***directive prophecy*** to any child of God, telling him what to do. If he does that, the prophet would be taking the place of the Holy Spirit and connecting people to himself and not to Christ. The Bible says that the Holy Spirit Who dwells in us jealously desires us (*James 4:5*). What for? He jealously desires that we should have a direct connection with our Bridegroom and that no man should come between us and Christ. ***There are many pastors and self-appointed “prophets” nowadays who tell people what to do, where to go, whom to marry, etc. All such people are actually hindering the work of the Holy Spirit, for they give people the impression that God will not speak to them directly. Such prophets are (knowingly or unknowingly) inspired by Satan, for they come between people and the Lord.*** Always remember that the Holy Spirit jealously desires that you be connected to Christ so intimately, that no-one can come between you and Him.

Many people have asked me to find the will of God for them in some area. I dare not do that because I reverence God. Only one who does not reverence God will dare to take the place of the Holy Spirit in the life of another. I am always ready to give people advice concerning the actions they are considering. I can tell them the advantages and dangers of a particular course of action. But then I will tell them to pray and I assure them that God Himself will tell them through the Holy Spirit, what they should do.

So don’t ever try to find out God’s will for somebody else and thus take the place of God in their lives. It says about the Antichrist that he will sit “*in the temple of God displaying himself as being God*” (*2 Thessalonians 2:4*). There are false prophets today who have this spirit of the antichrist who are sitting in the church (God’s temple), taking the place of God – and telling people what God’s will for their lives is. Yet another proof that these self-appointed “*prophets*” are *false prophets* is that almost all of them expect money from people after they have prophesied to them – exactly like a doctor who collects his consultation fees!! Those who go to such prophets never grow in the Lord because they lose their direct connection with the Holy Spirit. The next time they want to know God’s will, they will have to go to the prophet again. The Holy Spirit wants to show you the will of God Himself – and not through someone else.

What did Agabus, a true prophet, do here? He said that there would be a famine. He did *not* say that therefore they should take an offering for the poor saints and send it to them. No. Because He knew that in the new covenant, no-one is supposed to tell another child of God what he should do. He knew where to stop, unlike the false prophets. A true prophet will speak forth what God has revealed to him about the future – ***and then stop.*** The believers in Antioch then sought God and the Holy Spirit Himself told them what to do. They collected some money and sent it to the poor saints. Directive prophecy is an Old Testament feature because people didn't have the Holy Spirit in those days. ***It is never found in the New Testament.***

All collection of money that we read of in the New Testament – whether here, or in *1 Corinthians 16:2*, or in *2 Corinthians 8 and 9* – was always and *only for the poor saints in the churches*. We never read of Paul or any apostle asking anyone to take a collection for themselves or for their ministry. They only recommended that the poor should be helped. Paul worked to support himself and trusted the Lord to provide his extra needs through the Lord Himself prompting people to send money for his needs – and not by his advertising his needs to them himself or by sending reports of his work to the saints.

The collection from Antioch was sent to Jerusalem through Barnabas and Saul (*Acts 11:29, 30*). There was a huge wall of separation between the Jews and the Gentiles. But God used a famine to bring the Gentiles in Antioch closer to the Jews in Jerusalem. Some of the troubles and trials that God sends into our lives and our churches are designed by Him to bring us closer to each other. When a believer is sick in a hospital, the other believers may provide food for his family and pay for his hospital expenses. Thus when the sick person comes out of hospital, he will be more closely linked to the body of Christ. So we can give thanks even for sicknesses that God permits.

In *Chapter 12*, we read that James was killed by Herod. Herod then imprisoned Peter as well. But the church prayed fervently for his release and he was miraculously released (*12:5–16*). God could have delivered James as easily as He delivered Peter. But when a man's time on earth is over in God's diary, God just takes him home to heaven. In the Old Testament, we read that the prophets Uriah and Jeremiah displeased King Jehoiakim with their prophecies. But Uriah was killed by the king and Jeremiah escaped (*Jeremiah 26:11, 20–24*). Here James was killed but Peter escaped. Do you ever wonder why God didn't answer your prayer like He did for someone else? When Peter testified at that prayer-meeting, James's mother would have wondered why God didn't deliver her son as well. If she were a godly woman, she would have recognised the sovereignty of God and rejoiced with Peter's family members at his release.

At times, we see one brother healed and another dying of the same sickness. We can only humble ourselves in such situations and accept God's sovereignty. We cannot explain them.

First Missionary Outreach

In *Chapter 13*, we read about the first great missionary movement out of Antioch. Barnabas and Saul who had gone to Jerusalem with the money from Antioch had seen the amazing release of Peter and were challenged. They had gone to Jerusalem to bless the people materially, but got a spiritual blessing in return, by seeing what prayer could do. "*He who waters others will be watered himself*" (*Proverbs 11:25*). When they returned to Antioch, they taught the elders there what they had learnt about prayer (*13:1, 2*). And they all decided to fast and worship God. They were *worshipping God*, asking for nothing. It's wonderful to fast and just worship. God spoke to them saying, "*Set apart Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have (already) called them*" (*13:2*). It is not mentioned here how God spoke to them. It must have been by a deep conviction in their spirits that this was what God was saying.

This was *not* the time that God called Saul and Barnabas. He had already called them earlier. Whenever God calls anyone, it will always be personally and privately. It may be confirmed in public later, as here. But don't ever think God is speaking, when somebody says, "Thus says the Lord, 'Go there', or 'Marry this person'", etc. You must throw such words into the trash-can, where they belong. If God wants you to do something He will speak to you privately. He may confirm it through other elders publicly. But it will always be to do something that God had already told you earlier. Saul and Barnabas had already heard the call. They were thinking about it, when, in a prayer-meeting, the elders heard God saying, "*Set apart for Me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have (already) called them.*" Saul and Barnabas had patiently waited until their fellow-elders also heard God – and then they went out, sent forth by their fellow-elders. This is how ministry in the Body is under the new covenant – unlike under the old covenant where prophets went forth on their own, wherever they felt God was sending them.

The Lord called me to full-time Christian work on 6 May 1964. I was working in the Indian Navy and was on vacation, having meetings along with an evangelistic team. As I was reading the Scriptures, God called me very clearly from *Isaiah 49*. But no-one sitting near me heard what God had spoken to me. It was a *private and personal* call. About an hour later, as I was meditating on God's call and considering resigning from the Navy, a man of God who was traveling with us (and whom I respected more than anyone else in India) came to me and asked me, "When are you thinking of leaving the Navy?" It was a prophetic word that amazed me. But it was an external confirmation of what God had already told

me inwardly. If God calls you He will call you *personally* first. A confirmation will come to you then from other godly men. But you must hear the call yourself first. This is the way we see it in the New Testament.

In 13:36, we read that "*David served his own generation in the will of God and then fell asleep*". We are all called to serve our own generation by doing the will of God. So make sure that you fulfil *all* of God's will before you leave this earth. To do that, you must be a man like David, about whom God could say, "*I have found David, a man after My own heart who will fulfil all My will*" (verse 22).

Churches Planted and Elders Appointed

In Chapter 14, we read how the Lord healed a lame man through Paul. It is interesting to see the fickleness of the crowds there in Lystra. One moment they were ready to worship Paul and Barnabas as gods, but very soon they wanted to kill them (*verses 13 and 19*). In the synagogue in Nazareth, Jesus also experienced something similar. Initially, the people there said, "*What gracious words He is speaking!*" But a few moments later they wanted to kill Him (*Luke 4:22 and 28, 29*). But they couldn't kill Jesus and they couldn't kill Paul – because God's time for them had not come.

They stoned Paul and dragged him outside the city, supposing him to be dead. Does God allow His greatest servants to be treated like this by others? He does – even today. He did not stop evil people from killing Jesus (when His time came). And God did not stop evil people from killing the early apostles. As far as we know, only John out of the original twelve apostles, died a natural death. Judas committed suicide. The other ten were all martyred. Paul was beheaded. Some of the greatest servants of Jesus Christ in history have been killed – and God did not stop evil men from killing them.

In 2 Corinthians 12, Paul speaks of an experience that he had 14 years earlier of being taken up to the third heaven and coming back to earth. That may have happened at this time when he was stoned in Lystra. While his body was lying on the ground outside Lystra, God may have taken him up for a short trip to the third heaven!! You can be certain that if God allows you to face intense suffering, He will also give you some precious rewards to compensate for that suffering.

In 14:21, we read that Paul went back to Lystra to preach. He was not afraid to go back to the city where he had been stoned. He strengthened the disciples there by telling them (from his own experience now), that "*we can enter God's kingdom only through tribulation*" (verse 22). Paul had the spiritual authority to make such a statement, for he stood there with the scars and wounds of tribulation on his body.

In 14:23, we see Paul and Barnabas appointing *elders* in every church they planted. You never see "*pastors*" being appointed in any church in

the New Testament. The word ‘*pastor*’ is found only once in the Bible (in *Ephesians 4:11*) – and it has been *mistranslated* there. The Greek word translated as “*pastor*” (*poimen*) there has been translated as “*shepherd*” in all the other 22 places where it occurs in the New Testament – and it should have been translated as “*shepherd*” in *Ephesians 4:11* too. Shepherds are *gifts* the Lord gives to the church just as He gives apostles, prophets, evangelists and teachers to the church. But none of these are *offices*. ‘*Elder*’ however is an *office* of leadership in the church. And there was always more than one elder appointed in every church.

Under the old covenant, God called lone individuals to be the leaders of His people – for example, Moses, Joshua and David. But once Jesus came, He started sending out His disciples *two by two*. Under the new covenant, the Holy Spirit called Paul *along with* Barnabas. God’s will is that a minimum of *two brothers* lead every local church. Only then can the Body of Christ be expressed. Jesus spoke once about the worldwide *church* (*Matthew 16:18*) and only once about the *local church* (*Matthew 18:17*). And in the context of the leadership of the local church, He said that He would be present in the midst, when *a minimum of two* were present (*Matthew 18:20*). A minimum of two elders (who are one with each other) are required to bind Satan’s activities in a local church (*Matthew 18:18, 19*). Two elders also are able to give a balanced leadership to a church.

In *Chapter 15*, we read of a controversy about circumcision. The apostles very wisely came together to discuss the matter. Remember this was at a time when there was no written New Testament. Such controversies are unnecessary today because we have the written New Testament with us. In those days, they were in a transition period between the two covenants.

Acts

Balance of Grace and Truth

In 15:36, Paul suggests to Barnabas that they visit the new churches again and establish the believers in them. There is something profitable for us to learn here. The apostle Paul probably had a greater burden for reaching the unconverted than any man who ever lived. He was always seeking to preach the gospel where Christ was not even heard of. Yet here we read that he wanted to go back to the believers in the different churches and establish them. There were still thousands of places where the gospel had not yet been preached. But Paul knew that it was important to build the babes in Christ together into one Body. Unfortunately, many neglect this in our day.

Barnabas then suggested that they take John Mark also along with them. John Mark had gone with them on their first journey, but had dropped out, finding missionary work difficult. Paul refused to give Mark a second chance, but Barnabas wanted to. After all, Mark was Barnabas’

cousin (*Colossians 4:10*)! The disagreement between Paul and Barnabas over this issue was so sharp that they separated from each other (15:39). The Holy Spirit had called Paul and Barnabas together for a special task. Paul was a strict man, majoring on *truth*. Barnabas was a gentle person who majored on *grace*. Between the two of them, the glory of God could have been manifested “*full of grace and truth*” (*John 1:14*). But they could not get along with each other. Was their separation in the will of God? No. God does not call people to work together just for a year or two. If they had continued to work together, how much more the work of the Lord would have progressed! At the end of his life, Paul said, “*Mark is useful to me*” (*2 Timothy 4:11*).

How did this affect John Mark? He was blessed by Paul’s attitude and by Barnabas’ attitude. Paul’s strict attitude must have made him take his Christian life more seriously. At the same time, Barnabas’ gentle attitude saved him from getting discouraged and giving up. It is when grace and truth operate together, that people are truly blessed.

We see that the apostles also made mistakes. The *Acts of the Apostles* mentions a number of the mistakes that the apostles made. That is why we should never establish any doctrine from the book of *Acts*. But the apostles learned from their mistakes. If this disagreement between Paul and Barnabas had occurred when they were 60 years old, they would have found a solution without separating. But they were in their 30s then – full of *zeal*, but with very little *wisdom*.

The failures of the apostles, however, encourage us, because all of us have made many mistakes. God turned their mistakes for the furtherance of the gospel. Now instead of one team going forth, two teams went forth. And both teams had one experienced person in it. Barnabas took Mark and Paul took Silas. So the gospel spread even further. God uses the things that the devil does, for the furtherance of the gospel. Praise the Lord! He can do the same with our mistakes too.

In 16:1, 2, we read of Paul meeting Timothy. It was Paul who had chosen Silas to be his co-worker. But God had someone else in mind for Paul – Timothy. When Barnabas left Paul, God saw that Paul needed another *gentle* person to replace him. And so He gave him Timothy, an outstanding young disciple whose temperament was very similar to that of Barnabas. Then we see another mistake that Paul made: He circumcised Timothy in order to please the Jews. Later, Paul got light on this and said that circumcision was unnecessary (*Galatians 5:2, 3*). But the apostles were in a transition period between the old and new covenants and it took time for them to get clear light.

In 16:9, we see an example of how the early Christians understood spiritual leadership. Paul was the leader of the team and he alone saw the vision of a man inviting him to “*come to Macedonia*”. In the next

verse (16:10), we read, “*When Paul saw the vision, all of us sought to go to Macedonia.*” The rest of the team had such confidence in Paul’s leadership that they said, “*Paul, if you have seen the vision, that’s enough for us. All of us don’t need to get visions ourselves. We are convinced that God has called us to go to Macedonia.*” It’s wonderful when a team has such a godly leader.

There are many Christian workers who work all by themselves without any fellowship or leadership. They choose that, because it is easier on their flesh! They can then do what they like, without consulting anyone. But ultimately they will destroy themselves. If you are young, you need a God-appointed leader to guide you. Those who reject godly leadership are on dangerous ground.

Led By the Holy Spirit

In 16:6, we read. “*They passed through the Galatian region and were not permitted by the Holy Spirit to speak in the Asian region.*” How did the Holy Spirit stop them in Galatia? Paul explains in Galatians 4:13, “*You know that it was because of a bodily illness that I preached the gospel to you the first time*”. Paul was planning to go to Asia Minor. But he fell sick while in Galatia, and so could not leave the place. While he was there, he preached to people in that area. Some were converted and churches were planted there. So God permitted Paul to be sick so as to stop him in a certain place where there were people to be saved. So don’t ever think that you will miss the will of God if you fall sick.

In 16:17 we read of a demon-possessed girl following Paul and Silas around and saying, “*These are the servants of the Most High God.*” Paul ignored her for a few days and then commanded the demon to come out of her. Paul didn’t want a testimony from any demon. Jesus also refused to receive testimony from any demon.

In 17:10, 11 we read that Paul and Silas went to Berea. The Bereans are called noble-minded, because they received the word of God eagerly and then studied the Scriptures daily to check whether what they had heard was Scriptural or not. Since they checked every preacher’s doctrine with the Scriptures, they were never in danger of being deceived by any preacher preaching false doctrines. And that is why Paul never had to write a letter to the Bereans correcting false doctrine, as he had to write to some of the other churches!

In 18:9, 10, we read that the Lord told Paul while he was in Corinth, “*Don’t be afraid of the opposition. Go on preaching boldly because I have many people in this city.*” We don’t have to run away from somewhere, just because there is opposition to the gospel there. If we face persecution, however, the Lord has commanded us saying, “*Whenever they*

persecute you in one city, flee to the next (Matthew 10:23). But it is good to seek the Lord even then, before we flee. If the Lord tells us to leave, then we must leave. But the Lord may at times tell us to stay on, as he told Saul. It's good to listen to God and not to go by the witness of external circumstances alone.

In 18:24–28, we read of a godly sister, Priscilla and her husband Aquila, helping Apollos (a zealous brother) to get a clearer understanding of the gospel. Priscilla appears to have known the truth of the gospel more clearly than her husband – because her name comes ahead of her husband's in four out of the five places in the New Testament where their names appear together (18:26). She knew that in the new covenant, sisters could prophesy (Acts 2:17; 1 Corinthians 11:5). At the same time, she knew her place as a sister and didn't try to share the truth with Apollos all by herself. She called Apollos home and sat down with her husband and they explained the gospel to him. As a result, Apollos went on to become a mighty preacher of the truth. Sisters can have a great ministry in this new-covenant age.

In 19:2, Paul asks a question of some disciples in Ephesus: “*Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?*” Paul’s question here clearly teaches us that:

1. It is possible to receive the Holy Spirit at the same time as one believes in Christ,
2. It is possible to believe in Jesus and yet not receive the Holy Spirit. That means one is not really born-again.
3. We can know with certainty whether we have received the Holy Spirit or not.

They replied saying that they had not even heard about the Holy Spirit. Then He asked them, “*Into what then were you baptized?*” This shows that Christians in those days were baptised *not* in the name of Jesus alone but “*in the Name of the Father, the Son Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit*”. That was why Paul expected them to have heard about the Holy Spirit when they were baptised. They then told him that they had been baptised into John’s baptism. Then Paul baptised them in the name of the Father, the Son *Jesus Christ* and the Holy Spirit. Then Paul laid hands on them and the Holy Spirit came upon them and they spoke in unknown languages and prophesied.

Notice the different operations of the Holy Spirit in *Acts*. In *Chapter 2*, the 120 were praying and the Holy Spirit fell on them. In *Chapter 8*, the Samaritans received the Spirit when Peter and John laid hands on them. In *Chapter 9*, Paul received the Spirit when Ananias laid hands on him. In *Chapter 10*, Cornelius received the Spirit even before he was baptised in water, while listening to a message, without anyone laying hands on him. Here in *Chapter 19*, they received the Spirit through the laying on

of hands. This teaches us that the Holy Spirit can be received with or without the laying on of hands, and before or after water baptism. The *method* is not the main thing but the *reality*.

In 20:17–35, Paul warns the elders in Ephesus after having been with them for 3 years. There are a number of things we can learn here about how we should serve the Lord. First of all, Paul preached “*repentance and faith*” (20:21). He did not leave out the message of repentance as most preachers do today. And when he is about to leave the elders he does not highlight the various themes of his sermons to them, but points them to the humble and simple life of service that he lived among them (20:18, 19). He could boldly say, “Look at my life and *follow me* as I follow Christ”. Our life must speak to those we have lived with, more than our words. Then he warned them to watch their own lives first and then to watch over their flock (20:28). He warned them that wolves would come into the church once he had left (20:29). Why didn’t those wolves come in when Paul was there? Because Paul was a *very strict gatekeeper*. Every church needs at least one elder who is a strict gatekeeper who uses his rod to protect the sheep from the wolves (*Psalm 23:4*). If on the other hand, the elders seek to get a reputation for gentleness, then the church cannot be kept pure, for the wolves in sheep’s clothing will take over and the church will be destroyed. Paul also told them how he had supported himself and his co-workers all those three years and never been a burden to anyone (20:33–35). Those elders, however, did not give heed to Paul’s warnings and so the church in Ephesus drifted away from the Lord (*Revelation 2:1–5*).

Paul’s Imprisonment

In 21:3–14, we see a contrast between carnal and spiritual “*prophecy*”. In Tyre, some Christians “*prophesied*” and told Paul that he should not go to Jerusalem. They were well-meaning believers, but they did not know how to stay within the boundaries of new-covenant prophecy. They spoke out whatever came into their minds, prefaced it with a “*Thus says the Lord*” and thought that it was prophecy. Many do that today too.

A little later, a true prophet Agabus, came and he prophesied (21:11). But he knew where to stop. He only said that Paul would be bound in Jerusalem. But he did not tell Paul whether he should go to Jerusalem or not. As we saw earlier in *Chapter 11*, in new covenant prophecy, although at times there may be warnings about the future, *no direction will ever be given* to any believer as to what he should or should not do. After the coming of the Spirit on the day of Pentecost, all can now know the Father’s will themselves (*Hebrews 8:11*). *There is not a single example of directive prophecy after the day of Pentecost in the Bible*. Do you see the difference between carnal and spiritual prophesying now?

So Paul went to Jerusalem. Did he go there in the will of God? He certainly did. The Lord appeared to Paul there and told him, “*Take courage, Paul. As you have witnessed for Me in Jerusalem, you will witness in Rome also*” (Acts 23:11). There the Lord clearly told him that he was in God’s will. So, if Paul had listened to those well-meaning immature Christians who “prophesied” and told him not to go to Jerusalem,” he would not have gone to Jerusalem or to Rome. And he would have missed the will of God. It was in the prison in Rome that he wrote *Ephesians*, *Philippians* and *Colossians*. We would not have got those letters, if Paul had listened to those self-appointed prophets in Tyre who imagined that the Lord was speaking through them. ***If you listen to people who give you directive prophesies, you will miss the will of God even today.***

But in the same chapter (*Chapter 21*) where we read of Paul not listening to men but to the Holy Spirit, we also read of his making one of the biggest mistakes of his life as a Christian when he listened to men and not to the Spirit. In 21:18–26, we read how he yielded to pressure from James, the leader of the Jerusalem church, to follow some Jewish temple rituals and to shave his head. This shows us how the greatest men of God can fail when they stop listening to the inner witness of the Spirit in their heart.

In Paul’s testimony in 24:16, we see one great secret of his life: “*I always maintain a conscience blameless before God and before men.*” He never allowed sin to remain on his conscience even for a moment. He confessed it to God and man and set it right immediately.

In 26:19, we see yet another secret of Paul’s life: “*I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision.*” The Lord did not give Paul a blueprint for his whole life when He met him on the Damascus Road. He showed Paul only one step at a time. And Paul obeyed – one step at a time. That is all that we are called to do as well.

In *Chapter 27*, we read the story where the ship in which Paul was travelling to Rome as a prisoner was wrecked. Yet, no-one died. Because Paul was on board, God protected all those who were on that ship from death. Whether it be a ship, or a car, or an aircraft, or a house, or a city – all who are in it get blessed if one man of God is in there.

In 28:30, 31, we read that Paul stayed two years in his own rented house in Rome. He did not ask the church in Rome to pay his rent, even though they would have been glad to do that. He was a man who was free from all men. He could not earn money making tents while in Rome. How then could he afford to rent a house for two years there?

Paul’s father must have been a very rich businessman, for only such Jews could afford to go abroad to places like Tarsus and give their sons the high education that Paul received. But Paul must have been disinherited by his family when he became a Christian. However, it is likely that

the family changed their mind later and decided to give Paul his share of the family inheritance. When he was arrested in Jerusalem, we read that his sister's son came to meet him (23:16). This young man must have brought Paul the news that the family inheritance had been released for his use. This is probable, because immediately *after this*, we read that the governor Felix hoped to get a bribe from Paul (24:26). A governor like Felix would obviously expect a huge amount of money as a bribe. How did Felix imagine that a poor preacher like Paul could pay such a large bribe? He must have known from the Roman commander that Paul had received a large sum of money recently.

It is this money that enabled Paul to rent a house in the most expensive city in the world, for two years. It is wonderful to see how God cares for His servants when they are old and weak, so that they are not put to shame. "*He silently plans for us in love*" (Zephaniah 3:17 - paraphrase). This should be an encouragement to all of us who are in the Lord's service. He will never let us down.

While Paul was a prisoner in that house with a Roman soldier guarding him, he preached the gospel of the kingdom of God to all who came to him. All the soldiers who were guarding him heard the gospel and some were converted too (Philippians 1:13; 4:22).

God saw that Paul had so much spiritual content in him that needed to be passed on to future generations. But Paul was a man who was always on the go. How could God stop him enough to make him put down in writing what he had learnt of God? By allowing Satan to imprison him in Rome. While imprisoned, Paul wrote some of his finest epistles – which might never have been written otherwise – epistles that have now been a blessing to people for 20 centuries. God's plans are always for our very best. He turns the evil that Satan does for His glory.

The last word in *Acts* is "*unhindered*". All authority in heaven and earth belongs to the Lord Jesus, and so the gospel has gone forth unhindered for 20 centuries now – and it will continue to do until Christ returns.

God has given Paul's example to us in the *Acts of the Apostles* for us to be challenged. Paul supported himself all his life and served the Lord, so that he would not be a burden to anyone. We see him as a unique example in many other areas too. Let us follow his example and serve the Lord in our day.

ROMANS

THE FULL GOSPEL OF GOD

The theme of Romans is found in the very first verse of this letter: ‘*the gospel of God.*’ This is God’s good news that He wants everyone in the world to hear.

As we go through the presentation of the gospel in *Romans*, you will find that Christians stop at different points along the way and that very few reach the ultimate goal that God has for them. Many Christians have not heard the *full* gospel of God. There are churches that call themselves ‘*Full Gospel Churches.*’ I have been to a number of them, but I haven’t heard the full gospel in any of them the way it is described in *Romans*.

Romans is the most orderly, logical, step-by-step presentation of the gospel found anywhere in the Bible. In Paul’s other letters (except *Ephesians*) he gives various exhortations and teachings all jumbled together. But in *Romans* he goes step-by-step.

Along this way you can stop at whichever point you like and go no further. Some who want only forgiveness of sins stop at *Chapter 3*. Others move further to justification by faith and stop at *Chapter 4*. Yet others seek for a life of peace with God and joy in tribulation, and stop at *Chapter 5*. Still others move further into a life of victory over sin, but stop at *Chapter 6* and remain legalists. Some move further still to *Chapter 7* and become free from legalism. Many think that the gospel ends with the triumphant life, filled with the Holy Spirit described in *Chapter 8* and stop there. But a very few move still further into understanding God’s full purpose of making them one body in Christ and reach *Chapters 12 to 15* and finally to *Chapter 16* where Satan is crushed under their feet – the climax of the gospel. You may discover as we study this wonderful letter that you have stopped somewhere along this way. If you discover where you are stuck, you can start moving on from there to enjoy the *full* gospel.

Good News for Sinners

The good news in *Romans* is for sinners. It is not for those who imagine themselves to be righteous. Jesus did not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance. So the first thing that we need to see clearly is that we are all sinners. That is what Paul seeks to establish in the first 2½ chapters.

There are two types of sinners – the godless, worldly sinner (described in *Chapter 1*) and the religious sinner who imagines that he is holy (described in *Chapter 2*). Jesus portrayed these two types in the parable of the father who had two sons (*Luke 15:11–32*). The younger son there was worldly, wicked, rebellious, godless and immoral. The elder son, however, thought he had done nothing wrong and that he was holy and righteous. It was difficult for the elder son to recognise that he was a sinner. It is more difficult for those who have grown up in religious homes to recognise that they are sinners. “*It is with difficulty that the righteous is saved*” (*1 Peter 4:18*). When Jesus was on earth, the prostitutes and thieves experienced salvation easily. But the “*elder brothers*” of that time, the Pharisees, the self-righteous sinners, never came to Jesus to be saved. Jesus told them in *Matthew 21:31*, that the godless sinner was more likely to be saved than the religious one. In *Romans 1 to 3*, the Holy Spirit shows us that there is no difference between these two types of sinners in God’s eyes.

Now we can look at *Chapter 1*.

We are told in 1:3 that the gospel of God concerns His Son Who was born “*of the seed of David according to the flesh*”. The humanity of Jesus is stressed right at the beginning of *Romans*. Jesus was born through the body of Mary whose father was Eli (*Luke 3:23*) whose ancestry went back to Nathan the son of David (*Luke 3:31*). The body of Jesus was *not created from nothing* inside Mary’s womb. God could have done that, but then Jesus would not have had the physical connection with Adam’s race that was necessary for Him to redeem us. Jesus’ body was formed from an egg that came from Mary’s ovary. The Holy Spirit supernaturally created the sperm that united with Mary’s egg to form the *holy body* into which Jesus entered from heaven. The body of Jesus was born with an umbilical cord connected to Mary’s body that had to be cut when He was born. If you don’t believe that, then you don’t believe that Jesus was *born of Mary*.

We know that Jesus Christ is fully God. But if we don’t believe that He is also fully Man, then we will not experience the fullness of the gospel message. The gospel of God concerns His Son who became totally one with our human race. It was only thus that He could bring us salvation and be an Example for us to follow. The only difference between Jesus and us was that He was not born with a sinful nature (“*old man*”) like we are born with – because He was born of the Holy Spirit.

It is of great significance that Paul emphasises the humanity of Christ right at the beginning of his explanation of the gospel. Just before Paul died, he wrote one last letter to Timothy and there he said, “*Consider what I say, and the Lord will give you understanding in all things. Remember Jesus Christ who was born of the seed of David and raised from the dead according to my gospel.*” (2 Timothy 2:7, 8). Paul always thought of the gospel as being connected with Jesus Christ who lived on earth as a Man. When we see this wonderful truth that Jesus “*became like us in all things*” and “*was tempted like us in all points and yet did not sin*” (Hebrews 2:17; 4:15), it will give us a totally new understanding of the fullness of the gospel message. The gospel in *Romans* is about being free from sin. And so Paul begins with presenting Jesus Who never sinned – as a Man.

He was “*declared to be the Son of God by the power of the resurrection from the dead according to the Spirit of holiness, Jesus Christ our Lord*” (*Romans* 1:4). He was of the seed of David, but at the same time He was (and still is) the Second Person of the Trinity – the Son of God. God demonstrated to the world that Jesus was the Son of God by raising Him from the dead. He was the first human being ever to rise up from the dead, *never to die again*. All others who were raised from the dead before Him died again. But here was One, who was to begin a new race of human beings, of which we too can be a part. This is the gospel – that God is making a new race from out of the old human race. That work has already begun on the inside of many people – and will become manifest externally as well, one day. If we cooperate with God, we too can be a part of this wonderful work that God is doing in these last days. That is essentially what the gospel is.

In 1:5, Paul says that God has given him an “*apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith among all the Gentiles for His name sake.*” God calls certain people to spread this wonderful gospel across the world. The greatest ministry anyone can have is to proclaim this gospel clearly to our fellow human beings and to invite them to become a part of this new race that God is making. If you see the glory of this ministry, you will see what a tremendous honour it is to preach the gospel. *All of us* are called to proclaim this gospel to others. But God calls some (less than 1% of believers) to devote all their life and time to proclaim this gospel. God called me when I was 24 years old to serve Him full-time – and He could not have given me a greater honour on earth. Everything in the world is garbage compared to the calling of God. And as time has gone on, my calling as a servant of Almighty God has become more and more glorious in my eyes.

I have heard some full-time Christian workers boast about the sacrifices they have made for the Lord. Such people have not seen the glory of

their calling – and that is why they think they have *sacrificed* something for the Lord. Paul saw the greatness of his calling. And once God called him to be an apostle, he never felt that his giving up the opportunity to be a businessman in Tarsus was a sacrifice he had made. He had actually been promoted!

Paul said, “*I am under obligation.... I am eager.... I am not ashamed*” (1:14–16). What he meant by “obligation” was that once God had opened his eyes to see this wonderful gospel, he became indebted to everyone in the world to tell them the good news; and he was driven by a passion to clear his debt. What sort of a Christian would you be if you had been given money to distribute to everyone in your town and you kept it all yourself. Wouldn’t it be right to call you a thief? It is the same when we don’t share the good news of the gospel with others. What a responsibility we have to clear our debt to the people around us! We don’t need large evangelistic campaigns to do that. There are people whom we know and meet regularly. Let us clear our debt to them.

The Gospel is the Power of God

The gospel is the power of God unto salvation – not for everyone but only for those who believe (1:16). You can experience the power of this gospel only in the measure in which you believe. If you believe the gospel only up to *Romans chapter 3*, then you will experience that much. If you can believe up to *Romans 4*, then you get that much. But if you believe all the way to the end (*Romans 16*), then you will get all of the power there is in the gospel.

Paul said, “*I am not ashamed of the gospel because in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith, as it says, ‘The righteous man shall live by faith.’*” (1:17). ‘Faith to faith’ refers to higher and higher levels of faith. First of all, the faith that saves us from the guilt of sin and makes us righteous before God (*Romans 3 to 5*). Then the faith that saves us from the power of sin, sanctifies us and makes us holy (*Romans 6–8*). Then the faith that leads us to consecrate ourselves to God (*Romans 12*) and that makes us part of the Body of Christ with whom we fellowship (*Romans 14, 15*). Then the faith that finally crushes Satan under our feet (*Romans 16*). At any of these points, you can stop and say, “That is good enough for me.” It’s just like studying in a school. Some students drop out after the 4th standard, some after the 8th and some after the 12th standard. But there are others who don’t stop even after they have got a Ph.D., but go on to post-doctoral studies. I wish we all had that sort of eagerness for spiritual things, where you are never satisfied with any depth of knowing God but want to know Him even more. You want to be all that God wants you to be.

I have prayed to God and said, “Father, I want to experience as much as it is possible for a human being to experience of the power of Your gospel, before I die. I want to experience the fellowship of Christ’s sufferings to the fullest degree in my body, before I die.” Why am I eager for that? Because I know I can’t experience any of these in heaven. Can we be beaten for Christ’s sake in heaven? No. Can we be taken to court for Christ’s sake in heaven? No. Can we be abused and scandalised for Christ’s sake in heaven? No. Where can we experience the fellowship of Christ’s sufferings? Only here on this earth?

Many believers are a long way from experiencing the full gospel. Most so-called “Full-gospel” churches are miles away from the real full gospel. The gospel is not just forgiveness of sins and the baptism in the Holy Spirit. Those are just the kindergarten lessons. The A, B, C of the gospel is forgiveness of sins, water-baptism and the baptism in the Holy Spirit. That is the beginning of the gospel, but not the full gospel.

In *Romans 1*, Paul describes the guilt of the sinner. Sin begins by not honouring God and not giving Him thanks (1:21). The first step downwards is when a person is unthankful to God for His goodness to him. When he is not grateful to God for life, health, food, etc. he has already started backsliding. Sin begins with unthankfulness, but it doesn’t end there. It progresses downwards to slandering, hating God, insolence, arrogance, boastfulness, hard-heartedness and many other things like that (1:29–31). Thrice it says here, “*God gave them up*” (1:24, 26, 28). Just as there is growth upwards “from faith to faith”, there is also a deterioration downwards “from evil to evil”. And God gives up on a person when he refuses to listen to the convictions of his conscience. God gives them up to various sexual perversions, worshipping created things and not the Creator, etc. At its root, every sin is really a worship of created things instead of the worship of God.

The Guilt of the Religious Man

In *Chapter 2*, Paul goes on to describe the guilt of the *religious* man, who judges the sinners mentioned in *Chapter 1*. “*You who pass judgement on others, do you judge yourself, because in the thing you judge other people you condemn yourself?*” (2:1). The sins that you find in other people are the very sins in your heart too. This was what the Lord tried to impress upon the Pharisees, “*You have caught this woman in adultery. Tell me, how many of you have not committed adultery in your heart? If you have not committed adultery in your heart, throw a stone at this woman*” (John 8:1–11). They all went away from the Lord because not one of them could stand in His presence – in the presence of God’s Light.

“*We know that the righteous judgment of God falls upon those who practice such things. And do you suppose this, O man, when you pass judgment upon those who practice such things and do the same yourself in secret that*

you will escape the judgment of God?" (2:2, 3). That person sins openly, but you sin in secret. Men don't see your sin and so they consider you to be a holy man, and that other person to be a sinner. But God may deal more mercifully with him than with you – because you have the worst sin of all – hypocrisy – which that other sinner doesn't have.

Hypocrisy and spiritual pride are among the top two sins in God's list – above murder and adultery. When you see that, you will discover in the story of the prodigal son that the elder son was the bigger sinner of the two sons. But the Pharisees didn't understand that. I find that most Christians can't understand it either – because they are as blind as the Pharisees of old. They think that the godless people are sinners. What they don't realise is that God sees their hypocrisy and their spiritual pride – their pretending to be holy, their giving others the impression that they are very prayerful and generous, when all that is not true in their private life. These sins are worse than murder and adultery. Have you seen that? *Chapter 2* is for those who consider themselves to be holy and who look down on the adulterers and the murderers and the drug addicts and the drunkards.

Christian churches are filled with such people. The more separated they are from the dead denominational churches the bigger Pharisees they become. The purer their doctrine is, the more their Phariseeism, because there is so much hypocrisy in their lives. They are defeated by sin in their private lives and yet they think they are better than others. If you consider yourself to be a better Christian than those in other denominations, then your responsibility is greater to manifest a life that is more Christlike than that of those others. If, however, you find even one person in a dead denomination whose life is better than yours, then you should hang your head in shame and say, "Lord, don't let me fool myself into imagining that my purer doctrine has made me a better person."

"What shall we say then? Are we better than them? Not at all. All are under sin" (3:9).

Do you imagine that you sought after God? But in 3:11 we read, "*There is no-one who seeks after God.*" But you may say, "That can't be true because I did seek after God." Then hear this: "*Let God be true and every man a liar*" (3:4). I believe what God has said here that no-one really seeks after Him. It is He Who seeks after us first and gives us the desire to seek after Him. All the knowledge of God that we have today is because of His mercy, and not because we sought after Him. So, none of us are better than or superior to any other human being. All we have is 100% due to God's grace – from beginning to end. If you haven't understood that, you haven't understood the gospel at all. If a person really understands the

gospel he can never be spiritually proud. If you look down on another human being, you haven't understood grace. Many born again believers have not understood the gospel properly – because they look down on others. One who has understood the full gospel will always keep his face in the dust.

Many believers, even though they talk about grace, haven't understood what grace really is. Deep down in their hearts they believe they have done something for their salvation. If you want to experience the full gospel, you must first acknowledge this: "*Lord, I am not righteous. I don't understand anything of spiritual truth. I have never sought after You on my own. I have turned aside from Your way and become useless. I have never done any good in my life. My throat is an open grave. My mouth is full of cursing and bitterness. I do not know the pathway of peace*" (3:10–18). These facts are true of godless sinners (like the prodigal son – Luke 15:11–24) and *equally true* of religious sinners (like the older son – Luke 15:25–32). As a result every mouth has to be shut before God, because everyone is guilty (3:19).

For many years, I have laboured to convince believers of what they are very slow to accept: That they are all filthy, good-for-nothing sinners. I know from my own experience, that this understanding is the very first step to experiencing a full salvation. Otherwise, we will all become self-righteous Pharisees. I have met so many believers whose spiritual growth has been stunted just because they have not seen the filth and corruption of their flesh – the human nature that they inherited from Adam. So this is how Paul lays the foundation for the gospel (in these first three chapters of *Romans*).

Paul had to emphasise this truth in these 3 chapters. I have found in my ministry that I too have to emphasise this truth again and again to believers. It is the clear understanding of this truth that will produce humility and Christ-likeness in our lives.

Paul was one of the holiest men on earth in his time. He had lived with a good conscience before God all his life (*Acts 23:1*) and was blameless according to the standard of the law (*Philippians 3:6*). But yet he saw himself as "*the chief of sinners*" (*1 Timothy 1:15*). This was because He had seen the holiness of God. If we live before God's face, there will be many times in our lives too, when we feel exactly like that. We cannot bear to see ourselves like that *all the time* – because we would become discouraged. But occasionally, God gives godly men a glimpse of His glory and His holiness that makes them feel that they are the filthiest, the most selfish, and the proudest of all the sinners on the face of the earth. If you have never felt like that even once, I would seriously question whether you have known God at all. You may have known only Christian doctrine and not God Himself.

It is much easier to lead “*a prodigal son*” to understand this truth than “*the elder son*” – just like it is much easier to build a new house on an empty plot of ground than on a plot where one has to demolish an old building first. One who has no righteousness of his own to glory in, is like an empty plot of ground. But one who has come from a godly home and who has lived a good life before his conversion, has so much of pride in his own righteousness to be demolished, before the Lord can build anything worthwhile in his life. This was why the worst of sinners flocked to Jesus when he was on earth, whereas the Pharisees kept away from Him. With self-righteous people, we have to use a bulldozer and dynamite to blow up their pride – and that can take a long time. Many believers resist this work of demolition, and therefore much of their old building remains – and they have spiritual problems all their lives.

I want to say to all of you who have lived a good life: Allow God to do a thorough work of demolition in you, destroying all your pride in your religiosity, if you want to experience the fullness of the gospel message. I am not suggesting that you go out and commit sin. No, not at all. All you have got to do is come into God’s presence.

Isaiah was perhaps the holiest man on earth in his time. But when he saw the glory of God, he saw himself as one of the filthiest men on earth (*Isaiah 6:5*). John was perhaps the holiest man on earth towards the end of the first century. But when he saw the Lord in His glory, He fell at His feet as a dead man. Many believers never experience the full glory of salvation, because they don’t apply the first three chapters of *Romans* to themselves. They imagine that it has a message only for unbelievers. But this is the essential foundation for the message of the gospel.

When you read *Romans 1*, you feel that you are not as bad as those people described there. That’s exactly how the elder son felt about himself in comparison with his sinful younger brother in the parable of the prodigal son. And that’s why he could not sit at the father’s right hand. And that’s why the anointing, freshness and power of the Spirit are absent in your life. Why are you so dry? Because you have not allowed the Spirit of God to demolish your own righteousness. You haven’t seen that all your goodness is like filthy rags in God’s sight (*Isaiah 64:6*). You will remain dry and empty all your life until you allow God to do a thorough work of demolition in you, such that you never again look down on a believer in another denomination, or another human being. Even after hearing this truth for 40 years in our churches, I find that there are some believers who still haven’t come to this place! So you see how difficult it is for God to demolish human righteousness in a person.

The Clearest Definition of Sin

The final conclusion is in 3:23: “*All have sinned and come short of the glory of God.*” Godless sinners and religious sinners are both *equally* guilty. Neither is better or worse than the other.

What is the clearest definition of sin? *1 John 3:4* says, “*Sin is transgression of the law.*” This refers to sins of commission. *James 4:17* says, “*One who knows the right thing to do and does not do it, to him it is sin.*” This refers to sins of omission. But the clearest definition of sin is here in *Romans 3:23*: Sin is “*coming short of God’s glory*”. Sin is not just breaking the ten commandments, nor even coming short of the standard Jesus laid down in the sermon on the mount (*Matthew 5 to 7*). It is more than these. It is coming short of the glory of God.

What is the glory of God? “*The Word became flesh, and we saw His glory...full of grace and truth*” (*John 1:14*). The glory of God was seen in the life of Jesus Christ. So when we put these two verse together (*John 1:14 and Romans 3:23*), we see that sin is anything unlike Christ. Who then can say that he is totally free from sin? No-one. Because none of us have become totally like Christ.

It is those who lower their definition of sin who imagine that they are totally free from sin. Pass-marks in God’s kingdom is not 40% but 100%. Anything less than total likeness to Christ is sin. Many believers feel that they were not *as bad* sinners as some others. But that would be like a student who got 2% in an examination considering himself better than another student who got 1%. But both of them failed! Even if you managed to get 99% in God’s kingdom, you would be in the same class as the one who got zero. “*The person who keeps every law of God but makes one little slip is just as guilty as the person who has broken every law there is*” (*James 2:10 - Living*).

Having known thousands of Christians in my life, I have come to the conclusion that the fundamental problem with the vast majority of them is that they have never seen themselves as filthy, good-for-nothing sinners in God’s eyes. They will acknowledge that they are sinners but not as bad as some others. This hinders them from enjoying the full power of the Holy Spirit for a full salvation in their lives.

Many people avoid sin, fearing *the punishment they will get*. But when God sees someone sin, He thinks of *the glory he is missing*. There is a glory that you will miss throughout eternity if you tolerate any sin in your life. The measure in which you tolerate sin in your life will be the measure of the glory that you will miss.

How does God make us righteous? We cannot make ourselves righteous. So God justifies us freely (3:24). Our sins are forgiven freely through the blood of Christ (3:25). We are justified freely. The Holy Spirit is given to us freely. And God writes His laws upon our heart and mind freely too (*Hebrews 8:10*). Yet many believers who have received everything freely from God act often as though they earned these gifts by their faithfulness. Why is this so? Because they haven’t understood the *second* part of the gospel.

The *first* part of the gospel is to recognise that you are a good-for-nothing, filthy, useless sinner, no better than any other sinner in

the world. The *second* part of the gospel is to recognise that everything we receive from God is a free gift. What have you got today that is not a gift? Your intelligence is a gift from God, your health is His gift. And this is much more true of the spiritual gifts God has given you. Those who *boast* that they have received the baptism in the Holy Spirit (instead of being humbly grateful for it) will never experience the fullness of life in Christ – for God opposes the proud (*1 Peter 5:5*).

These are two foundational principles that Paul lays down. If you have never heard the gospel like this, ask God to open your eyes to make the reality of this hit you. Say to the Lord, “*Lord, I am not better than anybody else and the whole of salvation is Your free gift.*”

Justification

The next thing we need to understand is justification. “*Justified*” means God declares us righteous. The Holy Spirit has devoted the whole of *Chapter 4* to this subject. Let me use an illustration to explain justification. Word processing programs on computers have a command called ‘*Justify*.’ When we type anything, each line will naturally be of a different length. While the left edge of the typed matter is in a straight line, the right edge will always be jagged. Now, if we highlight the typed matter and click the command ‘*Justify*’, the right edge immediately becomes straight. That is called ‘*justifying*’. And that is a good illustration of justification. Our lives are full of jagged edges caused by sin. Every line we wrote with our lives from the day we were born ended with a jagged edge. When we accept Christ, God highlights our whole life and declares ‘*Justified*’. Immediately the jagged edge lines up and becomes straight. It doesn’t matter if you have written ten lines or ten thousand lines. They are all justified. It doesn’t matter if you are ten years old or fifty years old. You are justified. When you look at your life now, you cannot believe that once upon a time it was all jagged. What a wonderful thing it is to be justified! It is “*just as if I’d* never sinned. That’s how God looks at us, when we are in Christ. Our sins are all blotted out and we are accepted by God just as Jesus Himself is accepted.

Justification is *by faith*. Hence Paul uses the example of Abraham being justified in *Chapter 4*. How did Abraham get a son? Did he deserve it? Was it because he struggled? No. He had sought for so many years to have a son and he could not have one. He finally got a son as a sheer gift from God. Justification is exactly like that – it is a free gift from God.

“*Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God*” (*5:1*). Once we see ourselves clearly as justified, we will live in a wonderful new world – at peace with God. And further, “*we have an introduction by faith into this grace in which we stand and rejoice in the hope of the glory of God*” (*5:2*). This glory of God which we had missed at one time (*3:23*), is going to be a part of us increasingly. This cannot make us proud, because it’s all a gift.

Let me illustrate this. Suppose I were to bring a cake in here, baked by an excellent cook. I didn't buy it. I was given it and asked to distribute it to everyone here. So I cut it and pass it around. You eat it, and you say, "Brother Zac, this is a fantastic cake." I cannot even be tempted to pride on hearing your remarks – because I didn't bake the cake. If I had baked it and you had expressed your appreciation, then I would be tempted to feel proud.

So, when someone says to you, "Brother, you are such a humble brother," and you feel proud of it, then you must have manufactured your humility *yourself*. If your humility was given to you by God, you could not possibly be proud of it – even if people praised you for it. You cannot be proud of a cake that you did not bake. In the same way, if someone appreciated your holiness and you feel proud of it, then your holiness must be something you manufactured yourself. If it was something that God did in you, then you cannot be proud of it. If you preach a sermon and people appreciate it greatly – if you produced the message, you would be proud of it. But if God gave it to you, then it would be a sin to be proud of preaching it.

Do you think the servants of Cana were proud when they served the new wine that Jesus had made (*John 2:1–12*)? They would have humbly acknowledged, "We didn't make this. We are just distributing it." They were not in the *production* business, but in the *distribution* business. Praise the Lord that that is true for us too. We are not called to be producers of anything, but humble distributors of what He has given us.

There is far more spiritual pride in us than we imagine. One reason is that we think that we have manufactured our virtues ourselves.

There are two things we need to understand clearly:

1. The depth of sin within us; and
2. The height of pride within us, when we do not acknowledge that everything we have is God's free gift.

Chapter 4:21 says about Abraham that he was fully convinced and assured that what God had promised He would perform. That is real faith – believing that God will do what He has promised.

A lot of teaching on faith today makes believers look inside themselves and to ask, "Do I have enough faith to get this from God?" And then if they don't get what they want, they are told that they don't have enough faith. But the more we look inside ourselves, the more we will get into bondage. Abraham did not look *inside himself* to see if he had enough faith to have a son. Not at all. He looked *upward* at God – and was convinced that God was able to fulfil what *He* had promised. *Faith is always upward-looking – at God.* After the great chapter on faith (*Hebrews 11*), we are told to "look unto Jesus, the Author and Finisher of our faith" (*Hebrews 12:2*).

True new-covenant faith looks away from Self to Jesus, the *Author* of our faith – the *Author* who *writes* faith in our hearts.

The object of our faith is never found *inside* us. It is what we look at *outside* us that determines whether our faith is strong or weak. Consider this: If you are asked to walk across a river over a strong concrete bridge, your faith will be strong to walk over it! But if you are asked to cross the same river over a rickety, weak bamboo bridge, you will have no faith at all! There you can see that your faith has nothing to do with what is inside you. It has to do with the quality of the bridge across the river. Your faith is determined by an object outside of you – a strong concrete bridge or a weak bamboo one. Or consider this: If you are asked to put your money in an unreliable bank, you will find that you don't have faith for that. But you would have faith to put your money in a strong bank that is supported by the government and that has been going strong for many years. Again, you can see that your faith is in an object *outside* you. So remember these illustrations, when you read the promises of God in the Bible too. Don't ever allow anyone to make you look inside yourself for faith. Don't ask, "Can I do this?", but rather, "Will God do this for me?" Abraham believed that God would do what He had promised.

The New Testament emphasises such faith. We read about going "*from faith to faith*". Many of us have had faith that our sins can be forgiven. The same God who forgave our sins justifies us as well. He imputes the righteousness of Christ to us. It says about Abraham that his faith "*was reckoned to him as righteousness*" (*verse 22*). The righteousness of Christ is put to our account by God, apart from any works we have done to merit it (*verse 6*). If someone were to put a million rupees into my bank account as a gift, I can't say I did any work for it. And if the one who tells me that he has put that money to my account is trustworthy, I would believe him, even without going to the bank to confirm it.

So when the Lord says, "The righteousness of Christ is imputed to you," we believe it. It is a great insult to God to say to Him, "I don't believe You." If your father told you, "I have put some money into your bank account," and you say, "Dad, I don't believe you," that would be a great insult to your father, if he were a thoroughly trustworthy person. This is why unbelief is such a serious sin in the New Testament.

We can also miss a lot that God has for us if we don't believe His Word. It says in *Matthew 13:58* that Jesus could not do many mighty works for people in one place, because of their unbelief. They needed help – and Jesus also wanted to help them. But He still *could not* help them, because they would not trust Him.

The Blessings of Justification

When we come to *Chapter 5*, we see the blessings of justification. Many times here, a contrast is drawn between what we received through Adam and what we receive through Christ. “*Through one man sin entered into the world*” (*verse 12*). In the same way “*through one Man, Jesus Christ, grace abounded to many*” (*verse 15*). In Adam we died. In Christ we can be made alive. We all inherited something evil from Adam. We did not have to learn to be wicked when we were born. Children don’t have to be taught to tell lies, or to fight with others, or to be selfish. It is all there within them. The contrast between Adam and Christ should teach us this: That as complete and total as the inheritance was that we received from Adam, equally complete and total can the inheritance be that we receive from Christ.

How did we all manifest Adam’s sinful behaviour? Was it by trying to imitate Adam? No. We inherited his nature. How then are we going to follow Jesus? Will it be by trying to imitate Him? There are many people in the world who try to imitate Christ who are not even Christians. There are Christians also who try to imitate Christ. We did not try to imitate Adam, and we do not have to try and imitate Christ. We partook of Adam’s nature and we must partake of Christ’s nature. Adam gave us his nature totally. And Christ will give us His nature completely too – in the measure in which we open ourselves to Him. The Christian life is a life of faith – of dependence on God. He gives us His nature – this is the message of the New Testament.

And here is where many people make a mistake. They think holiness comes through striving and attaining. There certainly is striving in the Christian life, and there is “*putting lusts to death*” in the Christian life too. But they are *the result of* partaking of God’s nature and *not the means to* have God’s nature. If we imagine that we can produce the divine nature we must be crazy. We did not produce Adam’s nature, we inherited it, without our choice. We can inherit God’s nature too – but this time we have to make a choice.

In *5:10*, we read, “*For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son, much more now that we are reconciled to God we shall be saved by His life.*” After we are reconciled to God, after our sins have all been forgiven, and after we are justified, we can be saved – *by His life*. We were saved by His death, and now we are to be saved by His life.

There are two salvations God offers us on this earth. One is through the death of Christ – and we have already seen that. But here it speaks about being *saved by His life*. What does this salvation refer to? By Christ’s death we are saved from the *penalty* of sin. By His life which He imparts to us through the Holy Spirit we can be saved from the *power* of sin.

When We Come Under Grace

Thus we come to *Chapter 6*. Now that God's grace abounds so much, what shall we say? Shall we continue in sin that grace may increase? The gospel message is that Jesus came to save the worst of sinners and that salvation is a free gift that cannot be earned. Some people may then say, "O, in that case it doesn't matter how we live!" There are millions of Christians (and even preachers) who act in that spirit, because they have misunderstood grace. That is why many of them fall into adultery and covetousness – sins that even the Old Testament prophets did not fall into. Did Elijah fall into adultery? Did John the Baptist or Elisha (who were all under Law) run after money? No. Yet most Christian leaders who claim to live under grace today, live at a much lower standard of spiritual life than them. Why is that? Because they have misunderstood grace.

Under the law, those Israelites took sin seriously. Under grace, we should take sin *more* seriously.

When we come under grace, our attitude becomes: "*How shall we who died to sin still live in it?*" (*verse 2*). We were baptised into His death (*verse 3*). Baptism is a burial (*verse 4*). It is not a sprinkling, but a burial. When you bury a man you don't sprinkle sand on him; you put him right underneath the ground. In baptism, as a person is buried under the water and then raised up, he is testifying to a death to an old life and to a resurrection to a new one. The old man (the will to sin) has been crucified with Christ and is buried and gone. The new man does not *want to sin* any more. He may fall, because the lusts in the flesh are still there. But he doesn't *desire* to sin any more.

When Jesus died on the cross, our old man was crucified with Him (*verse 6*). How do we know that? In the same way that we know that Jesus took our sins on the cross. God's word says so and we believe it. Then we experience it. When Christ died, He took the punishment of all our sins. None of us saw Him die. Yet we believe He died – and we have experienced His forgiveness. The same word of God also says that our old man (the will to sin) was crucified with Christ on the cross – and we accept it. Just as we can't get forgiveness of sins until we accept that our sins were laid on Christ upon the cross, we cannot experience the reality of being dead to sin, until we accept it as true. This is not something we have to do. God has already slain our old man on the cross.

The old man is different from the flesh. Many confuse the two. The lusts in the flesh can be likened to a gang of robbers that seek to get inside a home (the heart). The heart is our home. Inside the heart of every unconverted man lives an unfaithful servant called '*the old man*', who always opens the door for the lusts of the flesh to enter and rob us of all purity and love, etc. What did God do? He did not kill the gang of robbers. He killed the unfaithful servant (the old man). That is why even after you

are baptised, you are tempted just as much as you were tempted before – because the robbers are still alive. The lusts in your flesh haven't died. But your old man has died. The servant who opens the door has been killed in all those who have been truly born again. If I were to ask you who are born again, "Do you want to sin any more?", your answer would be, "No, I never want to sin again." That is because the old man has died. But the robbers still come every day. In fact after we are born again, the robbers are even more furious and eager to enter our heart.

Why do believers then fall into sin? Because the new man hasn't "eaten" enough and not taken enough "exercise", he is not strong enough to keep the door shut – and the robbers push their way in. If you don't read God's Word and meditate on it sufficiently and God's Word does not abide in you, or if you are not filled with the Holy Spirit, you are not strong enough to keep those lusts of the flesh outside. But with God's Word and the power of the Holy Spirit, you can keep those lusts of the flesh from ever entering your heart. It says here "*Consider yourself to be dead – reckon yourself to be dead to sin*" (verse 11). Then sin won't have any more power over your life.

When God says, "Your old man was crucified with Christ," you believe it and accept it. You say, "Lord, just as I accepted that Christ died for my sins, I now accept that my old man has been crucified on that cross and I have died to sin. From this day onwards, I am going to consider myself dead to sin and alive to Christ." To live this way every day, we need the power of the Holy Spirit. And so it goes on to speak about the grace that the Spirit gives us: "*Sin will now no longer rule you because now you are under grace, not under law*" (verse 14).

What is the difference between law and grace? In two simple sentences, I would put it this way: *Law means I do something for God. Grace means God does something for me*. What a difference! When a 3-year-old boy tries to write the alphabet perfectly all by himself, that's *law*. It will never be perfect. *Grace* is when his father holds his hand and writes the alphabet perfectly with no mistake or error. If, however, the child is stubborn and says, "No, I am not going to let you hold my hand," then of course he will keep on making mistakes. In the Old Testament, people were under law and they did everything on their own. That is why they made so many mistakes – and sinned all the time, even the best of them. Under grace, God promises to help us. But we are so proud and self-confident that we don't allow God to hold our hand. You won't make a mistake if you let your Heavenly Father hold your hand. Submit and yield to Him. Then sin will not reign over you any more. Sin (unconscious sin) will still be there in your flesh, but it won't be able to rule you any more – something like a king who has been overthrown and made into a slave. Praise the Lord.

Three Spiritual Marriages

Chapter 7 speaks about the person who has a desire for victory over sin and to live a holy life but who misunderstands how to live it. The Holy Spirit uses the picture of marriage here (*verse 4*). When we were unconverted, we were married to the *old man*. After conversion, instead of being married to Christ, we make the mistake of marrying the Law. Every believer makes this mistake when seeking for victory over sin. He first tries to get victory over sin in his own strength – this is being married to the Law.

In *Chapters 6 and 7*, we see these three spiritual “*marriages*” – first to the old man, then to the Law and finally to Christ.

The old man can be likened to a wicked husband who beats his wife, turns her into a prostitute and destroys her life and her happiness. This battered wife longs to be free of this wicked husband. One day her husband – the old man is dead. She is born again! Now she is free to marry again. But instead of marrying Christ she makes the mistake of marrying someone who looks like Christ – the Law.

The Law is perfect, and so it is easy to mistake the Law for Christ, because it demands perfect righteousness. The Law is not like the old man. He doesn’t hammer his wife or beat her or trouble her in any way. But he demands perfection. You must wake up promptly at 6 o’clock in the morning. You must have breakfast ready on the table by 8 o’clock. It must not be 8:01, but exactly 8 o’clock. That is *perfection*. Every part of the house must be absolutely tidy and clean. The shoes must always be kept in the proper place, the clothes must be washed perfectly without any stain, and ironed perfectly too. The Law never asks you to do anything evil. But how many young sisters would like to marry a good man like this who demands such perfection in every area? Marrying the Law after being married to the old man now looks like having jumped out of the frying pan and into the fire. He is a good man, but he is so demanding. He never asks for anything evil, but you can never measure up to his standards. Then you realise that you have married the wrong man.

So what can you do now? The Law – God’s Law – can never die! Here is a husband who is healthy and strong and who will live forever. “*The married woman is bound to her husband as long as he is alive*” (7:2). So the woman gives up all hope of ever being happy. Then God does something wonderful. He makes the woman die, and that breaks the marriage-vow. The first time it was the husband (the old man) who died. Now it is the wife (you) who dies. “*My brethren, you were made to die to the Law so that you might be joined to another, to Him who was raised from the dead*” (7:4). Now that you have died with Christ, you are not bound to the Law any more. And God raises you from the dead so that you can be married to Christ. That is the third marriage – and it is a glorious one!

But Christ is also very demanding. He is as perfect as the Law and says, “Breakfast must be on the table at exactly 8 o’clock – not at 8:01.

Everything must be spick and span. The house must be tidy”, etc. His standards are not one whit lower than the standards of the Law. In fact they are actually higher. The Law only said, “You shall not commit adultery.” But Christ says, “You shall not even lust after a woman in your heart.”

But there is a big difference between Christ and the Law. Christ says, “Let’s make breakfast together – you and I.” He wants us to do everything in partnership with Him.

Suppose you are one of those inefficient wives who can get breakfast ready only by 1 pm in the afternoon! The Lord won’t condemn you and reject you like the Law would. He says, “Never mind, we will work together and you will improve.” And so the Lord works with you and in a few days you manage to get the breakfast ready by 11 am in the morning. The Lord says, “Wonderful! We have moved from 1 pm to 11 am. We are going to make it to 8 am one of these days. We will press on to perfection.” If you are poor at washing clothes and the stains still remain on the clothes, the Lord says, “Never mind, we will work on that area too.” The next time you wash clothes, with His help, you find that there are less stains left behind. And the Lord is determined to work with you until there is not a single stain left on any of the washed clothes – He will work with you until you attain perfection.

Do you see how the Lord works with His bride? He doesn’t just give us commands like the Law does. He works with us – we are His co-workers. That’s the type of husband Jesus is.

Legalistic Christians however live by rules and regulations and as a result they live in perpetual self-condemnation and misery and bondage. And they make others around them miserable too, imposing their rules on those others and bringing them into bondage too. God’s children, however, are to live in “*a glorious liberty*” (*Romans 8:21*).

In the latter part of *Chapter 7*, Paul speaks of the struggle that goes on within us *after we are born again*. “*I agree that the law is good, but I am not doing what I want to do*” (verse 16). “*The good that I wish, I don’t do, but I practice the evil that I don’t want to do*” (verse 19). He is not speaking of deliberate sin. He is not saying that even though he doesn’t want to commit adultery, he still commits it. Or that even though he doesn’t want to kill anyone, he still kills people somehow!! He is not talking about such sins at all. He is talking about things that he cannot understand. “*That which I am doing I don’t understand*” (verse 15). This whole section (7:15–25) is dealing with those areas in our life where we want to do things perfectly, but where we slip up and fall, despite our best efforts. And the areas in our life where we still don’t have light on the perfect will of God.

Consider, for example, if you are a person with a bad temper. One morning you decide, “I have lost my temper with my wife and children

every day. But today I am not going to do so.” And you are absolutely sincere. You don’t want to lose your temper. But something happens that suddenly provokes you, and you lose your temper again. You regret it immediately. That was not a sin that you planned to commit. You didn’t want to fall at all – but you fell. That was not your old man. It was your new man who was not strong enough to keep the door shut against the lusts of the flesh. There are many good things we want to do but we find that we don’t do them – and we end the day with regret. We didn’t want to lust with our eyes, but in a moment of weakness, we slipped up. How can we ever be free from this wretched life (*verse 24*)? Is there a way? Yes, thanks be to God there is. Our flesh will forever want to sin, but our mind and our will are set to obey God alone (*verse 25*).

The Law of the Spirit

In *Chapter 8*, we read of freedom from sin in three tenses – past, present and future. We are freed first of all from the *penalty* of sin – “*no condemnation*” (*verse 1*). Then we are freed from the *power* of sin (*verses 2–17*). And finally, we will one day be freed from the very *presence* of sin (*verses 18–25*).

In *verse 2*, we read of two laws. “*The law of sin and of death*” operates just like the law of gravity – always pulling us down. What frees us from this law is “*the law of the Spirit*”. The law of the Spirit unlike the law of Moses, is not a list of commandments, saying “Thou shalt”, “Thou shalt not”, etc. It is a Life – “*the very Life of Christ Jesus*”.

Let me give you an example. If I hold a book in my hand, it will not fall to the ground. But the moment I leave it, it falls. How is the book held up against the power of gravity? By the power of life in my body. My power overcomes the power of gravity and prevents the book from falling. That is how the Lord keeps us from falling too (*Jude 24*) – by imparting His life to us through his Holy Spirit. The law of life in Christ Jesus can keep us from falling by the law of sin and death – as long as we allow Him to hold us. That is how we can be overcomers. What credit can we get for not falling into sin, when the Lord is the One Who is holding us up? As much credit as a book can get for not falling when I am holding it up!! But unlike a book that has no power of choice, we have to cooperate with the Lord – because we have a will of our own. We can choose to jump out of the Lord’s hand, and then we will certainly fall. But if we submit to the Lord completely, He will keep us from falling. So, I am not saying that a believer will never fall. What I am saying is that a believer *need not* fall.

Chapter 8:28 says, “*God makes all things work together for good to those who love Him, to those who are called according to His purpose.*” The gospel brings us to a wonderful position in Christ. We start out as sinners and receive the forgiveness of our sins first of all. Then God

declares us as righteous in His sight. We move on to overcome sin, then become free from the law and a legalistic spirit and enter into life in the Holy Spirit.

In *Chapter 7*, the words “*I*”, “*me*”, “*mine*” occur many times: It is all about “*me*” and “*my struggle*” against sin. But in *Chapter 8*, the *Holy Spirit* is mentioned 17 times. There it is about life in the Spirit. When we come into this life of submission to the Holy Spirit, then our Father begins to work in *all* the circumstances of our life to make everything work for our eternal good. Even if other people try to harm us, God makes it work for our good (8:28). This is a wonderful gospel indeed! If we believe *Romans* 8:28, we will never again be afraid of people or of circumstances, for the rest of our earthly lives. We will not live in fear that we might have an accident, or get cancer, or be harmed by anti-Christian fanatics, or anything else – because our Father is sovereign and controls everything and everyone. ‘*All things*’ means *ALL* things. That is why we can “*always give thanks for ALL things*” (*Ephesians* 5:20). If *Romans* 8:28 had stated that “God works *most* things for our good,” then *Ephesians* 5:20 would have read, “Give thanks for *most* things,” and *1 Thessalonians* 5:18 would have read, “Give thanks for *most* things.” But since *Romans* 8:28 says, “God works *ALL* things for our good”, we can give thanks always and for *ALL* things. If we give only 90% of our life to God, then we will be able to give thanks only for 90% of the things that happen to us, because either Satan or we ourselves will be controlling the remaining 10% of our lives!

Romans 8:28 is one of the most wonderful promises in the New Testament and it covers every single circumstance we can ever face – absolutely and totally. I have personally believed it and lived in the good of it for many, many years now. This verse is like a water filter. If you pour dirty water into a water-filter, it comes out as clean water at the other end. In the same way, when someone tries to harm us, that will work for our good. If a water filter can clean water perfectly, Almighty God can certainly make everything work for our good perfectly. If we believe that, then we can live within the filter of *Romans* 8:28 all our lives. Whether people seek to do good to us or to harm us, everything will work for our good finally – *always*.

From the time I was born again in 1959 up until now, no-one has ever been able to do any harm to me until today. Many have attempted to harm me. People have spread false stories about me and my teaching, and tried to trap me here and there. Many have hated me, as I have stood for the truth of the gospel, and even taken me to court. But none of them have been able to actually *harm* me, because I live within the filter of God’s promise in *Romans* 8:28.

So tell the Lord, “Lord, I don’t have any ambition on earth, except to do Your will on earth as You Yourself lived. I do not desire to pursue

after money, or honour, or fame or comfort. I don't want a single thing on earth for myself. I only want to please You every day. And I will judge myself in these matters constantly." Then all things *WILL* work together for your good. And that "*good*" is mentioned in the next verse – *Romans 8:29* – you will be made more like Jesus Himself. There is no greater good that Almighty God can do for you than that.

If, however, you have your own private agenda, then the promise in *Romans 8:28* is not for you. The vast majority of Christians do *not* live in the good of *Romans 8:28*, because they have their own plans for their lives and they only want God to come and bless them.

But those who seek the will of God alone can go on to say, "*If God is for us who can be against us?*" (*verse 31*). Nobody can stand against those who have God on their side. God will freely give them all things (*verse 32*), Christ intercedes for them when they are accused (*verse 34*), and no-one can separate them from the love of Christ. What a blessed position to be in. Such believers are more than conquerors in all situations (*verse 37*).

God's Sovereignty, Righteousness and Faithfulness

In *Chapters 9 to 11*, we read about God's dealings with Israel and the church. *Chapter 9* deals with God's sovereignty, *Chapter 10* with God's righteousness and *Chapter 11* with God's faithfulness.

These three chapters use the example of God's dealings with Israel to show us how He deals with us. The main purpose is to *humble us*, after we have just read the tremendous expression of confidence and boldness and power in *8:31–39*, which can easily puff us up.

So, we need *chapters 9 to 11* to humble us, before we can move forward to *Chapter 12*.

In *Chapter 9*, we see that God is sovereign. This humbles us because we realise that we were NOT chosen because we were good. We are humbled also by the smallness of our intelligence that is totally unable to reconcile God's sovereignty with our free will.

In *Chapter 10*, we see that God is righteous. This humbles us, because we realise that we can never attain to the righteousness of God. Yet now we have it BY FAITH.

In *Chapter 11*, we see that God is faithful. This humbles us, because we realise that we are kept from falling not by our own faithfulness, but by God's faithfulness in being both kind and severe towards us (*11:22*). He is kind to us, *encouraging us*, when we are discouraged and disheartened; and He is severe toward us, *disciplining us* when we are careless about sin. It is by both of these (by grace and by truth) that we are preserved.

What then is the conclusion here? It is different from the conclusion in 8:31–39. There we were told of all the benefits *we* received through the gospel. Here we are told of all the glory God would receive finally. “*Everything is FROM him, THROUGH Him and TO Him*” (11:36).

Let us look at these three chapters now.

In *Chapter 9*, we read of God’s sovereign election of Israel.

We must not misunderstand God’s election, as though it means that He predestines some people to go to heaven and some to hell. That is a totally false teaching. God wants all people to repent and to be saved and to dwell with Him in heaven forever. But He will not compel anyone. He chooses us, based on His knowledge in advance as to who all will accept Christ as their Lord (This is very clearly mentioned in *1 Peter 1:1, 2*). We must bear in mind that the people of Israel were *not* chosen to populate heaven. No. Israel was chosen to fulfil a specific *ministry on earth*.

So God’s sovereign choice has nothing to do with being saved and going to heaven. God chooses people sovereignly for a specific ministry here on earth. We cannot have any ministry that we want to, in the church. God chose Israel for a specific ministry. Why didn’t He choose India or China? We can’t question God. Why does God choose one person to be an apostle and another to be a stay-at-home mother? We can’t question God. But God has a specific ministry for each of us and He determines sovereignly what gifts to give us.

We saw the sovereignty of God in *Chapter 8:28* controlling all our circumstances. In *Chapter 9*, we see the same sovereignty choosing people for particular tasks. He prepares us from our birth to accomplish a specific purpose for Him on earth. Even Pharaoh (9:17) was raised up to fulfil a purpose. Pharaoh opposed God and did not repent. Since he hardened his heart, God demonstrated His power through the hardening of Pharaoh’s heart. You can’t defeat God. If you fight with Him you will always lose.

In *Chapter 10* Paul speaks about *the righteousness of God*. The Jews did not achieve righteousness (9:31), because they sought after it in the wrong way – through the Law. There are Christians making that same mistake today. How can we have God’s righteousness? Verses 6 to 8 of *Chapter 10* tell us. It is not something outside us. It says here the word of faith is in our mouth. “*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*” (verse 9). We must confess with our mouth. But don’t confuse this with what many preachers are teaching today, that you can ask God for anything and if you confess with your mouth that you have got it, then you will get it – whether healing from sickness, or a new house, or a new car, etc. We are told here to confess *Jesus as Lord of our lives* – and

that means that we don't ask God any more for what *we* want but only for what *He* wants. So we confess what God has promised in His word, as we see in *verse 17*: "*Faith comes by hearing and hearing by the word of Christ.*" You can ask God for what He has promised in His Word. The phrase "*the word of Christ*" here, refers especially to the New Testament. So we believe and confess the New Testament promises such as, "*Sin shall not have dominion over you,*" (*Romans 6:14*), and then they will become a reality in our lives. Confess it with your mouth if you believe it. You may be thoroughly defeated by sin. But confess victory, just like Abraham confessed, "*I am the father of a multitude,*" even when he had no son. Keep confessing, "*Sin will not have dominion over me one of these days,*" until victory comes. I was defeated by sin for many years, but I kept confessing, "*One of these days sin will not rule me any more*" – and one day it became a reality.

Chapter 11 speaks about God's faithfulness. We are told not to be proud just because God has been good to us. "*Do not be conceited, but fear, because if God cut off the natural branches, will He spare you?*" (*verses 20, 21*). We can be part of God's tree and then be cut off. We are given this warning again and again in Scripture (See *Luke 11:35; Hebrews 3:12*, etc.). Pride is always the cause of this cutting off. Those who remain in humility need never fear.

What Should Our Response Be?

Chapter 12: In view of such a fantastic gospel and God's tremendous mercies, what should our response be? First of all, we must present our *bodies* to God daily as a living sacrifice (*verse 1*). God doesn't want our money, He wants our body. Like the Old Testament burnt offering, we must offer our bodies saying, "*Lord, here are my eyes, my tongue, my hands, my feet, my ears, my bodily passions – I lay everything on the altar.*" Then, secondly, we must give Him our *minds* to be renewed (*verse 2*). This takes place as we allow our minds to be saturated with the word of God. Many of us have tremendous problems with dirty thoughts. Why? Because in the past, we used our minds to think along worldly lines. Now God wants to change our way of thinking, so that we begin to think the way He thinks. Thus our mind is gradually renewed.

The moment we are born again we don't immediately begin to think as God thinks about everything. But from that moment God wants to change our way of thinking so that we gradually begin to look at everything the way He looks at them. Have we started looking at money the way God looks at it? Have we started looking at women the way God looks at them and not as worldly men look at them? The world either despises women or lusts after them. God doesn't do either. Have we started looking at our enemies the way Jesus looked at them? Worldly people hate their enemies, but Jesus loved them. Our minds have to be renewed in every

area. As we read and obey God's Word, the Holy Spirit transforms us into the likeness of Christ by renewing our minds.

Transformation takes place on the *inside* first. "*Be not conformed to this world*" (verse 2) teaches us that worldliness originates in our minds. Many imagine that worldliness is found in the way a person dresses. It doesn't. It resides in the mind first. We may dress very simply and yet love money greatly. Man looks at the outward appearance, whereas God looks at the heart. A true disciple of Jesus seeks for God's approval. It is only when we present our body and our mind to God like this that we can understand His perfect will for our lives (verse 2).

Paul goes on in *Chapter 12* to speak about the building of Christ's Body. The goal of the gospel is not individual salvation but becoming a part of Christ's Body – where we exercise the gifts God gives us – prophecy, service, etc. It is not only in *1 Corinthians 12*, but here too that a list of the gifts of the Holy Spirit are mentioned (verses 6–8). There is a gift mentioned here that hardly any Christian ever seeks for – the gift of generosity – the gift of giving *money* to the poor in the church and for God's work (verse 8).

The rest of *Chapter 12* speaks about how we are to relate to other people in the Body of Christ. "*Don't be haughty in your mind but associate with lowly people*" (verse 16). We must mingle with everyone in Christ's Body, but especially with the poor – for God has chosen the poor of this world to be rich in faith (*James 2:5*). "*Never take revenge on anyone for vengeance belongs to God* (verse 19). Just like worship and glory belong to God alone, vengeance also belongs to God alone. We have no more right to take vengeance on others than we have to receive worship or glory from others.

Chapter 13 speaks about submission to civil authorities. The gospel teaches us to submit to God first of all (12:1, 2); then to one another in the Body of Christ (12:3–21); and finally to secular authorities – because they are "*servants of God*" (13:4, 6). That is why we pay our taxes and obey the laws of our country.

Accepting One Another in Christ's Body

Chapters 14 and 15 speak about accepting one another in Christ's Body. As believers, we don't all think alike in every matter. One day when Christ returns and our minds become perfect, we will agree 100% on every doctrine and we will recognise what true spirituality is and what soulishness and worldliness are. But now we all have different opinions on these matters, because even if we are sincere and wholehearted, our minds have still been warped by the effects of sin. No-one has a perfectly clear understanding of anything. We see everything darkly through a glass

(*1 Corinthians 13:12*). So when we see something different in others, we should not be stubborn imagining that we are right and others are all wrong. That is how divisions come in the Body of Christ. There are clear and important truths in Scripture – especially concerning the Person and work of Christ. Jesus Christ is fully God and fully man and He died for the sins of the world and rose again and is the only way to God the Father. On such doctrines, we do not yield one bit. But there are other doctrines that are not fundamental.

Water-baptism, though not essential for salvation is still an important doctrine for local churches. It will be impossible for one who believes in baptising children to work together in the same church with another who believes that child-baptism is un-Scriptural – for they will be clashing constantly. But even though we may not be able to *work together* with such brothers, we must still accept him as a brother in Christ, if he is born again – for God has accepted him. We can *fellowship* together even if we can't *work* together. The tragedy today is that many believers feel that if they cannot *work* with a person, they cannot *fellowship* with him either. That is where *Chapters 14 and 15* come in.

Do you see a brother who is weak in the faith? Accept him. How should you accept him? “*Just as Christ accepted you*” (*15:7*). Did Christ accept you when you were perfect? No. Then why do you expect your brother to be perfect before you accept him? How weak and foolish we all were on the day we were born again. We knew nothing about God and we were all defeated by sin. Yet the Lord accepted us. He saw many things wrong in us, yet He accepted us. If we do not accept others whom God has accepted, we are proud and imagine ourselves to be more spiritual than God Himself! This is how cults are built – not only by wrong doctrines, but also by wrong attitudes towards other children of God. We should not make our petty rules and laws the basis for accepting other members of Christ's Body.

“*Why do you judge your brother?*” (*14:10a*). That's an *outward action*. “*Why do you regard your brother with contempt?*” (*14:10b*). That's an *inward attitude*. We must avoid both. When our hearts are enlarged to accept all whom God has accepted, just as they are, then we come to the culmination of the message of the gospel. “*In one accord (with others in Christ's Body) and with one voice, we glorify God*” (*15:6*).

The last chapter, *Chapter 16* includes greetings from Paul to different believers in Rome. In the church in Rome, there were five house churches (*verses 5–15*). They didn't all meet together in one hall as a mega-church. The church in Rome was very large, but they met in different houses in small groups. Even though Paul had never been to Rome, he took an interest in knowing different people in the church there and greeted them.

Finally: The expression '*the obedience of faith*' (verse 26) occurs here at the end of this letter just as it does at its beginning. God had given Paul the calling to lead people not only to faith but also to obey what they believed. Faith without works of obedience is a dead faith – like a lifeless body. Under the old covenant, the emphasis was on obedience. Under the new covenant, it is on the obedience *of faith*. We obey God now, knowing that every command comes from a loving Father and is designed for our very best.

1 CORINTHIANS

THE LOCAL CHURCH – AND ITS FUNCTIONING

In the second verse of this letter, we see its subject: “To the church of God which is at Corinth” (1:2).

This letter deals with the functioning of a local church in a city or a village. Notice these two expressions, ‘the church of God’ and ‘the city of Corinth.’ The spirit in the city had unfortunately gotten inside the church there, instead of the church influencing that city. That has happened in many churches today as well – where the believers have allowed the spirit of the world to influence them instead of their influencing the people around them.

Paul criticised many things among the Corinthian Christians because there were terrible things going on in their church. But in spite of all that he was going to tell them, he still began with a note of thanksgiving. That’s a good example for us to follow. Even when we see many things wrong in a child of God, there will still be some things that we can appreciate. In any case, we should avoid criticising anyone whom we have never appreciated for anything. Many try to help others by criticism, but they cannot help them because before they criticised them, they never appreciated them for anything good that they saw in them.

If I write with a chalk on a blackboard, you will be able to read what I have written. But if I don’t have a blackboard and I have only a piece of chalk, then even if I were to write correct things, I will be writing in the air – and you won’t be able to see anything that I wrote. It is only on “*the blackboard of appreciation*”, that we can use “*the chalk of criticism*” in a helpful way.

If you have appreciated a person in the past, then when you take the white chalk of criticism, he can see clearly what you are writing. But if you have never appreciated him, then there is no blackboard for you to

write on. Then, even if all your criticism is correct, you will be writing on thin air. He cannot see a thing, and he will not be helped. Most believers are writing on thin air, and that's why they get nowhere. Let me show you a more excellent way. Love that person first and appreciate something good that you see in him. Then, even one word of criticism will go home to his heart – and he will do something about it.

Paul's Appreciation and Instructions

Paul began like that. He said, "*I thank my God always concerning you*" (1:4). Paul thanked God for the grace of God that they had received, for their knowledge of the Scriptures and for their Christian testimony. He thanked God that they had all the gifts of the Spirit, unlike many believers who didn't care for spiritual gifts. They were also eagerly awaiting the return of Christ. With all this, this church still had so many problems.

But we can learn a lesson from Paul here: Learn to appreciate people first. A teacher once held up a white sheet before her class. The sheet had a small black dot in one corner. She told her students to look carefully at the sheet and to write down what they saw. Everyone wrote, "I see a black dot in the corner." Then the teacher said, "None of you wrote a word about the white sheet. All you saw was the black dot." That's how we are. There may be so much of white in another person, and yet all that we see in him may be one small black dot that he has. There are many good things in others. Let us concentrate on seeing them *first*. We must train our eyes to look at people the way God looks at them.

After that, Paul went on to tell them about their faults. Once he had put up the black board of appreciation, he could write words of correction on it.

He said, "*Each of you is saying, 'I am of Paul, I am of Apollos, I am of Cephas and I am of Christ.'*" (1:12). They were divided into what we call "*denominations*". Each had their favourite preacher. One group felt they were holier than all the others and said, "*We belong to Christ!*" Do you think that the people who said, "*I am of Christ,*" were more spiritual than the others? No. They were probably the proudest people in the church, who looked down on all the others, because they felt they alone were the Body of Christ (like many groups today).

We need to appreciate and value believers who are in other churches and who don't belong to "*our church*". Don't imagine that because your church is *non-denominational* or *inter-denominational*, that it is more spiritual than the *denominational* churches. Some who belong to *non-denominational* churches are among the most arrogant and conceited people I have met. And some from *denominational* churches are among the humblest I have met.

Paul goes on to ask, "*Has Christ been divided? Paul was not crucified for you, was he? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?*" (1:13). Paul

even avoided baptising people so that no-one would boast that he was baptised by Paul (1:16). In 1:17 Paul begins on a theme that goes right through 1 Corinthians – *the word of the cross*. What is the solution for a carnal church like Corinth that has so many problems? The word of the cross. “*The word of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.*” (1:18).

The Word of the Cross

What is the word of the cross? It is the way that Jesus walked – the way of recognising one’s weakness, being misunderstood and rejected by others, humbling ourselves, not retaliating, and not seeking any glory or honour from man. Paul speaks about this in 2 Corinthians 13:3, 4 also. And then Paul says, “*Consider this, my brothers. There are not many wise among you, not many noble, not many mighty.*” Here is the word of the cross: “*God has chosen the foolish people to shame the wise*” (1:26–28). When Jesus chose His apostles, He chose unlearned fishermen to put to shame the great Bible-scholars of His day. Gamaliel was a Bible-seminary professor, and Ananias and Caiaphas were archbishops. But Jesus picked Peter, James and John, who were unlearned fisherman, to be His leading apostles to usher in the new covenant.

Jesus chose unlearned and uncultured people who were hard working and sincere and who had an open heart. He did that in order to shame the clever people in the religious society of His time. He is doing the same today. Note however that it doesn’t say here that God does not choose *any* wise person. It says, “*...not many*”. God chooses a few wise people too. But most of His chosen ones are foolish and those whom the world considers as nobodies. God delights in using nobodies. If you look at the history of Christianity in India, you will see that most of those who have influenced this country for Christ were not great scholars. They were simple, unlearned people who were sincere. God picked them up, anointed them with the Holy Spirit, and used them mightily. We must never forget that. Why does God do it thus? Because an intelligent man who serves God *with his scholarly ability*, may imagine that God is using him because he is so clever – and be proud of it. Rich people who give generously to God’s work may imagine that they are very valuable to the church because their wealth is spreading the gospel. All such people are deceived. God may use our intelligence and our money to spread the gospel – but He does not *need* either. He did a wonderful job through poor, unlearned apostles in the first century. God does things in such a way that no human being will ever be able to boast before Him (1:29).

The new song that we will sing when we stand before the Lord is, “*Thou alone art worthy, O Lamb of God*” (Revelation 5:12). Even Paul is not worthy of any glory in heaven.

Many years ago, I was invited to speak at the graduation ceremony of a Bible seminary. The student who came first in the outgoing class and who won the most prizes, came to me afterwards and said he wanted to talk to me. He told me that he was thoroughly defeated by sin. All those years of accumulating Bible knowledge so accurately had not delivered him from dirty thoughts and lusting after women. He said that after four years of Bible-study, he was actually worse off than when he joined the seminary. How was all his Bible knowledge going to help him when he became a pastor? Was he going to teach people the root-meanings of the Hebrew and Greek words in the Bible? That is not people's greatest need. They need to know how to overcome sin. I felt very sad for him, because he was a non-Christian who had come to the Lord – and he was wasting his life.

That is the tragedy in Christendom today. Bible-scholars armed with numerous degrees are teaching people theories that don't work in daily life. They are leading people to the tree of knowledge that brings death, instead of to the tree of life.

So don't ever be proud of your family background or your intelligence. Your pride will prevent God from fulfilling His purpose through you. Paul himself was from a very wealthy family in Tarsus. Tarsus was a town where Jewish businessmen went to do business – and Paul's father must have been a very wealthy businessman. Paul had gone as a young man to the best seminary in Jerusalem – where the scholarly Gamaliel was the professor. It was a great honour to study under such a professor. Paul, not only came from a wealthy family, he also had a brilliant mind. Paul would have been a great success in any profession. If he were living today, he could have been a top-level computer engineer, or doctor, or businessman. But he did not depend on any of his abilities to serve the Lord. He allowed the word of the cross to crucify his confidence in his human qualifications.

He said to the Corinthian Christians, "*When I came to you proclaiming to you the testimony of God, I did not come to you with superiority of speech or wisdom*" (2:1). His preaching was not with words of human cleverness but in the power of the Holy Spirit, so that people's faith would rest on God's power and not on human cleverness (2:4).

Let me challenge those of you who preach the Word: Make your preaching simple. In the more than 50 years that I have preached God's Word, I have asked myself this question, "Can the little children who listen to me understand what I am saying? Or is it only the highly intelligent ones who understand? What about the many in India, for whom English is a second language, and who don't understand big English words? Did they understand me?" If the little children can understand me, then all the others will understand as well. And so I aim at the children when I speak – just like Jesus did. If only the clever people understand you, then you can be certain that 90% of the people haven't understood you. Then what

did you achieve by your preaching? Perhaps you got some honour as a great Bible-scholar or as an eloquent speaker – and perhaps some money as well!! Do you want all that – or do you want to bless people? Make your choice.

When I was a young man, the Lord asked me a question, “*Do you want to impress people or do you want to help them?*” I said, “Lord, I want to help them.” He said, “Then stop trying to impress them!” That was a turning point in my life. If you want to help people, be simple in your speaking. God reveals His truths to those who have a heart like a little babe and not to those who are proud of their intelligence and their degrees (*Matthew 11:25*). Jesus spoke simply. Even children could understand Him.

And so Paul is essentially saying, “Even though I have a brilliant mind and am a great scholar, and could have used all that to speak to you, I didn’t do that. I laid everything at Christ’s feet – all my ability, my knowledge and my scholarship. And I decided to speak to you in a very simple way with the power and anointing of the Holy Spirit – so that the Holy Spirit could take my words home to your hearts – and not to your minds alone. That’s what I want. I don’t want to impress you with my cleverness. I want the Holy Spirit to bring conviction into your hearts and to lead you into the way of abundant life in Christ.” That is *the word of the cross*.

The Corinthian Christians were babes, and so Paul had to give them milk (3:1, 2). When preaching to people, we have to identify their spiritual level first, so that we can give them whatever is appropriate for them. When speaking to mature, godly men, we must speak in one way, and when speaking to babes in Christ, we must speak in another way. The Corinthians had been believers for many years but they hadn’t grown. So he could not give them solid food – only milk. But when Paul met with more mature Christians, he could share the deeper matters of Christ with them (2:6). With mature Christians, we can talk about “*distinguishing between the soulish and the spiritual*” and about “*pouring out the soulish life to death*”, etc. But with babes we can speak only about simple things like repentance, forgiveness of sins, overcoming condemnation and guilt and anger and dirty thoughts, etc. We have to give babes milk because they can’t tolerate strong meat that needs to be chewed! But even when we speak to mature people, we don’t speak using the clever ideas of this world, but with the wisdom of God (2:6, 7).

This wisdom of God cannot be seen by the human eye, heard by the human ear or even understood by the human mind. It has to be *revealed* to us by the Holy Spirit (2:9, 10). So it doesn’t make a difference whether you have a brilliant mind or a dull one. In past centuries, we see that God has often given simple people (with a low IQ) an outstanding ministry and built His church through them. What are the great Bible scholars doing in India today? They are not going into the villages and leading people to Christ. No. They are teaching in Bible schools, presenting papers at large

conferences on evangelism and becoming directors of large Christian organizations funded from America. Who are the Christians doing God's real work in India? Most of them are simple, unlearned people, filled with the Holy Spirit, who go out and bring people to Christ and establish them in local churches. That is the real work of God. So I say, let the useless honour-loving Christians go and present papers at conferences on evangelism, and sit on international committees and become Directors. You who love the Lord, go out and bring people to the Lord and build His church. That's what I want to do all my life. I don't want to ever waste my time sitting on some committee or presenting a paper at some conference. I want to bring people to the Lord and establish them in churches. That's what Peter and Paul and all the apostles did.

Converts or Disciples?

In Chapter 3, we read about *evangelism* and *building the church*. “*Some of you say, ‘I am of Paul and I am of Apollos’*” (3:4). Paul says, “*What is the difference? We are both servants. I planted and Apollos watered*” (3:6). Paul did the work of evangelism – he dug the ground and planted the seed. Apollos came along later and watered. He didn't dig the ground or plant any seed. What was the need for that, when someone else had already done it? He would have destroyed the seed if he dug up the ground again! What the seed now needed was watering – and so that was what Apollos wisely did. Some evangelists get upset if someone else comes along and waters what they have planted. They will say, “Why don't you go and plant somewhere else? Why do you come into my field?” But is it your field or the Lord's field? If you are doing God's work, then it is God's field and He can send another servant to water what you have planted. Paul recognised that. So he was happy for what Apollos was doing. If however you are building your own field, then it will be burnt up as “*wood, hay and straw*” one day (3:12–15).

The tragedy with much of today's evangelism is that people say, “This is *MY convert*.” And so there is a lot of duplication of work in God's vineyard today – many Christians are doing the same thing over and over again, instead of each person doing what God called him to do. If Paul plants, isn't it good that Apollos comes along and does not plant again, but waters? That will make the weak plant to grow into a solid tree. That was the type of cooperation they had in the first century. But today, what we see in Christendom, unfortunately, is not cooperation, but competition. So let us learn not to duplicate another person's work, but to work in cooperation, not counting any work as “*OURS*”!!

The great commission the Lord gave us was “*to evangelize*” (Mark 16:15) and then “*to make them into disciples and teach them to do everything He commanded*” (Matthew 28:19, 20). Consider an illustration: If you saw 100 people carrying a log of wood, with 99 of them holding up one end

of the log and only one at the other end – at which end would you go to help? Today, in many lands, 99% of Christian workers are engaged in evangelism and 1% in making converts into disciples and building them into a local church. That was why I decided to help at the 1% – end of the log. I am not against those at the other end of the log. They are needed too. But there are already many people there.

Paul and Apollos worked together, and their converts were *for the Lord* and their churches were also *for the Lord*. Paul planted and Apollos watered, but God was the one who gave the growth. So all the glory should go to God. Paul says about himself and Apollos, “*We are nobodies. We are nothing*” (3:7). That’s why they could work together harmoniously. Two nobodies can work together easily. It is when one of them thinks that he is a somebody, that problems arise.

If you ever build a local church anywhere, let me give you a suggestion from seeing the Lord plant churches in India and elsewhere for 40 years: *Be a nobody yourself first and make all your converts into “nobody”s.* Then you will build a wonderful church – where there is cooperation and no competition. A church where everyone, from leader down to the newest convert, is just a *zero*, will be the best church in the world. They may all be zeros, but when you put Jesus in front of them all – He being a “1” will make even a church with 9 people worth a billion – 1,000,000,000!! So determine that you will never become a somebody, but always a nobody, like Paul and Apollos were.

Then Paul goes on to say about laying a foundation and building on it. Both foundation and superstructure are equally important. Paul first used the illustration of growing a tree – planting and watering. Now he uses the picture of a building – foundation and superstructure (verses 10–12). The foundation of the church is Christ alone – His perfect atoning work on the cross, with *none* of our works added to it. But then we must know how to build an *eternal* structure on this foundation. What sort of a church are you building? Is it one that is impressive in *size* or in *quality*? The question every Christian worker must answer is this: Shall I seek for *quantity* or *quality*? We can build with gold, silver and precious stones, or with wood, hay and straw (3:12). In the final day, it will be *quality* that matters, not *quantity* (3:13, 14).

With the same amount of money, you could buy a lot more of wood, hay and straw than of gold, silver and precious stones. So if you are interested in building something *huge* that impresses people *now*, you would choose wood, hay and straw. But if you knew that the fire would test your building as soon as it is completed, you would choose to build with something that can endure the fire like gold, silver and precious stones – even if your building would be only 1% in size compared to the former. We all have a limited amount of time. We don’t have thousands of years to live. We may have 60 years to live for the Lord after we are born again. How will you spend those 60 years? Will you spend it building

something big, but of poor quality, that will be burnt up in the final day? Or will you build something that will last a testing by the severest fires – even if it be small?

Many believers build churches that are large in size but poor in quality. But a few build wisely – building smaller churches of good quality – preaching repentance and discipleship. The statistics of the latter are not as impressive as that of the former. But one day when the Lord tests everything in the fire, the huge structures of wood, hay and straw will be burnt up completely and nothing will be left. But the small structures built by those who spent all their life making disciples and who were despised by other Christians because their work was not so big, will find that their structure comes through the fire and endures for eternity.

So how are you going to spend your life? Jesus said, “Go and make disciples of all nations.” Are you producing something that will last forever? That’s the question that must always be on our minds. Am I building the way God wants me to build – with the principles that Jesus taught? Am I making disciples who love Jesus more than anything else or am I just gathering converts who only say, “Lord Jesus, I believe in You,” but are not interested in becoming disciples? Think of the regret you will have when you stand before the Lord, if your entire life’s work will be burnt up on that day. You may be saved and go to heaven, but you will live in heaven with regret throughout eternity that you wasted the one earthly life that God gave you. I don’t want to have that regret. I want to build with gold, silver and precious stones. I want to do a quality-work for the Lord now.

True Servants of Christ

In Chapter 4, we read of something further about serving the Lord. “*The most important thing about a servant is that he does just what his master tells him to*” (4:2 - LB). That is what it means to be a faithful servant. It is not a question of how much you do, but whether you do only what the Lord tells you to do – and *in the way He wants it done*. For that, you have to wait on God and ask Him, “Lord, what do you want me to do? I want to do only that.” For example, if you employed a servant, you wouldn’t want him to run around doing whatever *he* felt he should do for you. No. You would want him to listen to you and do what *you* tell him to do. But most Christian workers do not listen to what God has said in His Word and follow those Divine principles. Instead they do God’s work in the way they feel is best – with their own bright ideas, which are usually worldly. They make their own programs to serve the Lord, and don’t have the patience to wait on the Lord to find out what His will for them is.

In Chapter 4, Paul says that true servants of Christ (who walk the way of the cross) will not be honoured by the world (and that includes worldly

believers). The apostles are the greatest servants of God in His church. They are elders to the elders of churches. Apostles plant churches, appoint elders and guide those elders. But how does the world look at these apostles? “*God has exhibited us apostles last of all*” (4:9). In the world’s eyes the apostles are right at the bottom of the social ladder. They are “*like prisoners soon to be killed... stared at by men... foolish... laughed at... kicked around*”, etc. (4:9–11 - Living). Paul compares himself and the other apostles with the carnal Corinthian Christians. He says, “*You all are filled and rich and considered wise, strong and distinguished by the world. We, on the other hand, are despised by the world.*” A true apostle of Jesus Christ will not be honoured by this world. Only carnal Christians are honoured by the world. If you seek the world’s honour, you will most certainly end up as a carnal Christian.

A true apostle of Christ will never become rich *through preaching the gospel*. Wherever you see a man who has become rich *through preaching the gospel* you can be sure that he is not an apostle of Christ. A person who has bought houses and lands for himself and his family *through preaching the gospel* is not an apostle of Christ. A man who can buy expensive cars *with the money he gets by preaching the gospel* is not an apostle of Christ. He is just a carnal Christian. Paul could have made a lot of money through his gift of preaching; but he didn’t. A true servant of God does not make money through preaching the gospel. He may accept gifts in order to meet his earthly needs – like Jesus and the apostles did – but he won’t become a millionaire thus. But it is exactly the opposite that we see in Christendom today. And that is why my respect for all these so-called apostles and preachers (who may even heal the sick) is *zero*. I have more respect for the Roman Catholic priests who go to North India and live simply and help the poor than for these evangelical preachers who take tithes from poor people and become wealthy through preaching the gospel.

Who are you going to follow? Paul and Peter? Or today’s counterfeits?

Paul goes on to say, “*We are roughly treated... we toil working with our own hands*” (4:11, 12). Paul supported himself financially, but yet he was reviled and slandered. People told false stories about him, but he blessed them in return. He was persecuted almost everywhere he went and became “*the scum of the world, the dregs of all thing*” (4:13). That means that the world considered him to be no better than the filth that flows in a sewage pipe. That was the way the greatest apostle of that time was treated by the world. In contrast, the Corinthian Christians were respected and honoured by the world – and they were happy about it.

I am sorry to say that Christendom has lost the understanding of what it means to be a servant of God. Our task now is to demonstrate to our land what it means to be a true servant of God – one who will not compromise or seek for any worldly honour. God is not impressed by anyone’s theological degrees or other worldly qualifications. Such qualifications don’t scare the devil either!

Most Christian workers desire to sit on thrones and to get honour. Don't go that way. Be a humble servant of God all your life. Be an ordinary brother and an ordinary sister, even if you are rejected by the world and by Babylonian Christendom as well.

Was Paul jealous of the Corinthians who were distinguished and comfortable? No. He felt sorry for them, because he was in a more blessed position than them. He spoke as a father to them – and not to shame them (4:14). A true servant of God is a father. He does not shame people. Teachers may shame their students, if the student does something wrong. A good father, however, will never shame his child, even if he does something stupid. But the proportion of fathers to teachers in Christendom is about 1:10,000 (4:15).

Paul went on to say, “*You all may be able to preach so many wonderful things. But when I come into your midst, I am not going to listen to your preaching. I want to see how much power there is in your life – because the kingdom of God is not manifested in words, but in power.*” (4:19, 20).

In the first four chapters Paul laid a foundation for the word of the cross. Then, from *Chapter 5* onwards, he begins to deal with the problems there were in the church at Corinth. The spirit of the world in Corinth had got into the local church. *Chapter 5* is a valuable portion of Scripture, because it teaches us how the apostles dealt with sin in the church.

The Spirit of the World

Paul deals here with the problem of immorality. There was a lot of immorality in the heathen temples in Corinth, and that spirit had got into the church. Someone was living in adultery with his stepmother, and not even repentant about it. And the elders in the church were so “spineless” that they didn't do anything about it. They didn't have the moral courage to put the man out of the church. They probably wanted a reputation for gentleness. An elder can lose his reputation for gentleness if he puts a man out of the church. Others will criticise him – and most elders do not want a reputation as being hard-hearted. Many elders love their reputation more than they love the purity of the church. Their goal is popularity, and in this respect, they are more like politicians. An elder or a pastor who is like that will only destroy a church.

It is possible that this man who was living in sin was a rich man. Most elders are scared to correct rich and influential members of their congregation – for various reasons. Such people support the church with large offerings. They are influential and can help you whenever you are in some difficulty. And so, pastors and elders usually leave such people alone. They discipline only the poor. But Paul couldn't care less whether

a man was rich or poor. He handed that man over to Satan and told the elders to put him out of the church – to excommunicate him (5:13).

Sometimes people have to be put out of the church. Jesus said, “*First go and speak to such a person alone*” (*Matthew 18:15–18*). If he doesn’t listen to you, then take two or three others with you and speak to him. If he still doesn’t listen, but continues in sin, then tell the whole church about him. If he still continues in sin, then treat him like a non-Christian and put him out of the church. There is a need for discipline in the church, just like in a home. A home where children are not disciplined will be a chaotic home, and a church where people are not disciplined will be a chaotic church. In a home where the children are not disciplined, the children will take over the home and the father will have to sit helplessly in a corner. In a church where there is no discipline, the elders will be helpless and others will take over. That has happened in many places, because the elders sought popularity more than holiness.

What does it mean to “*hand a person over to Satan for the destruction of his flesh*”? It means to allow Satan to attack him with sickness. All sickness is from the devil – and I don’t have the slightest doubt about that. God is a loving Father and no loving father would give sickness to their children. God may permit His children to be sick at times, as He did with Paul. God allowed Satan to put a thorn into Paul’s flesh and did not heal him, even when Paul prayed (*2 Corinthians 12:1–7*). But that was for Paul’s good – to save him from pride. God doesn’t tempt anyone either. But He does allow Satan to tempt us. So Paul handed this unrepentant brother over to Satan to be made sick so that he would come to his senses and repent. He would be put out of the church and no believer would meet him. And there in spiritual darkness, even though he had plenty of money, he would realise what he had lost and hopefully would repent. God may allow Satan at times to make some believers sick in order to make them repent. Paul, as an apostle, had Divine authority to deliver people to Satan like this, so that they would repent. The world may treat Paul like scum, but God gave him spiritual authority. Satan was scared of Paul.

Glorify God in Everything

In *Chapter 6*, Paul deals with believers who take other believers to court. Why would a believer want to take another believer to court? Because he feels that the church elders cannot help him solve his problem – and also that Almighty God cannot help him either!! So he goes to puny men in a worldly court to help him. The Holy Spirit says that this is totally wrong – because it dishonours God, as though He is helpless to solve the problems of His children! There will always be problems among believers. But they should take it to the elders of the church and trust God to help them – and not go to a worldly court.

Paul goes on to say, “*If your fellow-believer cheats you, why don’t you allow yourself to be cheated*” (6:7). But instead, they were trying to correct one wrong by doing another wrong – taking their fellow-believers to court. The Holy Spirit says that those who do such things will not enter heaven. If you take a believer to court, you will never enter God’s kingdom (6:9). That is a serious sin, because it disgraces the name of Jesus. Jesus said, “*All men will know you are My disciples when you love one another*” (John 13:35). But you are showing unbelievers that Christians fight with each other and thus driving them towards the devil. In that case, God says, you don’t deserve to enter His kingdom yourself. A Christian must be concerned about the glory of God and not about his own honour. “*Whatever you do, do all to the glory of God*” (1 Corinthians 10:31). Are you going to glorify God by taking your brother to court? No? Then don’t do it. Why do you take your brother to court? Because you hate him. You want a human judge to punish him. Why not leave it to God to punish him? “*Don’t insist on getting even; that’s not for you to do. I’ll do the judging,*” says God. “*I’ll take care of it*” (Romans 12:19 - MSG).

Paul then speaks about three different levels at which people can live. “*All things are lawful, but not all things are profitable*” (6:12). The *unlawful* (or *unrighteous*) level is where most unbelievers live. No believer should ever descend to this level – but unfortunately some do. If they persist in living there, they will lose their salvation. The minimum level for a believer is the next level – *lawful* (or *righteous*). But there is a still higher level – the *profitable*. Out of 100 things, 70 things may be unlawful. So we should not do any of them. But we can do any of the remaining 30 things that are lawful. But out of those 30 things, only 10 may be truly profitable spiritually. A *wholehearted* Christian will do only those 10 things. But a *halfhearted* Christian will choose from any of the 30 lawful things. If you want to be a wholehearted, effective servant of God, then you will have to select the profitable things from the lawful things.

Consider the example of time. We all have 24 hours a day. If you spend part of that time watching dirty movies or reading dirty books, that would be an *unlawful* way of spending your time. On the other hand, there are many lawful ways in which you can spend your day. Some of those things are necessary and we have to do them. But you could spend many hours reading the newspaper – which though *lawful* may not be the most *profitable* way to spend the day. If you want to be a useful servant of God, you will need to be disciplined and cut out some of those *unnecessary* items from your daily routine and spend more time in the things of God. You can choose to spend many hours surfing the Internet (on clean sites) or even watching many Christian TV programs and then have very little time left to study the Bible. Or alternatively, you could spend a short while surfing the Internet (for world news, etc.) and have much more time to study the Bible. You are not sinning if you spend two hours watching a clean TV program or visiting a clean Internet site; but it may be a waste

of time that could have been spent more profitably studying God's Word or helping needy people.

In the same way there are *unlawful* ways of spending money, *lawful* ways and *profitable* ways. A wholehearted Christian will use his time and his money only in profitable ways. We must learn to make the right choices. The secret of a godly life lies in the choices we make. Out of all the lawful things we can do with our time, we must choose the best way to spend it. Out of all the lawful ways in which we can spend our money, we must select the best ways. Such a man will count for God.

Then Paul goes on to speak about the way we use our body. "*I will not be mastered by any of my bodily desires*" (6:12, 13). Food is essential for our bodies; but if you want to be a servant of God, you must not allow yourself to be mastered by food. If you love food so much that you are mastered by it, you will never be a useful servant of God. You have to break free from that slavery. This is where fasting can help.

It is not only our spirit, but our physical body also is a "*member of Christ*" (6:15). So we must never use it for any immoral purpose. It must be for the Lord's exclusive use – our eyes, our tongue and every part of our body. Here is a wonderful promise of God for the body – that I have claimed for myself for many years now: "*The body is for the Lord, and the Lord is for the body*" (6:13). If you say, "Lord, my body is totally Yours, from head to foot – my eyes, my tongue, my everything," and mean it, then the Lord will be totally for your body. He will keep your body fit to serve Him as long as He wants you to serve Him. He will even preserve it from sickness. Even young people may faint, but those who give their bodies to the Lord him will fly like eagles in the sky.

Our body is also the temple of the Holy Spirit (6:19) – and so we must not defile it in any way. If you won't smoke or drink or commit adultery inside a church building, then you must not do any of those things in your body either – because the real temple of God is not any church building, but your body. "*You have been bought with a price. Therefore glorify God in your body*" (verse 20).

These nine verses (6:12–20) together form one of the most wonderful portions of Scripture about how we should use our body and God's provision for it. I would encourage you to meditate on it, because we need a healthy body in order to serve God. Many Christians talk about healing. But *health is better than healing*. Prevention is better than cure. It is better to eat less and be healthy, than to be a glutton, get sick, and then ask God for healing. Don't ask the Lord to be your Healer, ask Him to be your *Health*. Give your body totally to Him and say, "Lord, You are the Health of my body. As long as You want me to live on earth and serve You, I am available. I will glorify You in my body, because You purchased it for Yourself on the cross. My body belongs to You alone." Our body is

like a house that has been purchased by someone else – the Lord. We must vacate this house and let the rightful Owner now occupy it fully. It is a sin to continue to live in a house that somebody else has purchased. Hand over your body then totally to the Lord.

Run Away from Immorality

There is only one way to overcome the temptation to immorality – and that is the way mentioned in 6:18, “*Run away from it.*” The Bible is realistic and knows how strong sexual temptation is! When Joseph was tempted by Potiphar’s wife, he ran away. If you don’t flee, but stand around and expose ourselves to temptation, then you can be sure that you will fall – sooner or later. If you find that a conversation, a friendship or a relationship is moving in a dangerous direction, there is only one thing you must do – if you don’t want to destroy your life and your ministry. Turn around and run. Get away from there. If you don’t receive this advice, you can destroy yourself – and regret throughout eternity that you didn’t run away. It is that serious.

In this context, Paul goes on to speak about getting married as one way of running away from immorality (7:2). It is true that by remaining unmarried, you can have more time to serve the Lord. But because there is so much immorality in the world (and that is even more true today) “*let every man have his own wife and let every woman have her own husband*” (7:2). Some may say that that is a very *unspiritual* reason for getting married. But it is the Holy Spirit Who says here that marriage can protect you from immorality. So, don’t try to be super-spiritual (more spiritual than the Holy Spirit)!

“*If you don’t have self-control it is better to marry than to burn.*” (7:9). It is normal for most men to burn with sexual desire when they come to their late teens and most of them do not have the self-control to overcome it. So it is far better to get married and avoid that burning than expose oneself to avoidable temptation. The Bible is very practical. It does not teach us a hermit-style of life where we have to live in a forest or a monastery. We are to live in the middle of the world, and be married like the rest of the human race. It is written of Enoch that “*he walked with God and had sons and daughters*” (Genesis 5:22). We too can live a normal married life and have sons and daughters, and at the same time walk with God like Enoch did.

Married folk must recognise that they lose their authority over their own bodies the moment they are married. I find in Indian culture that this is very important for women to understand. There is not enough teaching on this in our churches. Preachers are embarrassed to talk

about this, when Scripture speaks about it so plainly. The husband must fulfil his *duty* to his wife, and the wife must fulfil her *duty* to her husband (7:3, 4). The sexual relationship between a husband and his wife is called a *duty* here. It is certainly nothing to be ashamed of. It is as much a duty as cooking the meals, taking care of the children, and working to provide for the needs of the home.

Once a woman gets married, she does not have authority over her body. Her body belongs thereafter to her husband. It was hers before she was married, but now her body is her husband's all the time. Husbands may be delighted to hear this! But they have a responsibility too. A husband does not have authority over his body but his wife does. This is not referring only to the sexual relationship – husbands may be ready to recognise their duty in that area at all times! It also means that your eyes and your tongue now belong to your wife. When you see a pretty girl, you must remember that your eyes belong to your wife. When talking with other women, remember that your tongue belongs to your wife now. You can certainly talk with women – but not in a flippant or flirtatious way.

There is so much hidden immorality among Christians – and even among preachers and pastors. The reports that one hears are only the tip of the iceberg. There is much more that is hidden. But where does this immorality begin? It begins in the heart and with wandering eyes, and when one does not run away from dangerous friendships.

At the same time, God may call some people, like Paul, to a single life. Paul says, "*I wish that all men were like me, but each man has his own gift from God*" (7:7). Paul accepted God's will for him to be single. But he recognised that very few men have such a calling. Paul was single for the sake of the gospel. He could not possibly have run a home with all his travels. But times have changed. Today, one can travel to the other side of the world in less than 24 hours and return home equally quickly, whereas in Paul's day, he would need a whole day to travel even 50 kilometres. Such an apostle would find it very difficult to raise a family, if he had a wide ministry. That was why some apostles like Paul and Barnabas were single and others travelled with their wives. The other reason why Paul encouraged bachelorhood was because of persecution. In times of persecution, it is more risky to be a married man. It was in such a situation in the first century that Paul said "It is good for a man to be single." There may be some situations today as well like that – but they are rare, probably in less than 1% of cases.

The main reason why Paul encouraged people to consider the single life was so that they could have "*an undistracted devotion to the Lord*" (7:35). And so he said, "*If you live in this world, don't get taken up with*

everything that happens in the world" (7:31). There are times when we will have to weep. But we shouldn't get overwhelmed with our weeping. We must finish with it and move on. In the same way, we shouldn't get so excited with the joy of our earthly possessions that our service for the Lord is hindered by our minds being occupied with such things. Get over the excitement quickly and get on with serving the Lord. Even if you are married, don't let your wife and your home become *everything* to you (7:29). There is work to be done for the Lord, and your devotion to the Lord must be undistracted. The Lord must be first in your life.

I want you to notice one more important matter here. Paul says more than once: "*I say to the unmarried... I say, but not the Lord... I don't have a command from the Lord, but I give my opinion*" (7:8, 12, 25). He differentiated between the commands of the Lord and his personal opinions. It's very important that, as God's servants, we make this clear when we preach. There is nothing wrong in expressing our opinions – but we must make it clear to everyone that those are our personal opinions and not God's commands.

Notice 7:40 as well: "*In my opinion, I think I have the Spirit of God.*" Observe Paul's deep humility here. His opinion was certainly a very godly opinion but he didn't have the arrogance that many have today who say, "*Thus says the Lord.*" I would rather listen to a man who says, "*I think I have the Spirit of God,*" than to somebody who says, "*Thus says the Lord.*" I have discovered in the 56 years that I have been a believer, that when someone says, "*Thus says the Lord,*" the Lord is *not* speaking through him at all. He is just speaking from his own mind. But when a man is humble enough to say, "*I think I have the Spirit of God when I say this,*" it is more likely to be an expression of the mind of God.

A Mature Christian

In *Chapter 8*, Paul speaks about the danger of using our liberty to do things that may cause others to stumble. In those days, all the meat that was sold in the market was presented to the idols in the temple before being sold. So those who had a problem with that decided to be vegetarians. But there were other believers who said, "What is an idol? Just a piece of wood with a face carved on it. What does it matter if the meat was put in front of that piece of wood? I believe in only one God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, and so I give thanks for this meat and I eat it."

Paul says here that each believer must respect the other believer's point of view – and not force the other to conform to your view. (This is similar to his teaching in *Romans 14*). Here in India, when a neighbour gives you sweets at *Diwali* (a Hindu festival) time it is possible that this was offered in front of an idol first. What shall we do? Paul says later in *1 Corinthians 10:25–28* (MSG), "*Eat anything sold at the butcher shop;*

you don't have to run an 'idolatry test' on every item. The earth, after all, is God's, and everything in it. That 'everything' certainly includes the leg of lamb in the butcher shop. If a nonbeliever invites you to dinner and you feel like going, go ahead and enjoy yourself; eat everything placed before you. It would be both bad manners and bad spirituality to cross-examine your host on the ethical purity of each course as it is served. On the other hand, if he goes out of his way to tell you that this or that was sacrificed to god or goddess so-and-so, you should pass. Even though you may be indifferent as to where it came from, he isn't, and you don't want to send mixed messages to him about who you are worshipping."

Here in Chapter 8, Paul says that these issues are not the most important things. The most important thing is love (verse 1). Knowledge can make a person arrogant so that he looks down on others and says, "You don't have any knowledge. You are scared of a block of wood!" But such a person may not have any love. If he did, he would be concerned that he does not cause those other believers to stumble. We must remember that those who have come out from idolatry have recognised those blocks of wood as gods for many years – and so their conscience bothers them. Your conscience does not bother you because you do not have that background. "*But take care that this liberty of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak.... Therefore, (Paul says) if food causes my brother to stumble, I will never eat meat again, so that I will not cause my brother to stumble*" (8:9, 13). That is the position any mature Christian will take.

Let us apply this to our time. The Bible does *not* say that if you drink a little wine it's a sin. The Bible only says you shouldn't get *drunk*. But suppose another believer sees you drinking just a little wine. You may have the self-control to stop with a small bit of wine. But when he sees you, as a godly brother, drinking wine, he also does the same. But he does not have your self-control; and he begins to drink more and more and becomes a drunkard – and finally goes to hell. Who started him on the pathway to hell? *You!!* So what should a godly man do? He should deny himself the pleasure of drinking even a little wine. He doesn't ask himself (like the self-centred believer), "Is it right or wrong?" No. He asks himself a higher question, "Will I stumble others?" And so he does not touch alcoholic drinks all his life. That is love. And when such self-denial can save souls from destroying themselves and going to hell, a godly person is delighted to practise such self-denial.

This principle can have other applications too. If you go to someone's home and discover that the man of the house is not at home, what should you do? It would be best not to go in – not because you will be tempted by his wife, but to preserve your testimony and to be an example to others. You may be totally pure; but someone else may follow your example and fall into sin – and you would be the one who led him astray by your example. These are small matters – but if you live by the principle of love,

you will be concerned about others all the time. To glory in our knowledge and to do what we like, unconcerned about what effect it has on others is the selfish way in which the heathen live. “*When you cause your brother to stumble, you sin against Christ*” (8:12).

Chapter 9 is about the subject of liberty. “*Am I not an apostle? Why do I have to work like others? Why do I have to remain single?*” All the apostles were married except Paul (9:5). So when a church teaches that one has to be single in order to serve the Lord full-time, that is a church that *most* of the apostles would have been disqualified from joining. Peter and John could never have joined such a church because they were married. That alone should prove that such teaching is wrong. If the apostles themselves do not qualify to join a church, what type of church is it? Another thing that some churches say is that if one wants to serve the Lord, he must not have a secular job. Paul and Barnabas would then be disqualified, because both of them supported themselves with secular jobs (9:6). Peter and John were supported by gifts given by other believers. But Paul and Barnabas supported themselves. So you can be an apostle supporting yourself with a secular job, or one who is supported by other believers. And as an apostle, you can be married or unmarried. Marriage and a secular occupation are no disqualifications for apostleship.

Then Paul moves on to the subject of supporting the Lord’s servants. God says, “*You shall not muzzle the ox while he is threshing*” (9:9). That was an Old Testament law. When an ox threshed the grain, some selfish, hard hearted farmers would shut the mouth of the ox, so that it does not eat some of the grain. So God commanded that the ox should *not* be muzzled. Paul says, “*Do you think that God is only concerned about oxen? That is written for our sake as well*” (9:10). That was to teach that we must provide financially for those who serve the Lord so that they can feed themselves and their families. Paul goes on to say, “*If we have sown spiritual things to you, is it too much if we reap material things from you?*” We must financially support those who feed us with spiritual food. Paul was not talking here about a servant of the Lord collecting money from others to buy lands and property for his family. No. He was talking about a servant of the Lord receiving money for his necessities, to live with his family in a simple way. But this provision that the Lord ordained has been exploited by many preachers to make money for themselves.

“*The Lord has directed that those who proclaim the gospel must get their living from the gospel*” (9:14). Those who preach the gospel have the right to receive gifts from believers who get the benefit of their ministry. (*Galatians 6:6*). I find two extremes in Christendom in this area. At one extreme are preachers who exploit this teaching to make a lot of money for themselves – and very often from believers who are much poorer than them. This is scandalous. At the other extreme are believers who are stingy and who never recognise their financial debt to those who consistently minister God’s Word to them.

Having taught this principle, Paul then goes on to say, “*I am not writing this so that you should now do this for me. I have never taken any money from you Corinthians. I earn my living with my own hands.*” Paul was very discerning as to who he would accept money from. He accepted money from the church at Philippi (*Philippians 4:14–18*). But he never accepted a cent from the Christians at Corinth or Ephesus or Thessalonica (*2 Corinthians 11:7–9; Acts 20:33, 34; 2 Thessalonians 3:7–9*). Paul did not live by a rule that said, “You must never accept money from *any* believer” nor by a rule that said, “You should accept money from *every* believer.” Whenever a gift was offered to him, Paul sought the leading of the Holy Spirit as to whether to accept it or not. This is what every true servant of God will also do.

There were very good reasons for Paul’s actions. First of all, he says, “*I do it because I want to make the gospel free of charge*” (9:18). People who hear the gospel must know that they don’t have to pay anything to hear the gospel. Throughout my life, in every public meeting *that I have had a say in organising*, I have always refused to permit the taking of an offering – because there could be unbelievers in the crowd, and they should not feel that they have to pay even one cent to hear the gospel. This was the practice of Jesus and the apostles – they never took an offering in any of their meetings. We have followed this practice even in all of our churches in India from the very beginning – because our believers bring their unbelieving friends to our churches to hear the gospel. Believers *alone* have the right to support God’s work. Unbelievers do not have that right (See *3 John 7*). No unbeliever should be able to say to the Lord in the last day, “Lord, how can You send me to hell when I gave money to support Your work and Your servants received it from me.” Unfortunately, many organisations and preachers collect money from people, irrespective of whether they are born again or not. If you are such a preacher, then the Lord will ask you in that day, “Why did you receive that money from one who was not My child?”

There may have been one more reason why Paul did not accept any money from the Corinthian Christians. They had questioned his apostleship – and Paul would never accept any money from people who did not receive his ministry. This is the stand that every preacher should take as well.

Paul then speaks about disciplining his body so that he is not finally disqualified himself, after having preached to others (9:24–27). Solomon wrote three books of Scripture and still went to hell. That is a warning to all preachers. The apostle Paul – the man who established many churches, wrote Scripture, healed the sick, raised the dead, and preached so many wonderful sermons – feared lest he be disqualified. So he kept his bodily passions under control. Don’t ever imagine that because God has used you so much, He will definitely take you into His kingdom. Paul did not think so. God looks at our life primarily and not at our ministry.

Warnings and Guidelines

In *Chapter 10*, Paul continues on the same theme and warns believers from the example of the 600,000 Israelites who were redeemed by the blood of the lamb, but whom God was displeased with and did not permit to enter the land of Canaan. They perished in the wilderness. The same thing can happen to you, Paul says, because this was written as an example for us (10:6). Then, we have this wonderful promise of God that He “*will never allow us to be tempted beyond our ability*” (10:13). No temptation can ever come into our lives that will be too much for us to deal with. This is what assures us that we can overcome *every* temptation and be victorious in *every* trial. Don’t *ever* say that any trial or temptation is too much for you. If you say that, you are actually saying that God is *not* faithful to His promise and that he is a liar. There is a way of escape in every temptation – and that is to ask God to give you grace to overcome.

In 10:31, we have a wonderful guideline to find God’s will in all areas where the Bible is silent. “*Whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.*” Whenever you are in doubt about God’s will in any matter, ask yourself, “*Can I do this for the glory of God?*” If you feel that you cannot do it for God’s glory, then don’t do it. This verse must be the principle by which we live all of our life.

Chapter 11 speaks about two things – the covering of the head and the breaking of bread.

Why should a man *not* cover his head when he prays or prophesies in the church and a woman *cover* her head? Three reasons are given:

1. “*Christ is the head of every man, and the man is the head of a woman*” (11:3). Since Christ is the head of man and Christ should not be covered in the church, a man should *not* cover his head. Man, however, is the head of the woman and man should be covered in the church. So a woman should cover her head. Further, “*man is the image and glory of God but the woman is the glory of man*” (11:7). The glory of God should not be covered in the church and so a man should not cover his head. The woman, however, is the glory of the man – and man’s glory should be covered. So that is what a man testifies to by *not* covering his head and what a woman testifies to by covering her head. A priest who wears a cap on his head in church is therefore just as wrong as a sister who does not cover her head.
2. “*If a woman has long hair, it is a glory to her*” (11:15). All women know that long hair is part of their beauty – their glory. And the glory of the woman (her hair) should be covered in the church? The glory both of man and of the woman should be covered.
3. “*The woman ought to have a symbol of authority on her head, because of the angels*” (11:10). By covering her head, a woman is showing that she is submissive to the authority of the man – to her husband or her

father – and if she is an orphan or a widow, then to the elders of her church. She is not rebellious like the angels that fell.

Unfortunately, Western influence has come into the churches of the cities of India and corrupted this teaching. But Paul concludes by saying, “*If you are going to have a lot of arguments about this, I will just say this that every church of God practices this – and I am not going to get into an argument with you about this matter*” (11:16).

It is clear, however, from this passage that women can *pray and prophesy* in the church meetings. What women are forbidden to do in the church are teaching and being elders (*1 Timothy 2:12*). But women can (and should) prophesy – that is, share God’s word in a way that will “*encourage, comfort and build up*” the others (*1 Corinthians 14:3*).

We now move on to the subject of the Lord’s table (11:23–34). When we come to the Lord’s table, we remember the Lord’s death. We testify that Jesus gave His body to be broken for us and we want to be broken like He was. No-one else can break the bread and put it into our mouths – because no-one else can decide whether we want to be broken. We have to break that bread ourselves, for the symbolism to be accurate. We also testify that all of us who are partaking of this one bread are one body – the body of Christ (10:17). So this is a testimony of a covenant with the Lord, and of our unity with our fellow-believers.

If we don’t have such a vertical fellowship with our Lord as well as a horizontal fellowship with our fellow believers, then our breaking bread would be a lie. If we are bitter against someone, then we should not break bread. And if we do so, we could become sick – spiritually sick or physically sick, and even die spiritually (11:30). So we should judge ourselves rightly about these matters before breaking bread (11:31).

Gifts to Build Christ’s Body

In *Chapter 12*, we read about the gifts of the Spirit. The gifts are seen here in relationship to the functioning of the local church – the local Body of Christ. Many Christians think of the gifts of the Spirit *without* recognising that they are to be used to build a local expression of the Body of Christ in every place. Therefore they go astray. We must seek for the gifts of the Spirit because we want to serve others better (*Luke 11:5–13*).

Many emphasise the first half of *Chapter 12* (about the gifts), but not the second half (about the Body of Christ). Others emphasise the second half and ignore the first half. They are just like those who emphasise the second half of *Chapter 11* but disobey the first half of *Chapter 11* (saying that it does not apply to us today).

If you want to understand the exercise of any of the gifts of the Spirit properly, you must always see them in the context of serving others and building up a local expression of the Body of Christ in a local church.

In 12:13, Paul speaks of the universal Body of Christ, the worldwide church (for he uses the word “*we*”). But in 12:27, he speaks about the local expression of that Body in Corinth (for he says “*YOU are the body of Christ*”).

The gifts of the Spirit operate in the Body of Christ exactly like the different members of our body. Nobody should want to be a prominent member in the Body, like the ear or the eye. “*If the whole body was just one eye, or the whole body was just eyes where would the hearing be? And if the whole body was just ears, where would the sense of smell be?*” (12:17). There must be a nose too. So we shouldn’t desire anyone else’s gift. It is God Who makes someone an eye or a tongue in Christ’s Body. He may not want you to be a visible member like the tongue, but an invisible member like a heart, a liver or a kidney. But all these invisible members perform a very important function. Some parts of our human body are like the soles of our feet – hard and capable of taking a lot of rough treatment. But other parts are weaker, and are very sensitive and easily injured, like our eyes. If one speck of dust gets into the eye it disturbs us continuously. But if our feet are covered with dust, that doesn’t cause us any problem. Also, some members of the body are attractive while other members are not so attractive – and so we hide them.

In the church also, there are some people who are very visible, like a preacher who is frequently in the pulpit. We could say that he is like the tongue. But most of the others in the Body never stand in a pulpit. They may be the “*pray-er*s” – those who pray much in private for the preacher. They are like the heart, pumping blood so that the mouth can speak. Both members are equally important. The mouth cannot speak without the heart pumping blood to it. But the heart will die if the mouth doesn’t open and eat food. The heart is dependent on the mouth and the mouth is dependent on the heart. So whatever gift of the Spirit you may have, remember that you need your brother and he needs you. That brother may be an invisible member like the heart which nobody sees or appreciates and you may be a visible brother like the eyes or the hands.

There are many gifts of the Spirit, but there is no competition between them, but only cooperation. One may be an apostle, another a prophet (12:28), one may speak in tongues, and another may have the gift of healing. All are equally needed. Nobody needs another person’s gift. And nobody can say to another, “*I don’t need you. I can do everything on my own*” (12:21).

Is your left hand ever jealous of your right hand? The right hand may be writing all the important letters and signing all the cheques. But does the left hand ever become jealous of that and think, “Oh, it is the right hand that always does the important tasks. I don’t ever get to do any important tasks.” And then suppose your right hand is injured one day and bound in plaster. Will the left hand now say, “Ah, now is my chance to do those tasks”? If the left hand were to sign a cheque

now, it wouldn't look like your signature and the bank won't accept it! But what does the left hand actually do? It does everything possible to restore the right hand to health quickly so that the right hand can sign that cheque. That is how the Body of Christ should function. When you see another brother more gifted than you are, remember that even if you work hard you won't be able to duplicate his ministry – because it was God Who gave Him that gift. It is enough that just one member in the body (the right hand) signs all the cheques. Wherever there is jealousy or competition in the Body of Christ, it is because believers have not *seen* the Body of Christ.

People have sometimes asked me this question, "Brother Zac, why do you keep emphasising only *holiness* and *balance* in the Body all the time?" I reply with this question, "Why does a kidney only keep purifying the blood stream and balancing the chemicals in it – and nothing else?" Because that is its God-given function. That is not *every* function in the body – but it is an important one. Once your kidneys fail to function you will die. But the kidney cannot function without the hand and the mouth. We need one another. Evangelism is something like a hand taking a potato and putting it into the mouth – bringing an unbeliever to Christ. But is that enough? No. After the unbeliever has come to Christ, someone else has to take over. The potato has to be chewed by the teeth and then go into the stomach, have acid poured on it, so that it is broken down. Finally, after many more processes, it becomes a part of the human body. In the same way, a new believer has to be broken down, made small and humbled and fitted for his task in Christ's Body. That is how he becomes an effective member of Christ's Body.

But suppose the potato just remains in the mouth or in the stomach, and doesn't get digested. Then you will just vomit it out after a while. So the evangelist has to hand over the convert to the teacher and the prophet and the shepherd (*Ephesians 4:11*). Which of these ministries is most needed? Even though there is a hierarchy in the gifts, the apostle, prophet and teacher being first, second and third respectively (*1 Corinthians 12:28*), yet all the gifts are equally *needed*. So we must never try to do someone else's ministry. Cooperate with them instead. Once you see this great truth, it will deliver you completely from all jealousy, competition and unrest.

Chapter 13 comes between *Chapters 12 and 14* (both of which deal with the gifts of the Holy Spirit). Sometimes believers forget that. Many believers who ignore the gifts of the Spirit speak much about *Chapter 13*. They jump from *Chapter 11* to *Chapter 13* and then from *Chapter 13* to *Chapter 15*. Why do they leave out the chapters in between – *Chapters 12 and 14*? Because they are against the gifts of the Holy Spirit.

Paul wrote *Chapter 13* to show believers how to exercise the gifts of the Spirit in "*a more excellent way*" (12:31). To exercise the gifts without love is something like using an electric wire without any insulation. It will kill.

The gifts are powerful and will kill the user and others (spiritually) – if they are not exercised in love.

The greatest need among those who major on the gifts of the Spirit is to meditate much on *Chapter 13*. Having all the most supernatural gifts (miracles, healing, prophecy and tongues) and even sacrifice and Bible-knowledge will all still make you worthless in God's work, if these are not all motivated by fervent love for God and fervent love for others. Love will make us humble, patient, considerate, unselfish, forgiving, etc. (13:4–7) and willing to acknowledge that we don't have the full answer to many matters (13:12). Those who do not manifest all these qualities in using the gifts of the Spirit are actually babies and immature (13:11). They have not understood the very first lesson in the use of the gifts of the Spirit – and this unfortunately is the condition of many who claim to be baptised in the Spirit, today.

Chapter 14 tells us how we are to exercise the gift of tongues and prophesy, particularly in the church. In 14:5, Paul says. “*I wish that you all spoke in tongues, like me.*” That doesn't mean that everyone *must* speak in tongues. In *Chapter 7:8*, Paul had also said, “*I wish that you all were single, like me.*” That did not mean that all believers *must* remain unmarried. Many believers who quote 14:5 never compare it with 7:8. In both verses, Paul was only expressing a personal desire. He was not giving a command from God. But Paul realised that most Christians are *not* called to be single. And he also realised that most Christians do *not* speak in tongues either. It is very clear from 14:5 that everybody in Corinth did *not* speak in tongues. When Christians are psychologically pressurised to speak in tongues, they will produce “*tongues*” themselves, in order to be accepted by the “*tongue-speaking club*”. Most of the “*speaking in tongues*” today, unfortunately, falls in this category. The proof is that the speakers are not built up to a godly life, which is what genuine tongues does (14:4).

At the same time, we are commanded in 14:39, “*Don't forbid to speak in tongues.*” We have two groups in Christendom today in this matter: One group urges every Christian to speak in tongues – going against 14:5 and against 12:30 (“*Do all speak in tongues?*”). The other group forbids anyone to speak in tongues – disobeying 14:39. Both groups are going against the Scriptures.

It is also clear from *Chapter 14* that the gift of speaking in tongues is different from the way the apostles spoke in tongues on the day of Pentecost. On the day of Pentecost, there was no need for the gift of interpretation. The apostles spoke in tongues and everyone understood the language without any interpretation. This could have been a miracle either in the hearing of the hearers, or in the speaking of the apostles. But 14:5 here says, “*What is the use of a man speaking in tongues unless he interprets?*” If there is no interpreter, he should pray that he should interpret or else keep quiet (14:13, 27, 28). On the day of Pentecost, the

"tongues" were many different languages that all the hearers automatically understood. But here in *Chapter 14*, it is an overflow from the heart (bypassing the mind). It could be a prayer, or a word of challenge or encouragement (14:6). Further, "*interpretation*" is not the same as translation. Translation is *word for word*. Interpretation is *thought for thought*. That's why if two different believers were to interpret the same tongue they would give the same message but express it in their own words.

In a church-meeting, a *maximum* of two or three people are permitted to speak in tongues (one at a time) – and if they do, each of those tongues must be interpreted by someone (14:27). A church where people speak in tongues simultaneously or without any interpretation, is a church that is disobedient to the word of God – and therefore I would have no respect for such a church. Many practices that we find in Pentecostal and charismatic churches today are in total contradiction to Scripture and are mere following of traditions handed down from previous generations. Many churches forbid speaking in tongues, while others follow the traditions of their forefathers. We must ignore both groups and follow the Scriptures alone.

Chapter 14 clearly teaches that the most important gift in a church-meeting is the gift of prophecy. Prophecy is not primarily foretelling the future. Throughout the Bible, the main burden of the message of every prophet was *repentance and holiness*. The greatest old covenant prophet, John the Baptist, never predicted the future. All the old covenant prophets called God's people to repentance. Predicting the future was rare under the old covenant and also in the new covenant. Prophecy (in the new covenant) is primarily speaking to men to build them up, encourage them, challenge them and comfort them (as clearly taught in 14:3). In the church-meetings, two or three prophets could speak first and then all the others were free to prophesy (14:29, 31).

Chapter 15 deals with the subject of the resurrection. Paul was trying to convince the Corinthian Christians that there would certainly be a resurrection. The body of every human being that ever lived will be resurrected one day – to face God's judgement. And in the day of resurrection and rewards for Christians, although all true believers will be in God's kingdom, not all of them will receive the same degree of glory. "*There is one glory of the sun, another glory of the moon and another glory of the stars. Star differs from star in glory. So also is the resurrection of the dead*" (15:41, 42). Those believers who have been more faithful on earth will be like the brighter stars, and those who have been less faithful will have less glory – throughout eternity. So we are urged to "*be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord*" now (15:58).

In *Chapter 16*, we see the freedom that Paul gave his co-workers. In 16:12, Paul says that he had urged Apollos to go to Corinth to teach the Word. But Apollos did not feel free in his spirit to go. So Paul told him to go whenever he (Apollos) felt free to go. This is a beautiful example of the

freedom that we should give one another in Christ's body, even if we have apostolic authority. There must be no compulsion.

Finally, a word for us all: "*Let all that you do be done in love*" (16:14). If we obey that word, we can never go wrong. That is how we can all do our part to build our local churches.

2 CORINTHIANS

THE TREASURE IN AN EARTHEN VESSEL

The ministry in any church depends to a large extent on the work that God can do in the life of the leader of that church. In *Revelation Chapters 2 and 3*, we see clearly that where the leader was a backslider, the church also backslid; and where the leader was faithful, the church also was faithful. I have observed this to be true in churches in many parts of the world that I have visited. Where the leader is a compromiser, the church is a compromising church. Where the leader is a godly man, the church is usually godly – because the ungodly will get offended and leave such a church, leaving behind a godly remnant.

1 Corinthians deals with a local church in a city. *2 Corinthians* deals with the inner life of the leader who leads the local church. *1 Corinthians* deals with spiritual gifts, how to conduct church-meetings, breaking of bread, discipline in the church, and other matters like that. *2 Corinthians* deals with God's preparation of the man who leads that church. Paul reveals his inner life to us in *2 Corinthians* more than in any other letter of his.

In *Acts of the Apostles*, we read what Paul did and accomplished as an apostle. But in *2 Corinthians* we read about all that God allowed him to go through in order to make him the man of God he became. Anyone who wants to serve the Lord must meditate on *2 Corinthians* to see how God prepares a man for His service. Paul's ministry was effective, not primarily because of the gifts God gave him, but because of his inner walk with God. An earthen vessel may not look impressive, but if it contains water it will satisfy the need of a thirsty man more than an empty golden cup. Some gifts of the Spirit are spectacular like the golden cup and others look very ordinary like the earthen vessel. But it is what the vessel contains that is important. So, it's not enough to have a gift of the Spirit. Gifts of the Spirit are necessary, but it is our inner life that we communicate to others through our gift.

1 Corinthians emphasises the gift, while *2 Corinthians* emphasises the vessel.

A Ministry that Comes Through Afflictions

In *2 Corinthians 1:1–8*, we see how Paul obtained his ministry. It was not just because God had anointed him with the Holy Spirit. Many who are anointed with the Holy Spirit do not have a ministry where rivers of living waters are flowing through them – because they haven't understood *2 Corinthians*. They have understood only the anointing of the Holy Spirit, and thought that that was the answer to everything. They have not allowed God to do a work of breaking in their inner life. It was when the rock was struck that the rivers of water flowed out (*Exodus 17:6; Psalm 105:41*).

In *2 Corinthians 1:3, 4*, we read in a nutshell how Paul obtained his ministry. He uses the word “comfort” here which means strength (from the word “fort”). So the verse reads thus: “*Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all strength Who strengthens us in all our afflictions, so that we can strengthen others who are in affliction, with the same strength that God gave us in our afflictions.*” We are surrounded by people who are facing all types of trials and afflictions. If we are to help them to be overcomers, then we have to go first through many trials and afflictions ourselves and overcome in all of them. The strength and encouragement and victory that God gives us to overcome is what we can then share with others. This is new-covenant ministry.

New-covenant ministry does not come through studying Christian books and listening to tapes and thus preparing sermons. No. One has to go through many afflictions in secret. Jesus was tempted in all points as we are so that He could be a Forerunner for all of us. Because He has faced every temptation and overcome, He can say to us, “*Follow Me.*” Now we have to be *mini-forerunners* for others around us – and we have to say to them, “*Follow me as I follow Christ*” (*1 Corinthians 11:1*).

If Paul had *not* gone through many trials and afflictions in his life, he would never have had a ministry, even if he had every gift of the Holy Spirit. Many say, “Bible-study is not enough. We also need the anointing of the Holy Spirit.” But I say, “Even these two are not enough. We also need to go through many trials and through God's help overcome in all of them.” Thus we will become new-covenant servants of God. We need to spend hours studying God's word to understand God's mind. We also need to seek God in prayer to receive the gifts of the Holy Spirit. And then God has to take us through the education of trial. Thus He can give us an effective ministry.

“*As the sufferings of Christ are ours in abundance, so also our strength is abundant through Christ*” (*1:5*). Paul tells us here how we can be strong

enough to help others. We may have to go through rejection by parents and relatives and being despised by others. We may have to go through financial difficulties and even sickness.

Health is a very useful gift of God. But it is *not* a necessary requirement for serving God. Paul had a sickness that he called "*a thorn in the flesh*", that God could have taken away but which He never did. Timothy's "*thorn*" was a frequent stomach ailment that God never healed him of – despite Paul's prayers for him (*1 Timothy 5:23*). Timothy had to take medication for his sickness all his life. Paul and Timothy were two of the most effective servants of God in the New Testament. Sickness not only did not hinder them from serving God, but made them serve God even better! God used their "*thorns*" to keep them humble – and thus they were empowered by God's all-sufficient grace, which He gives only to the humble (*2 Corinthians 12:7; 1 Peter 5:5*). So it is best to leave it to God to decide which is best for us – health or sickness.

Many preachers today give people the impression that a lot of money is necessary to do God's work. But this is totally untrue. Paul had very little money most of the time. At times he didn't even have enough money to buy food or warm clothes for himself (*2 Corinthians 11:27*). Why did God allow His greatest servants to be without even food and warm clothing, when worldly companies give their employees so much more than all this? Because God had to teach Paul first of all to be content and thankful under all circumstances. He also wanted Paul to experience how other people in the world feel when they don't have food and warm clothing. To serve God, we have to experience what others go through.

In the early years of my married life, we had very little money – and we struggled financially for some years. But that was a blessed time of trusting God. We learned in those days to live simply, within our means, never to borrow money, and never to be in debt to anyone. We got closer to God and closer to each other as husband and wife. The lessons in simple living that we learned in those days remain with us, today, 47 years later. My wife and I are deeply thankful for those early years. Financial difficulties were a major part of our spiritual education. In the same way, rejection, misunderstanding and false accusation have also been used by God to strengthen us. We can never have an effective ministry unless we experience such trials. So don't envy those who have an easy way through life. They won't have a rich ministry.

Paul goes on to say, "*We don't want you to be unaware, brethren, of our affliction which came to us in Asia, that we were burdened excessively, beyond our strength, so that we despaired even of life*" (*1:8*). He went through so many afflictions that he thought he may even die. It is good that Paul has written a little bit about what he went through. He hasn't given us all the details. But he has shared a little bit so that we don't imagine that his ministry came merely through Bible-study and the

anointing of the Spirit. Paul had to go through many trials; and what he mentions here and in *Chapter 11* are only a small portion of them.

Restoration and Forgiveness

In *Chapter 2*, we read about the restoration of the brother whom Paul had disciplined earlier (*1 Corinthians 5*). Now Paul says, “*You should receive him back now*” (2:6–8). That brother had learnt his lesson when everyone in the church avoided him – and he saw how dark it was out in the world. He had set matters right and given up his sinful ways. But now he was discouraged and depressed, sitting alone at home. Paul asked the church to restore him.

The purpose of all discipline is to bring a brother back into fellowship with God and the church. A father disciplines his child, not to drive him out of the house, but to make him a better son. If the son is a grown man and rebellious, then the father may tell him to leave his house. But even in such a case, once the son has learnt his lesson (like the prodigal son), the father will welcome him back home. This is what Paul is saying here.

Paul says, “*If you forgive him anything, I also forgive*” (2:10). And then, there is a word for all of us: “*We must forgive others so that no advantage is taken of us by Satan*” (2:11). It is extremely dangerous to live without having forgiven someone.

If someone has done you harm and you don't forgive him, Satan can destroy *your* life. The person who harmed you may repent later and enter God's kingdom. But you, who never did him any wrong, may go to hell, because you didn't forgive him. That looks unrighteous – that the person who did the wrong goes to heaven and you who suffered the wrong goes to hell. But it can happen if he repents and you don't forgive him. Jesus said, “*If you don't forgive someone, My heavenly Father will not forgive you*” (*Matthew 6:15*). If your heavenly Father does not forgive you, how can you enter heaven? So if you die without forgiving anyone, as per Jesus' word here, you will go to hell, irrespective of how long you were a believer before that. So, we must develop the habit of forgiving others immediately, no matter what harm they did to us. Otherwise Satan will get an advantage over us.

Paul says, “*We are not ignorant of his schemes*” (2:11). Satan is always trying to trip us up. Why do you think Satan constantly reminds you of the evil things that others have done to you in the past? Do you think he is sympathising with you? No. He already got a hold of that other person to harm you. Now he wants to get a hold of you as well! Don't be ignorant of his schemes. Forgive everyone.

Once a brother came to me and complained that someone had done a number of evil things to him. I asked him, “Has he crucified you yet?” He said, “No.” So I told him, “Then you have a long way yet to go in following Jesus, because He forgave even those who crucified Him.”

Many unbelievers and believers have tried to harm me during these 56 years that I have been a believer. But *Romans 8:28* has been like a filter for me all these years; and so the evil that they have tried to do to me has always worked for my good – to make me more like Christ (*Romans 8:29*). One day, God will certainly judge all those who have tried to harm His children (*2 Timothy 4:14*). But our duty is to forgive them all.

The thing that has helped me to forgive those who hate me has been to see anger and hatred as sicknesses. Sin is worse than the most deadly sickness. If someone is jealous of me, or hates me, or wants to harm me, or my ministry, he is sick. So I look at him as I would look at someone who has cancer and AIDS and leprosy (all combined). If you see a person with these three diseases, would you be angry with him? No. You would feel sorry for him. Once God opened my eyes to see people in this way, it was easy to forgive them. I could even pray that they would be healed. “*A gentle answer turns away wrath*” (*Proverbs 15:1*). That is the way of Christ.

Paul’s testimony in *2:14* – “*Thanks be to God who always leads us in His triumph in Christ*” – came to me as a challenge many years ago – especially the word ‘always.’ I wondered if that was possible. Paul experienced constant triumph – and thanked God for giving Him such a life. He didn’t say that he was walking in triumph by his own power. No. He said that it was God Who led him in triumph always. So Paul was an overcomer. He wasn’t perfect. He did slip up occasionally. Towards the end of his life he once got angry and shouted at the high priest (*Acts 23:3*). But he humbled himself and asked for forgiveness, as soon as he was aware of his sin. Thus his fellowship with God was restored immediately – and he lived an overcoming life constantly.

Seeking to Please God Alone

If you want to build a church that satisfies God’s heart, you must seek to please God in every area. God wants to lead you in triumph in your personal life, not once in a while, but daily. It won’t be in your strength. God Himself will lead you in triumph in Christ – always. A true servant of God will be able to testify: “*Thanks be to God who always leads me in triumph in every single place, and manifests through me the sweet aroma of the knowledge of Christ.*” It was the fragrance of Christ that came through Paul wherever he went – and not his own fragrance. And so God got all the glory.

But for some people, Paul was a fragrance of death (*2:16*). Not everyone appreciates the full-gospel message. One would think that everyone should be delighted to hear the message of victory. But many do not like the message, because it shows up their sin. When Jesus came manifesting the life of God, many hated Him and put Him to death. Many Christian leaders are the same today. They do not like their love of money,

their love of honour and their defeated life at home, to be exposed by the message of constant victory. And so they will hate you if you preach that message. They will hate you because you are shining a light on their sins.

If someone was committing a robbery in the darkness and you shone a flashlight at him, he would hate you. A true servant of God shines the flashlight of God's Word into the dark corners of people's hearts. Those who love sin will hate him and call him a false prophet and heretic – because he exposed their sin. But those who are groping in the darkness, looking for the safe path, will be thankful to him, because they can now see the way. So there are two reactions to the light. Some hate it and some are deeply thankful for it. Jesus fills us with the Holy Spirit and manifests His power and His triumph through us everywhere. Some will be thankful for us and others will hate us. But thereby the true condition of each person will be revealed.

2:17 is a word that all Christian workers should take heed to: “*We are not like many people who peddle the word of God.*” To “*peddle the word of God*” is to sell it for money. What Paul is saying is that “we are not like other preachers who are making money out of preaching God's word.” All who serve the Lord should be able to say at the end of their lives, “*I did not spend a single day of my life preaching God's word in order to make money.*” Let the vegetable vendors and sellers of earthly goods peddle their wares for money. But we do not peddle the word of God. We serve others freely, *expecting no gifts or payments* for our services. As the Lord gave us everything freely, we too give everything freely to others. Such is the dignity of a true servant of God.

New Covenant Servants

In *Chapter 3* Paul speaks about a new covenant servant. There is a vast difference between new covenant servants and old covenant servants. In the old covenant, there were a few prophets like Hosea, Isaiah and Ezekiel who had to go through some trials for them to learn God's ways and to obtain His message. But generally speaking, the Old Testament priests did not have to go through any trials in order to have a ministry as priests of God. They only had to study and understand God's laws and explain those laws to the people. They studied and they preached. If all your preaching comes merely as a result of your study, you are an *old covenant* servant. A new covenant servant does not get his ministry by studying alone. He has to *experience the message*. Then he speaks out of his experience. He does *not* say, “*Come and hear,*” but, “*Come and see.*”

In *3:5*, Paul says, “*We are not sufficient for this ministry.*” He says that we are incapable of producing what is required for this fantastic ministry of the new covenant. But our sufficiency comes from God. A new covenant servant does not depend on anything within himself in order

to serve God. He receives his ability entirely from God. God gives it to him and He gives it out – just like the servants in Cana distributed the new wine. Those servants took water to Jesus. He turned it into wine. Then they distributed it. In the same way the disciples took five loaves and two fish to Jesus. He multiplied them – and they distributed them. We also take our limited resources to the Lord. He anoints them, blesses them and multiplies them; and we pass them on to others. That is how we are to serve. We are called to be in the *distribution* business, not in the *production* business – not even the production of sermons. When we speak, we are to minister *life* to others – *not knowledge*.

Many Christian workers are discouraged, gloomy and depressed after a few years of serving God; and some even get a nervous breakdown. This is because they tried to serve God with their own sufficiency. We must depend on God to equip us for His service. We need to trust God even for physical health if we are to serve Him. God's promise is, "*Those who wait upon the Lord shall exchange their strength. Even young men will faint, but you will mount up with wings like an eagle*" (Isaiah 40:31). Our sufficiency comes from God. Even if you are in financial difficulty, trust this promise: "*Our sufficiency is from God.*" Whatever we need, God is well able to supply.

He has made us servants of the new covenant. In the new covenant, we are not servants of the *letter* but of the *Spirit* (3:6). In 3:9, two ministries mentioned – a ministry of condemnation and a ministry of righteousness. A ministry of condemnation is one where people feel condemned after listening to the message. You may think your sermon was wonderful, because people felt convicted and condemned. But it was an old covenant ministry. The law condemns people and constantly tells them: "*You are not good enough, you were not good enough.*" A lot of preaching today in so-called revival meetings is just telling people, "*You are not good enough. You are bad. You are bad. You are bad.*" And people sit there feeling condemned. That is *not* Christian preaching. Christian preaching will lead people to righteousness and to a glorious life; it will not stop with convicting people, but will go on to lift them up, heal them and deliver them by the end of the message. Thus they go away with hope. If your preaching brings people into bondage, you can be sure that you are an old-covenant servant. If your preaching makes people feel condemned, that is old-covenant preaching. If you push people down instead of lifting them up, that is old-covenant preaching. New-covenant preaching lifts people up and gives them hope.

In 3:13–18, Paul compares the new covenant with the old covenant, in terms of Moses and Christ. When Moses was in God's presence, the glory shone on his face. When he came down from the mountain, he would put a veil over his face. In *Exodus* it says that he put the veil so that people

would not be afraid to look at him. But here we are given another reason. As time went on, the glory on Moses' face under that veil became less and less; and so he put the veil over his face, so that the Israelites would not see that the glory was gradually disappearing (*verse 13*). There are many Christians today in whose private life the glory is becoming less and less. When some of today's 50-year old preachers were 25 years old, they were on fire for God. But now their attitude to money and sin and many other matters have become un-Christlike. This is one of the main marks of old-covenant ministry – the glory fades away.

In a new-covenant ministry it's exactly the opposite. We don't have to put a veil over our face. We don't have to hide anything in our private life. Jesus never came with a veil over His face, because in the new covenant this veil is taken away. "*When you turn to the Lord the veil is taken away*" (*3:16*). Now when we see the glory of Jesus in God's Word, the Holy Spirit changes us from one degree of glory to another so that His glory in us *increases* day by day (*verse 18*). In other words, if we are submitted totally to the Spirit, the anointing upon our life will be more today than it was a few years ago, and *much* more than it was 30 years ago. But if you are not faithful, then the glory will *decrease* in your life as you grow older. Many, many zealous young people backslide as soon as they get married. Why does that happen? If you marry in the will of God, your zeal and glory will be far more than when you were single. But the glory will decrease, if your wife, or your home, become more important to you than the Lord. Such a man stops seeing the glory of the Lord and begins to backslide.

Some brothers, when they were unknown, ordinary people serving God, had a tremendous anointing and glory in their lives. But as their ministry spread and they became well known, they lost their anointing. They began to be more concerned about what people thought about them. Or perhaps, when they started their ministry they had very little money and they were very careful with their money. But as they mingled with other Christian workers who loved money, they became like them. Then the glory began to fade away.

It is very easy for such things to take away the glory from our lives. And most preachers, when the glory is fading away, try to cover it up – just as Moses did. Make sure that doesn't happen in your life, because that is not the will of God. It must be the opposite in our lives – the glory must increase. So look steadfastly into God's word and see the glory of Jesus always. That is how we can be preserved.

2 Corinthians 3:18 is the one verse that best describes the ministry of the Holy Spirit in the entire New Testament. When the Holy Spirit becomes Lord in our lives, He brings liberty. "*Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty*" (*verse 17*). He frees us primarily from the power of sin,

but also from the love of money, from the traditions of our fathers and elders that are contrary to the Word, from the opinions of people, etc. This is a great freedom indeed. Then we become free to serve God and not man. In 3:18, we are told that the Holy Spirit shows us the glory of Jesus in the Scriptures (The mirror is the Word of God – *James 1:23–25*). Some people read the Bible only to get sermons and check doctrines. But the Holy Spirit primarily wants to show us the glory of Jesus in the Bible. As we see that glory, the Holy Spirit also changes us into that likeness.

That likeness includes likeness to Christ in the way He ministered as well. We will begin to minister like Him. The Spirit will show us how Jesus made sacrifices in order to serve His Father – and He will make us make sacrifices also to serve the Lord. Our life and our ministry will change radically if we allow the Holy Spirit to transform us. We will become new covenant servants – and we don't have to leave our secular employment to be that. Any brother or sister in the church can be a new covenant servant.

In 4:1, Paul continues to describe his ministry. “*Because we have received this ministry, as we received mercy, we do not lose heart.*” To lose heart means to get discouraged. Even the apostle Paul was tempted to be discouraged. So if you are tempted to be discouraged, that should not be considered strange. I have been tempted many times to get discouraged. But I have said like Paul, “*We don't get discouraged because we keep our eyes on Jesus and we think of the wonderful ministry that God has given us.*” So, although we will all be tempted to be discouraged, none of us need EVER get discouraged, if we keep our eyes fixed on the Lord.

In 4:2, Paul says, “*We have renounced the things hidden because of shame, not walking in craftiness or adulterating the word of God.*” If you want to serve the Lord there must be nothing in your life that you have to hide because of shame. If there is something, confess it, set it right before God and cleanse it away. Your life should be transparent. That is one of the most important requirements to be a new-covenant servant. What is craftiness? When you write what you call “*a prayer-letter*”, but your main aim is to get money from people for yourself or for your ministry, then you are being crafty. You should be honest and call it “*A letter asking for money.*” There is a lot of dishonesty like that among Christian workers. If you feel you should ask people for money, do it, but don't give your letter a “*holy*” title! That is just one example of craftiness. Paul says, “We have renounced all this. We don't want any of it in our life. We want to judge ourselves and cleanse out all of that from our lives. We want to commend ourselves to every man.”

The Glory of Christ in an Earthen Vessel

Then Paul begins to explain what the gospel is. Many people cannot understand the gospel because Satan (the god of this world) has blinded

their eyes so that they cannot see it. Paul speaks here about the glory of God as the only real treasure that we can have on earth (*verse 6*). Just as God commanded light to shine way back in *Genesis 1*, He has also shone into our hearts – and this light is in an earthen vessel (*4:7*). Till the end of our lives, we will all be only earthen vessels. The only attractive thing about this vessel is that it contains the glory of God.

In the Old Testament, Abraham and David were materially wealthy. That was an earthly glory – because all human beings glory in wealth. But in the New Testament, God used a man like Paul, who was both poor and unimpressive. Tradition tells us that the Apostle Paul was only 4 feet 11 inches tall, bald, having a hooked nose and sick for much of his life. When he stood up to speak, he was not a very impressive personality. But this was the man God used to “*turn the world upside down*” – because he was anointed (*Acts 17:6*). Paul was actually turning the world “*right side up*”, because the whole world has been upside down, ever since Adam sinned. He was a weak earthen vessel but one that contained the glory of Christ inside. It’s what’s inside you that really counts. Many people today are impressed by so-called great servants of God who stand on platforms like film stars. But that’s not the picture we get of a true servant of God from the apostle Paul. He was not a golden vessel. He was an earthen vessel. So don’t get discouraged if you find many human limitations and weaknesses in you. Ensure that there is a great glory inside – that you walk with a clear conscience before God and live under the anointing of the Holy Spirit all the time. That’s what really matters.

The light in an earthen vessel (*4:6, 7*) reminds us of Gideon’s army of 300 soldiers who had an earthen vessel each, with a light inside. These 300 were selected from a larger group of 32,000 by God, and are a type of the overcomers in the last days. When they go to battle against Satan, like those soldiers, they have a sword (which is the word of God). But they also have an earthen vessel with a light inside. Gideon’s soldiers were told to break their earthen vessels so that their lights would shine out. If you put a candle inside a pot, you will hardly be able to see its light. But if the pot is broken, the light shines forth. Paul tells us how his earthen vessel had to be broken for the life of Jesus to shine forth. He had to go through affliction, perplexity, persecution and being struck down, without despairing (*verses 8–12*). Thus his earthen vessel was broken and people could see the light (the life of Jesus) clearly in him. Many believers don’t understand this, and they are not interested either. But this way of the cross alone is the way of life.

When you sow a grain of wheat into the ground, its hard outer shell cracks open. Only then can the life within be released. Even in us born-again Christians, there is the hard outer shell, of our soulish personality

and our flesh, which has to be broken. Only then will the light of the glory of God shine forth from us.

This is a principle that we see right through Scripture. When a woman brought an alabaster vial of perfume to Jesus, there was wonderful perfume inside. But no-one in the house could get the scent of that perfume until the vial was broken. In the same way, God has to take us through various circumstances where our outer life is broken. Then we will no longer be attractive to people. You may want to come across to others as a very smart person. But God says, "Let Me break this desire of yours." Man comprises of spirit, soul and body. There is a tremendous glory that dwells in our spirit when Christ comes in. But our soul life hinders that glory from shining forth. That's why God allows many a breaking in our lives – so that we fulfil His purpose.

4:10, 11 are verses that are misunderstood by most Christians. Many believers are eager to hear of a gospel that will do physical miracles in their lives. But if you want the life of Jesus to be manifested in you, the answer lies in these verses. *We have to carry the dying of Jesus in our body.* What is this "*dying of Jesus*"? It is to die to our own will and our self-life the way Jesus did during His entire 33½ years on earth (*John 6:38*).

That means reacting to life's situations the way Jesus reacted when He was on earth. How did He react when people called Him the devil, when Judas Iscariot stole His money, when people spat on Him, when people called Him an illegitimate son (the son of Mary), when people insulted Him, robbed Him, abused Him, told Him to stop preaching and threw Him out of the synagogue? He died to human honour, prestige, reputation and dignity, and to His own will. That is the "*dying of Jesus*." You and I have no part in the dying of Jesus on Calvary. We cannot die for the sins of the world. But there was a dying in His life that went on every day of His earthly life. That is the dying that we have to share in.

Why is it called "*the dying of Jesus*"? Because Jesus was the first Person who walked this way of death to self and to the things of this world. He died to everything that was human, and thus He manifested the glory of the Father. You and I are called to follow in Jesus' footsteps.

In *4:17, 18*, Paul says, "*All this affliction that we go through is very light because the glory that is going to come into us through them is so great.*" But this glory can come into us only as long as "*we keep looking at the things that are unseen and refuse to look at the things that are seen*" (*4:18*). That means that we don't look at any of our sufferings from a human viewpoint, but from a Divine viewpoint. There is a glory that is worked into our lives through these trials and we get into closer fellowship with Jesus' heart. That is why we are encouraged; and that is the way we get a ministry. We don't get a ministry by studying God's Word alone.

Paul longs to explain to us the way to have a spiritual ministry in the new covenant. Let us listen to him. *2 Corinthians* describes the inner life of a man whom God uses to fulfil His will. God has given us Jesus as our ultimate Example. But He has also given us Paul as an example of a servant of God. We don't see Jesus establishing churches, appointing elders and dealing with church discipline etc. But we do see Paul doing these things.

An Ambition to Please God Alone

In 5:9, Paul speaks about his ambition. All young people have ambitions. The problem is they have got the wrong ambitions. The ambition of many is to make money, or to become great and famous, and to make a name for themselves. Paul also got an ambition when he was converted. "*We have as our ambition whether at home or absent – whether we are in heaven or absent from heaven – to please Him*" (5:9). He was saying that when he got to heaven, his ambition would not change. It would be to please God alone. Can we honestly say that when we get to heaven we will have the same ambition that we have right now on earth? That is the identifying mark of a truly spiritual man. He is in tune with God, because he is in tune with heaven's values. Such a man will be the most effective servant of God on earth because he is in tune with heaven. The trouble with a lot of Christian workers today is that they are not in tune with God or heaven. If you want to please God only after you get to heaven, then I wonder whether you will get to heaven at all.

In 5:10, 11, Paul says, "*We must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may be recompensed for his deeds in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad. Therefore, knowing the fear of the Lord, we persuade men.*" The judgement-seat of Christ is the place where believers alone will be judged and rewarded according to the degree of their faithfulness. This is different from the great white throne where all unbelievers will be judged (*Revelation 20:11, 12*). One day we will stand before the judgement seat of Christ and be evaluated for everything that we ever did in our whole lives – our actions, words, thoughts, motives and attitudes. Then we will be rewarded accordingly.

There are many things God gives us – 365 days every year, many opportunities to bless others, money, intelligence and other gifts. When we reach the other end of life's journey we will be evaluated for how we used these gifts.

Then Paul says, "*It is the love of Christ that controls us*" (5:14). These two things mentioned here should be the motivating forces in our life – a reverential fear of the Lord and the love of Christ. It was thus that Paul lived such an effective life for the Lord.

Then Paul speaks about the great truth that we all died with Christ when He died on the cross (5:14). He speaks about this truth in *Romans*, *Corinthians* and *Galatians*. “*I am crucified with Christ.*” “*If one died, then all died.*” This was a unique revelation that God gave Paul. We don’t read Peter, John or James writing about it. When Jesus died and rose again, in God’s eyes, we all died and rose with Him. Therefore, we can no longer live for ourselves, but for Him alone (5:15).

If you ask Christians, “Why did Christ die?”, the answer most of them would give is from *1 Corinthians* 15:3, “*Christ died for our sins.*” That is right. But that is only part of the answer. The second part is here: “*Christ died so that we should never again live for ourselves but for Him*” (5:15). When we live for ourselves, we frustrate the purpose for which Christ died. If we keep living in sin, we are taking advantage of the fact that Christ died for our sins, and thus taking advantage of the grace of God. Any believer who lives for himself has not really understood the full purpose for which Christ died. Satan’s aim is to blind our eyes to the *full* truth of God. He first tries to prevent us from understanding anything at all about Christ’s death. If we do see that Christ died for our sins, then Satan will try to blind our eyes to the full purpose of Christ’s death.

Christ died to deliver us permanently from a self-centred life. When we put these two verses together – *1 Corinthians* 15:3 and *2 Corinthians* 5:15 – we see that the root of all sin is self-centredness. A man lives in sin because he lives for himself. As long as you live for yourself, you will never have victory over sin. As long as the root of the tree has not been chopped off, it will keep on producing fruit. If you lay the axe to the root (self-centredness), then you won’t have to keep cutting off the evil fruit (sin) that comes forth.

Many people have got rid of sin on the surface, but the root is still there, the root of living for oneself. You will never get victory over sin as long as you live for yourself. You must decide once and for all, “From this day onwards I will never make a decision with me as the centre of my life. I will never make a decision based on how it will benefit me.” Do you know the number of people who make decisions in Christian work by this question, “How will this benefit me? How will this benefit my family?” That is how every unconverted, godless sinner in the world also makes decisions. You are then no different from them except that he is probably an atheist whereas you go to some church. But inside you are both just the same. Jesus died to deliver us from that, so that we would never make a decision by how it would benefit us, but rather by how it would glorify God and benefit His kingdom and His purpose. If we can get 100 people like that, we can turn India upside down. But it’s very difficult to find even a few like that.

The vast majority of Christians haven't understood that we are not to live for ourselves any more. They skip over verses like 5:15 and jump to 5:17, "*Old things are passed away and all things have become new – a new creation.*" But let me ask you, "What are the old things that have passed away, or that *should have* passed away?" Has "*living for self*" passed away? Have your ambitions and your goals become new?

Ambassadors of the Universe's Greatest Super-Power

In 5:20, we read, "*We are ambassadors for Christ, and we are entreating you.*" It is a tremendous calling to be an ambassador for Jesus Christ. There is a dignity about a true child of God. Even the ambassador of a very poor country has a dignity about him; and the bigger and the more powerful the country is, the more the dignified its ambassador will be. Think of the ambassador of USA in India. Can you imagine the dignity with which he conducts himself because he knows that he is representing the greatest super-power in the world. He won't do anything cheap or undignified. He won't go asking people for money, and he won't do anything that dishonours the name of his country. Can you imagine the ambassador of USA coming to your house and asking you for some money for helping his country?

Suppose a man dressed in a suit appears at your door (or on television) and says, "I am the ambassador of USA. We are in desperate need of some money in our country. Can you donate one hundred rupees for our work?" What will you say? You will say, "You are a deceiver. You are *not* the ambassador of USA. The ambassador of USA can never beg for money like that."

Now suppose another man appears at your door (or on television) and says, "I am the ambassador of the Lord Jesus Christ. We are in desperate need of some money for our work. Can you donate one hundred rupees for our work?" You will believe him and give him the money. Why? Because you believe that the ambassador of USA is a dignified man whereas the ambassador of the Lord Jesus Christ is a beggar.

There is only one super-power in the universe – and that is the kingdom of God Almighty. The USA ambassador may be representing the greatest super power on earth. But with all humility I can say I am an ambassador of the greatest super power in the universe. That's what a true disciple of Jesus is. Do you conduct yourself then with the dignity of such an ambassador? It grieves my heart when I see the Name of Jesus Christ dishonoured by the undignified, cheap way in which Christian workers beg for money on TV and in their church-meetings and through prayer-letters. In Psalm 50:12, the Lord says, "*If I were hungry I would not tell you, for the world is Mine, and all it contains.*" That's what a true

servant of God says too: "If I am hungry or needy, I won't tell you. I will tell my Master in heaven, Who owns the whole earth."

An ambassador has always to be in touch with his homeland. He cannot afford to be out of touch with his home country for even a single day. That is how we also are called to live. I long to see the day in India when we can see servants of God conducting themselves with the dignity of an ambassador of the greatest super power in the universe – even if they are poor and are riding only bicycles. But how many Christian workers have you met like that? Most Christian workers are just dignified beggars, always asking people for money and going after the rich. That is a tragedy.

Always remember that you are an ambassador of Jesus Christ, wherever you may go – when travelling in a train or a bus or anywhere.

In 6:3–10, Paul speaks about how he conducted himself as an ambassador of Christ: "*In nothing giving offence to anyone so that the ministry does not get a bad name. But in everything commanding myself by endurance in affliction, hardship, distress, beatings, imprisonments, labour, sleeplessness and hunger; conducting myself at all times in purity, patience and kindness. Sometimes we receive glory from others, sometimes dishonour. Some people appreciate us, others condemn us. Some say good things about us, others speak evil about us. But in everything we commend ourselves as ambassadors of Jesus Christ. Some call us deceivers, while others call us true servants of God. We are unknown in the world but well-known among God's people. As dying, we live. We go through many sufferings but we know we won't die until God's time comes. We are disciplined by God, but we aren't dead yet. We are often sorrowful, not because people are hurting us, but because we are concerned for so many who are lost in sin, and so many believers who are carnal. But yet we are always rejoicing because our joy is in the Lord. We are poor materially, but we are making many rich spiritually. We have nothing in one sense, yet we possess all things in another sense, because we possess all of heaven and earth. Everything is at our disposal. God provides us with everything that we need. In terms of a bank account we may not have much. We often live from day to day. But God takes care of us.*" That was how Paul lived. He never believed in the 'prosperity gospel'.

The Corinthians were narrow hearted towards Paul. But Paul's heart was wide open to them (6:11). This is a very important quality for every servant of God. Our hearts must always be wide open to others, even if they are narrow-hearted towards us. As Edward Markham's poem says,

*"He drew a circle that shut me out –
'Heretic, rebel', a thing to flout.
But Love and I had the wit to win:
We drew a circle that took him in."*

When others exclude us from their circle, let us have the wisdom to draw a bigger circle that includes them as well. Paul's heart was large. You cannot serve God if your heart is open only towards those in your own church, or only towards Christians who agree with you in everything. Your service for God will be severely limited if your heart is not open towards *all* of God's people.

In 6:14, we are given a warning not to be unequally yoked together with unbelievers. There was a law in the Old Testament that an ox and a donkey should not be yoked together (*Deuteronomy 22:10*). We must not be partners in business with unbelievers – because they may want to cheat or do some other unrighteous things that you can't agree with. In Christian work too, we cannot work with those who don't have your sense of values. And if you marry someone who is not a believer and who does not have your sense of values, and your vision and your ambitions, it will be an unequal yoke. Righteousness has no partnership with lawlessness and light cannot fellowship with darkness.

So we are commanded to separate from all such alliances. “*Therefore, come out from their midst and be separate*” (6:17). We mingle with unbelievers in the world but we cannot become partners with them.

I want to speak plainly here. There are believers in some denominational churches who know that their leaders and bishops are unconverted. Why do they stay in such a church then? If the leader is not born again, the Bible calls him “*a child of the devil*” (*1 John 3:10*) – even if he is an archbishop! How can you submit to a leader who is a child of the devil?

The Bible says that there are only two categories of people in the world – children of God and children of the devil (*1 John 3:10*)? Many believers don't believe that. And so they compromise. Maybe you know that your pastor is a crook who is only out to make money. What then are you doing submitting to such a pastor?

Jesus said, “*When a blind man leads blind people, they will both fall into a pit*” (*Matthew 15:14*). If you want to avoid the pit, then don't follow a blind leader. God says, “*Do not be bound together with unbelievers... Come out from their midst and be separate.... Do not touch what is unclean ... and I will be a Father to you*” (*2 Corinthians 6:14–18*). You will never regret obeying those commands.

In 7:1, Paul goes on to say, “*Therefore, having these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from all defilement of flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God*”. If you want to perfect holiness in your life, you have to cleanse yourself from ALL filthiness of flesh and spirit. There is external filthiness of associations that defile you, and internal filthiness of motives and attitudes. This is not an area where we ask God to cleanse us. We have to cleanse ourselves – continuously. And we must do this in the fear of God and not in the fear of men. In other words, we do not

cleanse ourselves before the eyes of men, but before the eyes of God. And we must not seek to please men – either our relatives or our brothers. We must seek to please only God. Thus our holiness will be perfected.

In 7:2, Paul says, “*I have a lot of room in my heart for you. Please make some room in your heart for me as well. I have never taken advantage of you. I have never wronged you. I have never corrupted any of you.*” This is the testimony that every servant of the Lord should have.

In 7:10, 11, Paul refers to the very strong rebuke that he had given them in his first letter. He had asked them to put a man out of the church (who was living in sin). The church at Corinth took that letter very seriously. Paul caused them sorrow by his letter (verse 8). Sometimes God’s servants have to speak so strongly to us that it will cause us sorrow. But such sorrow will last only for a little while. Sorrow that is according to the will of God will produce a repentance that will lead to salvation (verse 10). And true repentance will always bring an earnestness and a zeal for God.

Money and God

In Chapters 8 and 9, Paul writes to them to collect some money for the poor saints in Jerusalem. Notice that he was not telling them to collect money *for his ministry*. Some people use this passage to say that Paul wrote to people to collect money. But Paul did *not* ask people to collect money *for his ministry*. He was not going to touch one cent of that money himself. It is perfectly in order to ask rich believers to give money to help poor believers, so long as we don’t take any part of that money ourselves. That was the example of the apostle Paul. He never touched a cent for himself. He trusted God for his needs. When he didn’t have enough money, he stitched tents and earned something. Sometimes he went without food. But he would not lower his standards. He was an ambassador of the universe’s greatest superpower, and if he was hungry he was not going to tell anyone except God about it.

Every servant of God should have his eyes open to see where believers are poor and he should urge the rich believers (who are under his charge) to help them. In the New Testament, we never read of Jesus, or any apostle or servant of God asking people to give them money *for their own ministry*. They told only God about their personal needs and the needs of their ministry. They urged believers only to help other poor believers.

Paul then gives the example of Jesus “*You know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ that though He was rich, yet for your sake He became poor, so that you through His poverty might become rich*” (8:9).

Our Lord had everything in heaven. But He came down to earth and became poor. He hung on the cross, stripped of everything, so that we could become rich. Is Paul saying that therefore we should all become

wealthy – as some would interpret that verse? Not at all. He is saying, first of all, how we have become *spiritually* wealthy through what Jesus did for us. Secondly, Paul is urging us to follow Christ's example: "Look at the example of Jesus. He gave up everything for the sake of others. You are His disciples and should be walking in His footsteps. If you are rich, you should be helping your fellow-believers who are poor." That is the context of the whole chapter. But many money-loving preachers have misinterpreted this verse and encouraged other equally covetous believers to pursue after wealth.

It is very easy to take a verse of Scripture and misquote it for one's own benefit. You can justify the hoarding of your money for yourself by saying, "Jesus became poor so that I might become rich." That is how the prosperity-gospel cult has grown in numbers.

In 8:20, 21, Paul says that in distributing this money to the poor, he wants to be careful that he does it in a transparent way, so that no-one can accuse him of being unrighteous. We must have a great regard for what is honourable, not only in the sight of God, but also in the sight of men. Paul was careful to ensure that he and his co-workers should not be accused of having taken some of the money for themselves. So Paul sent Titus and another brother to transport the money to the church in Jerusalem (verse 18). It is important when dealing with money in the church that at least two believers who have a good testimony handle it.

In 9:6, Paul again talks about the subject of giving. He says that if we are miserly in our giving, we will reap proportionately too. If you sow just a little bit of seed, you will get only a small harvest. If you sow plenty of seed then you will get a big harvest. Many money-loving preachers (especially television evangelists) have used this verse to urge believers to give them money. Such preachers are hucksters who are out to deceive simple believers. What did Jesus tell the rich young ruler who came to Him? He told him to give all his money away to the poor and to come and follow Him *without his money!!* Jesus did *not* say (as most of today's preachers would), "Sell what you have and give me the money, because we have many needs in our ministry. I have to support 12 disciples and their families." Jesus wanted the man and *not* His money.

But where can we find servants of the Lord today, who will tell a rich person, "We are not one bit interested in your money. We only want to *you* to grow spiritually. So give your money to whomever you like and come and hear the Word of God in our church"? *We however, say exactly that to the visitors who come to our church – constantly.*

In 9:7, we read that "*God loves a cheerful giver.*" Under the old covenant, the emphasis was on *how much* one gave – 10% plus other offerings.

Under the new covenant however, the emphasis is on *how* one gave – cheerfully or reluctantly. The question now is not one of *quantity* of giving, but of *quality* of giving. Under the new covenant, quality alone is emphasised – even in the type of church one builds.

Many believers are spiritually poor because they are miserly and tight-fisted towards God. Be large-hearted and rich in your giving to God – first of all with your life and then with your time and your possessions as well. And you will find that God repays you a hundredfold.

When I was single, I did not have many expenses, and I gave to God's work most of my income from the Navy. When I got married later, I found I had many financial needs. But I never got into debt even once. I never had to borrow money from anyone at any time, because God took care of us and repaid what I had given Him earlier. So I can tell you from my experience:

Learn to give richly to God – and you will find your financial problems solved. But let me warn you to give wisely. Don't give money to preachers who ask you for money. And don't ever give to preachers who spend lavishly. They will waste your money. Pray and seek God's will and give where God shows you that the need is the greatest. Give to the poor and not to the rich. Give to those who are really in need. You will then find that God gives you a rich harvest at the time of your need. It cannot be the will of God that any of His children should ever be in debt or face constant financial problems – when they have such a rich Father in heaven. The reason why many believers face such problems is because they have never been rich towards God. We reap what we sow.

Paul was a great apostle and these Corinthian Christians were young believers. Yet he humbled himself before them when he wrote these words to them in 10:1, "*I urge you by the meekness and gentleness of Christ.*" That was the spirit in which he spoke.

Our Thought Life and Devotion to Christ

He goes on to speak about the "*fortresses that there are in our thought life*" (verse 5). The lusts in our flesh have built dirty thought-patterns and selfish thought-pattern, which are like strong fortresses. They make us live selfishly during the day, satisfying our own lusts. And at night, when we are asleep, dirty thoughts come out of these fortresses, as dreams. Is it God's will that we should live like this forever? No. God's will is that we bring every thought to the obedience of Christ. With spiritual weapons given to us by God, we can destroy these fortresses. One of those great weapons is the word of God which is powerful for the destruction of these

fortresses (*verse 4*). Thus we can bring “*every thought captive to the obedience of Christ.*”

As we fill our minds more and more with the word of God, we will find that these fortresses get demolished one by one – and the soldiers (thoughts) inside these fortresses also get destroyed. As a young man, I too have struggled with dirty thoughts, like all of you. This was the solution that I found in my younger days. I read, meditated and flooded my mind with God’s word. Our mind is like a bowl full of dirty water, because we have put a lot of muck and rubbish into it in our unconverted days. But if we pour a jug of clean water into that bowl, gradually that water overflows and gets diluted. Thus the water in the bowl becomes clearer and clearer. This will take a long time. But pouring God’s word into our mind can clean up our minds slowly, over a period of years. But if every now and then we throw a little muck into that bowl again, then the cleaning process gets delayed. We can ask God to give us grace to bring every thought of ours captive to the obedience of Christ.

In 10:13, Paul speaks about “*not boasting beyond our measure.*” He says, “*God has appointed a certain sphere for my ministry, and I don’t have any desire to go outside that sphere.*” For our Lord Jesus, in His earthly days, that sphere was *mostly* only within the boundaries of Israel. He rarely ever went outside Israel. Paul too had a sphere of ministry apportioned by God. So Paul was not in competition with Peter, Andrew, Matthew, or with anyone else. He would work only in the sphere apportioned by God to him. Paul had a clear understanding about the boundaries of that sphere. Many preachers today, however, don’t have a clear understanding of their boundaries. That is why they clash and compete with other preachers.

Paul’s Trials and Thorn

In 11:2, 3, Paul speaks about how he wants to present those Corinthian Christians as a pure virgin to the Lord on the day of “*the marriage of the Lamb*”. And so he was very jealous that they should not fall in love with anyone else along the way. Consider the story of Abraham’s servant Eliezer, taking Rebecca on a long journey (of about 1500 kilometres from Ur to Canaan) to present her to Isaac. On that journey, if any handsome young men had come and tried to win Rebecca’s affection, Eliezer would have warned Rebekah saying, “Don’t be attracted by these men. I have to present you as a pure virgin to Isaac.” Paul wanted to preserve the church in Corinth in the same way for Jesus. That is the holy jealousy that every servant of God must have for his flock. He must tell them, “You are reserved for Jesus. Don’t be attracted by money, illegitimate sex, or worldly honour. These will try to attract you. But you must resist their advances and keep yourself pure.” Then Paul goes on to say, “*I fear that Satan will come like he did to Eve in Eden, and draw your hearts away from that simple and pure devotion to Christ.*”

When does anyone become a backslider or go astray? Is it when they start believing some false doctrine or when they join a cult? According to 11:3, we go astray the moment we lose our devotion to Christ. Every believer who has lost his devotion to Christ has already gone astray. Our job as shepherds of God's flock is to preserve the sheep in devotion to Jesus Christ. That is the most important thing in the Christian life. The devil perpetually seeks to lead believers astray from loving Jesus fervently. It is no use engaging in evangelism or teaching or any other service for the Lord, if we have lost our fervent love for Christ. This was the Lord's only complaint against the messenger and the church at Ephesus (*Revelation 2:4*).

Paul goes on to say that he was not a financial burden to any of the Christians there: "*When I was present with you I was not a burden to anyone*" (11:5–13). He worked with his hands as a tentmaker and supported himself and his coworkers. He did, however, occasionally, accept gifts from the church at Philippi (11:8, 9). Why did he make this distinction? Because many believers in Corinth did not accept his apostleship or his ministry. As servants of God, we must never accept any money from people or churches who do not accept our ministry. We have a dignity as ambassadors of the Lord Jesus Christ. Accepting money from any believer is an act of fellowship. So there is nothing wrong in receiving money from someone who has accepted your ministry. But not otherwise.

In 11:23–33, Paul speaks about the varied trials that he had experienced in his service for the Lord – his imprisonments, the beatings he had received both with scourges and with rods, sleepless nights, hunger and thirst, exposure to inclement weather, dangers from robbers, etc. There were times when he did not have enough warm clothing to cover himself, or even enough food to eat; and he did not have the money to buy warm clothes and food at that time. God took him through all this to make him a mini-forerunner for other Christians who were suffering. In each of those trials, Paul humbled himself. He says, "*Once I was going to be captured in Damascus and the believers had to lower me in a basket through a window for me to escape capture*" (11:32, 33). If you were an apostle, and something as humiliating as that had happened to you, you may not want anyone to hear about it. But Paul did not want the Corinthian Christians to imagine that he was a great man whom God would send some angels to rescue. He was an ordinary man and he wanted others to know him as such. "*I don't want anyone to think more highly of me than he should*", he said (2 Corinthians 12:6 - Living). How different Paul was from most servants of the Lord today who try to give others a higher impression about themselves than they actually are.

In 12:1, Paul speaks about a time when he was taken up by the Lord to the third heaven. For 14 years he had never mentioned it to anyone.

What a man he was! He had kept quiet about this experience for 14 years – and even when he did speak about it, he gave no details whatsoever. Most believers would have spoken about such a vision in the very next meeting of the church – and given every detail about it! This is why I believe Paul's experience was genuine. The visions of heaven that some believers boast about these days are figments of their fertile imagination – spoken in order to get honour from others! Why do I say that? Because those who have genuine visions will find that those visions are (as Paul said) “so astounding that they are beyond a man’s power to describe or put in words” and they will “not be allowed to tell them to others” (12:4).

Then Paul spoke about a heavy trial that he had that God did not remove, even after persistent prayer. Paul called it “*a thorn in the flesh*” and “*a messenger of Satan*” – yet it had been “*given by God*” (12:7). The gift God gave Paul was a thorn!! God gave it to Paul because He saw Paul in danger of becoming proud. God resists all proud people, but He didn’t want to resist Paul. He wanted to give him grace. But He could give Paul grace only if he remained humble (1 Peter 5:5). So God allowed Satan’s messenger to harass Paul and thus kept him constantly dependent on God and humble.

So we see that, at times, God may permit even a messenger of Satan to keep on harassing us, with a good end in view. Sickness, for example, is a messenger of Satan. Why do we say that? Because Jesus said, “*If you, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give (only) what is good to those who ask Him*” (Matthew 7:11). We are all evil fathers when compared to God, Who is perfectly good. And none of us would ever give sickness to our children. Then how could a loving, heavenly Father give sickness to any of His children? Most of the sicknesses in the world come because the earth is under a curse (Genesis 3:17). Some other sicknesses are caused by Satan (Job 2:7). Even though God’s perfect will for us is to be healthy, He may still permit us to be sick at times, with a purpose. When Paul prayed for deliverance from the thorn, God did not deliver him but gave him grace instead, to be an overcomer in spite of the thorn. We can be overcomers too with that same grace.

In 13:4 and 5, we read, “*Jesus was crucified in weakness, yet He lives by the power of God. We also are weak in Him, yet we will live with Him because of the power of God.*” A true disciple is one who is weak in himself and who lives by God’s power. And that is how Paul concludes the epistle.

Twelve Marks of an Ambassador of Jesus Christ

In conclusion, let us look at 12 marks of “*an ambassador of Jesus Christ*” that we see in this epistle.

Paul was an ambassador of Jesus Christ (*2 Corinthians 5:20*).

1. He was called by God (*1:1*). “*An apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God.*” He did not call himself. God called him. This is very important. We must not enter full-time ministry if God has not called us.
2. He was utterly sincere (*1:12*). One of the most important things God requires from us is sincerity. You may have many weaknesses, but if you are honest and sincere, you can be a true servant of God.
3. He was anointed by the Holy Spirit (*1:22*). Whatever other qualifications you may have, if you are not anointed with the Holy Spirit, you will not be able to serve God. You might as well go and do something else.
4. He loved those whom he served (*2:4*). “*I want you to know the love I have especially for you.*”
5. He depended totally on God (*3:5*). “*Our sufficiency is from God.*” He did not depend on his human abilities or on influential people. He depended on God alone.
6. He never gave up (*4:1*). “*Since we have this ministry we don't lose heart. We never give up.*” In Christian work, we can often be tempted to give up. We must resist that temptation just like any other.
7. He was an example to other people (*6:3, 4*). “*In everything commanding ourselves as servants of God.*” He was an example in his life-style and in the way he conducted himself in trying situations.
8. He never took advantage of anyone (*7:2*). He never made people his servants to serve him in any way. He never took advantage of the goodness of others, or of their hospitality.
9. He handled money wisely (*8:20, 21; 11:9*). He was not a financial burden on anyone. He was extremely careful in money-matters. He never received money from those who did not receive his ministry.
10. He stayed within the boundaries that God had drawn around him (*10:13*). He had no lust to go beyond those boundaries.
11. He was willing to suffer (*11:23–33*). He had many sufferings in serving the Lord and he accepted them all joyfully.
12. Finally: He longed to lead believers to perfection (*13:9*). “*We rejoice when you are strong and we pray that you will be made perfect.*”

This was the way Paul followed Christ. Let us follow his example and serve the Lord like he did.

GALATIANS

FREEDOM FROM THE LAW

Freedom from the law' is the subject of *Galatians*. Paul speaks here of another gospel contrary to the one the apostles preached (1:8). The other gospel is a false gospel that keeps Christians bound to the spirit of the law – trying to please God by keeping certain rules. Christians who want to be holy stand in great risk of becoming legalistic instead of living by the leading of the Holy Spirit. Church-elders can feel that if they preach too much on grace, then their people will live just as they like – and sin. So they introduce a few rules for membership in their church – rules that are not found in God's Word – in order to control their people. But that is *not* God's way – because that always brings people into bondage. It is very important, therefore, to understand the difference between law and grace.

The Difference Between Law and Grace

The law could keep a person clean externally. The ten commandments could be likened to ten chains put on a pig. If you clean up a pig and then take it through a filthy area, it will come through clean, if you keep controlling it with those chains every time it wants to turn this way or that to wallow in the muck. The pig can boast that it is clean even after going through two kilometres of rubbish and muck. But it remained clean only because it was restrained by the chains. Any believer who is kept pure by the restraints of rules is under the law. Such a believer will be clean *only externally*. Inside, he will be unchanged, like the pig. On the other hand, if you were to send a cat through that two-kilometre stretch, it will come out clean – without any chains. It just avoids everything dirty. That is the difference between one who is under law and one who is under grace. It is a cat's inward nature that makes it different from the pig. Grace makes

us partakers of the Divine nature. God does not want to control us with chains but to change our nature within.

In the first few verses of this letter, Paul talks about how these Christians had gone away from the gospel he had preached to them, to a legalistic gospel. And Paul relates that to a desire to please man. “*Am I seeking to please men or God?*” (1:10). Those who live under the law are invariably men-pleasers. That is the real problem. In 1:4, Paul says, “*Christ gave Himself for our sins that he might deliver us from this present evil world,*” and its opinion, approval, rules and regulations. He delivers us so that we might live according to the will of God. So Jesus died not only

- to forgive our sins, and
- that our old man might be crucified with Him, and
- that Satan might be defeated on the cross, and
- that we might not live for ourselves, but for Him;

but here is another reason why He died:

- So that we might never be part of this world’s system.

Have you understood that? Those who are legalistic usually want to live in this world system as Christians. I have observed that legalistic Christians by and large, love money and are worldly. They are not worldly on the outside. They may dress simply, but they are worldly in their hearts and minds. But those who come under true grace become free. Jesus died in order to deliver us from this world system.

Every religion in the world has rules and regulations. No religion preaches free forgiveness without our having to do anything. Every religion teaches that we have to do something before God can forgive us and accept us. And whenever “*Christianity*” begins to preach something like that, you can be sure it is a false gospel.

A legalistic gospel seeks to please men and not God. Because the righteousness of the law is external, and we want an external righteousness in order to impress people that we are very holy. But the righteousness that comes through grace and from God is primarily inward. If we seek to please men, we will not care about our inside. Jesus said to the Pharisees, “*You clean the outside of the cup, but the inside is dirty.*” That is how it is for all who are legalistic. Their outside is clean, but their inside is dirty. Paul says here that if we truly want to be free from legalistic Christianity, then we must deal with the root-cause of it. We must decide once for all not to please men but to please God alone.

Galatians 1:10 is a very important verse for anyone who wants to serve the Lord: “*If I seek to please men, I cannot be a servant of Christ*”. This is

a clear-cut statement. The moment you seek to please your relatives, your colleagues, or your fellow-brethren, or any man – you cannot serve the Lord. In every decision you take and everything you do, you should therefore ask yourself, “Am I doing this to please men or to please God?” Believers ask many questions, such as, “Can I watch this television programme?”, “Can I wear ornaments?”, etc. To find the answer, all that they need to do is ask themselves, “Am I doing this to please myself/others – or am I doing this to please God?” We don’t have to judge one another in this matter but only ourselves.

When it says here, ‘*to please men*’, it includes satisfying ourselves too. When we please ourselves we cannot please God. To be free from legalistic Christianity, we must decide once and for all, that whenever we are tempted to please ourselves or others, we will instead deny ourselves and seek to please God alone. Life will then become full of the joy of the Lord and we will be able to serve others in the power of the Holy Spirit.

The Ministry of Paul

Paul then goes on to defend his ministry. Remember that Paul was writing at a time when the New Testament was not written. A lot of the books in the New Testament were written after Paul died. So when Paul wrote this, there was no New Testament available in different places. Even after the New Testament was written there were only a few copies of it available. So Paul had to defend his apostleship, in exactly the same way that we today defend the authority of the Bible as the Word of God, to those who do not accept its authority. In the same way the apostles had to defend their apostleship, in those days, so that people would accept what they taught as the word of God. We don’t need to do that today, because we are not preaching our word, but the word of Scripture.

Paul was not quoting any Scripture when he said, “*We are justified by faith in Christ.*” There was no Old Testament verse that taught that, or that the law had been abolished. Paul was writing Scripture – and so he needed to defend his apostleship. And that was why God had to confirm his apostleship with signs, wonders and miracles in a way that is not needed today. That is why we do *not* see so many miracles today as Paul and Peter saw in their time. In the *Acts of the Apostles*, God confirmed the message of the gospel with miracles wherever it was *being preached for the first time*. And God is doing such miracles even today in remote areas where the gospel is being preached for the first time.

Paul then says that he did not receive the gospel from man (1:12), but by direct revelation from Christ. Once he had been very zealous for the law and had promoted it. But when God revealed His Son to Paul’s heart, he did not consult with man but went straightaway to Arabia

and then went to Jerusalem only three years later (1:16, 17). First of all he started out more zealously than all the people of his time. He was advancing and promoting the law through traditions (1:14). But when Christ was revealed to him on the Damascus road, he went off to Arabia for three years.

Why did he go to Arabia for *three* years? He had spent *three* years in Gamaliel's Bible school in Jerusalem, acquiring wrong ideas about God and about how one could be saved through the law. So it is possible that God took him away to the desert for three years to get all that chaff out of his head and to give him revelation on the new-covenant gospel. This is what God often has to do with people who go to Bible-school and get knowledge without the revelation of the Holy Spirit.

Gamaliel, as far as we know, was a God-fearing man (Acts 5:34–39). But he did not have the revelation of the Holy Spirit. So he could not lead the students in his Bible school into Divine truth. All he had was an intellectual knowledge of the law. So his student Paul had to be alone with God for three years before he could get the Spirit's revelation.

We have often looked at the word '*revelation*.' We never see this word in the Old Testament, because people did not have the Holy Spirit within them then. Under the old covenant, the emphasis was only on '*meditation*.' If we meditate on the Scriptures but don't get revelation from the Spirit, we can miss what God has for us. When Peter recognised Jesus as the Son of God, Jesus said to him, "*Blessed are you because you got revelation*" (Matthew 16:17). Paul says here that he got the same *revelation* (1:16). It's important when studying the Scriptures, that we get *revelation* on it from the Holy Spirit. It's not enough to *understand* it. There are many who understand the Bible and who even believe what is written therein. The devil also understands and believes in that way. But that doesn't change Satan. And it won't change you. We can believe, understand and even memorise Scripture and yet remain unchanged.

You can know that you have received *revelation* on Scripture when it changes your life, your ambitions, your attitude toward money, your attitude to your enemies and your attitude towards sin. But if these things have not happened, then all your knowledge of Scripture is no better than the devil's. A very immoral person can be a first-class teacher of chemistry. In the same way, a very immoral person can be a first-class teacher of the Bible. If you have intelligence you can study the Bible just like people study chemistry. You can get a doctorate in chemistry or you can get a doctorate in the Bible. That is only a test of your intelligence. But in their personal life the chemistry teacher and the Bible teacher may both be living immorally. Or both may be living to make money and

have many earthly ambitions. Neither of them have any Divine revelation. Revelation is something that will change our lives. That is what we need if we are to serve God.

In Christendom, we find people who have gone to two extremes. Some are totally intellectual and do not believe in revelation; they are dead spiritually. Then there are others who believe in revelation but who have taken it to another extreme. They talk about special revelations that they have received, that are not in the Bible. These are extremists and cultists.

The Gospel Brings Freedom

In *Chapter 2*, we read of how Paul defends the gospel of the grace of God, even before Peter. I want you to see something that Paul did here, that is an attitude that all of us should have. Here we see a healthy corrective to the imbalance I just spoke about. Paul first went to Arabia, and then after 14 years he went to Jerusalem, because of a revelation (2:2). In Arabia he had received revelation on the mysteries of God. Then God gave him another revelation and told him to go to Jerusalem and submit this gospel he was now preaching privately to godly leaders in the church there – to check up whether he was teaching the truth or whether he was going off on a tangent. So Paul went to godly leaders in the church and asked them, “Brothers, this is the revelation I have received and that I am preaching. What do you think about it? What is your opinion about this revelation?”

Whenever you get some new revelation, I would encourage you to go to some older, godly brother or brothers and check up with them whether your revelation is Scriptural. There could be other aspects of Scripture that you are ignorant of and may not have considered. It is a safety for younger people to go to older people and confirm whether their revelations are from God. That will save you from being imbalanced and will protect you from false teaching.

In those days, there were false brothers who came into the church to spy out the liberty that people were having in Christ and preaching about and wanted to bring them into bondage again (2:4). Paul would not listen to them at all. And even the godly leaders of the church acknowledged that what Paul was preaching was right (2:6).

In those days, some Jewish Christians said, “You must be circumcised in order to be saved”. Today some church leaders say, “You must remove your jewellery before we will baptise you”, or “You must get rid of your television set before we will allow you to break bread with us”. Such legalism has been around in Christendom for centuries, in different forms. Legalists have always sought to add something or the other to the simple message of repentance and faith in Christ for salvation. Church leaders

have added their own rules to the Scriptures through the centuries. And that is why many churches are in such a pathetic state today.

When God accepts someone, He doesn't check whether she has removed her jewellery or whether he has got rid of his television set. He sees whether he has repented and believed in Christ. Further, God loves a cheerful giver of obedience and so He never forces anyone to do anything.

Are you adding something not found in the New Testament as necessary before you accept a brother into your fellowship? Theoretically people may say it is only repentance and faith that are required. But in spite of saying that, when it comes to actually welcoming a person into the church-fellowship, church-leaders will say something else is also required. There are just as many traditions of the elders in many of the so-called "New Testament" churches as there are in the mainline denominations. And to justify their actions, they will quote some verse out of context.

So the letter to the *Galatians* is very relevant for our time. Paul was a man who fought for the freedom of the gospel. Every true servant of God will fight for the freedom of the gospel. Are you in a church-system whose top leaders believe something that you know is a tradition? Those elders are bringing a whole lot of people into bondage through those traditions.

How many are there, who have courage like Paul, to confront such elders and to tell them that they are wrong. Paul confronted even Peter. "*Peter came to Antioch, and I opposed him to the face*" (2:11). Remember, Peter was the man who had publicly welcomed Paul recognising that he had a God-given ministry (2:9). Yet Paul confronted him.

There is something wonderful we see here about Peter, James and John. Paul who was much younger than them, began having a wider ministry than them – and they had the grace to recognise it and encourage him in it. It is very rare to find older servants of God like that today, who have the grace to recognise an anointing upon a younger brother. Paul then confronts Peter, the senior leader of the church, and tells him that he is wrong. That would be like a junior worker confronting the top leader of his denomination and saying, "You are wrong."

Why are there so few like Paul? Because most Christians are diplomatic and seek to please men. They mistake their compromising attitude for gentleness and humility. When it comes to the truth of the gospel, we must not seek our reputation. Truth is not our property. It is God's and so we have to defend it. Most Christians would fight tooth and nail for their earthly property. But when it comes to God's property – the truth – that is being stolen, most Christians just keep quiet. That proves that they just love themselves. They don't love God or the truth.

But Paul loved the truth. If someone was only stealing Paul's coat or shirt, he would have let him have it. But when they were robbing the truth of God's word, he fought for the truth. That is how every godly man is. He cares more for God's truth than for his own property.

If all of you had valued God's truth as much as you value your own property, you might have progressed much further than you have. I find there are very few people who are willing to take a stand for the truth. Most preachers are men-pleasers. So God cannot make them His prophets. God will test you in many different circumstances to see whom you want to please. God tested Paul here to see if he would seek to please Peter.

Peter was a senior apostle, but what he was doing was wrong (2:12). He used to eat with the Gentiles. But when some people came from James (the elder at Jerusalem), he became afraid of what James would think and withdrew. That was when Paul stood up to Peter. Even Barnabas was carried away by Peter's hypocrisy (2:13). Barnabas also was senior to Paul. He was a gentle, gracious person. His attitude may have been, "Brother Peter is a senior brother. So let me not say anything and judge this godly man." Paul's attitude, however, was, "It's not a question of whether he is more godly. I am not comparing myself with him. What he is doing is contrary to the gospel message that we are preaching. What's wrong with eating food with the Gentiles? Why should we be afraid of what Brother James has to say?"

Are you afraid like that of some elder brother's opinion? It was because there were brave, fearless men like Paul in the first century that we have the pure gospel in the New Testament. Because there were fearless men in all these 20 centuries, who stood for the truth of the gospel, and did not seek to please men, we have the pure gospel message today. Thank God for such men.

In 2:20, we see the secret of Paul's life and how he had the courage to stand for the truth. He was "*crucified with Christ*." The old Paul had died. Christ was living in him now. Many Christians have understood only one side of the way of the cross – the negative side of it – death to Self. But there's another glorious side to it – "*Christ lives in me*." Death to Self leads to the resurrection-life of Christ. Then His life can be manifested through us.

Faith – Not Works

In Chapter 3, Paul speaks about the basis on which we receive the Holy Spirit – not works, but faith. He asks them, "*Did you receive the Spirit by the works of the law?*" (3:2). Some people imagine that God will give them the fullness of the Holy Spirit if they fast and pray sufficiently.

But did you get forgiveness of your sins because you fasted and prayed? No. It was a gift. Forgiveness of sins and the gift of the Holy Spirit are both given exactly on the same basis: By grace, without works.

Paul then asks the Galatians, “If you started your Christian life by faith, do you think that you can now perfect it by fleshly efforts?” It was the Holy Spirit Who brought salvation into your life, and He is the One Who will make you holy as well. It is not laws, rules and regulations that will make you holy. If you have understood this truth, then you have understood the main message in the letter to the Galatians.

You did not receive the Spirit by the works of the law. Perfection does not come by the works of the flesh, but by the work of the Holy Spirit. You have to submit to the Holy Spirit, listen to His voice whenever He convicts you, and set matters right. Thus He will keep you holy. Fasting and prayer won’t make anyone holy. Many who fast and pray regularly are still defeated by sin – they quarrel with others and lust in their hearts. This proves that holiness does not come that way. It is only by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Then Paul reminds them that the miracles God worked among them were also not as a result of their works (3:5). They were in response to their faith. God does amazing supernatural works for His children – not because they deserve it or because of any good works they did, but because of their faith.

Abraham was justified by faith (3:6); and then he was made a blessing to all nations (3:8). And so can we be (3:14). When Christ hung on the cross, He became a curse for us (3:13), to remove the curse of the law from us. There is a curse in the law: If you don’t live according to its standard, you are cursed. *Deuteronomy* 28 lists some of these curses – madness, blindness, and many sicknesses. Christ took away those curses when He died on the cross. This teaches us that we cannot suffer because of any sins committed by our ancestors – because every curse was broken at the cross. When we received Christ as our Lord, every curse was broken. We don’t have to live in fear of any generational curse now. Instead we have the opposite – the blessing of Abraham (3:14). That is why we can now receive the Holy Spirit through faith.

The blessing given by God to Abraham was: “*All nations and all families on earth will be blessed through you*” (3:8). So the purpose of the Holy Spirit coming into our lives is to make us a blessing to every person we meet. One mark of a Spirit-filled person is that he is a blessing to everybody he meets. When he visits a home, he blesses that home. Many Christians, when they visit a home, bring confusion into that home. Many cultists bring division and many other problems into Christian homes. But a godly person brings a blessing. When one person in a home gets converted, there can be some disturbance in that home. But as time

passes, the blessing of God will come into that home; and more of the members of that home will be converted. This is the blessing of Abraham that we are called to partake of.

Justification and Sanctification

In the rest of *Chapter 3*, we read about the difference between law and grace. The above promise was given to Abraham 400 years before the law. In 3:24, we are told that "*the law is like a child-trainer (or nanny) that leads us to Christ.*" One function of the law was to show us that no matter how holy a man was, he could never rise up to God's standard. Pass marks in God's kingdom is 100%. The best among us get 0%!! For 1500 years, the Israelites tried to keep the law, but failed repeatedly. They were like the disciples who went fishing and caught NO fish (0%) the whole night (*John 21*). Finally, they looked to the Lord and He filled their boat with fish (100%) in a moment.

When we come to Christ, He adds His 100% to us immediately – and thus we are justified. Justification is like receiving grace marks in an examination. We all get 0% by God's standards. But God offers us all 100 grace marks. Those who accept the offer get 100%. Those who refuse, have to live with their 0%. Thus, those who accept the 100 grace marks go ahead of all the others, even though they may be worse students!! This is the gospel of justification by faith. The righteousness of Christ is put to our account. We humbly acknowledge that we deserve only zero. Thus all the glory for our salvation goes to God alone.

God doesn't leave us there – merely justified. He wants to sanctify us entirely too. And so the righteousness of Christ that was imputed to us, He then imparts to us, day by day, through the Holy Spirit, so that it becomes a part of our own nature. Thus we press on to perfection.

That essentially is the message of *Galatians*. It doesn't make a difference who you are – "*you are all sons of God*" (3:26). Nobody is better than another in Christ's Body. There is no Jew or Greek, free man or slave, male or female in the Body. All are equally accepted by God. And we must accept all people equally, once they have come to Christ. If you look down on someone of another community, you haven't really understood justification in Christ. You are back under the law again. The law divides people into communities. Justification by grace unites us.

One indication that you are free from the law is this, that you can sincerely look at every person in Christ irrespective of language, community, education or background and say, "He is my brother. She is my sister. I can have fellowship with them no matter what background

they come from. They are all the same to me, because all our differences have been eliminated in Christ.”

In *Chapter 4*, the difference is pointed out between being a child and an adult son. Under the law, God treated the Israelites as small children. There is no difference between a child and a slave because a child can't really exercise ownership of anything, even if he owns everything (*4:1*). But when the child becomes an adult son, then he can exercise his ownership of everything. This is the difference between law and grace. Under the law God treated people like little children. Under grace, we are treated like adult sons.

Under the law, God had to give the Israelites laws for every little thing. They were told, for example, what to do with a pot if a lizard fell into it, and what to do if they found a mother-bird along with its little ones in a nest, and how to handle various types of skin disease, etc. That is how we deal with little children. We have to tell them to wake up at a certain time, brush their teeth, pack their books, go to school, do their homework, etc. We have to hold their hands and teach them to look left and right before crossing a busy road. We have to teach a child every little thing. But you don't have to remind an adult to brush his teeth in the morning, or to go to school. You would teach an adult son good principles to live by. That's another difference between law and grace. Under the new covenant, you find principles and not detailed rules. When Christians take those principles and make detailed rules out of them, they become Pharisees. You find such Christians in every denomination in Christianity. The tendency towards Phariseeism is in every group. Leaders prefer to make rules for their flock rather than teach them divine principles. Thus they bring people back under the law. They treat people like children when God wants to treat them as adults. If God wants to treat His children as adults, we better learn to treat them as adults too!

In *4:13*, Paul tells us that he preached in Galatia for the first time because he was sick. He didn't plan to stay in Galatia initially, but only to pass through. But he fell sick, and because of that he had to stay put in Galatia and while he was in that region, he preached the gospel to people there, and churches were established. Thus we see that the sickness that the devil gave Paul only served to fulfil God's purposes. If Paul had not been sick, he would not have stayed in Galatia and then there would have been no churches planted there. In *Acts 16:6*, we read that Paul and his team went through Galatia and were “*forbidden by the Holy Spirit to travel to Asia Minor*”. It is only when we read *Galatians 4:13*, that we discover that the way the Spirit stopped him in Galatia was through sickness!! As the old saying goes, “*Disappointments are His appointments*.” If you are a wholehearted child of God, every disappointment will become God's appointment for you. God still works in amazing ways through sicknesses, delayed trains, missed buses, and other delays.

In 4:19, Paul compares himself to a mother going into labour to deliver a child. He is referring to the burden he has in his heart that the image of Christ should be formed in the Galatians. If you have seen a photograph of an embryo in its mother's womb, you would have noticed that it looks more like a tadpole than a human being, with a big head and a small body that looks like a tail. But after nine months it comes out of the womb as a perfectly shaped baby. Paul is saying here, "You Christians are like that embryo. You don't look like Christ at all. The Divine seed is there in you, but everything is out of proportion. So I am burdened for you, that the image of Christ should be formed in you, so that you are perfectly proportioned in every area of your life." That is the burden that every true servant of God carries in his heart for his flock.

A Life Led By the Spirit

In 5:1, Paul says that Christ came to set us free. So we should never permit anyone to bring us into bondage to laws again. We must never become slaves to the traditions and laws made by any group or church. At the same time, we must not use our freedom as an excuse to sin (5:13). Many believers have misunderstood grace and Christian freedom and ended up worse than being under the law – they live as slaves to their flesh. The only right way to be free from the law is to be led by the Holy Spirit. Otherwise we will sink lower than the law and live in sin. But if we walk according to the leading of the Spirit, then we will not descend to the level of the flesh. Only such believers can claim to be free from the law (5:16, 18). So there are three levels at which a believer can live:

1. Led by the Spirit (the highest – new covenant – level); or
2. Led by the law (the old covenant level); or
3. Led by the flesh (the lowest level).

Look at these three levels of life as the three floors of a building. If you are not living on the third floor (led by the Spirit), and you destroy the second floor (led by the law), you will descend to the first floor (led by the flesh). If you say, "I am not led by the law because Jesus has abolished the law," then you better be led by the Spirit. Otherwise, you will descend to the level of the flesh. This is what has happened to multitudes of believers. They have read in *Galatians* that we are not under the law. But they do not live according to the leading of the Spirit. The result is they live according to the flesh. That is why we find Christian leaders today doing things much worse than what people did who lived under the law. How do believers who say they are under grace live according to the lusts of their flesh? Because they have thrown away the law. It is only "*if you are led by the Spirit, that you are not under law*" (*Galatians 5:18*). The law is necessary for those who do not want to be led by the Holy Spirit.

The message in *Galatians* is *not* “Throw away the Law.” It is, “Throw away the Law only when you have come to a life in the Spirit.”

The Holy Spirit then describes what life in the flesh is like (5:19–21): impurity, idolatry (worship of money and people), enmity, strife, jealousy, outbursts of anger, disputes, dissensions, factions, etc. Are these found only among unbelievers? No. Even so-called “*believers*” indulge in these sins. Why? Because they threw away the Law before entering into a life in the Holy Spirit. Such will not inherit God’s kingdom (5:21).

On the other hand, those who are led by the Spirit will bring forth in their lives the fruit of “*love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control*

Examining Our Work

In *Chapter 6:1*, Paul says, “If you see a brother who has fallen away from this standard of life that I am describing, don’t criticise him. If you are a spiritual man, go and help him. You could also fall like he did.” The only person who can help someone who has fallen is the one who recognises that he too can fall in the same way. If however, someone’s attitude is, “It’s *not* possible for me to fall like this man,” then he will not be able to help that fallen brother, because he lacks ‘*the spirit of gentleness*’ that can restore backslidden believers.

We must bear the burdens of others if we are to fulfil the law of Christ. There is a balance however here, for it says: “*Bear one another’s burdens*” and then it says, “*Each person must bear his own burden*” (6:2, 5). So we must never seek to put our burdens on others.

In 6:3, Paul warns haughty believers, “If anyone thinks that he is somebody great compared to other believers, he is actually a nobody.” He will be useless in God’s service. If you see a brother fall, don’t think that you are superior to him in any way. You have the same flesh as he has. God’s mercy and grace kept you from falling. You should never forget that.

Paul goes on to say, “Examine your own *work* and see what God has been able to accomplish through you.” In *1 Corinthians 11:28*, we are commanded to examine ourselves – our *life*. Here we are commanded to examine our *work*.

Many believers criticise others when they themselves haven’t accomplished even 1% of what those others have done for the Lord. Such people would do well to shut their big mouths and examine their own work *first*.

In 6:7, 8, we are reminded that everyone will reap whatever he sows. Those who sow to the flesh will die eternally, whereas those who sow to the Spirit will reap eternal life.

In 6:14, Paul speaks about the cross again. Paul spoke thrice about the cross in *Galatians*. In 2:20, he says that he himself was crucified with Christ. In 5:24, he says that those who are Christ's have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. Then here in 6:14, he says that through the cross of Christ, the world was crucified to him and he was crucified to the world. Self, the flesh and the world – all three – were crucified. Paul had died to the world and had as little interest in it as a dead man has. He lived on the high plane of life in the Spirit, above the world. There is a close connection between living in the Spirit, and walking the way of the cross.

Freedom from the law (the theme of *Galatians*) comes by living according to the leading of the Holy Spirit, and walking along the way of the cross.

EPHESIANS

IN CHRIST – A HEAVENLY LIFE ON EARTH

Ephesians is perhaps the most spiritual letter that Paul wrote, and that indicates that the church in Ephesus at that time was in a very spiritual state. It was a very good church. There was nothing there for Paul to correct.

To the Galatian Christians he had to use very strong language saying, “*O, foolish Galatians. Who has bewitched you?*”, and words like that. But among the Ephesian Christians he had nothing to correct. It was a wonderful church and so he was able to share with them many things that he was not able to share with other churches. To the Corinthian Christians he said, “*I could only give you milk.*” But to the Ephesians he was able to share deeper truths. We can receive only according to the measure of our spiritual growth. A baby cannot eat meat, because it cannot chew. If we live like babies for a long time, we will have to live on milk for a long time. This is the condition of most believers. They never seem to go on into the deeper things of God. They are satisfied with having their sins forgiven. Thereafter they see their only task as bringing others also to the forgiveness of sins.

If this were God’s plan then, a major portion of the New Testament can be thrown away as unnecessary. Why is there so much of teaching in the New Testament? Because God doesn’t want us to stop with the forgiveness of our sins. He doesn’t want us to stop with being born again and live on milk ever after. He wants us to grow up to maturity. The more we grow to maturity, the more effective our testimony will be to others. God is not involved in a programme of merely taking people to heaven. He is involved in a programme of having a powerful testimony for Christ on earth – in Christian homes and local churches in every place. That was why Jesus said that we were to make disciples in every nation and teach them *to do everything He had commanded* (*Matthew 28:20*).

In Ephesians Paul speaks about the universal church. When we understand the principle of the universal church, we will see how every local church should be. *Ephesians* deals with living a heavenly life on earth. A church and a Christian can fulfil their function on earth only if they are heavenly-minded. The more heavenly-minded you are, the more you can fulfil God's purpose for you on earth. The more earthly-minded you are, the more useless you will be to fulfil God's purposes on earth, even if you say you are going to heaven when you die. Your home can fulfil its function for God only if it is a heavenly-minded home. The Lord's will for us is "*that your days on earth may be like the days of heaven upon earth*" (*Deuteronomy 11:21 - KJV*). This was not possible under the old covenant. But *Ephesians* tells us how we can live like that under the new covenant.

In Christ

There is an expression that occurs frequently in *Ephesians*: '*in Christ*', or '*in Him*.' The external ministry of Christ is something anyone can read in the *Gospels*. He cared for the poor, He touched the lepers, He healed the sick, He preached the gospel, etc. People of all religions admire the external ministry of Jesus and some of them even try to imitate Him in these areas. That is admirable in human eyes – and so one can get a good reputation by it. But *Ephesians* speaks about being '*in Christ*.' Paul is speaking here about the inner life. If you follow the external life of Jesus without being *in Christ*, you will not even be saved. You can imitate Jesus for the honour of men. But true spirituality comes from being in Christ and thus seeing His inner values and His inner motives. The life of Jesus must first come inside us and then become manifest outside from within.

When we studied the Tabernacle, we saw that God did not begin with the outer compound wall made from sheets. He began at the centre – with the ark in the Most Holy Place. That is always God's way. We are God's dwelling place as individuals and as a church. And when God makes His dwelling place, He always begins from within – from your spirit. The word '*in*' occurs 89 times in this brief letter; '*grace*' occurs 13 times and '*spiritual*' occurs 13 times. *Ephesians* is not talking about material prosperity, but about *spiritual* prosperity. It's not about law but about grace. It begins with our inner life '*in Christ*' and then proceeds to our outer conduct. If you keep this in mind, as you study *Ephesians*, you will understand what it means to live a heavenly life on earth. That's why *Ephesians* begins with the phrase "*spiritual blessings in heavenly places*" (1:3).

Ephesians is very neatly divided into two sections. The first three chapters tell us about our position as believers in Christ. The next three chapters tell us how we are to walk on earth and how to fight the devil from our position '*in Christ*'. It is like a building which has a foundation

and a superstructure. The foundation is in the first three chapters, and the superstructure in the last three chapters.

If you try to build the superstructure without this foundation '*in Christ*', you will become like the non-Christians who admire Jesus' life and say that we must follow His teachings in the sermon on the mount. Many religious people have tried to follow the sermon on the mount, and tried to be kind and good to others. They have tried to build the superstructure without a foundation. Christians without discernment can admire such a man as "*Christlike*"! But they are blind. A house without a foundation will be washed away when the flood comes.

The danger of admiring such men is that you can become like them too. You can spend your life doing social work caring for the poor, the lepers and the widows, etc. and get the honour of men. But if you are not "*in Christ*", you will be rejected by God. This is a real danger that we face in Christendom today.

Another fact we notice in *Ephesians* is that there are no exhortations or commandments in the first three chapters. We are not told to do anything in those chapters. We are only told *what God has done* for us. On the other hand, *Chapters 4 to 6* are full of exhortations. That is the balance we should have in our Christian life. We first need to be gripped by what God has done for us and in us. Then we can move on to God working through us. If God has not done a work in us first He will not be able to do a work through us. In such a case, it will be our trying to imitate Christ. We can try and have a simple lifestyle and care for the poor etc. But it will all be external and hollow.

That's why *Ephesians* emphasises '*in Christ*'.

People of many religions admire Jesus Christ and read the sermon on the mount (*Matthew 5 to 7*) and try to follow that. They do a lot of good things too. But they did not come "*into Christ*" first. So it is not God working through them in all their works. They only tried to imitate Christ. That is like a painted fire. An artist can paint a fire that looks very much like a real fire from a distance. But it doesn't give any light or warmth. It is easy to be fooled by those who seek to imitate Christ, if we do not have discernment. Imitation of Christ can get a person a lot of honour in this world. But it cannot give him eternal life. A person must know Jesus as his personal Lord and Saviour to have eternal life. True service for God always flows from within a person.

Jesus said, "*First clean the inside of the cup, then the outside will be automatically clean.*" That is what He emphasised primarily in the sermon on the mount. It's not just avoiding adultery. One should not lust inwardly after women. It's not just controlling your tongue. The mouth speaks out of that which fills the heart. So controlling your tongue is not worth much, if your heart is filthy. In an unguarded

moment all the filth in your heart will come out. “*Watch over your heart with all diligence, for from it flow the springs of life*” (*Proverbs 4:23*).

Spiritual Blessings in the Heavencies

Chapter 1:3 says, “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ Who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ.” Notice there that all these blessings are *spiritual*, not material. Earthly blessings were what the Israelites were promised under the old covenant. We can read that in *Deuteronomy 28*. This is what distinguishes the grace that Christ brought from the law that Moses brought. If there were a verse like this in the Old Testament, it would have read like this: “Blessed be God Almighty (not our Father) who has blessed us with every *material* blessing in earthly places in Moses.” So those believers who are seeking *primarily* for physical healing and material blessings are really going back to the old covenant. Such “believers” are actually Israelites and not Christians. They are followers of Moses, not of Christ.

Does that mean that God does not bless believers materially today? He does – but in a different way. As they seek His kingdom and His righteousness first, all their earthly needs are provided for them. Under the old covenant, people sought only these earthly things and they got plenty of them – many children, much property, a lot of money, victory over enemies, honour and position on earth, etc. But under the new covenant, we seek for spiritual blessings – spiritual children, spiritual wealth, spiritual honour, spiritual victories (over Satan and the flesh, and not over the Philistines or human beings). Our earthly needs, like the health and money we need to do the will of God, are added to us. God will give us as much money as He knows will not ruin us. Under the old covenant, God may have made some people billionaires. But he doesn’t do that for us today, because it might prevent us from seeking the things that are above – and thus destroy us.

Many believers have not understood the difference between the old covenant and the new covenant. That’s why they still pursue after the things which God promised people under the old covenant. People who preach prosperity from the Bible are very selective about what they preach. For example, the old covenant blessing in *Deuteronomy 28:11* promised that God would bless the Israelites with plenty of money *as well as many children*. But these preachers won’t preach the second part. This proves their lack of integrity. I have not heard any one of these prosperity preachers preaching that God will bless His people with many children. This one fact alone is enough to prove that they are deceivers of the first order. They preach material prosperity because they want to justify their immense wealth (that they got by collecting money from poor

people) by quoting an irrelevant Old Testament verse. Don't be deceived by such preachers.

The words "*spiritual blessing*" in 1:3 could be translated as "*blessing of the Holy Spirit*". God has already given us every blessing of the Holy Spirit in Christ. We have only to claim them in Jesus' name. Imagine a beggar girl sitting begging by the roadside. A rich prince comes by and decides to marry her and puts millions of rupees into a bank account – an account from which she can draw money freely any time she wants. What a lucky girl she is! Once she had nothing but a little tin can with a few coins in it. But now she lives in grand style with the finest of clothes. She can withdraw any amount of money from the bank, because she has so many blank cheques signed by the prince. This is our picture, spiritually speaking. We can now go to the bank of heaven and claim every single blessing of the Holy Spirit because they are all ours in Christ's Name.

Everything of heaven is ours in Christ *if we remain in this bridal relationship with Him*, if we can say, "Lord, I want to be true to You all my days on earth as Your bride." Then every blessing of the Holy Spirit is ours. We don't have to try and convince God that we deserve any of them – because we do *not* deserve any of them. Can you imagine that beggar girl imagining that she deserves all the wealth she got freely? Not at all. All that we receive is by God's mercy and grace. We can take everything of heaven because they have all been given to us freely in Christ. We cannot earn them by our fastings or our prayers. Many do not receive the blessings of the Holy Spirit because they try to earn them in these ways! We cannot receive them like that. We must accept them all through Christ's merit alone.

I remember how the Lord taught me this lesson when I was praying for some earthly need once. I said, "Lord, I have served you for so many years. So please do this for me." The Lord said, "No, I won't do it, if you come in your own name." That day I understood what it means to pray in the Name of Jesus. That day I realised that the new believer who was just converted, and I who had been converted in 1959, had both to come to God on exactly the same basis – in the merit of Jesus Christ alone. He has to come to the bank of heaven with a cheque signed by Jesus Christ. I too can come there only with a cheque signed by Jesus Christ. If I come to God saying that I have been faithful to Him for so many years, then I am coming to heaven's bank with a cheque signed by me. And heaven's bank will reject it. That's the reason why many of our prayers are not answered. We are not going in Jesus' Name. We are going in our name. We think that because we have sacrificed so much for God, He should answer us. Even if we have lived faithfully for 70 years, when we come before the Lord, we can come only on the same basis as a new convert – *in Jesus' name*. I thank God for that revelation, because after that I never took a cheque to God signed with *my name*!! When I am tempted to do that I say, "That cheque will never be cashed. Let me go *in Jesus' name*

and because of His merit alone.” So every blessing of the Holy Spirit is ours in the heavenly places in Christ.

Chapter 1:4 says, “*He chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world.*” God chose us before the world was created – *long before Genesis 1:1*. We saw earlier how *John 1:1* comes before *Genesis 1:1*. *John 1:1* says, “*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word (Jesus) was with God and the Word was God.*” That is referring to eternity past. The next verse in the Bible, chronologically, is not *Genesis 1:1*, but *Ephesians 1:4*, which also refers to eternity past. It’s a wonderful thing to recognise that we who are in Christ were in God’s mind before the heavens and the earth were created. Our names were in God’s Book of Life in His mind, before He created anything. That is why we need never get discouraged. We are special to God. You may think you are just a useless nobody, but if you are born again, your name was in God’s mind before *Genesis 1:1*. Praise the Lord for that.

God didn’t choose us to go to heaven. Unfortunately, a lot of preaching majors on going to heaven when we die. There is no verse in the Bible that says that God chose us to go to heaven when we die. God chose us so that we might live a holy and blameless life on earth before we go to heaven. Many hymns we sing are about going to heaven when we die. But we don’t hear many hymns about God choosing us to be holy and blameless. We should change our perspective. *Chapters 1 to 3* are the foundation. There is no stone in the foundation that says, “We were chosen to go to heaven when we die.” The stone in the foundation says, “God chose us so that we should be holy and blameless before Him.”

If the foundation of a building is weak, the building will collapse. If the foundation of your Christian life is weak, your life as a Christian will collapse. Many Christians don’t have the solid foundation of *Ephesians 1 to 3* and that is why they collapse later on in their lives. If you have a crack in the fourth floor of a building, it’s most probably because the foundation was not strong enough. There are other buildings that have a hundred floors but have no cracks – because they have a deep and solid foundation. It’s like that in the Christian life. If you backslide 15 years after you are born again, it is because you did not lay a good foundation when you began your Christian life. Make sure that you are seeking spiritual blessings from God primarily and not physical and material blessings. Make sure you are seeking blessings in the heavenly places and not in earthly places. Make sure you are in Christ. Recognise that you were chosen by God not to go to heaven, but to be holy and blameless before Him.

We read further in *1:4, 5* “*In love He predestined us.*” “*Predestined*” is another word which is greatly misunderstood. What did God predestine us for? Was it to go to heaven or hell? No. He doesn’t predestine anyone

to go to heaven or hell. It says here, “*He predestined us to be placed as sons in Christ according to the kind intention of His will.*” He predestined us to be mature sons in Christ and not baby-Christians. You are to be a responsible son who is interested in your heavenly Father’s business. So conduct yourself like a son who has a sense of responsibility about his Father’s business. What is the difference between a father placing his 25-year-old son in his shop and placing his 4-year-old son in that shop? The 4-year-old will run away as soon as his friends call him to come and play with them. The 25-year-old, however, will stay in the shop faithfully and work until midnight if necessary. That’s the difference between a son and a child.

In God’s church there are a few sons who have a tremendous sense of responsibility towards God’s work. They are concerned about it and think about it often. They don’t work for pay; they work because they have a sense of responsibility. There are also babies in the church who never grow up. They are only interested in fun and entertainment and music and have very little or no sense of responsibility towards God’s work. They come and sit in the church-meetings, listen and do nothing more for the church. These are not sons, they are babies.

The Holy Spirit and Revelation

In 1:7, we read that we have “*redemption through His blood, forgiveness of sins according to the riches of His grace*”. That’s the first part of grace: forgiveness of sins. Romans 6:14 is another part of grace. In 1:13, we are reminded that we are sealed with the Holy Spirit of promise. In 1:14, the gift of the Holy Spirit is referred to as a pledge, a guarantee and a down payment on our final inheritance. If someone were buying a property worth 500,000 rupees, he may sign an agreement promising to pay the balance in three months and would make an initial payment of 50,000 rupees. That 10% is the guarantee that he will make the full payment and buy the property within that specified time.

God saved us and decided to make us totally like Christ one day. The guarantee of that is the gift of the Holy Spirit. God has not given us a new body as yet. He has not removed all the lusts of the flesh from our body as yet. How do we know that all this will be done one day? He has given us the Holy Spirit as a guarantee. He will make my mind exactly like the mind of Christ one day.

Paul says, “*First of all I give thanks for you because I have heard of your faith and love I never stop giving thanks for you*” (1:16). Paul was one who was always giving thanks for God’s people. He went on to say, “Even though God has done a wonderful work in you that you have faith and you also love all the saints, I am praying something more for you. I am praying that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory

will give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation" (1:17). Notice the word 'revelation.' That is a new covenant word. Under the old covenant, the emphasis was on *meditation on the Law* (*Psalm 1:2*). But under the new covenant, the emphasis is on getting *revelation* from the Holy Spirit on the Word. Under the old covenant, the important thing was to know the Scriptures. But under the new covenant, the important thing is to know God Himself.

Paul goes on to say, "*I am praying that the eyes of your heart* (not your mind) *be enlightened*" (1:18). The emphasis in the new covenant is always on the *heart*. In the Old Testament, the emphasis was on knowledge *entering the head*. But now it is on *light entering the heart*. There were a few men in the Old Testament who were *men of the heart*. *Proverbs* speaks a lot about the *heart*. David was a man after God's own *heart*. But generally speaking, the priests and the Bible-scholars under the old covenant were not men of the heart. It was intellectual study of the Scriptures that produced the scribes and the Pharisees – who crucified Jesus. If you spend your life just using your head to study the Scriptures and acquire a lot of Bible-knowledge, you will end up being another scribe or Pharisee. The truth of God must sink down from your head into your heart and become *revelation*. That 12-inch drop from the head to the heart is what makes all the difference!

Paul prayed that "*the eyes of their heart would be enlightened so that they would see*:

1. *The hope of God calling them;*
2. *The riches of the glory of God's inheritance in the saints; and*
3. *The greatness of God's power available to them*" (1:18, 19).

Paul did not ask them to read his letter 25 times to understand these truths. They could have read it a hundred times and still not understood. He prayed that they would get *revelation* from the Holy Spirit on these great truths. You can study the root meanings of all the Hebrew and Greek words in the Bible and still be totally blind spiritually and not experience a single "*spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ*", or become "*holy and blameless*" as you were predestined by God to be.

When you get *revelation* from the Holy Spirit on the Bible, things become different. You may not know Greek, but you will know *Christ*. You will be in *Christ*. You will be able to take the cheques in the Bible (the promises of God) to the Bank of Heaven and cash them and become a spiritually rich person. So don't ever pursue study of the Bible without *revelation*. The purpose of your Bible study must be to get *revelation* from the Holy Spirit. Anybody who emphasises the head over the heart, is leading you astray. I am not against using our minds. When I study or preach, I use my mind extensively. Otherwise I wouldn't be able to speak to you. But I have made my mind a slave of the Holy Spirit. When studying the Bible,

we begin by using our eyes (body) to read. Then the Word enters our mind (soul). But then the Word must penetrate beyond our soul to our spirit, where the Holy Spirit will give us revelation.

We can see an illustration of this in the old covenant tabernacle which had 3 parts. The outer court symbolised our body, by which we read or hear God's Word. The next area, the Holy Place, symbolised our soul, through which we understand (mind) and are stirred (emotions) by the Word. Then comes the Most Holy Place symbolising our spirit, where God gives us revelation on His Word that leads to obedience. It is only when we get revelation that we have really heard God through His Word. Only then can we accomplish God's purposes.

So let all your Bible study go beyond reading and understanding to *revelation and obedience*. Jesus died and the veil was rent so that we might enter the Most Holy Place (*Hebrews 10:20*). The Pharisees read their Bible and understood it, but they didn't get any revelation on it and so they considered Jesus to be Beelzebub, the prince of demons. Peter, however, got revelation on the Scriptures and saw that Jesus was the Son of God and the Messiah.

The Holy Spirit wants us to know the hope with which God has called us. Once you *see* this, it will change your attitude to all the impurity there is in this world. We are called to be holy. We cannot read or see what others in the world feel free to read and see. Consider a surgeon in an operating-theatre, about to do an operation on a patient. His hands have to be absolutely clean and sterile; otherwise he could kill the patient with the germs on his hands. If a pair of scissors falls to the ground he won't touch it or use it. In our eyes that pair of scissors may look very clean. But there is defilement in it because there are germs on the floor. A true Christian lives in the world with a similar passion for 100% purity.

Others may indulge themselves in many worldly pleasures. But God has called us for a holy purpose and we have to fulfil it. It is because Christian leaders don't live in such purity that they defile their flock with their "defiled, unsterile hearts" and bring spiritual death wherever they go.

Have you seen the hope of His calling you?

Have you seen the riches of glory of His inheritance in the saints? This is not referring to our inheritance in heaven, but to God's inheritance in us. God has an inheritance in us.

Resurrection Power

Have you seen the greatness of His power that He can manifest in us? The greatest power that God ever manifested in this universe was not in creation, but in the resurrection of Jesus (1:20). What we see in the

universe around us is the first creation. In the resurrection of Jesus, began the second creation, the new creation. The new creation is more powerful than the old one. What you read in *John 20* is more powerful than what you read in *Genesis 1*. The resurrection of Christ was the greatest manifestation of power ever seen in this universe. Moral power is greater than physical power.

Paul prays that we will have revelation on the fact that God wants us to experience that power. He wants us to experience that power in our inner life first. Later we will experience it in our bodies as well, one day. God's work always starts from within. One day we will experience the resurrection power of Christ in our bodies. Today, God wants us to experience that resurrection power in our spirit. Resurrection power is a power that will lift us up from spiritual death. The law of sin brings us down to spiritual death. Resurrection power lifts us up against that.

Resurrection power, lifting us up from the law of sin, is like me lifting a book against the law of gravity (which seeks to pull it down). Resurrection power lifts us up to the heavenly places. We read in 2:1–6 that when we were dead in our sins, it was this power that raised us up and made us sit together with Christ in the heavenly places (2:6). Some may think this is fanciful, picture language. But it is not. It is actually true. If you don't believe that this is true, you will never get any of the benefits of this – for we receive according to the measure of our faith. Let God be true and every man a liar. Our feelings are all deceptive. Even our vision can deceive us.

There is a story of two little boys watching the sun set. The older boy who was about 12 years old said, "Hey, the sun moved. It was in the east in the morning, now it's in the west." The younger boy who was only 6 years old said, "No. You remember what Daddy told us. It's not the sun that moves. It's the earth that rotates on its axis." The older boy said, "I believe what I see and what I feel. I saw the sun in the east and now it is in the west. And I did not feel the earth rotating under my feet. It was stationary." The younger boy said, "I believe Daddy."

Who was right – the one who believed his father, or the one who believed what he saw and felt? Many Christians also live by what they see and feel. But our senses can deceive us. So I believe my heavenly Father; and what He says is always right, even if I cannot see it or feel it.

So I believe what God says that I have been raised up and placed in the heavenly places in Christ. I don't care what my feelings tell me. I know that my feelings are as deceptive as my vision. I have found that when I believe what my heavenly Father says, everything works out all-right in my life. When we don't believe our heavenly Father, we end up having many problems. We are told here that this amazing resurrection power

is not available to all people, but only for those who believe. If you don't believe this, then you will *not* experience this power. Jesus told Thomas, "*Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe*" (John 20:29). I am one of those.

I am more blessed than the apostles, because I have believed in Jesus without seeing Him with my eyes. If your father were a multi-millionaire who loves you, and he tells you one day that he has put a million rupees in your bank account, would you believe him, or would you have to go to the bank to check it out first? God says, "He has placed me in the heavenly places in Christ." I believe it. I don't belong to this earth any more. For many years I belonged to this earth. But a day came in my life when I realised that I belonged to heaven, and now my mind is set on the things above, even though my body is here on this earth. That is why I don't fight for earthly things now. I don't even fight to get people to remain in my church. If someone were to tell me one day that some preacher had lured away a brother from my church, I would say, "Praise the Lord. I am not going to fight with anyone for that. If he wants to go to some other church, let him go wherever he is going to be happy." Jesus said, "My kingdom is not of this world. That is why My servants do not fight." We see so many believers fighting for position and honour and money on earth and in churches. Such believers are earthly-minded and are not "*seated in heaven*". They are actually – unbelievers who are holding on to a Christian doctrine in their minds. They have not allowed the Holy Spirit to lift them up to the heavenly places in Christ.

Ephesians 1 to 3 is the foundation of the Christian life. God lifts us up to the heavenly places. We cannot do that on our own. We can never raise ourselves from the dead. Even Jesus did not raise Himself from the dead. The Bible always says that God raised Him from the dead. Jesus did say that He had the authority to raise Himself from the dead (John 10:18). But He never used that authority. He allowed the Father to raise Him from the dead. In baptism, when another person pushes you under the water, it is he who lifts you up. You don't lift yourself up. This symbolises God lifting us up in resurrection power. When we submit to others crucifying us, then God raises us up and keeps us seated in the heavens. From that heavenly standpoint, everything on earth will look small. When travelling in an aeroplane, huge buildings on earth look like toy buildings and large cars look like toy cars. The things of earth will become small in your eyes and you will stop fighting for them when you are seated in the heavens with Christ – even as you would not fight for toy cars.

Paul then goes on to speak about our salvation. Our salvation is by faith (2:8), not as a result of works. But even though it is not as a result of works, God has planned good works so that we should walk in them (2:10). Then in 2:11–22, he speaks about how God makes us one body in Christ. The dividing wall between Jews and Gentiles has been broken down. When Jesus died on the cross, He abolished the enmity between

Jews and non-Jews (2:14, 15). The Jews and the non-Jews are the most opposite races there are in the world. It is worse than any caste system in India. But Jesus brought them both together at the cross. He abolished the enmity. If you are in Christ, all the enmity that you had towards other communities is broken down. If such enmity is still there towards any other person, you are not crucified with Christ. He wants to make us all one body. You can become one body only with a believer whose life is in the heavenly places. A church of earth-minded people will be just a group of people, a congregation. You have to get people to live in the heavenly places in Christ, if they are to become one body (2:16).

In *Chapter 3* Paul speaks about a great mystery. This was a mystery which was not revealed under the old covenant – that the non-Jews and the Jews were going to become one (3:4). The way to this has been revealed by the Holy Spirit only under the new covenant.

There are two prayers in the first three chapters of *Ephesians*. In 1:17–23 is a prayer for *revelation* through the Holy Spirit and in 3:14–21 is a prayer for the *power* of the Holy Spirit. These are the two things we need – the *revelation* of the Holy Spirit to see what we are in Christ Jesus, and the *power* of the Holy Spirit to live the life that is going to be described in *Chapters 4 to 6*.

The second prayer is: “*That He will grant you according to the riches of His glory to be strengthened by power by His Spirit in the inner man, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts by faith*” (3:16, 17). The last part of that verse means, “*that Christ may feel at home in your heart*.”

We all know the difference between *living* in someone’s home and feeling “*at home*” there. When staying in some homes, we feel uncomfortable. But in other homes, they make us feel perfectly *at home*. In the same way, Jesus may be dwelling in your heart. But the question is, “*Does He feel at home there?*” Or is He unhappy with some things that you have in your heart and home. But there are some in whose hearts Jesus feels perfectly at home. The Holy Spirit fills us so that Christ can feel perfectly at home within us.

“*That you may be able to understand with all the saints what is the breadth and the height and depth of the love of Christ*” (3:18). We cannot understand the love of Christ all by ourselves. Only along with **all** of God’s saints can we know the love of Christ **fully**. Paul concludes by saying, “*That you may be filled up to all the fullness of God*” (3:19). Then 3:20, 21 tells us that we can receive from God far beyond what we can ever ask or think. What God wants to do for us is way beyond what we can ever imagine.

A Heavenly Life on Earth

Now we come to *Chapters 4 to 6*. Many believers live in *Chapters 1 to 3* only. They rejoice that they are seated in the heavenly places. They are “so heavenly minded that they are of no earthly use.” But that was not how Jesus lived. He was the most heavenly-minded person who ever walked on earth. Yet, His life was the most useful life for all humanity. Our mind must be in heaven, but our feet must be on earth. Our heavenly life must be manifested in practical ways on earth. Jesus demonstrated how a Christian must live this heavenly life on earth – as a little boy, as a teenager, as a working man and as a full time preacher. We live our lives at *home*, at our *place of work* and in *Christian activities*. In all these three areas, Jesus has demonstrated to us the spirit of heaven. Anything less than this way of life is not true Christianity.

Jesus was not a hermit. He did not dress or eat differently from the others around Him. He lived and worked just like all the others. He looked so much like the others that the Roman soldiers needed someone to identify Him in the garden of Gethsemane. That shows us that He looked just like his disciples in every way. Externally, He was just like them, but inwardly He was heavenly-minded. Heavenly attitudes controlled His behaviour and His actions. That is how we are to live in our homes and in the church. This is what *Chapters 4 to 6* are all about.

Chapter 4 begins with these words: “*Therefore, I implore you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling with which you have been called*” (4:1). In the first three chapters there is no exhortation. Everything in those chapters deals with *what God has done for us*. He chose us in Christ and blessed us with every spiritual blessing, lifted us up from our dead state and placed us in Christ in the heavenly places, made us His inheritance, gave us His power, defeated Satan, united Jew and non-Jew in one Body on the cross, etc. All of this was God’s work. We had no part in it. So the emphasis in *Chapters 1 to 3* is on receiving revelation on these truths. Now we have to live out this revelation in our daily life.

The purpose of all this is that the many-sided wisdom of God may be made known through the church to angelic authorities (both good and bad) in the heavenly places (3:10). Satan and his demons kept saying ever since Adam’s fall, that no man could ever live a heavenly life on earth. But Jesus disproved Satan’s lie by the way He lived. Jesus came like us, was tempted like us and yet lived a heavenly life on this earth.

Now Satan says two things:

1. “Perhaps Jesus could do it, but no-one else can. Every believer will be earthly-minded.” And God’s reply is: “I will show you in My church that there are some who will live with a heavenly mind on earth.”
2. “It is impossible for people who are different from each other to become one. Malayalees and Tamilians cannot become one. Anglo-Indians and Malayalees cannot be one. Westerners and Easterners cannot

become one". God's reply is: "I will show you in My church how all these and many other groups can become one with each other in Christ."

These are the two challenges that we face as believers to demonstrate to Satan, so that God can boast about us as He could about Job (*Job 1:8*).

But unfortunately, that is not what we see in most of Christendom today. Most Christians live defeated lives and most churches are disunited. But God still has a remnant here and there in a few places on earth concerning whom He can boast to Satan and at whose lives even the angels in heaven are amazed.

Chapter 4:2 begins thus: "*With all humility and gentleness.*" I have often stated that the three secrets of the Christian life are: *Humility, Humility, and Humility*. That's where everything begins. Jesus humbled Himself and said in *Matthew 11:29*, "*Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am humble and gentle.*" The only two things He ever told us to learn from Him were humility and gentleness. Why? Because as the children of Adam, we are all proud and hard. If you want to demonstrate a heavenly life on earth, it is *not* going to be demonstrated first by evangelism, preaching, Bible teaching, or social work. It is going to be demonstrated by an attitude of humility and gentleness first of all.

When God gave the pattern of the tabernacle to Moses, He began with the ark. When planning any construction, man begins with the outer dimensions of the building. But God began from the innermost sanctuary. Man seeks to clean the outside of the cup. But God seeks to clean the inside first. He begins with the inside and then moves towards the outside. If you are human in your thinking and approach, you will be more concerned about the outside that men can see. If you are more divine, you will be concerned with the inside that only God can see. You will be more concerned about the *quality* of the people in your church, than about the *number* of the people. Size impress people. God looks at the quality of the people.

God looks for humility, gentleness and patience. *4:2* (LB) says "*Make allowances for each other's faults because of your love*". No-one in any church is perfect. Everyone makes mistakes. So in the church we will have to bear with one another's mistakes. We have to make allowances for each other's mistakes because we love one another. "*If you make a mistake I will cover it up. If you leave something undone, I will do it*". That's how the Body of Christ is to function.

Unity in the Body of Christ

"*Be diligent to preserve the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace*" (*4:3*). Unity is a great theme in many of Paul's letters. And this is the burden the Lord has for His church too. When a human body dies, it begins to disintegrate. Our body is made of dust, and the bits of dust are held

together because there is life in this body. The moment the life is gone, disintegration starts; and after a while, we find that the whole body has become dust. It is the same in a fellowship of believers. When the believers in a church are disunited, we can be sure that death has already come in. When a husband and wife are disunited, you know that death has already entered, even if they never divorce each other. Disintegration can start in a marriage within a day after they are married – with misunderstandings, tensions, quarrels, etc. That can happen in a church too. A church usually starts with a few zealous brothers who come together with great zeal to build a pure work for the Lord. Very soon disunity comes in and death enters. We have to fight a battle constantly to preserve the unity of the Spirit – both in a marriage and in a church.

The wonderful thing about the human body is that all the little bits of dust that it is made of, are all united together so closely that one cannot see where they are joined. If the body is injured, certain processes start within it immediately to close up the skin. The body does not like any part of its skin to remain gaping and open. It starts working immediately to unite the separated parts of the skin. It is the same when a bone breaks. The body immediately starts working to unite it. No man on earth can join two bones together. A doctor can only place the broken parts of the bone next to each other. It is the body itself that joins those two parts together. The human body always works towards unity. That's how the Body of Christ also should function. When a church does not function like that, it is not representing the Body of Christ.

God is not building a bunch of holy individuals. He is building *a Body*. This is what Paul is speaking about in *Chapter 4*. He urges us to “*preserve this unity of the spirit because there is one body*.” When can we say that there is unity in a local body? “*By the bond of peace*” (4:3). “*The mind of the Spirit is peace*” (*Romans 8:6*). When you think of a brother or sister, and your thoughts are thoughts of peace and rest towards him/her, then you know that there is unity between you and that person. But if you are even slightly agitated when you think of that person, then you can be sure that you are *not* united with that person. You may greet him with an exuberant, “*Praise the Lord*”, but it is hypocritical. Peace is the test. So the unity of the spirit must be preserved in the bond of peace.

In 4:5, when it speaks of “*one baptism*”, it means one *Scriptural baptism*. The christening of children which some people call “*child baptism*” is not a baptism at all. So if you were christened as a child, you have not been baptised at all.

Then Paul speaks about the gifts needed to build up Christ’s Body. It is impossible to build the church without the supernatural gifts given by the Lord – and God has a gift for everyone in Christ’s Body: “*To each one of us grace was given according to the measure of Christ’s gift*” (4:7).

Then we read about Jesus’ ascension: “*When He ascended He led captive a host of captives*” (4:8). This is what that verse means: When Jesus died

He went to the heart of the earth for three days and three nights as He said He would (*Matthew 12:40*). Thus we know that paradise was at that time in the heart of the earth, because Jesus told the repentant thief that he would be with Him in paradise that day. Then Jesus came back into His body (which was in the tomb of Joseph of Arimathea) and came out of the tomb. Then He was on earth for another 40 days, and appeared to many people. After that He ascended to heaven. When He ascended, He took all the people who were in paradise (who had been captives in the heart of the earth) up with Him to the third heaven.

We know today, that paradise is in the third heaven, because in *2 Corinthians 12:2 and 4*, we read that Paul was taken there. And he says he was taken *up* and *not down*. When a child of God dies today, he does not go down to the heart of the earth like Moses, David, and Jesus went when they died, but he goes *up* to the third heaven where Christ is today. Christ descended first into the lower parts of the earth (*4:9*). Hell was also there, but there was a big gulf between hell and paradise – as we read in the true story of the rich man and Lazarus. Hell is still in the centre of the earth.

After Christ ascended up to heaven, He gave gifts to the church. These gifts were *people*. Christ gave the church apostles, prophets, evangelists, shepherds and teachers (*4:11*). These gifted men had to equip *ALL* the believers to build up the Body of Christ. It is important to note this. These gifted men were *NOT* to build the church by themselves. They were to equip the believers, so that the believers would build up the Body of Christ. Every believer has a part to do in building up the Body of Christ. But such a work is so rarely seen today.

First among the gifted men are the *apostles*. These are not the first twelve apostles alone, because it says here that Christ gave them to the church *AFTER* He ascended into heaven. In *Acts*, we read that Paul and Barnabas are also called apostles. And in *Revelation 2:2*, we read, that at a time when there was only one of the original 12 apostles living (John), the Lord said to the church in Ephesus, “*You tested those who claimed to be apostles and found them to be false.*” That proves that there were other genuine apostles also at that time. Otherwise there would not have been any need to test anyone who claimed to be an apostle. There are apostles today too. Apostles are not necessarily those who write Scripture. Andrew and many of the original 12 apostles did not write any Scripture. And there were non-apostles like Mark and Luke who wrote Scripture. Apostles were men who were sent out by God with a specific task. The word ‘*apostle*’ means ‘*sent one*’ – a man sent by God to a particular place at a particular time. They establish local churches in a number of places and appoint elders in those places. Then these apostles become elders to those elders, guide them, solve their church problems and lead them to maturity. Although an apostle may have a home-base

in a church, he will not have any responsibility over the members of that local church. His responsibility will be for the elders of the churches.

Next come the *prophets*. These are men who are given the discernment to diagnose the problems in a church. They are like good doctors who can diagnose a patient's sickness, give him the right medicine, or perform the needed surgery, remove the cancer and cure him. Prophets are not very popular, because they are always exposing the cancer of sin in every church. Many people may not be happy to see the results of their body-scan. Even so, many believers are not happy when a prophet tells them about their sinful inner state. But this is the most important ministry in a local church. For any church to remain in spiritual life, it must have prophets who expose sin in *every* meeting. Then people will be convicted of their hidden sins and acknowledge that God is present in the meeting and turn to Him (*1 Corinthians 14:24, 25*). I am not referring now to the multitude of *false* prophets in Christendom today who tell people where to go, or whom to marry, or who threaten them with judgement. That is counterfeit prophecy. Directive prophecy is *NEVER* found in the new covenant. That was the ministry of old covenant prophets, at a time when only the prophets had the Holy Spirit. But that is not the case today.

Next are the *evangelists*. These are believers who are given a burden for those who have never heard the gospel and who are given the ability to bring them to the Lord – either through personal evangelism or through evangelistic meetings. The evangelist is like the hand in the body that takes a slice of bread (type if an unbeliever) and puts it into the mouth. The prophet then is like the teeth that chew that slice and make it small, and also like the stomach that pours acids on it and reduces its size, and finally makes it a part of the body. The gentle ministry of picking up the slice is more appreciated than the acid-pouring ministry. But both are needed if the slice of bread is to become a part of the body. So the evangelist and the prophet have to work together.

Next come the *shepherds*. The Greek words *poimen* (noun) and *poimaino* (verb) are used 29 times in the New Testament and are always translated as “*shepherd*,” “*to shepherd*” in every other place. Here alone has it been translated as “*pastor*”. This has led to a lot of misunderstanding of this ministry in Christendom. Shepherds are those who look after the sheep, and care for them when they are hungry or wounded. A shepherd’s job is to nurture the sheep, tenderly care for the little ones (the lambs), and to ensure that they grow up to maturity. Every church needs shepherds, not just one pastor. Jesus shepherded only 12 men. So if a church has 120 men, it needs 10 shepherds to look after them. I am not referring to 10 full-time paid workers who have the title of ‘*pastor*.’ I am referring to those who have a shepherd’s heart to care for those younger to

them. They could be men who are holding secular jobs, but who seek to encourage the younger ones in the church. A 25-year-old man can encourage all the teenagers in his church and thus be a shepherd to them. Many such men can be a great help to the elders in a church. As a church grows in size, it needs more shepherds. Mega-churches are not in God's plan for Christ's Body, but small churches with shepherds who have a father's heart. Large churches are actually "preaching centres" where people come to be entertained and educated, but not to grow in grace. The leaders of such churches are merely good administrators and preachers/teachers, but not shepherds.

Finally, we have the *teachers*. These are the men who can explain the word of God and make it simple and understandable to people. There are not many good teachers in Christendom. But then every church does *not* need a teacher. One teacher is enough to travel around and teach 20 or 30 churches. And nowadays with CDs, DVDs and the Internet, one teacher can reach hundreds of churches. In the same way, every church does not need an evangelist, because an evangelist can bring people to Christ and then move on elsewhere. But what *every* church does need are prophets and shepherds.

The purpose of all these ministries is to build up the Body of Christ. An evangelist must not bring souls to Christ and then tell them to go to whichever church they like or to go back to their old dead church. That's not the type of evangelist spoken of here in *Ephesians 4*. But unfortunately, today we have evangelists who have their own name attached to their ministry. They conduct meetings and people are saved (hopefully). Then they tell them to go back to their dead churches. In those dead churches, there are no shepherds or teachers to lead them to the truth.

Here in *Chapter 4*, we read of evangelists working together with the apostles, prophets, shepherds and teachers. The evangelist must hand over the converts to good shepherds. This is the type of cooperation we need in the Body of Christ. This is how it was in the early days of the church. Philip was an evangelist, but not an apostle or a shepherd (*Acts 8*). So others in Samaria took over the responsibility from Philip to lead those converts further into the truth of God. Philip did not let them wander around on their own.

Unfortunately, a lot of evangelistic ministry today only builds up one man's name – and he makes a lot of money for himself from the offerings of people. It has become a profession and not the calling spoken of here in *4:11*. That is not the type of evangelist spoken of here. Here the evangelist is one who builds the Body of Christ and not his own ministry or his name.

Growth in the Body of Christ

Further, Paul speaks here about the necessity of unity in the Body. He says that as believers, we must all “*preserve the unity of the spirit ... until we attain to the unity of the faith*” (4:3, 13). There may be many areas where as believers we do not see eye-to-eye. You may not agree with my view that the church will go through the tribulation before Christ comes to take her up to Himself. You may feel that Christ will come before the tribulation. There could be other differences of opinion like that. We have not attained to unity in *ALL* matters of the faith. But until we do, we must be united *in spirit*. We don’t have to wait until we are united in all matters of the faith before we are united in spirit.

We are to grow up gradually “*to a mature man, to the fullness of the stature of Christ*” (4:13). Our aim must be to grow ourselves and to help others to grow to this fullness. We must not remain babies “*tossed here and there by waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, by craftiness in deceitful scheming*” (4:14). God allows us to be exposed to deception and false teaching so that we can grow in discernment. Our sense of discernment will not be developed otherwise. That’s why He allows so many deceivers and false prophets to move around in Christendom. Thus we will be able to discern the one whose spirit is *not* right from the one whose spirit is right. We don’t have to judge others. But we must discern. Then our spiritual senses will be exercised.

In 4:15, we are urged to “*speak the truth in love in order to grow up*.” Notice there the balance between truth and love. Should we speak the truth? Yes. Always. But are we permitted to speak it in any way we like? No. We must speak the truth *in love*. If you cannot speak the truth *in love*, then you should wait until you have enough love for people to speak the truth to them. Love is the board on which you can use the pen of truth. If you try to write the truth without a board to write it on, you will be writing in thin air. No-one will be able to understand what you are writing. It is by speaking the truth in love always – in the pulpit and in private conversation – that we can “*grow up in all aspects into Him who is the head, even Christ*.”

In 4:16, he speaks of “*the whole body, being fitted and held together by what every joint supplies, according to the proper working of each individual part, causing the growth of the body for the building up of itself in love*”. The joints here speak of fellowship. Consider how many joints you have in just one arm. There is a joint at the shoulder, another at the elbow, one at the wrist, and then three in each finger – at least 17. It’s the joints that make your arm work freely. If you had a strong upper arm and a strong lower arm, but if your elbow was stiff, what could you do with that arm? Nothing. It is not just strength that makes your arm useful. It is also functioning joints. Consider now the application of this to the Body of Christ. Here is a good brother, a strong upper arm. And here is another good brother, a strong lower arm. But they cannot fellowship

together with each other. That is the tragedy in the Body of Christ today. In the human body, this is called arthritis and it is very painful. A lot of local churches have arthritis. When our joints function properly, there is no noise. But when a body has arthritis, it creaks and every movement produces an unhealthy noise. What is called “fellowship” among some believers is exactly like that. It creaks. But when the joints function well, there is no noise at all. Our fellowship with each other must be like that. If it is not like that with you, then you need to take some medicine for arthritis: Die to your “self-life”. Then you will be healed and your fellowship with others will be glorious. That is the will of God in the Body of Christ.

Then we have some strong exhortations in 4:17–25: “*Don’t walk like other people in this world walk. Their understanding is darkened and they are excluded from the life of God. You must walk differently. You did not learn Christ in this way.*” Do you know the difference between learning the Bible and learning Christ? When we read the Bible, we must learn Christ and not just get Bible-knowledge. If we learn Christ, we will not walk like the heathen. We will put away our manner of former life and we will be renewed in the spirit of our minds (*verse 23*). We will put away all falsehood (*verse 25*).

In 4:26, we are exhorted to get rid of all our anger before the sun sets. People went to bed in olden times soon after sunset. So this verse exhorts us to get rid of every wrong attitude before we go to bed daily. Husbands and wives, don’t ever go to bed without settling your quarrels and causes of tension. You are warned in this verse, that if you don’t do that, you will give the devil an opportunity to come between both of you.

Then there is some practical advice. Those who stole in the past must do the opposite now. They must earn honestly and share what they have with others (4:28). We must be careful about our speech and ensure that no word ever comes out of our mouths that grieves the Holy Spirit (4:29, 30). *ALL* bitterness, wrath and anger must be put away (4:31). These verses teach clearly that there must be ZERO bitterness, ZERO anger, ZERO gossiping and backbiting, ZERO slander and ZERO hatred in our lives.

I remember seeing a board on the wall of an automobile factory that said: “OUR AIM IS ZERO DEFECT”. The company wanted their workers to aim to produce cars with zero defect. And I thought, “My aim also must be to have *Zero defect*”. It may take time for all of us to get there. But that must be our goal. If automobile manufacturers can press on towards zero defect, why can’t Christians also seek to press on to that?

“*Be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you. Be imitators of God, as beloved children; and walk in love, just as Christ also loved you and gave Himself up for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God as a fragrant aroma*” (4:32; 5:1, 2).

Our calling is to imitate God and walk in love. There can be no higher calling than that.

"Impurity and greed must not even be named among you. There must be no filthiness and silly talk, or coarse jesting, which are not fitting, but rather giving of thanks. For this you know with certainty, that no immoral or impure person or covetous man, who is an idolater, has an inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God. Let no one deceive you with empty words" (5:3–6). What a high standard this is for our conversation. One way to avoid the *negative* (foolish jesting and impurity) is by concentrating on the *positive* (being thankful for everything). We should not be deceived into thinking that our conversation has no effect on our eternal destiny.

Since our lifetime on earth is short, we must make the most of our time because the days are evil – knowing what God's will for our life is (5:16, 17).

Then we come to this wonderful verse, "*Be not drunk with wine but be filled with the Holy Spirit*" (5:18). Notice two commands there. The first one is, "*Don't be drunk with wine.*" The second is, "*Be filled with the Spirit.*" Why is it that Christians who would never disobey the first command here do not take the second one seriously? This is but one example of how Satan blinds our minds to the truths of Scripture. Most believers consider the first as a command ("*Don't get drunk*") but the second as a suggestion ("*Be filled with the Spirit*")!! But both are commands – and both are equally important. If it is a serious matter to be drunk even once in a year, then it is equally serious *not* to be filled with the Spirit even one single day in a year. Have you seen it like that?

The verb in 5:18b is a continuous verb – it means "*be being filled*", "*keep on being filled*", and not "*be filled once*". If we were filled with the Spirit in the morning, we need to be filled with the Holy Spirit in the evening and every day continuously. Ask God to fill you with His Spirit all the time. Such people were referred to in Acts as "*men and women FULL of the Holy Spirit*".

One of the primary marks of being filled with the Spirit is a change in the way we speak. Our tongue will become "*a tongue of fire*" (Acts 2:3). This is not "*speaking in other tongues*", but "*speaking in our mother tongue with God's fire of love and purity*". Our language will become heavenly. Notice the emphasis on our speech in these verses "*Be filled with the Spirit, speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody with your heart to the Lord; always giving thanks for all things in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ to God, even the Father*" (5:19, 20). The spirit of thankfulness will replace the spirit of gossip, slander, bitterness and anger when we are filled with the Spirit.

All the verses following 5:18 are characteristics of Spirit-filled people (from 5:19 to 6:24). It begins with thankfulness and continues on to *subjection to one another* in the church and in home relationships (5:21 to 6:9); and then to *fighting and overcoming Satanic forces* (6:11). So the secret of our Christian walk and warfare on earth is *being filled with the Holy Spirit*. We cannot praise God properly if we are not filled with the Spirit. We cannot be godly husbands and wives without being filled with the Spirit. We cannot bring up our children properly without being filled with the Spirit. And we cannot defeat Satanic forces without being filled with the Spirit. Everything in our Christian life is dependent on our being filled with the Spirit.

Home Relationships

In relation to our home, we are told here about three relationships – husbands and wives (5:22–33), children and parents (6:1–4) and masters and servants (6:5–9). This last section applies to servants working in our homes as well as to those who work in an office – as servants of a company or the government, with bosses above us. So these instructions tell us how we are to conduct ourselves as masters/mistresses and servants – at home, or in an office. We all spend most of our time in two places – at home and in our office. A Spirit-filled person will manifest the Spirit of Christ at home and at his place of work. It is only with that Spirit that we can build the body of Christ.

Ephesians speaks about building the Body of Christ. The fundamental principle that underlies our conduct towards one another should be: “*Be subject to one another in the fear of Christ*” (5:21). So just like wives have to be subject to their husbands, husbands also have to be subject to their wives. In the same way, fathers also have to be subject to their children and masters have to be subject to their servants. What does this mean?

God has drawn a boundary around everyone and we must all respect those boundaries. That is how we “*honour all people*” (1 Peter 2:17). Husbands, wives, fathers, children, masters and servants, all have a boundary drawn by God around each of them. If you have a servant working in your home, he has a boundary of certain rights that you cannot violate. For example, he must be given his salary regularly, his dignity must be respected, he must not be humiliated when he is being corrected, etc. Thus a master must be subject to his servant.

In the same way, when a child is being punished for bad behaviour, his dignity must be respected. Fathers must be subject to the boundary around their children. As a father, I made it a rule that I would never punish my children in the presence of others – whether visitors or their brothers – because that would be a double punishment for them – first

the rod and then the humiliation before others. And the humiliation could be more painful for them than the rod. So a child also has a circle of dignity around him – and his father must respect that boundary.

In the same way, a wife has a boundary around her too. She may want to do things in a certain way in the kitchen. That's her sphere. The husband should not interfere in the way she runs her kitchen. I heard of a godly man who was very orderly in his ways. But his wife was the very opposite. She used to keep the plates and cutlery in her kitchen in a very haphazard way – all mixed up. Whenever the husband washed the dishes in the kitchen, he was tempted to put away the dishes and the cutlery in the orderly way that his mind told him to do it. But he knew that when his wife saw the orderly kitchen she would get discouraged because she could never arrange things that way. So he deliberately put away everything in the same slipshod way that his wife put them away, so that she would feel quite at home in her kitchen. What was the result? They had a slipshod kitchen but glorious fellowship between them!! That godly brother knew how to be subject to his wife in reverence for Christ! He was wise and recognised that fellowship between him and his wife was the most important thing. He didn't care whether the plates and cutlery were kept in a haphazard way or an orderly way. Some married couples are so foolish that they value a neat home more than mutual fellowship.

Fellowship between parents and children also is more important than having a neat and tidy home. We must certainly teach our children to be neat and tidy and to put things away in their proper places. But when they are young and play in the house, it will be impossible to keep everything neat and tidy at all times. Their home is the only place where our children can be free. Personally, I am not at all concerned whether others think my house is neatly kept or not. I want my wife and children to be happy in my home and I want fellowship with them. That is more important to me. Always value fellowship more than having a neat and tidy home.

It goes on to say in *Ephesians 5* that a wife must recognise the authority of her husband as her head. God has placed the husband as the head – just like the brain in our body. The head (brain) cares for all the members of the body (5:28). Even so, the husband must care for his wife. Being the head doesn't mean just giving orders. The head gives commands to the body – it tells the hands, legs and tongue to do various things. But the head also cares for the members. If there is the slightest injury anywhere in the body, the head feels it immediately and does something about it. Even so a husband, as the head, must be sensitive to the hurts of his wife. That is how Christ our Head is towards us. I am not referring merely to physical hurts, but to emotional hurts as well.

When the wife is feeling sad or discouraged or hurt about something, the husband must sympathise with her and bring healing. A husband who is not interested in such care is not fit to be the head. A head who merely gives orders is a dictator! A sensitive husband and a submissive wife are together a beautiful demonstration to the world of what Christ and the church are. That is the type of home we must all build. This will take time, but we must pursue it with all our hearts.

Children must be brought up to obey their parents (6:1–4). The most important thing we have to teach our children is obedience to parents. Slaves are commanded to obey their masters, not with eye service but heartily. And masters are urged to deal with their servants graciously and without partiality (6:5–9).

Spiritual Warfare

In 6:10–18, we read about spiritual warfare – with Satan. Notice that the section on spiritual warfare comes immediately after the section on the home. The devil always attacks the home first. We are to stand firm against the devil and never fight with flesh and blood (6:12). If you want to fight Satan effectively, the very first qualification is that you *stop all fighting with human beings*. The reason why many believers are overcome by Satan is because they fight so much with human beings. I made a decision many years ago that I would never fight with a human being about anything. Then I found I could fight Satan effectively. If you make just one decision – never again to fight with man – you will be able to overcome Satan constantly and do something useful with your life for God and the church.

The armour is a picture of the many pieces of spiritual equipment God has given us.

First of all, the belt of truth. Truth means sincerity, reality, no hypocrisy and no lying. If you are not free from these sins, then you might as well forget about fighting Satan. The Devil is a liar – and if you have lying in your inner life, Satan will have fellowship with you in your inner man. Then you won't be able to overcome Satan. So make sure your life is transparent and without guile at all times.

The breastplate is righteousness. There are two types of righteousness–

- i. the righteousness of Christ that is *imputed* to us, by which we are justified (declared righteous by God Himself); and
- ii. the righteousness of Christ that is *imparted* to us, that we *partake* of, through the Holy Spirit, little by little, as we grow spiritually. This involves keeping a clear conscience at all times and obeying whatever God shows us.

Next comes the shoes of readiness to preach the gospel. Did you know that preaching the gospel to others is one way by which we can overcome Satan? Those who are lazy and never think of sharing the gospel with others are overcome by Satan easily. But those who are active and serving the Lord are protected. I remember in my younger days the thing that protected me from so many temptations that young men face was that I spent most of my spare time studying God's Word, fellowshipping with believers and witnessing for Him. I was working in a secular job. But twice every week, I would spend a few hours preaching the gospel in the streets of Cochin (the city I was living in). I must have covered almost every major street in that city during the two years I worked in the naval base there. Doing evangelism, giving out tracts, sharing the gospel with small groups of 4 or 5 people in homes, kept me busy and thereby protected me from many temptations. Many temptations will come to us if we have plenty of spare time with nothing to do. The idle mind is indeed the Devil's workshop. Our feet must always be ready to give the good news of peace with God to others. Try it – and see if it doesn't help you in your battle with Satan.

The fourth piece of armour is the shield of faith. One of Satan's greatest weapons is to make us doubt the love of God. This is the missile that he fired at Eve in Eden. He sowed a seed of doubt in her mind suggesting that if God really loved her, He would not withhold such lovely fruit from her. She fell under that missile. Faith is to believe that God loves us intensely and desires the best for us in every situation; and to know that He loves us even when we have failed. Then every fiery missile of Satan will be quenched.

The fifth item is the sword of the Spirit. Jesus always overcame Satan by quoting God's Word. He did not enter into a discussion with Satan as Eve did. He just told Satan what God had said. Thus He always overcame. In times of temptation, we must quote Scriptures such as, "*God will not allow me to be tempted beyond my ability*" (1 Corinthians 10:13), "*Sin cannot rule over me*" (Romans 6:14), "*Jesus is able to keep me from falling*" (Jude 24). Quote God's Word to Satan and he will flee from you as he did from Jesus (James 4:7).

Finally, we must keep our armour well-oiled. How do we do that? "*With all prayer praying at all times in the Spirit*" (6:18). To pray in the Spirit does not refer to praying in *unknown languages*. Praying in *tongues* is called praying *with our spirit* (1 Corinthians 14:15). Praying in the Spirit is prayer inspired by the Holy Spirit and not by our flesh. If we allow our mind to be renewed by the Spirit and allow our tongue to be under His control, we will pray in the Holy Spirit. Paul says, "*Pray especially*

for me." We need to pray especially for God's servants who are out in the forefront fighting the Lord's battles.

With the whole armour of God, we can build the Body of Christ in such a way that it will be triumphant against the gates of hell.

PHILIPPIANS

HAVING THE ATTITUDE OF CHRIST

The theme of Philippians is found in 2:5, “*Have this attitude in yourself which was in Christ Jesus.*” Everything Paul writes here is basically around this subject.

There is a lot of emphasis on joy in this letter. “*Always offering prayer with joy in every prayer I pray for you*” (1:4) and “*Rejoice in the Lord always, and again I say unto you, rejoice*” (4:4).

Philippians was written when Paul was in prison (1:13). It is challenging to see that Paul wrote so much about joy while he was in a prison. It's one thing to preach about joy when all our circumstances are comfortable. It is quite another thing to write about it when our circumstances are difficult. Paul's words here teach us that it is possible for a Christian to have joy under *all* circumstances. That is the mind and attitude of Christ.

Jesus spoke most about joy on the night before He was crucified (in *John 15 and 16*). At the last supper, He told His disciples, “*These things I have spoken to you so that your joy may be full.... No man can take away your joy ... I want to give you My joy.*” He was going to be falsely accused and crucified publicly as if He were a criminal in a few hours from then. Yet He was going around sharing His joy with others and encouraging them!!

This is the mind and attitude of Christ that Paul had. He was full of joy in prison. We don't know whether Paul was only under house arrest as a prisoner at the time he wrote this letter (*Acts 28:16, 30, 31*) or whether he was in an actual Roman prison. The Roman prisons of those days were dark dungeons full of rats, mosquitoes and creeping insects, where prisoners had to sleep on the floor and were given very little food. Whichever of these two locations Paul may have been in, the circumstances were

definitely not pleasant. Yet in such circumstances, Paul was full of joy. He had been imprisoned for preaching the gospel. But he had no tears for his own sorrows. He didn't want any sympathy from anyone either. He was full of joy.

What an example Paul is for Christians who live in comfort and yet complain at the smallest inconvenience. How often we see believers trying to get sympathy from others just because they are facing a little difficulty or going through a small trial. Paul doesn't say a word here about his sufferings. He says, "*I thank my God in all my remembrance of you, always offering prayer with joy in my every prayer for you all*" (1:3, 4). He wrote that probably after a whole night of being bitten by mosquitoes; and he may not have had much warm clothing to cover him either. His joy did not come from his circumstances, but from the grace of God that he saw in the believers at Philippi.

Many years earlier he had been led by the Lord through a vision to go to Philippi (*Acts 16:9–12*). He had followed that vision and gone there and led people to the Lord – and been imprisoned in Philippi too. The jailer who was converted there was probably an elder in the church in Philippi now, and he would have told the people then, "I saw this man rejoicing in prison." Paul's joy came out of a life that was spent usefully for the Lord. When you come to the end of your life, the thing that will bring you joy is the fact that in the days when God gave you health and strength you spent your life serving the Lord, gathering people for His kingdom and building His church. Think of that now, so that when you come to the end of your life, like Paul, you can thank God for what He did with your life.

Treasuring God's Word and His People in Our Heart

Paul was a great prayer warrior (1:4). He prayed for God's people all the time, everywhere. He did not only preach to them, he prayed for them. A true servant of God not only preaches, but also prays for His people.

Paul says, "*I am convinced that what God has begun in you, He will complete in the day of Christ. It is right for me to feel this way about you because I have you in my heart*" (verses 6, 7). If you are a preacher and you want to have a prophetic word for God's people, then you must have two things in your heart at all times. You must have *God's Word* and *God's people* in your heart. If you have only God's word in your heart but no love for His people, then God will not give you a word for them. In the same way, if you love God's people but your heart is not filled with God's word, then again, He will not give you a word for them.

Paul carried believers on his heart, just like Aaron had the names of the 12 tribes of Israel on the breastplate over his heart. As a human being, Paul could not possibly carry every believer in the world on his heart.

He carried only those for whom God had given him a responsibility. When we have God's Word and the people He has given us responsibility to care for, in our hearts, then even one sentence that we speak will bless them.

Paul longed for the Philippian Christians with the affection of Christ Jesus, and he prayed that their love would increase (1:9). But he also prayed that their love would increase in *discernment* (1:9, 10). Love without discernment can be dangerous. When our love increases along with spiritual discernment, then we will be able to approve the things that are *excellent* above the things that are *good*. As the proverb says, "*The good is the enemy of the best.*" You can choose a way that is good and miss out on a way that is far better – one that is excellent.

There are evil things, good things and the *very best* things. Paul speaks in *1 Corinthians 6:12* about unlawful things, lawful things and *profitable* things. The wise man chooses not just what is lawful but what is *profitable*. That is how he becomes spiritual. We must think not just of *good* ways to serve the Lord, but of the *very best* way to serve Him. We must preach not just a *good* message, but the *very best* message possible. We must think of helping people not just in a *good* way, but in the *very best way*. This is like a doctor saying, "I want to give this sick person not just a *good* treatment, but the *very best* treatment possible." That is what he would say if the patient were his own child. When we love people like that, we will always want to give them the *very best*.

When I am invited for a meal in a home, and see the dishes spread out on the table, I have often thought of how much effort the housewife had put in to produce that meal. And I have said to myself, "When I give God's word to people, I must make the same effort to give God's people the *very best*."

Trials Turn to Blessings

Then he mentions his imprisonment and says, "*Don't be discouraged about my imprisonment because my imprisonment has turned out for the progress of the gospel*" (1:12). Paul believed that "*all things work together for good to those who love God and are called according to His purpose*" (*Romans 8:28*). How did Paul's imprisonment work out for his good?

Here is one way in which Paul's imprisonment worked for **our** good. Paul was a man who was always on the go. Even when he was old, he was always travelling. He wanted to reach as many places as possible with the gospel, before he left this earth. He had such a close walk with God and had been through so many trials that he had become a very rich man spiritually. But he had not written down all that he had learnt from the Lord. God determined that this man's spiritual wealth should not go down with him into the grave, but be preserved and transmitted for the blessing of coming generations. But how could God make Paul slow down enough to make him sit down and write all that? He allowed Paul to be

imprisoned!! When Paul was in prison, he could not travel. So he decided to spend his time profitably and write letters to the churches and to his co-workers. That is how he wrote *Philippians*, *Ephesians* and *Colossians*. What was the result? His life and writings became a blessing to millions of people for 2000 years. So, Paul's imprisonment turned out for good.

In the mid-1980s, I was admitted in a hospital for a very minor operation. It was something that the Lord could have easily healed me of, without surgery. But the Lord chose to heal me through surgery. When I was in the hospital I asked, "Lord, why have You put me in a hospital? You could have healed me, and I could have been busy serving You somewhere at this time." The Lord said to me, "I could have healed you without surgery; but I put you in hospital so that you could lie down for a while and listen to what I have to say to you. You are running around so much that I hardly get a chance to talk to you." When I saw that that was the reason for my hospitalization, I was happy to lie there for as long as the Lord wanted me to, because I wanted to hear Him. One advantage of lying in a hospital bed is that you can only look up! As I lay there, the Lord began to speak to me day by day. As the Lord spoke, I wrote down what He said. That was the only article I ever wrote that was written almost word for word, as the Lord spoke to me. I have published it as a small booklet titled, "*Fifty Marks of Godly Men*". It can also be found under the chapter heading "God Needs Men" in my books "*New Wine in New Wineskins*" and "*Principles of Serving God*", God has used that booklet around the world in many countries. I consider it to be the most important of all my writings. But I might never have written it, if the Lord had not put me in a hospital-bed.

God stops us at times from doing things by sickness or by imprisonment in order to make us do something for Him that we would never have done otherwise. So we can be thankful whenever God stops us in our tracks. He has a purpose in it, for "*the stops of good men are directed by the Lord, just as much as their steps*" (*Psalm 37:23*).

Here is a second way in which Paul's imprisonment worked for good. He says, "*My imprisonment in the cause of Christ has become well known throughout the whole praetorian guard and to everyone else*" (1:13); and later, "*All the Christians here want to be remembered to you, especially those who work in Caesar's palace*" (Living). How did people in Caesar's palace get converted? Because Paul preached the gospel to those prison guards when they were chained to him. In those days, prisoners were chained to a prison guard to prevent them from escaping. During the 8 hours that a Roman soldier was chained to him, Paul preached the gospel to him. The guard could not go away!! He had to listen. The guard may have repented and received Christ as his Saviour. When his 8-hour shift was over, another guard replaced him for the next 8 hours; and Paul

started preaching the gospel to him!! Thus a number of the guards were converted and very soon there was a little church meeting in Caesar's palace!!

Paul's imprisonment resulted therefore in the Scriptures being written and in people (who would never come to a meeting) being converted. And that was not all. Because of Paul's imprisonment, many believers became more courageous to preach (1:14). Timid believers got rid of their fear of preaching the gospel and became bold.

But there were some people there who were jealous of Paul and who had a spirit of competition and strife – just as there are today. They wanted to preach to show off their own gift; but they never got the chance to do so when Paul was around. But now that Paul was in prison, they could preach. They didn't have an anointing, but they had a lust to preach. What was Paul's attitude when he heard about this? He rejoiced that Christ was being preached and left it to God to judge them for their wrong motives (1:15).

Today, we see many preachers preaching Christ in order to make money. God may use them to save some souls and even to heal some sick people; but He will finally send them to hell for preaching about Christ in order to make money (*Matthew 7:22, 23* makes that clear). There are preachers who listen to my sermons on the Internet and read my books only to find points for their sermons – to gain honour for themselves. Some souls are blessed by their preaching – and so I rejoice. God will, however, judge them for their wrong motives one day. An unconverted person may distribute gospel tracts and people can be saved through those tracts. But the man who distributed the tracts goes to hell. We don't have to judge them. God will judge them in the final day. He will not spare any man who preaches the gospel with wrong motives.

Paul says in 1:21, "*For to me to live is Christ and to die is gain*". If he died, he would be with the Lord immediately. If he continued to live, he would have some more years of fruitful labour in Christ's vineyard. Both options appealed to Paul equally. So he did not know which to choose. He finally felt that he should live on a little longer to lead believers into a godly life. God allowed him to live a few more years for the sake of those believers who still needed to be established, and for a few more letters that needed to be written to complete Scripture. Later on, when Paul wrote *2 Timothy*, he knew that the time had come for him to leave the earth.

In 1:27, Paul says, "*Please conduct yourself in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I am in prison or I come to see you, I will always hear that you are standing firm in one spirit, one in mind, striving together.*" This was Paul's burden – unity – as we can see in the different expressions he uses here – one mind, one spirit, and striving together.

In 1:28, he urges them not to be alarmed because of their enemies, for their “*being at rest*” when persecuted would be an evidence of their own salvation and a sign of destruction to their enemies! When Pilate told Jesus, “Don’t You know that I have power to crucify You?” Jesus replied, “You can have no power against Me, unless My Father gives it to you” (John 19:10, 11). Jesus was not alarmed. And if a time comes in your life or mine, when we have to stand like that before some secular authority, let us make the same “*confession that Jesus made before Pontius Pilate*”: “You can have no power over me except what my heavenly Father gives you.” Such a confession will be a sign of destruction to our enemies. God has given us *two* privileges (1:29) – “*to believe in Christ*” and “*to suffer for His sake*”. Both of these go together.

Freedom from Selfishness and Pride

In Chapter 2, Paul continues with the same theme of unity (as in 1:27). In 2:2, he uses four expressions of unity: “*Be of the same mind, same love, united in spirit, intent on one purpose.*” Then he goes on to tell them how to have this unity. How the Body of Christ can be built and grow in unity: *Never do anything from selfishness or pride* (2:3). The two sins that will remain with us in some degree until we die are selfishness and pride. We may overcome unclean thoughts, the love of money, getting offended, slandering, gossiping, bitterness and an unforgiving spirit – over a period of time. But selfishness and pride are very deeply rooted in us. They are like two huge onions. When we peel off one layer, we find another layer underneath. And when we peel off that layer, we discover yet another one under that.

Selfishness is a primary characteristic of Adam’s race, and is seen in the way we do things, in the way we spend our money and our time, etc. As we get light on our selfishness, we can cleanse away a little bit at a time. Gradually, we will become more and more loving and Christlike, over a period of time. If you are not getting more and more light on your selfishness, that would be one of the clearest indications that you are not walking in the light with the Lord. And you will be a hindrance to the unity of Christ’s Body.

The second characteristic of Adam’s race is pride. It could be pride in our appearance or our intelligence. After we have overcome our pride in these matters, we stand in danger of spiritual pride. That is a huge onion. Often we get light on our spiritual pride after we have done something for the Lord. It could be after a testimony that we gave, where we didn’t give God *all* the glory. If we repent and cleanse ourselves, we would have peeled off one more layer of the onion of spiritual pride.

Those who are faithful in peeling off the onions of selfishness and spiritual pride, will gradually become more and more one with each other in Christ's Body.

In this connection, Paul goes on to say, "*Have this mind (attitude) in you which was in Christ Jesus*" (2:5). You can live all your life with just this one verse. You don't need any other verse in the Bible for transformation. In every situation ask yourself, "Do I have the attitude of Christ here?" Judge your past actions by this question, "Did I have the attitude of Christ there?" There is a lot of selfishness in the attitude of the race of Adam to their own conveniences. We like to choose the best bed, the best food and the biggest slice of cake." Children are like that in a crude way. As we grow older, we avoid crude actions like that, because it would spoil our testimony; but we could still be like that inside!

What is the attitude of Jesus? While in heaven, He thought of the pathetic condition of people on earth who did not have all that He had; and His attitude was, "I want them also to have what I have here in heaven." That was the attitude of Christ. So, our attitude towards other people should be, "I have forgiveness of sins, but they don't have it. I have victory over sin, but those believers don't have it. I must offer these to them". This can apply to the *necessities* of life on earth too. On a cold night, when you cover yourself with a blanket, think about whether the other believers in your church have blankets too. That's the Spirit of Christ. When you eat food, think of your fellow believers in your church, and ask yourself if they all have food to eat. That is the mind of Christ.

When Christ came to earth, we see *three* steps of humility that He took. *First*, although He was equal with the Father, He gave up those privileges and became a *Man*. *Secondly*, as a Man, He became a *Servant* of all men. *Thirdly*, He went lower still and died like a *criminal* (2:6–8). These are the three secrets of the Christian life: *Humility, Humility, Humility*.

He knew that He could help people only if He served them, and not if He was like a king over them. That's why He refused to be a king, when the people tried to make Him one. We may think, that as a king, one can help many people. But Jesus has shown us by His life that it is only a servant who can help people. So he refused to rule over others. He spent all His life serving others, never taking any position or title. He called Himself the '*Son of Man*' – meaning "*an ordinary man*". He was God Almighty, even when on earth; but He would still say that He was only an ordinary man. He had the mind of a servant.

There is a difference between serving and *being a servant*. We have probably seen photographs in newspapers of some Cabinet Minister sweeping a road, inaugurating a 'Cleanliness Campaign'. He sweeps the road for 5 seconds and waits for the newspapers to take his photograph. Is he a servant? No. He is only acting like a servant for 5 seconds

to get a reputation. There is a world of difference between serving and being a servant. We can serve for man's honour. But *being a servant* means having an attitude of mind where we always think of ourselves as servants.

This is how the Lord once taught me this truth. I spent eleven years in the military where punctuality was extremely important. If a parade was at 6.30 in the morning, we had to be there at 6.25 and not at 6.31. If anyone came at 6.31, he would be taught such a lesson that he would never come late again for the rest of his life! When I became an elder in a church, I saw that more than half the people in the church never came on time for the Sunday morning meetings. This disturbed me considerably and I would try every possible exhortation to get people to come on time; but nothing worked. Then the Lord showed me that I was acting like a master in the church and not as a servant. A servant in a palace, for example, has to be on time at the breakfast table always. But the king and queen can come whenever they like. The Lord told me to be a servant in His church and to treat the others as more important than me. Then I came to rest. I realised then that I needed to have *the attitude of a servant* and not just serve. That liberated me; and I was no longer disturbed by the lack of punctuality that I saw in others. I let "*the kings and queens*" come whenever they liked. Gradually, some of them may become servants – and start coming on time!

Jesus humbled Himself to be a servant – and God exalted Him. The more you humble yourself, the more God will exalt you – spiritually. He won't exalt you over people but over sin, the world, and the devil.

In 2:14, we are told to do *everything* without grumbling or complaining. This looks like an impossible standard and so most Christians ignore this command. But it can be done with God's power. In the previous two verses (2:12, 13), we are told that God first works within us and we have to then work it out. We cannot produce the humility and the unselfish love of Christ on our own. God has to work inside us first. And He does. But then we have to work it out in our daily situations. The Holy Spirit continually works within us – and we have to work out what He works in. Thus we will grow in likeness to Christ day by day (*2 Corinthians 4:16*). And thus we will be able to live without ever grumbling or complaining at any time.

Paul then quotes the examples of two of his co-workers – Timothy (2:19–21) and Epaphroditus (2:25) who manifested this unselfish attitude of Christ in their lives. Paul said that among all his coworkers who were with him then, he could only choose Timothy to send to Philippi, because all the others sought their own. The others were all born-again Christians who had been baptised in the Holy Spirit. They spoke in tongues and could preach well. They even had a passion for souls.

But they still sought their own gain – some honour, some money and some comfort for themselves. Paul, being a spiritual man, could discern that these good brothers were not all of the same quality. Timothy alone stood out as totally unselfish. We find the same today among most Christian workers.

In every group of Christians, we will find *good* brothers and sisters and *excellent* brothers and sisters. The excellent ones are those who do not seek their own. Most Christian workers (whom I have met) *appear to me*, to be seeking their own. They are not like Timothy. God is looking for those who seek the things of Christ first and foremost. To such He gives revelation and through such He does an eternal work. Timothy and Epaphroditus were like that. Epaphroditus was sick to the point of death while serving God, but yet his life radiated the glory of Christ.

In 3:1, Paul says, “*To write the same things again is no trouble to me, and it is a safeguard for you.*” Paul was not ashamed of repetition in his writings. He sought the good of people and not his own honour. Most preachers will not repeat a sermon, because they seek the honour of men. They keep a list of their sermons and make a note of where all they have preached it, so that they don’t repeat that sermon anywhere!! Such people are professional preachers and not prophets. The old covenant prophets repeated their sermons numerous times, because they were more interested in getting people to obey God than to get honour or money for themselves. Paul repeated his exhortations, because he saw that people needed to hear it.

Everything Outside of Christ is Rubbish

In 3:2, Paul says, “*Beware of the dogs. Beware of the evil workers. Beware of the false circumcision, people who believe in the external circumcision. We are the true circumcision.*” Circumcision – the cutting off of the flesh – symbolised “*no confidence in the flesh and glorying only in Christ*” (3:3). Paul goes on to say that he had many things to boast of, in terms of the flesh – he was a Pharisee of the Pharisees and blameless according to the righteousness of the law. That means that from his childhood he had faithfully kept the first 9 commandments and lived an upright life. (No-one in the old covenant could keep the 10th commandment – *Romans 7:7–9*). But when he found Christ he discovered that all his “*human goodness*” was actually garbage – rubbish.

I often use the words “*garbage*” and “*rubbish*” when referring to the worthless things of this earth. But that word did not originate with me. Paul used it first here (3:8)! He said that everything on earth, including human righteousness, was actually garbage and rubbish compared to Christ. Have you seen that yourself? Have you seen that all the money in the world is rubbish compared to Christ? Have you seen that all the honour of man is rubbish compared to Christ? Have you seen that all

earthly comfort is rubbish compared to Christ? Doing God's will, being in the place where God wants you to be, growing in Christlikeness and fulfilling the ministry that God has for you – those are the only things that matter from eternity's standpoint.

If other Christian workers are honoured and you are not, what does it matter? Our calling is to share the reproach of Christ. Earthly honour is rubbish in any case. Are you jealous that another Christian worker is getting more money than you and living a more comfortable life? Then you haven't seen money as rubbish. All he has is a little more garbage than you! Do you feel sad about that? It was because Paul saw the worthlessness of all these things that he was such a free man – undisturbed by earthly pleasure, wealth and honour – and free to serve the Lord without any hindrance.

We cannot serve the Lord faithfully until we see that everything outside of Jesus Christ is garbage. We certainly need money to live on this earth. As servants of the Lord, we can receive money by working with our hands or as gifts (*that we never ask for or seek*) and we can use it for our life on this earth – for paying for food, clothing and housing and for the education of our children. But if we compare our lot with that of others in money matters, or if we are "*calculating*" in our attitude towards money, or if we make money a factor in our service for the Lord, then we have completely missed God's way. Money must be our servant and never our master.

The streets of heaven are paved with gold. Gold is under our feet in heaven. That is where money should be for every true servant of the Lord on earth too. On earth, they put gold on their heads. If you can put gold under your feet now, then you are ready for heaven. But if you still have gold in your head (mind) all the time, then you are not ready to go to heaven yet. You better learn quickly to put money in its proper place; and likewise with honour. Worldly honour or dishonour should be exactly the same to you – *garbage!*

Paul goes on to speak about his great longing in life. It was not to become a famous preacher or to be well known. All that was garbage to him. His earnest desire was to know Christ more, to know more of the power of His resurrection and more of the fellowship of His sufferings (3:10). He goes on to say that he hadn't attained to all that he wanted to – he had not yet reached the perfection of Christ (3:12). But in another sense, he says that *he was perfect* (verse 15). And he says that there were some others too who were perfect like him. He urges the Philippians to make such people their example. Have you understood this paradox – "*Perfect – yet not perfect*"? That is the paradox of true spirituality. Many Christians are afraid of the word '*perfection*,' because they haven't studied the New Testament carefully. There is a perfection that we can

never attain to until Christ returns, but there *IS* a perfection that we can have while we are on earth.

The perfection we can have on earth is *a perfect conscience* – every matter set right with God and with man (*Acts 24:16*), every known sin confessed and cleansed in the blood of Jesus Christ (*1 John 1:7, 9*), every restitution made, every debt repaid, every apology made, etc. Then our conscience is perfect. This is the perfection that we *can* have. The perfection that we *cannot* have is total likeness to Christ. Paul acknowledged that he had not become totally perfect like Christ – but he was pressing on towards that goal. That perfection will come when Christ returns to earth. But that goal is like the peak of a mountain. When we are born again, we are at the foot of that mountain. Becoming totally like Christ is the top of the mountain. Every day we must climb a little higher towards that peak. Thus we press on to perfection. We are not to sit at the foot of the mountain all our life. We must press on.

So what Paul is saying here is that we must make those who live with a perfect conscience at all times as our example (*verse 17*) – and not others, since most Christians do not walk like this. Instead, they are enemies of the cross of Christ (*verse 18*). Their god is their stomach (*verse 19*). How do we know whether our stomach (our appetite) is our god? If the food your wife has cooked is not tasty one day, and you get upset with your wife for that, then your taste buds are your god! If that is the case, then when you pray before eating your food, you are only imagining that you are praying to the Lord Jesus. You are actually bowing down before your taste buds. Don't make your taste buds your god. Don't make your stomach your god. Let Christ alone be your God. When you get good food, praise the Lord. If one day the food does not taste so good, praise the Lord again. If one day the breakfast is not ready on time before you go to work, don't get upset with your wife. Instead say, "Perhaps the Lord wanted me to fast this morning. Maybe that is why He permitted the breakfast not to be ready. Perhaps the Lord sees that I am a great lover of food and He wants me to be free from it." So give thanks and go to work without breakfast! Don't make your stomach your god – because we are our citizens of heaven (*verse 20*).

Strength for All Things in Christ

In *4:4*, the Holy Spirit urges us, "*Rejoice in the Lord ALWAYS*" – not sometimes or even most of the time, but *all the time*. This verse challenged me many years ago. I acknowledged that this verse was not true in my life; and then I asked the Lord to make it true in my life. Do you want to be healthy only *sometimes*, or *most* of the times, or *all* the time? We all want to be healthy *all the time*. So do you want to rejoice *sometimes*, *most* of the time, or *all the time*? You say, "*Is that possible?*" By the grace of God it *IS* possible. God would not have given us such a command if

He knew it was impossible. If this is not yet true in our lives, then let us be honest and tell the Lord so. Ask him to fill you with the Holy Spirit and to teach you that everything in the world is garbage outside of Christ. Then you *WILL* rejoice all the time. A lot of the grumbling, complaining and murmuring found among believers is because they have not seen everything in the world as garbage, outside of Christ – then it is indeed impossible to rejoice always! Paul was a prisoner in a rotten dungeon of a prison in Rome when he wrote those words. If he could rejoice in such circumstances, then why can't we?

Then Paul says one more challenging thing: "*Be anxious about nothing*" (4:6). That is yet another mountain-peak to climb. Anxiety comes so easily to all of us. It comes when you don't have enough money to meet your needs till the end of the month. When your children are late in coming back from school, you begin to be anxious. If you are a young person, and growing older, but see no prospects of marriage, you can become anxious. Many things can cause us anxiety. We may never reach the peak of this mountain on earth. But we should press on, so that our faith and confidence in God grows, so that whenever we are anxious about anything, we take it to the Lord in prayer. As the old hymn says, "*O what peace we often forfeit, O what needless pain we bear, all because we do not carry everything to God in prayer.*" And along with our prayer, we should add thanksgiving. Thanksgiving means, "*Lord, I thank You that You have heard my prayer.*" Then you are certain that your request has reached heaven. Then the Lord will take care of it. Once you thank God, you can rise from prayer, without anxiety. If the anxiety still remains, it could be because you did not conclude your prayer with thanksgiving.

We are exhorted further to always set your minds on the things that are excellent (4:8). Paul then tells us that in his own life he has learnt the secret of being content with much or little, whatever God, in His wisdom, chose to give him (4:11, 12). This is indeed a secret – for most Christians have not learnt it.

Paul then makes this triumphant declaration: "*I can do all things through Christ Who strengthens me*" (4:13). As Christ strengthens us, we will be able to rejoice *always* and be anxious for *nothing*. We cannot attain to this life on our own, but we can, through the power that Christ gives.

The Philippian church was the only church that supported Paul financially and from whom Paul felt free to receive gifts (4:14–18). And so to such a generous church, Paul says, "*My God will supply all your needs according to His riches in glory through Christ Jesus*" (4:19). God will supply us with everything that we need to live a godly life. This promise is not talking about earthly things primarily, but about God's riches

in glory. He will give us all that we need to overcome sin and Satan, and to live a life of continuous joy and peace, filled and anointed with the Holy Spirit. He will also supply our material necessities. It does not speak here about luxuries, but only of our *needs*. Remember however that this promise was given to those who had been generous to God's work first of all. From such believers God will withhold nothing. He will give them the very best – and all that He has.

COLOSSIANS

CHRIST IN YOU – THE HOPE OF GLORY

Colosse was a place that Paul had never visited. It is probable, however, that when Paul was in Ephesus for three years, one of his coworkers, Epaphras, may have gone across and planted a church in Colosse (1:7). So Paul knew a lot about that church from Epaphras, and so he had a very real interest in the developments in that particular church. We could say that Paul's letter to the *Colossians* is like a twin letter to his letter to the *Ephesians*.

Jesus – God and Man

In *Ephesians*, the theme was '*In Christ*'. In *Colossians*, the theme is '*Christ in you*'. We find that in 1:27: "*Christ in you, the hope of glory.*" We read in *Ephesians* about our position in Christ that has made us rich with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places. In *Colossians*, we see the other side of that truth – that because Christ is in us, He can manifest through us the same heavenly life that He manifested when He was on earth. So we could say in another way that the main emphasis in *Colossians* is that the fullness of God dwelt in Christ in bodily form (*Colossians 2:9*). The fullness of God dwelling in a human body was first seen in Jesus Christ and now Christ dwelling in our human body can manifest that same divine life. That is the theme of this letter.

In this letter, we see Paul correcting two extremes of wrong doctrine concerning the human body. These two extremes are found in many false religions also.

One teaching was that the human body was essentially evil. So it had to be suppressed and treated roughly, if one was to become spiritual. This teaching is found today among those who seek to be holy through yoga, asceticism and bodily discipline. Paul deals with this in the latter part of *Colossians 2*.

The other teaching was that the human body was unimportant, since the main thing was the human spirit; and so bodily lusts could be indulged in to any extent. This led to immorality and fornication in the name of religion. You would have heard of temple prostitutes in heathen religions.

Throughout the centuries many religions have had these two extreme attitudes to the human body. Both these teachings despise the human body.

Because of this teaching, some in Colosse could not believe that Almighty God could possibly come in a human body like ours and walk as a man on this earth. Even today, many Christians who do believe that Jesus Christ came as a Man, still do not find any practical application of that truth in their daily lives on earth.

Jesus Christ is God – and always was God. Even when He was on earth He was still God. But He also became totally a Man. Both these truths are equally important. If we lose sight of either of them and their practical application, in that measure our Christian life will suffer loss.

If we don't believe that Jesus Christ is God, then our sins cannot be forgiven, for no-one other than God Himself can take the punishment for the sins of all humanity on the cross.

If we don't believe that Jesus Christ became a Man like us, "made in ALL things like His brothers" (*Hebrews 2:17*), then we cannot follow Him, for we cannot follow someone who was only God. But Jesus gave up His privileges as God when He lived on earth with our limitations, and that is why we can follow him (*Philippians 2:5*).

Sin is not something found in the body. It is not because you have a body that you sin. Jesus had a body like ours. His body came from his mother, through "the seed of David" (*2 Timothy 2:8 - KJV* – "the **sperm** of David" is the literal Greek word there). But even though He had a human body like ours, there was never any sin in that body – no conscious sin and no unconscious sin. He was totally pure from birth till death.

On the other hand, Satan who has no body is full of sin.

So we see that sin has nothing to do with the human body. We make the choice ourselves in the moments of temptation – whether to allow sin to be manifested through our body, or the life of God and purity to be manifested through our body.

Colossians deals with the fullness of God dwelling in bodily form in Christ, and Christ now dwelling in us. *Chapter 1* emphasises the pre-eminence of Christ in creation and in redemption. First of all, Paul thanks

God for them and prays for them, like he always does for all the churches that he wrote to. *“From the day we heard of it, we have not ceased to pray for you”* (1:9). Paul was praying here for Christians he had never met (1:7, 8). His coworker Epaphras was the one who had established this church. He told Paul about the believers in Colosse.

An interesting Bible study that you could do would be to study the prayers of the Apostle Paul. There are many prayers of Paul from *Romans* to *2 Timothy*. You will notice that in all his prayers he prayed only for spiritual things for the believers. He never prayed that Christians would become rich, or that they would have good houses to live in or that they would advance in their jobs. He never prayed for such material things for any of them. He always prayed for eternal, spiritual things. Paul was gripped in his heart with the fact that everything on earth was only for a short period.

To use an illustration: Our life on earth can be compared to a train-journey to eternity. The train-journey is only for a short period. Then we reach our final destination. If we are wise, we will concentrate more on having a good place to live in, at our final destination than on having a comfortable train journey. So Paul prayed for believers that they would live on earth in such a way that when they get into eternity they would have no regrets.

He prayed that they would be “*filled with the knowledge of His will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding*” (1:9). Or in other words, “*I am praying that you will look at things from God’s point of view*” (J.B. Philips paraphrase). Look at your physical body from God’s view point and don’t despise it or indulge it. Jesus came in a human body. So don’t despise your body. Look at everything in life from God’s point of view. That is a good prayer to pray for ourselves: “Lord, help me to see everything that happens in my life from Your viewpoint.” How do you look at the circumstances that came into your life, that sickness, that thorn in the flesh, that person who is treating you badly? Look at all of them from God’s viewpoint. Did it surprise God when that thing happened to you? No. It didn’t. But it did surprise you, because you are a human being limited by time and space. But remember that God was not surprised. So when you move up to God’s viewpoint, you will find that your heart comes to rest about many things that would otherwise bother you, if you had looked at them from an earthly viewpoint.

If you can build a church where people have learned to look at things from God’s viewpoint, there you have a spiritual church. A church is not spiritual just because it engages in a lot of evangelism and social work. We must teach everyone to look at things from God’s viewpoint. Only then can we walk “*in a manner worthy of the Lord and bear fruit in every good work*” (1:10). Paul then speaks about “*being strengthened with power according to His glorious might*” (verse 11) which is a referring to a life filled with the Holy Spirit.

1:15 is one of the clearest descriptions in the New Testament of the fact that Jesus Christ was God when He was on earth (in case anyone doubts that). “*He is the image of the invisible God, the Firstborn of all creation.*” That means He was God in human form – the One Who began (or created) everything that has been created, Who existed before anything was created and who created all things (as clarified in 1:15–17). The “*fleshy body*” of Christ is emphasised in 1:22, because some people then said that He did not have a fleshly body.

Filling Up the Sufferings of Christ

Paul says in 1:24, “*I do my share on behalf of His body, which is the church, in filling up that which is lacking in Christ’s affliction.*” What is it that is lacking in Christ’s sufferings? Didn’t He say on the cross that it was finished? There is a great truth here.

We read of some of Jesus’ physical sufferings in the gospels. But He suffered in His soul also in ways that are not recorded in Scripture. When He said, “*It is finished*” on the cross, He had not only finished paying the price for man’s sins, He had also finished overcoming the entire range of temptations that any man can ever face. He had been tempted in all points as we are and overcome (*Hebrews 4:15*). In every temptation, we have the option of yielding to the temptation and choosing the way of *pleasure*, or resisting the temptation and choosing the way of *suffering* (*the opposite of pleasure*). Jesus consistently chose the way of suffering and “*suffered in the flesh*” (*1 Peter 4:1*). Thus He became the Forerunner for us. Now we have to follow in His footsteps and become mini-forerunners for others. When we are tempted to sin, the Holy Spirit leads us to choose the same way of suffering in our flesh that Jesus went through. What Paul was saying in 1:24 was that he had not yet completed all the sufferings in his life (in temptation) that Jesus had completed.

Jesus also suffered externally in many ways because He stood for the truth. If you take a glass to represent suffering, then in Jesus’ case, all the suffering He chose to go through in His life time filled up that glass completely. Finally, on the cross He said, “*It is finished.*” Now we follow in Jesus’ footsteps, and we too have a body like He had. The Holy Spirit has to do the same work in us – of filling up that glass. When we are born again, our glass is empty because we have suffered nothing for Christ. Gradually as time goes on, this glass begins to fill up with what we suffer for Christ’s sake. The same Christ who suffered on earth dwells in us now and He wants to take us through the same sufferings He went through, but now in our body. The servant is not greater than his master. All His sufferings have to be completed now, in our body. That is actually a great privilege. Paul said that his glass had not yet been filled up.

Many Christians don’t understand that when they go through any suffering, they are fellowshipping with Christ in His sufferings. I am not

talking about the sufferings we get because we do something foolish or sinful. Jesus never did anything sinful or foolish. He suffered because His way of life was totally contrary to this world. His entire ministry was in constant conflict with the Bible scholars and theologians of His day. They hated Him and finally killed Him.

It is the same today. If we are true disciples of Christ, we will find ourselves in conflict with the entire religious system of this world and also with a lot of so-called Christian theology and religion. We will find ourselves in conflict just like Jesus did – with people who don't know God, but who are very religious. Who were the ones who called Jesus '*Beelzebul*'? They were not the Greeks or the Romans. They were people who had a Bible (the *Old Testament* at that time). Who were the ones who persecuted Jesus the most and killed Him? They were religious people with a Bible. So if we are going to fill up the afflictions of Christ, we will find religious people with a Bible afflicting us too, because they don't know God. Jesus said they hated and persecuted Him because they didn't know His Father. They will do the same thing to us.

Paul says, "*I rejoice in these sufferings, because I am doing my share.*" Each of us have a share for the sake of this Body of Christ, the church. First, Jesus suffered in His physical body. Now He has to suffer in His spiritual body, the church. You have your share and I have mine in these sufferings. I cannot fulfil your share and you cannot fulfil mine. When you go through some suffering, I can't be faithful *for you*. You have to be faithful *yourself*, when you suffer because of your relatives or neighbours, or when you are persecuted or thrown out of your house because you want to follow Jesus. These are a part of the sufferings of Christ. Rejoice at that time and say, "Lord, thank You for giving me the privilege of filling up a little bit of Your afflictions for the sake of the church which is Your body." That is how we will have a ministry to others and that is how we can build the church.

That is why this is called a part of "*the fellowship of Christ's sufferings*". Christ gained nothing *for Himself* through His sufferings. But we gained a lot. When we are in fellowship with Christ's sufferings, we ourselves gain nothing from it. It is for the sake of the church. *Others* will gain through our sufferings. Are you willing for that? I hope we will say, "Yes, Lord. I am willing. I want to be in fellowship with Your mind and Your spirit and Your attitude. I want to suffer so that others will gain something through my suffering."

Have you seen how sugarcane is crushed in a grinder? They put those sugarcane sticks into the grinder and grind it and the juice comes out. After this is done a few times, one would think that all the juice has come out of those sticks. But, no! They put it back in again – and some more juice comes out. For whose benefit is it being crushed? For *somebody else* to drink it. That's how God makes us also a blessing to others. We are crushed and squeezed in the circumstances and trials of life, and we

humble ourselves and accept them joyfully, and from that crushing, the radiance and beauty and aroma of Christ come forth. That is the only way we can be a blessing to others.

In 1:28, Paul says that with this experience of Christ's sufferings, "*we proclaim Christ, admonishing every man and teaching every man with all wisdom, so that we may present every man complete in Christ.*" This is both prophecy and teaching – with all wisdom. Paul's ultimate goal was to "*present every man perfect in Christ.*" If Paul had a church of 100 people, he was going to do everything possible to make sure that all those 100 people – every brother and sister – would become perfect in Christ. He was going to exhort them, admonish them, and teach them with all wisdom, because one day he would have to present them to God.

There are very few pastors and shepherds who have such a burden. They just preach. That's all. But Paul had a burden to lead *every single person* to spiritual maturity. You cannot take the responsibility of being an elder in a church lightly. When I was an elder in our church at Bangalore for 25 years, I sought to know the spiritual condition of *every single adult* in my church, so that I could correct them, rebuke them, give them wisdom, speak encouraging words and strong words to them, so that I could present them perfect in Christ one day. I never wanted anything from them for myself. For their sake, for the sake of the Body of Christ, I had to go through a lot of crushing in my private life. God dealt with me in so many ways so that the aroma of Christ could come forth from me so that others would be blessed. This is true Christian ministry.

In 1:29, Paul goes on to say, "*For this purpose I labour, I work hard, striving.*" How does he strive? "*With the mighty power of the Holy Spirit – which first of all God works mightily inside of me.*" God always has to work inside us by His Holy Spirit first and only then can He work through us to bless others. Those of you who serve in the church, make these two verses your goal, to present every man perfect in Christ (1:28) and to have the fullness of the Holy Spirit by which you reach that goal (1:29).

Mysteries of Godliness

In 2:2, Paul says, "*I pray that your heart will be knit together in love, 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.*" This word '*mystery*' comes a few times in the New Testament and refers to a truth that can be known only if God reveals it to you through His Holy Spirit. 1 Corinthians 2:8–10 states, "*Eye has not seen, nor ear heard, nor entered the heart of man, all that God has prepared for those who love Him, but God has revealed them to us through His Holy Spirit.*" There are only two mysteries that are called '*great*' mysteries in the Bible. One is the mystery that God came in human flesh (1 Timothy 3:16): "*Great is the mystery of godliness. God was manifest in the flesh.*" That is called the secret of godliness or the secret of how to live a godly life.

The second mystery is about the church as the Body and Bride of Christ. *Ephesians 5:32* says, “*The two shall become one flesh. This is a great mystery, but I am speaking about Christ and the church.*” The church being one flesh with Christ is the second great mystery.

We need revelation from God if we are to understand that Jesus came in the flesh, was tempted like us, and overcame all temptation, and how we now can follow in His footsteps, overcome sin and thus build the Body of Christ along with others who are walking the same way. Building the church as Christ’s Body is the greatest ministry anyone can ever do on the face of the earth. There is absolutely nothing greater than that.

Paul spent all his life labouring to build this church. The greatest servants of God are those who work with Christ to build His church. It is important to live a godly life; but that is not enough. We must also do what Paul did— build the church. Paul did not spend his life doing social work. Helping the poor in earthly matters is good, but that will not fulfil God’s *eternal* purpose. If you make people’s lives more comfortable by giving them education and medical treatment alone, you would only have smoothed their pathway to hell! Initially, they were going to hell along a rough path, but you made that path a little smoother. Paul realised that the most important of all ministries was to lead people to Christ, lead them to a godly life and then build them together into a Body. That is the greatest ministry any of us can ever do.

We respect all who do social work and help the poor in Christ’s Name. May God bless all who are called to do that. But Paul never got involved with that – even though there were so many social needs in the world in his time. Those who help the poor may get earthly honours like the Nobel peace prize. But Jesus and Paul would never have won the Nobel peace prize. Nobody gives Nobel prizes to those who build the church.

In 2:11, 12, Paul says, “*In Christ you were also circumcised with a circumcision made without hands in the removal of the body of the flesh.*” Just like in circumcision there is a cutting off of some flesh, we must recognise that our flesh (self-will) was cut off on the cross. We must take that position by faith. In water baptism, we testify that we have been buried and raised with Christ (2:12). God commanded Abraham that all his descendants were to be circumcised. In the same way *every* child of God needs to be spiritually circumcised – they must have no confidence in their flesh (*Philippians 3:3*). Baptism is a symbol of that inward circumcision.

Jesus' Triumph Over Satan

In 2:14, 15, we read of the two things that Jesus did for us on the cross. First of all, He cancelled our debt to God. God’s Law had a list of commandments that we had to keep. But we broke them all. Every sin we commit is a debt we owe to God our Creator – and we have all accumulated a

huge debt in our lives. Jesus paid our debt completely on the cross and tore up the certificate of debt. There is no debt against our names now.

The second thing Jesus did on the cross was to take away the armour of all the demonic principalities and powers. When Jesus triumphed over them on the cross, He took away their weapons. We can picture it something like this: A whole lot of demons had machine guns pointed at helpless human beings like us – and we were scared of them. They were always shooting at us, and we always had to run for cover. But Jesus took away all their machine guns and gave them all to us. Now they are on the run from us. We don't have to be afraid of Satan or his demons any more. If we live with a clean conscience and dwell in humility, then in the name of Jesus we can live in victory over all of Satan's forces *all the time*. The name of the Lord is a strong and mighty tower. The righteous can run into that Name and be safe (*Proverbs 18:10*).

Satan and all his demons were defeated on the cross, once and for all. If you ever meet a demon-possessed person, remember that the demon inside that person was defeated on the cross. His machine gun was taken away on the cross – and he doesn't have any weapons. You can fire the name of Jesus at that demon now. It does not matter if you are weak. The weakest soldier with a machine gun can fire away at a stronger enemy who has no guns. That huge Goliath of a demon will fall before you. The Name of Jesus is the mightiest weapon of all.

Shadow and Reality

In 2:16–23, Paul speaks of various methods of “*becoming holy*” that people have thought up without any revelation from God. Some say, “*Keep holy days, go on pilgrimages, keep the Sabbath*”, etc. But the Holy Spirit says, “*Don't let anybody judge you in such matters. The Sabbath was only a shadow. The reality is in Christ.*” When you have the reality why do you need the shadow?

If Paul were living today, he would have said, “All those ceremonial old-covenant laws and festivals were only like a photograph. Now you have the reality in Christ.” I look at my wife's photograph only when I am travelling and away from her. But if she is right beside me, I would be crazy to be looking at her photograph. Even so, when Christ Himself is dwelling in you, why do you need all those pictures? Christ, your Husband, is with you. Why do you need His photograph then? The Sabbath day and all those old-covenant festivals were only photographs and shadows. Now you have the reality – Christ.

Paul then goes on to say, “*Don't let anyone cheat you of your prize.*” There is a prize that God has reserved for you in heaven? Don't let anyone cheat you of it by making you delight in self-abasement (a false humility). There is a lot of false humility among believers. False humility is actually spiritual pride wearing the garments of humility and pretending to be very humble. Get rid of it.

Paul speaks about worshipping “*angels*”. The word for “*angel*” can also be translated as “*messenger*”. There is a lot of worship of God’s messengers in Christendom today. Many non-Christians worship their so called ‘*godmen*.’ Many Christians have godmen too – Christian leaders whom they admire so much that it almost amounts to worship! To respect a godly man, to appreciate him and to listen carefully to his advice is all very good. But, be careful that he does not take the place of Christ in your life. Then it becomes worship. That is part of this false humility. You can’t become holy like that. Instead of holding on to that messenger, you must hold on to the Head (2:19). The best messenger is the one who helps you to get closer to Christ, the Head.

The other way of holiness that many people teach is through discipline: “*Don’t handle this, don’t touch this, don’t taste this*” (verses 20, 21) – seeking for holiness by changing one’s diet. Or through a severe treatment of the body “*Sleep on the floor and not on a bed. Fast for 40 days.*” (verse 23). I have seen people who fast for many days but who still lose their temper and have bitterness in their hearts. All their fasting has not made them holy. They still gossip and speak evil of others. Severe treatment of the body doesn’t make anyone holy. It does have “*an appearance of holiness*”, but it does not deliver one from sin.

How can sin be dealt with? In 3:3, Paul says, “*You have died with Christ.*” That is the way. Take your position as dead with Christ. You have also been raised up in Christ (3:1). That is the way to genuine holiness. Not by keeping holy days, worshipping messengers, severe treatment of the body, or by discipline or fasting. None of these things will make you holy. Even if you practice these all your life, they won’t make you holy. The way to be holy is by dying with Jesus to this world and then living with Jesus. It is not just death. If you only think of death to Self, you can be deceived into a *yoga* type of holiness, with self-denial, etc. But the Holy Spirit wants to communicate the life of Christ to you and to manifest the life of Jesus in your body. He wants to enable you thus to live the way Jesus lived on earth in His body. One proof of that will be that your mind will be set on the things that are above (3:2). You won’t be occupied with the type of food you eat and other earthly disciplines. You will be occupied with the things that are above. That is where true holiness begins.

Notice the contrast between “*your mind*” in 3:2 and “*your body*” in 2:23. It is not by *suppressing* our *bodily* desires and passions that we become holy. It is when our *mind* is set on things above that our body will obey the Holy Spirit. “*Christ is seated at the right hand of God. Let your mind be set on things above. Since you have died with Christ, consider the members of your body as dead*” (3:1–3). This is the way of holiness that Paul explains in *Romans* as well: *You are dead and risen with Christ.*

Ask God to give you an understanding of this, for this is the secret of genuine holiness. When you see this truth, it can become as great a crisis experience in your life as your new birth.

Being Peaceful and Thankful

There are many prejudices we have that need to be crucified in this new life. There is no distinction between people of different races in the Body of Christ (3:11). We now look at all believers in the same way, whatever their race or culture may be. We bear with one another and forgive one another just as Jesus forgave us. The peace of Christ becomes the referee in our hearts, in our relationships with each other (3:15). Our conscience is like a referee that tells us when something is wrong. In a football match, as soon as a player commits a foul, the referee blows his whistle. When the referee blows the whistle, the game stops. Nothing is counted until the foul is set right.

When you lose peace in your heart, and you are agitated and troubled, that is your conscience blowing a whistle – indicating that you did something wrong. Maybe you spoke harshly to your wife, or you did something unrighteous with money. Once that whistle is blown, everything must stop. You have to set the foul right immediately. Never speak when you are agitated – at home or in a church meeting. You can bless people by keeping your mouth shut. Just confess your sin to God and to man; or give back what you took wrongly. Then the peace of Christ will be restored in your heart. If you listen to this referee you will never go astray. In some football matches, the players argue with the referee. But the referee's word is final. Don't argue with him, or he may send you off the field! Just set the matter right immediately.

In 3:15, Paul says, “*Be thankful for one another.*” He has been speaking about the Body of Christ. We must learn to be thankful for one another in our local church.

Paul then speaks about home-life: “*Don't be bitter against your wife*” (3:19). What a word! How many days in a year are you permitted to be bitter against your wife? *Not even once.* When the Bible says, “*Don't murder,*” we know that it means we are never to murder anyone even once. Even so, when the Bible says, “*Don't be bitter against your wife,*” it means that we must not be bitter against our wives *even once.* The same God who says, “*Don't murder,*” also says, “*Don't be bitter against your wife.*” If you are a serious Christian, you will strive to achieve that goal at any cost. In 3:21, there is an exhortation for fathers: “*Don't exasperate your children.*” Don't keep on nagging them, or they will get discouraged. In 4:1 is a word for masters: “*Treat your slaves fairly*”. Be good to them.

Give them some money, even though they are your slaves and you are not obliged to pay them.

Then a couple of practical exhortations: Devote yourself to prayer (4:2). Always speak with grace, so that you reply wisely to everyone (4:6). You may speak like a lion in the pulpit, as the mouthpiece of God. But in your private conversation with people, be like a lamb. Speak always with grace, kindness and mercy.

In 4:12, we read of Brother Epaphras who was always praying for the Colossian Christians that they would become perfect. This was the burden of the apostles – that every brother and sister must become perfect in Christ. They were not happy with people just getting converted. They wanted them to become disciples. And then they wanted those disciples to become perfect. Those apostles were not so busy doing just evangelism that they had no time to lead people to perfection. This is how we must serve God today as well.

In 4:16, Paul refers to a letter he had written to the church in Laodicea. We read of the pathetic state of this church in *Revelation 3:14–17*. If they had taken heed to the warnings Paul had written to them, they would not have ended up in that state. Paul's letter to the Laodiceans is not in the Bible. But I am sure it must have been full of prophetic exhortations that could have saved that church from calamity. At times, God may send a prophet to you with a word specifically meant for you. If you take heed to it, it can save you. If you reject it, you can be destroyed.

Paul mentions Demas who, at this time, was a coworker of his (4:14). But later, Demas got attracted by the things of this world and went astray (*2 Timothy 4:10*).

In 4:17, we read a wonderful exhortation that Paul gives Archippus: “*Take heed to the ministry which you received from the Lord, that you fulfil that.*” Don't bother about the ministries that God has given to others. God has given *you* a particular ministry. Concentrate on that and fulfil it, at any cost. Put your name there in place of Archippus and take that as a word to your own heart. When I was a young man and I read this verse, I put my name there in place of Archippus and I heard the Lord saying to me, “Take heed to the ministry that I have given you, and fulfil it. Don't get sidetracked and do something else.”

I want to say to all of you, “Don't get sidetracked into social work, if God has called you to build a church. Don't sit behind a desk as a Director in some Christian organisation, if God has called you to a prophetic ministry. Take heed to the ministry God has given you and fulfil it.”

1 THESSALONIANS

A CHURCH READY FOR CHRIST'S RETURN

Enough Paul's letters in the Bible begin with *Romans* and end with *Titus*, as far as we know, they were not written in that order. There are certain indications in some letters as to the time in which they were written. Paul was probably converted about 6 years after Jesus died and rose again. *1 Thessalonians* was probably Paul's first letter – written 15 years after his conversion, and 5 years after he had started his first missionary journey (*Acts 13*). The order in which Paul wrote his letters was most probably *1 and 2 Thessalonians, Galatians, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Romans, Ephesians, Colossians, Philemon, Philippians* (these last four were written from prison), *1 Timothy, Titus, and 2 Timothy*.

It is interesting to note that the very first letter that Paul wrote deals with the second coming of Christ. The theme of the letter is being ready for Christ's return. The church in Thessalonica was a persecuted church; and Paul had been prepared to minister to the people there by being persecuted himself in Philippi before coming there. True servants of God are made mini-forerunners by God for other people. You cannot encourage a persecuted church if you have never been persecuted yourself. God knew that the church in Thessalonica was going to suffer a lot of persecution. So before God sent Paul to Thessalonica, He allowed Paul to be beaten and imprisoned in Philippi (*Acts 16:22–24*). So Paul came there fresh from an experience of persecution. Later, when the Thessalonian Christians were persecuted, they realised that Paul, who gave them the gospel and established the church there was persecuted himself. God prepares us for a ministry to a people by making us go through the same things that He knows those people are going to suffer. Only such a preacher can minister powerfully, without being merely theoretical. So what God takes you through is a preparation for your future ministry.

True Repentance and Faith

Paul speaks first about faith, love and hope “*their work of faith, labour of love and steadfastness of hope,*” (1:3) and in the closing verses of *Chapter 1* he speaks about true repentance. Here we have one of the clearest definitions of true repentance in the New Testament: “*turning to God from idols*” (1:9). Repentance is turning away from all our idols and facing God. When you live in sin, you face your idols and your back is toward God. Your idol could be money, your job, your ambition, some sinful pleasure, your girl friend, or yourself. It could be visible idols too. There are many types of idols. Repentance is turning away from *all* those idols and turning 180 degrees around to God, so that your idols are now all behind your back. If you have not turned your back to such idols, you have not really repented.

Many Christians try to face God while still having idols in their lives. Their ambitions and interests are all in the world, but they also imagine that they are born-again Christians! Such “*Christians*” are the most unhappy people in the world. People who live totally for their idols of pleasure and money are happier than such “*Christians*”! But the people who live totally for God alone are supremely happy. The most miserable people in the world are those who try to live for God and the world. It’s like keeping your feet in two boats that are going in different directions. You fall into the river in the middle. Many problems that “*Christians*” face are because they have not laid a proper foundation of repentance in their lives.

An idol is *anything* that takes the place of God in your life. It could even be a Christian leader whom you admire so much that he replaces God in your life; or it could be a particular Biblical doctrine that you love.

Once we have turned to God, we are to spend the rest of our life serving the Living and True God, and waiting for His Son to return from heaven (1:9, 10). Here we have a perfect description of what true repentance and faith are. A Christian who has been converted like this alone has got a good foundation. He has put money, comfort, food, sleep, the opinion of people and everything else on earth in their proper place, and he has turned totally to God. His primary aim in life thereafter is to serve God. He may be in a secular job, but his primary aim is to serve God. He serves God expectantly waiting for the return of Christ from heaven. When Jesus returns, He will “*deliver us from the wrath to come*” (1:10). It is good for every Christian to check whether his experience corresponds to 1:9, 10.

Paul's Example in Serving the Lord

In *Chapter 2*, Paul reminds them that just before he came to Thessalonica, he had suffered persecution and been mistreated in Philippi.

The Thessalonians remembered how Paul had preached the gospel to them with great boldness in the face of much opposition. Thus, Paul was an example to the Thessalonian Christians, of one who was not afraid of persecution for the sake of the gospel.

Paul goes on to say something about his ministry that we should all give heed to: “*We spoke not as pleasing men, but God who examines our hearts*” (2:4). That should be the testimony of all who preach and teach that they never preach to please their hearers but only God. God constantly examines the hearts of all who preach to see whether they are seeking to please Him alone.

Paul emphasised this when writing to the Galatian Christians too. Paul often emphasised the fact that he never sought to please men. Seeking the honour of men is a sin that is not recognised sufficiently in Christendom. Other sins are easily recognised, but not this one. Seeking man’s honour is a very serious sin. Such a person can never be a servant of Christ (*Galatians 1:10*).

Paul says in 2:5, that he never flattered anyone in his preaching. He never said anything just to please some rich people in the congregation – not even in private conversation. Many preachers flatter the rich and the influential to get some benefit from them. But a true servant of God will never flatter anyone.

Paul goes on to say that he never preached in order to make money (2:5). Many preachers know what to say that will make people give them a good offering. But if they preach the truth that God wants them to preach, they will be rejected by most churches. Most preachers want to be invited back to large, rich churches and so they speak what pleases the people.

In Paul’s preaching he did not seek glory from people (2:6). Neither did he assert his authority over people, even though as an apostle he could have. There are a number of verses here that teach us how we are to serve the Lord. All who serve the Lord must meditate on this section of Scripture: There was no flattery, no desire for money, no seeking glory from people and no assertion of authority.

In addition to these *negatives*, Paul talks about some *positive* things as well, as to how he ministered and served among them. First of all, he served as a *gentle nursing mother* cares for her baby (2:7). Secondly he says, “*We had a fond affection for you*” (2:8). No man is fit to speak God’s word to people unless he has a great love for the people to whom he is speaking. If you don’t have a real love in your heart for people, forget about preaching to them. Go and do something else. Thirdly, he says, “*We wanted to give you not only the gospel of God, but we wanted to give you our lives*” (2:8). What a challenging example for us! They didn’t

want to just give them a message; they wanted to pour out their lives to serve them. Fourthly, he says how *he worked hard night and day so that they wouldn't become a financial burden on them* (2:9). A servant of God must be a hard-working person. Many full-time Christian workers in our country don't really do much hard work. They go in the evenings here and there for some meetings, but waste much of the rest of the day. They are not really full-time workers. They are only *evening* workers. The real full-time workers in India are those who do a secular job during the day, throughout the week, and then go out and do the Lord's work in the evenings and on Sundays. Paul made tents during the day and when he had some spare time, late into the night. Thus he earned his living and did not become a burden to anyone.

Paul goes on to say how devoutly, uprightly, blamelessly he behaved towards the believers in Thessalonica (2:10). Wherever Paul went, he could say, "It's not just my message, but the way I live that demonstrates the gospel." What a need there is for Christian workers in India who can say that!

In 2:11, Paul says that he also rebuked, encouraged and implored those believers *as a father*. A true servant of God is both a mother and a father. As a mother, he deals gently with the believers, and as a father he gives them advice and disciplines them where necessary. Both these qualities must be found in every servant of God and in every elder of a church. I would encourage anyone who wants to serve the Lord to read and meditate much on 2:4–11, if he wants to be effective.

In 2:18, Paul says, "*I wanted to come to you but Satan hindered me.*" It is true that Satan was defeated on the cross, his armour was taken away from him, and he has no power over us. Jesus has given us authority over all the power of the enemy (*Luke 10:19*). Paul was a wholehearted servant of God, but yet he says that Satan hindered him at a certain point. He wanted to go to Thessalonica but Satan hindered him.

We know from *2 Corinthians 12*, that God allowed a messenger of Satan to harass Paul constantly. It was because Paul was such a wholehearted servant of God that Satan was harassing him constantly. Satan would have sent his junior (less powerful) demons after other Christians, but Satan himself went after Paul. So I suppose today, *Satan will go after whoever he considers to be the most wholehearted servant of God in the world.*

Among the demons there are different levels of power. The Bible speaks about evil principalities and powers (*Ephesians 6:12*). The stronger demons go after the more wholehearted Christian workers, and the junior demons go after the half-hearted ones. Satan will totally ignore the proud and the money-loving Christian workers because he knows

that they cannot harm his kingdom in any way! He knows that they will destroy themselves and destroy others along with them. So it is actually a great honour if Satan considers you worthy to be persecuted, harassed and troubled. That means that he considers you to be a threat to his kingdom.

Satan hindered Paul from going to Thessalonica. But God used it to fulfil His will – just like He used Paul's thorn in the flesh also to keep Paul humble. When Paul could not go to Thessalonica, he sent Timothy there (3:2). That gave Timothy some needed experience in the ministry, and enabled him to grow to maturity. Sometimes when a senior worker cannot go somewhere, that can be a good thing, because a junior worker goes instead and gets experience. So God turned the tables on Satan here, just like He always does. In our ministry, if we live in the will of God, nothing that Satan can do can ever hinder God's purpose for our ministry.

Paul had great joy in serving God. There are a number of expressions of joy in 2:19 to 3:9. He says, "*My greatest joy is found in you Christians in Thessalonica*" (3:9). Something is seriously wrong with a servant of God who does not find joy in those whom he serves.

Love in Human Relationships

In 3:12, 13, we read how we can have a heart of true holiness. Paul says there, "*May the Lord cause you to increase and abound in love for one another, because that is how He will establish your hearts unblameable in holiness.*" So genuine holiness is *increasing* in love for one another. We can be established unblameable in holiness only if we love one another. That's a very important corrective for those who imagine that holiness has only got to do with freedom from dirty thoughts and modesty in dressing. Many who have these good qualities are utterly selfish in their conduct. They are concerned about their own inward purity, but don't have much of a concern for the needs and problems of others. They are not *growing* in love for others. *Such people are not holy*; they are Pharisees. The way God establishes us unblameable in holiness is by filling our hearts with more and more love for others. Holiness without fervent love for others is a counterfeit holiness. True holiness is fervent love for God, fervent love for our fellow believers and fervent love for all men. Those who pursue this path will be established unblameable in holiness when Christ returns (3:13).

In 4:1–8, Paul speaks about purity in the sexual area. 4:4 could be translated in two possible ways. The word "vessel" here (*skeuos* in Greek) could refer either to our body or to our wife.

So it could mean: "*Each of you must know how to possess his own body in sanctification and honour.*" We must learn to keep our body holy and

pure, because the will of God is that we must be sanctified (4:3). There are many areas where we don't know what God's will is. But this is one area where we definitely know what it is. To be sanctified means to be separated from everything that is sinful, worldly and un-Christlike. We must learn how to keep our bodies free from all such evil.

4:4 could also mean: "*Each of you must know how to acquire his own wife in sanctification and honour.*" That means, the way you get your wife must be in a holy and pure way. There are many unholy ways in which people try to get wives. Looking for a dowry is one of those unholy ways. Are you looking for a wife in a holy way, or do you look for worldly qualifications when looking for a wife? To look for a wife "*in lustful passion*", is to look for a wife like the heathen do. But if you want to serve God, you must look for a wife who has the same godly desire that you have.

In 4:6, Paul goes on to say that "*no one should ever cheat his brother in this matter.*" That means, "Don't get too friendly with someone else's wife", for "*God is the avenger of those who do that.*" We have to be very careful in our relationships with the opposite sex, because we live in a society today that is very similar to the one that the Thessalonians lived in, where sexual immorality is not considered sinful. There is, unfortunately, a lot of immorality among young people in churches and even among Christian workers in these days. It is important that, as Christians, we are different from the world, and that we have a clear testimony in this area. You must know how to preserve your body in purity in this area. Otherwise you will fail the Lord. Samson and David are tragic examples of people who knew God who failed. There are many like them in our day as well.

In 4:11, Paul urges the believers: "*Make it your ambition to lead a quiet life, to mind your own business and to work with your own hands.*" In 2 Corinthians 5:9, we saw that Paul says that his *ambition* was to please God. His statement mentioned here does not contradict that statement. Our ambition must always be to lead a peaceable life, not quarrelling with anyone, minding our own business, not being busybodies in anyone else's affairs, and working hard to support ourselves and our families. This is a great verse with some important exhortations that we would do well to take heed to.

Christ's Return in the Clouds

In 4:13–18, Paul speaks about how it will be when Christ returns. "*We don't want you to be uninformed about those who have slept in the Lord.*" That refers to those who have died in Christ. Jesus died and rose again; and those who have died in Christ will also rise again. When Jesus returns, we who are alive will not be taken up ahead of those who died

in Christ before us. They will arise from the graves. That will be the first resurrection. And we will be taken up together with them to meet the Lord. Unbelievers will not rise for another one thousand years. They will rise in the second resurrection.

At His return, our Lord will descend with a shout, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet of God. Then all the saints will be caught up to meet the Lord in the clouds. Jesus spoke about these very same matters, when He spoke to His disciples about His return. He said, "*Don't believe those who say, 'He is here' or 'He is there' or 'He has come secretly'*" (*Matthew 24:26*). What He was saying was that He would not come secretly, as many believe today. When He comes, it will be like the lightning that flashes from the east to the west. Every eye will be able to see Him.

When will Christ's coming take place? Jesus answered that too: "*Immediately after the tribulation*" (*Matthew 24:29*). Many believe that Christ will rapture His saints *before* the tribulation. But there is not a single verse anywhere in Scripture that teaches that: That is a doctrine of men. Jesus Himself clearly stated that His coming would be after the tribulation. The events mentioned here in 4:16, 17 are exactly the same as mentioned by Jesus in *Matthew 24:30, 31*: Jesus appearing in the clouds with the angels and a trumpet-sound, and the saints being taken up to meet Him.

In 5:2, we read, "*The day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night.*" A thief does not announce his coming, but comes unexpectedly. Thus, every unbeliever will be surprised when the Lord returns. We, the sons of light, however, are expecting our Lord to come (5:4). We do not live in darkness. So we should not be asleep spiritually, but alert (5:6). How can we know whether we are awake or asleep? When a man is asleep, the things that are real around him in the room are invisible; but the things that are unreal (in his dreams) appear to be real. In the same way, a believer is spiritually asleep when the real things of eternity appear unreal to him, and the unreal things of this world appear real to him. This whole world is like an unreal dream when compared to heaven and eternity. The truly eternal things are the things of heaven. For believers who are asleep, the Lord will certainly come as a thief in the night. Paul says we look forward to that day and we eagerly await His coming. People around us will be imagining that everything is peaceful and safe (5:3). But destruction will come upon them suddenly.

This destruction, it says here will come suddenly "*like birth pangs upon a woman with child*" (5:3). Jesus used the same expression when speaking of the last days (in *Matthew 24:8*). Every woman knows that before she gives birth to a child there is a painful time of labour which

can last for many hours. (Some mothers say that it was so painful that they felt like dying). It is only after that the child is born. This is a picture of the painful period of tribulation that will precede the coming of Christ. No child is born without those birth-pangs. And the coming of the Lord is not going to take place before this painful tribulation. We are not afraid of that period. It will be a great honour for us if the Lord allows us to be here as witnesses for Him and to lay down our lives for the sake of the gospel.

Final Exhortations

In 5:12, we are told to “*appreciate those who diligently labour among us, especially those who give us instruction.*” Those who shepherd us as elders and who teach us God’s Word must be highly esteemed, and we must express our appreciation to them. This debt of appreciation that we owe them is just as important to be paid to them as any debt of money. There are two extremes I have found among Christians: Some worship their leaders as gods, while others do not esteem their leaders or express their appreciation to them. If you disobey God’s command here, you alone will be the loser.

In 5:14–18, Paul gives nine brief and powerful exhortations: Admonish the unruly, encourage the faint-hearted, help the weak, be patient with all, never repay evil for evil, always seek good for others, rejoice always, pray always (that means have a spirit of prayer all the time) and in everything give thanks – because all of these are God’s will for us.

Then in 5:19–21, Paul gives some advice about the gift of prophecy – first to those who prophesy and then to those who listen. If the Holy Spirit *urges* you at times to share a Word, stand up and speak up. Don’t quench that fire. And listeners are warned first of all not to despise “*prophetic utterances*” (the sharing of God’s Word in the meetings of the church) and secondly not to accept everything they hear as prophecy. This second warning is greatly needed in our day, when there are so many false “*prophecies*”. They must use their God-given discernment to decide what is from God and what is not. They must hold tightly to what edified them and throw away the rest. To use an illustration: Peel the skin off from the banana and eat the banana. The more spiritually mature the one who prophesies is, the thinner the skin of his banana will be!!

In 5:22 and 23, we are urged to abstain from every form of evil. If we do this, we are assured that the God of peace will sanctify us and make us perfectly holy in spirit, soul and body and preserve us until the second coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.

In 5:23, we see more clearly than anywhere else in the whole Bible that man is spirit, soul and body. Man is the tabernacle of God, and the Old Testament Tabernacle had three parts – the Most Holy Place, the Holy Place and the Outer Court, corresponding to man's spirit, soul and body. God dwelt in the Most Holy Place then. That teaches us that God now dwells in our spirit – the most important part of our being. Our soul consists of our mind, emotions and will. God does not dwell in our mind or in our emotions. Our spirit consists of our conscience and the ability to receive the life of God.

2 THESSALONIANS

DANGERS IN THE LAST DAYS

The second letter of Paul to the Thessalonians also deals with the subject of the second coming of Christ. This was probably written one year after the first letter. The first letter was written to comfort them with the hope of the return of the Lord. The second letter was written to correct their wrong ideas about the second coming of Christ. In his first letter Paul told the Thessalonians to be ready for Christ's return. Some of the Christians then said, "If the Lord is coming soon, why are we wasting our time working? Let us resign our jobs and spend our time telling people everywhere about the Lord's return." So they sat around lazily doing no work. So Paul had to correct their wrong ideas.

We read in the papers every now and then of some crazy cult group that taught that the Lord would return on a certain date and who went to the top of some mountain to wait for Him. The leader of that cult usually made a lot of money from his followers by making them sell all their property and giving the money to him!! Those followers then wait for a few days and discover that they were deceived.

Jesus said that no man knew the exact date or the hour of His return. He said that we could know when it was near, but not the exact date. Israel has re-occupied Jerusalem (*Luke 21:24*). So we know that the coming of the Lord is near. There is a lot of strife around Jerusalem (*Luke 21:20*). So we know that the coming of the Lord is near. But we don't know the date or the hour. It's not for us to know the times or the seasons (*Acts 1:7*). So no-one should resign his job and wait on some mountain for the Lord's return. 2000 years have gone by since Jesus said He would return. If those Christians in Thessalonica had not been corrected by Paul, they would have been jobless and starving until their death. We must not be foolish like them.

In *1:4*, Paul is joyful that those Christians were faithful in their tribulations. Their faithfulness and perseverance in the midst of their

persecutions were a clear proof that they were worthy of the kingdom of God (1:5). At the same time, that was a clear proof of God's righteous judgement on the unbelievers. It will be righteous for God to punish all those who afflicted His children, one day. Paul told them that when Christ returns, they would get relief from their tribulation. That teaches us that persecution will continue until the return of Christ (1:7).

When Paul wrote that, he did not know that 2000 years of church history would be filled with persecution of Christians everywhere. He was writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, and he said relief would come only when Christ came again. Even today, Christians are being persecuted. I have read that more people have been killed for their faith in the Lord Jesus Christ in the last 100 years than in all the preceding 1900 years. A lot of the persecution of Christians never gets publicised. But when Christ returns again, He will dole out judgement on "*those who don't know God and who don't obey Christ*" (1:8). And in that day, "*Christ will be glorified in His saints*" (1:10).

So until Christ returns, we can expect to be persecuted, if we are faithful. We will be persecuted not only by non-Christians, but by our relatives and nominal Christians as well. That is our appointed lot as believers, because we are here on earth like fish out of water. This world is not our home, and we are in constant conflict with this world system. We are strangers and foreigners here and we are a threat to Satan's world system. That is why he hates us and persecutes us. If you become friendly with this world, then it will stop troubling you. But then, you won't be a witness for Christ.

The Rise of the Antichrist

In Chapter 2, Paul continues to correct wrong notions about the Lord's return. He tells them not to be disturbed or shaken by people who claim to have messages and visions from the Lord about His return. Don't believe them. This is a very relevant warning for our day when many are claiming just that. Don't believe them. We have the Word of God as our guide, and that is enough for us.

In those days, people were writing letters to Christians and signing them "*Paul*", to make people believe that those were letters from Paul. Those days, people did not have the New Testament with them as we have today.

Paul told those Christians, "*Don't let anyone disturb your minds by saying that the day of the Lord has come.*" Paul was saying, "*Don't let anyone tell you that Jesus came secretly and took away His saints.*" Paul goes on to say that Christ's coming won't be like that, because the day of His return will not come until there is, first of all, a great falling away of Christians from the faith. That "*falling away from the faith*" is happening in our day. Secondly, Paul said that *Christ cannot return until the*

Antichrist (the man of lawlessness) is revealed (2:3). The Antichrist has to come first and the period of tribulation has to be over. Everywhere in the New Testament we read this truth clearly that Jesus will return only after the great tribulation – and when he comes, everyone will see Him coming (See Matthew 24:27–31).

Chapter 2 is speaking about “*the day of the Lord*” – which is the day of Christ’s return. Some Christians separate the day of the Lord from the coming of the Lord. Clever people can twist Scripture to suit their own doctrines. We must not be deceived by them. We must *not* come to the Scriptures with any preconceived ideas and make the Scriptures fit what we believe. If we do that, God will allow us to be deceived (which is what it says in 2:10, 11). We must come to the Scriptures with no opinions of our own. We must allow our opinions to be moulded by the Scriptures. Only then will we will know the truth.

Many Christians have opinions that they have inherited from the teachers in their churches. Then they make every Scripture to fit this opinion. I was like that myself, in my early days as a believer, because I had not studied the Scriptures carefully. But when I studied God’s Word with an open mind, I found that I had to change many of my pre-conceived views, to make them fit with Scripture. One of the truths I then saw was that before Christ returned, the Antichrist would arise and Christians would go through the great tribulation.

That does not mean that as believers we await the great tribulation. No. We await the return of our Lord. If you were to ask a pregnant wife, “Are you looking forward to your birth pains?”, she would say, “No, I am looking forward to the birth of my baby!” She is well aware that the birth pains *will* come first; but she is not looking forward to those birth pains, but rather to the birth of her baby. In the same way, I am looking forward to the return of my Lord. But I know that there will be a time of tribulation that will precede the birth of Christ’s millennial reign.

During the tribulation, the Antichrist will “*sit in the temple as god*” (2:4). He will get people to worship him. John says that that spirit of the Antichrist is already in the world. Some people are already sitting in the church and ruling over people as if they were God. This characteristic of the Antichrist – acting like god in the church is called “*the mystery of lawlessness*” – and it is already at work (verse 7). When Christian leaders try to control your life, they are acting like God. That is the spirit of the antichrist and is unfortunately found in many Christian leaders today.

There is a *mystery of lawlessness*, just as there is a *mystery of godliness*. The mystery of godliness is that *Christ was manifest in the flesh* (1 Timothy 3:16). *We manifest by our lives that it is possible to live a godly life on earth – because Jesus lived like that on earth.* The mystery

of lawlessness (sin) however is *Satan is manifest in the flesh*. Satan does not actually *become* flesh, but he influences the minds of Christians so that they believe that it is *NOT* possible to live a godly life in this flesh. So they take sin lightly, and proclaim by their lives that sin will forever rule over them (contradicting *Romans 6:14*). Thus they agree with Satan.

The Lord will slay the Antichrist with the breath of His mouth when He comes again (2:8). But before the Antichrist appears, his spirit will move around the world preparing the way for him. Just like John the Baptist prepared the way for Christ's coming, there will be a great movement that prepares the way for the Antichrist. This spirit will manifest itself in all types of wickedness, Satanic power, soulish power and counterfeit signs and wonders. There will be many counterfeit healings and miracles in the last days (2:9). We see that already in the multitudes of "*healing campaigns*" today, where men are exalted to the place of God, and cheat poor people of their money. All this is preparing the way for the Antichrist. Jesus does heal the sick and He does miracles even today. I have experienced them myself. But there is a lot of counterfeit as well – and we need to discern between the two.

It says here that God will send "*a deluding influence*" (verse 11) on many people because they "*did not love the truth so as to be saved*" (verse 10). *This is one of the scariest verses in the New Testament*. If we are not willing to face up to the truth about ourselves when God shows us our selfishness or our pride or some other sin, and if we don't long to be saved from those sins, then *God Himself will allow us to be deceived*. What a terrible tragedy that will be! Satan is already deceiving us, our hearts are deceptive and so are our lusts. On top of these, if God also allows us to be deceived, then we are doomed without hope.

So we better make sure that God is on our side. If you want God to be on your side, then love the truth about yourself when God shows you your sin. When God shows you your covetousness, selfishness, love of money or pride, acknowledge it. Then say, "Lord, I want with all my heart to be saved from this." If you justify yourself and cover up your sin, I can guarantee that God Himself will send a deluding influence on you so that you will believe what is false. You will believe the counterfeit miracles you see. Why is it that so many believers are deceived today by these counterfeit miracles? Here is the answer: They don't acknowledge the sin in their own life and they don't long eagerly to be saved from it.

"But brethren, we give thanks for you because you were chosen that you may gain the glory of Jesus Christ" (2:14). The whole purpose of the gospel is that we may acquire that glory of the Lord Jesus – the fullness of grace and truth in Him whereby He manifested His glory (*John 1:14*).

Final Exhortations

In 3:6–11, Paul warns the Christians there (and us) to “*stay away from brothers who are living lazy lives*”. He reminds them how he had lived among them. He had worked hard, never taking any money from them for his support. He even paid for his food. What a fantastic example Paul was as a servant of God. Very few full-time Christian workers ever think of paying for the food they are given. But Paul was different. It was not that he paid believers who invited him to their homes for a single meal. But since Paul stayed a long time there, some believers must have been supplying him with food on a regular basis – and he did not take advantage of them. He was serving them as the Lord’s servant, and so he did have the right to receive food from them on a regular basis. But he did not use that right. He paid for the food. He worked night and day making tents and earned money and paid for the food. What an example for us to follow. A true servant of the Lord must be able to say to others, “Follow my example.”

Paul pointed out his example to them, because he heard that some of them were leading undisciplined lives, and not working to earn their living. Perhaps because of their wrong ideas about the Lord’s return, some of them thought, “If the Lord is coming soon, let us all quit our jobs and go around preaching the gospel.” And they ended up sitting around most of the day doing nothing, like most full-time Christian workers today!! And this led them to spend their time being busybodies in other people’s matters.

So Paul laid down a rule for them, “*If anyone is not willing to work, then he is not to eat, either. Such persons we command and exhort in the Lord Jesus Christ to work in quiet fashion and eat their own bread*” (3:10, 12).

If you are serving the Lord full-time, you should be working harder than others who work in a secular job. You may not be able to earn your own living, as Paul did, making tents. Maybe you are financially supported by gifts from your church-members. If so, ask yourself this question: *If my church-members have to work so hard, leaving home at 8 in the morning and returning at 7 pm in the evening, to earn their living, and they are the ones who support me, do I work as hard as they do?* If you don’t work as hard as they do, then it’s not right to expect those people to support you. A servant of the Lord must be a hard working person – from morning till night. The tragedy in Christendom is that most Christians in secular work are working much harder than full-time Christian workers!

Finally, Paul says, “*If anyone does not obey our instruction in this letter, take special note of that person and do not associate with him, so that he will be put to shame. Yet do not regard him as an enemy, but admonish him as a brother*” (3:14, 15). We must refuse to associate with lazy full-time workers who were never called by God but who have gone into Christian work merely to earn their living. There are thousands

like that in India. We don't treat them as enemies; but we are not to associate with them but admonish them.

May the Lord help us consider everything written in this letter seriously, because these are important truths that we must take heed to, if we are to be ready for the second coming of Christ.

1 TIMOTHY

THE CHURCH AND ITS SHEPHERDS

The letters to Timothy and Titus are the closing letters that Paul wrote towards the end of his life – *2 Timothy* being the last. All three of them are related to the servant of the Lord serving in the church.

The theme in *1 Timothy* is the church and its shepherds – the attitude shepherds and leaders of the church should have, the way they should live and the way they should conduct church matters. It is interesting to note that these last three letters of Paul all have this same theme. Paul sensed that his time on earth was getting over and he was very concerned that the leaders of the church in the next generation should have the same principles and values that he himself had as a servant of the Lord. In his earlier letters he spoke more about the Christian life. But in these last three letters he speaks more about the next-generation leaders having the same values, and gave them prophetic warnings about how things would be in the last days, in order to prepare them for that time.

Paul unburdens his heart to Timothy here. And so we will see some of the most important things that a servant of the Lord must bear in mind. First of all, Paul says “*Don’t allow people to preach strange doctrines in your church*” (1:3). If you are a leader in your church you have a responsibility to check the teaching that goes on in your church. You must be alert. In the early days of the church, believers had the freedom to stand up and share what was on their hearts. Some of them may have had some strange ideas about the Christian life, because no-one had a Bible in those days. But today, even with Bibles in our hands, strange doctrines are being proclaimed in many churches. A leader must always be alert and never allow anyone to proclaim strange doctrines in his church.

Paul also told Timothy repeatedly in both his letters, “*Don’t get involved in arguments and disputes about genealogies and speculations*”. Speculations refer to matters not mentioned in Scripture, such as who Cain’s wife was. You don’t need to know the answer to such matters,

because it won't help you in any way. There are many similar questions that inquisitive minds can ask. Don't get involved in such speculations.

Paul then reminds Timothy of the purpose of all his teaching: It is to get people to love from a pure heart, a good conscience and a sincere faith (1:5). A pure heart is a heart that loves God totally – a heart that has no place for anybody or anything other than God. If the believers in your church are merely attending the church services but not growing in love for God and for one another, then your ministry is a failure, for such believers have failed to be what God wants them to be.

This love must also come from a *good conscience* and a *sincere faith*. Towards the end of his life Paul stressed the importance of a good conscience frequently. He mentioned his own "*good conscience*" when he stood for trial before the High Priest (Acts 23:1) and before Felix (Acts 24:16). And now he tells Timothy of its importance. Paul had seen how Christian workers had made shipwreck of their lives by not keeping a good conscience (1:19). The *sincere faith* that Paul mentions here is a faith that can trust in the Lord in the daily trials of life, and not just a faith that trusts Him to forgive our sins and to take us to heaven.

This is a good verse (1:5) to keep in mind if you are called to build a local church. You are a successful elder brother if you have led your people to love God and others with a pure heart, a clear conscience and a sincere faith.

Paul warns Timothy in 1:6 that "*some people have strayed away from these fundamental truths*" – and that has led them to fruitless discussions and argument. "*They want to be teachers of the law but they don't understand what they are saying and the matters about which they make confident assertions.*" I have heard a lot of preachers in Christendom and I have sensed that most of them do not speak from experience. They just preach what they have read in some book or studied in some Bible college or heard from someone else. They haven't allowed God's Word to become a part of their daily life. They haven't come to a place where they love God with all their heart themselves. Then how can they lead others to such a life?

The word that you hear from a man of God is second hand. You must take that before God and say, "*Lord, please convert this to first hand. Make it real in my life.*" When you come into a living experience with God of the truths you heard, then you can speak that as *your message*. It is no longer second-hand. You can convert every message that you have heard from me in this way and make it first-hand from God. Many have asked me, "*Brother Zac, can we preach your messages?*" I reply, "*Certainly. But there is a condition. Live it first.*" If you try to preach it

without living it first, you will destroy yourself. You will be a teacher who does not understand what you are talking about.

Paul says about the law: “*We know the law is good if you use it lawfully. But the law is not made for a righteous man*” (1:8, 9). A righteous man does not need the law. Why will you need a law that says, “Don’t commit adultery,” when you are not even committing it in your thoughts? Why will you need a law that says, “Don’t commit murder,” when you are not even angry with people? A righteous man doesn’t need the 10 commandments, because he is living in the Spirit at a far higher level. His standard is higher than the Law. “*The law is made for those who are lawless, rebellious, ungodly sinners and a lot of things like that, and anything else is contrary to the glorious gospel of the blessed God*” (1:9–11). We saw in *Galatians* how we are free from the law when we walk in the Spirit.

How God Prepares a Man for the Ministry

There is something else that Paul emphasised much towards the end of his life: “*Look at my example*”, he says, “*see how I lived*” This is what he tells Timothy repeatedly.

“*I thank Christ Jesus our Lord who has strengthened me because He considered me faithful, putting me into the ministry*” (1:12). Even though God sovereignly calls people to His ministry, He tests a man before He puts him into the ministry. Paul was tested for a period of 10 years (from *Acts* 9 where he was converted to *Acts* 13 where he was sent out into the ministry). What was happening to Paul those 10 years? God was watching Paul to see whether he was faithful in his daily life as a Christian. After God tested him for 10 years and saw his faithfulness, then He said, “Now I will send you out to serve Me.”

If God calls you He will first test you. I know that God tested me for 16 years (9 of them in full-time Christian work), before He opened up the ministry He had for me – to build new-covenant churches. Don’t imagine that as soon as you step out into Christian work, you will have an anointed ministry. God will test you to see whether you are faithful in the little things. If you are faithful in little things, faithful to study His word, faithful with money, faithful with time, faithful in purity, upright, honest, and humbling yourself under the authorities God places over you, then, after 10 years perhaps, He will put you into an effective ministry.

When God Himself puts you into a ministry, you will do more in one year than when doing ministry according to your own ideas in 30 years. Paul says, “*He (Christ) put me into the ministry*” (1:12). It wasn’t any man who ordained Paul. “*Even though I was a blasphemer, a persecutor*” (1:13). God puts converted sinners who were once wicked into the ministry. That is an encouragement to all who have lived a very wicked life in

the past. In one of the writings that have come down from the 2nd century, the author says, that Jesus Christ, in order to show that He came not to call the righteous but sinners to repentance, picked up some of the worst sinners of His time to become His apostles. Paul was one of them. “*Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners among whom I am the greatest*” (1:15). So God doesn’t necessarily pick up those who have been brought up in God-fearing homes and who have lived clean lives always. He does use many like that. But He also picks up those who have lived in the depths of sin. He picks up adulterers, thieves, drunkards and drug addicts, and makes them apostles, to prove that sin in one’s unconverted life doesn’t disqualify anyone from even becoming an apostle. Paul, the greatest sinner became the greatest apostle. God can do a lot through any of you, if you will repent of your sins and trust Him.

I want you to notice a progression in the apostle Paul’s understanding of his own sinfulness. Many think that the closer they get to God they will be less and less aware of sin in their lives. But that is not true. Every godly person will acknowledge that the closer he gets to God the more he is aware of sin in his own life, because God is so holy. Isaiah saw the holiness of God and said, “*Lord, I am a sinful man.*” Job said that. Peter said that. John said that. And Paul said that. In *1 Corinthians 15:9*, about 10 years before he wrote *1 Timothy*, Paul said, “*I am the least of the apostles.*” Five years later in *Ephesians 3:8*, he says, “*I am the least of all the believers.*” Still five years later when he wrote *1 Timothy* he says, “*I am the worst of all the sinners in the world.*”

So how shall we assess our spiritual growth? By being more and more aware of our littleness, our nothingness and our sinfulness. If that is the way you are growing, then you are growing in the right direction – you are coming closer and closer to God.

In 1:18, 19, Paul urges Timothy, “*Fight a good fight, keeping faith and a good conscience which some have rejected and have suffered shipwreck.*” There are people who did not keep a good conscience, and who made shipwreck of their lives. They lost their faith. Sometimes you read of believers losing their faith. I heard of a born-again Christian who went to a liberal Bible seminary and lost his faith altogether after he heard what was taught there. How did he lose his faith? In the first place he shouldn’t have gone there at all. Secondly, if he had kept a good conscience, he would not have lost his faith. Many lose their faith when they don’t stand up for their convictions. Such people deserve to lose their faith and to go to hell, because hell is made for cowardly people who won’t stand up for what they know to be right (*Revelation 21:8*).

Among the ones Paul named as examples were Hymenaeus and Alexander. Some people say we must never mention names. But Paul was not afraid of naming people who were leading others astray. He had

to warn others about them. So Paul delivered Hymenaeus and Alexander over to Satan so that they may learn not to blaspheme.

What to Pray for

In 2:1, Paul says, "*I want you to pray and give thanks for all men.*" We have already considered exhortations to give thanks at all times and for everything. But here it goes even further and says that we must give thanks for all men. That means that we say, "Lord, I am thankful for everybody, those who harm me and those who do me good, because You make everybody to work for my good." You can't do that unless you believe in *Romans 8:28*. Paul says here that we must especially pray for those in authority in the government. The ruler of Rome when Paul wrote this letter, was Nero, one of the worst of all Roman emperors, one who persecuted Christians and who later on chopped off Paul's head. Yet the Holy Spirit says that we must pray for such leaders. So we are to pray not only for those in authority who are upright, but even for the most ungodly among them.

What are we to pray for? We are to pray that God will restrain the forces of darkness and prevent them from hindering His purposes on earth. What should we pray for in India? We do not expect that our rulers will be believers. Let them be unbelievers. There were no believers in authority in Paul's time in any country. We pray and ask Almighty God our All-powerful Father to control the government in our country. In our church we have always prayed at election time that God would bring a good government to power. We have also prayed that God would control the decisions taken by the government. And we have seen amazing answers to our prayers. If you don't have the faith that Almighty God in heaven can control the government of a country, then of course you should not pray. It's no use praying if you don't have faith. I believe however that even a few people who are living godly lives and with a good conscience can pray and influence a country's government in a way that fulfils God's purposes in that country.

At times, God's will may be that His church should go through persecution – to purify its members. Then we must accept that. The early Christians were persecuted for nearly 200 years. Jesus warned His disciples that in the last days, "*all men will hate you.*" Then how can we pray, "Lord, don't let people hate me"? How can we pray against what our Lord Himself said would happen? Jesus also said that in the last days there would be famines, earthquakes and wars. How then can we pray that there should be no famines or earthquakes or wars? But we can pray that the forces of evil will be restrained.

In *2 Thessalonians 2:6, 7*, we read of a restraining influence in the world. That is the Holy Spirit operating through the church. One day the

Holy Spirit will stop all His restraining and then the Antichrist will arise in power. But until that day comes, we must pray for those in authority in our country, and influence them by our prayers. We can influence the government far more by prayer than by getting involved in politics. We do not pray that we will not be persecuted, but rather that we may be able “*to live a quiet life, in all godliness and dignity*” (2:2). If however God sees that we Christians need a season of persecution in India, then we will accept that as well.

In 2:4, Paul says that “*God wants all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.*” That teaches us that God wants every single human being in the world to be saved. God has not predestined anyone to go to hell. This verse teaches us that God not only wants everyone to be saved, but also to come to the full knowledge of the truth about Him. Once a person is saved, the next part of God’s will is that he should come to the full knowledge of the truth about God.

In 2:5, we are told that “*there is one God and one Mediator between God and men, the Man Christ Jesus*”. 35 years after Jesus ascended into heaven the Holy Spirit still refers to Him as ‘**the Man Christ Jesus?**’ He is not called the God-man, as some mistakenly call Him. He is 100% God and He always was. But once He took human form, He is forever 100% Man as well. He has taken our manhood to heaven to represent us there. And He has given us His Divine nature to represent Him here on this earth. Jesus is doing His part faithfully in heaven, representing us before the Father. We must do our part faithfully representing Him faithfully here on earth.

Women’s Ministry in the Church

From 2:9 onwards, the Holy Spirit speaks about the way women should dress and conduct themselves in the church. Women must wear clothing that is discreet and modest. That means that her dress-style should not be one that provokes men to lust after her. The dress-fashions of the world are designed to provoke men to lust. Sisters, be careful when you buy your clothes to ensure they are modest. If a tailor is stitching your clothes, tell him exactly how you want your body to be covered. To be modestly dressed doesn’t mean to be shabbily dressed. It is a good testimony for all brothers and sisters to be dressed neatly and decently – and even smartly. There is nothing wrong in a woman looking as attractive as possible, but not in a way that provokes men to lust.

The Holy Spirit goes on to say that women should not to adorn themselves with fancy hairstyles, or gold, or pearls, or expensive clothes. Preachers in some churches emphasise the ‘*not with gold*’ part but do not emphasise the ‘*not with expensive clothes*’ part. They will tell a sister to remove her 800-rupee earrings, but will say nothing about her 10,000-rupee saree! Thus they encourage her to be a hypocrite. The main

emphasis in this passage is to avoid all display of wealth with grand clothes and jewellery. Instead Christian women should adorn themselves with good works – as is fitting for godly women.

The Holy Spirit then goes on to speak about the ministry of women in the church. The subject of *1 Timothy* is the church and its shepherd. Paul tells Timothy in 3:15, “*I am writing these things so that you will know how to conduct yourself in the church.*” In the church meetings, “*a woman must quietly receive instruction.*” (2:11). She should not try to teach and she should not have any position of authority over men – as a pastor or an elder. She can teach little children at home and in a Sunday School class. She can even be an evangelist or a missionary and preach the gospel to unconverted men and women. She can pray and sing and even prophesy briefly in the church meetings (as we read in *1 Corinthians 11:5*). But she is commanded “*to be quiet*” as far as teaching men is concerned. She can give her testimony in the church and share a word that has been a blessing to her, but she must not teach. She must not exercise authority over men.

In *Romans 16*, we read of 5 women who were co-workers of the apostle Paul. They were not just cooking the food. They were actually serving the Lord – in evangelism and with the women and children in the churches. So women had a great ministry in the early church. In a country like India, it is very difficult for a man to speak to women. Who then will reach 50% of India’s population (women) with the gospel? The sisters in the church. Women in the church can have a great ministry in counselling other sisters and in evangelism to reach out to India’s women. We should not hinder women from having that ministry. But when it comes to authority in the church, it was Adam who was created first and then Eve (2:13). And secondly, it was Eve who was deceived, not Adam (2:14).

Women also have a great ministry through bearing children. Timothy who got this letter, became a man of God through the godly upbringing of his mother. If it had not been for his mother, he would never have become an apostle. Mothers are the ones who are more at home with their children than fathers. SO they can have a great influence on their children and train them to be disciples of Jesus. Here, it goes on to say, “*Women will be preserved through the bearing of children if they continue in faith and love and sanctity with self-restraint*” (2:15). The Lord told Eve in *Genesis 3* that she would bear children through much pain. So when Paul speaks of Adam and Eve here, he remembers that and tells women that they don’t have to fear childbirth. God will take care of them when they are delivering children. Let them only continue in faith and love and purity.

Qualifications for Elders

In *Chapter 3*, the Holy Spirit speaks about the qualifications for elders and other servants in the church. In 3:1–7, the qualifications for elders

are mentioned. They must have a good testimony in the world and they must not have more than one wife. In those days there were people who were married to two or three wives. If the man and all his three wives got converted, what was he to do? The man must live only with his first wife and support the others financially in another house. They can all be a part of the church. But such a man cannot be an elder in the church, even if he is a good brother. In the same way, a divorced-and-remarried man cannot be an elder of a church (because he has two wives). It's good for elders of churches to be married men, because they have to counsel married people. An elder must be temperate, wise, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not a lover of wine. He must not be one who wants to live a selfish, comfortable life. He must not be an argumentative man, but gentle. And above all, he must be free from the love of money.

Notice how much emphasis there is in the New Testament on *freedom from the love of money* - which is never spoken of in the Old Testament. In the Old Testament the Israelites were merely warned about the dangers of wealth. But Jesus and the apostles preached on the necessity of being *free from the love of money*.

An elder must be one who can control his own children well. If a man cannot keep his children at home under control how can he take care of the house of God? If he cannot take care of 3 or 4 children at home, how can he take care of 300 children in the church? Impossible. So the way a man brings up his children and controls and keeps his house in order is one of the qualifications to be given responsibility in the church. This teaches us that our home life is very important, if we are to be servants of the Lord. Children of some pastors are the worst behaved children in his church. That is a very bad testimony. Such a man should resign from his position of leadership in the church. New converts must not be made elders because they can fall into pride (3:6).

The word “*deacon*” (3:8) is actually a Greek word “*diakonos*” that has unfortunately been imported into the English Bible. It just means “*a servant*” and should have been translated as such. Elders are the ones who are the spiritual leaders of the church. But there are many non-spiritual responsibilities like handling finances and other practical matters such as looking after the distribution of food to the poor, etc., in every church, which have to be taken care of. For this, we need “*servants*”. This word “*servant*” is much to be preferred to the dignified word “*deacon*”, which can give some servants a false sense of importance! Such servants also must not be double tongued (3:8–10). That just means that they should not say one thing to one person and another thing to another person. They must also be sincere and upright. They must be people who hold the mystery of the faith, and people who live with a good conscience. Such servants also must be (like elders), husbands of just one wife, who

manage their own children well (3:12). Even those who are responsible for the practical aspects of a church's ministry must have a good testimony in their family-life.

In 3:11, Paul speaks about women-servants in the church ("deaconesses"). Women also can be given many ministries of service in the church, other than spiritual leadership and teaching men. They can teach women and children and help in many practical ways. But they must not be malicious gossips. The Greek word translated as "*malicious gossips*" here is "*diabolos*", which is translated as "*devil*" in 34 other places in the New Testament. So what Paul is saying is that women should not be little devils, slandering others! Of course, men also should not be little devils – but Paul perhaps knew that women have a greater tendency and opportunity to gossip than men. Men are usually out at work the whole day whereas women are at home and when they are older, they don't have much to do at home. So they can visit other women and sit with them and slander others. Women-servants must be self-controlled and faithful. Only such women must be given a ministry in the church.

The Great Mystery of Godliness

In 3:15, 16, Paul moves on to a very important topic. This is the great mystery of godliness. There are two **great** mysteries mentioned in the New Testament. One is mentioned here: Christ coming in our flesh. The other is mentioned in *Ephesians 5:32* – the church being one flesh with Christ. A *mystery* in the New Testament refers to a truth that you cannot understand without divine revelation. How can the uncreated eternal God become a man? Quite frankly, I can't explain it. How can such a Man be tempted in all points as we human beings are – which is implied in His coming in the flesh (*Hebrews 4:15*)? Quite frankly, I don't know. But I believe it – and it has become for me, the secret that led me to a godly life. The *Living Bible* paraphrase of this verse reads thus: "*It is quite true that the way to live a godly life is not an easy matter. But the answer lies in Christ, who came to earth as a man and was proved spotless and pure in his spirit*".

There was one Man who came in the flesh and walked on this earth and was tempted exactly like us and yet lived a godly life. That is why we can also live a godly life. Christ in the flesh is the living proof that a man can live as God wants man to live on earth – loving God wholeheartedly and loving other men as oneself, overcoming the lust of the eyes, controlling one's temper, never jealous, never bitter, etc.

Jesus came in the flesh and He was vindicated by the Spirit (3:16). That means the Holy Spirit examined every area of His life and said it was 100% pure. He was beheld by angels. Angels watched this great mystery of God becoming flesh and walking on this earth as a Man, being tempted and overcoming in all areas. This is what we proclaim in all the nations

of the world. People believed on Him in the world when He was here also. And He was taken up to glory. This is the secret of godliness, and this is the way we have to go too. Today we are in the flesh. The Holy Spirit examines our lives to see whether we are pure. Angels are watching us (*Ephesians 3:10*). Our life is a proclamation to the nations about what the gospel is. People believe, and one day we will be taken up to glory as well, if we are faithful.

But in contrast to God's method of holiness, the Holy Spirit says that in the last days many Christians will fall away from their faith being deceived by deceitful spirits (operating through preachers) who will preach some other method of holiness (4:1). These new doctrines will be called "*doctrine of demons*". When we read of doctrines of *demons*, we may imagine some horrible teachings. But they are not. They are just *deceptive*, like forbidding marriage, for example. In the last days, some will teach that celibacy is the way to godliness. That is a doctrine of a demon. And some will teach that the way to a godly life is through avoiding certain types of food – avoiding meat or by fasting and by disciplining oneself!! These are all doctrines of demons. They appear good. But it is all a deception!

The way to a godly life is through allowing the life of Christ to be manifest in our flesh, by partaking of His nature and following His example in the power of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit will show you the life of Jesus and transform you into that likeness. This is the truth that every church must be a pillar and support of. Otherwise, we will produce a church with a lot of rules and regulations such as, "We must fast, we must pray, we must read the Bible, etc." All these things are very good, but they will only produce legalistic Pharisees, if we don't emphasise the life of Christ being manifest in us, through the Spirit's power. If somebody wants to remain celibate, or to fast, that is fine. But that is not the secret of godliness.

Paul goes on to say that the reason why many are deceived in this matter, is because they have hypocrisy in their lives (4:2). They have the spirit of lying in them and their conscience is bad. If there is hypocrisy in your life, or lying, or if you have a bad conscience, you are a perfect candidate for deception by the doctrines of demons.

Then he tells Timothy, "If you point out to the believers that the secret of godliness is not in all such self-discipline but in the life of Christ being manifest in their flesh, then you will be an excellent servant of Christ Jesus" (4:6). Do you want to be a good servant of Jesus? Point out these things to others and you will be an excellent servant of Christ Jesus, constantly nourished on the words of faith. He says, "Don't waste your time with all these worldly stories which are only fit for old women." Old women have nothing else to do, and so they sit around telling worldly

stories. Paul says, “Don’t waste your time listening to such fancy tales. But rather discipline yourself for the purpose of godliness.” (4:7).

So Paul is not *against* discipline. There is a great need for discipline in the life of every Christian. There is a great need for fasting and prayer. But by itself, bodily discipline and physical exercise cannot make anyone godly. Godliness on the other hand is profitable in this life and in the next. In other words, if you live a godly life it will even improve your physical health. We can be physically healthier, if we are free from jealousy, bitterness and anger. We will be saved from acidity-problems and asthma and arthritis and migraine headaches, if we live lives free from bitterness and anxiety. I am not saying that these sicknesses are *always* caused by spiritual causes. No. Most often they are caused by natural causes. But at times, these sicknesses could come because of sin in a person’s life.

Be an Example by Your Life

Timothy was a young man in the church in Ephesus, and there were many older people in that church. So Paul tells him not to let anyone look down on him because of his youth (4:12). A young preacher can feel intimidated by older people in his church, particularly if some of them are rich and influential people. Paul urges Timothy not to allow them to intimidate him, but to be an example by his life, in the godly way he speaks, in the way he conducts himself, in his love for them, by his faith in the midst of all his trials, in the purity he has in his life and in every area. This is in direct contrast to what Paul said in 4:1–4. False teachers merely teach, whereas true teachers teach by example. False teachers teach theories. True teachers teach by their lives. 4:13 emphasises public reading of the Scriptures, because in those days, believers did not have Bibles. So the one who had a Bible had to read out large sections of it for the people to hear. Today, believers can read large sections of the Scripture at home.

Then Paul reminds Timothy that he needs something more than a good life and Scripture-knowledge. “*Be a good example and give attention to Scripture*” (4:12, 13). That is good. But “*don’t neglect the gifts of the Holy Spirit*” (4:14). Paul reminds Timothy that he had laid hands on him along with other elders to impart a spiritual gift to him. We need the gifts of the Spirit also to serve the Lord. We must “*earnestly desire to prophesy*” (*1 Corinthians 14:1*) – that is, to speak in such a way that our words go home to people’s hearts like an arrow, like the words of the prophets in the Old Testament, like the words that go out of God’s mouth that never return empty (*Isaiah 55:11*). To minister like that, we need the anointing of the Holy Spirit. Jesus needed it and we all need it too – all the time. This is not something we can get once for all. No. We must seek to be anointed *at all times*.

Young people: Don’t feel that you have to wait until you are 40 years old to serve the Lord. I was born again when I was 19 and baptised when

I was 21. And I started preaching immediately. I didn't know much then. But with the little I knew, I could teach the "A, B, C..." of the Christian life to those who knew less than me. As I grew up I could teach people more. A first-standard student can teach a kindergarten-student. Why do you have to wait until you are old before you start to preach God's Word? The moment you are converted, start sharing with those who know less than you – especially with those who are not yet converted. Always be ready to share God's Word and to seek God for the power of His Spirit to share it effectively.

In 4:15, Paul urges Timothy to "*take pains with these things*." A businessman takes a lot of pains to earn money and to establish his business firmly. If you are serious about the Christian life, you will take a lot of pains to study the Scriptures, seek for the gifts of the Spirit and cleanse your life from everything impure. One translation of this verse reads, "*Be absorbed in them*." When you are absorbed with these things your progress will become evident to everybody.

Let me give you a negative example of what "*being absorbed*" with something can mean. A family was watching a popular television programme in their home and totally absorbed with it. Some thieves who knew that the family was thus occupied, quietly got into their house and stole whatever they could! And the family never knew about the theft until the TV programme was over.

In the same way, but in a positive sense, we can be so absorbed with Jesus Christ and His Word that the temptations of this world don't attract us so much. And we won't be chasing after the many things that worldly people chase after. If you live an "*absorbed*" life like that, you will make progress constantly. Every year you will be a better Christian and a more effective servant of the Lord.

In 4:16, Paul urges Timothy to pay close attention to two areas: his *life* and his *teaching*. These are the two areas that we must watch constantly. Our life and our teaching must both be pure. Paul says that if we persevere in these two areas, we will save ourselves and others as well. We first need to save ourselves. Only then can we save others. What that means is: If you yourself have not been saved from some sinful habit, how will you be able to save others from it? If you preach *above* the level of your life, you will be a hypocrite and God will not bear witness to your words. We must be serious about our Christian life, just as businessmen are serious about the way they run their businesses. They are whole-hearted about making profits. In the same way, we must persevere and give ourselves wholly to living for God and serving Him.

Some Practical Instructions

In 5:1, Paul exhorts Timothy that since he was a young man, he should ensure that he always spoke respectfully to older people and that he

treated older women like mothers and younger women as his own sisters, in all purity. Many young brothers today are arrogant in the way they speak to older brothers. This is one indication that they do not fear God (See *Leviticus 19:32*). And this is why many preachers fall into sin with young sisters.

In 5:3–16, Paul talks about how the church should care for helpless widows. In those days, many Christians were being killed for their faith, and so there were many widows. Paul said that only widows above the age of 60 should be supported by the church, while younger widows should be encouraged to get married again. And older widows should be supported by the church only if they had no children and grandchildren to take care of them. Here is a very important verse that says that if a believer does not provide for his own family, he is worse than an unbeliever (5:8). Then he gave some conditions. Only those widows should be supported who have brought up their children in a godly way, who have shown hospitality and who have “*washed the feet of the saints*” (5:10).

This verse (5:10) proves clearly that the believers in the first century did *not* have the practice (that some have today) of washing each other’s feet. Because if all those believers had been practising that, there would have been no need to make that a condition for accepting a widow for church-support. When Jesus told His disciples to “*do as He had done*” (*John 13:14*), what He meant was that they should do (and always be ready to do) dirty jobs for each other, as He had just done for them. He was not prescribing a ritual.

In 5:17–22, Paul gives some important instructions concerning elders in the church. Elders must be given “*double honour*”. That means that they must be honoured twice as much as other believers in the church. True elders will be hard-working like the oxen that tread out the corn and like labourers who work hard (5:18). Such devoted elders who “*work hard at preaching and teaching*” must be given *double honour* – for this is their due, just like a labourer deserves his wages. If you don’t honour an elder brother, it would be like cheating a labourer of his wages. Elders must be highly appreciated and highly respected.

At the same time, Paul advises Timothy how to deal with elders who sin. First of all, he tells Timothy not to “*receive an accusation against elders unless there are at least two or three witnesses*”. If it is then proved that they are in sin, then they must be “*rebuked publicly, so that others will fear*”. Elders get double honour – but if they sin, then they must be rebuked openly before the church. Paul warns Timothy not to set apart elders (“*lay hands*”) too soon. Prove a man first before setting him apart as an elder. Thus Timothy could keep himself from being responsible for the sins of elders whom he appoints (5:22).

In 5:23, we see Timothy also had a “*thorn in his flesh*”. He had frequent pain in the stomach. Obviously Paul had prayed for him numerous times, but he was not cured. So Paul urged him to take a little wine as

a medicine. Here is an inspired Scripture that teaches us that at times, not all sicknesses are cured even in the most godly of men and that we should seek medical help and use medicines when we are sick.

In 6:4, Paul warns Timothy not to get involved in controversial questions. This is a warning that all elders need to bear in mind. Some believers are constantly interested in doctrinal controversies. Avoid such discussions.

Then he urges Timothy to always be content with whatever God has provided for his earthly needs. He warns him of the dangers there are in pursuing after wealth beyond one's needs (6:6–10). It is very easy for a Christian worker to become covetous. Money is a good servant but a terrible master. Those who long for it will ruin themselves and have many problems, for "*the love of money is the root of all sorts of evil*". Many who are in Christian work have destroyed themselves by their love for money. In this area, we are exhorted to "*fight the good fight and to lay hold of eternal life*" (6:12). Eternal life is the life of God Himself and even a wholehearted brother like Timothy was urged to seek to possess more and more of that life. This is in direct opposition to seeking to lay hold of more and more money. We are urged to "*remember the confession Jesus made before Pontius Pilate*" (6:13). The confession Jesus made to Pontius Pilate was, "*My kingdom is not of this world*." A Christian worker should never become rich by preaching the gospel. Rich Christians are urged not to trust in their "*uncertain riches*" but to share their wealth with the poor and needy among the believers (6:17).

In conclusion, Paul urges Timothy to "*guard the sacred deposit entrusted to him*" by God and to steer clear of all worldly chatter and arguments (6:20). May the Lord help us also to be faithful until the end.

2 TIMOTHY

A TRUE SERVANT OF GOD AND HIS MINISTRY

This is the last letter that Paul wrote. He knew that he was going to leave this world soon and be with his Lord. When he wrote *1 Thessalonians* he had said, “*We who are alive will be caught up.*” At that time, he had felt that he would be alive when Jesus returned. That is the way every Christian should live. But 12 years later, when he wrote this, his last letter, he says, “*The time of my departure has come*” (*2 Timothy 4:6*).

The theme of *2 Timothy* is “*A true servant of God and his ministry*” – which is the basic theme of Paul’s last three letters – to Timothy and Titus. Paul’s burden before he left the earth was to prepare another generation of leaders to be good shepherds of God’s people. He pointed them to his own life. Paul always pointed to his own life as an example. When he spoke to the elders in Ephesus he did not say, “Remember the sermons I preached to you”, but rather “*Remember the way I lived with you*” (*Acts 20:19, 33–35*). And he tells Timothy the same thing here, “*I thank God whom I serve with a clear conscience the way my forefathers did.*” (*1:3*). Paul was not perfect, but to the best of his knowledge, as his conscience taught him, he lived an upright life before God.

Paul then speaks endearing words to Timothy, because Timothy was the one co-worker who brought greatest delight to Paul’s heart. Paul was disappointed with many believers in many churches because they were not radical disciples. He was also disappointed with many of his co-workers because they did not live utterly and totally for God. Any true servant of God will face the same disappointment today. If Paul faced disappointment with the churches he planted, do you think we are going to do any better? I have planted churches and I am disappointed with a lot of things I see in some of those churches. I have co-workers and I am

disappointed with some of the things I see in some of those co-workers. Here and there we find one person like Timothy who does not seek his own in anything. Such people bring great delight to the heart of a servant of God.

Paul was excited because he found a few like him who could carry on the ministry into the next generation. What brings the greatest delight to the heart of any servant of God is to see at the end of his life, that there are some who will carry on his ministry with the same spirit and devotion to the Lord. Timothy was one like that. That's why Paul wrote, "*I always remember you in my prayers, longing to see you. I recall your tears.*" That must have been the last time he saw Timothy. Now Paul thought he might never see him again.

Timothy's grandmother Lois was the first person that came to faith in that family (1:5). His grandmother transmitted her faith to his mother, Eunice – and she transmitted it to Timothy. That grandmother gave faith to her daughter, not Scripture-knowledge. And that mother passed on that *faith* to Timothy. That means as Timothy grew up, he must have seen his mother trusting God in different trials she went through. Do your children see you trusting God in your trials? That's how you can communicate faith to them. That's why God allows those difficult trials to come your way. From a small age your children must know one thing: "My Mummy prays and trusts God when she is in a difficult situation. When I was sick my Daddy laid hands on my head and prayed for me in the Name of Jesus." When that little child grows up and leaves home one day, and he or she faces a difficult situation, they will do exactly what their Daddy and Mummy did. They will pray to God in the Name of Jesus. That is how we are to communicate faith to them. We must tell them the stories in the Bible. That is necessary. That way they will have the knowledge of God's Word. But we need to communicate faith to them as well. Little did Eunice know that this little boy of hers would grow up to be a mighty apostle of Jesus Christ. Paul selected Timothy to be his co-worker when Timothy was perhaps 20 years old. What a work that mother did for the church in her home. You can do the same by bringing up your children to trust in the Lord from their childhood.

Timothy's father was Greek (Acts 16:3). Eunice was the daughter of a Godfearing Jewish mother. But Eunice must have drifted from God to have disobeyed the Law and married a Gentile. Later she must have repented. Her husband was probably a rich businessman, who had no time for God and no interest in bringing up his son in a godly way. So Eunice had to raise Timothy single handedly. Yet she brought him up in such a godly way that he became one of the finest apostles of the first century. What an example Eunice is for mothers today who have unconverted husbands! Who knows, but God's plan for that little 4-year-old son of yours may be that he should become an apostle of Jesus Christ one day! If so, then a great deal depends on you, dear mother, on

how you bring him up, and whether you communicate faith in God to his little heart. Don't let him hear you backbiting against others in the church and complaining and murmuring about things at home. That will destroy him.

I was very careful in my home, that my children should never hear me speaking evil of other believers, lest they be infected with that disease. Just as I did not want any of my children to get tuberculosis or leprosy, I did not want them to be infected with negative attitudes towards other believers. If we can communicate faith to our children, when they see us facing difficulties at home, we would have given them the most important gift of all.

In most cases, we have observed that first-generation Christians are stronger in faith and in devotion to the Lord than second-generation Christians who grew up in believing homes. But Timothy was an exception. He was a third-generation believer who was devoted to the Lord. So there can be second-generation and third-generation believers who are even more devoted to the Lord than their parents were.

Keep the Fire Burning

But Timothy had more than faith. He also had spiritual gifts and Paul reminds him of this, "*I want to remind you of the spiritual gift you received when I laid hands on you.*" The Holy Spirit is not a spirit of timidity. Paul urged him to stir up that gift and to kindle it afresh, to keep the fire burning. From this we learn that even though Jesus baptises us in the Holy Spirit and fire (*Matthew 3:11*), we still have to do something to keep that fire burning at all times. God lights the fire. We have to keep supplying the fuel – a life totally surrendered at all times to God's will. Don't imagine that just because God anointed you once, that you can now relax and say, "Once anointed, always anointed". That is as great a fallacy as saying, "Once saved, always saved".

I have seen people who were genuinely anointed by God who are spiritually dead one year later. The fire is gone. Worldly interests and pride have come in and taken the fire away. They are now running after money and a comfortable life, and have lost the fire of God. That is sad and a great loss for the kingdom of God.

So Paul told Timothy, "That fire that came upon you, keep it afresh, keep it burning. It is up to you now. If you don't keep it burning it will die out. Keep it burning by keeping a good conscience, by studying the word of God, by humbling yourself constantly, by seeking God wholeheartedly, by staying away from the love of money, and from arguments with others and from anything that will quench this fire."

Paul then went on to say, "*God has not given us a spirit of timidity*" (*1:7*). Paul was a fiery person naturally. Barnabas and Timothy however

were timid. God puts a fiery person along with a timid person in a ministry because they can keep each other balanced. This is the ideal combination for leadership in any church.

If the leaders were all like Timothy, the church would be filled with wishy-washy compromisers. And if the leaders were all like Paul, hardly anybody would be left in the church, for most people would have got discouraged and left. But when both types of men are in the leadership, it brings a balance of *grace* and *truth*! So if you have a co-worker whose temperament and gifts are exactly the opposite of yours, that could be God's perfect choice for you. If God gives you a wife who is exactly the opposite of you in temperament, that could be God's perfect choice for you. We may have the same devotion to Christ and the same passion to live for God, and yet be opposite in temperament. Paul and Timothy had the same devotion to Christ, but their temperaments were totally opposite to each other.

I thank God that in my life He gave me co-workers who are devoted to Christ but the opposite of me in temperament and gift – like the left hand and the right hand. God knew what type of co-workers I needed to balance me out and He has given me co-workers exactly like that. I appreciate them greatly and value them very highly. I could never build Christ's Body without them. We must learn to appreciate the people God chooses to be our co-workers.

So to some we say, “Don't let your natural *timidity* take over your life.” To others, we have to say, “Don't let your natural *hardness* take over your life.”

Paul says, “*God has given us a spirit of power, love and of discipline*” (1:7). The Spirit of God gives us power, love for others and enables us to discipline ourselves.

Whatever experience of the Holy Spirit you may have had, if you don't allow the Holy Spirit to discipline you – to make you spend your time and your money in a disciplined way, and to discipline your speech, you will never be what God wants you to be. The greatest servants of God in the history of the church were men and women who allowed the Holy Spirit to discipline their lives. They were disciplined in their sleeping habits, in their eating habits, in prayer and in study of the Scriptures. They were disciplined in putting God first above all their earthly desires. Many Christians remain satisfied with having received the baptism in the Holy Spirit and they imagine that everything in their lives will flow smoothly thereafter. But you need to be disciplined too, if you are to fulfil God's will for your life.

Uphold God's Standards

Paul goes on to say, “*Don't be ashamed of me, I am a prisoner*” (1:8). Many believers were proud to be associated with the apostle Paul while he was

planting churches and doing miracles. But now that he was a prisoner, they didn't want to associate with him because it was shameful. Many Christians will associate with a preacher when he is popular. But the moment he becomes unpopular or rejected, they pull out. But those who stuck with Paul till the end were the ones whom God approved and who He used to build His church. They were tested through Paul's unpopularity and found faithful. God will test us to see whether we will stick with a servant of His who is anointed but unpopular. There God finds out whether you are seeking your own or whether you will be true to Him.

Then in 1:12, Paul says, "*I know whom I have believed and I am convinced that He is able to guard what I have entrusted to Him until that day*" (1:12). He was confident that the Lord would preserve Him unto the end. The wholehearted Paul could say that. But if a half-hearted Christian quotes that verse today, he is deceiving himself.

"*Don't ever lower the standard*" is Paul's next exhortation to Timothy (1:13). What a great need there is for that exhortation for all Christian preachers in our day: "Don't lower the standard that you see in the Scriptures in order to bring more people into your church. If you have less people with a higher standard, you are a better church in the Lord's eyes, than if you have more people with a lower standard. It is better to have a church with 3 disciples than with 300 compromisers. Three wholehearted disciples can influence a whole village for Christ more than 300 compromising believers. This is the burden that every true servant of God must have for the next generation after him. In Christian history, we find most often that the second generation of a movement lowers the standards, because they don't have the same vision that their founders had. Compare the great denominational churches of today with what they were like in the days of their founders. If the founders of those denominations came to earth today, they would not join the denomination they founded – because it has lowered the standard that the founders held up and proclaimed. The external form of doctrine may still be there, but the power and the anointing are gone. Life has gone, and the knowledge of God has gone."

We must guard this standard through the Holy Spirit who dwells in us, because it is a sacred treasure. If your company gives you five million rupees in cash to be taken from Bangalore to Delhi by train, you will guard it very carefully and ensure that when you reach the other end, there is 5 million with you and not 3 million! That is how we have to safeguard God's standards in His Word. We will never be able to do this without the wisdom and power of the Holy Spirit (1:14).

Paul tells Timothy that many believers in Asia Minor had "*turned away from him*" (1:15). Paul in his last days experienced something that Jesus also experienced – believers leaving him and breaking their fellowship with him. Those believers did not want to associate with Paul now because he was in prison. They didn't want to get into trouble with the Romans.

So they kept a little distance from him. Phygelus and Hermogenes who left him may have been Paul's co-workers at one time. But Onesiphorus stayed on and was not ashamed of Paul's chains (1:16). He had served Paul in Ephesus and now in Rome, he went and met Paul in prison and fellowshipped with him. Praise God for such loyal brothers who stick with God's servants *through thick and thin*. Paul says, "*When Onesiphorus was in Rome, he eagerly searched for me and found me. The Lord grant to him to find mercy from the Lord on that final day*" (1:18). If you give even a cup of cold water to a disciple in Jesus' Name, you will not lose your reward.

Characteristics of a True Servant of God

In *Chapter 2*, Paul speaks about the characteristics of a true servant of God.

First of all, a true servant of God must be *a faithful teacher* of God's word. Paul tells Timothy, "*Whatever you heard from me entrust to faithful men who will teach others also*" (2:2). There we see Paul's burden to reach the *fourth* generation with the gospel. Timothy (a second generation disciple) was to find faithful men in the *third* generation (*not* clever men but *faithful* men) who would go out and find faithful men in the *fourth* generation. God has never looked for clever men or rich men, but only for *faithful* men.

Secondly, a servant of God must be *a soldier*, who does not get entangled with the affairs of this world but is detached from it (2:3, 4). He lives *in* the world but recognising at all times that he is *not of* the world. A good soldier will concentrate on fighting the enemy and winning the battle for his country. Other matters will take *secondary* place in his mind. A true servant of God also will have his mind set on establishing the victory of Christ in the territory of Satan. In order to do that, he will seek to be free from attachment to earthly things. "*If you have been raised up with Christ, keep seeking the things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your mind on the things above, not on the things that are on earth*" (Colossians 3:1, 2).

Do you want to serve the Lord? Then set your mind primarily on the things above and determine to fight the devil and win battles for the Lord. God will take care of all your earthly needs. Many believers are good soldiers when they are single. But when they get married and have a family, they allow their minds to be so taken up with earthly things that their love for the Lord cools off. But if you have married in the will of God, your devotion to Christ will *increase*. I was a full-time Christian worker even before I got married. My wife and I have brought up four sons who have all grown up and are married now. I took care of them and provided for them. But at no time did my family become more important to me

than the Lord Himself. My wife and children did not lose out in any way, as a result of my putting God first in my life. If you live in the will of God you will not suffer spiritually or materially. God is faithful. If you serve Him faithfully, do you think He will let your family down? That is impossible. So be a good soldier and seek the kingdom of God first, and you will see that God will provide your family with all the things of earth that they need. If you live for Him He will not let you down. I am only adding my testimony to the testimony of many servants of God through 2000 years, who can say the same thing. If you honour God, He will honour you. So, "don't let the world around you squeeze you into its own mould" (*Romans 12:2 - J.B. Philips*).

The third picture he uses here is that of an *athlete* (2:5). A true servant of God must be like an athlete who runs according to the rules. That means he does not cheat. He does not do something against the rules, when nobody is watching. Consider an Olympic event such as the 50 kilometres walk. The walkers have to walk throughout that event and not run even one step. But 50 kilometres is a long distance, and I can imagine that somewhere along the way, when people are not watching, some walkers would be tempted to run a little bit. But there are hidden video cameras watching the walkers along the way. And if a walker cheated and came in first, he would be disqualified and get no medal. So there must be no cheating in the life of a servant of God. There must be no false reporting of the results of our ministry. You will never have to tell a lie in the Lord's work. It is only in the devil's work that people have to tell lies. We must be absolutely honest. There must be no cheating in the way we keep our financial accounts. It is better to suffer at the hands of men for telling the truth than suffer at God's hands one day for telling a lie.

Fourthly, we must be like *hard-working farmers* (2:6). When a farmer sows a seed he doesn't come the next morning to see if the crop has come. He waits. It takes a long time for the harvest to come, but it does come. Meanwhile he waters the seeds and puts in fertilisers. Farmers have to be hard-working people. Otherwise they won't get a good crop. A servant of God must be like a hard-working farmer, in his study of God's Word and in his serving the people. He works diligently, and so many years later he has the joy of seeing the people he served grow up to maturity and becoming servants of God themselves. This is the tremendous joy that I have had in the last few years. Young people who have grown up to become faithful servants of God.

We must meditate seriously on these word pictures and examine ourselves in their light.

Then Paul says, "Remember Jesus Christ risen of the seed of David. Consider what I say, for the Lord will give you understanding in everything" (2:7, 8). Paul reminds Timothy once again that Jesus came in the flesh

(the seed of David) and conquered, sin, death and Satan – proved by the fact that He was raised from the dead. Thus He paved the way for us also to conquer these enemies. This is what Timothy needed to get understanding from the Lord on – and what we need to get understanding on, as well.

Fifthly, a servant of the Lord must be *a diligent workman* (2:15). He must study God's Word carefully, and handle the truth accurately. Thus alone can he present himself to God as fit for His service. Have you spent many hours trying to understand God's word accurately? If not, how can God use you to minister His Word. Whenever you see men expounding Scripture powerfully, remember that this is not only because they are anointed by the Spirit, but also because they have worked hard studying God's Word. God is *not* a rewarder of lazy people! When children come to me at examination time and ask me to pray for them, I ask them, "Did you study hard for the examination?" If they didn't study, then my praying won't help them. A farmer who does not carefully sow seed at sowing time and diligently water it, cannot pray that he should get a good harvest. If you want God to use you, you must be diligent in your study of the word of God.

In 2:11–13, we read, "*If we died with Him, we will also live with Him; If we endure, we will also reign with Him; If we deny Him, He also will deny us; If we are faithless, He remains faithful, for He cannot deny Himself.*" If we want the life of Christ to be manifested in us, in our daily life on earth, we must first die to ourselves, daily. If we want to reign with Christ eternally, we must endure with Him now on earth. If on the other hand, we deny Him by the way we live, then we will find that He denies us in the final day.

In 2:14, Paul warns Timothy, "*Remind people of these things and solemnly charge them in the presence of God not to argue about words.*" The two books in the Bible that warn us the most to avoid arguments and disputes are *1 and 2 Timothy*. Many Christian preachers unfortunately, have not taken this command seriously. When preachers come to argue with me about some doctrine, the first thing I try to sense is whether he is sincerely wanting to know the truth because he wants to live a godly life, or whether he is just wanting to argue to prove that I am wrong. If I sense that he is really seeking for a godly life, I am willing to spend hours with him, explaining the Scriptures. But if I sense that he is only interested in arguing with me, then I stop the discussion immediately and change the subject to something more pleasant – so that we don't spend our time arguing.

In 2:16, Paul says again, "*Avoid empty worldly chatter, for it will lead to further ungodliness.*" Remember that all worldly chatter and gossip invariably lead to ungodliness. Your speech can be like gangrene (2:17). When people suffering from diabetes get a small wound in their foot, it

sometimes does not heal – and gangrene sets in and finally the foot has to be cut off. Spiritual gangrene is a terrible thing. Arguments and worldly chatter can destroy your life and the lives of others as well. So avoid them like the plague. Hymenaeus and Philetus were two men who indulged in such worldly chatter and arguments and ended up falling away from the truth altogether. They even went on to teach that the final resurrection had already taken place and were upsetting the faith of many.

Paul then speaks about the firm foundation of God. God's foundation has two sides to it – the upper side which He alone can see and the bottom side which we can see. This resolves the common argument in Christendom between *Calvinism* and *Arminianism* – whether one who is saved can be lost. What is the truth? As someone has said, "*The truth is not found in one extreme or in the other. Much less is it found in the middle. The truth is found in both extremes held together.*" God is sovereign and He chooses us. At the same time we need to seek Him diligently for only then will we find Him. He holds on to me. But I must hold on to Him as well. He will never divorce me. But I must never divorce Him either. God never takes away our free will at any time. If He did, we would become robots.

From God's side of the foundation, He knows who His children are. If we could look into the Book of Life we could tell who all are the children of God. But we cannot. We look at it from the *underside*, and what do we see there? "*He who names the name of the Lord must stay away from sin*" (2:19). So if you stay away from sin then you are eternally secure. So we see both truths there in God's foundation – the sovereignty of God and the free will of man. The Lord knows those who are His – and those who name the name of the Lord stay away from sin. So God holds us and we must hold on to Him.

The *sixth* characteristic of a true servant of God is that he must be a *holy vessel*, a vessel who cleanses himself (2:20, 21). There are two cleansings spoken of in the New Testament. One is the cleansing that God does: "*The blood of Jesus cleanses us from all sin. If we confess our sin He is faithful and righteous to cleanse us*" (1 John 1:7, 9). God cleanses us from the guilt of sin. We can't do that. Only the blood of Jesus can do that. The second cleansing is something that we have to do ourselves ("*If a man cleanses himself*" – 2:21). These are like two sides of a coin. God cleanses away our past sin and we cleanse ourselves from the wrong things we see in our lives.

Maybe you have the habit of cracking jokes that hurt others – something that Jesus would never do. Don't ask God to cleanse it away. Say, "Lord, I am going to cleanse myself. I am going to give up this bad habit, with Your help." Or perhaps you have a curiosity that makes you a busybody in other people's matters. You must cleanse yourself from being interested in matters that do not concern you in any way. If a man cleanses himself thus he can be a vessel sanctified and useful to the Master.

The passion of my life for many years has been to be a vessel useful to God for every good work that He can do through me in my one earthly life. We may live at the most 80 or 90 years on this earth. Every year of our lives must count for God. If you want to live such a life, cleanse yourself daily. Ask the Lord to show you the things that are useless – and cleanse them away. Let your life be one of continuous cleansing. If you are serious about this, you will be a vessel useful to the Master. There are many vessels in the church that are useless.

Paul compares Christians to different types of vessels in a house. “*In a wealthy home there are dishes made of gold and silver as well as some made from wood and clay. The expensive dishes are used for guests, and the cheap ones are used in the kitchen or to put garbage in. If you stay away from sin you will be like one of these dishes made of purest gold – the very best in the house – so that Christ himself can use you for his highest purposes*” (2:20, 21 - Living).

But don’t think of *usefulness* alone. Many people are happy to know that God is *using* them. In a house, people use *wooden* boxes more than their *golden* vessels. But which vessel has more value? Are you concerned about your *usefulness* or your *spiritual value*? Your spiritual value is far more important to God than your usefulness in His work. God uses many people to do His work – even the devil. The devil once sent a thorn as a messenger into Paul’s flesh – and God used it to keep Paul humble. God used Balaam. God used Solomon even to write Scripture; but he went to hell after that. So don’t ever glory in the fact that God is using you. Many who prophesied and did miracles in Jesus’ Name will be rejected in the final day (*Matthew 7:22, 23*). So being used by God is *not* the main thing. What is your intrinsic worth? Are you a golden vessel?

When there is a fire in a house, people rush to remove their gold and silver vessels – not their earthen jars. So will it also be, when the world is on fire. “*They shall be Mine, says the Lord Almighty, in that day when I make up My jewels. Then you will see the difference between those who serve God and those who don’t*” (*Malachi 3:17, 18 - Living*). If you are only a cheap earthen vessel at present, you can become a golden vessel by cleansing yourself from everything that you see as un-Christlike in your life.

If you decide to cleanse yourself, one of the first things you must run away from is youthful lusts (2:22). Even a man like Timothy who was about 45 years old at this time, had to run away from youthful lusts. Paul tells this wholehearted brother Timothy that the only way he could escape sinning in this area was by running away from temptation. He was not to imagine that he was too old to be tempted in this area. Don’t imagine that because you are 45 years old you won’t be tempted. Don’t allow such sins to drag you down and destroy your ministry.

"Pursue after righteousness with those who call upon the name of the Lord with a pure heart" (2:22). In other words, we must seek for fellowship primarily with those who seek for purity. That will help us to flee from sin. Our best friends on earth must be those who desire purity with all their hearts. Many believers have lower standards and are not interested in godliness. But we must spend most of our time with those who are seeking to live a holy life.

How can we know if someone has a pure heart? Jesus said that people speak out of that which fills their hearts (*Matthew 12:34*). We know what is filling a man's heart by the things he loves to speak about. If he is always talking about money and material things, it is because his heart is filled with thoughts of money. On the other hand, when a man wants to talk mostly about the Lord, you know that's what is filling his heart. I want to fellowship with those who long to be like Jesus. When we love the Lord we love to talk about Him. This is the secret of effective service for the Lord.

The seventh characteristic of a servant of God is that he must be *a gentle counsellor* (2:24–26). He must be gentle in the way he speaks to people, not argumentative or quarrelsome. You cannot be a servant of God if you are a quarrelsome type of person. You must also refuse all foolish arguments (2:23). We are more likely to help people to be free from sin and to be delivered from Satan's grip, if we speak meekly and courteously to them (2:24–26).

Final Exhortations

In *Chapter 3*, Paul speaks about how it will be difficult to be a faithful Christian in the last days. Because "*men will be lovers of themselves*" (3:2). Paul is not talking here about the people of the world. Worldly people have always been lovers of themselves. But here he is talking of people who call themselves believers – who "*will hold to a form of godliness*" (3:5). The *form of godliness* refers to the doctrine. In the last days, evangelical Christians with the right doctrine will still be lovers of money, boastful and arrogant, etc., (3:2–5). Doctrine is like the parts of our human body. A human body can have all its parts and yet be dead! Even so, a Christian can have all his doctrines right and yet lack power. They don't have the power to live for God. If you glory in the fact that all your doctrines are right but live for yourself and love money, you are dead.

Here are some characteristics of those who have merely *a form of godliness*: "Arrogance, ingratitude, inability to get along with others, malicious gossiping, evil-speaking, brutality, treachery, conceit, and love of pleasure and comfort more than love of God." Many who have these qualities can still imagine that they are God's children, because they have the right doctrines (3:2–5).

There are many “Christians” in the world today who speak the right religious language, and yet have never been delivered from living for themselves and for the world and for money. Paul tells Timothy to *avoid such people*. Why should we avoid such people? Because we can get their infection otherwise.

Many such preachers go into the homes of weak women who admire them and captivate their minds. They visit the homes when only the women are there and often end up falling into sin with them. Such women go to many meetings and keep on listening to many preachers. But they never come to an understanding of the truth (3:6, 7). If you are a preacher, beware of this habit. Don’t be an effeminate preacher. Be a man of God. However, not all women are like that, for there are many excellent, godly sisters in the church.

Paul then quotes the example of Jannes and Jambres, Pharaoh’s magicians, who opposed Moses (3:8). There are people like that today too, who have a form of godliness, who will oppose true servants of God. But one day God will judge them and their folly will become manifest to all.

In contrast to such preachers, Paul tells Timothy, “*You have seen how I have lived. You have seen my conduct, my purpose in life, my faith, my patience, my love, my perseverance, and all the persecution I suffered*” (3:10, 11). Paul was not boasting there. At times, we have to share our testimony with other believers to challenge them. Paul had to remind Timothy about his way of life to contrast it with that of other preachers who were crooked, but claimed to be servants of God. Paul went on to say that all who seek to live a godly life in Christ will be persecuted (3:12). But evil men and deceivers will go from bad to worse, deceiving others and being deceived themselves. Timothy is warned to steer clear of them and to follow what he had learned from his childhood (3:13, 14).

Paul then exhorts Timothy to give himself to the study of the Scriptures, which were “*breathed out by God Himself*” to make us perfect. The same Holy Spirit Who inspired God’s Word initially, uses it now to teach, reprove, correct and equip us to become men and women of God, ready for every good work (3:16, 17).

Then Paul gives his concluding word to Timothy, “*I am charging you in Jesus’ name. Preach the word. Be ready always to preach the word when you feel like it and when you don’t feel like it, when it’s convenient and when it’s not convenient*” (4:1, 2). We must be ready at all times, to preach God’s Word; and when we preach, we must not only comfort people with God’s Word, but also reprove, rebuke exhort and teach them with great patience (4:2). This is because a time will come when people will not be willing to listen to “*sound doctrine*” – which means the *hygienic* doctrine that leads to a godly life. Instead they will want their ears to be tickled by preachers who make them happy (with “*myths*” – techniques learnt from psychology) in order to collect money from them (4:3).

If you were to go to a Christian bookshop today and look through the books being sold there, you will hardly find a single book that can lead you to a truly godly life. Most of what is sold there is useless trash – about people's experiences (real and imaginary) that entertain you but don't lead you to godliness. That is because most Christians today are not interested in holy living. And so Paul urges Timothy to endure hardship and do the work of an evangelist and to make *disciples* (this is real "evangelism" – *Matthew 28:19*) and not to waste his time.

Paul then says that he knows his time on earth is over. Looking back over his life, he is thankful that he fought the devil and the lusts of his flesh, wholeheartedly, that he kept the faith uncorrupted and uncompromisingly, and that he finished the course God had for him. He completed his earthly ministry. He went to every place that God wanted him to go – walking at times, and sometimes through shipwrecks. He was determined to go everywhere that God wanted him to go. Therefore God had laid up for him a crown of righteousness which He will give not only to Paul, but also to all who love His appearing (4:8). But Paul had some disappointments with his co-workers too. Demas deserted him, seeking the glory of this world – probably money – like many preachers today (4:10). Alexander the coppersmith did him much harm. But Paul would not take any revenge. He would leave it to the Lord to repay him in the final day (4:14). When Paul was taken to court everybody deserted him, but the Lord stood with him and saved him (4:17). Paul did not want the Lord to save him from martyrdom but only from "*every evil deed*" (4:18). Thus the Lord would give him a glorious entrance into His heavenly kingdom. What a wonderful way to end one's life.

We thank God for the example of such a godly servant who kept the faith until the end, fought the good fight, and finished his course. May we follow in his footsteps.

TITUS

ELDERS – AND WHAT THEY SHOULD TEACH

The subject of Paul's letter to Titus is again the church and its elders. These three letters – *1 Timothy*, *2 Timothy* and *Titus* – relate to the church and its leadership. The first thing Paul seeks to do is to establish order in the church. In *Chapter 1*, Paul speaks about appointing godly elders who can lead the church and silence rebellious people; in *Chapter 2* he speaks about sound doctrine and in *Chapter 3* about doing good works.

Working Together Despite Differences

Some of Paul's close workers like Titus were not Jews. Paul himself was a very strong Jew, a Pharisee of the Pharisees. But his constant travelling companion was a Greek doctor named Luke, who wrote the *Gospel of Luke* and the *Acts of the Apostles*. The other person he worked so closely with was Timothy. He was half Greek, his father being a Greek. Titus was also a Greek. So these four people from different communities working together – Paul, Titus, Timothy and Luke – were a living demonstration of the gospel of the new covenant where people of different nationalities could work as one.

If you can work only with people of your own culture and nationality, something is wrong with your Christianity. If you are a Malayalee and you can only work with Malayalees you haven't understood the gospel. The gospel made Paul work with people of different languages and different nationalities. We must be willing to work with people of any nationality or temperament, if they are disciples of Jesus – whether they be Chinese, African, Russian, South American or North American, whether they be introverts or extroverts. Temperament and nationality

may all be different, and yet they can be close co-workers. We must get out of the sectarian, communal, narrow way of thinking that makes us comfortable only with people of our own nationality and temperament and we must learn to work with all who are in the Body of Christ.

There are some peculiar traits that people of certain nationalities and communities have. But when they come to Christ they can be delivered from those traits. Paul told Titus, when Titus was in Crete, that one of the Cretan religious preachers had said, “*Cretans are liars, evil as beasts, lazy and gluttonous*” (1:12). That may have been true. But when such a Cretan comes to Christ and is filled with the Holy Spirit, he won’t be a liar or evil, he won’t behave like a beast, he won’t be lazy and he won’t be a glutton. So we must never judge a person according to his nationality or community. If we are prejudiced against any Christian because of his community, we will remain spiritually poor.

God has made me immensely rich spiritually, through fellowship with people of different nationalities and communities – Chinese, Africans, Indians of different races, Europeans, Americans, etc. My heart has always been open to God’s people from all communities and nations – because I know that godliness is not found in any particular nation. I have noticed that people from certain wealthy countries are very arrogant. But the true believers from those countries are humble. So the Cretans may be liars, but the Christians in Crete are not liars. People of some communities have very poor family values. But the Christians from those communities need not be like the others. So we should never judge a Christian by the community he comes from. He is a new creation. That is why Paul had no problem with having some of his closest co-workers from other nationalities.

If you are unwilling to work with people who are different from you in the Body of Christ, you will not be able to fulfil the whole purpose of God for your life. God will not then show you who your co-workers should be – because in His plan, He may want you to work with somebody of another nationality, or from another part of India, and He sees that you are not willing to accept His plan.

There are many wrong attitudes in us that need to be broken down before we can work together with others in the Body of Christ, without any distinction of any sort. If we have a preference to work only with people of the same type as us, God will not guide us. We may choose our co-workers ourselves and say that the Lord led us to them – but it won’t be true. It would have been our own carnal preferences that led us. We chose them because they were of the same intellectual level, or of the same community, or of the same temperament as us. That type of union is all right for marriage. But when working for God, we have to be open to anyone whom God chooses as our co-workers.

Godliness

Paul begins his letter by saying, “*I am speaking here as a bond servant of Christ for the faith of those chosen of God and the knowledge of the truth which is according to godliness*” (1:1). We notice, as Paul approaches the end of his life, his letters contain a great emphasis on *godliness of life*. Consider these last three letters of Paul – *1 Timothy*, *2 Timothy* and *Titus*. How much does he speak in these letters about speaking in tongues? Nothing. Or about physical healing? Nothing. Or about financial prosperity? Nothing. Consider John’s first epistle, that he wrote towards the end of his life. How much does John speak in it about speaking in tongues, or physical healing, or financial prosperity? Nothing. These apostles, when they came to the end of their lives emphasised the things that were of *fundamental importance* – not these other secondary matters that many Christians emphasise these days.

What does John speak about in his letter? *Obedience*. What does Paul speak about in his last three letters? “*Godliness*” (11 times) – “*The secret of godliness*” (*1 Timothy* 3:16), “*The power of godliness*” (*2 Timothy* 3:5), “*The truth according to godliness*” (*Titus* 1:1). Whereas in his earlier letters, Paul never used the word “*godliness*” even once. Paul would say at the end of his life, as a mature apostle, “I have spoken about many things earlier – about the return of our Lord, speaking in tongues, healings, miracles, etc. But as I come to the end of my life, I see the great need to stress *godliness* as primary and foundational to everything else.” We can know that we have become mature when we also stress godliness in our ministry. Without godliness, we will not be able build the church of Jesus Christ today – even if we have all the gifts of the Spirit and financial prosperity! We are not against the gifts of the Spirit. We need them all. But our primary emphasis must be on godliness of life. The man I would listen to, is the mature man who has seen the importance of what Paul and John saw towards the end of their lives – *godliness*. So today, when you hear preachers preaching so many things, compare them with these apostles, and you will be able to identify who is really mature.

Qualifications for Elders

Paul tells Titus that he left him in Crete to “*set in order the things that are wrong, and appoint elders in every city*” (1:5). Paul was also concerned towards the end of his life that in every church there must be elders in the leadership. The Holy Spirit always seeks to appoint more than one elder in every church – and never a single pastor. Paul did not tell Titus to appoint a pastor in every church. There must be at least two elders leading every church – so that church-leadership is balanced. One-man leadership will make a church imbalanced. Under the old covenant,

leadership was always exercised by one man – one high-priest, one king and one prophet. But as soon as Jesus started His ministry, He sent His disciples out two-by-two. That was the beginning of Body ministry – which would be one of the distinctive features of the new covenant, from the day of Pentecost onwards.

The elders in a church must be the most spiritually mature persons in that church and not necessarily those who are oldest in age. But what do we see today? Young, immature men become pastors of churches after getting a degree from some Bible school. Most people sitting in their churches are far more mature than them. That is not the church of Jesus Christ, but an organisation. In the church of Jesus Christ, those who know God the best are the elders.

Maturity is not determined by preaching ability or by gift. Even a 15-year old boy can engage in evangelism. But maturity comes through faithfulness over many years. The qualifications of an elder are listed here in 1:6-9. We saw some of these qualities in *1 Timothy* too. An elder must have a good testimony in the neighbourhood. He must be the husband of one wife. His children (who are at home) must love the Lord and not be wild or disobedient. If a man cannot control his own children, how will he be able to control the church of God? There is a great emphasis in the New Testament on the way a man brings up his children as a qualification for church leadership. A believer's children are a testimony as to how he has lived at home. The children of some believers misbehave perpetually, whereas the children of other believers are always well-behaved. This has nothing to do with the children. It has to do with how the parents have brought them up.

Some parents are so undisciplined that they allow their children to do anything they want in the church service and when visiting people's homes. Such brothers are totally unfit to have any responsibility in the church of God. A man who is an elder in the church must have disciplined children, who learn to sit quietly in the meeting even when they are small. An elder whose children are constantly running around during the church-service should resign and hand over his eldership to someone else who can control his children. If a man cannot discipline his children he cannot lead a church. He may be able to preach, but he cannot be a leader. Those who seek to have responsibility in the church must first learn to be good leaders in their own home.

"He must not be one who is quick tempered and angry" (1:7). A quarrelsome, short-tempered man is not fit to be an elder. He is fit to be a terrorist, not a church-elder. Elders in churches must be peace-loving men.

"They must not be greedy for money" (1:7). They must have no interest in getting money from people.

“They must be hospitable” (1:8). Their home must be open to people who need spiritual help.

“They must love what is good, sensible, righteous and devout; and they must be self-controlled” (1:8).

“They must hold fast the faithful word in accordance with the teaching, so that they can exhort with sound (hygienic) doctrine and thus refute those who contradict” (1:9). The word used to describe pure doctrine is the Greek word “*hugiaino*” from which we get the English word “*hygienic*.” This is a word that Paul uses frequently in his letters to *Timothy* and *Titus*.

Hygiene is what a good hospital has that keeps everything free from germs, by frequently cleaning the floors and sterilising their equipment. If we ever have to go to a hospital, we would all choose a hygienic hospital. The church we choose to be a part of should also be like that – one that emphasises holiness. Unfortunately, many churches are like some government hospitals in India, where people who go for treatment acquire sickness that they never had when they entered that hospital!! A new believer goes to such a church and learns to gossip and backbite – because they don’t have any hygienic standards in that church. The church that pleases God is a church that majors on godliness.

“There are many rebellious men, empty talkers and deceivers, whose mouths must be silenced” (1:10, 11). We must never stand in the pulpit and bore people in a church meeting. *If you have nothing to say, don’t say it in the pulpit!!* It is a crime to waste people’s time like that. It is the responsibility of the elder to ensure that such people are silenced.

Then there are the deceivers who need to be silenced. *“Such teachers are only after your money” (1:11 - LB).* They are not interested in leading people to a godly life. If a preacher comes to your church and he is mostly interested in collecting money, the best thing to do would be to send him away as soon as possible. That will be for his good as well as the good of your church.

As we have studied through the New Testament, have you noticed how much it speaks about being free from the love of money? This is a very important subject under the new covenant. So, if you are a true servant of God, you will speak frequently about the love of money and warn people against it. But I find very little preaching about that today, because most preachers and pastors themselves are lovers of money. That’s why they can’t speak about it and expose this gross sin that is ruining churches today.

Paul asked Titus to reprove the Cretans so that they could become sound in the faith (1:13). Imagine how difficult it must have been for the

church in Crete to be a light in the midst of the Cretan society that was filled with liars, evil people and lazy gluttons. In our society, the sins may be different. But in every area of sin that our society specialises in, the church must stand out as different – as a light. If for example, in our society, the husband is like a king who never does any dirty jobs in the house, then Christian husbands must be different. In Indian society the husband usually never changes a baby's diapers and he never goes to the toilet and cleans his little child's bottom. All that is supposed to be the wife's job. Why is that? Didn't the husband and wife produce that child together? Then why can't the husband also do these dirty jobs? In such an Indian culture, Christian husbands must stand out as different. Since they were co-workers with their wives in producing their children, they must be co-workers with their wives in every aspect of bringing up those children. We must be different from the darkness around us.

In 1:15, Paul says, "*If you are pure, all things are pure to you. But if you are defiled, you find that nothing is pure, everything is defiled to you.*" Some people see filth everywhere, because their mind is filthy. That's how our minds have been corrupted by the devil. We must now allow the Holy Spirit to purify our minds so that we don't see something dirty where there is nothing dirty, and that we don't always impute a bad motive to what we see others do. Proverbs 27:19 says, "*As in water face reflects face, so the heart of man reflects man*". What that means is that you see in others the evil lurking in your own heart. If you do most things with wrong motives, then when you see someone doing something good, you will attribute a wrong motive to him. If you preach only to make money, then you will imagine that every preacher preaches only to make money. This is because you are seeing the reflection of your own heart in the hearts of others. That person may not be impure like you, but you will imagine that he is. If however your mind is pure, you won't go around judging people like that. You will attribute good motives to people.

Juniper belonged to the brotherhood of Francis of Assisi in the 13th century, that had decided to live in great simplicity in all areas. One day when Juniper saw one of his brothers dressed in a relatively expensive dress, he said to himself, "Perhaps under that expensive dress he has a humbler heart than I have under my simple dress." Juniper was pure and so all things were pure to him. He did not judge anyone. But those whose minds are corrupt will see corruption in the motives of others. They see the corrupt motives in their own heart reflected in others!

When Isaiah saw the glory of God, he heard the seraphs saying, "*Holy, holy, holy is the LORD. The whole earth is full of His glory?*" (Isaiah 6:3). But when we look at the earth, we don't see it full of God's glory but full of corruption. The angels in heaven however see the earth as full of God's glory. Those angels have a different opinion from man, because their

minds are pure. They see the glory of God in many things, such as in the beauty of creation, and in godly believers here and there. They also prophetically see the future day when the earth will be filled with the glory of God.

Hygienic Doctrine

In 2:1, Paul speaks about hygienic doctrine again. He is not referring now to the doctrines of forgiveness, justification, baptism in the Holy Spirit, water baptism, the coming of the Lord, the church and its eldership. He is talking now about the Christian's daily life. He urges Titus to "*teach the people hygienic doctrine*" – and then mentions different groups of people.

The *older men* must be taught to be dignified, sensible, sound in faith, full of love and patience. Older people should love younger people who are ignorant, immature and foolish. An older man who cannot love is not really dignified. Something is wrong with him.

Older women must be reverent in their behaviour. They should not be malicious gossips. They must be taught to do good. Older sisters must be the teachers of the younger sisters (2:4). What should they teach? They should teach the younger sisters how to love their husbands, how to love their children, how to be sensible and pure, and how to be workers at home (2:5). Mothers must be taught not to neglect their homes and their children, by going to work *merely to raise their living-standards*. They must give priority to their homes. Wives must be taught to be subject to their own husbands – so that the word of God is not dishonoured. These are the important things that older sisters should be teaching younger sisters – and they don't need a Bible-college degree to teach all this. This is real *hygienic* teaching. But unfortunately, what we see around us is many older sisters being experts in gossiping and backbiting. This is sad – and it dishonours God.

Hygienic doctrine is practical Christianity and it relates to life. It teaches us to love, to be sensible, to give priority to our home-life, to bring up children in a godly way, to love husbands and children, to be workers at home, etc. In these days, many mothers have neglected their children by going to work – and thus their children go astray.

I am preaching only what I have practised. I married a medical doctor in 1968. As a servant of the Lord, working among students and in the villages primarily, I was extremely poor when we started our married life. Once God gave us our first child, my wife stopped working in the hospital. God gave us four sons and my wife spent her days bringing them all up in godly ways. She never earned one rupee as a doctor, after our first child was born. But she has helped and counselled hundreds of women and children with her medical knowledge. We decided that

our children were more important than money. Now, after 47 years of marriage, we can see the results: All our sons are born again and living for the Lord. They have married godly women and are raising godly children themselves. We don't have any regrets today that we chose to raise godly children instead of trying to earn more money to have a luxurious life-style. We lived simply and God gave us grace to bring up our children to live for Him.

Your children are far more important than your standard of living. Millions of rupees you earn can never be a substitute for godly children. So I say to all mothers and wives: *Don't neglect your children.* As it says here in God's Word: "*Be a worker at home first.*" If your children have grown up and left home, then you can go to work. And if you are an older sister you should be able to teach a younger sister how to be a worker at home, by your own example. That is God's way. I recognise that there can be exceptions to this, such as, if a husband is an invalid or sick, and his wife has to go to work to earn their living. But that must be the exception and not the rule.

Young men must be taught to be sensible. This is hygienic doctrine. Paul urges Titus himself to be a good example – in good deeds, in purity, in pure doctrine, dignified and sound in speech – so that the devil cannot point out anything in him that will bring disgrace to the Name of the Lord. Satan should not be able to point out your home and say to God, "God, look at that Christian family. See that mother who is only interested in making more and more money and see how rebellious her children are, without any respect for parents or for the church." Don't let the enemy have anything to say about you that will bring shame on the Lord's Name. Your children are a reflection of the values you have in life. You can pretend to be a spiritual man and fool everyone in the world. But you can't fool your children. They know what your values are and what you are living for.

Christian servants (and this includes those working in offices and factories today) must be taught to be subject to their masters in everything. They must not argue with their bosses. How many preachers are there who tell people they must not argue with their bosses in the factory or office? When a Christian argues with his boss in the factory or office, he is a disgrace to the name of Jesus. I am not saying he should not stand up for his convictions when he is asked to do something wrong. That we must do. I remember when I was in the Navy, there were a number of occasions when I had to stand up to my senior officers and say, "I am sorry, Sir. I am a Christian and I cannot do that because it is against my conscience." But we must never be argumentative.

Here is another important exhortation to servants (and to workers in offices): “*Don’t pilfer*” (2:10). What is the difference between pilfering and stealing? Stealing refers to expensive items that are taken unrighteously for oneself. Pilfering refers to minor items – such as taking a sheet of office-paper to write a private letter. It’s in such small matters that we discover whether we are godly or not. Jesus said, “*If you are faithful in little things, you will be faithful in much.*” If you have pilfered things in the past from somewhere, you should calculate the approximate cost of what you pilfered and give back the money. That is true Christianity. That is what Zaccheus did. I am preaching what I have practiced all my Christian life – and today my conscience is absolutely clear. It is thus that we are to “*adorn the doctrine of God our Saviour in every respect*” (2:10). Just as ladies adorn themselves with jewellery, Christians must adorn the doctrines they preach with a Christlike life.

“*The grace of God has come teaching us to deny ungodliness and worldly desires and to live sensibly, righteously and godly in this present age, looking for the blessed hope and the appearing of the glory of our great God and Saviour Christ Jesus*” (2:11–13). Here is a passage that speaks about what God has done for us in the *past* – *He brought salvation*; what He is doing for us in the *present* – enabling us to live life denying all ungodliness; and what we are looking forward to in the *future* – the return of our Lord.

Here we are told clearly why Christ gave Himself for us (2:14). So that He might purify for Himself a people for His own possession, zealous for good works. If you have been saved by Christ, you should be a person who is eager to do good. That is *hygienic* doctrine. Hygienic doctrine goes beyond justification, water-baptism and the baptism in the Holy Spirit. It is practical Christianity in daily life. Any doctrine that does not lead a person to a godly life is *not* hygienic doctrine, but a doctrine of the slums – similar to filthy hospitals that don’t sterilise their equipment for surgery and that don’t clean their floors. Such is a filthy church that does not lead its people to a godly life. Hygienic doctrine is the greatest need in the church today. And so Paul urges Titus to “*Speak these things, exhort, reprove people with all authority*” (2:15). The great need in Christian homes, Christian churches and Christian pulpits in our day, is, “*godly authority.*” Speak in such a way that people will not think that “*what you say is unimportant*” (2:15 - LB).

Concluding Exhortations

Paul then goes on to deal with the subject of how Christians must relate to earthly rulers and authorities. We must “*be subject to them, obedient to them and ready to do every good deed*” (3:1). Then comes this verse that

I have encouraged Christians to write down and hang up in their dining rooms and sitting rooms: “*Speak evil of no one*” (3:2). Haven’t we all seen notices sometimes in offices that say, “*Thank you for not smoking?*” What about having a notice that says, “*Thank you for not gossiping.*” There is so much of gossiping that goes on in Christian homes. It’s much worse than smoking. I would rather have someone smoke than gossip in my house. Is that your view too? If you can request a person not to smoke in your house, why can’t you request him not to gossip there?

“*Speak evil of no one, don’t be contentious, be gentle showing consideration for all men, because once upon a time we also were foolish*” (3:2, 3). We were all foolish like that once – and not only foolish, but disobedient, deceived, enslaved, spending our life in malice and envy, and hating one another. But the kindness and grace of God saved us from all that. And he saved us not on the basis of any good works we did, but through His mercy and grace alone. This is the first thing that Paul always emphasised – that our salvation is not the result of our righteousness or good deeds, but the free gift of God’s grace. Then God renewed us through the Holy Spirit – and here Paul refers to the secret of the Christian life – *the filling of the Holy Spirit*. This is the second thing that Paul always emphasised.

Paul then urges Titus to preach all this “*confidently – with assurance and conviction*” (3:8). An actor once said “*The difference between us actors and preachers is this: Preachers talk about real things as though they were unreal, while we actors talk about unreal things as though they were real*”!! That is true about most of the preachers I have heard. There is no fire, or zeal, or earnestness in their ministry. They talk about eternal things, about eternal life and about a hell where people burn forever – in such a sleepy, sluggish way. Who will believe such preachers? Don’t ever be a preacher like that. If you are not sure that the Bible is God’s Word, then don’t ever preach. Go and do business or engage in some other profession. But don’t open your mouth and confuse people in the church. If you preach God’s Word, it must always be with confidence and authority.

I believe with all my heart that the Bible is God’s inspired, infallible Word. That is why I speak from it confidently. I used to preach from it, confidently, when I started preaching, more than 50 years ago and I preach from it even more confidently today – because I am more convinced about its truthfulness today. In my lifetime, I have proved that the promises in God’s Book are all true. The Bible is not a bunch of fairy tales but God’s eternal truth. The great tragedy in Christendom today, is that we don’t have enough preachers who speak with Divine authority.

Another thing that Paul exhorts people about, towards the end of his life is to “*avoid arguments over unanswerable questions and controversial theological ideas – for they will lead to quarrels and will only do*

harm" (3:9 - Living). And so, "if anyone is argumentative and causing strife and divisions, he should be given a first and a second warning. After that you must have nothing more to do with him, for such a person is perverted, sinning, and has condemned himself" (3:10, 11).

A stranger once came to my home to try and convince me that Christians should not take medicines when they are sick, but only trust the Lord to heal them. I told him that I disagreed with him and would not get into an argument with him about it. I said, "Let's talk about Jesus, about His word and His work". I told him that if he was willing to restrict himself to those topics, we could talk. But within two minutes he went back to the subject of "healing without medicine". I gave him a second warning and told him that if he was going to argue about that topic, then I would have to request him to leave my house. So I talked about the Lord for two minutes and again he went back to his old topic. So I got up and escorted him to the door and said "Goodbye. God bless you." I obeyed the above Scripture. I am not interested in arguing with anyone about matters that are not central to living a godly life.

Paul concludes with a final exhortation to urge God's people to engage in *good works* (3:14).

PHILEMON

COMPASSION FOR A CONVERTED SLAVE

This is a brief letter of Paul's with just one chapter of 25 verses. He wrote this to a rich brother, Philemon. Apphia (1:2) was probably his wife. Archippus, whom we considered in *Colossians 4:17*, was probably his son. Philemon probably lived in Colossae. He was probably an elder in that church and the church may have been meeting in his house. There are some beautiful things we see in this brief letter.

First of all Paul says, "*I thank God for you, and I pray for you regularly.*" It is a great encouragement to anyone if he knows that a servant of God is praying for him. We pray for people we love. If you look at the list of people you pray for, you will see that you love all of them. There are many other people whom we don't love so much and so we don't pray for them. We are human and so we cannot love everyone equally. Paul loved Philemon, and prayed for him. Philemon must have been greatly encouraged to know that this great apostle Paul found time to pray for him, Paul goes on to say, "*I thank God for your love and faith and I have had a lot of joy and comfort in knowing that you are a blessing to the saints*" (1:5–7). Paul was not flattering him. Paul never flattered. He was encouraging him with words of appreciation – a godly habit that we must all learn from Paul.

A Plea for Onesimus

Philemon was a godly man, and he was very hospitable to the many poor believers who came to his home. Paul then went on to make his request. He said, "*I could order you to do it, in the name of Christ because it is the right thing for you to do, but I prefer to appeal to you*" (1:8). Paul is now an old man in jail for the gospel's sake and his only request to Philemon is that he will show some kindness to Onesimus, whom Paul had won to the Lord while in jail (1:10). He reminds Philemon that he owed his life to Paul (1:19). He had been saved through Paul's ministry.

And so Paul could have ordered him to do something. But he would not order him. Instead he begged him. See the graciousness of this mighty servant of God – a wonderful example for all of us to follow. People who are converted through our ministry respect us so highly that they may be willing to do anything for us. I know people like that who are willing to lay down even their lives for me. If I order them to do something, they will do it. But I will *never* order them to do anything. I will beseech them. That is the way a true servant of God acts. He never takes advantage of his authority. Let us all learn to be gracious, as Paul was.

What does Paul want from Philemon? Onesimus was his slave who had run away from him and gone to Rome. There, in the sovereignty of God, he came in touch with Paul and was converted.

In those days, if a slave ran away from his master, the law permitted the master to kill him when he found him. Slaves had no rights in those days. When Paul asked Philemon for a favour he was not asking anything for himself. He was asking for somebody else. He was a godly man who would never ask a favour for himself. He told Philemon that when Onesimus came back to him, he was coming back as a brother in Christ. Once he was only a slave. Now he is a brother as well. God used his running away so that he could come back as a brother (1:15). Paul beseeches Philemon to accept Onesimus as a brother for Paul's sake. The name *Onesimus* means "Useful" – and Paul says that he would be really useful to Philemon now.

Paul is essentially telling Philemon, "Suppose you saw me coming toward your house, how would you receive me? Please receive Onesimus in exactly the same way." This reminds us of how Jesus speaks about us to the Father. "Father, this child ran away from the house, lived in sin and lived a godless life. But I found him and I have brought him back. Please accept him, as You accept Me." And that is how we are accepted. The Father loves us and accepts us now, just as He loves and accepts Jesus (John 17:23).

Then Paul says, "*If Onesimus has cheated you and robbed something from your house, whatever the amount may be, charge it to my account. I will repay it.*" And that is what Jesus also said, "*Charge those sins he has committed to My account.*" This is the attitude of every godly man: "*Charge it to my account, I will repay you whatever he owes you.*" What an attitude to have to help a man whom Paul had led to the Lord. Here is a preacher who, instead of asking for money for himself, offers money to a believer!! Have you ever seen a preacher like that?

Remember that Paul was not a rich man getting money from the churches. But with the little he had earned with his tent-making business, he said to Onesimus, "*I will help you with what I have. I will help you clear your debt.*" What an example! If only we had more preachers

who were eager to help poor people instead of collecting money from poor people, what a different Christianity this world would have seen.

Focusing on God's calling

Paul was reasonable. He did not tell Philemon to share his property with Onesimus. No. For Onesimus was still a slave. Paul did not carry on a crusade against slavery in those days. He had the discernment of the Holy Spirit to know that the time was not yet ripe for that. If Paul had started a crusade against slavery he would not have been able to concentrate on writing Scripture and building the church.

To carry on a crusade against slavery is a good thing. But Paul knew that that was not his calling. Some are called to do that. President Abraham Lincoln of the United States of America did that many centuries later. The good can often be the enemy of the best. Paul sought to understand God's mind in his ministry and He knew that God had called him to do something better than social service – which would benefit people *only in this world*. Paul knew that God had called him to make disciples and to build the church – for that would bring *eternal* results.

That is something that we must remember today too. You can be taken up with some social cause or with liberation theology – all of which may be good to help people in this earthly life. But in being occupied thus with a *good* thing, you can miss the *best* that God wants you to be engaged in. The best thing is to make people disciples of Jesus Christ and to build His church.

Thereafter, whenever the church met in Philemon's house, he and Onesimus were brothers – Brother Onesimus and Brother Philemon. But once the church-meeting was over, it was Onesimus the slave and Philemon the master once again. What a wonderful demonstration that was of the glory of Christ!

The Lord did not come to abolish all social distinctions or to equalise the wealth of all Christians. He did not come to get the rich to distribute their wealth to the poor. That is Communism – and Christianity is not Communism. Onesimus and Philemon were not equal in their earthly rank or in their privileges or in their wealth. In all those areas they differed from each other, throughout their earthly lives. But they were equal and one as brothers in Christ. The letter to Philemon is the one portion of inspired Scripture that clearly teaches that the Holy Spirit does not teach Communism – and that He does not want Christians to be Communists.

HEBREWS

JESUS – THE MEDIATOR OF A BETTER COVENANT

If you are using a KJV Bible, you will see at the top, ‘*The Epistle of Paul to the Hebrews.*’ But that is not correct. There is no record within this letter as to *who* wrote it or to *whom* it was written. Whenever Paul wrote a letter he always put his name at the beginning and also mentioned to whom he was writing. That was his style. So this letter was obviously *not* written by Paul. Neither do we know to whom it was written. The reason why people titled this letter as ‘*Hebrews*’ was because there are at least 30 references to the *Old Testament* in it – such as, the priesthood of Aaron, Melchizedek, Joshua entering Canaan, the tabernacle, the sacrifices, the Old Testament heroes of faith, etc. So people assumed that it was written to Christians who were familiar with the Old Testament – namely, the Hebrew (Jewish) Christians. But we are not interested in finding out who wrote it or to whom it was written. We shall leave such useless research to those pursuing doctorates in theology!! As for us, we know that *the Holy Spirit* wrote it and that it was *written for us*. So we know the real Author and we know whom He wrote it for – us!!

Jesus – As a Man

This is a very profound letter. I don’t know how many believers read it carefully. I think most believers prefer to read *Romans* and *Philippians* rather than *Hebrews*. But that could be the work of the devil – who does not want believers to be gripped by some amazing truths taught in this letter that we do not find in any other book in the Bible. This book reveals the humanity of Jesus Christ our Lord and the practical implications of that for us more than any other book in the entire New Testament. Every truth in Scripture has a practical implication. Because Jesus Christ is

God we worship Him and pray to Him. But He is also Man. What practical implication does *that truth* have for your life today? If you have not found any practical implication for yourself today, from the humanity of Christ, then that has become a dead doctrine for you. A dead doctrine is like a dead muscle. What happens to a muscle if you don't use it for a long time? It becomes weak and finally withers up. That's why people who have been lying in a hospital-bed for many months have almost to learn to walk all over again, when they get out of that bed.

Most Christians have not sought to find a practical application in daily life for the truth about Jesus having become a Man. And so they have lost that truth for all practical purposes. So much so, that when someone emphasises the humanity of Jesus Christ today, many believers will consider him to be a heretic. When Martin Luther proclaimed justification by faith in the 16th century, many people called him a heretic, because they had lost that doctrine for centuries. The same thing happens whenever a lost truth in the Bible is recovered. His generation will call him a heretic. But the next generation will recognise that he was a prophet.

The same thing happened when Christians began to teach the baptism in the Holy Spirit more than 100 years ago. They were called heretics. But now, most Christians have accepted it as the truth of God. It is exactly the same when it comes to the humanity of Christ. Very rarely do you hear any preaching today on the humanity of Christ and what its implications are for us.

It is because Jesus lived on earth as a man, that we too can follow in His footsteps and “*walk as He walked on this earth*” (*1 John 2:6*). If He had not been a man like us, we cannot possibly follow Him. The letter to the Hebrews presents *Jesus the Man*.

“*Consider Jesus*” could be called the theme of this letter – for that appears in *3:1; 8:1 and 12:2, 3*.

“*Pressing on to perfection*” (*6:1*) could also be considered as a theme of this letter.

“*Entering into the Most Holy Place*” (*10:19*) could be considered as yet another theme. This letter shows us how we can enter into a place of intimate fellowship with God.

The word ‘*better*’ occurs 13 times in this letter – a *better* sacrifice, a *better* resurrection, a *better* covenant, a *better* Mediator, etc. Words like ‘*perfect*,’ ‘*heavenly*,’ ‘*eternal*’ are also frequently used in this letter.

Basically what this letter reveals is that if you look at Jesus as a Man as your Example, you will find in Him, the secret of an overcoming life. We need the power of the Holy Spirit and we need the Word of God. But we also need to see *Jesus as a Man*.

Chapter 1 begins with one of the clearest expressions of the Deity of Christ found anywhere in the New Testament. The writer of *Hebrews* was inspired by the Holy Spirit to write extensively (more than any other New Testament writer) about the humanity of Christ. So he knew that Christians would wonder whether he did not believe in Jesus' Deity. So he was inspired to emphasise that Jesus Christ is God in *Chapter 1*.

Most Christians over-emphasise the Deity of Christ to such an extent that for all practical purposes they discount His Humanity. And that is one reason why *Hebrews* is not very popular with them. But this is the very letter they need to study, if they are to be balanced in their understanding of truth.

I have written a book on the humanity of Christ titled, “*Living as Jesus Lived*”. In its first chapter also, I have begun by emphasising that Jesus Christ is God. He was God, even when He walked on earth – and that was why He readily accepted worship from people – something that even angels will not do.

In *Hebrews Chapter 1*, the writer proves from a number of Old Testament verses that Jesus Christ is God. Then in *Chapter 2*, he proves from a number of Old Testament verses that Jesus Christ is Man. These are the subjects of the first two chapters.

In *Chapter 1*, we are told that in the Old Testament, God spoke through the prophets in many ways – through visions, dreams, prophetic words and written Scripture. But now God has finally spoken to us through His Son. His Son is called “*The Word of God*” – which means God speaking. Jesus is the Message. His life is God’s Message for us. In the Old Testament, God spoke through written words. Now He has spoken through a Living Word – a Person.

The application for us is this: When we go out into the world, God wants to speak to others through you – through your life and not merely through your words. Jesus was the Message of God in His time. And you and I are the message of God to the world now. That’s why Jesus is called “*The Word made flesh*”. The Word (Message) of God was made flesh first in Jesus. Now that Word (Message) has to be seen in our flesh.

We are told clearly here that the world was made by Jesus the Son (1:2). This is mentioned again in 1:10. The One mentioned in *Genesis 1:1* as the Creator of the world is Jesus the Son of God, along with the Father and the Holy Spirit.

Jesus is the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of His nature (1:3). Or in other words, if you want to know what God is like, just look at Jesus. “*He who has seen Me, has seen the Father*”, said Jesus (John 14:9). Jesus is also the One who upholds the entire universe by the word of His power (1:3). And when Jesus had made a purification of all our sins He sat down as a Man at the right hand of the Majesty on high. And God commands all the angels to worship Jesus the Man (1:6).

The word ‘worship’ here once again proves to us that Jesus is no created being – for no created being has the right to receive worship. When John fell down to worship an angel once, the angel immediately said, “*Don’t do that. Worship God*” (*Revelation 19:10*). The only Person entitled to receive worship in this universe is God Himself. Anyone who receives worship other than God commits a terrible sin. When Jesus was on earth, we read in the *Gospels*, of His receiving and accepting worship from men, at least seven times. This proves beyond any doubt, that even though He had emptied Himself of the *privileges* of God when He came to earth, in His Person, He was still God – for God can never cease to be God.

Finally, we see God the Father Himself addressing Jesus as God, saying: “*Thy throne, O God, is forever and ever*” (*Hebrews 1:8*) – a quotation from *Psalm 45:6*. All of this introduction is to prove the deity of Christ beyond any shadow of doubt. For only after laying this foundation, can we proceed to study His Humanity.

Then the writer moves on to show us the humanity of Jesus and all the practical implications there are in that truth for us.

Here is a verse that shows us how Jesus lived on earth as a Man: “*You have loved righteousness and hated lawlessness. Therefore God, Your God has anointed You with the oil of gladness above Your companions*” (*1:9*). When Jesus lived on earth, He lived with all the limitations of us human beings. So He needed to be anointed. God the Father doesn’t need to be anointed. And Jesus did not need to be anointed when He was in heaven. But when He lived on earth, He had to be anointed to be an Example for us. Here in this verse we are told why God anointed Jesus with the oil of gladness (joy) more than us, His companions. It was primarily because of one reason – He loved righteousness and hated lawlessness. He loved purity and hated sin.

There is a difference between *doing* righteousness and *loving* righteousness. A child can obey his father without *loving to obey*. Jesus did not just *do* righteousness, He *loved* righteousness.

In the same way, Jesus did not just *avoid* sin. He *hated* sin.

AIDS is one of the deadly diseases that people get through sexual sin nowadays. And so, many don’t commit fornication because of the fear of getting AIDS. They don’t *hate* sexual sin; they are just afraid of getting AIDS. In the same way many who want to steal don’t do so, because they are afraid they might get caught – not because they *hate* stealing. In the same way, you can avoid any other sin without hating it.

But if you want to be anointed with the oil of gladness, you have to *love* righteousness and *hate* sin. It says here that that was the reason why Jesus was anointed with the oil of gladness more than others.

There is no partiality with God. A good father will never treat his eldest son with greater favour than his other children – there will be no partiality with him. What he does for his eldest son he will do for all his children. God the Father is also like that. Jesus is called the First-born of

many brothers. We who are born again are His younger brothers. Jesus is the Eldest Son. Since God is not partial, He will do everything for us that He did for His Eldest Son, Jesus. Whatever God did for Jesus, He will do for me too, if I fulfil the same conditions that Jesus fulfilled. This is one of the great truths that we discover through knowing about the humanity of Christ.

If it had been written that Jesus was anointed with the oil of gladness because He was the Son of God, that would not have encouraged or challenged us in any way. But when we read that He was anointed because He loved righteousness and hated lawlessness, that gives us hope that we can be anointed in the same way too, if we also love righteousness and hate sin. So we need to pray, “Lord, work in my heart through the Holy Spirit, so that I will not only do righteousness but love it; and that I will not only avoid sin but hate it.”

The more we love righteousness and the more we hate sin in our lives, the more we will be filled with the joy of the Holy Spirit. The kingdom of God which is righteousness and joy in the Holy Spirit will come and fill our hearts (*Romans 14:17*). Then we will be enabled to obey the command that tells us to “*rejoice in the Lord ALWAYS*” (*Philippians 4:4*).

Because the One who has spoken this Word is such an important Person, therefore we must pay much closer attention to the word, lest we drift from it (*2:1*). Some Christians may think that some commands of Christ are minor and therefore unimportant. But the important question is not how important the *commandment* is but how important the *Person* is Who gave it. Many Christians are not in danger of *rejecting* the word of God, but of *neglecting* it – and thereby drifting away from it. I worked on ships for many years and I know what drifting is. When a ship has stopped in a harbour, if an anchor is not dropped, it will drift. Even a slow current is enough to push it far away. This slow drift may not be observable. But by the next morning the ship can be far from where it stopped the previous night. *Drifting* from God’s Word is like that. If your standard of righteousness has become lower, and you have started thinking lightly of some sins, and your love for the Lord has cooled off, from what these were a year ago, then you can be certain that you have drifted – without even realising it.

It is not God’s will that you drift and then come back to Him when you hear a powerful message and then drift again and then come back again. God wants you to make consistent progress towards total Christlikeness in your life. To avoid drifting, you must pay close attention to God’s Word (*2:1*). In *2:3*, the writer asks how we can escape if we *neglect* such a great salvation? That verse was not written for unbelievers but for believers.

Even many Bible-seminaries *neglect* teaching the Bible itself. Instead, they teach the many theories that people propound about the Bible.

Hebrews

God has made provision for a fantastic salvation for us. But most Christians have neglected it. That is why they live defeated lives. They have accepted salvation from the *penalty* of sin (going to hell), but they have *neglected* salvation from the *power* of sin.

Then the writer goes on to speak about the humanity of Christ. In 2:6, he quotes *Psalm 8:4* – “*What is man that You remember him, or the son of man that You care for him? You have made him for a little while lower than the angels and have crowned him with glory and honour, and You have put all things in subjection under his feet.*” But when we look around today, all things are *not* under man’s feet. Man is a slave when he should be a king. The devil is ruling the world of men. But we do see the Man Jesus in Whom this verse *has* been fulfilled. All things *are* under His feet. For a little while Jesus was made lower than the angels. But now He is crowned with glory and honour – and all things *are* under His feet today. Since Jesus is our Elder Brother, this is the place to which God wants to bring all of us too. What God did for His Firstborn Son, He will do for all of us. If you are a younger brother/sister of Jesus, then everything that God did for Jesus He will do for you too – because there is no partiality with God. This is the good news of the gospel.

So this verse in *Psalm 8* is referring to Jesus primarily. He was made a little lower than the angels – because of the suffering of death. Angels don’t die, but Jesus could die. This made Him lower than the angels. Adam when created could not have died. So he was not lower than the angels. But when he ate the forbidden fruit, then he became lower than the angels, and he could die. Today, Jesus has conquered death and is above the angels – and everything is under His feet. When we are connected to our Lord Jesus Christ, even though at the moment we are below the angels and we are going to die, we will one day be above them in the resurrection.

Jesus Needed Grace

“*Jesus tasted death for everyone by the grace of God*” (2:9). Jesus needed grace from His Father to go to the cross and die. We know that we need grace till the end of our lives if we are to live in victory, be overcomers and do God’s will. But Did Jesus need it? He certainly did. In fact the first person about whom it says in the Bible that “*the grace of God was upon Him*” is Jesus Christ (*Luke 2:40*). And the next time in the Bible that we read that expression is in *Acts 4* – about grace being upon the disciples of Jesus. When grace is upon someone, he is “*under grace*”. It is when we are “*under grace*” that we can overcome sin (*Romans 6:14*). Grace came through Jesus Christ (*John 1:17*). Jesus was the first person to live under grace and never sin. So *grace* cannot mean “the unmerited favour of God,” as many people say, because Jesus certainly did not get *unmerited* favour from God. He merited every bit of God’s favour. *Grace is God’s help and power.* Jesus needed that as a Man – and so do we.

The Holy Spirit is showing us here that Jesus needed grace as a Man, because although there was no sin in Him, He was weak like us in every way. In order to bring us to glory, God perfected Jesus, our *Leader and Captain* through suffering (2:10). We become perfect the same way too – through suffering.

What does the word “*perfect*” mean? We need to understand this, because this word occurs a number of times in *Hebrews*. It does not refer to the perfection that there is in God. All it means is “*complete*” – like an empty glass that is now filled. Then it is *complete*. It is not as though the glass had dirty water at first and now has clean water. No. There was no dirty water (sin) in Jesus at any time. He emptied Himself only of the *privileges* of God when He came to earth (*Philippians 2:5*). Jesus never had to obey anyone when He was in heaven. How then could He experience what it means to obey an imperfect earthly father and mother, as human beings have to? How could He know what it is to perspire and work hard to earn His living? Only by becoming a man like us.

In order to become the Captain and Leader of our salvation, Jesus became exactly like us. He submitted Himself to an earthly father and mother, He helped His mother in the kitchen, carried water from the well for her, and obeyed everything they commanded Him to do. He perspired as He worked as a carpenter and He was tired. He went through our human experiences of suffering, little by little. Thus the vessel of His experience as a human being became full and He became “*perfect*” as a Man. Our life on earth is one of suffering. He accepted suffering and walked through the same path we walk. Now the One who sanctifies us and those who are sanctified are all from one Father. Jesus sanctifies us and we are sanctified, and His Father has become our Father now, and He calls us brothers. He is not ashamed to call us His brothers. I am not a son of Jesus, I am a son of God and a brother of Jesus. Sometimes Christians are very hesitant to say we are younger brothers of Jesus. But it says very clearly in *Romans 8:29* that God predestined that Jesus Christ must be the first born among many brothers.

Then in 2:12, we find a quotation from *Psalm 22* – the psalm of the cross (see *Psalm 22:1*): “*I will proclaim Your name to My brethren.*” This is a reference to the younger brothers and sisters of Jesus. And then another verse from *Isaiah 8* is quoted: “*Behold, I and the children whom God has given me.*” Then he goes on to say, “*Since the children take part of flesh and blood He also took part of the same*” (2:14). That was the only way He could die – and through death take away the power of death from Satan.

Here we are told that Satan had the power of death. Ever since Adam sinned, and throughout Old Testament times, Satan held the keys of death. Adam had given it to him. When Jesus died, He took that key away from Satan. Now Jesus says, “*I have the keys of death*” (*Revelation 1:18*). So if you are an obedient child of God, *you cannot die until Jesus*

opens the door. I praise God for that revelation. Nobody and nothing can kill me – no accident, no cancer, no religious fundamentalists – until Jesus opens the door of death for me and says, “*My son, come in.*” It gives us such tremendous confidence to know this truth. Jesus conquered death and thereafter the keys of death have been in His hands alone.

Satan had the power of death because man had sinned. Man gave himself to the devil in Eden. Now Jesus wants to deliver us who have lived all our lives in the fear of death (2:15). All human beings live in the fear of death. But you don’t have to live in the fear any more, if you are a disciple of Jesus Christ. If you have surrendered everything to Christ and have no ambition now but to do God’s will on earth, you need never have the fear of death for a single moment. You can sleep peacefully.

We are told here again that Jesus did not become like the angels (2:16). The angels also fell into sin – before man. But Jesus did not become an angel in order to save them. But when man sinned, God became a man in order to save us. I think the reason for this is that Satan sinned on his own – whereas Adam sinned through the instigation of Satan. Jesus was made like us, His brethren, in everything (2:17). The humanity of Christ was exactly like ours, except for our sin. He did not have sinful flesh and He never sinned. But otherwise His humanity was exactly the same as yours and mine. That is how He could become a merciful High Priest for us. Only thus could He satisfy the righteous requirement of God’s Law and make an atonement for our sins. And as a Man, since He was tempted in every point, and suffered in His flesh in those temptations, He can now come running to our aid, when we are tempted (2:18). He could not have understood the power of temptation practically, if He had not been tempted exactly like we are.

Consider an illustration: If an angel from heaven came to teach you how to swim and took you to a river and flew across the river and said, “Follow me”, what would you tell him? You would say, “I can’t follow you. I can only admire you. If you want me to follow you, first get rid of your wings, take a body like mine that is pulled down by gravity and then tell me to follow you.” In the same way, if Jesus had come to earth and used all His powers as God, and lived in perfect purity and said, “Follow Me,” we could tell Him, “We can’t follow you. You are God – and God cannot be tempted. But we are not God. We are tempted all the time, pulled down by the law of sin.” To be an example for us, Jesus would have to feel the pull of temptation exactly like we do, and have no resources other than what we have. Only thus could He be an example for us. And that is what Jesus did. He came just like you and me, felt the pull of temptation, sought the power of the Holy Spirit, sought for grace to overcome that pull and lived in perfect purity. He asks us now to overcome temptation, exactly as He overcame (*Revelation 3:21*).

I remember when my eyes were opened to this truth. I wept and said, “Lord, I never realised that You came right down to my low level. I thought

You came to a level, slightly above mine. But now that I realise that You loved me so much that You became like me and were tempted like me in order to be my Example, I want to follow You all the days of my life." This revelation changed the direction of my life. But the more I proclaimed it, the more I found that Christians opposed what I taught. The devil hates this doctrine because he knows it will lead people to victory. He knows that this is the secret of godliness – and he doesn't want you to be godly. This truth changed my life, my family life, my ministry, the lives of people whom I ministered to, and the family lives of the people whom I ministered to. The Bible became a new book to me. I saw wonderful things in Scripture which I had never seen before, when the Holy Spirit filled me and showed me that Jesus was made like us in everything, and was tempted like us, and suffered like us. What an example Jesus became! Under the old covenant they never had any example. They only had commandments. But we now have an Example. Praise the Lord!

In 3:1, the writer invites "*holy brethren*" who have a "*heavenly calling*" to "*consider Jesus*." That is really the message of this book: *Consider Jesus*. I wish I could proclaim to every Christian in the world, "Holy brethren, you have a heavenly calling. Do you want to live according to that heavenly calling? Do you want to be a holy brother/holy sister? Then consider Jesus Who became like you (2:17), and Who was faithful to God Who appointed Him. Jesus is greater than Moses because Moses was only a part of the house whereas Jesus is the Builder of the house.

The Evil of Unbelief

In 3:7, we are warned, "*Today if you hear His voice don't harden your heart.*" And then in 3:12, "*Take care lest there should be in any one of you an evil, unbelieving heart.*" The writer is warning holy brethren who have partaken of the heavenly calling to fear ending up with an evil, unbelieving heart that cannot believe that Jesus came exactly like them.

It is only when you are fed up with your defeated life that God will give you this revelation that Jesus came like you in order to be your Example. I was a thoroughly defeated Christian at one time. But I was sick and tired of my defeated life. I used to cry out to God day and night, saying, "Lord, I don't know what the answer is. I am a preacher but I am defeated by sin in my inner life. I am defeated in my thoughts, in my words and in my family life. I am born again, and water-baptised. But I am defeated. Show me what I need to know." Then the Lord showed me the secret of godliness – *Christ came in the flesh and was tempted exactly like me, and yet lived a pure life.* I believed it wholeheartedly – and it changed my life. We are warned here that if we have an unbelieving heart, we can fall away from God (3:12).

But instead of falling away, the next verse gives us another option, "*Encourage one another, exhort one another every day, as long as it is*

called today" (3:13). We do not know what will happen tomorrow. So let us do something today. Let us encourage someone today. Let us exhort someone today. In the context of this chapter, that means to encourage someone to consider Jesus Who became like us. Our calling, every day, is to lift up Jesus. Our conduct and our words must always be saying, "Look at Jesus. What a wonderful Saviour He is! He not only forgave my sins, but He changed my life. He has changed my family life, He has filled me with the joy of the Lord so that I can rejoice always. He has taken away the fear of death from me. Consider Jesus." Our life must be a challenge and an encouragement to others every day. When people look at your face, they must see something of the glory of God there.

3:13 warns us that it takes only 24 hours to become a backslider. That's why we need to exhort and encourage one another *every day*. We have a responsibility for each other in the Body of Christ. Cain said, "I am not my brother's keeper." But in Christ's Body, we are our brother's keepers, we are our sister's keepers. If you see somebody slipping up, encourage him. If you see somebody falling, lift him up. If you have nobody to encourage you or exhort you, you have the Holy Spirit and the Bible. The apostle Paul has exhorted and encouraged me personally on many days – through his words in the Bible. Peter, James and John have also exhorted and encouraged me. Many times when I didn't have brothers near me to exhort me, these apostles came to me through the pages of the Bible and encouraged me. Isn't it wonderful that we all can have Peter, Paul and John with us in our rooms, to encourage us every day? Why don't you let them encourage you? Why do you keep them locked away inside the Book?

You need to read the Bible itself, more than all the other books that speak *about* the Bible. I don't want to know what all the great Bible-scholars have to say about Peter's, Paul's and John's writings say. I want to hear them directly. So I read the Bible itself – and not books about the Bible.

3:14 tells us that "*we have become partakers of Christ IF....*" There is a big *IF* there. We are told there that we become partakers of Christ only "*if we hold fast the beginning of our confidence firm until the end*". Not otherwise. We have to endure until the end. A lot of people start a marathon race well, but they don't finish the race at all. They drop out along the way. It is the same with many Christians. And there is no prize in any race for starting well.

Look at the example of the Israelites who started well but did not finish their race. Three times in the New Testament, we are told to take a warning from the Israelites who left Egypt but never entered Canaan. Here in *Hebrews 3* and also in *1 Corinthians 10* and in *Jude 1*. They started wonderfully, banging timbrels and praising God (*Exodus 15*). But two years later, God began to be angry with them; and He continued to be angry with them for the next 38 years.

Their problem was an evil unbelieving heart. God had promised them while in Egypt that He would take them into Canaan's land. But they did not believe that God was capable of doing that. Yet God gave them food from heaven during all those 40 years. He gave them water from a rock and did many miracles for them. When God does a miracle for you, that is no proof that He is happy with you. It just proves that He is a good God. He could still be angry with you for allowing the giants of sin to rule in your life. When will He be happy with you? When you enter "*the land of Canaan*" and put those giants of sin under your feet. These Israelites could honestly testify that they had experienced some of the greatest miracles ever experienced by men on earth – two million people getting bread from heaven every day for 40 years, rivers of water flowing from a dry rock, and miraculously instantaneous healing from snakebites. Yet God was angry with them for 38 years. The same is true today too. God is angry with many people for whom he does amazing miracles, because they tolerate sin in their lives. Have you put anger, jealousy, bitterness, lustful looks and the love of money, under your feet? If not, then your experiencing miracles proves nothing.

In 3:19, we read "*They were not able to enter because of unbelief.*" And then we are told in 4:1, to "*fear lest, when God has given us also a promise of entering into His rest we come short of it.*" What does that mean? God has promised us that if we come under His grace, "*NO sin can have dominion over us*" (*Romans 6:14*). That is as clear a promise as God gave the Israelites that He would bring every giant in Canaan under their feet. This is the life of rest that God promises. The opposite of rest is turmoil, defeat, up-and-down experiences, etc., You should fear lest you don't enter into this rest, because we also have had the gospel (good news) preached to us just like they heard it (4:2).

What was the good news they heard? There were two parts to the promise that God gave them when they were still in Egypt, "*I will take you out of Egypt*" and "*I will bring you into Canaan*" (*Exodus 3:17*). They heard that *good news*, but they experienced only the *first part*. We too can hear about the two parts of our salvation – *Jesus can forgive our sins* and *Jesus can keep us from falling into sin* – and yet experience only the first part. We are told here to fear lest we miss out on entering into this life of victory. Yet I find very few believers who have this fear. They are casual about their defeated life. The Israelites were given this fantastic promise of defeating the giants and possessing Canaan. But they remained occupied with seeing miracles, hearing voices from heaven, experiencing healing from snake-bites, etc. But they never entered into the land God had promised them. You too can be occupied (and excited) with healings and miracles and voices from heaven, and miss out on the main message of the gospel – overcoming sin. Why couldn't the Israelites enter the land? Because they did not stand together in faith with Joshua and Caleb who heard and believed. It is by faith in God's promise that we

can enter into this life of rest. God's will is that we should enter into this life of constant rest.

The writer then uses the example of the Sabbath as another old-covenant picture of rest (4:4). When Adam and Eve were created, *their very first day was a day of rest*, because they were created at the end of the sixth day. God rested on the seventh day in order to teach Adam and Eve the necessity of beginning all their labour from a position of rest in Him always. To the disobedient Israelites, God said that they would not enter into His rest. But to us, God says that we can enter in. He says, “*Today, if you hear His voice don't harden your heart*” (4:7). The time in the gospel-message is always ‘*Today*’ – not tomorrow or yesterday. God is calling you to a much higher life than you have experienced thus far. So don't harden your hearts. Say, “Lord, I want to enter into this life of rest.”

The land of Canaan is only a *picture* of the life of victory that God offers us. There remains a *Sabbath rest* for you today. God is promising you a constant Sabbath – a life of perpetual rest in Him. We can enter this rest when we recognise that our own striving will not help us to enter. We must allow God to bring us in. We must rest from our own works, just like God rested from His work (4:10). God worked for six days and then stopped working on the seventh day. The writer is using that as a picture of how we also should stop struggling, if we are to enter into this rest. As long as you imagine that by your own efforts you can overcome sin one day, you will be defeated. Consider the example of the disciples trying to catch fish (in *John 21*). They were struggling all across that lake the whole night – but caught nothing. When they stopped struggling and trusted in the word of the Lord, their boat was filled with fish. The lesson there is the same. When you come to the Lord and say, “Lord, a lifetime of struggle will not give me victory. You have to give it to me by Your grace”, then you will enter into this life. The period of struggling is a picture of living under the law, where *man tries to do something for God*. Under grace, *God does something for us*. When you cease from your own struggling, you will enter into this rest. That is the secret.

In 4:11, we read, “*Therefore let us be diligent to enter into this rest by faith and not fall like those people in the wilderness in disobedience.*” Let us cry out to God and say, “Lord, bring me into this life of rest. This is something I have never experienced in the Christian life. I want it.” Jesus said, “*Come to Me, all you who labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, and you shall find rest for your souls*” (*Matthew 11:28, 29*). First we enter into the rest of the forgiveness of our sins, and then we can enter the rest of victory over sin.

The Piercing Word of God

In 4:12, we read. “*The word of God is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing as far as the division of soul and spirit,*

of both joints and marrow, and able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart." God's Word penetrates like a sword into our hearts and reveals to us our thoughts and our intentions. In the new covenant (which *Hebrews* emphasises), it is "*the thoughts and intentions of the heart*" that are of utmost importance, whereas under the old covenant evil thoughts and intentions were not considered serious, because the Israelites did not have the Holy Spirit dwelling within them. The Law could not expose or punish man for having evil thoughts and intentions. As long as man did everything externally, the Law would commend him. But not so, in the new covenant. When man was under the Law, the Word of God only tested him on the outside, like a doctor examining a patient superficially. But in the new covenant the Word of God penetrates inside the heart, like a scan or an X-ray. God is now more interested in our thoughts, attitudes, motives and intentions. At times, when everything looks good on the outside, there could be great evil inside, just like a lot of people who look healthy on the outside can have serious diseases like cancer on the inside.

So if you read God's word today and you are convicted *only* of *external* sins in your life, that would indicate that you did not hear *all* that God wanted to say to you. So always test yourself with this question: "Did God's Word reveal the thoughts and intentions of my heart to me?" Notice that the emphasis here is on the *heart* and not the head. In all anointed preaching of God's Word, the Word will go through your mind and enter your heart and reveal to you your innermost thoughts and intentions.

In *1 Corinthians 14:25*, we read of the result that comes from anointed preaching. The thoughts of people's hearts are revealed and they bow down and acknowledge that God is present in the meeting. The same thing can happen when you are in conversation with a godly man and he speaks an anointed, prophetic word to you. The anointed word always reveals the thoughts and intentions of the heart because God's Word is like a sharp two-edged sword. If you want to serve the Lord, make sure that the blade is sharp in your heart and mouth. Don't ever blunt the edge of the sword and soften the word of God with polished words, in a diplomatic way, to make it more acceptable to man. That won't do people any good, because it won't penetrate and go where it should. Have you tried cutting meat with a blunt knife? You can go on cutting and the meat will still not be cut. A preacher who compromises the sharpness of God's word will find at the end of his message that no-one heard God.

God's Word is a two edged sword. The preacher must first allow it to cut open his own heart and reveal his own thoughts and intentions! Only then will he be able to use it to cut open other people's hearts. If the Word of God hasn't penetrated your own heart first, don't preach it. Most preachers never judge themselves with God's Word. They only judge others.

The Word of God penetrates and judges our motives too. If we open ourselves to the voice of the Spirit in God's Word constantly, we will ultimately have a totally clean heart, because the thoughts and motives of our heart will be revealed to us constantly and we will be able to cleanse ourselves. Every believer should live like this every day. Just as the Israelites in the wilderness received the manna *daily*, we too must receive God's anointed Word every day from Him.

Soulish or Spiritual?

Another thing that the word of God does is divide between soul and spirit (4:12). This goes a little deeper than what we have just considered. For example, if we preach with a bad motive (to get honour or to make money), we will know that immediately. But the division of soul and spirit will reveal whether we are depending on our soul (mind and emotions) to get God's Word across to people, or upon the Holy Spirit. People under the old covenant could not distinguish between soul and spirit.

The old covenant tabernacle had three parts – outer court, holy place and most holy place. This was a picture of man's body, soul and spirit (1 Thessalonians 5:23). The soul was represented by the Holy Place and the spirit by the Most Holy Place. God's presence was in the Most Holy Place. There was a thick veil between the holy Place and the Most Holy Place. No man was allowed to enter the Most Holy Place (except the high-priest once a year). This was to symbolically teach that man could not live or serve God "*in the spirit*" under the old covenant. So the Israelites were not able to distinguish between what was *soulish* and what was *spiritual*. Those who still cannot distinguish the difference between these two are living as old covenant Christians.

The word of God will show you what is soulish and what is spiritual. A lot of so-called "Christian" work today is soulish. Soulish work is based on human ideas of serving God. They may be good ideas that are not evil or carnal. But they are human and soulish. There are three types of Christians. *Carnal* Christians are those who are born again but who still enjoy "*limited*" amounts of sinful pleasure and who love money, etc. Then there are *soulish* Christians who have given up all of that, but who still live in their intellect and their emotions. Then there are *spiritual* Christians who seek to be led by the Holy Spirit in all that they do.

Soulish Christians may be good people who are eager to witness and serve the Lord. But their way of doing all of this is very *human*. They don't understand God's ways. God says, "*My ways are not your ways. As the heaven is higher than the earth, so My ways are above your ways*" (Isaiah 55:8, 9). There are human methods by which we can try and

reach lost souls, and human methods of serving God. David once transported the ark of God on a bullock cart – the way the Philistines once did it (*2 Samuel 6:3; 1 Samuel 6:11*). That was a good idea – to save the Kohathites from the burden of carrying it on their shoulders for that long journey. But that was not God's way – and that was why God brought judgement on the way.

Whenever Christians adopt a human way of doing God's work, there will be confusion. There may be external results that are impressive. But the glory of God will be absent. Moses made the tabernacle exactly like God told him. He did not build it, as he had studied in the academies in Egypt, where they learnt how to build the massive pyramids. Moses had to give up his human understanding of how to build God's house. That was one reason why God had to take him into the wilderness for 40 years – to get rid of his human wisdom. That was why God took Paul to Arabia for 3 years to get rid of the human ideas he had got from Gamaliel's Bible-school during the 3 years he studied there (*Galatians 1:17, 18*). He had to pour out his soulish understanding to death before He could understand God's ways.

Soul also refers to human power – where we depend on human resources. We can imagine that we can do God's work better if we have many electronic gadgets and we have political influence. That is a deception. It is the power of the Holy Spirit by which God's work can be accomplished. The early apostles did not have money, gadgets, or influence. Their human resources were about zero. But they accomplished much more than Christians today accomplish with all their gadgets, money and influence. The apostles had spiritual power – not soul power.

We must divide between soul and spirit if we are to become truly spiritual. I have been to many meetings where they claim that the Holy Spirit is moving just because there is a lot of emotion and noise. But I am not fooled. I can see clearly that it is merely the working up of the *human soul*, and not the working of the Holy Spirit. What they call "the baptism in the Holy Spirit" is only a "baptism of their soul-power". Jesus does genuinely baptise Christians in the Holy Spirit even today. But that brings spiritual power to be a witness for Christ (*Acts 1:5, 8*). Soul-power however only stirs up one's emotions. But most Christians have no discernment on this matter and so they are deceived.

They speak in "*tongues*" in some non-Christian prayer meetings as well, and whip up their emotions and claim to "*come to an inner rest*"! Many religions indulge in the whipping up of human soul-power.

If we don't discern between soul and spirit in these days, we will be thoroughly deceived. A lot of "*healing*" that is being done in Jesus' Name today is also through the power of the human soul and not through a genuine gift of the Holy Spirit. An "*atmosphere*" is built up in the meeting with a lot of singing. People's emotions are whipped up,

by singing songs like “*Lord, I believe,*” numerous times. Then people are asked to “*release their faith*”!! This has nothing to do with God. The preacher is just hypnotising the people. Jesus and the apostles never healed people like that. They healed the sick quietly, without any singing or emotion.

If you don’t recognise this counterfeit, you may even try to copy it, imagining that this is the way to serve God. And then you may go and manifest your soul power in similar ways to others and deceive them and yourself. So allow the word of God to penetrate within you and to show you what is soulish and what is spiritual. If you look at Jesus, you will find the answer in Him. If you ever attend a healing meeting or watch it on Christian TV, just ask yourself if this is how Jesus did it. You will discover the truth straightaway. But if you neglect the word of God, then you will certainly be deceived. Let the word of God divide between soul and spirit. God has given us His word and the example of Jesus and of the apostles to show us what true spirituality really is.

“*There is no creature hidden from Him and everything is open and naked to Him with whom we have to do*” (4:13). This is a lovely phrase: “*Him with whom we have to do*.” It means that as human beings, there is only one Person in the universe with whom we have to do, only one Person we are answerable to – God Himself. If you live your life recognising that you will become more and more godly. But if you are always thinking about the opinion that others have of you, then you will become their slave. If you want to be a servant of God, then recognise always that “*it is only God with Whom you have to do*”. Ten thousand people calling you a godly person will not make you a godly person. In the same way, ten thousand people calling you an ungodly person will not make you ungodly. Certificates from men are worthless. So throw them all in the garbage bin. Other people know very little about your private life, your thoughts and your money-dealings, etc. They know only about 1% of your life – and their opinion is based only on that 1% knowledge. So their opinions are worthless – whether good or bad. Both good and bad opinions are equally fit for the garbage bin. Throw them there. That’s what I myself have done for many years. Thus I have been freed to serve God.

If you want to be freed to serve God say, “Lord, You are the One with whom I have to do. Every day I want to stand before You. There is nothing hidden from Your eyes. Everything in my life is open and laid bare before You. I can fool people that I am spiritual, but I cannot fool You.” If you live like that you will see a change coming in your life for the better. Thus you will begin to enter the new-covenant life.

In 4:14–16, we read about Jesus having passed through the heavens. The Bible tells us that there are three heavens. The first heaven is space,

part of which we can see – the sun, moon and stars, etc. (*Psalm 8:3*). The *third* heaven is where paradise now is, and Paul was taken there once (*2 Corinthians 12:2–4*). In between these two is the *second* heaven (or *heavenlies*), where Satan has his headquarters. When Satan was thrown out of heaven (*Isaiah 14:12*), he was not thrown down to hell, but to the second heaven. From there he can speak to God (as we see in *Job 1 and 2*) as well as move around on earth. But he cannot ever enter the third heaven again. When we die we go to the third heaven. When Jesus ascended after His resurrection, He passed through the two heavens into the third heaven, where the Father dwells (*Hebrews 4:14*).

In *4:15*, we are told that Jesus, as our High Priest can sympathise with our weaknesses. God as our all-knowing Creator could certainly have sympathised with our struggles, even without becoming a Man. But Jesus' sympathy with us now comes through His having actually experienced the struggles we face as human beings. We can all sympathise with someone who is going through some difficulty. But we can sympathise with him far better if we have gone through that same difficulty ourselves. For example, if a mother has lost her only son, someone who has also lost an only son will be able to sympathise with her far more than others can. That was why God became Man – so that He could enter into everything that we go through and thus sympathise with us and come into a true fellowship with us. Since Jesus is our Bridegroom, He wanted to go through everything that we, His Bride go through as well. Thus He can also be an Example to us and meaningfully say, “Follow Me.”

If my wife is walking through a very difficult pathway, I would *not* want to sit on the outside and just exhort her to be faithful. I would also want to go along with her through that path and help her to be faithful. Jesus is our Bridegroom and He is like that. Are you going through some difficulty, discouragement, trial, pressure or temptation? Jesus has faced the pressures you face and can well understand your plight. He may not have faced the exact situation that you face. But He has faced every temptation that comes to you in your situation. And He will also help you through His Spirit to be an overcomer as He Himself overcame (*Revelation 3:21*). I will never allow my wife to lift a heavy weight all by herself. I will help her to lift it. Jesus does the same for us.

Life's Biggest Problem

What is the biggest problem that we face? Some may imagine that their financial difficulties are their biggest problem. But what many call “*financial difficulties*” is just the result of covetousness. They compare themselves with others who are better off than them and feel envious. If however they had compared themselves with those who have less than them, they would have been perfectly content and thankful – and their “*financial difficulties*” would have disappeared! I remember reading of a

missionary who, at one time, did not have money even to buy toothpaste. But he discovered in those days that he could brush his teeth without toothpaste! We are used to a certain standard of living, and when we can't live at that standard, we imagine that we are poor. A man who is seeking after godliness will never be concerned that he cannot afford toothpaste – or even a toothbrush! Most people in India in any case, brush their teeth with only their fingers and a little salt or coal-powder.

The biggest problem that a person seeking after godliness is concerned about is overcoming the temptation to sin.

In 4:15, we read that Jesus "*was tempted in all points exactly as we are.*" That is why He can sympathise with us. He felt the pull of *every* temptation, in exactly the same way as we feel it. Otherwise it would not be written here that He was tempted "*as we are, in every point*". When Satan tempted Him He felt the pull of temptation, but He said, "No." If He didn't feel that pull, it would *not* have been a temptation. Temptation is like a tug-of-war. Two teams hold the rope and pull against each other. When you are trying to hold on to a holy life, you feel a pull in the other direction. That is temptation. If nobody is pulling the rope on the other side, there is no tug-of-war. If Jesus did not feel any pull, then we will have to say that He was *not* tempted like us. Then we will have to say the Bible is telling lies when it says in *Matthew 4:1–10* that the devil tempted Him and when it says in *Hebrews 4:15*, that He was tempted in all points just as we are.

The word "*temptation*" in the Bible always refers to the temptation to commit sin. Normal desires like the desire to sleep when we are tired, are not temptation. That is not the meaning here when it says that Jesus was tempted like us. He was tempted like we are, to sin – and He did not sin. Is He an Example in that area for us? He certainly is. We saw in *Hebrews 2:17* that He was made like us in all things. He was not like an angel with wings trying to teach us to swim. No. He came to earth without His "*wings*" so that He could teach us to swim. When Jesus walked on the water, He overcame the law of gravity. If an angel had skimmed over the water, that would not have been a miracle. But this was a miracle because Jesus overcame gravity. When He told Peter that he could also walk on the water, He was actually telling him that he could do the same as Jesus did, if he trusted Him. Our Father in heaven is not partial to His eldest Son, Jesus. What He did for Jesus, He will do for us too, if we trust Him.

Jesus was tempted in all points as we are but He did not sin. And in this He is our Example. Whenever we are tempted we can tell the Lord, "Lord, at some time in Your earthly life in Nazareth You too were tempted as I am being tempted now. Help me to react exactly as You did then." Are you being tempted to be discouraged or to react in sinful anger?

Jesus too was tempted in those areas. But He did not sin. So you can look at His example and say, "Lord, I want to follow You." He lived like that through the power of the Holy Spirit. So we too must seek for the power of the Holy Spirit if we are to live like Him. And that is why it says in 4:16, "*Therefore let us (also) go to the throne of grace...*". The word "*Therefore...*" refers to the previous verse about Jesus being tempted like us and not sinning. Therefore, we can also go to the throne of grace as He went in His earthly days and receive the same grace that can enable us also to overcome sin.

4:16 speaks of *mercy* and *grace*. There is a difference between *mercy* and *grace*. *Mercy* deals with our past, whereas *grace* is for the future. We need *mercy* for the sins we have committed. Then we need *grace* to help us overcome sin in the future. They had only *mercy* under the old covenant. *Grace* came through Jesus Christ in the new covenant (*John 1:17*). Jesus did not need *mercy* because He never sinned. But we need both *mercy* and *grace*.

What is "*the time of need*" spoken of in 4:16? It is when you are tempted. Suppose you were climbing a mountain and you slipped and were hanging on a cliff by your fingers. You can't hold on and you fall and break your bones. Then you cry for help. Then the ambulance comes and picks you up, takes you to the hospital, fixes your bones. *That is mercy*. But if you cry for help before you fall, and someone pulls you up and makes you stand on the rock, *that is grace*. Your real time of need is *before* you fall. To cry for help after falling is the second best. The best is to ask for help *before* you fall. The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of grace and He is called the Helper. He can help you when you are slipping (tempted), before you fall.

Most Christians keep on falling and keep on asking for *mercy*. They fall and then ask God to forgive them. They start climbing again, fall again and ask for the ambulance of *mercy* once again. Mercifully, the ambulance does come each time. But that is not the way God wants you to live. The next time you are tempted, when you are tempted to be angry, or to think sexually dirty thoughts, *and you find yourself slipping*, cry out, "Lord, give me *grace* now." You will be surprised to find that you do not fall. God's *grace* will hold you up. *Romans 6:14* says, "*Sin shall not rule over you because you are under grace.*"

In 5:1, he speaks about Jesus as our High Priest. No one in Israel could decide to be a high priest unless God called him, as He called Aaron (5:4). In the same way, we are told that even Jesus did not make Himself our High Priest. He waited 4000 years in heaven and when the time came that the Father had appointed, He was told to go to earth and He went (*Galatians 4:4*).

Wasn't there a need on earth for those 4000 years? If we were in God's place, we would have sent Jesus the very next day after Adam sinned.

But God's ways are not our ways. Whenever we see a need, we act immediately. But God could wait 4000 years. Even after Jesus came to earth, He waited for 30 years before He went out into the ministry. Jesus was never moved by the need alone. He saw the need and was concerned about it. But when the Father said, "Go," He went. And then in 3½ years He completed the ministry the Father had appointed for Him. He didn't just run around here and there trying to meet various needs. At the end of His life, Jesus could say, "*I have finished the work My Father gave me to do*" (John 17:4). Most Christians will not be able to say that at the end of their lives, because they acted on the basis of need and not on the basis of God's call.

One of the things I learned very early in my Christian life was this: "*Observe the needs carefully, but go only where God tells you to go and when He tells you to go*". We must lift up our eyes and look at the harvest. But what we are to do is the will of God (See John 4:35 and 34). Even Jesus waited until He was sent.

Jesus Learnt Obedience

In 5:7, we are told of how Jesus prayed "*in the days of His flesh*." He "*prayed with loud crying and tears to be saved from death*". This is not referring to the last day of His life when He prayed in Gethsemane only. God's Word is exact when it says that He prayed like that "*in the days of His flesh*". "*Days*" refers to His entire 33½ years on earth. The death that Jesus prayed to be saved from (and from which He was saved, as this verse says) was certainly not physical death, but spiritual death (which results from committing even one sin). Jesus prayed that He might never sin even once. And He was so earnest about that, that His prayers for help were with loud crying and tears. That is why He never sinned. Many imagine that Jesus overcame sin because He was the Son of God. No. He overcame sin because He prayed with loud crying and tears to be saved from sin. He loved righteousness and hated sin so earnestly that He prayed so fervently – and His Father anointed Him with power, more than other believers who don't pray as earnestly as He did (Hebrews 1:9). Most believers take sin casually and assume that they can never overcome sin, because they are human. But that is not the reason. The reason is that *they don't pray with loud crying and tears to be saved from sin*.

It was to pray with loud crying and tears that Jesus often sought out lonely places for prayer (Luke 5:16). When we live in the city, it is difficult to find a lonely place. But I have discovered that I can pray with loud crying in my heart to God, without making any sound with my mouth, wherever I may be. I can cry out for purity in thought, word and deed. And if I fall into some sin, I want to have tears. Jesus never fell and yet He had tears. That really humbles me. Zeal for purity consumed Jesus and burned Him up. That's why He accomplished all the will of God on earth.

The fullness of the Holy Spirit brings a zeal for purity within us. Then we can follow Jesus' example. Jesus was never afraid of physical death. But He feared spiritual death and so He never wanted even the smell of sin in Him at any time. What was He praying for in Gethsemane, when He said that He didn't want to drink the cup? The cup He feared was the break of fellowship with His Father for 3 hours on the cross – when He would bear our sin. That is spiritual death. And Jesus hated sin, because it would break His fellowship with His Father.

But in Gethsemane, the Father told Him that He would have to accept that break in fellowship, if He was to save others from eternal separation from God in hell. And in His immense love for us, Jesus agreed to pay that heavy price. But all through His life He had resisted any break of fellowship with the Father – that would come through sin. The slightest smell of sin breaks fellowship with God immediately. If we value that fellowship, we will also pray with loud crying and tears that there should not be the slightest smell in us of bitterness, or spiritual pride, or impurity, or jealousy, or love of money, or hatred, or anything outside the perfect will of God.

It is because we don't have such a passion to live in God's perfect will, that we take sin so lightly. Holiness is not the major passion of most Christians. Their passion is usually some type of service for the Lord or for people in need. But that can be a worldly concept. Mary sought fellowship with Jesus while Martha sought to serve Him. And Jesus rebuked Martha saying that what Mary chose was the only thing necessary (*Luke 10:42*). It is holiness that makes our service effective.

In 5:8, we read that "*although He was a Son He learned obedience from the things He suffered.*" Jesus had to learn obedience. 'Learn' is a word connected with education. Jesus had to get an education in obedience in the days of His flesh. As God in heaven, He had never obeyed anyone. If you have never done something in your whole life, then when you do it for the first time, you learn something. Jesus learnt to obey when He came to earth as a Man. Then He not only had to obey His Father, He had to obey Joseph and Mary as well. Joseph and Mary were sinful, imperfect people. They must have made mistakes, just like all parents do. Yet Jesus obeyed them. That must have been difficult. He obeyed and suffered in His obedience. That means that He suffered the pain of denying His own will and obeying His Father, all through His life. That is how He learnt obedience when it cost Him suffering.

Some areas of obedience can be enjoyable. If you tell your child to eat up his ice-cream, he enjoys obeying you. There is no suffering for him there. But when he is playing with his friends and you tell him to stop playing and come in and do his homework, then obedience becomes painful. Even so, in our life, there are certain areas where obedience may be easy and enjoyable. We obey knowing that it is good for us. But the real test of our obedience is when we have to do something that we

don't like to do, something that involves denying our will, something that brings us pain. That is where our obedience is tested.

Jesus learned obedience by denying Himself. Anything that His Father said, "No," to, He also said, "No" to. He learned obedience through the things He suffered, and at the end of this education "*He was made perfect*" (5:9). "*Perfect*" here means "*complete*". Jesus graduated and got His degree. It is the same degree that we also need to get. We too have to overcome numerous temptations as He did. What happens if we fail in a test? Then we have to do that test again! When we pass all our tests finally, we get our degree. Then we are overcomers! That is the most important degree in life that we can ever get. Every other degree is, comparatively speaking, rubbish. When Jesus says, "Follow me", He is asking us to do what He did as the Captain of our salvation. He will never ask us to face a temptation that He Himself never faced. Let us go boldly then to the throne of grace and get grace to help us complete our education. If we have to suffer, we will suffer. But we are determined to learn obedience and complete our education.

In 5:9, we read, "*Having been made perfect, He became to all those who obey Him the source of eternal salvation.*" Jesus has now become the Professor in this college of obedience. He went through the same college from the lowest level to the highest – and obeyed in everything.

We as servants of God are now called to be junior lecturers in this same college of obedience. The more you have learnt obedience through suffering, the more you can be a true servant of the Lord who leads others also to obedience. That alone is true Christian ministry. But if you keep on failing in your tests, how can you be a lecturer in this college?

"*He has become to all those who obey Him the source of eternal salvation*" (5:9). This "*eternal salvation*" is not referring to salvation from the *penalty* of sin, but rather to salvation from the *power* of sin in daily life.

Jesus has been designated by God as a High Priest according to the order of Melchizedek (5:10). Melchizedek was a man in the Old Testament who obeyed God (*Genesis 14:18*). When God told him to take some food to someone unknown to him (Abraham), he obeyed promptly. We read further, in 5:11. "*Concerning this Jesus after the order of Melchizedek we have got a lot of things to say, but it is very hard to explain this because you people don't seem to be interested in this.*" They were not interested in an overcoming life or in godliness. Can you imagine trying to teach people about godliness who are not interested in godliness? That would be like a teacher trying to teach some important subject to students who are more interested in the score at a "World Cup" game going on at the same time. The teacher may be trying to teach mathematics or science. But nobody is listening. Their mind is on a game. That is exactly how many believers are. They are thinking more about getting a promotion

or building a house or getting married. There is nothing wrong in any of these things. But if godliness is not your *primary* passion, then it is very hard to understand these truths.

Observe research scientists. They will sit up, late into the night, doing research because they have a terrific passion to discover something new in that field. When you have a passion like that to study the word of God because you want godliness, you will understand its secret. But it is difficult to explain this to those who don't have a passion to be pure.

Growing to Maturity

Those Hebrew Christians were still babies who needed milk and not solid food. Everyone who partakes of milk is not accustomed to the *word of righteousness* (*Hebrews 5:12, 13*). Even today there are many "babies" in churches who have been believers for 25 years and still cannot eat solid food. They are satisfied with just milk – the message of repentance, faith in Jesus, forgiveness of sins, water-baptism, and baptism in the Holy Spirit. That is all they want. They have no interest in the word of righteousness. They should have become teachers in this college of obedience by now. But they were still in the kindergarten, satisfied with knowing just the A, B, C of the Christian life.

Many churches are full of *babies*. You can find 200 *babies* in a church feeding on their milk bottles every Sunday morning. They have no ear for the deeper truths of God's word. They don't want to hear about perfection. Solid food is for the mature who by practice have exercised their senses to discern between good and evil (5:14). What that means is that, in different situations they faced, they exercised their senses to discern between what was soulish (human) and what was spiritual (divine) – and they chose the spiritual. For example, in speech, they did not merely avoid the sinful. They also avoided a human response and responded in a Christ-like way. When a Christian justifies his carnal actions with the excuse, "After all we are only human", he is a babe. Paul rebuked the Corinthians saying, "*You are walking like mere men*" (*1 Corinthians 3:3*). Is it wrong to behave like other children of Adam? Of course. We should behave like Christ.

When you preach God's word, do you speak like men or do you speak like Jesus? Anyone who stands to preach God's word in a pulpit must say, "Lord, I want to preach like You preached." When God called me to preach His Word, as a young man, I prayed earnestly, "Lord, I want to preach just like You preached." I didn't want to make any man on earth my model. I studied the four gospels to see how Jesus preached. He became my Example. I want to encourage all of you to discern between soulish preaching and spiritual preaching, and between a soulish way of living and a spiritual way of living. We must all develop our spiritual senses to discern that.

In 6:1–3, the writer goes on to speak about pressing on to maturity. In Chapter 5, he used the illustration of drinking milk and eating meat. Now he uses two more illustrations. First, the example of elementary teaching and advanced teaching; and then the example of the foundation of a building and its superstructure. All these word-pictures are meant to contrast babies with mature Christians. The difference between the two is seen in times of temptation. The mature saint has a *Christlike* response to temptation, while babies have a *human* response.

Most believers behave in a *human* way – and not in a *Divine* way. Let us examine ourselves. For example, when sitting with others, if you crack a joke that embarrasses another person, do you ask yourself immediately whether Jesus would ever crack a joke like that? If you never ask such questions, you will never get light on your human behaviour – and you will always remain a baby-Christian. It is good to check ourselves at different times during each day, to see if we are acting (and reacting) as Jesus would in a similar situation. If you never examine yourself like that, you will never grow. Then you will forever be living with only a foundation and nothing ever being built on it. You will be forever in the kindergarten class, forever drinking only milk. But if you listen to the Holy Spirit, and are serious about advancing in your spiritual education, you will mature very quickly.

To use another illustration: Think of pressing on to maturity like climbing a mountain (of say, 10,000 metres). Jesus has already reached the top. When we are born again we start at the foot of this mountain. Our goal is to follow Jesus and to press on towards the top, no matter how long it may take. Then we can say to our younger brothers and sisters, “*Follow me as I follow Christ*” (*1 Corinthians 11:1*), even if we have climbed only 100 metres.

What is the foundation? What is milk? What do we learn in the kindergarten class? Repentance, first of all (6:1). That means to turn away not only from sin but also from *dead works*. Under the *Old Covenant* they had only good works and evil works. But in the *New Covenant* we have good works, evil works and *dead works*. Dead works are good works done with a bad motive. For example, preaching God’s Word is a very good thing to do. But if someone preaches for honour or for money, then it is a *dead work*. If we do something good, like giving money for God’s work but do it *unhappily*, then it becomes a *dead work*. There are many such examples. Anything you do without faith and without joy is a dead work, even if it does good to other people. We need to repent from such dead works. We need to repent of our selfish motives.

The other parts of the foundation are faith in Jesus, being baptised in water, receiving the baptism in the Holy Spirit, receiving spiritual gifts (“*laying on of hands*”), waiting for the resurrection of the dead at Christ’s return and being ready for the final judgement (*2 Corinthians 5:10*). These are all kindergarten-lessons. Christians who are occupied only

with these are still in the kindergarten. Their house is still at the foundation level. We must press on from here to maturity and perfection – to be increasingly like Jesus, in every area of our life.

The burden of the writer of *Hebrews* is that Christians must go beyond the milk-level to solid-food-level, beyond foundation to superstructure, beyond the kindergarten class to higher classes. In our earthly life, no-one would want to remain a baby forever. No-one would want to stop his education with the kindergarten. No-one would want to have a building with only a foundation. Yet many believers seem to be satisfied with just that. Even many preachers and pastors are babies. The result is that their churches are also full of babies.

In 6:1, it says, “*Let us press on to perfection.*” If we are gripped only with foundation-doctrines, we will only produce babies through our preaching. The main message of the *New Covenant* is not just to get people’s sin’s forgiven. If it had been so, then the Word would have said, “*Let us produce more babies!*” But we are exhorted instead to press on to maturity. Every baby must grow up to maturity.

It’s because churches are full of babies, that they have so many quarrels and court cases, with even leaders falling into adultery and running after money and fighting with each other, etc. Babies will always fight. When we grow up to maturity we don’t fight and we won’t covet any position or honour in the church. If you fight or covet position or honour in the church, you are still a baby. Unfortunately many leaders in Christendom today are still babies. To build a church with babies is like building a house with just a foundation and no roof or walls.

Can We Fall Away?

The writer then goes on to speak in *Chapter 6* about the danger of not pressing on to perfection. Earthly foundations may last a long time even if nothing is built on it. But in spiritual matters, if you don’t build a superstructure on the foundation (or in other words, if you don’t press on to perfection), then the foundation itself will be eroded one day. The believer will lose his salvation, the Holy Spirit will leave him and he will lose his faith, his repentance and everything. We have seen that happening in many places.

In 6:4, 5, we read a five-fold description of a born-again Christian. He is first of all ‘enlightened.’ Light came into his dark heart. Secondly, he has “*tasted the heavenly gift*” – the gift of salvation through Jesus Christ. Thirdly, he has been “*made a partaker of the Holy Spirit*”. He is not just a nominal Christian. He has received the Holy Spirit. Fourthly, he has “*tasted the good word of God*”. He has responded to God’s word. Fifthly, he has “*tasted of the powers of the age to come*”. That means he has tasted something of God’s supernatural power in his life. He has tasted the miraculous. He has tasted supernatural answers to prayer in

impossible situations. Healing from sickness is a part of “*tasting the power of the age to come*”. In the future age I will have a resurrected body in perfect health without any sickness. I can’t have that body today. But I can have a taste of it – through physical healing. Healing is a little sample of what we will get in fullness one day in the future. We cannot claim healing from *every* sickness now, as our right or privilege. But in God’s goodness and in His sovereignty, He allows us at times to taste this power and to be healed when we are sick. Whenever I am sick I pray, “Lord, give me a taste in my body of that resurrection power which will one day transform my whole body into the likeness of Jesus’ body. I know that I can’t have it fully now. But give me a taste of it in Jesus’ Name.” God decides when and to whom He gives a taste of that. It is His sovereign decision. I have tasted it many a time.

But a person who has experienced all this can still fall away if he is careless and rebellious and abuses God’s grace (6:4). This is not referring to a believer who falls and gets up again. We have all experienced that. This is referring to someone who falls *away*.

If the Bible says that a believer can fall away like that I believe it. If God has said that it is possible then it is definitely possible. If your understanding disagrees with that, then just acknowledge that your theology is wrong and that God is right. Many people come to Scripture with a preconceived idea of what it *should* say. Thus they remain blind to what the Bible actually says. If you want to know what the Bible really says, then you must come to the Bible with a totally open mind. Get rid of all your preconceived ideas and say, “Lord, open my eyes. Maybe what I have always believed is wrong.” The Bible was written for simple people, for fishermen, not for intelligent scholars. God hides His truths from the clever and the intelligent and reveals them to those who are humble like babes (*Matthew 11:25*).

Why do such believers fall away? Because “*they crucify the Son of God afresh*” (6:6). What does that mean? It was sin that crucified Christ. And so whenever a believer (who has seen clearly that Christ died for his sins) takes sin lightly in his life and keeps on sinning deliberately, thus despising the grace of God, he is crucifying Christ all over again. When he sins deliberately, he is saying “*Crucify Him, crucify Him*”, just like the crowds said in relation to Jesus.

Jesus need never have been crucified if man had not sinned. When I explain the gospel to little children I tell them, “Even if you were the only boy or girl in the whole world who did something wrong and everybody else was good, Jesus would still have come down from heaven and died for you”. That is the gospel. If you were the only sinner in the whole world and everybody else was holy, Jesus would still have come and died for you. For whose sins would He have died then? Only for your sins! You can believe that Jesus died for the sins of the whole world and still remain unconverted. The day you realise that it was for your sins that

Jesus died, you will be converted. It was your sins that crucified Him. So every time you sin, you are crucifying Him afresh. I am not talking about slipping and falling in sin. I am talking about deliberately sinning. The difference between the two is like the difference between accidentally stamping on somebody's foot and deliberately stamping on it! At times you may accidentally lose your temper. But there are other times, when you may plan and scheme to sin. Such sins are much more serious than accidental ones. If you accidentally put a nail into the hands of Jesus, that's not as serious as deliberately nailing Him. We may fall into sexually lustful thoughts accidentally. Perhaps you did not expect that there would be a filthy indecent picture in that magazine. But it was there and you saw it and were suddenly tempted. That is quite different from going and buying a pornographic magazine and looking at it. When you keep on sinning deliberately, you are crucifying the Son of God afresh.

It is possible for a believer to keep on sinning deliberately and thus lose his salvation. For example, if he keeps on refusing to forgive someone, God will not forgive him (*according to Matthew 6:15*). Then he will be lost and go to hell, even though he may once have been saved. When Jesus hung on the cross, He said, "Father forgive them." But if you say, "No, I won't forgive him," then you are crucifying the Son of God afresh. You will then fall away. It was a terrible shame for Jesus to be crucified openly, hanging almost naked, before all men. And when you sin deliberately, you are "*putting Christ to an open shame*" once again (6:6). That's how we must see deliberate sin. And *as long as* a person keeps on crucifying Christ like that, it is impossible to bring him to repentance. But if he comes to his senses and sees the seriousness of his sin as being equivalent to crucifying Christ afresh, then he *can* still repent and come back to God.

6:7 indicates that a believer who keeps on sinning is only interested in God's blessing on his life, but not in bringing forth fruit in his life for God's glory. He keeps on drinking the rain, but instead of bringing forth vegetation that is useful to others, he brings forth thorns and thistles (6:8). He will attend meetings that teach that God will bless him with wealth and health but not meetings that tell him how he can be free from sin. God bless him. But what does he bring forth after drinking in all this rain from heaven? Not love, joy, peace, long suffering, gentleness, goodness, faithfulness, meekness and self-control, but bitterness, an unforgiving spirit, sexual sin, etc. He takes advantage of the grace of God and never repents. That is a very dangerous path for anyone to walk in.

The blessings of the new covenant are greater than the blessings of the old covenant. But if you fall away from the new covenant the fall will be greater too. If you fall from a height of 3 metres, you can be hurt. But it won't kill you. But if you fall from a height of 300 metres, that will

kill you. When old covenant people like David fell into adultery, it was like falling from a height of 3 metres. That was bad, but not very serious, because God had not done any great work *in* David. But now that Christ and the Holy Spirit have lifted us to heaven itself in the new covenant, if we fall, it can lead to spiritual death.

A donkey can never rise to great heights; but it cannot fall to great depths either. A donkey could never, for example, have become Satan. Only the highest of God's created beings (an angel) could fall and become Satan. The greater the work God does in us, the greater the spiritual injury, when we fall.

The Israelites were forgiven by God nine times for their disobedience. But when they disobeyed Him the *tenth time*, they were not allowed to enter Canaan (*Number 14:22, 23*). But Moses, their leader, was not given even one chance. When he disobeyed God *just once*, he was punished immediately and not allowed to enter Canaan (*Numbers 20:12*). Why the difference? Because when God gives more to someone, He requires more from him as well.

So, in this new covenant age, if a church-leader falls into adultery, it is not proper for him to come back into leadership – as David did under the old covenant. If he repents, he can be restored to fellowship with God and become a member in his church again; but he cannot be given spiritual leadership in that church thereafter. *The higher a man rises, the more serious it is when he falls.*

Under the old covenant, people followed Moses. But we follow Jesus. The difference in spiritual height between Moses and Jesus is vast. And so falling is a more serious thing when we are disciples of Jesus. But the writer goes on to say that although he has given this warning, he believes that they will not fall away like that (6:9).

But along with those strong words he also adds a word of encouragement. "*God is not unrighteous. He has not forgotten your work or the love you have shown to His name in serving other believers*" (6:10). Jesus said that anyone who gave a cup of cold water in His name would not lose his reward. Then he goes on to say: "*I desire that you will continue with the same diligence and the full assurance of hope until the end*" (6:11). He encourages them not to be lazy but to press on until the end with the same diligence. There is no time in the Christian life when we should be lazy. Even if you are 90 years old, press on and serve the Lord. Don't waste a single day of your life.

I have been constantly challenged by this poem of A.B. Simpson's:

*No time for trifling in this life of mine
Not this the path the blessed Master trod;
But strenuous toil – each hour and power employed
Always and all for God.*

*Time swiftly flies – eternity is near,
And soon my dust may lie beneath the sod.
How dare I waste my life, or cease to be
Always and all for God.*

Every day of Jesus' life and every bit of energy in His body were devoted 100% for His Father. And that is how we too are to live until the end of our days. If you are lazy, you will never enter into this new covenant life. You have to be radical and wholehearted. You have to give up many things that worldly people are interested in, and concentrate on things of eternal value. I am not saying that you can't go for a picnic or have a little entertainment. But make sure that even your times of relaxation are kept in their proper proportion.

Many Christians do not spend time studying the Scriptures. They say they are busy. But we can find the time if we want to. So, "*don't be sluggish, but be imitators of those who through faith and patience inherit the promises*" (6:12).

Jesus Our High Priest

Faith and patience are always linked together in the new covenant. When God gave the promise of a son to Abraham at the age of 75, it took 25 years for Abraham to receive that son. But "*he patiently waited and he obtained the promise*" (6:15).

God told Abraham, "*I will surely bless you and I will surely multiply you*" (6:14). Under the old covenant, when God blessed a man he had children. That was part of the old covenant promise: "*I will bless you and I will multiply you.*" In the new covenant, the same is true *spiritually*. When God blesses us He gives us spiritual children. If God had told Abraham, "*I will bless you but you won't have any children,*" Abraham would have been terribly disappointed. And if God tells me today that He will bless me, but He won't give me any spiritual children, I will be terribly disappointed too. God did not disappoint Abraham – and He won't disappoint us.

God gave Abraham a son who would fulfil his vision. And when God blesses us He will give us brothers who have the same vision, the same passion, the same desire and the same longing as we have. Jesus had 11 such disciples. If you say that God is blessing you but you don't reproduce even one person like yourself, something is wrong. The will of God is that we have spiritual children who have the same passion and vision that we have.

When people look at our physical children, they say, "He looks like Daddy" – the same colour and facial features, etc. And spiritually, our children will have the same passion, the same longing and the same desire that we have. That must be our desire for our local church. When God

blesses us He will multiply us. But like Abraham, we will have to wait patiently for it. Abraham waited in faith and received the promise. So will we.

God had given us two unchangeable things – His *word* and His *oath* (6:16–18). With those two, we can lay hold of the hope set before us – a hope that is the anchor for our soul. What is that hope? Many Christians say that their hope is the second coming of Christ. But that is only half our hope. *1 John 3:2* says that *He will come again* and when He comes *we will be like Him*. Those are the two parts of our hope. The next verse (*1 John 3:3*) goes on to say that “*everyone who has this hope will purify himself, just as Christ is pure.*” This double hope is called “*the sure and steadfast anchor of our soul*” (6:19).

When a ship drops an anchor it cannot move. We saw earlier in *Chapter 2* about the danger of drifting. The way to stop drifting is by dropping this anchor – the anchor of hope that we will become like Jesus one day. If you have any other goal in life than that – such as, to make plenty of money or to be a great preacher – you will certainly drift. It doesn’t matter whether you are a mother looking after many children at home, or an evangelist bringing many people to Christ around the world. The anchor for both is the same – the hope of becoming like Jesus. One is not more important to God than the other.

Here we read that Jesus has gone inside the veil as our *Forerunner* (6:20). This is a title of Jesus that is not well known. Most Christians have heard of Jesus as their Shepherd, the Way, the Truth, the Life, and as their Saviour, Lord, King and Healer. But very few have heard of Him as their *Forerunner*? Many believers don’t even know about this verse.

The book of *Hebrews* is one of the most important books in the New Testament, next to the gospels. Only in *Hebrews*, do we read of Jesus as our Forerunner, Who was made like us in all things and Who was tempted like us in all points, without sinning, because He prayed with loud crying and tears (2:17; 4:15; 5:7). Only in *Hebrews* do we read about the terms of the new covenant (8:10–12), about the new and living way that Jesus opened for us through His flesh (10:20) and how we can press on to perfection in His footsteps (6:1; 12:1, 2), etc. This is a very, very important book; and that is why Satan prevents most believers from studying this book seriously. He doesn’t want them to be overcomers, or to press on to perfection, or to drop an anchor and stop drifting.

In 7:1, we read about Melchizedek – the king of Salem (or Jerusalem). The priesthood of Melchizedek is shown to be greater than the priesthood of Levi. And the writer proves this in an interesting way. When Abraham met Melchizedek he gave Melchizedek 10% of all the spoils he had collected in the war (7:4). And since Levi, as a descendant, was within Abraham’s body then, Levi also gave that tithe to Melchizedek.

Therefore Melchizedek is greater than Levi!! Since Jesus has been appointed as a priest of the order of Melchizedek, His priesthood is therefore greater than that of Levi.

The Levitical priests taught people to pay their tithes. They would threaten people saying that God would curse those who did not pay their tithes (*Malachi 3:10*). But Melchizedek never asked Abraham for his tithe. He only accepted a gift that Abraham gave voluntarily. *In the new covenant, all gifts are voluntary; and there is no command to tithe.* God's people give voluntary gifts just like Abraham gave to Melchizedek. Jesus never asked anyone to give their tithes to support Him. He accepted only what people gave Him voluntarily (*Luke 8:2, 3*).

Most of Christendom today follows the practices of the priesthood of Levi. When a pastor tells people to pay their tithes to support him and his ministry, he is not following Jesus' example but the example of the Levitical priests. Those priests wore a long dress to distinguish them from other people. And that is how many "Christian" priests and bishops dress today also. Jesus and the apostles however dressed just like the ordinary people of their day. In the priesthood of Levi they also had a special building which they called the house of God – the temple. Today also many churches are called the house of God or "*the sanctuary*". All this is going back to the old covenant. Most Christians live under the old covenant – and that is why they are defeated by sin as well.

Melchizedek however was totally different from all this. He went to meet Abraham, taking some food with him to bless Abraham and his many servants. He did not go to get any money from Abraham. He did not need that, because he was a king. He was not dependent on Abraham's gifts. Abraham gave him a gift from the spoils of war, just to show his gratitude for the vast amount of food that Melchizedek had brought to feed Abraham's retinue of 318 servants. Melchizedek accepted the gift graciously and blessed Abraham with the blessing of God. Paul was like Melchizedek too, for he also said to the Philippians that he accepted their gift only so that God would bless them (*Philippians 4:16–19*). The priesthood of Levi however was totally different. They were dependent on people's gifts and so they would force the people to pay their tithes. We can learn a lot about the right financial principles for Christian work by comparing the priesthood of Levi with that of Melchizedek.

Melchizedek had the dignity of a king. Jesus and Paul had that too. And so does every genuine servant of God. Jesus and Paul trusted God alone for their needs. When they received gifts from others, it was in order that the people who gave the gifts would be blessed, and not because they coveted what the people had. Pastors who want to manifest the dignity of the priesthood of Melchizedek (of which Jesus is the High Priest) should not descend to the methods of the Levitical priests.

The Levitical priests did not have the dignity of a king. They kept on asking people for their tithes. When the people did not pay their tithes to

the Levites (in the time of Nehemiah), they stopped working as priests and started farming (*Nehemiah 13:10*). They served God only when they were paid each month. And that is exactly how most preachers and pastors work for God today. Melchizedek was totally different. He behaved with the dignity of a king even in the presence of a rich man like Abraham. Where do we find servants of God like that today? Most pastors flatter rich people in order to get their money.

Melchizedek was a picture of Christ in other ways too. He was a king of *righteousness* (by his name), and a king of *peace* (*Salem* means “*peace*”) (7:2). Righteousness and peace met together in Jesus Christ (*Psalm 85:10*). Further, Melchizedek appears in the book of *Genesis* – which is a book of beginnings and where the genealogy of every man of God is clearly indicated – whether it be of Enoch, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob or Joseph. The lineage of all these men from Adam downwards is clearly shown. But there is no record there of Melchizedek’s father or mother. In the same way, the deaths of all these men of God in *Genesis* are also mentioned. But Melchizedek’s death is not mentioned. In this way also, Melchizedek is a type of Jesus who lived from all eternity in heaven: “*Without father, without mother, without genealogy, having neither beginning of days nor end of life*” (7:3).

Jesus is different in yet another way too. The priests in the old covenant had to offer sacrifices for sin, every day. But Jesus offered up his body as a sacrifice just once (7:26–28). And when those priests offered their sacrifices, it was for the sins of the people as well as for their own sins. Jesus however offered His body only for the sins of the people. He had no sin Himself. The absolute purity of Christ as a Man described in 7:26. “*This High Priest of ours is not like other high priests on earth. He is holy, innocent, undefiled, completely separated from sinners.*” There was not a trace of sin in Him, unconscious, conscious or of any other type. He lived a perfect life on earth.

Notice another fundamental difference in these two priesthoods. Under the old covenant, a man became a priest by a carnal commandment: He had to be a descendant of Levi. Jesus however became the Guarantor of a better covenant by the power of an indestructible life (7:16, 22). The priesthood of Levi depended on earthly qualifications. But it is not so in the new covenant. If you imagine that you can serve God because you have a Bible school degree, you are back to the priesthood of Levi. In the priesthood of Melchizedek, what you need is a life that cannot be destroyed by sin (7:16). It is the indestructible life of Jesus within us alone that can qualify us to be servants of God in the new covenant. The more we have of this heavenly life, the more effective we will be as new covenant priests of the order of Melchizedek.

In 7:25, we read that Jesus lives to make intercession for us in heaven. That is yet another mark of the priesthood of Melchizedek. They pray for others. They pray that the Lord will bless the people whom they

preach to. And Jesus Himself intercedes for us. In the Levitical priesthood, they just prayed routine, formal prayers, did their jobs and went home. But Jesus and His priests are devoted to prayer. Take time to study *Hebrews* 7 and see the difference between the old covenant and new covenant priesthoods.

The Glorious New Covenant

Chapter 8 continues with the theme of the difference between the old covenant and the new covenant. Jesus is our High Priest at the right hand of God in heaven. The tabernacle that Moses built was actually a shadow of the heavenly realities (8:5). That was why God told Moses, “*Make sure when building the tabernacle that everything is exactly according to the pattern I gave you on the mountain.*” In the same way, when we build the church and in all our ministry, everything must be exactly as God has taught us in the new covenant. So it is tragic to see people who call themselves new covenant believers going back to the rules of the priesthood of Levi! That is one reason why the glory has departed. In the Old Testament Moses did everything exactly according to the pattern that God showed him. He didn’t change it, modify it, or bring in his human ideas into it. And then the glory of God came upon that tabernacle. If we build a new covenant church today exactly as taught in the New Testament, we will see the glory of God too. Today our pattern is Jesus Himself. In the old covenant, they had a scroll giving all the details of the tabernacle. Today our pattern is found in a Person. We have to pattern our life and ministry exactly according to the pattern Jesus has shown us.

So, to be a new covenant servant, we must look at Jesus more and more. Consider Him. Look at this High Priest of ours. Pattern your life and ministry more and more after Him. If you want to know how to serve the Lord, look at Jesus and see how He served the Father. If you want to know how to preach, see how Jesus preached. If you want to know how to live, study how Jesus lived. If you want to know how to live at home, look at how Jesus lived at home in subjection to His mother for 30 years. If you want to know how to work, look at how Jesus worked in the carpenter’s shop. That is our pattern in every area. Make sure that you do exactly according to that pattern.

Then the new covenant is described in 8:7–13. Even the letter to the *Romans* does not explain the new covenant as clearly as it is done here in *Hebrews*.

If the first covenant had been faultless, there would have been no need for a second covenant (*Hebrews* 8:7). What does that teach us? That the law was faulty. Don’t misunderstand this word “faulty”. This is not like a car manufacturer discovering some fault in his first model and then rectifying it in the next model. No. God knew that the first covenant could never accomplish what He desired for man. But He gave it to man

for 1500 years, to teach man that however hard he tried he could never come up to His standards. No matter how hard he tried he would never be able to manifest His nature. The Israelites tried very hard and always failed. Moses lost his temper, David committed adultery, Elijah wanted to die, and John the Baptist lost his faith in Jesus as the Messiah when he was imprisoned. They could not live up to God's standard. That was one purpose of the law.

For us too, our initial experience after being born again is somewhat like that. We hear a message about victory over sin – and we try, and try, and try. And we fail, and fail, and fail. Finally, some learn the lesson that they cannot get victory in their own strength. Then God leads such people into the new covenant. It is the same lesson – of our spiritual impotence – that we have to learn when we seek to serve the Lord.

Even today, after more than fifty years of preaching, when I stand up to preach, I know that I am weak and helpless and cannot preach what the Lord wants me to preach *in the way He wants me to preach it*. I will be utterly foolish if I think I can depend on my past experience." The anointing of the Holy Spirit is what we need every single time we speak, even if we have preached the same message a hundred times.

First of all, in the new covenant, God promises not only to forgive our sins, but also never to remember our past sins (8:12). Under the old covenant, there was a constant remembrance of past sins. But in the new covenant there is no remembrance of past sins at all. When you enter the new covenant, the first thing God does is to blot out your past life record. You may have lived a very wicked life, but once you are forgiven and justified by the blood of Christ, *God sees you as though you had never sinned in your entire life!* All have sinned and come short of God's glory. Some have sinned more than others. But God totally forgives everyone who repents. To use an illustration: If pass marks in an examination are 40%, and someone gets 25% and you get zero, he is certainly better than you. But both of you have still failed. Then God in grace gives both of you 100%. Thus both of you become equal in His eyes. This is the wonder of justification. Once you enter the new covenant, you must not look back to your past, except in gratitude to God for having forgiven you so much.

Secondly, in the new covenant we can know God personally as our Father. God says "*All shall know Me from the least to the greatest*" (8:11). Every person, starting from the *least* to the greatest, can know God personally. In the world, they normally say "*greatest to the least*". But with God, everything is the opposite of the world. He starts from the *least*. The least believer can know the Lord personally. You don't have to go to a prophet to find out God's will now. You can know God personally as your Father and Friend and go to Him at any time with any need. You don't need somebody else through whom you go to God now. Others can teach you

the Bible. But you don't need anyone's help to know God as your own Father. "*Nobody will teach his neighbour saying, 'Know the Lord.'*" (8:11). This is your privilege under the new covenant.

Thirdly, God now promises to write His laws in our heart and in our mind. "*I will put My laws into their minds and write them upon their hearts*" (8:10). In the old covenant, God wrote His laws on the *outside* – on tablets of stone. Now He writes His laws *inside* us. That means that God will now help us to obey Him. He says, The old covenant was full of "You shall"s and "You shall not"s (*Exodus 20:1–17*). In the new covenant however, God says, "*I will, I will, I will, I will, I will*" – 5 times (8:10–12). The old covenant could be likened to a master commanding his servant, "You must take care of all my property perfectly, you must keep the house perfectly tidy, you must wash the clothes perfectly clean, you must cook food perfectly, etc." – and the servant is overwhelmed by these commands of his master. The new covenant however can be likened to a husband telling his wife, "Let us do everything *together*. I will help you look after the children, wash the clothes, keep the house tidy and even cook the food. I will help you in every task." How much easier that makes things for a wife! The new covenant can also be likened to a father telling his small child, "I will hold your hand and teach you how to write the alphabet perfectly" In the new covenant, God holds me and helps me obey His commandments.

The Lord writing His laws in our *minds* means that He gives us the *desire* to keep His laws. His writing it on our *hearts* means that He also gives us the *ability* to keep those laws. What more do we need? In *Philippians*, we read the same thing in different words. "*God works in us to will (= desire) and to do (=ability) His good pleasure*" (*Philippians 2:13*). All we have to do is cooperate with God as He works within us.

Think of that rock in Mount Sinai where God wrote His commandments. That rock submitted to God. When God wrote, the rock (as it were) said, "All right God, write on me." And God wrote. That is what we have to do too – allow God to write His laws within us. Mary, the mother of Jesus, said to the angel Gabriel, "I submit to the Lord. Whatever the Lord has decided to do within me, let it take place." She submitted – and God created the body of Jesus within her womb. She *could not* have produced that herself. At the same time God *would not* have produced that body in her womb if she had *not* submitted. Mary submitted and the Holy Spirit produced the body. That is a beautiful example for us. We submit and the Holy Spirit produces the nature of Christ within us. We do not have to produce the nature of Christ. In fact, we *cannot*. To try and produce the nature of Christ within us is as foolish as the virgin Mary just determining to produce a baby on her own! She could never have done that. The Holy Spirit had to produce that body. It is interesting to note that the New Testament begins with that story. Mary submitted and the Holy Spirit produced it. It has to be the same with us.

Hebrews

Jesus referred to The Holy Spirit as the *finger of God* (*Compare Matthew 12:28 with Luke 11:20*). The Holy Spirit was the One Who wrote on the two tablets of stone in Sinai. And He is the One Who now writes God's laws in our mind and on our heart. He is the One Who gives us the desire and the ability to do God's will. In Nazareth, if Mary had not been willing to submit to the Holy Spirit, God would have bypassed her and found someone else to be the mother of Jesus; and Mary would have missed that honour and privilege. And if you don't submit to the Holy Spirit today, God will bypass you and give the privilege of fulfilling the particular ministry (that God planned for you) to someone else. Don't miss out on the privilege of fulfilling God's perfect plan for your life.

In 8:13, we read that "*the old covenant is obsolete*". In Chapter 9, the theme is the benefits that have come to us in the new covenant, through the better sacrifice that God provided for us. In the old covenant tabernacle, there was a thick veil between the Holy Place and the Most Holy Place. God was indicating to the people thereby that they could not enter into God's immediate presence because of sin in their life. When Jesus shed His blood for us on the cross, the veil was torn and man could now enter God's presence.

Jesus Our Perfect Offering

In 9:9 we read that the old covenant could not make a worshipper perfect in his conscience. There is a "*perfection*" that we cannot attain as long as we live on earth; but there is also a perfection that we can attain. To be totally perfect in our entire being, as Jesus was, is something that we can have only when Christ returns. But if we live in the new covenant, we can be '*perfect in our conscience*.' With this perfection, we press on to the final perfection. We start with a perfect conscience and end with perfect likeness to Christ. So when we speak about perfection, we are only referring to being perfect in our *conscience*. We must distinguish between the things that differ. Otherwise we will be confused.

In 9:14, we are told that Jesus Christ offered Himself up *without any blemish* to God. How did He offer Himself to God without any blemish? He was tempted exactly like us, in so many ways during His 33½ years on earth. Yet He did not sin. How did He manage that? This verse gives us the answer: "*Through the Eternal Spirit*." It was through the Holy Spirit's power that Jesus remained without blemish. He lived on earth, not with His inherent power as God, but as a man with the same power of the Holy Spirit that He now offers us. With the Holy Spirit's power we too can overcome temptation as He did. But you have to seek for that power and submit to it as Jesus did. It is just like the electric power that we have in our houses that powers up so many gadgets. That happens because we connect the power to all those gadgets. Through the Spirit's power, we too can offer ourselves without blemish in our conscience to God.

Jesus' blood cleanses our conscience not only from sin but also from *dead works* (9:14). Dead works are works that may appear holy and good before men. But they are works done without love, without joy, without faith, without zeal, done for personal gain, and merely to ease one's conscience, etc. We must repent and cleanse ourselves of these dead works before we can serve God.

9:27 is a very important verse. It says that it is appointed for men to die once and then to be judged by God. There are two truths that we can learn from this verse. First of all, that once a man dies there is nothing further for him to look forward to, but judgement. There is no second chance to repent after death. The other beautiful truth is that God waits until a man dies before He judges him. He hopes that the man will improve any time before he dies. Most of us however are not like that. We judge people long before they die – because we don't hold out any hope for them! Let us learn to follow God's example and wait until people die before we judge them. Thus we will also save ourselves from a lot of sinning.

In 10:1, we read that the law could never make anyone perfect. Notice the word "perfect" here again. What was the fault with the old covenant? In one sentence, we could say that it was this: *It could not make anyone perfect*. What is the mark of Christians who live under the old covenant today? *They are afraid of the word 'perfection'*. What is the main feature of the new covenant? *It can make people perfect in their conscience and thus help them to press on to perfection in their life, till one day they become like Jesus*.

If you are serious about the new covenant you will never again be afraid of the word 'perfection'. You will long to be perfect. If you don't have a longing to be perfect, you are an old-covenant Christian.

In 10:5, we read that "God doesn't want our offerings." I quote this verse to people who have suffered under preachers who have kept on telling them that God wants their offerings. What does it say here that God desires from us? Our bodies. Under the old covenant, the emphasis was, "Pay your tithes to the Levites." In the New Testament the emphasis is, "*Give your bodies to God*" (Romans 12:1). A church that is constantly asking its people to pay their tithes, is an old-covenant church. A new-covenant church will emphasise presenting our bodies – our eyes, our hands, our tongues, etc., – as a living sacrifice to God. It is not material offerings that God desires from us today, but our bodies.

Giving our bodies to God is the new-covenant equivalent of the old-covenant tithe – just like Christ dying on the cross is the equivalent of the old-covenant lamb sacrificed on the Passover day. Does this mean that we don't have to give any money now for the work of God on earth?

You may certainly give, but God wants only what you give cheerfully (*2 Corinthians 9:7*). In any case, He wants *your body first of all*. Those who give Him their bodies usually give Him everything else as well. But everything must be given cheerfully and joyfully.

When Jesus came into the world, He did not come to give tithes and material offerings to His Father (*10:5*). He came to give His body as a sacrifice. And He is the Mediator of the new covenant and taught us that what God wants from us, primarily, is our body.

Many give offerings of money and service to God. You may boast that you have distributed hundreds of tracts, or served as a missionary in some difficult area for many years, or prayed for a number of hours, or fasted for many days. These are all good offerings. But those offerings don't have any value to God, if you still lust sexually with your eyes and still get angry. Then you haven't given Him what He wants first of all – your body. Then God will say to you, "Forget about giving Me your sacrifices and your offerings. Give Me your eyes and your tongue first of all. I want your body." Don't substitute material offerings for your body. People who value the material offerings they have given to God are back in the old covenant. In the new covenant what God wants is your body. The book of *Hebrews* is one of the most important books in the Bible. If you want to live in the new covenant, study *Hebrews*.

Jesus never had a body when He was in heaven. When He came into this world the Father gave Him a body. What was He to do with that body? Was He to show His love for His Father by going to some difficult place like Africa as a missionary? Or was He to pray for 4 hours every day and fast twice a week? None of these. He says, "*I have come (to earth), to do Your will O God – and not to make sacrifices*" (*10:7*). This is what Jesus used His body for – and this is what we have to use our bodies for, as well. When we present our bodies to God, it is to do His will thereafter with every part of them – with our eyes, hands, tongues, passions, desires, etc. Our only passion in life thereafter will be to do the will of God every day.

What is the will of God for us, *first of all?* "*This is the will of God – even your sanctification*" (*1 Thessalonians 4:3*). That is the first part of God's will for every one of us. And when it comes to our ministry, we are not to rush here and there trying to do something for God. We must again do the will of God in our ministry. Jesus taught us to pray, "*Thy will be done on earth as it is done in heaven.*" The angels in heaven do not run around trying to be busy for God in some way or the other. Jesus also did not run around trying to do something or the other for His Father. He sought the Father's will and did just that. When the Father told Him to work as a carpenter from age 18 to 30, He did that. After He had been faithful in His earthly work for all those years, the Father told Him to go out and preach for 3½ years. Jesus was equally pleasing

to the Father when He was making stools and tables for 12 years as He was when preaching the gospel and healing the sick.

Jesus did not come to earth to be a missionary or to do full-time work. He came only to do His Father's will, whatever that was. When His Father's will was carpentry, He did that. When His Father's will was full-time work, He did that. We must dedicate ourselves also to do the will of the Father, and not this job or that. God may call you to be a carpenter and not a missionary. Are you willing?

If I join the Indian Army, I cannot ask to be posted to a place of my choice. I have to go where they tell me to go. They can post me to the battle-front or they can post me in the supply department behind the scenes. That is their choice. It is the same when we join the Lord's army.

Jesus said, "*Lo, I come to do Your will, O God.*" Thus He took away the first covenant and established the second covenant (10:8, 9).

In the first covenant there was a lot of religious activity – especially inside the tabernacle and the temple. But Jesus did not do any *religious* work for 90% of His earthly life. He helped His mother at home and supported the family as a carpenter – for 30 years. Then He preached for the next 3½ years. Thus He finished the work His Father gave Him to do and glorified Him (See John 17:4). We learn there that to help your mother at home is as important in God's eyes as healing the sick. In the new covenant, whatever God wants you to do at a particular time that is God's will – and that is the holiest thing you can do at that particular time. Many people have gone out into full-time ministry and missionary work without a clear call from God. They end up frustrated and discouraged. I have come across old missionaries who have made a mess of their lives because they did not seek the will of God but went out to "*serve God in the foreign field*" because someone pressurised them to do so. Don't make that mistake yourself. Follow Jesus's example. He has set the pattern for us all.

Then the terms of the covenant are repeated in 10:16, 17: "*I will put My laws upon their hearts and I will write them on their minds. I will not remember their sins any more.*" This is so very important – and that is why they are repeated a second time.

A New and Living Way

10:19–25 is the central passage of *Hebrews*. It speaks about *a new and living way* that Jesus inaugurated for us to enter into the immediate presence of God and live there *permanently*. This was God's plan for man and this is our privilege in the new covenant. "*We now have confidence, brethren, to enter into the Most Holy Place, (first of all) by the blood of Jesus and (secondly) by a new and living way that He inaugurated for*

us through the veil, that is, His flesh." The veil was torn in the temple when Jesus died. And that veil symbolised His flesh – that is His self-will – which was rent (crucified) every day of His earthly life, so that He might do only His Father's will at all times (*John 6:38*). This way is called *the new and living way*. "New" means "ever-fresh". In *Revelation 5:9*, we read that they sang a *new* song in heaven about Jesus' death on Calvary. How could that possibly be "*new*" song? It is *fresh* for all who sing it. It is as if they are hearing about Christ's death for the *very first time*. This is how the Holy Spirit makes the death of Christ living and fresh for us constantly. In the same way, the way of following Jesus is also fresh and exciting for us every day. This is the ever-fresh way of the cross, the way of death to Self and to our own will, offering our bodies to do God's will alone every day. As we saw earlier in this chapter, "*Behold, I come to do Your will, O God.*" We don't have to rend the veil now, for Jesus has already rent the veil and opened the way. But we have to walk along it to live in God's presence constantly.

Jesus has inaugurated this new road for us to walk in. It was not easy for Jesus to walk this way. He had to pay the price of death to Self every day for 33½ years to inaugurate this way. This is the highway of holiness that Jesus now invites us to walk in (*Isaiah 35:8*). But we must be careful not to be taken up with the way itself – the way of the cross. Our eyes should always be on the goal. Jesus endured the cross because of the joy set before Him of fellowship with the Father. If you are travelling from Chennai to Bangalore by a newly-made, excellent road, you will not spend your time admiring the road. Then you will never reach Bangalore. The road is only a means to reach your destination. So also, the way of the cross is only a means to enter the Father's presence and to dwell there every day. Many believers keep talking only about putting the flesh to death. But they are gloomy, miserable, judgemental of others and critical – proving that their flesh is still very alive!! Thus they never make any progress in their lives. After twenty years, they are still talking about the road and never seem to get any closer to their destination – they do not become any more Christlike. Our goal is Christlikeness and a closer fellowship with God.

We are not to run the race looking at the way but at Jesus (*Hebrews 12:1*). Runners never look at the road they are running on. They are always looking in front towards the finish line. People who look down at the road and run will come last in the race. If you are merely gripped with the message of the cross you are not holy. But if you are gripped with the Person of Jesus Himself, then you are holy.

The Lord has opened the way of the cross for us to walk in – and He is our High Priest and Forerunner. So we can now "*draw near to God now with a sincere heart in the full assurance of faith, with our hearts cleansed from an evil conscience, and our bodies washed with pure*

water" (10:22). That last phrase means that every sin that we committed with our bodies has been set right. We have apologised to all the people we hurt in any way, we have returned money that we cheated people of, etc. Thus our tongues and hands are cleansed from those defilements. We now "*hold fast to the confession of our hope and do not waver*". We now think of our fellow-believers and "*consider how to stir them up to love*". We no longer live for ourselves; and we seek to "*fellowship with other people as often as possible*", awaiting the return of our Lord eagerly (10:23–25). Take this passage – 10:19–25 – seriously and meditate on it. It's a very important passage in *Hebrews*.

Then the writer speaks of the danger of sinning deliberately. Then there can be no more sacrifice for our sins. If we have truly repented our attitude to sin would have changed radically. We may fall in a moment of weakness. But we will hate sin and try our best to avoid it.

The new and living way is a *way* and not a gate. It is a way in which we must keep moving forward. Later, in 12:1, the writer speaks about running the race looking unto Jesus. Christians backslide when they stop seeking to move forward. An aircraft in the sky stays up as long as it is moving. If it turns off its engines and stops, it immediately begins to fall. That is a picture of the Christian life. If we don't keep moving forward, we will backslide.

The writer then warns us about Old Testament people who were punished without mercy when they sinned (10:28). Since God has called us with a much higher calling than them, our punishment will be greater if we take sin lightly now – for that amounts to trampling Christ under our feet, treating the blood of Jesus as something cheap and despising the Holy Spirit's voice. It's a terrifying thing to fall into the hands of the living God (10:31).

He then goes on to say that we must be willing to suffer for Christ's sake (10:32–34). People may take away our property. We should not be occupied with these earthly things. When persecution comes to India, we may lose many earthly things and lose our honour too. We may not get jobs easily because we are Christians seeking to be upright, we may not get promotions. People may turn against us and they may tear down our church buildings. If we live in the Most Holy Place with God, we will be able to take these things joyfully (10:34). They will not disturb us, because we know that we have a much better possession in heaven.

But instead of going this way if we shrink back, then the Lord will have no pleasure in us (10:38). There are only two ways – either you will live by faith or you will shrink back. If you live by faith, you will make progress. The opposite of living by faith is shrinking back (10:38). So we see from that verse that all backsliding is primarily *a failure of faith*.

Heroes of Faith

Then in *Chapter 11*, he expands on the subject of faith. He says that God requiring *faith* in man is not something new. Even the Old Testament saints lived by faith. Abel offered a sacrifice to God by faith (11:4). Faith is defined as believing those invisible things which we know for certain are true. It is the firm conviction that the things we have not seen as yet we will receive. Abel had such faith and so he gave the best he had to God, because he knew that would please God (*Genesis 4:4*). Cain on the other hand gave a cheap offering to God (*Genesis 4:3*). Enoch also walked with God by faith for 300 years (*Hebrews 11:5*). He walked by faith in an unseen God, pleasing Him, when all others were living only to please themselves. God tested Enoch for 300 years and then took him up to heaven.

Without this type of faith whatever other good qualities we may have, it will be impossible to please God (11:6). We may do a lot of work for God and make many sacrifices for Him. But if we do not live by faith in an invisible God, we cannot please Him. Jesus said that those who believe *without seeing Him* are more blessed than those who believe after having seen Him (*John 20:29*). Do you want to please God? Then you must believe two things about Him: First, that He really exists up there in heaven; and secondly that He rewards all those who seek Him diligently (*Hebrews 11:6*).

Do you really believe that your Father-God is there in heaven – for you? When you face some trouble or difficulty, who do you turn to *first*? If you live by faith, it will be God. There is nothing wrong in asking people for help. But the first person we turn to must be God. If the ruler of my country were my father, any time I had a problem I would just ring him up and say, “Dad, I have a bit of a problem. Can you help me?” And he would say, “Sure. What is it?” I would tell him my problem – and he would say, “Don’t worry, son. I will take care of that.” I would then put the phone down and be at rest. Do you believe that your Father in heaven is more powerful than the greatest rulers in the world? There are certain problems like sickness etc., that even powerful rulers cannot solve. But your heavenly Father can. Then why don’t you talk to Him first? Let us develop the habit of going to God first at all times, with our problems – both big and small. “*He is a Rewarder of those who diligently seek Him*” (11:6).

Noah also lived by faith (11:7). He “*condemned the world*” by the way he lived. That’s how we must live too. When people saw Noah selling his property and spending all his savings to make the ark and preaching that God’s judgement was going to come on the world – that was a condemnation of the world’s lifestyle. Because people in the world were using their money only to enjoy themselves. Noah however was denying himself all the time. He did not go on holidays, he did not waste money on buying fancy clothes or in luxurious living. He spent everything that

he could spare on building the ark. Thus he condemned the world. When a Christian's primary passion is to build the church of Jesus Christ, he too is condemning the world. The people of the world will say, "You are crazy spending your money on travelling here and there to preach the gospel and on Christian books, etc., when you could be spending it on enjoying yourself" But the church is the only thing that will remain when Jesus comes back. If you have faith like Noah, it will radically change the way you spend your time, your energy and your money; and thus you will manifest your faith. What do people see you spending your time, money and energy for?

By faith Abraham left Ur of the Chaldeans when God called him. He did not leave until God told him to leave. Don't ever leave a place unless God tells you to do so. When God called Abraham, he left his home and obeyed immediately (11:8). When Jesus called Peter, he obeyed immediately. If people had asked Abraham where he was going, he would have said, "I don't know. But I know Who is leading me." He lived by faith as a stranger in a foreign land, because he lived for heaven (11:9). By faith he and Sarah received the ability to have a child, when he was impotent and she was barren. Here we see the faith of both husband and wife. You are a blessed man if you get a wife like Sarah who also has a strong faith.

These people died in faith without receiving the promise (11:13). They never got all that God wanted to give man. They received only a little bit. Abraham got a son. But God told Abraham that all the families of the earth would be blessed through him. Did he see that? No. He died in Canaan without ever seeing the fulfilment of that promise. But today it has been fulfilled. Some of us may never see the final result of our labours before we die. William Carey, the missionary to India, died without seeing the extent to which his translation of the Bible into Indian languages would bless India and the people around the world who would be challenged by his life. Jim Elliot, the missionary to Ecuador died as a very young man, without seeing the many among the Auca tribe who would come to Christ and the many more around the world who would be blessed through his life. If you live by faith and are faithful, your life will go on blessing people long after you are gone. Abraham's life showed that he was not living for the things of this earth, but for the better country in heaven (11:16).

By faith Abraham also offered up Isaac, when God asked him to do that. God was testing Abraham to see if he would put his love for God above his love for Isaac. God had told Abraham that Isaac was the son through whom His promises would be fulfilled. What would happen to those promises if Isaac had been killed? Abraham believed that God would raise him from the dead and still fulfil His Word (11:19). What amazing faith Abraham had – to believe that Isaac would be raised from

the dead – when such a thing had never happened in human history. God makes His servants do things at times that others cannot understand. When Elijah wanted to call down fire from heaven on the altar, he first asked the people to pour twelve buckets of water on it – water that would quench the fire. Thus he would prove that the fire when it came was from God Himself and not some cheap magician's trick!

Then we read of the faith of Isaac. He blessed his children Jacob and Esau concerning future things. Later, Jacob also, blessed his children by faith (11:21). We too can bless our children by faith. We can bless our children concerning their future, because we have taught them and led them in the ways of God. What a blessing we, as parents, can give to our children – just like Isaac and Jacob gave to their children!

We also read here that Jacob was "*leaning upon his staff*". At Peniel, God had dislocated his thigh and broken his human strength and renamed him Israel. That staff on which Jacob leaned thereafter indicated how he was now a broken man, leaning on God alone for help. It's wonderful to see this. In a chapter, where the many mighty accomplishments of men of faith are listed, we read of one man whose main accomplishment was that he leaned upon a staff! But that is actually one of the greatest miracles that God does – when He breaks the soulish strength of a man and makes him lean in helpless dependence upon Him alone.

By faith Joseph prophesied that the Israelites would go back to Canaan, as God had promised, and would not stay in Egypt (11:22). We see another example of the faith of parents in 11:23 – Moses' parents saw their child as a beautiful child and hid him, without being afraid of Pharaoh's edict to kill all male babies. We too as parents need to see our children as beautiful children who can fulfil God's purposes. Those parents had also put such faith into Moses' heart when he was young, that when he grew up, he took three important decisions by faith. *He refused the honour of this world* (refusing to be known as Pharaoh's daughter's son). *He refused the pleasures of sin*. And *he refused the wealth of this world* (11:24–26). If you live by faith, these are three things you will also reject – this world's honour, this world's sinful pleasures and this world's wealth. Instead of those, Moses chose the reproach of the Messiah (Christ) Who was going to come one day. And that reproach is what we will choose as well.

Then the writer goes on to mention some other wonderful things that men of faith accomplished – splitting the Red Sea and pulling down the walls of Jericho (11:29, 30). Notice here how we must have faith ourselves and not just *imitate* what others do: The Israelites went through the Red Sea by faith. But when the Egyptians imitated them, they drowned (11:29)! Rahab the harlot, had faith that the God of Israel would protect her, even though she was a Canaanite. So she protected the Israelite spies, risking her life to do so. And God honoured her faith. At times, we too may

have to take risks in our walk of faith. Then the writer mentions Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David and Samuel the prophet – who by faith conquered kingdoms, shut the mouths of lions, quenched the power of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, put armies to flight; and some women even received their dead children back to life by faith (11:31–35).

However, all these are just one side of faith – faith to accomplish amazing miracles. But there is another side too. There were men and women who had equal faith who never experienced any such things. Some of them who refused to deny their faith were tortured and killed and will get their reward only when Christ returns. Some other men and women of faith experienced mockings, scourgings, chains and imprisonment. Some men of faith were stoned and some were sawn in two. (Tradition says that it was Isaiah who was sawn in two.) Some other men of faith were put to death, some wandered about in sheepskins and goatskins, destitute and afflicted and ill treated. They wandered about in deserts and mountains and caves and in holes in the ground. All of these were equally men of faith as the ones mentioned earlier who experienced miraculous deliverances. Even today, God's plans for His children are different. He allows some to accomplish great things and to experience miracles by faith, while He permits others to be imprisoned and tortured for their faith. Carnal believers will value the former over the latter. But God sees them all as people of whom this world is not worthy. They are all too good for this world.

So we see that faith is not always manifested in splitting seas and shutting the mouths of the lions. At times, it is seen in standing true to God and proclaiming that Jesus Christ alone is Lord, even when lions come to kill us and eat us up or when they come to behead us. That too is faith. Both manifestations of faith are mentioned together here in *Chapter 11*. We leave it to God to decide which of these paths He has planned for us.

Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego went into the fire and came out untouched by it. Many of the early Christians however were burnt to death by their persecutors. Daniel went into the lion's den and came out untouched. The early Christians however were thrown to the lions and the lions ate them up. Who had more faith? Both had equal faith – one to escape death and the other in being faithful unto death. It is for God to decide whether the lion should eat us up or spare us, whether we should be beheaded or escape. The early Christians left it to God to decide that for them. James was beheaded, but Peter escaped (*Acts 12*). Both men had equal faith. But God's will was different for each of them.

Chapter 11 concludes by saying that under the *old covenant*, both these groups of men of faith (the ones who triumphed and the ones who endured) got God's approval through faith. But it then goes on to say that God has provided something better for us now in the *new covenant* – something

far superior to anything that these men listed here in *Chapter 11* experienced. This word ‘*better*’ occurs many times in *Hebrews*.

Following Jesus – Our Example

Today, our faith is not looking up to Abel, Moses, Enoch or any of the men listed in *Chapter 11*. Our faith is “*looking away from everyone else unto Jesus*” (12:2), because He is the Author and Finisher of *our* faith. We look up to Him and run this race. We don’t stand still. The race of faith is something in which you can’t stand still. The time is short and so you have to run. If you fall down, get up and continue running. There are many runners who have fallen down in a race, who got up, continued to run and still came first. So don’t get discouraged if you fall down sometimes in your walk with the Lord. Don’t lie there. Get up, confess your sin and continue to run.

Look at Jesus who endured the cross and ran till the end of His life. When many enemies oppose you consider Him who had so many enemies opposing Him (12:3). You have not yet resisted to the point of shedding blood like He did, in striving against sin (12:4). Here we see that Jesus strove against sin. In other words, His attitude toward sin was, “*I would rather shed My blood than commit sin.*” If you have the same attitude – that you would rather die than commit sin – you too will be an overcomer. When you are tempted to tell a lie, if you say, “I would rather die than tell a lie”, you will be an overcomer. When you are tempted to cheat a little bit to make more money, if you say, “I would rather die than cheat even a little”, you will be an overcomer. When you are tempted to lust after some pretty woman and you say, “I would rather die than lust”, you will be an overcomer. That is the secret of living the overcoming life.

The writer then speaks about the matter of God disciplining us to make us holy. We look unto Jesus as our Example; and we look unto our Father Who disciplines us. God disciplines us as a Father for our good. If we do not experience any discipline from God that would prove that we are not really His children. We may not feel happy while being disciplined, but we will see later on that it produces holiness in us. (12:4–11).

In 12:14, we are told to “*pursue peace with all men and sanctification*”, without which we will not see the Lord. It is vital that as Christians we are known as men of peace who do not like to fight or quarrel with anyone for anything.

Then we are exhorted in 12:16, not to be foolish like Esau, who for a little bit of earthly profit lost his spiritual birthright. Don’t lose your eternal inheritance by compromising your convictions, for the sake of some earthly gain. Esau regretted his action and wept and begged for the

birthright later on, but could not get back what he had given away. In the same way, at the judgement seat of Christ, many will pray with tears as they look back at the foolish choices they made and their wasted life. But they cannot live their life again. So be wise now.

In 12:18–23, the writer says that we have not come to Mount Sinai, where the law was given, but to Mount Zion (the church). So we do not have to live in fear and trembling as Moses and the Israelites did.

In 12:24, the blood of Jesus is contrasted with the blood of Abel. The blood of Abel cried for judgement, the blood of Jesus cries for mercy. When somebody harms you like Cain harmed Abel, you will either pray for judgement on that person or mercy. That depends on whether you are under the old covenant or new covenant. If you follow the old covenant and somebody harms you, you will cry out for judgement like Abel did and say, “Lord, punish that man” – just as David and some of the other authors of the psalms prayed. But if you follow Jesus you will cry out for mercy and pray, “Lord, forgive him for he does not know what he is doing.”

In 12:25–29, we read about the kingdom that God is building – the church – the only thing that will remain forever. Everything else will be shaken and destroyed. People who have put their confidence in money, gold, real estate, property or anything on this earth will find their lives shaken. You can have property, but don’t let your trust be in that. Let your confidence be in God alone. Then we will serve Him with thankfulness. The writer reminds us that our God is a consuming fire. So we must serve Him not with the fear the Israelites had at Sinai, but with reverence and godly fear – as Jesus had (*Hebrews 5:7*).

In *Chapter 13*, the writer concludes with some closing exhortations.

“Love the brothers. Show hospitality to anyone who comes to your house. Remember those who are suffering and Christians who are being ill-treated and in prison. Suffer with them and encourage them. Keep your marriage perfectly pure. Don’t ever have sex outside of marriage, because God will judge all such people” (13:1–4).

Be content and perfectly satisfied with whatever God has given you (13:5). Don’t run after money because God has said that he will never leave you nor forsake you. That promise is like having a large balance in your bank account. God Himself will always be with you. Isn’t that enough? Don’t look at what others have and desire those things. Do you think a better house, more clothes, a fancy car and many gadgets will bring you happiness? No. Be satisfied with what you have. It is enough to hear the Lord say, “I will never leave you nor forsake you.” For then you can boldly say in every situation, “*The Lord is my Helper. I will not be afraid. What can any man do to me*” (13:6). Then we will live without fear of any person or any circumstance.

In 13:7 we are commanded to observe the life of older godly men who have led us and to see the good results that come from their lives – and to follow their example. Since “*Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today and forever*”, He Who led them and blessed them can lead you and bless you as well. What He did for them, He can do for you. The writer warns us not to be occupied with strange doctrines that have not brought godliness to those who preach them. The right doctrine is that which will “*strengthen your heart with grace*” so that you do not sin (13:9). There are many strange doctrines being preached today. So we must be careful. Always find out whether these doctrines have made the people preaching them more Christlike. If not, leave them alone.

Following Jesus will always involve, in every generation “*going outside the camp* (both of the world and of religious (but unspiritual) Christians) *and bearing the reproach of Christ*” (13:10–13).

Let us learn to offer a sacrifice of praise to God at all times (13:15).

In 13:17, we are commanded to obey our church-leaders. We must respect, value and submit to those who have been placed by God in spiritual authority over us. The writer assumes that all believers will have some such spiritual authority over them as their leaders. Those leaders have to give an account to God one day about you. Did you know that your elders will be giving an account to God for you and for everyone under their charge? Elder brothers also need to take this verse seriously and recognise this responsibility they have for their flock.

The concluding blessing in the letter is:

“*Now the God of peace, who brought up from the dead the great Shepherd of the sheep through the blood of the eternal covenant, even Jesus our Lord, equip you in every good thing to do His will, working in us that which is pleasing in His sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be the glory forever and ever. Amen*” (13:20, 21).

JAMES

TRUE FAITH WILL PRODUCE GOOD WORKS

The letter of James was probably the first among the books of the New Testament to be written. It was probably around 16 or 17 years after the day of Pentecost. This was written before any of the gospels were written.

If this is the first book of the New Testament it is interesting to see how James emphasises that *true faith will produce works*. “*Salvation is by faith and not by works of the law*” was a new message that the Jewish Christians were hearing – and it was much misunderstood then, even as it is misunderstood today. They thought that faith was intellectual and it no longer mattered how they lived so long as they “*believed*” in Jesus!

So James wrote his letter to correct that error. This is why this letter has special relevance for many Christians who have fallen into the same error today.

In *Chapter 1*, James speaks about faith giving us victory over temptation, so that we do not sin. In *Chapter 2*, he speaks about faith producing love for all men so that we are not partial towards the rich or the mighty in the church. In *Chapter 3* he says that faith will make us control our speech. And in *Chapters 4 and 5*, James says that faith will separate us from the spirit of the world and bring purity and patience into our lives.

James’ main burden is to teach that true faith will always produce the works of faith. Otherwise what you call “*faith*” is a counterfeit. Faith is like money – there is the real and the counterfeit. If you have worked hard and were paid for it in a lot of 1000-rupee currency notes, you can think you are rich. But when you go to the bank to deposit that money and are told by them that all those notes are counterfeit, you realise that you were cheated. It can be like that with your faith too.

A counterfeit faith can send you to hell. That is why it is very important to check your faith. The letter of *James* will give you a good scan to check whether your faith is real or not.

He begins by saying, “*Consider it all joy when you encounter various types of trials*” (1:2). If your faith is genuine, you will rejoice when you face trials – for that is like putting the 1000-rupee note under the scanner to check whether it is real or not. Why should you be afraid of that? If your faith is counterfeit isn’t it better to know now rather than at Christ’s judgement-seat? So it is good that God brings you into some trial now so that you can know for certain whether your faith is genuine or not. So rejoice!

If you are building a house, wouldn’t it be better if an earthquake came while you were still laying the foundation and not after you completed the house? If the foundation is shaky, you can rectify it immediately. Even so, it is good to go through trials, at the very beginning of your Christian life. You may say, “I trust in the Lord.” But when you get into a little financial difficulty, you start worrying and complaining. Maybe you are sick and you start questioning God. Or perhaps you get some opposition from men and you get discouraged and lose your faith. All these trials would prove to you that your faith was not really genuine.

Further, trials also produce the virtue of patience in us. We saw in *Hebrews* that faith and patience go together. They are like the two legs we stand on. We always need patience (endurance) along with our faith. If we allow this endurance to complete its work in us, it will make us perfect and complete, lacking in nothing (1:4). Consider this goal – “*perfect and complete, lacking in nothing*”. Do you want to get there? The way there is through trial. There is no other way to get there.

We haven’t got there yet, and so we need to go through many more trials. If I have acquired any spiritual value in my life, it is through the trials that the Lord has taken me through. But I have to go through many more trials to reach that goal of ‘*perfect, complete, lacking in nothing*.’ That is God’s goal for all of us. Don’t get discouraged if you discover through some trial that your faith was not genuine. Thank God for showing it to you, and ask Him to give you genuine faith. God will give it to you.

In dealing with our trials, what we need most of all is wisdom. So we should ask God for it. Maybe someone is treating you badly. You need wisdom to know how to respond to him in a godly way. Perhaps the enemies of the gospel are troubling you. You need wisdom there. Ask for it. And here is an encouraging word: “*God will not scold you*” for asking (1:5 - LB). Our parents and teachers may have scolded us many times when we failed. But God never scolds. He corrects us, but He will never

scold us. That is a great encouragement to know. A godly father will correct his children, but he will not scold them. We scold people whom we look down on. We consider him stupid or dull for bungling up things. But God never despises anyone. He will say, "What you did is wrong, my son. But I will teach you and give you wisdom so that you can do it right next time." That is God's way – always gentle and gracious.

So, the next time you don't have wisdom for some situation, go to God and ask Him for it. He will give it to you. But there is one condition. You have to ask in faith. Here is my definition of faith: "*Faith is believing that God is more eager to give me what He has promised than I am to receive it*". So, believe that God is eager to give you wisdom.

If you don't ask in faith, then James says that you are like the waves of the sea that are tossed here and there. Have you seen on a beach how the waves come into the beach and then go right back and come back again? A man without faith is like that. He trusts in the Lord one moment and then loses his faith the next moment. If you ask God and then imagine, "Yes, He will give me wisdom. No, He won't give me wisdom" – and so on, back and forth, then you won't get it. Here is what the Word of God promises to those who *don't* have faith: "*He will receive nothing from the Lord*" (1:7). He won't get forgiveness, or the baptism in the Holy Spirit, or answers to prayer, or godliness, or any of God's spiritual riches. James says that such a man is an unstable, double-minded man.

James then goes on to speak about a *poor* brother who has faith. His faith will enable him to rejoice in "*his high position in Christ*", even if he has very little of this world's goods (1:9). He will not envy the rich believers around him, neither will he want any sympathy from any of them. He knows that he is a son of the King and that his real wealth is in heaven. And so he has a dignity about him. That is how a poor brother with genuine faith will think.

In the same way, a *rich* brother with faith will look at all his property and money and say, "*All of this will pass away like the grass*" (1:10). One day it is there but the next day it is gone. If a rich person lives for his earthly wealth, then he himself will fade away along with all his wealth one day. But if he does *not* live for his earthly wealth but for the kingdom of God, then when his earthly wealth fades away, he himself will remain.

Temptation and Sin

Then James talks about temptation and sin. The earlier trials he spoke about were difficulties in our life. Now he talks about the temptation to sin. He says that if you keep on overcoming in temptation, you will receive a crown of life from God one day. God promises that to all who love Him. That teaches us that if we love the Lord we will fight against

all temptations to sin. When a temptation comes to you, don't ask, "God, why did You send this temptation to me?" God never sent it. God doesn't tempt anyone. "*Let no one say when he is tempted that God is tempting him. God doesn't tempt anyone.*" (1:13). Who then is tempting you? It is Satan through the desires in your flesh. Because we have all indulged in the desires of our flesh for so many years from our childhood, Satan can use those desires to tempt us. When a country is at war, the enemy sends their agents secretly inside the country to cause destruction from within. The enemy fights on two fronts – at the battle front and also from within the country through its agents. So it is with Satan too. We must identify Satan's agents within us – the ungodly desires in our flesh, which are on the side of Satan – and put them to death. If you slay the agents of the enemy within, you will be strong to fight against Satan on the battle-front.

It is only when you allow your mind to agree with a wrong desire that you sin. Until then the thought that comes to your mind is only a temptation. For example, as you are walking down the road, you see something that tempts you. That's not a sin. That is temptation. But when you look again at it, then you sin. The first look is temptation, the second look is sin. We cannot avoid the first look because we are living in a world which has so much evil all around us. But we can decide whether we agree with that evil or not.

It is similar to how a baby is conceived – which is the example used by the Holy Spirit here. When your mind agrees with the wrong desire in your flesh, it is like a woman agreeing to give her body to a man for sexual union. Then a conception takes place. But if the woman refuses to give herself to the man, there is no conception. Even so, if you reject the temptation and do not allow your mind to agree with the wrong desire, then there is no sin.

Someone has said, "*You cannot prevent the birds from flying over your head, but you can stop them from making a nest in your hair.*" The birds flying over your head are the temptations – many bad thoughts that come into your mind. Those are not sin, if you reject them immediately. Those are temptations. But if you choose to enjoy those bad thoughts for even a few seconds, then you have allowed the "birds" to start making a nest in your mind. Then you have sinned. Satan tempted Jesus also by putting thoughts into His mind in the wilderness. But Jesus rejected them every time – and so He did not sin.

So don't get discouraged because thoughts keep coming into your mind. They are only temptations. It is only when you enjoy those thoughts and accept them, that they become sin. This is very liberating for us to know that only when a conception takes place sin is born. If there is no

conception, there is no baby. The final result of sin is spiritual death (1:15), and we should not be deceived about this (1:16).

In the next verse, we are reminded that “*every good and perfect gift comes only from above – from our heavenly Father*” (1:17). So victory over temptation can never come from within ourselves. It has to come from above – by help that comes from our Father through the Holy Spirit. We have to ask God for grace to overcome.

Whatever God gives is perfect, for He never changes. God brought us into the world so that we might be an example (*‘first fruits’*) in the midst of His creation. Since this is God’s will for us, He will certainly help us to overcome temptation, so that we can be an example to all of His creation. So never imagine that God won’t help you to overcome sin. He certainly will. You are the first fruits of His creation. You are to be an example to all of creation. God will certainly help you.

Then James talks about our speech. “*Let everyone be quick to hear, slow to speak and slow to anger*” (1:19). Most human beings are the opposite of that: Slow to hear, quick to speak and quick to anger. Here in this verse is a first step to overcoming anger: When people are speaking, learn to listen to them patiently first. Don’t interrupt them. Then after they have finished, give them your opinion. When we are slow to speak, we will be slow to anger too. Try this prescription for freedom from anger!

James goes on to say that we cannot expect to fulfil God’s purposes by getting angry. Anger can never achieve the righteousness of God. It is a concern for God’s glory that will accomplish God’s righteousness.

In 1:21, we are exhorted to “*put aside all filthiness and all that remains of wickedness*.” Even after we have put away *all* filthiness, there will still be some wickedness remaining at the bottom. After you have drunk your cup of coffee and you turn the cup upside down into the sink, if you look inside, there will still be some stains of coffee in the cup. Sin is like that. You may imagine that you have confessed everything. But as you get closer to the Lord, you will discover that there is more sin within that you did not notice earlier. Don’t be too quick to say that you have finished confessing every sin. Ask God to show you. Then, “*in humility acknowledge what God says and it will save your soul*” (1:21).

When we hear God speak to us, we must obey immediately. Otherwise, James says you will be like someone who saw dirt on his face in the mirror but did not wash it away. God’s word is a mirror which shows us the condition of our heart. Don’t go away forgetting what you read in God’s Word or what you heard in the meeting. We could say that God’s Word is like an X-ray or scan, that shows us our true inner state. And when God shows you something, set it right at once. God’s word is a law of liberty that can set us free (1:25).

Then the Holy Spirit gives a very challenging word by which everyone who imagines himself to be spiritual should evaluate himself. “*If anyone thinks that he is a godly man and cannot control his tongue he is deceiving himself*” (1:26). Remember that verse all your life. *If you cannot control your tongue, your Christianity is worth zero.* All your work for the Lord is worth zero if you cannot control your tongue.

It is very important that we control our tongue if we claim to be believers. Most believers have a very bad testimony because they cannot control their tongue. Even when they say something beneficial to someone, they say it in a very hard way. You may have a tendency to point out a fault in a person as soon as you see it. I have noticed at times, that if I made a small *factual* mistake in a message, someone will come to me at the end of the meeting and tell me about that one thing that was factually incorrect. He will not say one word about any blessing he got from the message. That is the nature of Adam. He found something wrong in his wife as soon as he lost his fellowship with God. Adam’s nature tends to find fault rather than to appreciate. If you don’t allow the Holy Spirit to change this nature, your usefulness to God will also become zero. Ask the Holy Spirit to help you to control your tongue.

1:27 tells us that true Christianity is not just a matter of attending meetings and studying the Bible. It is intensely practical. It is caring for those who are in need, such as orphans and widows in the church. If a widow or an orphan is rich, you don’t have to worry about them. But caring for the poor and the helpless is a major part of true Christianity. A true servant of God will seek to serve the poor more than the rich. He will visit poor churches more than rich churches. He will go to village churches more than city churches. He will visit people who cannot afford to give him a gift and not people who give him money. He will fellowship with poor brothers rather than with rich brothers. He will seek for fellowship with the poor and the lowly rather than with the great and the mighty. But do we see that in Christian workers today? It is extremely rare. There are very few true servants of the Lord today. But you yourself can be one like that. Decide that you will concentrate on serving those who are weak and poor in the church. At the same time keep yourself completely “*unspotted and unstained by the world*”. This is the essence of true Christianity.

The Sin of Partiality

In 2:1, James goes on to speak about showing partiality to the rich. This is a major problem in almost all churches today. Because a pastor needs financial support from his congregation, he ends up pleasing the rich people therein, so that he can get their money for his salary. Such a pastor is an *evil* person (2:4) – and therefore unfit to lead any church. One who despises the poor is just like any worldly person who also treats

only the rich people with favour. In my younger days when I visited different churches (of all denominations), I saw that the rich and the influential people were always the Board-members of the church. This was not because they were spiritual, but because they had high positions in society. They were given honour in the church, just as written here: “*Please come and sit here – on our Board as a member!*” And they tell the poor man, “You can’t sit on the Board as a member, because you don’t have either influence or money. You may be spiritual, but we don’t care for that” (2:2, 3). What type of “*churches*” can such pastors build? Only worldly clubs! Certainly not the church of the Lord Jesus Christ, with Whom there is no partiality and Who was the Friend of the poor.

God has chosen poor people to be rich in faith and promised His kingdom to them (2:5). It is a shame when any church dishonours poor people. Rich people who sit on the Board are the ones who get offended easily and then drag the church to court. Only rich people can drag others to court, because they alone have the money to do that. Poor people don’t have the money to pay lawyers. It is the rich who blaspheme the Name of Jesus (2:6, 7).

If you love others as yourself, as the Scripture commands, you can never show partiality to anyone (2:8). Those who show partiality anywhere – to their children at home or to people in the church – are committing a serious sin. You cannot compensate for that by living in purity in other areas (2:11). You are still a sinner, because partiality is as much a sin as adultery and murder –but not recognised as such by most believers. What would you think of a believer who commits murder and adultery? A believer who shows partiality to the rich is in the same category.

In 2:12, 13, the Holy Spirit warns us against another equally serious sin – unmercifully judging others. Those who are merciless to others (for any reason) will find that God will show them no mercy when He judges them in the final day. When people hurt us, if we are believers, we will hear two voices rising within us, “*Judge him,*” and “*Be merciful to him.*” Which voice will win? The voice of mercy must always win over the voice of judgement.

In 2:14–26, we are told that genuine faith will always produce a helping attitude towards people who are in physical need. If you see a brother who is in need of food or clothes and you don’t help him, your faith is useless. Note that he is not talking about buying that poor brother a car or a scooter. He is only talking about food and clothing – the necessities of life. We don’t have to help a brother to live in luxury. But if a brother is shivering in the cold, or his house is leaking and he can’t sleep properly at night, it is no use saying, “Praise the Lord, brother. We will pray for you”. There is no need to pray there. Just get him a blanket and give him some money to fix his roof. That is true Christianity. It is no use saying you have faith if you don’t have works to back it up.

Abraham had faith, but he proved it by offering up his son (2:21). His faith was proved by his works. If you have faith and it doesn't produce any works, such faith is not genuine faith.

2:26 we could say is the central verse of the epistle: "*For just as the body without the spirit is dead, so also faith without works is dead.*" The parts of the human body can be compared to correct doctrine and faith to the breath in the body. Believing the right doctrines without the works of faith brings spiritual death.

The Tongue is a Fire

Chapter 3 is the great chapter in the Bible about the use of the tongue. The book of *Proverbs* also speaks a lot about being wise in our speech. On the day of Pentecost it was a *tongue* of fire that came upon people. Unfortunately, carefulness in our speech is not sufficiently emphasised in Christendom. If you are serious about serving God, you must take the matter of controlling your tongue very seriously. Failure in this area is one of the main reasons why many preachers don't have the word of God when they speak. If you want to be a spokesman for God, you must first of all, "*remove all the worthless from the precious*" in your ordinary day-to-day conversation (*Jeremiah 15:19*). If you speak idle words in your ordinary conversation, you cannot expect God to speak through you when you stand in the pulpit. A second reason is unfaithfulness with money. God does not give true riches from His Word to preachers who are unfaithful with money (*Luke 16:11*).

The tongue is like the bit that is put into a horse's mouth with which the horse can be controlled and turned in any direction (3:3). Horses that don't have a bit in their mouth will run wild – and such horses accomplish nothing. Horses that win prizes in races are those that allow themselves to be controlled by the bits in their mouths. If you want to accomplish something with your life for God let Him put a bit and a bridle in your mouth. Tell the Lord that you want Him to control your speech totally.

The tongue is also compared to the rudder of a ship (3:4). The rudder is a small steel-plate at the rear-end of every boat and ship. When you turn the rudder one way the ship turns in the same direction. It is a small piece at the back of the ship that turns a huge ship in the direction it should go. Your tongue is the test of your spirituality – and not your activity or your Bible-knowledge. Show me the way you use your tongue and I will tell you whether you are a spiritual person or not.

James uses all these examples to show us the importance of the tongue. It's only a small part of the body, but what a fire it can start (3:5)! Many believers' tongues are set on fire with the fire of hell (3:6).

“Nobody can tame the tongue” (3:7, 8). In a circus, even lions and tigers are tamed – and some men even put their heads inside the lion’s mouth – and the lion doesn’t bite them off. But no-one can tame the tongue. What is the solution for this problem? We must ask the Holy Spirit to tame it in us. That was why when the Holy Spirit fell upon people on the day of Pentecost, *a tongue of fire* rested on their heads. The Holy Spirit was saying thereby, “I want to control your tongue with the fire of God from now on.” Many Christians haven’t understood this. It’s a great tragedy that many who preach the baptism in the Holy Spirit today are more eager to get people speak in *other* tongues than to lead them to speak graciously at all times in their *mother* tongue. This is what has resulted in many counterfeits among those who “*speak in tongues*”.

The Holy Spirit has given me the gift of speaking in an unknown language to my heavenly Father, and I praise Him for that. But above all, He enabled me to control my mother tongue – and I praise Him even more for this. This is how we can know whether we received the Holy Spirit or some other false spirit. Apply this test to yourself: “Can you control your mother tongue?” If not, reject every other spirit you have received and seek God again to be filled with the Holy Spirit. Tell God that you want to have the power to speak graciously at all times. Only the Holy Spirit can tame the tongue. How can you bless God in the church-meeting and then curse men afterwards (3:9)?

In 3:13, James says, “*If you are a wise man show your wisdom by the gentleness of your actions.*” Wise men are gentle in the way they communicate their wisdom. There are two things that will never be found in a *wise* man: bitter jealousy and selfish ambition (3:14). If you are jealous of others you are not wise, no matter how much Bible-knowledge you may have. If you have selfish ambition and want to show that you are better than others, that you can pray better than others, or preach better than others, or that your church is better than that of others, or that you are accomplishing more than others, then you are earthly-minded, soulish and demonic (3:15). Then James repeats the twin dangers of jealousy and selfish ambition a second time (3:16). There is a lot of jealousy and selfish ambition in Christendom. When God blesses someone’s ministry, others can become jealous of him and then criticise him. Such people are influenced by demons. A spiritually-minded person will rejoice even when someone much younger than him has a more spiritual ministry than he has. He will praise the Lord for that and never be jealous.

Selfish ambition will prevent you from appreciating what others are doing for the Lord. Paul could rejoice even when some people were serving the Lord with wrong motives (*Philippians 1:15–18*). We don’t have to judge people when they disagree with us. God is the Judge of all men – and He waits until people die before He judges them (*Hebrews 9:27*). So let us leave all judgement to God. We can disagree with the

wrong doctrines people preach and the un-Christlike methods they use – and even expose those errors. But we must never judge people. Before you criticise someone for serving the Lord poorly, you should ask yourself what you are doing for the Lord yourself.

Proverbs 9:1 speaks of the seven pillars of wisdom. Those pillars are listed here (in 3:17): Purity, peaceableness, gentleness, being reasonable, being full of mercy, being unwavering (without partiality) and being without hypocrisy. These are qualities worth meditating on. Where we lack any of these, we are urged in 1:5 to pray and ask God for them and we are promised that God will give us these qualities liberally.

Friendship With the World

James

In 4:4, James says that friendship with the world makes you the enemy of God. One who loves this world is an adulteress, because he is unfaithful to his marriage vows to Jesus Christ his Bridegroom. That is how serious a matter love for this world is. This world's principles and its way of life are totally different from God's. So if you align yourself with this world you automatically become an enemy of God. Friendship of this world doesn't mean you can't have friends in the world. He is talking here about the *world-system*, the principles by which this world operates. If you are a disciple of Jesus, you will reject this world's sense of values and live by God's sense of values.

In 4:5, James goes on to say, “*God jealously desires the spirit which He has placed within us.*” The spirit is the deepest part of man, where God dwells in a Christian. Just like a husband has a pure jealousy that his wife should belong exclusively to him, God also is jealous that no-one else should have any influence over our spirit. The Holy Spirit jealously desires that our spirit be devoted to Jesus alone. He doesn't want it to be polluted with this world-system.

If we are humble, God will give us grace to keep ourselves unspotted by the world (4:6). God fights against those who are proud but supports the humble. If you remain in humility, God will always support you. But if you are proud, God will always resist you. In other words, if we are proud, God will keep on pushing us back. The devil is already pushing us back. The lusts in our flesh are also pushing us back. On top of that, if God also starts pushing us back, we will have no hope at all. But if we are humble even though the devil and our lusts are against us, God will keep pushing us forward. That is why the humble alone can make spiritual progress. I often say that the three secrets of the Christian life are “*Humility, humility, humility!*” Beware when thoughts of pride and self-congratulation enter your mind because of what you are, what you

know, or what you have accomplished. Give God the glory and credit for it all. Otherwise God will begin to resist you. Humble yourself at all times and say, “Lord, I am what I am by Your grace alone.”

If we submit to God totally first and then resist the devil, he will always flee from us. This is God’s promise (4:7). But if you try to resist Satan without submitting totally to God, you will find that nothing happens. If we draw near to God, He will always draw near to us (4:8).

Practical Exhortations

James then gives us a number of practical exhortations. “*Humble yourself in the presence of the Lord*” (4:10). “*Don’t speak against or judge your brothers*” (4:11). Don’t boast that you will do this, that or the other tomorrow. Remember that your life is in God’s hands and if God permits you to go somewhere or to do something, give Him the credit for it (4:13–17).

Then James speaks to the rich people in the church. He warns them not to trust in their wealth and to ensure that they always pay their employees properly. Don’t make money by paying your workers less than they deserve to be paid (5:1–4). I have come across many believers who praise God and preach loudly in the Sunday meetings , but who do not pay their servants properly at home. I can find out whether you are a man of faith by the salary you pay your servants at home. If you are stingy and miserly, and you never get new clothes for that poor person who works for you at home, then your shouts of “Hallelujah” in the meeting are empty. God says, “Keep quiet and go and do something good for that poor person who works for you.” If you are stingy and miserly in your payment of your servants, your faith is worth nothing. If you don’t pay your servants properly and therefore you have some more money in your bank, there will be a curse on that money. It will consume your flesh one day (5:3). The cry of your poor servants has gone up to God and He has heard their cry saying, “O God, see how this child of yours treats me. He doesn’t pay me properly.”

Then James speaks to the ones who are suffering. He encourages them to wait patiently for the coming of the Lord, like a farmer waits for the harvest (5:7). By patience we can strengthen our hearts (5:8). And then he speaks to all believers saying that we should never have a complaint against one another, for God will judge those who complain (5:9). Very, very few believers have taken this warning seriously.

When we are suffering, we should look at the example of all the Biblical prophets who suffered patiently (5:10). Then James reminds us of the example of Job (5:11). What a lot he suffered! And then see how the Lord blessed him finally. The Lord is full of compassion. If you have to go through a lot of suffering because other people treat you badly or

suppress you or take advantage of you, because you are poor, leave your case in God's hands. As Job said, "*He knows every details of what is happening to me*" (*Job 23:10 - Living*). Remain faithful to the Lord. The Lord will return and deal with all who are troubling you and bless you doubly, as He did for Job. We can see that James had a great concern and compassion for poor Christians.

Then James gives a few closing instructions. Always speak the truth (5:12). If you are suffering, pray. If you are cheerful, sing praises to the Lord (5:13). If you are sick, call for the elders of the church to come home and pray for you. Let them take a little oil (a symbol of the Holy Spirit) and anoint you and pray something like this, "*Lord Jesus, this body is the temple of your Holy Spirit. Preserve Your temple in good health. Give him a taste of Your resurrection power in his body. Amen.*" The prayer offered in faith will heal the sick (5:14, 15). The faith referred here is the faith of the elder. The sick person has manifested his faith in calling for the elders. The elders of course, can pray only according to "*the measure of faith that God has given him*" (*Romans 12:3*). An elder who has more faith will obviously be able to pray with greater faith for the healing than another who has less faith.

James

Sometimes healing may still not come because of some unsettled sin in the life of the sick person – usually an unforgiving attitude towards someone who has hurt him or her. And so the sick person is urged to confess his sin before the healing can come (5:16). Not all sickness is due to sin, but some sicknesses remain due to sin. If such a person does not confess his sin, he will not be healed, irrespective of how many elders with great faith come and anoint him with oil and pray for him.

And sometimes praying once may not be enough. We may have to pray again and again like Elijah did (5:17, 18). When there was no rain in Israel for 3½ years, Elijah prayed earnestly seven times, before the rain came (*1 Kings 18:44*). The context here is praying for *healing*. And James is telling us to follow Elijah's example. Elijah sent his servant after prayer to find out if there was any sign of rain. Six times the servant returned saying "No". That is like asking after prayer, "Is there any sign of healing?" The answer may be "No." Then pray again, and again, and again. How many people pray like that? Very few. Most people pray just once, and when healing has not come, they say, "It must not be the will of God for this person to be healed." Elijah didn't say that about the rain, after praying just once. God wants us to be persistent in our prayer. We must be earnest and say, "Lord, why should I be sick? I want to be healthy to serve You. I believe You will heal me so that I can serve You." Pray like that when you are sick.

I am not saying that every sickness will be healed. In some instances, for reasons best known to God alone, He does not heal. Paul was not healed of a thorn in his flesh to keep him humble. But God still gave him grace to finish his course with joy (*2 Corinthians 12:7–9*). Timothy was not healed of his stomach-problem and other sicknesses (*1 Timothy 5:23*). But Timothy too must have received grace and finished his course with joy. Generally speaking however, God wants us to be fit and healthy so that we can serve Him. “*Those who wait upon the Lord will renew their strength. Even young people may faint, but those who wait upon the Lord for strength will fly like the eagles*” (*Isaiah 40:31*). So be one who always waits upon the Lord.

In a closing word, James encourages us to work with those we know who have strayed from the truth and to draw them back to the Lord (5:20).

Let us manifest our faith by the many works that James has described in his letter. Amen.

1 PETER

THE TRUE GRACE OF GOD

Peter writes to all those who live as *foreigners* in this world. That is our calling – to live as foreigners here on earth – because our citizenship is in heaven.

The theme of his letter, Peter says is: “*Standing firm in the true grace of God*” (5:12).

We have seen that James wrote about the true *faith* – because there is a counterfeit faith that does not produce works. Peter writes about the true *grace* because there is a counterfeit grace that does not lead Christians to overcome sin and Satan in their lives. So Peter wanted to explain the different aspects of the true grace of God.

In 1:1, 2, he begins by telling us that God chose us *according to His foreknowledge*. That teaches us clearly that God’s choice of us to be His children was not arbitrary He did not pick names randomly. He chose us because He knows the end from the beginning. God looked into the future and saw those who would respond to the message of the gospel and He chose them. Foreknowledge alone was the basis of His choice. Peter is very clear on that – and it is important for us to remember that. God knows the whole future, but He does not influence the actions.

Consider an illustration. When you watch a video-film (in which you had no part), you know very well that you are not influencing anyone in that video movie. If someone did something good or bad in that video, you didn’t make him do it. But whereas you can only watch a movie of events that have already taken place, God can watch a video-movie of events in the future. But, as in any video that you watch, God also doesn’t influence anyone’s decisions in the movie. He just sees it. He sees some people accepting Christ and many rejecting Him. And God chose those who accepted Christ. That is an illustration of His foreknowledge.

In 1:2, we see the whole Trinity. The Father chooses us, the Holy Spirit sanctifies us and the purpose is that we obey the Son the Lord Jesus Christ. God has reserved a great inheritance for us in heaven (1:4). That inspires us in our battles here on earth. All the trials that we go through on earth are only, “*for a little while*” (1:6). From the standpoint of eternity, even 100 years is only a little while. This eternal perspective is what we must always have in the midst of our trials. All the apostles had this perspective. James refers to our life as a vapour (*James 4:14*). Paul refers to “*our momentary affliction*” (*2 Corinthians 4:17*). Remember that the theme of this letter is the true grace of God. So one of the first things we understand here is that it is perfectly normal for those who receive the true grace of God to be distressed by various types of trials.

Faith Tested by Fire

The purpose of those trials is to prove the genuineness of your faith – like “*gold tested in the fire*”. When gold is dug from the depths of the earth it is not pure. The only way to purify it is by putting it into the fire. You can’t purify gold by scrubbing it with soap and water. That only removes the dirt. But to remove the metals that are mixed in the gold, it has to be put into the fire. Then all the alloys in it are melted away and the pure gold comes forth. The trials you go through can be fiery. It hurts, and you feel as if you are in the fire. The only purpose is to get rid of things in your life that are impure. For example, in countries, where Christians were persecuted and their property was taken away, what was the result? They became better pilgrims. They became less attached to their property because now they had nothing. But where there is no persecution, even the best of believers can be very attached to their property and their possessions. We may imagine we are not attached to them, but we are deceiving ourselves. And so, God may allow persecution to come in our land one day – and then we will be purified.

When the Communists ruled Russia, I have heard that Christians could not get a college education or good jobs. They could only get lowly jobs like cleaning the streets. In such situations, we easily get detached from the honour and sense of importance that comes from having high positions and big jobs. All the scum from the gold is burnt away, and we become really pure. That’s why it is in places where there is persecution today that you have some of the finest Christians in the world. And that is why I never pray that there should be no persecution of Christians in India – because then I would be praying against the purification of the church. I don’t pray *for* persecution, but I don’t pray *against* it either. The Lord knows what is best for the church in India at any time. So I leave it to Him to decide. Either way is equally fine with me. This will be our attitude when we receive the true grace of God.

Peter goes on to say that all this will result in bringing much praise and glory and honour to Christ when He returns. In the midst of these trials, even though we don't see Jesus, we still love Him, trust Him and rejoice with great joy. Peter had seen Jesus physically. But Jesus said, "*Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe*" (John 20:29). I don't know how many of you believe that verse – that, we who have *not* seen Jesus physically are more blessed than those like Peter, who saw Him physically. I believe that with all my heart, because Jesus said so. Peter goes on to say that as a result of going through trials faithfully, we receive "*the salvation of our souls*" (1:9). The apostles spoke about the salvation of our souls more than salvation from hell.

Our soul has inherited selfishness and pride and many other evils from Adam. We need to be saved from all the evil that we have inherited from Adam – such as our attachment to material things, our love of honour, and our self-centred way of life. Fiery trials and persecution help greatly in delivering us from many evils.

Think of the trial of having a mentally-challenged child. Some people think of that as a great misfortune. None of us would pray to have such children. But if God allows a family that loves Him to have such a child, we can be sure that God will make it work for their good. I have noticed in families that have such children, that there is a tenderness and a spirit of sacrifice and service among the other children more than in other families. Very often, there is a pride that comes unconsciously into the hearts of parents whose children are all smart and capable. Pride does not belong to heaven; it belongs to hell. But, unfortunately pride is found in the families of many believers.

God allows all His children to face trials. In His great wisdom, He knows exactly when to send them. When we stand before the Lord, we will discover that God never made a single mistake in any of the trials He allowed in our lives. Every single trial He allowed in our lives, we will discover in that day, was to purify us as gold. If you believe that, you will praise the Lord at all times. You will have inexpressible joy in the midst of your trials – and that will result in the salvation of your soul. This is the salvation that the prophets in past times sought to understand, but could not. Even the angels long to look into this (1:12). But now the Holy Spirit sent from heaven has anointed people who preach this gospel. So, Peter says, since we have such a wonderful gospel, and we have to go through these trials only for a short period, we should sharpen our minds looking forward to the coming of Christ and not be disturbed by the trials that we face (1:13).

He then reminds us of our calling to be holy like our heavenly Father (1:15). That is the reason why God seeks to purify us like gold. That is why "*the affliction of the righteous are many*" (Psalm 34:19), whereas

worldly people have a relatively easier path through life. The One Who has called us is holy, and so we must be holy too. The little kittens must keep themselves clean like their mother-cat. Little piglets however remain filthy like their mother-pig. Once upon a time our father was the devil – and we were like him. We told lies, we fought, we gossiped and we were interested in sinful things, like all unclean spirits are. Then one day God became our Father. That is something like a piglet suddenly becoming a kitten! Now we must be holy in everything.

If we call God as our Father, One Who is totally impartial in judging everybody's work, then we must conduct ourselves with intense reverence for Him throughout our earthly life (1:17). We must remember that we were not purchased with silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ. If we obey the truth that God reveals to us day by day, our souls will be purified (1:22). In the midst of fiery trials, as we obey God's word, the muck of sin will be burnt away from our lives, and we will gradually become more Christlike.

There is a certain hardness in believers who have never faced any serious trials in their lives. I feel sorry for those believers who have never faced sorrow, or pain, or financial difficulties, but who live in comfort and ease with their children growing up in wealth and affluence. Gentleness and humility will be missing in their lives. Compare them with believers who have faced great sorrows and trials in faith, and you will notice a marked difference. These latter ones have been purified like gold. Impure gold and pure gold may look the same to a layman; but if you take them both to a goldsmith, he will notice the difference immediately. When God takes someone through trials and he has been faithful to God in them, that will show in his character. You will find that such believers have no problem at all to love others or to take a lowly place. This, as Peter says, "*is the true grace of God.*"

Spiritual Growth

In Chapter 2, Peter speaks about spiritual growth. We grow not only by facing trials, but also by having a thirst for the milk of the word of God. As soon as a baby is born it begins to cry. And very soon it is crying for milk many times a day. Nobody teaches that baby to cry for milk. It cries out of a sense of need. A baby that does not cry for milk *every day* is sick. That is also one of the tests of a genuine new birth. If you are really born again (as it says in 1:23, "*born again not with perishable, but imperishable seed*") you will "*like newborn babies, long for the pure milk of the word*" (2:2). When someone says that he is born again but does not long for the milk of the word daily, I question the genuineness of his new birth. I belonged from birth to a church that did not place any emphasis on God's Word. But when I was born again I found a cry in my heart for God's word *every day*. Nobody had to tell me to read God's Word. Such is

the experience of everyone who is truly born again. We need the word of God to “grow in respect to salvation” (2:2) – that is being saved from everything un-Christlike in our soul – which is the salvation of our souls.

As we grow in the Lord, He brings us into fellowship with others of like mind, with whom we can be built up together as a spiritual house for the Lord (2:5). This is taught in all the epistles. *The true grace of God will not allow you to live as an individualistic Christian.* It will compel you to join with others to be built up together with them – just like bricks put together next to each other in the building of a house. The true grace of God brings people into fellowship. We are not only God’s house but also a chosen race, a holy nation and a people for God’s own possession (2:9). The purpose of God in this is that we may show forth His excellencies to the evil world around us – how God has called us out of darkness into His marvellous light. This is the true grace of God.

Submission to Authority

Then Peter goes on to say how we are to show forth this life. “*Keep your behaviour excellent among the heathen*” (2:12). He then goes on to speak about submission. A man who experiences the true grace of God will always submit to authority wherever he goes. He will have no problem at all with submission. Sin originated in rebellion, long before Adam was created. The highest archangel rebelled against God’s authority and became Satan immediately. That is why “*rebellion is like the sin of witchcraft*” (1 Samuel 15:23) – for a rebellious spirit brings one in touch with evil spirits, just as much as witchcraft does. Jesus overcame Satan by living in the very opposite way. He humbled Himself and came down to earth in perfect submission to His Father; and here on earth He submitted to imperfect Joseph and Mary for 30 years, for those were the human authorities His heavenly Father had placed over Him. The one who has experienced the true grace of God will experience salvation in his soul from the spirit of rebellion. If you have a problem in submitting to authority, you need to be saved in your soul.

Christians are called to submit to all human authorities, to kings, governors, etc., (2:13, 14). At that time the emperor of Rome was Nero, one of the most wicked kings that ever ruled Rome, and one who persecuted and killed Christians. Yet Peter tells Christians not only to submit to him, but also to “*honour the king*” (2:17). He also says that we must, “*honour all men*.” (2:17). Under the old covenant, the law was to honour aged people (*Leviticus 19:32*). But under the new covenant, we are to honour *all* people. The standard in every area is higher under the new covenant. Under the old covenant, people had to give 10% to God. In the new covenant, we have to give everything (*Luke 14:33*). Under the old covenant, *one* day was to be kept holy (the Sabbath). In the new covenant, *every* day is to be holy. Under the old covenant the firstborn male

child had to be dedicated to God. In the new covenant, all our children are to be dedicated to God. A man who has experienced the grace of God has no difficulty in honouring *all* people. We are to be servants like Jesus, and so we are happy to honour everyone and to “*consider all others as more important than ourselves*” (*Philippians 2:3*).

Then he speaks specifically to servants and tells them to be submissive to their masters. All the apostles taught servants to submit to their masters. A Christian who has a spirit of rebellion against his authorities in his office or factory is a very poor witness for Christ. A Christian student who rebels against his teachers in school or college is also a very poor witness for Christ. Such a Christian has not understood “*the true grace of God*” at all. He has not understood that Jesus came and submitted to imperfect earthly parents for 30 years. This is a lesson we all need to learn. Servants be submissive to your masters with all respect. If you work in an office, factory, school, hospital or anything, you must show respect to those above you in that place.

We must teach our children to respect their teachers, and not to gang up with other children and make fun of the teachers. Servants must learn to show respect not only to those masters who are good and gentle but also to those who are unreasonable. It’s easy to submit to a good master, but a Christian who has experienced “*the true grace of God*” will submit to an unreasonable master as well (2:18). It is when you submit to an unreasonable master that your light shines as a Christian. A burning candle is not easily visible in the sunlight. But at night everyone can see its light. Even so, a Christian’s light is seen most brightly when he is in dark surroundings.

There is no virtue in submitting patiently when you are punished for having done something wrong. But when you patiently endure suffering, even when you did what was right, then God is pleased with you (2:20). Suffering unjustly is one of the great themes of Peter’s letter. He goes on to say that that was exactly how Jesus also suffered. He suffered unjustly and has left us an example to follow in His steps. We are called here to “*follow in His steps Who never sinned, Who never told a lie, Who never answered back when insulted; and Who, when He suffered, did not threaten to get even; but kept entrusting His case to God who judges righteously*” (2:21–23). This is how a Christian who has understood “*the true grace of God*” also behaves.

It says that Jesus has left us an example to follow in His footsteps. That’s a very popular expression found in Christian hymns: “*Following in Jesus’ footsteps.*” But notice the context here. It is talking about *not sinning, never telling a lie, and suffering injustice quietly*. That is the way to follow in Jesus’ footsteps. I wonder how many Christians mean this when they talk about discipleship and following Jesus! This is “*the true grace of God*”. It is much more than mere forgiveness of our sins!

I want to add a word of explanation here about 2:24, which reads: “*He Himself bore our sins in His body on the cross, so that we might die to sin and live to righteousness; for by His wounds you were healed*”. That last phrase “*by His wounds you were healed*” is a quote from *Isaiah 53:5*. In *1 Peter*, the Holy Spirit gives us His interpretation of what He inspired Isaiah to write in the Old Testament. This phrase does **not** refer to healing from physical sickness. It is referring to healing *from sin* (spiritual sickness) and becoming *righteous* (spiritually healthy). This is clearly explained in the phrase that precedes it: “*that we might die to sin and live to righteousness*”. There are some who say that this verse teaches that Christ’s death on the cross brings healing to all our sicknesses just like it brings forgiveness to all our sins. If so, then why is it that many who have enough faith to receive forgiveness of *all* their sins are unable to have faith for the *lesser* miracle of healing from all their sicknesses? That failure itself proves that the interpretation given by such people is wrong. The Holy Spirit’s interpretation of *Isaiah 53:5* here should put an end to all such wrong teachings.

Suffering Unjustly

Peter then goes on to point out the example of Christ who suffered unjustly to wives who suffer unjustly (3:1). “Do you have a husband who is unreasonable and does not obey God’s word?” Submit to him, just like Jesus submitted to unreasonable people. “*In the same way*” in 3:1, means “*in the same way as Jesus submitted*” (2:21). Wives who have unreasonable husbands have a great opportunity to follow in Jesus’ footsteps. When Jesus suffered injustice without complaining on the cross, a Roman centurion, who had crucified many people, had never seen anything like this. And he said, “*This is the Son of God*” and was converted instantaneously. A thief hanging next to Jesus also had never seen anything like this. He also believed that Jesus was the Son of God and said, “*Lord, remember me when You come in Your kingdom*”. He also was converted. And when your unreasonable husband sees your Christlike conduct, he also will get converted. Peter says, “*You will be able to win him without preaching one word to him*” (3:1). Many Christian wives try to convert their husbands by preaching to them. But the more they preach to them, the more their husbands turn away from the Lord. Try the submission-method in future and stop your preaching.

Then Peter teaches women how to adorn themselves. Not with fancy hairstyles or gold jewellery or expensive dresses, but with the inner beauty of “*a gentle, quiet spirit*” (3:4). That beauty will never fade away and never perish. That is the hidden beauty that God is looking for. It is very precious in His sight. Most men in this world are blind to this *real* beauty, because they do not know God.

When young men ask me for advice on the type of sister they should marry, I ask them: “*Do you want to marry a sister who is precious in God’s sight?*” Then I point them to this verse and tell them, “Look for a sister who has the imperishable beauty of a gentle, quiet spirit.” This is not referring to silence in *speech* but to silence in her *spirit*. It is not a question of how much she talks, but rather *how* she talks and conducts herself. Peter says that this was how godly sisters (in the past) like Sarah were, who obeyed Abraham (3:5, 6). We can know that a sister has received “*the true grace of God*”, if she manifests a gentle, quiet spirit.

How can we know if a *husband* has experienced “*the true grace of God*”? Peter says that it is by his living in an understanding way with his wife, respecting her as a weaker vessel. Such a husband will never put burdens on his wife that he should be carrying himself. For example, if you and your wife are travelling with two suitcases – one big and one small – you will definitely carry the big suitcase yourself and give her the small one. It must be the same with burdens in the home as well. There are many burdens that wives carry in a home that are much heavier than suitcases, and many husbands don’t even lift a finger to help them. For example, a wife may be struggling in the morning cooking breakfast, looking after the baby and getting the older children ready for school. Her husband may be sitting quietly, reading his Bible and asking God to speak to him and give him some new revelation! If he has ears to hear, he will hear God saying, “*Close your Bible and go and help your wife!*” A husband who obeys that voice has understood “*the true grace of God*”. If a husband and wife live like that, they will be “joint-heirs” – a king and a queen together – of the grace of life.” What a powerful testimony for Christ such a home will be, in this evil world!

Various Exhortations

The *Living Bible* paraphrase of 3:8–11 reads like this:

“And now this word to all of you: You should be like one big happy family, full of sympathy toward each other, loving one another with tender hearts and humble minds. Don’t repay evil for evil. Don’t snap back at those who say unkind things about you. Instead, pray for God’s help for them, for we are to be kind to others, and God will bless us for it. If you want a happy, good life, keep control of your tongue, and guard your lips from telling lies. Turn away from evil and do good. Try to live in peace even if you must run after it to catch and hold it!”

These exhortations are clear and simple and need no explanation. This is a description of church life, where everyone lives under “*the true grace of God*”. Peter also emphasises the importance of the control of our tongue – as in other epistles. And then Peter says, “*If you live like this,*

zealous for what is good, who can harm you?" (3:13). This verse is very similar to *Romans 8:28*. All through your life, no-one will be able to do any eternal harm to you, if you decide to live like this.

In 3:15, Peter tells us how to reply to others who question us about the "reason for the hope that is in us". He says that you must always reply with gentleness and respect. We must never speak rudely to anyone, even if they speak to us rudely. Jesus told us, "*Learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in spirit*" (*Matthew 11:29*). Gentleness is a primary mark of those who have understood "*the true grace of God*". A person who is harsh has not understood grace as yet.

"Do what is right; then if men speak against you, calling you evil names, they will become ashamed of themselves for falsely accusing you when you have only done what is good. Remember, if God wants you to suffer, it is better to suffer for doing good than for doing wrong!" (3:16, 17 - Living).

That is what it means to follow in Jesus' footsteps.

In 4:1, we are told that if we "*suffer in the flesh as Jesus suffered in the flesh*," we will finish with sinning. Since this is talking about finishing with sinning, we need to understand this verse correctly. Our Lord never asks us to go through any suffering that He never went through Himself. He humbled Himself first of all under His mother Mary. Consider for example, when Jesus as a little boy was playing some game with His friends outside, and Mary called Him and asked Him to go and get some water from the well urgently. Most children would have told their mother to wait. But Jesus denied Himself and learned obedience through suffering – the suffering of denying His own will (*Hebrews 5:8*). This is how He "*suffered in the flesh*" for 33½ years. If we arm ourselves with the same mind, we too will stop sinning. That means to determine, "Lord, I don't care how much I have to deny myself. I am not going to sin. I am going to put my self-will to death." Anyone who has that attitude will stop sinning very soon.

Then you will no longer live the rest of your life for the lusts of men but to do the will of God (4:2). This is "*the true grace of God*". We are living at a time when "*the end of all things*" is much nearer than it was in Peter's time. So we must live "*soberly for the purpose of prayer*" (4:7).

Keep Fervent in Your Love

Then Peter gives some practical advice on how to remain in fervent love for one another: Forgive everyone and be hospitable (4:9). One who has experienced "*the true grace of God*" will be large-hearted. His home will be open to God's people. His hands will be open to help the needy. Stingy, miserly people, who are always calculating in their giving to the needy

know nothing of the grace of God. In India, I have noticed that it is the poor people who are really hospitable. The richer people are, the stingier they become.

If God has given you a spiritual gift, exercise that gift in humility (4:10). Even that is a part of "*the true grace of God*". And when you preach God's Word, preach as the very mouthpiece of God. Those who serve must serve with the power that God gives. And in everything God alone must be glorified (4:11).

We must not be surprised when we go through fiery suffering, as if that was a strange thing to happen to a believer (4:12). God tests us through such sufferings. This world is not our home. We are like fish out of water here. So we will suffer. That is the experience of everyone who experiences "*the true grace of God*". If we are reviled for the name of Christ, we should consider ourselves blessed, for that is an honour (4:14). But we should never suffer for doing wrong to others. Peter says, "*Don't suffer as a murderer, or as a thief, or as an evildoer, or as a busybody in other people's matters*" (4:15). Most Christians never suffer as murderers, thieves or evildoers, but many unfortunately are busybodies in other people's matters. They don't know how to mind their own business. That is a very bad testimony.

Instead of judging other people, we must learn to judge ourselves first (4:17). In the world, people put themselves first in every area except in the matter of judgement. In judgement they judge others first. A true Christian however lives by the very opposite principle. He puts others first in everything except judgement. *He judges himself first*. Those who have experienced "*the true grace of God*" will never judge others, but only themselves. The happiest people in the world are those who judge themselves always and never judge others. This is the prime mark of all who belong to the true family (household) of God (4:17).

Then Peter speaks to the elders of the churches (5:1). Elders who have experienced *the true grace of God* will look after their flock voluntarily, cheerfully, and without seeking for money (5:2). They serve God's church, whether they receive money for their needs or not. They do not serve for a salary or for money. One who serves the Lord for money knows nothing about *the true grace of God*. A godly elder will also never lord it over his flock, but will be an example to them in all areas (5:3). Then one day when the Chief Shepherd returns, he will receive a crown of glory from Him.

God Gives Grace to the Humble

Young people can also experience *the true grace of God*. When they experience it, they will gladly submit to their elders (5:5). "*God is opposed to the proud but gives grace to the humble. Therefore, humble yourself under the mighty hand of God*" (5:5, 6). The mighty hand of God is the

circumstances that God allows us to face in our life. That difficult boss, that troublesome neighbour, the difficult circumstances, the financial difficulty, sickness, trials, etc. When we face these circumstances, we must humble ourselves under them. That means we do not grumble or complain but accept them joyfully as having been permitted by God. Then God will exalt us over our circumstances and make us victorious. God knows how and when to end the trial and then His mighty hand will exalt you. The same mighty hand that crushed you will exalt you. Jesus submitted under the mighty hand of God. It pleased the Father to crush Him (*Isaiah 53:10*). Then one day the Father raised Him up. He will do the same for you. When you humble yourself like that, you will be able to resist the devil, firm in your faith (5:8, 9). Satan may come as a roaring lion, but he won't be able to harm you, if you have humbled yourself under God's hand.

All the suffering we face on earth is only "for a little while" (5:10). That little while could be 70 years. But then God will "*perfect you, confirm you, strengthen you and establish you.*"

Peter concludes by saying that all that he has written in this letter is "*the true grace of God*" (5:12). In our day when a lot of *counterfeit* grace is being preached, it is good to study this letter of Peter carefully so that we understand the *true* grace of God.

2 PETER

GODLINESS AND FALSE TEACHERS

This is a brief epistle in which Peter speaks first of all about “*partaking of God’s nature*” (1:4). This is the greatest of all of God’s promises given to us. Then he also speaks about some of the dangers that Christians can face if they are not careful.

Partaking of God’s Nature

The Christian life is not a life of following many rules and regulations, as it was under the old covenant. The promises God has given us in the new covenant are far superior to those in the old covenant. The old covenant offered people, material prosperity, physical healing, many children, an abundance of cattle and sheep, rich harvests and overflowing barns of grain. But we can now have something far better than all that. We can actually *partake of the Divine nature*. That is the greatest gift that God can give anyone. There is absolutely nothing superior to that. And here is another promise “*God has given us everything necessary for life and godliness*” (1:3). There are many things in this world that we don’t have answers for. But for living a godly life, God has revealed everything necessary for that in the Scriptures. And He offers us the power of His Holy Spirit to live that life.

Since God has given us these promises, what should we do? First of all we must be diligent (1:5). We must work hard to add moral excellence to our faith. As we walk by faith, our moral excellence will increase and then we will increase in our knowledge of God. As we increase in the knowledge of God we will develop more self-control in our life – over our tongue and in other areas of life. And as we have more self-control, we will find that we become more patient. The more patient we become, the more godly we will become. The more godly we become, the more we will be able to love our fellow believers. The more we love our fellow

believers, the more we will be able to love all people. This is the progression mentioned in 1:5–7.

And if we work hard to ensure that these qualities keep increasing, then our life and our ministry will be abundantly fruitful and we will not be useless Christians (1:8). But if we lack these qualities, we will gradually become spiritually blind (1:9). Another way to become spiritually blind is by forgetting what type of sinners we were in our unconverted days (1:9). When believers forget what filthy sinners they were once and what a filthy pit Jesus pulled them out of, it is then that they begin to despise other people. That proves that such believers have become spiritually blind!

But if we follow the exhortations given in 1:5–9, then we are assured that we will not only never fall away and lose our salvation, but we will receive an *abundant entrance* into God's kingdom (1:11). Many believers are happy if they just make it to heaven, "*by the skin of my teeth*" as it were! But I want "*an abundant entrance*", where the Lord says to me, "*Well done, good and faithful servant*". I want to please God with all my heart in this one earthly life, because Jesus suffered so much for me. Peter says if we go the way described in 1:5–9, we will have that *abundant entrance*. Every believer should long to have such an abundant entrance into God's kingdom.

Peter says that the Lord has shown him that he will be leaving the earth soon (1:13, 14). It is wonderful to see that these apostles like Peter and Paul lived so close to the Lord that the Lord showed them clearly when their time to leave the earth was near (2 Timothy 4:6). But as long as Peter was alive, he would continue to remind those believers of these important spiritual truths, even though they already knew them, and even though he had written to them about these matters earlier (1:12–14). The apostles were like the Old Testament prophets. They kept on preaching the same things again and again. They did not seek for a reputation to always preach something new, like most modern-day preachers. If the people needed to hear some truth again, then they would repeat it. So Peter kept on telling people about the true grace of God, about God having provided everything necessary for a godly life and about partaking of the divine nature. As long as he was alive, he would keep on reminding them of these truths. And he would write them down in letters so that they would remember these truths even after he had left the earth (1:15). What a burden these apostles had for their flock. They were not professional preachers preaching for money! Peter never realised that what he wrote would encourage and challenge billions of people for the next 2000 years!! Peter then tells them how he personally saw the glory of Jesus on the mount of transfiguration and that he was not telling them fairy-tales (1:17).

Peter then says how this was a fulfilment of the prophecies in the Old Testament which were like a light shining in the dark. Here is a paraphrase of these verses.

“So we have seen and proved that what the prophets said came true. You will do well to pay close attention to everything they have written, for, like lights shining into dark corners, their words help us to understand many things that otherwise would be dark and difficult. But when you consider the wonderful truth of the prophets’ words, then the light will dawn in your souls and Christ the Morning Star will shine in your hearts. For no prophecy recorded in Scripture was ever thought up by the prophet himself. It was the Holy Spirit within these godly men who gave them true messages from God” (1:19–21 - Living).

False Teachers – Sexual Sin and Love of Money

Then Peter says: *“But there were false prophets, too, in those days, just as there will be false teachers among you. They will cleverly tell their lies about God..., many will follow their evil teaching that there is nothing wrong with sexual sin. And because of them Christ and His way will be scoffed at. These teachers in their greed will tell you anything to get hold of your money” (2:1–3 - Living).*

Notice here the two main ways in which a false teacher can be detected – *sexual sin and love of money* (2:2, 3). It is not by checking a preacher’s doctrines primarily that we will be able to distinguish the false teacher from the true. Because there are many more false teachers whose doctrines are all correct. If a preacher comes preaching from the Gita or the Koran, or says that Jesus Christ is not God, no true Christian will be deceived by him. But if someone comes preaching from the Bible and preaches all the fundamental doctrines of the Christian faith, most Christians will never consider him to be a false teacher at all.

But Peter says here, that the primary marks of false teachers are their loose attitude towards *sexual sin* and their *greed for money* (2:2, 3). Their eyes are full of adultery. So I warn all sisters: “Be careful of any preacher whose eyes are not pure, who you feel is looking at you in a lustful way. Stay clear of such a preacher, if you value your life. He is a *false teacher*. And to both brothers and sisters I say, stay clear of any preacher who urges you to give your money for his ministry and quotes Scripture to pressurise you to give. Beware of preachers who have become rich through preaching the gospel. Sexual impurity and greed for money are the two primary characteristics of false teachers. If you watch out for these two things in a preacher, you will be saved from many false teachers.”

Then Peter says that just like God punished

1. the angels who sinned in Noah’s time, and
2. the whole world of ungodly people (except Noah’s family), and
3. the people of Sodom and Gomorrah, and
4. Balaam the false prophet
– even so, He will severely punish all false teachers as well (2:4–16).

Noah is called “*a preacher of righteousness*” here (2:5). That is the type of preacher that God needs in these last days, which have become like the days of Noah. And once again Peter repeats the two primary marks of false teachers – adultery and greed (2:14). In the case of Balaam, his donkey knew more about God than “*the prophet*”. So it is with today’s false teachers too! They are worse than animals.

These false teachers may have known the way of righteousness at one time. But they have turned away from it now (2:21). They have become like the pig that has gone back to its wallowing in its mire and like the dog that returns to its own vomit (2:22). There are many false teachers and false prophets in the world today, who started out as very sincere people, and were like washed pigs. *But they never partook of God’s nature.* They remained as clean pigs, instead of partaking of God’s nature and being transformed. They remained as dogs instead of partaking of God’s nature. In other words, their cleanliness was only on the outside. They never cared about their inner daily walk with God. And so, after a while they went back to eat what they had vomited out and back into the muck.

The Promise of Christ’s Coming

Peter tells us that in the last days there will be many mockers who say, “*Where is the promise of Christ’s coming?*” (3:4). They will make fun of Christians who have been preaching about Christ’s return for nearly 2000 years now. That is how they made fun of Noah too, in his day. They asked Noah, “*Where is the rain that you have been saying for the last 120 years will be coming that will destroy all of us?*” But the rain came suddenly. And Christ too will come suddenly.

“*But we who believe in Christ’s coming, how should we be living?*” asks Peter (3:11, 12). We know that this earth will soon be burned up. How then should *we* be living? We should be living godly lives. If we are not, then we are no better than the mockers. Let us “*be diligent to be found by Him in peace, spotless and blameless*” (3:14).

The Lord is not slack or slow to fulfil His promise. He is waiting because He wants all people to come to repentance (3:9). That one verse totally disproves the theory that God elects just some people to be His children. If God wanted, He could force every human being to repent. But that would make men into robots. God has given man a free will and He will never override that free will and force any man to choose Him. Everyone must choose Him voluntarily – for God loves cheerful givers. And so God waits for people to repent.

Then Peter refers to Paul’s writings in which there are some things that are “*hard to understand, which the untaught and unstable distort, as they do also the rest of the Scriptures, to their own destruction*” (3:15, 16). Peter is referring to the false understanding of grace which he tried to correct in his first letter – and which is being preached by many preachers even

today – where “*grace*” has become a license to sin without any fear, for they say, “*Once you are saved by grace, you are saved forever, irrespective of how you live*”! They won’t say it in exactly those words. But that is the message people get. More people have gone to hell through believing this message of false grace than through believing any other teaching.

So Peter warns us to “*be on our guard so that we are not carried away by the error of unprincipled men and fall from our steadfastness*” (3:17). Instead he urges us to “*grow in the grace (the true grace of God) and in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ*” (3:18).

We praise the Lord for Peter’s two letters and we pray that we will have grace to walk in the light of these words inspired by the Holy Spirit.

1 JOHN

LIGHT AND LOVE – LIFE AND FELLOWSHIP

There are two things that John says here about God. “*God is light*” (1:5) and “*God is love*” (4:8). And those are two of the main themes of his letter – *light* and *love*. In practical terms *for us*, that means *life* and *fellowship*.

In Jesus was life – and that life was the light of men (*John 1:4*). It was through the life of Jesus that the light was seen and it is through our life that the light will be seen. God is love and John reminds us of the one command that Jesus gave. It is interesting to note none of the first three gospel-writers mention the new commandment that Jesus gave His disciples: “*A new commandment I give unto you that you love one another as I have loved you*” (*John 13:34*). John alone emphasises that. And that is what he emphasises in his letter also. He says that if you love one another, the evidence will be *fellowship*. So ‘*Life and fellowship*’ are two of the important subjects in this letter.

He begins this letter referring to the life of God that was present from eternity past (1:1) – “*that which was from the beginning*”, just as he does in his gospel as well (*John 1:1*).

The Primary Truth

John wrote all his letters just a few years before he died, when he was about 95 years old. He had been baptised in the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost, 65 years earlier. And for 65 years he had walked with God. He had planted churches, exercised the gifts of the Spirit, done miracles, prophesied, spoken in tongues and seen the ministry of the other apostles. The other 11 apostles of Jesus had died, and John was now the only one living. He had seen the mighty move of the Spirit by which churches had been established and he had seen the decline of many of those churches by the end of the first century. He had heard many false

prophets and many false doctrines. He had seen many good believers becoming fanatical in their zeal. He now writes as a mature 95-year-old man who knew God intimately. He could look back over 65 years and discern what was important in the Christian life and what was not. He could see where people went astray by over-emphasising some truth and where they went astray by under-emphasising some other truth. So when we study *1 John* let us bear in mind that this is the writing of a mature apostle – and not that of a young Christian zealot. John waited till he was 95 years old before he wrote anything. So, as we study his letter, we need to notice carefully not only what he says but also what he does *not* say – because what he does *not* say will show us the things that John realised were not so important. In his 4-page letter, he emphasises the most important matters.

For example, John does not write at all about the pattern of church government or the church-meeting, speaking in tongues, healing, material prosperity, evangelism, etc. These are all important matters, but they are not primary, when churches are decaying spiritually. For many Christians however, some of these matters *are* primary. John writes in his letter about what was from the beginning, at a time in eternity past, when there was no church government, or church-meetings, or believers, or human beings, or angels, or heaven, or earth – at a time when only God existed.

What was there in eternity past? Only God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit. They had *eternal life* and they had *perfect fellowship* between them. So what John is saying is, “Remember that these are the two eternal realities – *life and fellowship*.” Everything else is only for a short period of time. So if we get taken up primarily with matters that are only temporal and miss these two great eternal realities, then we would have missed everything. That would be akin to polishing the nuts and bolts of a car’s wheel, when the car’s engine has broken down! Many Christians are occupied with minor issues and have missed the main things in the Christian life.

Having observed the development and decline of Christianity in the first century, John teaches us what is important for us today. If you don’t have the life of God in you, that life of purity, humility, love and goodness, then whatever else you may have is worthless. When compared to the life of Christ, everything else is rubbish. When you come together with other believers, if you cannot build fellowship with them, but only have activity and ministry, then you are missing out completely on true Christianity. Even evangelism will be a waste of effort if it does not lead to building fellowship. Remember that in eternity past there was only *life and fellowship* in God.

Consider the Christian home. What is the most important thing in a home? Is it that everything should be neat and tidy and in its proper place, with nicely painted walls and attractive curtains? No. It is the life of God that should be manifest in the husband, wife and children, and in the relationships between them.

How can we have this life and fellowship? Through humility. When we humble ourselves, we provide God with the ground on which the Holy Spirit can bring forth His fruits in our lives.

John says in his very first words in this letter that he has heard, seen and touched this life of God that was manifested in Jesus (1:1–3). And it needs to be manifested again and again in God's people in every generation – until Christ's return. John is not talking about evangelical doctrine but of the life of God. Many Christians spend hours arguing over points of doctrine – some of them over silly matters like what the initial evidence of the baptism of the Holy Spirit is, whether we can take medicines when we are sick, and a host of other things like that, that are not going to matter at all in eternity.

We are called to proclaim eternal life to the world – that life that never had a beginning, that pure and holy life of God Himself. Wherever you go till the end of your life, make it your passion to manifest and proclaim eternal life. When I was a child (spiritually), I spoke like a child and argued about many minor matters. But now that I have grown up and become a man (spiritually), I have put away all those childish matters (1 Corinthians 13:11). Even the apostle John in his younger days spoke foolishly. He wanted to call down fire from heaven to consume the Samaritans (Luke 9:54). But he grew up. And so must we. We can learn from our past mistakes and we can also learn lessons from the mistakes that others make – and become wise. Then we can help the younger generation not to do the same foolish things that we did when we were young. Those who are humble will receive our advice.

Eternal Life and Fellowship

We must emphasise life first and then fellowship. Any so-called “fellowship” without the life of God is a deception. The ecumenical movement in Christendom today seeks to unite churches. But it is not on the basis of the life of God. Finally they will join with people of other religions as well. It is just a matter of time before that happens. That is not the fellowship John is talking about in his letter. People can have that type of “fellowship” even in hell.

We must be friendly with all people. But *fellowship* is a far deeper thing than friendship. Life and fellowship go together. “*We have seen that eternal life which was with the Father manifested to us. We have seen*

and heard, and we proclaim it to you. The purpose of proclaiming it to you is that you may have fellowship” (1:1–3).

“*Our fellowship is with the Father*” (1:3). True fellowship is in two directions, like the two arms of the cross. It is through the cross that we come into fellowship with God and also with one another. Between Christ and us there is a cross on which He died. Because of that we can have fellowship with our Lord. We can never have fellowship with God apart from that, because in ourselves, we will never be good enough. And between us as believers also, there must be a cross on which each of us die to ourselves, if we want to have fellowship with each other. Fellowship is impossible without this death on the cross – both in the vertical and in the horizontal directions. The cross is the secret of life and fellowship. There is no life without the cross and there is no fellowship possible without the cross.

The cross was in God’s mind from way back in eternity past. The Lamb was slain “from before the foundation of the world” (*Revelation 13:8 - KJV*). God knows the end from the beginning and so the Trinity knew from all eternity past, that the Second Person would have to come to the earth as a Man and be crucified for man’s sins. That was not something God decided on, *after* Adam sinned. It was eternally foreknown. God placed a sword in front of the tree of life when Adam sinned. That sword fell on Jesus and slew Him. And that sword must fall on our Adamic life too – we must accept our place as “*crucified with Christ*” (*Galatians 2:20*) – if we are to come to the tree of life and have fellowship with God and also with each other.

What is it that causes problems among believers? The life of Adam. If you bring the life of Adam into the church, it will always produce conflict. If you bring the intelligence, reasoning and cleverness of Adam into the church, it will always produce conflict. You must put all of that intelligence and cleverness that comes from the life of Adam under the fiery sword of the Holy Spirit. Don’t kill just the “*bad sheep*” of Adam. Kill the “*good sheep*” of Adam too. Saul lost his kingdom because he killed only the *bad sheep* of Amalek (a type of the *flesh*) but not the good sheep. What do those bad sheep typify? Jealousy, bitterness, sexual sin, love of money, etc. And what do the good sheep typify? Human intelligence, cleverness, talents, abilities, etc. Put them all to death.

Come to Jesus with empty hands and ask Him to give you His supernatural gifts to serve Him. Then God will sanctify you and give you His life. Then your natural abilities will become servants of the Spirit – and you will do God’s work with His power and not your own. But first you have to lay everything on the altar. You may say that you have abilities

that God Himself gave you at birth. But even what God gave you has to be put on the altar and slain. Isaac was God's gift to Abraham. But God told Abraham to offer up even Isaac on the altar. That is what you have to do too, with your God-given talents. So place your intelligence, your musical abilities and all your natural talents on the altar and offer them as a sacrifice to God. Then let God raise them up from the dead and then He will use them for His glory. That's the only way to serve God. God gave me some intelligence too when I was born. But I laid it totally on the altar and gave it up to God. He gave it back to me under the anointing of the Spirit to use for His glory. That is how our natural talents and abilities can be sanctified and become useful to God for His work.

John says that fellowship will result in fullness of joy (1:4). Joy is a major part of the Christian life, because joy is the atmosphere of heaven. There is no gloom in heaven. The angels are never discouraged. They are always full of life and full of joy. And we can have that joy too, if we have fellowship with God. The Holy Spirit has come to bring the atmosphere of heaven into our hearts – and part of that is a fullness of joy.

Satan will tell you that if you give your life totally to God, you will be miserable, gloomy, depressed, and long-faced. It is unfortunately true that some Christians do give that impression by their appearance. I heard a story of a long-faced Christian witnessing to someone and asking him, "Would you like to receive Christ into your heart?" That person looked at the Christian's face and replied, "No, thank you. I have enough problems already!" That is a poor witness for our wonderful Lord. If your life and your home are not radiating the joy of the Lord, then something is wrong in your life. You have missed the will of God somewhere.

No Darkness in Him

John goes on to say that if you want this life, fellowship and joy, then the very first thing you need to understand is that God is light and that there is no darkness in Him at all (1:5) – zero lying, zero impurity, zero hatred, zero pride, etc. Do you want such a life where you never tell a lie, never hate anyone, where you are never jealous of anyone and never proud? If you choose that life, you will never be gloomy or discouraged. You will live a life of perpetual joy in the Lord. Is it possible to live such a life on this sin-cursed earth? Yes it is. *Philippians 4:4* commands us to rejoice in the Lord always. That was written for people here on earth and not for those in heaven! Your joy can be full here on earth, whether you are being persecuted like John on Patmos, or whether you are sitting comfortably at home. Your joy will *never* be dependent on your circumstances, if you choose to walk in the light of God at all times.

But if we say we have fellowship with Him and we walk in darkness, then we are not practising the truth. There are many Christians who say that they have fellowship with God but walk in sin. You can see in their

faces that the joy of the Lord is not there. There is no spring in their step, no song on their lips, and no sparkle in their eyes. They have missed the joy of fellowship with God. The older we become as believers, the *more joy* we will have, if we are walking with God.

1:7 is a beautiful verse, but most quote only part of it. They say, “The blood of Jesus Christ cleanses us from all sin”. But that is *not* what this verse says. It says, “*If we walk in the light as He is in the light, then (and then only) the blood of Jesus cleanses us from all sin.*” The blood of Jesus does not cleanse everyone who confesses some sins to God. It cleanses only those who walk in the light of God. That refers to people who hide nothing in their lives from God and who are totally free from hypocrisy. This verse is not talking about perfection. It is telling us to be totally honest about our sins and not be hypocrites.

This verse also says that the blood of Jesus will *cleanse* us, and not just *cover* our sins, as it was in the Old Testament. The blood of Christ cleanses our sin, removes it, and wipes it out so that there is no record of it any more. We are cleansed and justified by His blood. God will not remember our sin any more (*Hebrews 8:12*).

Then we read in 1:8, “*If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves.*” Here, the sin being referred to, is not conscious sin (which every godly man confesses and forsakes), but to unconscious sin, which all of us have. Consider who is writing this verse. John, a man of God, 95 years of age, who had walked with God for 65 years. He includes himself here, saying, “*We*”. Did John still have unconscious sin in his life even after walking with God for 65 years? Yes. Here is the godliest, holiest man walking on the face of the earth acknowledging that there were still areas in his life where he hadn’t become totally like Christ. He was pressing on. There will never be a time in our lives when we will be totally free from unconscious sin. John was climbing a mountain. When he was born again he was at the foot of the mountain. Becoming totally like Christ is the top of the mountain. He had climbed a long way up in 65 years – perhaps 70% of the way up. But he still hadn’t reached the top. There was still un-Christlikeness in him in certain areas, which he was unaware of. He is not referring here to anger, bitterness, lust, adultery and sins like that. He had finished with all of that when he had reached 100 feet up the mountain. Now he was past 20,000 feet up and was dealing with other sins, which younger believers don’t even consider as sin!

The Christian life is a struggle at every stage. The second-standard student struggles with mathematics. It is multiplication that is difficult for him. The Ph.D. student also struggles with mathematics. But he is struggling at a far higher level. Both students are struggling, but at different levels. The Christian life is like that. At every stage, it is a struggle. It is a struggle when we have climbed just 500 feet of the mountain, and it is a struggle after we reach 20,000 feet as well, because there will be unconscious sin (un-Christlike areas) in our lives until the very end

– until the day when Christ returns and we become fully like Him. There is more sin within our flesh than we imagine. As we walk in the light with God, we get light on those unconscious sins, little by little, and we “cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of flesh and spirit, and perfect holiness in the fear of God” (*2 Corinthians 7:1*). But until the end of our life on earth, we will have to admit that there is still sin in us.

In *1:9*, we read a clear promise: “*If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sin, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.*” To whom should we confess our sins? There is a lot of false teaching among some Christians (and also in cultistic groups) that says that we must confess our private sins to other believers and even in public! Such teaching is a demonic doctrine. *Sin must be confessed only in the circle in which it was committed.* For example, if you have a dirty thought, only God is in that circle. So you confess such sins only to God. If however you have hurt another person, then there are two persons in that circle – God and that other person. Then you must confess to God as well as to the other person. If you have hurt a church, then you must confess to God and to the whole church publicly. You don’t have to confess your sins to anyone outside that circle. Remember this – and it will save you from a lot of the foolishness going on in Christendom today.

Pastors in some groups are trying to control their congregations by making people confess their private sins in public. Then when they know all about a person’s past life, that man can never leave the group because they could blackmail him saying, “We know all about your past life. If you don’t want us to tell others about it, stay with us!” There are many wicked leaders like that in Christendom today. They will quote *James 5:16*, “*Confess your sins to one another*” to justify their teaching. But that verse is referring to someone who became sick due to some sin and confessing that sin privately in the presence of his church-elders in order to be healed. It is not talking about public confession of sin at all.

God is faithful. He will forgive us and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. And if we say we have not sinned, then we make Him a liar (*1:10*). *1:8* and *1:10* are referring to two different things altogether. *1:8* is referring to unconscious sin within our flesh, whereas *1:10* is referring to having sinned in the past.

Then in *2:1*, John goes on to say. “*These things I am writing to you so that you should not sin.*” That is the first word: We should *not sin*. Only after having said that, does John refer to what we should do, when we do sin. That is the balance found in Scripture: *We should not sin, but we may sin.* “*And if anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous.*”

Why is Jesus Christ called the righteous? Because many advocates are liars. Jesus Christ is not. Jesus Christ won’t tell a lie. He will help you if

you speak the truth. He is a righteous Advocate. He is on your side. But if you want Him to help you, you must speak the truth. Don't tell a lie. Don't pretend that you have not sinned. Don't pretend that you are holy when you are not. Acknowledge your sin and He will forgive you. He will support you. He will defend you. He is an Advocate on your side but a righteous Advocate. He hates all hypocrisy.

Consider if John had written 2:1 with the second sentence coming first, like this: "*My little children, if anyone sins we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous, but I am writing to you that you may not sin.*" Do you think that would have made a difference? Yes. It would have made a great difference because then the primary emphasis would have been on the fact that you will, of course, sin. But you should try not to sin. But that's not how John put it. The emphasis is first of all on "*Do NOT sin.*" Then secondarily, if you fall, here is what you can do. So, John is saying that we don't have to fall into sin. We can overcome.

If we are learning mountain-climbing, the instructor won't first tell us, "Well, of course you are going to fall and break some bones." No. He will teach us how to climb to the top without falling. Then he will tell us what to do if we do fall. When preachers teach "*What to do when you sin*" first, then they are encouraging unbelief. They should be preaching, "*You should not sin,*" first. And then teach what to do if people fall into sin. That is the right way.

2:2 tells us clearly that Christ died for the sins "*of the whole world*". This goes completely against those who teach that Christ died only for the sins of the elect. Scripture is clear. Christ died for everyone in the world. But only those benefit from His death who accept His offer of forgiveness.

In 2:3, we are told how we know that we have come to know Jesus. By keeping His commandments. If you say that you know Him and you don't keep His commandments, you are a liar (2:4). Obeying God's commandments is one of the main themes of 1 John. Another main theme is loving our fellow-believers.

2:6 is one of the most important verses in this letter, that all Christians must take seriously: "*Anyone who says he is a Christian should live as Christ lived*" (Living). We are not to walk as other people walk but as Jesus walked. We must not excuse our sins by saying "*After all, we are only human.*" No. We are to walk as Jesus walked. We cannot *become* like Christ now. John makes it clear that that will take place only when Christ returns (3:2). But *walking* is a *conscious* act. So walking as Jesus did relates only to the *conscious* area of our lives. The unconscious part of us will remain un-Christlike in many areas until He returns. But in our conscious area, we can walk as Jesus did. The unconscious part will become totally Christlike when He returns.

Then John speaks about loving our brothers – another great theme of his letter. One who hates his brother is still in darkness; but one who loves his brother abides in the light (2:9).

Three Stages of the Christian Life

Then, in 2:12–14, John writes about three stages in the Christian life, spiritual babyhood, spiritual youth and spiritual maturity.

Babes are those who know only the forgiveness of their sins and that God has become their Father. These are two things that all babes in Christ must know. That is the foundation and the starting point of the Christian life. You can't grow if you don't start on this clear foundation. The next level of maturity is when we learn how to have God's Word abiding permanently in our hearts so that we are strong and can overcome Satan (2:13, 14). From there, we must grow and become spiritual fathers to others. They know God and His ways intimately – which is more than just knowing Him as their Father. When you become mature, you know God personally, the values He has and the principles by which He works, etc. Such fathers can guide other believers – and that is the greatest need of the hour in our churches today.

Those who only talk about the forgiveness of sins and how God is a good Father Who cares for all their earthly needs and heals their sicknesses and provides for them, are babies. They are like babies who keep saying, "Mamma, Dadda". We all begin there. But we must not remain in that state. We must grow up and learn how to fight Satan. Then we have to go beyond even that. We must go on to know God intimately. That is the greatest thing of all. Then we can be a blessing to many in the church as "fathers".

To all these believers who are at different levels of maturity, John gives an exhortation: "*Don't love the world or the things in the world*" (2:15). Do spiritual fathers also need an exhortation not to love the world? Yes. Even the most mature Christian in the world is in danger of loving the world at any time. So even he needs the exhortation, "*Don't love the world. If you love the world, you cannot love the Father.*"

There are three things mentioned here that constitute what John calls "*the world*": the lust of the flesh – sexual passions, overeating, laziness; the lust of the eyes – the desire to buy everything that we see, which is related to the love of money; and pride – the greatest sin of all. These three things characterise this world system. Anyone who loves any of these things cannot love the Father. But all these and the world will pass away very soon. *Only the one who does the will of the Father will remain forever* (2:17). That is something we must always bear in mind.

Then John goes on to speak about the spirit of the Antichrist. The Antichrist is one who will rise up in the last days. But there were already people with the spirit of that antichrist in the church in the first century.

2 Thessalonians 2 tells us that the Antichrist will sit in the temple as god. There are people sitting in the church today who act like God. One mark of such people is that they love to rule over other believers. They do not have the spirit of a servant that Jesus had. They are anti-Christ (= the opposite of Jesus Christ). Another mark of such people is that they never ask forgiveness from anyone – just as God never has to ask forgiveness from anyone. These people act as if they never make a mistake. These are the antichrists in the church today. Don't ever imagine that you will come to such a place of maturity that you will never again make a mistake. As far as I am concerned, I know that I will have to ask forgiveness from people until the end of my life, because I anticipate that I will be making mistakes until the day I leave this earth. You and I will make mistakes. We must humble ourselves before God and men and acknowledge that we are not God – and we must be ready to ask forgiveness from the lowest and the least person on earth.

The antichrists were already there in the first-century church. But John's preaching was so powerful that those antichrists were driven out. The preaching in the church must be so powerful that the antichrists must get offended and go somewhere else where all the other antichrists congregate. We need some people like John to drive these antichrists from the church today. "*They went out from us because they didn't belong with us*" (2:19). Their spirit didn't agree with our spirit. John goes on to say, "*You must discern that through the anointing. The anointing will teach you all things*" (2:27). You don't need John or any apostle to come and teach you, because you have the Holy Spirit to show you what spirit another person has.

Purifying Ourselves

In 3:1, John speaks about the Father's great love that enables us to be His children! But we still don't know what we are going to become, because we don't see that very clearly right now (3:2). Many are curious about the future life. But even John at 95 says he is not very clear about it. So it is best not to speculate about such things.

We don't know many things about the future. But we do know how we are supposed to live on this earth now. And we also know this about the future that when Christ appears we who are children of God will be like Him (3:2). If we really have this hope within us, we will purify ourselves as Jesus is pure. How can we know that the hope of the second coming of Christ is a *living* hope within us and not a dead one? Here is the proof: Knowing that we will be like Him when He comes, we will keep on purifying ourselves, keeping Jesus' total purity as our goal. In 1:7, John tells us how *Jesus purifies us* from our past sins through His blood. But here John tells us how *we must purify ourselves*. That

is the balance that we see in the Scriptures – *He purifies us and we purify ourselves.*

John defines sin here as lawlessness (breaking God's commandments). And then he tells us that Jesus appeared on earth to accomplish two things:

1. *To take away our sin* (3:5), and
2. *To destroy the works of the devil* (3:8).

Let me use an illustration to make this plain. When we were born on earth, imagine that we were given a large beautiful ball of thread, neatly rolled up. We began untying this ball as we grew up and tied it into numerous knots through our sins. Now that we have lived many years, this ball of thread has got a million knots in it – and as we look at it, we are thoroughly discouraged and wish we could start life all over again. But we know that is impossible. Jesus has come to “*untie*” the works of the devil and to give us back a neat ball of thread once again. Isn’t that wonderful? I praise God that He can deal with all the wretched mistakes we have made in our lives and again give us hope for the future. He can still make something good out of our life. We read in a parable (that Jesus spoke) that even those who came to work in the eleventh hour got a reward. So even if you have wasted 90% of your life (11 hours out of 12), you can come to the Lord now – and He will still make something good out of the rest of your life. Thus even older people who have lived most of their life in sin, have hope. What an encouragement that is. Praise the Lord!

In 3:9, John says, “*No one who is born of God practises sin.*” What that means is that when we are truly born again (born of God) we won’t *keep on* committing sin. If you keep on committing sin consciously, then it is quite likely that you are *not* born again. A person who is born again may slip up occasionally, but he won’t choose to *keep on* committing sin. That is how we distinguish between the children of God and the children of the devil (3:10). There we see that there are only two categories of people in the world – *children of God and children of the devil.*

Then John speaks about love in 3:12. He warns us not to be “*like Cain who hated his brother.*” Cain killed his brother, because Cain’s deeds were evil while his brother’s were righteous. Cain was an evil man – and that was why his offering was not accepted. Abel was a righteous man – and that was why his offering was accepted. The Bible says that the Lord had regard for Abel first and only then for his offering. And the Lord did not have any regard for Cain and that was why his offering was not accepted. (Read *Genesis 4:4 and 5* carefully). However good your offering may be, if your heart is not right with God, He will *not* accept your offering. And then John says, “*Don’t be surprised if the world hates you*” – as Cain hated Abel. The world hates those whom God approves of. And because we stand against the spirit of this world, the world naturally hates us.

In 3:16, John gives us one proof that God's love is dwelling in our hearts: "We know love by this that He laid down His life for us – and we ought to lay down our life for the brethren." Many people know John 3:16. But they don't know 1 John 3:16. John 3:16 tells us about Jesus laying down His life for us. 1 John 3:16 says that because of that, we must be willing to lay down our lives for our brothers as well. This is the balance we find in the teaching of Scripture: He laid down His life for us. We must lay down our life for our brothers. Our love should be shown not in words but in deeds. We should always be ready to help our fellow-believers when they are in need of *food and clothing*. He is referring here to born-again brothers who lack the basic necessities of life – and not to selfish believers who seek to take advantage of the kindness of other believers to get money from them to buy luxuries!

John then goes on to speak about our heart condemning us. "*In whatever our heart condemns us, God is greater than our heart and knows all things*" (3:20). That means that if your conscience itself is convicting you about sin, you can imagine how much more sin there is in your life that God sees? You see only 10%, God sees 100%. But we don't have to be disturbed about that unconscious area of our lives that God alone can see, because God holds us responsible only for the area that we can see. It is enough if you keep your conscience clear – that 10% that you can see and God will cleanse the rest as we saw in 1:7. So if our heart does not condemn us, then we can have confidence in prayer. This teaches us that one of the most important requirements for answered prayer is a clear conscience. Whatever we ask we can receive because to the best of our knowledge we are keeping His commandments and doing the things that are pleasing to Him (3:22).

Next John warns us not to believe every spirit that operates among Christians but to test all of them (4:1). This is one of the most needed warnings in our day. We must test all the supernatural manifestations going on in Christendom today and not blindly accept everything supernatural as coming from God. We must check every preacher's message with the Word of God and test his methods with the methods of Jesus and the apostles. For example, Jesus did not collect money from people, before or after healing anyone, or before or after preaching anywhere. Jesus never asked anyone who was healed to come before the people and give a testimony. The methods adopted by today's preachers are totally different from the methods used by Jesus. And so we must expose this deception that is deceiving so many Christians. And the so-called "healings" nowadays are all so superficial and so shallow.

But some will say, "Don't speak against the Holy Spirit." But the Holy Spirit says here, "*Test every spirit*" (4:1). And that is what we must all do. When someone makes a babbling noise we should not automatically

believe that that is “a message in tongues”, as most Pentecostals believe. We must test the spirit. We must check whether it was edifying and a blessing to the church. In 95% of cases, I have found such tongues to be fake. In most cases it is just a psychologically-produced outburst. Even demons can make a person speak in tongues. Only 5% of what I have heard has been genuine tongues. Test the spirits. If it is of God, it will edify you, it will lift your spirit up and bless you. But if it is not of God, it will be like a “heavy wet blanket” upon the meeting. So we must always test every spirit.

Obedience, Love and Christ’s Humanity

In 4:2, we read another of the great themes of *1 John*: “*Every spirit that confesses that Jesus has come in the flesh is of God.*” Three of the great themes of *1 John* are – obedience to God’s commandments, loving one another and confessing that Jesus came in our flesh.

Remember that John has watched the development of the church for 65 years. And what he is saying now is that if you want to build the church the way God wants it to be built, then these three matters must be emphasised: *Obedience to God’s commandments, love for one another and the humanity of Jesus Christ.* Are these three subjects being emphasised in your church? If not, it will not be built as the Body of Christ.

In 4:4, John encourages believers by saying, “*You are from God, little children. He that is in you is greater than he that is in the world.*” That’s why we can be overcomers at all times and why we need never be afraid of the devil or of anyone else in the world.

After that, John comes back to the theme of loving one another, which he says is the primary mark of a person who knows God (4:7, 8).

In 4:12, John repeats what he had earlier said in his gospel as well: “*No one has seen God at any time.*” This statement is found only twice in the Bible. In *John 1:18* and here. When we put both these passages of Scripture together, we learn a great truth. *John 1:18* says: “*No one has seen God at any time, but Jesus came and showed people what God is like.*” Here, in *1 John 4:12*, it says, “*Now that Jesus has gone back to heaven, the world can see what God is like in us believers, when we love one another.*” The world still has not seen God. But God has placed His church here so that people see what He is like. When Jesus was here on earth, He was the Body of Christ. People saw God in Jesus. Now we (the church) are the Body of Christ. People must see God in us. That is why we must love one another. As we seek for the *life* of God and *fellowship* with Him and one another, we will manifest through our lives that God is both *light* and *love*.

When Jesus was on earth He said, “*If you have seen Me you have seen the Father*” (*John 14:9*). Today we as the Body of Christ should be able to

say, “*If you have seen us you have seen a little bit of what Jesus is like, a little bit of what heaven is like. If you live in my home, you will see a little bit of what heaven is like. If you fellowship with me you will taste a little bit of what Jesus is like and a little bit of what heaven is like*”. That should be our testimony. If that is *not* our testimony, then we have to acknowledge that we have failed God. We can preach, evangelise and teach the Bible, but if we do not manifest the life and love of God in our daily lives, our testimony is a failure. Because then the people around us still haven’t seen what God is like in us. That is the tragedy in Christendom today.

In 4:17, John goes on further, to say, “*As Jesus is, so we are in this world.*” This is an amazing verse. We are called to be as Jesus in this world. This also means that we can have authority over Satan just as Jesus had. Do you believe that? That is the only way we can live with dignity, boldness and confidence as we face the future. This is a verse that I would like to put in front of every wholehearted child of God: “*As Jesus is, so are you in this world.*” Live with that authority and don’t ever live in any fear. We will have no fear when we realise how much God loves us (4:18). Fear can come in only when we think that God wants to punish us for something. But there is no fear when we recognise that God loves us immensely. And we love the Lord in return because He first loved us (4:19). The more we recognise how much Jesus loved us, the more our love will grow for Him – spontaneously. Perfect love casts out fear.

But no-one can say that he loves God if he hates any brother in Christ. Such a person is not a believer but a *liar* (4:20). Here it is referring to a brother “*whom you can see*” (4:20). It is easy to love believers whom you never see – like the ones living in far-off lands. But it is the brother and sister who you meet regularly who tests whether you love God or not.

In 5:4, John boldly says that everyone “*born of God overcomes the world*”. He goes on to say that it is by faith that we overcome the world – by our faith in the fact that God loves us and that all that Jesus revealed about God is true. Thus we overcome the attractions of this world easily. It is when believers don’t believe everything that Jesus said that they find the world very attractive – and are overcome by its temptations.

Before John closes his letter, he once again assures every true believer that he “*has eternal life*” (5:13). And he also assures them that when they pray for anything according to the will of God, their prayers will be heard and answered by God (5:14). We must live with that confidence in our Father, that He delights to give us everything that is good for us, in answer to prayer. If at times His answer is “No”, He still answered our prayer – but the answer was “No”, because He saw that what we asked for was not for our good.

In 5:16, John urges us to pray for believers who we see committing some sin, so that God can deliver them from death and lead them to life. Then John says that we should not pray if we sense that the sin is one that will lead to death. This probably refers to a sin like the one Ananias and Sapphira committed, for which there was no use praying for them. They had to die. We may ask how we can know which sin is which. The answer to that is that if God gives you a responsibility of eldership like He gave Peter, He will give you the discernment to know which sin is which. I have used that promise many times. I see somebody committing a sin which I don't believe is serious. I pray for him and I have seen God giving him life.

In 5:19, John states that the whole world is lying under the power of Satan. Most believers don't believe this. If we believe it, we will be careful in dealing with everything in this world – its financial system, its educational system, its fashions, its entertainments, its music and its entire value system – for it has all been poisoned by Satan.

John's concluding word is: "*Little children, guard yourselves from idols*" (5:21). That means, "*Give up everything in your life that hinders God from having first place in your life*". Amen.

2 JOHN

JESUS CHRIST CAME IN THE FLESH

The second letter of John is a very brief letter, and there are two things he speaks about in this letter: Obeying God's commandments and a warning against false teachers. He wrote it to one he calls here the chosen lady. That could have been a godly widow who had God-fearing children whom John sought to encourage. But even more likely, it could have been a church, because he writes a number of things here that all churches need to take heed to. In 1:4, John says, "*I was very glad to find some of your children walking in truth just as we have received commandment from the Father.*" That's a great testimony when a widow has brought up her children to walk in the truth in such a way as to get commended by an apostle.

Walk in Love and Truth

In 1:5, John reverts once again to his most favourite exhortation: "Love one another." Notice how this comes through in all of John's writings. John was living at a time when the Christian testimony was in decline in many churches. Spirituality was disappearing everywhere and very few elders and churches were standing up for the truth uncompromisingly. In *Revelation chapters 2 and 3*, we see that only two churches out of seven were spiritually-minded. John could see the causes for their failure. John writes as an apostle inspired by the Holy Spirit to rectify the problems in these churches. Peter went out and did evangelism. Paul went out and built up the churches. John at the end of the first century, is correcting the problems in the churches, emphasising the essentials.

John's emphasis is: Love one another, but not at the cost of truth. Don't love one another in a human way that compromises the truth, but walk in the truth and love one another. And then he again talks about the deceivers. "*Many deceivers have gone out into the world, those who*

don't acknowledge that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh." Notice again in 1:6, 7, John's three-fold emphasis: "*Obey God's commandments; love one another; confess that Jesus Christ came in the flesh*". Even in a short letter like this, he brings out these three points. That teaches us how important these three matters are: We must teach people to obey all of God's commandments, and to love one another and that Jesus came in the flesh (because of which He was tempted like us but did not sin). A person who does not confess these is a deceiver and antichrist.

There are two truths concerning Jesus that a Spirit-filled believer will confess: That He is *fully God* and *fully Man*. The Bible says in *1 Corinthians 12:3*, "*No one can confess that Jesus Christ is Lord except by the Holy Spirit.*" Jesus is the Lord Jehovah of the Old Testament. The Bible also says in *1 John 4:2*: "*By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God*". Both these truths are important. But notice that John emphasises the second one more than the first. All true Christians acknowledge that *Jesus Christ is God, the Jehovah of the Old Testament*.

Jesus Christ in the Flesh – Our Spiritual Dictionary

But all Christians don't sufficiently emphasise the second truth that *Jesus Christ came in the flesh*. The implication of Jesus having come "*in the flesh*" is that He could therefore be tempted exactly as we are, in every point (*Hebrews 4:15*). Some Christians are so blind as to think that the fact that Jesus was tempted like us is a false teaching! John however says the very opposite. He says that a Christian inspired by the Holy Spirit confesses that Jesus came in the flesh; whereas one who does *not* confess this has got the spirit of the Antichrist – which is the spirit of continuing to live in sin. But many Christians have gone so far from this truth that they think that it is the one who confesses that Jesus came in the flesh who has the spirit of the antichrist. This is the state of Christendom today – exactly as it was at the end of the first century.

If you want to speak God's prophetic word to backslidden Christendom today, do you know what it should be? Read John's epistle:

1. Obey God's commandments;
2. Love one another; and
3. Confess that Jesus came in the flesh.

This is the finest 3-point sermon you can preach to Christians for the rest of your life. The first two of these are dependent on the third.

Now that Christ has demonstrated how to live an overcoming life in human flesh, we have no excuse for not obeying God's commandments or for not loving another. Jesus was tempted like us in these two areas – but He did not sin. He kept all of God's commandments and He loved others. So why can't we?

Why does God allow deceivers to come into Christendom and preach against this truth? So that our discerning faculties as Christians can be sharpened and so that we become mature. Many examinations these days are conducted with questions having ‘multiple choices’ for answers. Below the question there will be four answers for you from which you must choose the right one. Three of those answers will be wrong. Thus your discernment is sharpened. If a question had only one answer (the right one) given below it, then everyone would get 100%. Then the examiner will not be able to discover who has discernment and who doesn’t. So in physics or chemistry, you will really need to know the subjects well to pick the right answer. In the same way, God allows deception in the church as well. There are a hundred different teachings about any subject in Christendom. Only one of them is right. The other 99 are all wrong. The Lord says, “Pick the right one.” Some of the 99 false teachings appear to be right. But the one with discernment will recognise that they are false. Those who love the truth will not be deceived, as we read in *2 Thessalonians 2:10, 11*.

If you have seen that Jesus came in the flesh – and its implications for you – you will not be deceived. I have personally been protected thus from many a deception.

Let me give you one example: Nowadays there are many preachers who claim to have the supernatural gift of healing the sick. How can we know whether a particular preacher and his healing methods are from God or not? We may not know anything about his personal life. And we don’t have to test him with many verses of Scripture. “*Jesus came in the flesh*” is the only test required. Jesus in the flesh healed thousands of sick people. Compare that preacher and his methods with Jesus in the flesh. Immediately you can know whether he is from God or not.

For example, if he is interested in collecting money at his meetings, is he from God or is he a deceiver? Ask yourself, “When Jesus was in the flesh, was He interested in collecting money from the people – either for Himself or for His ministry?” Never. Then we know immediately that this preacher is a deceiver, whatever wonderful truths he may be preaching and even if one or two people are healed in his meetings.

Or here is another preacher who preaches, “If you really believe in God you will be financially wealthy” – quoting some old-covenant promise like *Deuteronomy 28:11*. Jesus also knew *Deuteronomy 28:11*. But did Jesus in the flesh ever teach financial prosperity to His disciples from that verse? The answer is “**No**”. Then you discern immediately that this preacher is also a deceiver. No deceiver in the world can fool you once you have seen Jesus having come in the flesh.

“*Jesus Christ in the flesh*” must now become our *spiritual dictionary*. What do I mean by that? When we don’t know a word in English, we

pick up a dictionary and look up the meaning of the word there. We may imagine that the word means something else. But we acknowledge that the dictionary is always right. We can adopt the same principle in the Christian life as well. For example, we see many things going on today in the name of “*Holy-Spirit power*”. We don’t know which is right and which is wrong. Let us go to the spiritual dictionary: “*Jesus, the Word made flesh*” – and check up. In the four gospels, we see the things that Jesus did and said when He was in the flesh. So when we see people today falling down and laughing, roaring like lions and barking like dogs and saying that those are manifestations of the Holy Spirit, we don’t have to be confused. Let us just look at Jesus in the flesh and see whether He ever lay down on the floor and kicked His legs in the air or laughed or roared like a lion, etc. No. Then we know that all those manifestations are **not** of the Holy Spirit. We don’t need to know the whole Bible to have discernment on these matters. In the first century, most Christians did not have a Bible. But those who were filled with the Holy Spirit had Jesus revealed to them by the Spirit. And so they could see through false teachings quite easily.

Abide in the Teaching of Christ

In 1:8, John warns us, “*Watch yourselves, be careful.*” Be careful that you do not lose your full reward, by being led astray by all these deceptions in Christendom today. By the grace of God, I have served the Lord for more than forty years in India and the Lord has planted churches – and I can say without any hesitation, that the truth that has led me and preserved me all these years is this that Jesus came in the flesh and was tempted like me but did not sin.

Look at Jesus and follow His example – and you will never be deceived. You don’t have to criticise or judge the deceiving preachers. Leave them alone. God will judge them all one day. They are blind leaders of the blind and they and their followers will end up in the pit finally. So don’t judge them – and don’t follow them.

In 1:9, John warns: “*If anyone goes too far and does not abide in the teaching of Christ...*”. That is referring to those who go *beyond* what Jesus taught and beyond what the Word of God teaches on this subject. Here is one example. The Bible says that Jesus did *not* come in *sinful* flesh but only in “*the likeness*” of sinful flesh (*Romans 8:3*). But some foolish Christians in a false zeal for this doctrine, “*go too far*” and say that Jesus must have had sinful lusts in His flesh if He was to be tempted like us. Like psychologists, they try to analyse the inner life of Jesus (which none of us can do) and thus teach error. They are like the people of Bethshemesh who “*looked inside the ark*” and were killed by God for their lack of reverence (*1 Samuel 6:19*). John says that such people “*do not have God*”. We must stop where Scripture stops. “*The secret things belong to*

the LORD our God, but the things revealed belong to us" (*Deuteronomy 29:29*). We must stop with the things that are clearly revealed and not "go too far" into foolish speculations. Beware of trying to be "super-spiritual".

In 1:10, 11, John says, "*If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do not receive him into your house, and do not give him a greeting – for the one who gives him a greeting participates in his evil deeds*". The apostle of love speaks very strongly against false teachers. Those who belong to the *Jehovah's Witnesses* cult openly declare that Jesus Christ is not God but a created being. They go, two by two, from house to house, in many lands and deceive people. John says that we should not even receive them into our house or give them a greeting saying, "God bless you" – because God cannot bless those who dishonour the Lord Jesus. Anyone who gives them a greeting is participating in their evil deeds, says John. So, don't think it is Christian love to show hospitality to such deceivers.

Stand true to the Lord in these days of deception.

3 JOHN

A BAD ELDER AND A GOOD ELDER

This letter tells us about a good elder and a bad elder. The good elder is Demetrius (1:12) and the bad elder is Diotrephes (1:9). It also teaches us some fundamental principles of serving God – especially in relation to money. This letter was written to a brother named Gaius.

Deception of the Prosperity Gospel

In 1:2, when John says, “*Beloved, I pray that in all respects you may prosper and be in good health, just as your soul prospers*”, he is only saying what we would all say in a letter to a friend, “I hope your business is doing well and that you are keeping good health.” But this verse has been misinterpreted by those who preach the “*health-wealth*” gospel as though God Himself were speaking through it to all believers everywhere saying that He wants all of them to be financially wealthy and never sick at any time. It is easy for people to “*read into*” Bible-verses whatever they want it to mean – and this is a classic example of such foolishness.

As we said in our last study, whenever in doubt about the meaning of a verse, go to the spiritual dictionary – Jesus in the flesh. Was Jesus a rich Man? Not at all. He Himself said that at times He did not even have a place to lay His head. To prove a point once, He had to *borrow* a coin. He didn’t have one Himself. To pay His taxes, He had to send Peter to catch a fish and get a coin out of its mouth. That clearly proves that financial wealth is not the will of God for all His children. And so that is obviously *not* the meaning of this verse.

Did Jesus have health to do God’s will? Yes. But the Bible also says that He was “*familiar with sickness*” (*Isaiah 53:3 - Literal translation*). We need health to do God’s will. But Jesus never taught that His servants would never get sick. Paul and Timothy were some of His greatest servants in the first century. Yet the Lord did not heal Paul but allowed him

to live with “*a thorn in his flesh*” (*2 Corinthians 12:7*). Timothy had to live with his “*stomach’s frequent ailments*” (*1 Timothy 5:23*).

So we see that our “*spiritual dictionary*” delivers us from false teachings.

1:4 is a wonderful verse: “*I have no greater joy than this, to hear that my children are walking in the truth.*” This is what every father and spiritual father (church-elder) should have as his *greatest joy*. Even many Christian fathers unfortunately find their greatest joy in knowing that their children are earning a good salary. John’s greatest joy was in knowing that those whom he had ministered to, were walking uprightly.

In *2 John*, we saw how John warns us not even to receive certain people into our homes. But here he says how we must *show* hospitality to certain *other* people. Gaius was acting faithfully when he welcomed brothers to stay in his home – even though he was meeting some of them for the very first time. There were brothers in those days travelling from place to place preaching the gospel, and they usually received hospitality from the believers in each locality. We have to be careful however as to who we allow to stay in our homes – for there are many wandering preachers who seek to take advantage of the hospitality of believers. So the practice in those days was for a known brother to introduce such preachers with a letter to the home where they stayed.

John goes on to recommend that Gaius should send such preachers on their onward journey in the ministry “*in a manner worthy of God*.” In today’s terms, that would mean getting them a ticket for their onward journey and providing them money for their food and travel expenses. There were no salaried preachers in the first century. That bad habit started much later in Christendom. But in those early days, the true servants of God whom God had called to serve Him went forth trusting God for their needs. And money didn’t drop down from heaven for them. It was given to them by other believers. But they did not ask or beg for money. They trusted God to move people’s hearts to provide them what they needed, as they went forth seeking God’s kingdom first and preaching the gospel.

God’s Work and Money

We also see in *1:7* that the preachers in those days “*received no money from non-Christians*”. This verse teaches us very clearly, which John had observed for 65 years in the church, that no godly man takes money from unbelievers for preaching the gospel. How sadly different it is today with Christian preachers who conduct evangelistic meetings. Before they preach God’s *free* salvation to those unbelievers, they pass a collection bag in front of them and collect their money. That is like saying to them, “Before you listen to the gospel, you had better pay up”. Does that unbeliever have to pay before he hears the gospel? What an insult to the Lord that is. And what is the money being collected for? The preacher says,

“To support the Lord’s work.” Are those non-Christians supposed to support the work of the God of heaven? That is the spirit of Babylon and not of the true church of God. It is almost impossible nowadays to see a Christian public meeting where money is *not* collected. In fact, collecting money is one of the major items in the meeting. But the preachers in the first century never took a cent or a paisa from any unbeliever.

To give to support God’s work is a privilege and an honour that is reserved for the children of God alone. No-one else has that privilege. In my own case, no unbeliever will be able to stand before God in the final day and say that he ever supported me in my service for the Lord. I have consistently refused to receive gifts from unbelievers in all these 50 years of my full-time Christian service. There are times when unbelievers have sent money to our church. When we know that the sender is an unbeliever, we have either returned their money to them graciously, explaining our position, or, at times, bought Christian books with that money and sent them the books as gifts. We have refused to use even one paisa of such money for the work of the Lord. We have to be utterly faithful to the Lord in this matter. God has enough money among His people to do His work. He doesn’t want the devil’s money to do His work.

The Bible says that everyone in the world lies in the power of the Evil One (*1 John 5:19*). Those who are not born again are the children of the evil one. Does a country ever collect money from an enemy in order to fight that enemy? But this is what many foolish preachers are doing. They tell an unbeliever that he is a child of the devil; and then tell him, “Please give me your money so that I can deliver you from the devil.” That is the height of stupidity and deception. But it is being practised by almost every preacher in Christendom – even by those in fundamental, evangelical groups. They have no light on Biblical principles in the use of money, because they haven’t studied the Scriptures. They go and study in Bible-colleges, but haven’t read *3 John 7*. We must never receive money from unbelievers for God’s work. They have no right to support God’s work or His servants. If they offer you money, tell them graciously, “May God save your soul. But I don’t want your money.” Elisha refused to take Naaman’s money, because Naaman was an idol-worshipper. Elisha lived in a poor hut. But he didn’t want Naaman’s money. His servant Gehazi however took it – and got Naaman’s leprosy along with it and passed on that leprosy to his children as well (*2 Kings 5*). Most Christian workers today are like Gehazi, and that is why the prophets of God are rare in the world today.

A Warning Against Rebellion

John then writes about Diotrephes, the bad elder. Diotrephes loved to be a leader. Many an elder starts out as a humble man. But gradually he can come to a place where he becomes big in his own eyes. Diotrephes

became so big in his own eyes that he would not even listen to an apostle. I am sure that in the early days, when Diotrephes was an unknown young brother, he listened to John. But as his ministry developed he began to think, "Who does John think he is? I am also a man of God. God has used me. I have established a church here. I don't need to listen to John any more." That was Diotrephes's downfall. Today, he must be regretting in hell that he did not listen to the apostle who brought him to the faith and taught him everything that he knew about God.

Diotrephes must have sought to displace John's authority in his church by promoting himself before his congregation. Such things happen even today. People who have grown up as children under some spiritual father suddenly begin to think that they are somebody important and turn against their godly leader. That's exactly what the devil wants them to do, because he wants to destroy them finally. "Let him go on doing this for ten years", the Devil says, "and then I will destroy him."

If you are fortunate enough to have a godly brother as your elder and your guide, respect his advice. No matter how much God allows you to grow, no matter how much He uses you, humble yourself. That brother may not force his authority on you because he is a gracious godly man. But you will be the loser if you don't humble yourself and take his advice. You will be another Diotrephes.

But John does not plan to give up. He cares for the church there and so he says, "When I come there, I will point out his sins to all the others." John was not afraid of exposing arrogant elders before the congregation. Diotrephes even accused John with wicked words before the church (1:10). We see here that even John, the saintliest man on earth at that time, was accused by an elder of a church. If you want to serve God you will be unjustly accused with wicked words by others.

Diotrephes rejected all the brothers whom John sent to that church. And if anyone in the church received those brothers, Diotrephes would put that person out of the church (1:10). He would ask him, "Why did you receive that brother?, Why did you allow him to stay with you?, Did you take my permission?", etc. Diotrephes was a dictator, not an elder. There are dictators like that in many churches today, who seek to control their people and not serve them. Don't ever stay in such a church, for it is Babylon, through and through.

The true church of Jesus Christ does not have dictators as its elders. Its elders are servants who give freedom to their flock and do not seek to run their lives. Such elders have also learnt in humility to submit to the spiritual authority God has set over them.

Then John commends Demetrius who has received a good testimony from everyone as a good elder. He says that the truth itself bears witness to Demetrius as a humble godly man.

JUDE

CONTEND EARNESTLY FOR THE TRUE FAITH

Jude's letter is a very brief letter. The subject is "*Contending earnestly for the faith, and not compromising*" (1:3). It deals with false teaching, false teachers and their judgement. We are exhorted to stand true to the Lord in the midst of all the compromise around us.

Jude actually wanted to write about salvation (1:3). In other words, he wanted to write something like Paul's letter to the Romans, explaining all about our salvation in Christ. But as he began to write he felt the burden of the Holy Spirit to write about something completely different. I have had that experience too, where I begin to write to a brother about some matter, and end up writing about something totally different, because the Holy Spirit put another burden on me. When we are in touch with the Holy Spirit, such things happen.

True Faith and True Grace

Jude felt a strong burden to appeal to believers to contend earnestly for the faith. He felt that was more important at that time than explaining the way of salvation. The believers he wrote to already knew about salvation. But now the great need was for them to stand up for the true faith in the midst of compromise. This is a great need in Christendom today as well, because some deceivers have crept into the church unnoticed (1:4). How did they creep in? Because the elders – the doorkeepers – of the church had gone to sleep.

The Lord told Ezekiel that He had appointed him as a watchman in Israel. In the same way, the elders in a church are appointed by the Lord to be watchmen. If the watchmen are asleep, the wolves get in. An elder must be a doorkeeper who is spiritually awake all the time, and

who checks up on who all are coming to the church-services, why they are coming, and why some doubtful person is visiting the brothers, etc. People creep in to churches to lead believers astray and to turn the grace of God into licence to sin.

Just like one gets a *licence* to drive a vehicle, in the same way people take the grace of God as a licence to commit sin!

They imagine thus: "Now I have my licence (grace). Now it doesn't matter how much I sin. God's grace will always be there to forgive me." Thus they misrepresent the grace of God. There are many Christians who live by that false understanding of grace today. They commit adultery and then say, "David also committed adultery. But he still remained as king. So I can still continue in my ministry." It's tragic. To them, the grace of God has become "permission to sin"!

There is a difference between standards under the old covenant and in the new covenant. If Paul had fallen into adultery (like David), Paul would never have preached again. He would have gone and done some business in Tarshish and sat as a back-bencher in the church there for the rest of his life. It is one thing for a young believer to fall into adultery. He can repent and one day have a glorious ministry. But it is quite another thing for a mature leader to fall into adultery. If Paul had fallen into adultery, how could he ever preach again that "*sin cannot have dominion over you when you are under grace*", (*Romans 6:14*) and that "*God always leads us in triumph in Christ*" (*2 Corinthians 2:14*)? So David is *not* our example in the new covenant age. Jesus and Paul are. They are the ones who said "*Follow me*" (*Matthew 4:19; 1 Corinthians 11:1*).

But is this message of the true grace being preached today? No. The grace of God is being preached as a licence to sin. These old covenant preachers say, "So many great leaders in Israel sinned. Samson committed adultery with so many women and yet he served God." Such preaching of false grace is leading Christians back to the old covenant. Then, it becomes as though Jesus never came to earth and as if the Holy Spirit never came – for that is how it was under the old covenant!

These preachers preach, "*Once saved, always saved. It doesn't really matter how we live now. Our salvation is not by our works but by grace.*" And so Jude reminds them about what happened to the people who came out of Egypt. They were symbolically saved. But they never entered Canaan. They perished in the wilderness.

The example of these Israelites is quoted three times in the New Testament to warn believers. In *1 Corinthians 9:27*, Paul says that after preaching to others, he could be disqualified himself – and then gives the example of the Israelites who came out of Egypt but perished in the wilderness (*1 Corinthians 10:1–11*). He concludes by saying, "*Let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall*" (*1 Corinthians 10:12*). Then in

Hebrews chapters 3 and 4, the writer says, “*Let us fear lest we also fall like those Israelites who came out of Egypt.*” And Jude says here, “*Let us fear, for the Lord afterwards destroyed the people whom He had saved from Egypt*” (*Jude 1:5*). What Jude is basically saying is, “*There is no such thing as ‘Once saved, always saved.’*”

Will you preach this message (that Jude writes) in your church – that the people whom the Lord once saved He destroyed later on, because they lived in sin? The Bible speaks to born-again Christians saying, “*Brethren, if we live after the flesh, we will die*” (*Romans 8:13*).

Then Jude gives another example. The angels in heaven were holy. But when some of them did not stay within their boundary but went into strange sins, God threw them out and “*kept them in eternal bonds under darkness for the judgment of the great day*” (*1:6*). Then Jude gives a third example – Sodom and Gomorrah and their neighbouring towns “*indulged in lust of every kind, including lust of men for other men and they were destroyed by fire and they continue to be a warning to us that there is a hell in which sinners are punished*” (*1:7 - Living*). The angels came and warned these people, but they would not listen. These are all examples of those whom God judged in Old Testament times. But in spite of all these warnings, false teachers who make grace a licence for sin, go right on living their evil, immoral lives and “*reject authority and revile angelic authorities*” (*1:8*).

Yet another characteristic of those who live according to the flesh is that they reject spiritual authority. They are a law unto themselves and won’t submit to anyone. Maybe they did submit at one time. But now they consider themselves important people and reject authority. Thus the devil prepares them for their doom. They even go so far as to make fun of the devil. Jesus never made fun of the devil. Satan was defeated on the cross. And so we can rebuke him, resist him, stand against him and command him to get away in Jesus’ name. And he will flee (*James 4:7*). But don’t ever “*scoff at him*”. Even the archangel Michael when disputing with the devil about the body of Moses did not pronounce a judgement against him but merely said, “*The Lord rebuke you*” (*1:9*). But Jude says, “*false teachers sneer at things they don’t understand, and live by animal-instinct and thus destroy themselves*” (*1:10*).

When people turn the grace of God into sin they become like animals who follow their natural instincts. If their body has a passion for sex, they just follow that. On Indian streets, we often see dogs chasing after female-dogs just to have sex with them. Worldly men also follow after girls in the same way to have sex with them. That is to live like dogs. And if those who “*claim to be God’s children*” do that, then they also have become like unreasoning animals. Jude says, “*Woe unto them*” (*1:11*). May a curse be on them. Such people are not children of God at all. They should first stop claiming to be Christians and then they can do what they like.

Jealousy, Covetousness and Rebellion

Then Jude gives three other examples from the Old Testament – Cain, Balaam and Korah.

Cain's problem was jealousy. He was jealous of his younger brother on whose sacrifice God had sent a fire, accepting it. Are you jealous of a brother (perhaps younger than you) in whose life and ministry you see a fire and an anointing from God? Then you are following in Cain's footsteps. Whenever you are jealous of anyone, it proves that you don't love him. Elders can be jealous of younger brothers who are anointed and on fire and progressing spiritually beyond them. If you are jealous, you are in fellowship with the devil. A godly man will encourage such a younger brother. He will sit down in a meeting and let the younger brother be the main speaker.

Consider a father who is an uneducated labourer whose son goes to college and gets a degree. The father goes to the college to see his son getting his degree-certificate. Is he jealous of his son, because the latter has gone ahead of him educationally? No. Why? Because he is a father and he loves his son. If you as an elder in a church are jealous of anyone in your church, it is because you are not a father. A true father will encourage his son to go on and even get a Ph.D.! I have seen poor labourers who are happy to see their children well-educated. But it is rare to see an elder who is eager to push his younger brothers forward like that. Instead, I have seen elders who sit on their thrones and watch with a jealous eye some anointed younger brothers who they fear will be a threat to their authority – and they seek to suppress them in every way possible. The tragedy in Christendom today is that there are very few fathers. All seek their own. A truly godly man will be delighted to see young brothers maturing and having a greater anointing on their ministry than them. They will push such young brothers forward and withdraw into the background. If you want to be a godly elder be one like that – and not like jealous Cain.

The second example Jude quotes is Balaam. His problem was covetousness and the love of money. Balaam preached many good things – even about the coming of the Messiah (*Number 24:17*). But he also ran after money – exactly like many preachers today who preach wonderful truths and are just as covetous. Such preachers have gone the way of Balaam.

Thirdly, Jude speaks about Korah. His problem was rebellion against authority. Korah would have perished as a slave in Egypt. God never saw him fit to be the leader of Israel. He used Moses who delivered Korah from slavery. Moses encouraged him and even gave him a position of some leadership. But this went to Korah's head and he began to defy Moses. See how God judged him. The earth opened and swallowed him up. Cain was jealous of his younger brother. Korah was jealous of an older spiritual leader. You too can become proud and unsubmissive to godly men who led you and fed you – because you now think that you also are a spiritual

leader. But God will vindicate those whom He has really anointed – and that day will be a sad day for you, as it was for Korah.

Rebellion against authority is something that is unfortunately very common in Christendom. We should never rebel against spiritual authority anywhere. If you are not happy with a church, leave it and go somewhere else. But don't stay there and cause problems for the leadership. Otherwise you will end up like Korah. If you don't agree with a group, leave it and go elsewhere. Start another group if you like, but never cause rebellion anywhere. These men are hidden reefs – hidden rocks under the water's surface that ships crash on. They fool people into thinking that they have spiritual gifts – but they are like clouds that give no rain (1:12).

God Needs Men

Then in contrast to all these bad examples from the Old Testament, Jude finally gives a good example from the Old Testament, Enoch (1:14). Enoch was the only man in the many generations between Adam and Noah who walked with God. And he walked with God for 300 year and prophesied (1:14). He was the first prophet in the Bible. And what did this first prophet in the Bible proclaim? He proclaimed the second coming of Christ and judgement against sinners (1:14, 15). He preached against the ungodly actions and the ungodly speech of sinful people. He was a man who spoke fearlessly against sin. His great grandson Noah followed in his footsteps and walked with God and also proclaimed judgement. What did Isaiah preach? Judgement. What did Jonah preach? Judgement. What did Nahum preach? Judgement. What did Jeremiah preach? Judgement. Every true prophet in the Bible proclaimed that God would judge His people for their sins. Where are the prophets today who preach the same message?

India is one of the largest countries in the world, having a population of more than one thousand million people, God loves India. Why then doesn't He send many prophets into our land? I feel that the Lord did call many young people in our land to be His prophets. But most of them got sidetracked and fell by the way side, running after money, or marrying the wrong women, or joining some Western organisation and thus missing God's perfect plan for their lives. God may be having a plan for some of you who are reading this, to be prophets in our country. May you be saved then from missing your calling by marrying the wrong girl, or by running after money. May the Lord save you from sitting at a desk as the Director of some Christian organisation when He wants you to be a prophet for Him. Be like Enoch, the one lone man who walked with God and spoke fearlessly for God.

That is what Jude is saying. Be like Enoch. Contend for the faith. Stand up like him for the truth of God. Stand against all the grumblers who find fault, following after their own lusts, and who speak arrogantly and speak flattery (1:16). Stand against the preachers who flatter people in order to get some benefit for themselves from them. Remember the words of our Lord and of His apostles how they warned that in the last days there will be many mockers who follow after their own ungodly lusts and who cause divisions among God's people like Korah did – worldly-minded people who do not have the Holy Spirit at all, but who yet talk about the gifts of the Spirit (1:17–19).

Jude concludes with a number of wonderful exhortations. “*Build yourself up in the most holy faith, pray in the Holy Spirit, keep yourself in the love of God*” (1:20, 21). To keep oneself in the love of God means a number of things.

Rooted and Grounded in the Love of God

First of all, it means to remain assured at all times about God's perfect love for you. When Peter was going to deny the Lord, the Lord said to him, “I am not praying that you will not fall, Peter. I am praying that when you do fall, that your faith will not fail.” When you hit rock bottom in your life, remember one thing, that *God still loves you*. The prodigal son, in a far country having lost everything, remembered one thing: *That his father still loved him*. That was what brought him back home. And that will bring you back home too, however far you may have wandered.

Secondly, it means to keep fervent in your love for God at all times. The more we see the love of God for us, the more we will love Him in return.

Thirdly, it means to keep loving others as God has loved us. When the assurance of God's love fills your heart, you will find that you love other people too. God loved you when you were in the gutter of sin, and you begin to love others who are in the gutter of sin too.

When you keep yourself in the love of God, the Lord will “*keep you from falling*” (1:24). You *keep yourself* in the love of God and Jesus *keeps you* from falling into sin. In the beginning, like Peter, you may fall a few times. But a time will come, as you humble yourself and build yourself up in your faith and keep yourself in the love of God and keep praying in the Holy Spirit, that you will find that Jesus keeps you from falling into sin (1:20–24). Sin will no longer have any mastery over you.

It is with this attitude that we are to engage in evangelism and to help those who are backslidden (1:22, 23). Jude warns us to be careful

when seeking to pull sinners out of the fire that we ourselves don't get polluted by their sin (1:23). Jesus was the Friend of sinners, He was never polluted. We can walk like Him too.

Many believers can keep themselves holy when they are in the midst of godly people. But when they go and visit their unconverted relatives even for one week, they backslide and get polluted. They start gossiping and watching TV programs that pollute them. My advice is this: When you are with unconverted relatives who are gossiping or watching some dirty TV program, just get up quietly and leave the room. Do the same thing the next day and the next day. In a few days they will get the message, that you don't like some of their habits. That will be your silent witness to them. And you would have kept your spiritual garments from being polluted (1:23). When walking through muddy water, how careful you are to pull up your trousers, so that they don't get dirty. Be equally careful when in the midst of unbelievers.

The Lord is able to keep us from stumbling and to make us stand in His presence, blameless and with great joy. That is the hope we have. So may we give all glory, majesty, dominion and authority to God our Saviour through Jesus Christ our Lord (1:25). Amen.

REVELATION

THE FINAL TRIUMPH

The word revelation means “*an unveiling*”. God pulled the curtain away and showed John three things.

1. An unveiling of Christ Himself in His glory (*Chapter 1*);
2. An unveiling of Christ and His church – the inner state of some of the churches (*Chapters 2 and 3*);
3. An unveiling of Christ and His kingdom – how things will be at the close of this age (*Chapters 4 to 22*).

A Revelation for Bondslaves of God

1:19 also divides the book of *Revelation* into three parts: The things which you have seen (*Chapter 1*), the things which are at present (*Chapters 2 and 3*), and the things which will take place in the future (*Chapters 4 to 22*).

This revelation was given not only for John, but for all Christ’s bond-servants (1:1). Bond-servants is another word for “slaves”. God has His slaves and His servants. What is the difference between a servant and a slave? We don’t have slaves today and so we don’t know much about that. But in the first century, everyone understood clearly the difference between a servant and a slave. A servant gets a salary – and he can claim that every month. He will stop working if he doesn’t get his monthly salary. A slave however never gets a salary. He has no rights whatsoever. All his life he has to just serve and expect *nothing* in return for his work. A servant could appeal to the Roman government if someone ill-treated him. A slave however could not appeal to anyone if he was ill-treated. God has servants who will serve Him as long as He cares for them and provides food, clothing, shelter and money for them. If one day they don’t get something they ask for in prayer, they will complain and murmur and

stop serving Him. They claim certain rights. They say, “Lord, I did this for You. So You have to do this for me.” A slave of God however has given up all his rights. If God gives him food and shelter and money he is happy. If God gives him nothing, he is still happy. He will joyfully continue to be a slave. The one difference is that slaves in those days worked for their masters out of compulsion and fear. We however choose to work for God out of love, as the slave in *Exodus 21:5* said, “*I love my master. I will not go out free.*”

The book of *Revelation* can be understood properly only if you are a bondslave of God – if you have given yourself so completely to God that you don’t demand anything from Him; if you belong to Him so completely that you have no complaints about anything He does to you, or that he does *not* do for you, or that you think He should do for you; if your attitude is: “Lord, I love You. I am Your slave. I don’t want to live for anything other than You. I don’t serve You for money or any reward I am going to get – either on earth or in heaven”.

If that is your attitude towards God, then you will understand this book. Otherwise you may use your clever brain and study this book all your life and get many fanciful interpretations of the symbols in this book – but *you will be totally wrong*. You can read all the books in the world on *Revelation* and get many clever ideas. But it won’t be the truth, and it won’t change your life. You will live in a world of delusion. So don’t ignore the very first verse of this book. Remember always that this revelation of Jesus Christ is something that God reveals only to His slaves. John was one of those slaves, and so he understood it. Today also there are slaves who understand.

1:1 also says, “*He signified it*” (KJV). The word ‘signified’ means “showed by signs.” That informs us that the whole book will be full of signs. We may not be able to understand some of those signs accurately. But the more of a slave of God you are, the more accurately you will understand them. The less of a slave of God you are, the less you will understand them. Today there are many interpretations of *Revelation*, because the ones interpreting are *not* slaves. Maybe they are servants. Servants can give their opinions. But such opinions are fit only for the trash-can.

In 1:3, we read, “*Blessed is the man who reads this book and obeys the things written in it.*” There is a special blessing promised here for those who hear and obey the things written in this book. Now you can see why the devil doesn’t allow most Christians to read this book. It doesn’t say, “Blessed are those who *understand* this book.” No. The blessing is for those who **obey**. It doesn’t matter if you don’t understand all the prophecies in this book, provided you obey the commands of the Lord in this book.

The book of *Revelation* has *not* been given to us to make charts about the future. I have heard so many theories spun by Bible-teachers with

their charts that teach when the rapture of the church will take place and how the seven churches are pictures of different periods in the church age from the 1st to the 21st century. I have also seen people who study these charts, fight and quarrel with each other and live a defeated life, having no victory over sin. Such charts are fit for the trash-can. What you need to know is not the explanation of all the prophecies in this book, but how to obey all that the Lord has commanded here. When you find verses in here that you don't understand, just leave them aside, and obey what you *can* understand.

John writes to the seven churches from “*Jesus Christ the ruler of all the kings of earth*” (1:5). And immediately he talks about Christ’s return, “*He is coming in the clouds*” (1:7). When Christ returns, He will not come secretly. He will come as He Himself said, like the lightning shining from one end of the sky to another – that everyone will see (*Matthew 24:27*). There will be no secret rapture of the church before the tribulation as many falsely believe. There is only one coming of Christ – after the tribulation – and that is when the church will be raptured to meet Him in the sky. Every eye will see us being taken up to heaven.

A Brother and a Fellow Partner

In 1:9, we see John referring to himself as “*your brother*.” He was not Pope John or Bishop John or Reverend John or even Pastor John. At the age of 95, he was still just *Brother John* – an ordinary brother, just like all other brothers in Christ. There we have a good example for all Christian leaders to follow. But I am certain that 98% of church-leaders will not follow John’s example – because their sense of superiority and their desire to exalt themselves over other believers will make them want to retain their titles. They love their titles! Jesus told His disciples that they were all *brothers* and *servants* and commanded them never to take any other titles (*Matthew 23:8–11*). But that is just another command of our Lord’s, that most Christians disobey.

John was also “*a fellow partner in the tribulation*” (1:9). The book of *Revelation* has a lot to say about tribulation. But if one is to preach about tribulation, he needs to have gone through tribulation himself first. So John had to go through tribulation. He was exiled on the island of Patmos, and while suffering tribulation there, he got a vision of how the church would go through tribulation. If you had gone to John on Patmos and told him, “Brother, the church will not go through tribulation,” he would have said, “Brother, I am going through tribulation right now.” Do you think that any suffering that Christians will face in the final great tribulation will be worse than what many Christians have suffered in these 2000 years of church history – and especially in many communist countries in the last 100 years? Is it because God did not love the Christians in the first three centuries of Christian history, that He allowed them to

face such terrible tribulations at the hands of non-Christians and to be tortured and killed in painful ways? God allows His greatest saints to go through tribulation from man, in order to manifest their faith and thus to glorify His Name before demons and men.

John continues: “*I was in the Spirit on the Lord’s day*” (1:10). It’s only when we are “*in the Spirit*” that we can understand what God reveals. “*And I heard a loud voice like the sound of a trumpet*” (1:10). When we are in the Spirit, God’s voice will sound loud and clear as a trumpet. If you are not in the Spirit, you will not hear anything. There are many voices in the air nowadays – rock music, false teachings, preachers of false religions, etc. To hear any of them, all you need is a radio tuned to that frequency. In the same way, when we are tuned to the Holy Spirit’s frequency in our hearts (which means having a clear conscience with God and men), we will hear God’s voice, loud as a trumpet. That is how John heard it.

The Lord told John to write down what he saw and to send it to seven churches. John was on Patmos – a rocky island in the Aegean Sea, about 100 kilometres south-west of Ephesus on the mainland. John was asked to send a message to the church at Ephesus. About 100 kilometres north of Ephesus was Smyrna. About 40 kilometres north-west of that was Pergamum. About 100 kilometres south-east of that was Thyatira. About 40 kilometres south of that was Sardis. About 40 kilometres south-east of that was Philadelphia. And south-east of that was Laodicea, which was about 100 kilometres from Ephesus. So all these churches were within a circle of about 100 kilometres radius. Yet they did not belong to one denomination. They were all *independent* churches. They did not have a bishop ruling over all of them. Each church had its own elders. That’s how all churches were in the first century, when the apostles planted them.

Because they were all independent churches, corruption from one church could not spread to the other churches. If however they had all been in one denomination, then if one church became corrupt, all the other churches in that denomination would have become corrupt too. If one bishop went astray, he would lead the whole denomination of churches astray. So in God’s wisdom, the New Testament pattern is that each church should be independent, and not part of a denomination. So John was asked to send the letters not to “the *church* in Asia Minor”, but to “to the *churches*”. Do you see the difference? In God’s eyes there is no such thing as “*the church* in India”. There are *churches* in India. But man has used his wisdom and combined many churches into one denomination – and thus corruption has spread to all the churches.

When John turned around, he did not see one lampstand with seven branches, as in the Old Testament tabernacle. He saw seven *separate* lamp stands. That symbolised seven independent churches – and not one denomination with seven branches. In the middle of the seven lampstands stood Jesus, the Head of each church.

Then John describes Jesus in symbolic language – symbols of His purity and power. The word of God is seen as going out of His mouth as a sharp sword (1:16). John, who once leaned on Jesus' breast at the last supper, now falls on his face as a dead man before the Lord. John was at that time perhaps the holiest man on earth. And he fell on his face with his mouth in the dust. Whenever you see the glory of the Lord, that is what will happen to you too. You will humble yourself. It is when you don't see the glory of the Lord that you get puffed up.

Jesus spoke to John (who had suffered persecution for so many years) the same word that He had always spoken to His apostles when He was on earth, “*Don't be afraid*” (1:17). That is the one word that rings throughout the book of *Revelation*. That is the word that comes to us also as we face the prospect of persecution and tribulation in the future. “*Don't be afraid. See My glory. Forget about your persecutors. I am the First and I am the Last. Don't be afraid of the people who seek to persecute you. I am the Living One. I was dead and now I am alive. I have the keys of death. You cannot go through the door of death, until I open it. So don't be afraid.*” Tradition tells us that John was not killed. He died a natural death at a ripe old age, because Jesus decided how and when to open death's door for him.

Jesus is the One Who decides for you and me whether we will be martyred in India for the cause of the gospel or whether we will die a natural death. No anti-Christian persecutor is going to determine that for us. Our Lord has already determined how He will call us to Himself. That has already been written in His book. He has the keys of death. I am not afraid – and you don't have to be afraid either. It will be impossible to serve God faithfully in the days of tribulation if we don't see this vision of our risen Lord first. We must see Jesus in all His glory first, before we look at anything around us. John had to see the glory of Jesus first before he saw the backslidden condition of the churches around him. Otherwise he would have been discouraged. When I see the backslidden state of some church, I say, “Lord, let me see Your glory first. Then I won't be discouraged.”

Seven Churches

The Lord then told John that the seven stars in His hand were the messengers of the churches (1:20). The word for “*angel*” and “*messenger*” are the same in the Greek language (“*aggelos*”). Among the two or three elders in each church, the one who had the gift of preaching the Word was called “*the messenger*”. John was asked to write to the messenger of each church, giving him a message both for him and for his church.

The seven lampstands represented the seven churches, each of which was *directly under the Lord Himself*. There was no bishop in charge of the seven churches. If there had been a bishop, Jesus would have asked

John to send the letter to the bishop to circulate it to the seven churches. But John had to send separate letters to each messenger of each church. This is the new-covenant pattern – each church independent under its own leadership. If you are an apostle, you can be a spiritual father to the churches you planted (as Paul was) to guide and correct them when needed. But each church must be under the headship of the Lord alone.

In *Chapters 2 and 3*, we read about the seven churches. Two of them were in very good shape, but five of them were terribly backslidden.

A Loveless Church

The *church in Ephesus* was a *loveless church*. The elder and the church had many good qualities (2:2). They had many good deeds and hard work and perseverance to their credit. They would not tolerate evil men, which means they judged sin in their midst. They would not endure false prophets either, which means that they exposed false doctrine. In addition they had suffered for Jesus' Name, without getting weary (2:3). One would think this was a wonderful church, with purity in life, purity in doctrine, enduring in suffering, laboring and holding up the name of Jesus. But the Lord told them that all this was worthless because *they didn't love Him like they loved Him at first* (2:4).

Do you see there how important it is to love the Lord wholeheartedly? All your work for the Lord is worth zero without a passionate love for the Lord Himself. The Lord told them that they had fallen. Can you imagine that an elder who fights for purity of life and doctrine, and who works hard for the Lord could be a backslider? He was a backslider because he had lost his love for the Lord. He had fallen. Once, all that he did had come out of a fervent love for the Lord. But not now. It had now become a routine. He had fallen – and he had to repent.

The relationship Jesus wants to have with us is like a marriage relationship between husband and wife. A newly married wife loves her husband and is happy to serve him out of love. In the first year of marriage, she works hard at home, cooking the food, washing the clothes and keeping the house tidy, and waits for her husband to come back from work. As soon as the doorbell rings, she rushes to the door to greet her husband. They enjoy their time together over dinner and thereafter. But if you visit that house twenty years later, things have changed. The wife still cooks the meals, washes the clothes and keeps the house tidy. But when the husband comes and rings the bell she doesn't go to the door. He has a key and he can open the door himself. She has finished her dinner earlier. Her husband can go and eat his dinner by himself. She still serves him – but her love for him has gone.

That was what happened to the elder and to his church in Ephesus. And that is what can happen to you and me, if we don't preserve our love for our Lord. We must always be able to say, "Lord, I love You first and

foremost – and not my ministry. I want to love You today more than I ever loved You.”

What does a good husband want from his wife? He doesn’t care how well she cooks the food or washes the clothes. He wants her first of all, to love him fervently – more every year than the previous year. That is a good marriage. And that is how it must be between us and our Lord. Many a time, I have laid down on my bed and said, “Lord, if I am paralysed one day and I can’t preach any more and have to lie down in my bed the whole day, I will not be discouraged. I will still love You with all my heart. That is all that I live for. My ministry is not my god. I may never write another book and never preach another sermon. But my love for You, my Lord will increase more and more, every day.” If it is like that with you, then your service for the Lord will be full of joy and victory.

To each of these churches the Lord concludes with a message to those who overcome. Here He tells the overcomers, that He will grant them “*to eat from the tree of life which is in the Paradise of God*” (2:7). The overcomers will get what Adam missed. That promise is not for everyone. It is only for those who overcome.

A Suffering Church

The church in Smyrna was a suffering church. It was facing a lot of tribulation (2:9). This church would never have believed the false teaching going around today that the church would escape the great tribulation! The Lord was very happy with this church for it was faithful to Him in the midst of tribulation. God loves His people and permits them to face tribulation – to purify them. Tribulation had made this church spiritually rich (2:9). They were being persecuted by people who called themselves Jews (the people of God) but were actually the synagogue of Satan. Today also there are people who call themselves Christians but who persecute the godly. They are actually the “church of Satan”.

The Lord’s word to this church was what He told John “*Don’t be afraid of what you are going to suffer*” (2:10). This could be a word for some of us today. “*The devil will put some of you into prison. But don’t be afraid.*” Can the devil put God’s servants in prison? He certainly can. All the apostles experienced that. We may experience that too. Satan can drag you to court through other “Christians” who hate you. Jesus Himself was taken to court by religious people – and even killed. If you follow the Lord and follow in His footsteps, you will go wherever He went. If you are put into prison, you can be sure that that will happen only with God’s express permission. The first book written in the Bible (the book of Job) teaches us that God has to give Satan permission before he can do anything to God’s servants. And if God allows you to be put into prison, it will be “*so you will be tested*” (2:10). A test is an examination. If you pass the examination, you will be promoted. So don’t despise God’s tests. And if

God decides to conduct your test in a prison, then be ready to answer His question-paper there! The more tests you pass, the more promotions you will get. Then you won't be sitting in the same class forever, as many believers are.

We notice another fact here. God determines the exact period of our trials. Here the Lord told them that their trial would be "*only for ten days*" (2:10). On the eleventh day they would be free. God determined how long Job should suffer, how long Peter should be in prison, and how long these people in the church should suffer. God determines how long you should suffer something that you have to go through. You may be in the middle of a trial right now. But remember that God has already determined the date on which your trial will be over. Isn't that good for us to know? "*Be faithful till the end*," the Lord tells them and then He promises them "*the crown of life*."

Here the Lord promises the overcomers that they will not be hurt by the second death (2:11).

A Worldly Church

The church in Pergamum was a worldly church. The Lord said to them, "*I know you are living where Satan's throne is*" (2:13). That indicates that Satan had a special interest in that city. Satan doesn't keep his throne everywhere. He has his throne in one place and sends his demons everywhere. Satan had his throne in those days in Pergamum. Part of the reason for that may have been that in that city there was a very faithful servant of God named Antipas (2:13). When Satan saw how whole-hearted Antipas was, he determined to make his headquarters in that city to harass him. Antipas must have been the elder in that church, who through his faithful life and preaching had kept the church pure. The Lord called him, "*My witness, My faithful one.*" Satan finally got him killed. But he died only when Jesus opened the door of death for him – for our Lord has the keys of death (1:18). It was Jesus Who opened the door of death for Stephen and for all the apostles who died before John. When Antipas died, the usual thing happened in Pergamum that happens in many churches when a godly leader dies. It began to decline spiritually. The church of God depends at times on one godly man. Once Antipas was gone, all the other elders were compromisers, just as it happened in Ephesus after Paul left (Acts 20:29, 30).

Now the church in Pergamum started following the teaching of Balaam. That means they ran after money and allowed immorality in their midst, as Balaam did. Some in the church held the teaching of the Nicolaitans. We don't know what exactly the teaching of the Nicolaitans was, but it was something that God hated. The Lord called them to repent, as otherwise He would judge them (2:16). The Lord promised the overcomers there that He would give them some secret revelations ("*hidden manna*")

that would not be given to others. He would also give them a stone (like a wedding ring with a diamond) with a new name written on it (2:17). In other words, the Lord would treat the overcomers there like a loving husband treats his beloved wife.

An Adulterous Church

The church in Thyatira was an adulterous church. They had many works, and love, faith, service and perseverance. But along with all of that, there was also spiritual adultery in their midst. There was a woman there, whom the Lord refers to as *Jezebel*. She was probably the elder's wife, since the word '*woman*' here can also be translated as '*wife*'. The elder here was being controlled by his wife. Perhaps, after he had taken decisions in an elders' meeting, when he came home, his wife would tell him things to change his mind. So he would arrange another elders' meeting and change the decisions as his wife suggested! Such things are happening in many churches even today. There are Jezebels who control elders of churches.

Queen Jezebel in Israel controlled her husband Ahab. He was a weak man who was easily manipulated by his wife. Many church-elders are like that, without a *spiritual backbone*. Their wives control them. There were 7000 people in Israel in Jezebel's time, who had not worshipped idols. But Jezebel was not afraid of any of them. She was afraid of only one man – Elijah. What a powerful woman she was! There are some powerful women like that in churches today – and there is a need for some Elijahs to put them in their proper place. If as an elder, you are not strong like Elijah to put such strong women in their proper place, your church will end up as another adulterous church like the one in Thyatira.

This woman brought all types of worldliness into that church. And the Lord warned saying that He would severely punish all who listened to her teachings, which He calls "*the deep truths of Satan*" (2:22–24). The overcomers are promised spiritual authority (just as God gave Elijah) and they will rule the nations with a rod of iron one day (2:26, 27).

A Hypocritical Church

The church in Sardis was a hypocritical church. It had a name that it was alive, but it was spiritually dead. The elder had made a name for himself through his preaching. His doctrines were all evangelical. But he didn't have a life to back up his preaching. He was a compromiser. He lived on his name and his reputation. But the Lord noticed that in his church there were a few brothers (probably young brothers) who were zealous and pure, who had not corrupted their garments, and who were more spiritual than their elder (3:4). The overcomers were promised that they would be clothed in white garments (3:5). Those who do not overcome are

warned here that their names would be “erased from the book of life” (3:5). Many verses like this prove that the “once saved, always saved” doctrine is a false teaching invented by Satan. Yet many Christians believe and preach that, totally ignoring verses such as this.

A Faithful Church

The church in Philadelphia was the faithful church. The elder was faithful, and so the church was faithful. The Lord told them, “I have put before you an open door which nobody can shut” (3:8). When the Lord opens a door for us nobody can shut it. He says, “I have the keys. I open and no man can shut” (3:7). We don’t have to go banging away at any door. Our Lord opens the right ones for us, without our even touching them. They are like the automatic doors that we have seen in some airports that open as soon as you come near them. Are you looking for a door of ministry for yourself? Are you trying to open such a door for yourself or looking to some influential man to open that door for you? Are you coveting the ministry that someone else has? That is evil. Be faithful to God in the little things and He will open the right doors of ministry for you at the right time. Then you won’t waste your time or your life, going through many wrong doors. Trust in God and let Him alone open the doors for you – and He will lead you step by step to the places that He has planned for you.

I remember once when I was travelling to a certain country the Lord said to me, “You are not to write to anyone you know in that country that you are going there. Just go.” I went there and had no ministry anywhere – and I came back. The Lord tested me to see if I would obey Him. The next time I went to that country, the Lord opened so many doors to people I did not even know. Those were the places that the Lord wanted me to go to. I saw then that God in His sovereignty opens the right doors. If I had tried to open doors by myself earlier, to create some ministry for myself, I would have missed the will of God completely. So don’t ever push yourself forward anywhere. Wait on God and let Him open the right doors for you. Like the ones in Philadelphia, you may have just a little strength. But if you keep God’s Word and do not deny His Name, the Lord will make even your enemies recognise that He has loved you (3:8, 9).

Then the Lord told this church, “I am coming quickly. Hold fast what you have so that nobody takes your crown” (3:11). When the Lord gives us a ministry, we must be faithful in fulfilling it. Otherwise He will give that ministry to someone else and then that person will get the crown that was meant for you! He will get his crown and yours as well. So be faithful. The Lord will make those who overcome “pillars in His church” (3:12). Pillars are what hold up a building. When Samson pushed down two pillars, the whole building collapsed. Sometimes there are only two elders who hold up a whole church. When they die, the church dies as

well. God wants many pillars in His churches. You can be a pillar, if you seek to overcome sin in your private life and in your thoughts.

A Proud Church

The church in Laodicea was a proud church. Here was an elder and a church that were totally content with themselves, even though they were thoroughly dead spiritually. They had not become cold (that is, thoroughly worldly), but they were not on fire for God either. They were half-hearted and lukewarm, which means they had a casual attitude to sin. The Lord spits such elders and churches out of His mouth (3:15, 16). An elder is to be God's mouth and spokesman to the church. But God was rejecting this man. He had been God's mouthpiece once, speaking the prophetic word to the church. But he had taken it easy and backslidden and now lost the anointing and the fire of the Holy Spirit. God was now rejecting him, not because of any wrong doctrine, but only because he was not on fire for God. We must live totally for the Lord or for the world. We cannot be half here and half there.

Who are the ones who bring the greatest disgrace to the Name of Jesus Christ in India? Not the non-Christians, for they do not take the name of Christ, but Christians who are *half-hearted* – those who claim to be believers but who love money and sinful pleasures and live for the world. We must either be on fire for Christ living totally for the glory of God, or be thoroughly worldly. Those are the only two options. There is no third option. The church in Laodicea did not believe that the Lord would *prefer for them to be totally cold and worldly rather than be lukewarm*. Most Christians do not believe that today either. When Christ returns and you stand before Him, you will discover that every lukewarm person is going to be rejected by the Lord. Every lukewarm Christian will be spat out of the mouth of Jesus, even if he is an elder of a church. If you don't believe that, then you must be honest and scratch out this verse (*Revelation 3:16*) from your Bible. I believe it, I preach it and I judge myself in the light of it always.

This last church was so bad that the Lord had absolutely *nothing* good to say about it. He was outside its door and knocking to get entry (3:20). Most Christians quote that verse to unbelievers. But it was actually spoken by the Lord to the elder of a church. Things were so bad in that elder's life that Christ Himself was outside his life trying to get in. And Christ was outside his church as well. They were singing songs of praise and preaching God's Word inside that church. But the Lord was waiting outside its door! This is the condition of many churches and elders today as well.

If the Bridegroom is outside the door of a church, where should His bride be? The bride will be outside the door with Him. I don't want to sit inside any church when my Bridegroom is outside its door. If they

have rejected Him, they will reject me too, if I am a faithful bride of His. The sad thing today is that there are churches that have rejected Christ and His word, but there are believers sitting inside those churches. That proves that they are not a part of the Bride of Christ. If they were, they would be outside the door with their Lord. Such words are strong words. But they are the words of the Lord in the last book of the Bible.

The overcomer is promised a place on Jesus' throne even as Jesus also overcame and sits with His Father on His throne (3:21). This verse teaches us clearly that Jesus also overcame in the days of His flesh. He Himself said that He had "overcome the world" (John 16:33). He had to fight a battle against temptation and thus overcame. There is no overcoming without a battle. Jesus faced battles in His earthly life and He consistently overcame in every battle. Therefore He was exalted to sit with His Father on His throne (3:21). Now He encourages us to fight our battles and to overcome, and promises us a place with Him on His throne. We are to walk the same road that He walked. In the messages to all the seven churches, the Lord specifically speaks to the overcomers in each church.

What is the last message of the Lord to His church? Jesus started out preaching repentance to *unbelievers*, saying, "*Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand*" (Matthew 4:17). His final message to *the church* in *Revelation 2 and 3* is also the same: "*Repent. Elders of churches, repent.*" The twofold message in the book of *Revelation* is, "*Repent*" and "*Overcome*." If you have been gripped by these two messages, then you have understood the main truths in the book of *Revelation*. You don't have to understand the charts about the future that many preachers show along with their messages on *Revelation*. You just have to be an overcomer. Many who study those charts are not overcomers. The important thing is to *obey* God's Word – not just *understand* it. Be like the few in Sardis who kept their garments pure.

Come Up Here

In 4:1, the Lord tells John, "*Come up here and I will show you what will take place in the future.*" From here onwards, the Lord shows John some of the things that will happen in the future – towards the end of this age, just before the Lord returns to earth. That is a beautiful word "*Come up here.*" If we are to be strong enough to face the persecution that will come upon Christians in the future, then we must listen to this word of Jesus, "*Come up here where I am and look at everything from My heavenly viewpoint.*" Then we won't be afraid. If however, we look at things from an earthly viewpoint, then we can be gripped with fear.

In *Chapter 4*, we see the first of seven glimpses of heaven found in the book of *Revelation*. In *Revelation*, we read of seven spirits, seven trumpets, seven seals, seven bowls, and we also see seven glimpses of heaven.

In every glimpse that we see of heaven here, we find everyone praising and worshipping the Lord there. That is what heaven is like. If you want to get ready for heaven, you have to start praising and worshipping God now – for that is the spirit of heaven. The Lord God Almighty is on His throne. The elders are falling down, casting their crowns before God and worshipping Him (4:10). No-one is boasting about the crowns they won. They are casting them down before the Lord saying, “*You alone are worthy, O Lord.*” When godly men receive rewards from God for their faithful service on earth, each one of them will say, “Lord, this crown will not be on my head – for it is rightfully Yours. You are the One Who gave me grace to live and to serve You. I am just one among millions of Your servants. Lord, You alone are worthy.” That is the attitude of every truly godly man even here on earth.

The Lion is a Lamb

In Chapter 5, John sees a scroll. He hears a voice saying, “*Who can open this book and break the seals?*” This is referring to our redemption. There is a beautiful picture of this in the Old Testament law that stated that if a man became so poor that he sold himself as a slave, his brother (or close relative) could pay the redemption money and redeem him (*Leviticus 25:47, 48*). In the book of *Ruth*, we see the rich Boaz marrying his relative’s widow, Ruth, and redeeming her and her land as well (*Ruth 4:1–10*). Boaz there is a picture of Christ and Ruth is a picture of the church – the despised Gentile whom Boaz redeemed and married. According to the Law, only a brother or close relative could do this redemption. So Jesus came in the flesh and become our Brother so that He could redeem us.

In 5:5, we see one of the elders telling John, “*Don’t weep. The Lion of Judah has overcome.*” John turned to see the Lion, but what he saw was a Lamb (5:6). *The Lion is a Lamb.* A truly godly man is both a lion and a lamb. A preacher must be a lion against Satan in the pulpit and as a lamb among the people.

Jesus took the book. You see there the result of the prayers of many of the saints for hundreds and hundreds of years (5:8). All over the world for many centuries, Christians have been praying, “*Our Father who art in Heaven. Hallowed be Thy name. Thy kingdom come.*” Now finally it is time for the kingdom to come. No prayer is wasted – not the prayers offered 1900 years ago nor the prayers offered now. Not a single prayer prayed by a sincere believer is ever wasted. It all goes up like incense before God and finally the answer comes. They then sing a new song, “*Thou art worthy.*” “*Neu*” means “*ever fresh*”. In heaven, they are never tired of singing that Jesus’ blood has purchased them. I hope you are never tired of singing that. One of the prayers I have prayed is, “*Lord, don’t let the death of Jesus on Calvary ever become a stale truth for me.*” I want it to be always fresh, whenever I sing of Calvary’s cross and the amazing love

of Jesus that saved a wretched sinner like me. Each time I sing it, I want to sing it as though I am hearing this truth for the very first time. Then I will be in tune with heaven's singing. The Holy Spirit can keep this fresh for us always. Then we see millions of angels and all creation joining in the worship and praise of God (5:11–13).

Seals Being Opened

In Chapter 6, we see a number of seals being opened – and various events taking place, similar to what Jesus said would happen in the last days (in Matthew 24 and Luke 21:25, 26).

When the first seal is broken, a man comes forth on a white horse and a crown is given to him (6:2). This cannot symbolise Christ, because Christ comes with *many* crowns of His own, whereas this man is *given* a crown. This is the Antichrist, pretending to be the Christ, by coming on a white horse.

When the second seal is broken, we see a red horse – a picture of war (6:4). Peace will be taken from the earth in the last days.

When the third seal is broken, we see a black horse with a pair of scales in his hand saying, “*This is the price of wheat, this is the price of barley. The oil and wine we will not touch*” (6:5, 6). This is a picture of famine. The interesting thing we see here is that during the famine, the wheat and barley (necessities) will be expensive. But the price of the luxurious items (oil and wine) will not be affected. That means that in the time of famine, the rich will not suffer but the poor will. We see that happening around us today. The rich are getting richer everywhere and the poor are getting poorer.

When the fourth seal is broken, we see an ashen horse, symbolising death, coming forth, killing multitudes of people (6:8).

When the fifth seal is broken, John sees the souls of the martyrs – those godly people who were persecuted and killed from the time of Abel onwards. Abel's blood cried out for vengeance (*Genesis 4:10*). And throughout the Old Testament, the blood of many prophets that was shed, also cried out for vengeance. When John wrote this book (in 95 A.D.), not many Christians had become martyrs as yet. But many Old Testament saints had been martyred. Those Old Testament saints are crying out, “*Lord, how long are You going to wait before You avenge our blood?*” (6:10). They were told to wait a little longer, because a few more martyrs had to shed their blood. We see now that they have had to wait for more than 2000 years. A certain number of martyrs have to be killed (6:11). Just like a certain number of people have to be saved (whose names are in the Book of Life), before Christ returns, there is a second list – of Christian martyrs who have to be killed. It will be a great honour if our names are in that second list. When the last martyr in that list is killed, Jesus will return.

When Jesus broke the sixth seal there was a great earthquake, the sun became black, the moon became like blood, the stars of the sky fell, the sky was split, the mountains and the islands were removed, and the kings of the earth began to hide in the caves (6:12–16). The strong people on earth suddenly became fearful and weak – because the time had come for God to judge.

In those six seals, we see a glimpse of the end of the ages in a nutshell. The book of *Revelation* is not written in sequence. Here we are given a bird's eye-view of the end-time events, and thereafter, we are given the smaller details. Later in the book, we are again given a bird's eye-view of future events and again the small details.

Chapter 7 refers to the time when the tribulation is about to begin – and is divided into two parts. The first part refers to Israel (7:1–8). A remnant from Israel, who do not know Jesus as their Saviour, but who are God-fearing, is represented here by 144,000 from different tribes. This is only a symbolic number (We must remember the word 'signified' that we saw in *Chapter 1*). This signifies a small group of people from Israel.

In 1948, Israel came back to the land that God had promised to their forefather Abraham. Jesus spoke of the fig tree (a symbol of Israel) putting forth leaves. There will be no fruit there but only leaves. That began in 1948 and moved one step further in 1967, when Jerusalem was retaken by Israel. These are all in fulfilment of prophecies that Jesus made more than 1900 years ago. He said that Jerusalem would be ruled by the Gentiles until the times of the Gentiles were over (*Luke 21:24*). When Jesus was in Jerusalem, the Romans ruled that city. From then on, until 1967, Jerusalem was always ruled by some foreign power (as Jesus had predicted). In the time of the tribulation, there will be a group of God-fearing Israelites who will be sealed by God.

Then in 7:9–17, we see another group – a great multitude from every tribe, tongue and nation crying out saying, "Our salvation is due to our God and the Lamb on the throne," and falling down and worshipping the Lord. They are clothed in white robes – robes that were washed and made white in the blood of the Lamb. These are believers. This is a great multitude because it includes all the babies that died in infancy and that were aborted before birth, in every tribe and nation on earth. (Babies who die go to heaven, by virtue of the blood of Christ).

When it says here that "they came out of the great tribulation" (7:14), it means that they were *in* the tribulation and came *out* of it. (Just as in *Chapter 18:4*, the Lord invites His people to "come out of Babylon" – which means that they were in Babylon and had to come out of it. Even so here.) The church here (not every individual in the church but those who are on earth in the last days) go through the great tribulation and come out of it. The New Testament consistently teaches this truth that the church will go through the great tribulation. There is not a single verse anywhere in the New Testament that teaches otherwise.

Silence in Heaven

In *Chapter 8:1*, we read that there is silence in heaven for half an hour. This is an amazing thing, because all the other pictures of heaven in this book are those of loud praise, as loud as thunder and the roar of mighty rivers. This half an hour of silence indicates that God is now going to do something that He does not like to do – pour out His wrath upon those who rebel. He does not like to do it. It is a “*strange work*” (*Isaiah 28:21 - KJV*) and an “*unusual task*” (*NASB*) for Him. In *Isaiah 61:2*, we read that “*the acceptable period of the Lord*” is a whole year (*365 days*) whereas “*the period of vengeance*” (*judgement*) is only *one day*. There we see that the proportion of God’s grace to His vengeance is *365:1*. Judgement is a strange work that He is reluctant to do. That is the meaning of this silence in heaven.

Then “*the seven angels stood to sound their seven trumpets*” (*8:2*). This is the *sevenfold last trumpet*, after which the dead in Christ will rise and we who are alive will be raptured together with them to meet the Lord in the air. *1 Corinthians 15:52* also states that the dead will be raised and we will be changed at the last trumpet – not before that. *The church will never face God’s wrath*. The great tribulation is a period of the wrath of *men* against the church. But at the end of the great tribulation, as the wrath of God is just about to be poured out on the earth, the church will be taken up to meet our Lord in the air and to welcome Him back to the earth.

Then John sees incense being added to the prayers of the saints, ascending to God (*8:4*). The incense symbolises the Name of Jesus added to the prayers that make our prayers acceptable to God. Then many natural calamities happen on the earth and in the sky when the trumpets sound. When the first trumpet sounds, there is hail and fire. When the second one sounds, the mountains are thrown into the sea (*8:8*). When the third one sounds, a great star falls from heaven; and when the fourth trumpet sounds a third of the sun, the moon and the stars are smitten.

When the fifth angel sounds his trumpet, many demons are released from the bottomless pit (*9:1-11*). Most demons are free to travel between the second heaven (Satan’s headquarters) and the earth. Some of them possess men and women. But some especially evil demons have been locked up in the bottomless pit. They are released at the fifth trumpet and they come to earth and torture people for five months (*9:5*). Men will seek for death in those days but will not be able to die (*9:6*). Jesus once warned his disciples that if anyone did not forgive his brother from his heart, God would hand him over to the torturers (*Matthew 18:33-35*). Those torturers are demons. That was not an empty threat that Jesus made but something that would actually happen to every believer who does not forgive his brothers.

In *9:12-17*, we read about the sixth trumpet. Four demons bound in the River Euphrates will be released then who will kill 200 million people.

There will be a fierce war around Iraq (the River Euphrates goes through the middle of Iraq). This was written 2000 years ago, and we see today the fierce conflict going on around Iraq. The countries involved in this battle will have millions of soldiers in their armies, even though all those soldiers won't be in the Middle East. Then in 9:20, we read that the rest of mankind still did not repent. It is only repentance that God is seeking for. And the reason why people are punished is only because they do not repent of their sins.

In 10:1-3, an angel comes down and cries out with a loud voice and then there are seven peals of thunder. John was about to write what the seven peals of thunder said when the Lord told him not to. So we don't know what the seven peals of thunder said. What I learn from that is that there are some things that the Lord tells us that He does *not* want us to tell anyone else. It's only meant for us personally. This is like a husband telling his wife a secret that he doesn't want anyone else to hear. If you walk with the Lord, He will tell you some secrets that are meant only for you and for no-one else. You must not speak about them to anyone.

But what the Lord tells you to write, you must write. The Lord told John, "*Take the book which is in the angel's hand and eat it. It will be as sweet as honey in your mouth, but it will make your stomach bitter*" (10:8, 9). God's Word does a double work – it encourages us, but also takes us through bitter experiences of trial and tribulation. In the new covenant, we have to experience both of these. Under the old covenant however, when Ezekiel ate a similar book, it was *only sweet* (Ezekiel 3:3). God give us "*joy unspeakable and full of glory in the midst of many trials*" (1 Peter 1:5-8).

Once John had eaten the book and had this twofold experience, then the Lord told him that he could prophesy. He could share his experience to others. There are certain things we can't tell others and certain things we can.

Then we read about the days when the mystery of God would be finished (10:7). The seventh angel has sounded the last trumpet and the mystery is finished. The mystery of God is the church as the Bride of Christ (See Ephesians 5:31, 32). The great tribulation is over and the church is taken up into the skies at the last trumpet.

In 11:1, John was asked to measure the temple of God. God is measuring His church – but only those "*who worship in the Most Holy Place*". Those in the outer court are ignored (11:1, 2).

Jerusalem will be trampled down for 42 months (1260 days) (11:2). This is the last-half of the seven years of tribulation. The Lord gave Daniel a prophecy of a 490-year period (*Daniel 9:24 – one day symbolising one year*). Out of that period, 483 years would pass from the time King Cyrus commanded Jerusalem to be rebuilt up to the crucifixion of Jesus

(Daniel 9:25, 26). (Note: In the prophetic calendar – in *Daniel* and in *Revelation* – one year is counted as only 360 days. So 483 prophetic years of 360 days are equal to 476 *solar* years of 365 days. And it was exactly 476 years from the time of the command to rebuild Jerusalem up to the crucifixion of Jesus). The remaining 7 years of that period were carried forward to the end of time – and will be fulfilled in the 7-year-period of tribulation at the end of this age (*Daniel* 9:27). The second half of that 7-year-period is called “*the great tribulation*” – 1260 days, or 3½ years – the same period of time that Jesus exercised His public ministry. The Antichrist will duplicate that and have lordship over the earth for 3½ years.

At that time there will be two witnesses (symbolically) for the Lord on earth (11:3, 4). Zechariah also saw a similar vision of two olive trees supplying oil to a lampstand (*Zechariah* 4:11–13). These symbolised a two-fold prophetic ministry in the last days. When they speak, fire proceeds out of their mouth (symbolically speaking) to devour their enemies. They have power to stop the rain and to turn the rivers into blood (11:6). This ministry will be similar to the ministries of Moses and Elijah who did similar miracles. And finally, *when they finish their ministry*, they will be killed (11:7). That is a wonderful truth. A true servant of the Lord who walks in the will of God, cannot be killed until he has *finished* his earthly ministry. Nobody could kill these prophetic witnesses before God’s time – and no-one can kill you before that either.

These prophets will be publicly shamed. Their dead bodies will lie in the street of Jerusalem (11:8). John was then told that people from all over the world would be able to see their dead bodies lying on the street for 3½ days (11:9). How can billions of people all over the world see these dead bodies lying in the street of Jerusalem? By satellite television – which was unknown in John’s time. Here we see a hidden reference to the arrival of satellite television. The world will rejoice when these Christian prophets are killed. The world (including religious Christendom) has always rejoiced at the death of true prophets. But then a miracle will take place. After 3½ days, these two prophets will be raised from the dead. When they are raised up, a great fear comes upon everyone. They will then be taken up to heaven. Then there will be a great earthquake and one-tenth of the city will fall (11:11–13).

Jesus said in the last days there would be wars, famines and earthquakes – a preparation for more serious calamities to come. Then the seventh angel sounds and there is a proclamation, “*The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord Jesus Christ. He will reign forever and ever*” (11:15). The elders then fall down and worship God.

We saw a bird’s eye view of the last days in *Chapter 6*, and we saw another one in *Chapter 11*. Now, more details of the last days are given again.

The Woman and the Dragon

“A great sign appeared in heaven, a woman clothed with the sun, the moon under her feet and on her head a crown of twelve stars” (12:1). Joseph had a dream in which he saw the eleven stars (representing his 11 brothers) bowing down to him. So when we compare Scripture with Scripture, it is clear that the 12 stars refer to the 12 tribes of Israel. So this woman symbolises Israel, and she brings forth a Child. That Child was Jesus, born in Israel.

Then we read of a dragon (the devil) who long ago took one third of the angels (“stars of heaven”) with him when he rebelled against God (12:4). All of them became demons. From this verse, we learn that, out of the millions of angels, one-third became demons. So, two-thirds of the angels remained faithful to God. Remember therefore that for every demon in the world there are two angels on our side!

The dragon waits in front of the woman (Israel) to swallow up the Child. That’s what Herod tried to do – to kill the Baby Jesus. But he didn’t succeed. The Child (Jesus) finally ascends to God and to His throne (12:5).

In 12:7–10, we read how Satan is cast down from the second heaven (“*the heavenly places*” – Ephesians 6:12). Many years earlier, he was cast down from the third heaven (the immediate presence of God) to the second heaven. Now he is cast down from there to the earth. He is called here the “*Deceiver of the whole world*” and the “*Accuser of believers*”. He accuses believers to God constantly – day and night (12:10). Anyone who accuses believers is joining hands with Satan. We can *expose* wrong doctrines in other believers and *disagree* with them. But we must never join Satan in *accusing* them.

In 12:11, we see three steps to overcome Satan.

- *First*, by the blood of Jesus Christ. Satan’s accusations have no power at all against us, because the blood of Jesus has cleansed us from all our sins. When the devil accuses us of any sin that we committed in the recent past or in the ancient past, we must tell him with perfect faith, “*The blood of Jesus has cleansed me from every sin. So there is no condemnation for me now.*”
- *Secondly*, by “*the word of our testimony*.” We must tell Satan frequently that he was defeated on the cross by our Lord and therefore has no power over us, and so we are not afraid of him, and he cannot ever touch us without God’s permission. If we are bold to give this testimony to Satan, we will overcome him constantly.
- *Thirdly*, by not loving our self-life, but instead putting it to death (*Galatians 5:24*). Our self-life (our *flesh*) is Satan’s agent within us. If we consistently hate it and crucify it, Satan will lose his power over us.

In 12:13–16, we see the dragon seeking to persecute the woman (the Jewish remnant) because Jesus came forth from Israel. Throughout world history, there have been people who have tried to destroy the Jews. Haman tried to destroy the Jews (in *Esther*). Hitler tried to destroy the Jews in the 20th century. But they did not succeed. Today the Jews are living in the land of their fathers. We read that the earth helped the woman and protected her from the attacks of the dragon. When he could not succeed with Israel, the dragon went off to make war with the church that came forth from her (12:17). The first Christians were all Jews for many years. Here the church is called “*those who keep the commandments of God and hold the testimony of Jesus.*” That is the twofold mark of the true church.

Two Beasts

In 13:1, we see a beast coming out of the sea having ten horns. This pictures the rise of the Antichrist. We see him being supported by the dragon. People worship the Antichrist. By subtle deception, he tries to imitate the resurrection of Christ (13:3). He is healed from a dangerous wound, and the whole world wonders how he could recover from such an injury. He didn’t actually die and he was never resurrected. Only Christ has been resurrected. But the Antichrist seeks to imitate that. He speaks arrogant words (13:5). He opens his mouth and blasphemes God (13:6). He is permitted to make war with the saints and to kill them (“*overcome their bodies*” - 13:7). The devil and his agents may overcome our bodies and kill us. But he will not be able to overcome our spirits. We see here that many saints will be killed by the Antichrist in those days. That proves that in the days of the Antichrist there will be saints (believers) on earth. Here is yet another proof that the church will be here on earth during the time of the great tribulation. The overcomers (God’s spiritual commando troops) will be standing up for Him bravely in those days. *He who wants to hear the truth, let him hear.*

In 13:8, we read that all earth-dwellers (that is, those *whose minds are set on the things of earth*) will worship the Antichrist. But those whose names are written in the Book of Life will not worship Him. These are the overcomers whose minds are *not* set on the things of earth. Here is yet another statement that proves that believers will be here on earth, standing up against the Antichrist, during the time of the great tribulation. With all these plain statements, it is surprising that there are still people who believe that the church will be secretly raptured *before* the great tribulation. Once people have been brainwashed by preachers to believe a wrong teaching, it is difficult for most of them to change their minds, even when they see it plainly in Scripture. It requires humility, honesty and great boldness to do so.

Then another beast comes out from the earth to join the Antichrist (13:11). This is the *false prophet*. This completes the Satanic trinity of

Satan (the master), the Antichrist (the political leader) and the False prophet (the religious leader). This combination of religion, politics and Satan join together to persecute the church. This new beast has horns like a lamb. He pretends to be a follower of Christ. This could be a religious leader who persecutes the true believers of Jesus Christ. History tells us of many leaders in Christendom (both Roman Catholic and Protestant) who have persecuted the true followers of Christ in past centuries, and who do so even today. So it won't be surprising if another so-called "*Christian*" leader teams up with the Antichrist to persecute God's people. He has horns like a lamb, but he speaks like a dragon. He is a wolf in sheep's clothing. He has the support of the political power, the Antichrist, and he performs deceiving signs to fool people. He is a magician and a hypnotist, and he does false miracles to deceive simple-minded people who are ignorant of God's Word (13:13, 14).

He also makes an image of the political leader and makes that image to speak, thus deceiving people. This will be a computerised robot made to look exactly like a human being and from which a recorded voice comes forth. The mouth is made to move along with the speech in a very realistic way – and many are deceived. I have seen such robots in some museums.

Then the false prophet makes all the people in the world to receive a mark. It's called "*the mark of the beast*". This mark can be taken by people either on their forehead or on their right hands (13:16). If it is inside their palm, they can hide it from others. But if it is on their forehead then everyone can see it. That means that the devil gives people the option to be either open followers of his (having his mark on their foreheads) or secret followers (having his mark hidden in the palms of their hands). There are those who *openly* follow Satan today. And then there are others (even in Christian churches) who secretly follow Satan – they live in sexual sin in secret, they give bribes with their hands in secret, and then come and break bread as holy people in the church with the same hands. The devil gives people that option to keep up their "good" reputation in their churches and to follow him in their private lives. Satan offered Jesus all the things in this world if He would bow down to him. Christians who secretly follow Satan can get many things in this world, and yet nobody in the church may ever know the wrong things they do in their private lives – because "*the mark of the beast*" is hidden in their hands. But one day everything will be revealed.

The number of the Antichrist is mentioned as 666 (13:18). What does this mean? The word '*Jesus*' in Greek is written as '*IESOUS*'. Unlike English, each Greek alphabet has a *numeric value*. The total numeric value of I,E,S,O,U,S in Greek is 888. 8 is the number of the new creation. The 8th day of the week is the beginning of a new week. In a piano keyboard, the 8th note is the beginning of a new octave. And Jesus is the Beginner of *a new creation*. A triple 8 refers to the Trinity. So this number symbolises Jesus as God who is also a Man and the Beginner of the new

creation. Now look at 666. 6 is the number of man, for man was created on the 6th day. A triple 6 refers to the Trinity. So 666 symbolises man seeking to be God. That is what the Antichrist does. “*The man of sin who opposes and exalts himself above every so-called god and takes his seat in the temple of God, displaying himself as being God*” (2 Thessalonians 2:4). One day when we know who the Antichrist is, if you check the numeric value of his name in Greek, you will find that it totals 666.

The Followers of Jesus

In 14:1–5, we read of the followers of Jesus. But notice the difference between them and the followers of the Antichrist. The followers of Jesus are *not* given the option to have the mark on their hands. It has to be *only* on their foreheads. In other words, *you cannot be a secret follower of Jesus*. You have to be an *open* follower of Jesus, or not be a follower of His at all. You can be a *secret* follower of *Satan*, but *not* of Jesus. The 144,000 mentioned here is again a symbolic number. This number is very small compared to the great multitude that cannot be numbered – mentioned in Chapter 7. This shows us that among the great multitude of those whose sins are forgiven, there are very, very few who actually *follow the Lord wherever He goes* (14:4). The way to life, as Jesus said, is very narrow and very few find it (Matthew 7:14). Very few choose the way of the cross.

This small group also sings a new song, a song of devotion to Christ, which they have learned here on earth before they go to heaven (14:3). You can't learn this song of devotion to Jesus after going to heaven. It has to be learnt here on earth. It also says about this group, that no lie was found in their mouth (14:5). So, to be in this group, one has to get rid of all lying, all pretence and all hypocrisy from their lives. These are the true followers of Jesus, the Bride of Jesus Christ. They have been “*purchased from the earth*” (14:3), meaning that they have been freed from attachment to this earth. It also says about them that they “*have not been defiled with women, but have kept themselves pure*” (14:4). This refers to their having kept themselves from the *harlot Babylon* – worldly Christianity (that we read more of in Chapters 17 and 18).

In 14:7–11, we read of three angels proclaiming three messages of judgement. The first one says, “Fear God and give Him glory because the hour of His judgement has come.” The second one says, “Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great.” And the third one says, “If anyone follows the beast, he will be tormented forever.”

In 4:14–20, we read of the harvest of judgement as the Lord uses His sickle. An angel says, “*Put in your sickle and reap, for the hour to reap has come, because the harvest of the earth is ripe*” (14:15). This is *not* the harvest of souls who need to be saved. That harvest was ripe 2000 years ago, when Jesus said to his disciples, “*Lift up your eyes and look.*

The fields are ripe for harvest” (*John 4:35*). But what we see here is another harvest – a harvest of God’s judgement on the world at the end of this age.

The Bride of Christ

In *Chapter 15*, we see another picture of the Bride of Christ (*15:2*). She stands victorious here on a sea of glass mixed with fire. A sea of glass is a picture of a life of perfect rest. “*The wicked are like the troubled sea that cannot rest*” (*Isaiah 57:20*). What we see here is the very opposite of that. Here are believers who have entered into “*the Sabbath rest in Christ*” in their lives (*Hebrews 4:9–11*). They sing the song of Moses. There are two songs of Moses – one in *Exodus 15:1–4* and the other in *Deuteronomy 32:1–44*. The theme in both those songs is the same: “*God Himself has taken vengeance on our enemies*”. We didn’t do it. God did it. Praise the Lord!

In *Chapter 16*, we read of seven bowls of wrath that are poured out on the earth. All that is described in this chapter could take place in a very short time. The wrath of God is mentioned in *Revelation*, only here – in *Chapters 14 to 16* – towards the end of the time of tribulation (a preview of this is mentioned in *6:16, 17*). That wrath will never touch a believer, for we have been saved from God’s wrath. The Lord’s return is suddenly mentioned in the middle of this chapter (*16:15*). The church is raptured, God’s wrath is poured out upon the earth and Christ comes down to earth with His church to reign on the earth (*19:11*).

When the seventh bowl is poured out, various calamities hit the earth and the short-lived battle of Armageddon takes place and Babylon is ready to be judged. What Babylon stands for is described in the next two chapters.

Babylon and Spiritual Harlotry

Chapters 17 and 18 are about *Babylon* – which is both a religious system and a political system. It symbolises corrupt Christendom which has the same spirit as the corrupt political parties in the world. Babylonian Christianity seeks for earthly power as well as for God’s power. But since God’s power *cannot* be mixed with earthly honour and power, Satan deceives Christendom with counterfeits of God’s power – as we see being exercised by the great multitude of Babylonian preachers today. Jesus however said, “*My kingdom is not of this world*”. You can’t be a disciple of Jesus and have the kingdom of heaven and the kingdom of this world. But Babylonian Christianity says you can. So Babylonian Christians seek to get all they can of this world while professedly seeking the kingdom of God first. But they will discover in the final day that Satan deceived them and they do not get the kingdom of heaven at all.

In *Chapter 17*, we see a woman riding on the beast. The beast is the world’s political system, and the woman is religious Christendom – and

they are hand in glove with each other. In 17:5, we read of ‘*Babylon the great*.’ Babylon is called ‘great’ 11 times in the book of *Revelation*. Jerusalem however is called the ‘holy’ city (*Revelation 21:2*). The contrast between ‘great’ and ‘holy’ is the contrast between *quantity* and *quality*. The essential difference between Babylon and Jerusalem is one of quality. Do you seek to be great or holy? That will determine whether you build Babylon or Jerusalem. Even if your doctrines are all evangelical, if you seek to be great in the world or in Christendom, you will only build *Babylon*. If however your passion is holiness, then you won’t be great, but you will build Jerusalem. This is the choice that faces those in Christian work today: Shall we seek for number or for quality. If we lower our standards, we can always gather more people. But we will lead all of them to hell. Noah had only 8 people in his church after 120 years of ministry, because he was “*a preacher of righteousness*” who never lowered his standards (*2 Peter 2:5*). If he had lowered his standards, he could have got 800 or even 8000 people in his group. But all of them, including Noah, would have been drowned in the flood. Nobody would have been saved. Thank God Noah emphasised quality and never sought for numbers. As a result he saved all eight of them. If you make mere converts to Christianity but do not make them disciples of Jesus, you may have large numbers. But they will be a part of Babylon that will finally be destroyed by God.

I have found this Babylonian spirit in at least some Christians in every single Christian group. No denomination or church is excluded. A church-leader has to fight a constant battle if he is to keep this spirit out of his church. The spirit of compromise and worldliness and seeking the honour and wealth of this world comes into Christians so easily. Then one cannot be a disciple of Jesus. If you seek to please men, you cannot please God. You cannot escape this spirit of Babylon by leaving one church and joining another. Many Protestants and Pentecostals say that the Roman Catholic Church is Babylon. But the spirit of Babylon is found among Protestants and Pentecostals too – and among their leaders especially. They run after money much more than the Roman Catholic priests do.

Babylon is not a particular group or a particular denomination. It is a system. Like Satan’s world system, it penetrates and permeates every Christian group. You can sit in the holiest church in the world and be a member of Babylon. It is a spirit that mixes Christ with money, Christ with comfort and heaven with the world. But these are all opposites and like oil and water, they do not mix. The only way to escape the spirit of Babylon is by putting your flesh to death consistently and getting rid of the spirit of the world from your life.

In *Chapter 18*, we see Babylon as an *economic system*. The Christian religion has become a great means of making money for many people. In Jesus’ time, the worldly Jews sold doves and sheep in the temple, not

to serve the people, but to make profit for themselves. Whenever you do Christian work for personal profit and without personal sacrifice, you are moving in the spirit of Babylon. Many preachers in Christendom today write books and make videos and earn huge royalties for themselves. They minister in the Lord's name to make money for themselves. This is the spirit of Babylon. Think of Christmas celebrations. What a lot of money shopkeepers make from selling Christmas cards and gifts!

The true prophets of God will stand against this corrupt system, declaring that this is not the way the apostles served the Lord. The New Testament does teach that those who serve the Lord can receive gifts from others who give them gifts *voluntarily*. *But if you are in Christian work and you are earning more through your ministry than you would have earned if you were working in a secular job, then you are influenced by the spirit of Babylon.* Many Christian workers are earning five to ten times what they would have earned if they had been in a secular job. They are *not* serving the Lord. They are serving themselves. Many preachers and pastors are furious with me for exposing all this. But the priests in the temple hated Jesus also, for exposing those who were making money in the name of God. So it is quite all right if people hate me too, for the same reasons.

All those who go along this way will have tremendous regret in the final day. The way of God is the way of sacrifice. Jerusalem is a city of sacrifice. If you went to the temple in ancient Jerusalem you would see blood all over the outer court. It is a place of sacrifice. Babylon however is a place of business. To follow Jesus and to serve Him is to go the way of sacrifice, not the way of personal gain of money or honour. One day this economic religious system will be destroyed by God along with all those who built and supported it. So the Lord calls His people today saying, "*Come out of Babylon, my people. Do not take part in her sins, or you will be punished along with her. For her sins are piled as high as heaven, and God is ready to judge her for her crimes*" (*Revelation 18:4, 5 - Living*).

In *Chapter 19*, we read the word '*Hallelujah*' occurring for the first time in the New Testament. There are only 4 occurrences of the word in the New Testament – and all 4 are in this chapter. Today many say "*Hallelujah*" meaninglessly. But in heaven they say "*Hallelujah*" with a reason. Three times they shout "*Hallelujah*", because Babylon has been destroyed! (19:1-4). Will you also join them today and say, "Hallelujah! Lord, You are going to destroy this wretched money-making, pleasure-loving Christianity that has led so many people astray"?

The fourth time they say "*Hallelujah*" is because "*the Lord God is reigning and the marriage of the Lamb has come and His bride has made herself ready*" (19:6, 7). This is yet another thing we must shout Hallelujah for, that the Lord is preparing the Bride of Christ in purity on earth today.

The Bride of Christ comprises of those who have kept themselves pure from the spirit of Babylon. She is clothed in pure, white linen, without any gold, symbolising the righteous life that those believers lived. This is not the righteousness of Christ but “*the righteous acts of the saints*” (*Revelation 19:8*). This pure white dress is in contrast to the gaudy dress of the harlot, who is decked in purple and scarlet with gold, precious stones and pearls (*17:4*).

John was so excited when he saw the Bride of Christ that he fell down to worship the angel. But the angel said, “*Don’t worship me, worship God*” (*19:10*).

Then we see Christ returning to earth, as a warrior, along with the saints who had just been raptured to meet Him in the air to welcome Him to earth (*19:11–16*). He is coming to establish His kingdom. There is a brief description of the battle of Armageddon here (*19:17–21*). Then the Antichrist and the false prophet are taken and thrown into the lake of fire (*19:20*). They are the first two occupants of the lake of fire. The lake of fire is a bigger version of hell.

The Thousand-Year Reign

In *Chapter 20*, we read of Satan being bound in the bottomless pit for 1000 years when Jesus reigns on the earth. In those days this prophecy will be fulfilled: “*The wolf and the lamb will lie down together, and the leopard and goats will be at peace. Calves and fat cattle will be safe among lions; and lions will eat grass like the cows. Babies will crawl safely among poisonous snakes, for as the waters fill the sea, so shall the earth be full of the knowledge of the Lord*

” (*Isaiah 11:6–9 - Living*). During those 1000 years, those who were faithful on earth will reign with Christ.

Here is a brief history of Satan. He was originally cast down from the third heaven to the second heaven when he rebelled against God. One day he will be thrown down from the second heaven to earth (as we saw in *Chapter 12*). Here we see him being cast from the earth into the bottomless pit. After 1000 years, he will be released for a short while and then he will be thrown into the lake of fire. That will be his final end.

We also read here about the first resurrection – the resurrection of the righteous (*20:6*). The wicked will not be raised for their judgement until the 1000-year reign of Christ is over. At the end of 1000 years Satan will be released for a short period just to show people that even after people have seen the peaceful reign of Jesus for 1000 years, they still want to follow Satan, because men are selfish, self-centred and do not want to submit their lives to God. But in a moment, the fire of God comes down and burns them all up and then the devil is thrown into the lake of fire (*20:9, 10*).

Then comes the second resurrection, when God will sit on the great throne of judgement and unbelievers from all the ages will be raised from the dead to stand before Him. The records of their lives will then be opened (20:11, 12). When *Revelation* was written, books were not like the books we have today. They were rolled-up scrolls of parchment. The nearest to that, that we see today, is a video-tape which is also rolled up like a scroll. So God takes the video tape of each one's memory and "*presses the rewind button*". The person's memory goes back to the time when he was born and his life is played back from there – for the whole world to see. Everything that he said and did, all the lies he ever said, all the filthy books he ever read, all his secret sins, all his thoughts, his attitudes towards others and his motives, everything, will be on display on the screen for the world to see. Everyone will then see for themselves that that person deserves to go to the lake of fire. These people were already in hell. Why were they raised up to be cast into the lake of fire? It was so that the whole world may see the righteousness of God's judgements – that everyone who is cast into the lake of fire deserves to go there. *Judgement must not only be done, but also seen to be done.*

We all have a video-tape running in our memory that will be exposed before the world one day – for believers at the judgement seat of Christ (2 Corinthians 5:10), and for unbelievers at the great-white-throne judgement described here. There is only one way for all our sins to be blotted out from that video tape. By an honest confession of our guilt, a genuine repentance and turning away from that sin and asking Christ to cleanse us with His blood from all sin. Then that part of the video tape will be wiped out and be blank. That does not mean that we can take sin lightly, just because it is easily cleansed. Even if our sins are wiped out from the tape, it will still be embarrassing for us in the final day when people see a lot of blank spaces in the tape of our memory!!

The New Jerusalem

In *Chapters 21 and 22*, we read about the new Jerusalem and the new heavens and the new earth. Here in the new Jerusalem, the overcomers will inherit everything (21:7). In 21:8, we see a brief list of those who are sent into the lake of fire. Notice there that the cowards are listed first. These are the ones who feared men more than God and who cared for the approval of men more than for the approval of God and who therefore did not have the courage to stand up for the truth.

The new Jerusalem is made of crystal-clear material (21:10, 11). This symbolises the importance of being transparent and totally free from all hypocrisy if we are to be a part of this glorious church. This is also symbolised in 21:16, where we are told that "*the length, width and height of the*

city are all equal". It is a cube. Its depth is exactly the same as its front-face (length and width). So seek with all your heart to be crystal-clear in your life at all times and to have as much spiritual depth in your life as others see on your outside. In other words, live in such a way that your private life is not in any way different from what you are in public.

In 21:12 and 14, we read about the 12 tribes of Israel as well as the 12 apostles of Christ. This seems to indicate that the Old Testament saints and New Testament believers will both have a part in this new Jerusalem.

Then in 22:1, 2, we see the river of life, the tree of life, and the throne of God and of Christ. There will no longer be any curse anywhere (22:3). The tree of knowledge of good and evil has been destroyed. There is no more need for the light of the sun for God Himself is the light there (22:5). This is a picture of our eternal home. Then Jesus says, "*I am coming quickly. Be ready. Blessed is the man who obeys the words of this book*" (22:7).

John is so excited that he falls down to worship the angel once again. John makes this mistake a second time. But the angel again tells him to "worship God" (22:8, 9).

In 22:11, we see an amazing exhortation: "*Let the one who does wrong still do wrong, and let the one who is filthy still be filthy.*" Can you imagine that the Bible concludes in its last page with an exhortation to continue to do wrong and to be filthy!! What that means is that if you have read the whole Bible and come to the *last page* and *you still want to do wrong and be filthy*, then God tells you to go ahead and do wrong and be filthy – for there is no more hope for you then.

We are now living in the last days. The Lord is coming soon and He will give to every man according to what he has done (22:12). In 22:15, is a final warning against lying – by word or by deed. The first sin mentioned in the Bible is lying when Satan told Eve that she would "*not die*" (Genesis 3:4). The last sin mentioned in the Bible here, is also lying. That shows us the seriousness of all lying and hypocrisy. The Bride of Christ consists of those who have cleansed themselves from this habit of lying (Revelation 14:5).

A final *invitation* is given before the Bible closes, to all who are thirsty for the divine life to come and partake of eternal life freely (22:17). There are two invitations in *Revelation*: Unbelievers are invited to be *saved*. Believers are urged to *overcome*.

A final *warning* is also given to anyone who removes or modifies any of the commandments given in this book (22:18, 19).

The Bible concludes with the words of Jesus promising to come back to earth (22:20) and the words of the apostle John: "*The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with all the saints. Amen*" (22:21). The last word in the Old Testament is 'curse' (Malachi 4:6). And the last sentence in the

New Testament is about “*grace*”. There we see the difference between the old covenant and the new covenant.

Thus we come to the end of the Bible. Because we have seen the end of the Bible we know where Satan will finally be – in the lake of fire. And so if Satan ever accuses you or troubles you, tell him boldly, “I have read the last chapter and I know what your end is going to be.” “*When the devil reminds you of your past, you remind him of his future!*”

We also know where we will finally be – eternally with our heavenly Father and Jesus and the saints and angels in heaven. This should give us great confidence at all times.

Let me conclude with an illustration. Suppose there was a cricket match between your country and another country and you watched it on television and you saw that your country’s team won the match. A friend of yours, who did not see the match and does not know the result, watches a replay of that match on television a few hours later. You sit with him and watch the match too. During the replay, at times when your team is doing badly, your friend is tense and wonders whether your team will lose. But you are totally relaxed, because you already know the final result.

Apply that to our battle with Satan. There you can see the reason why some believers are tense, discouraged and worried frequently and why other believers are at rest. The latter ones have already seen the end-result. They have read and believed what it says in *Revelation*, that Satan has already been defeated on the cross and will be cast into the lake of fire finally. Jesus and the saints are triumphant in the end. So they know that even if Satan wins a few *battles* here and there, at present, he has already lost the *war*. Praise the Lord.

(For a fuller study of the book of *Revelation*, you can read my book *The Final Triumph*, where I have given a verse-by-verse study of the whole book. You can also read that on line at:
<http://www.cfcindia.com/books/the-final-triumph>).



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