

# **Pointers along the way**

**Jacob Ninan**

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**Jacob Ninan**

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## **#901 Misplaced zeal**

Once someone was talking with me about how important it was to preserve trees. He said how people were being very short-sighted when they cut down trees for money or convenience, without realising what the long-term consequences could be for generations down the line. I agreed that this needed to be brought to the attention of everyone so that we could all act more responsibly. But I also pointed out that some activists who were agitating for the preservation of trees did not seem to mind that some people were even getting killed due to clashes resulting from that agitation. He had not thought of that. It suddenly occurred to him that effectively, to some of those activists their agenda had become more important than human life. They had not factored in that aspect when they organised their protests.

In another case, someone gets agitated about some wrong thing that is being done in a church and revolts. He thinks what he has is righteous indignation and thinks that raising that point is needed even if that was going to divide the church or bring dishonour to the name of Christ.

What is common in these cases is that people are not looking at all the different factors together. They get excited about one particular thing and that becomes a most serious issue in their mind. In the heat of the moment, they assume that nothing else deserves consideration at this point and are willing to become martyrs for it.

But we know that life has many sides to it. Getting to be able to have a broader outlook and to look at situations with all the different aspects together is to grow in maturity. Think of

what happened between Paul and Barnabas when they were comparatively young regarding John Mark, a cousin of Barnabas, who had deserted them in the middle of their first missionary trip. Paul may have thought they should not trust him again so soon, while Barnabas may have thought that everyone needs to be given a second chance. Apparently each stood with his viewpoint, and was not able to consider that the other too had a valid point. Finally they parted ways and possibly this resulted in some loss for God's kingdom who had planned for both of them to work together as a team.

"The first to plead his case seems right, Until another comes and examines him" (Pr.18:17). We can apply this piece of wisdom to another situation where we are convinced about a certain position we take, without having considered other possibilities. We can judge other people wrongly based on our own assumptions without really understanding what the others actually meant or intended.

This teaches us the great need for humility to admit to ourselves that we don't know everything. When it comes to other people, let us recognise that we need to first understand where they are coming from and to avoid jumping to conclusions. How humiliating it is to realise afterwards that what seemed to be so right to us was totally misplaced! Let us keep learning and growing.

## #902 Discerning between soul and spirit

We know that we human beings have been created with a body, soul and spirit unlike animals which have only a body and soul. 'Soul' here refers to our mind with which we think, feel and make decisions. The Greek word used in the New Testament for soul is *psuche* from which we derive the word psychology which is a study of our mind. God is spirit, and He has given us a spirit with which we can communicate with Him. This spirit died when Adam and Eve sinned, which means that their connection with God was lost. All of us are born from them, and we are born disconnected from God (Ps.51:5). That is why we need to be born again by the Holy Spirit who regenerates us to have a real relationship with God as our Father (Jn.3:3). We can be born again only by acknowledging our condition of being separated from God and having sinned against Him, and receiving the death of Jesus on the cross as the substitutionary sacrifice for our sins.

After we have been born again and we have an open line of communication with God through the Holy Spirit, some of us fall into a very serious error in hearing God. That is to confuse what comes up from our mind (soul) as coming from God. In addition, we may forget that Satan and his demons can also place ideas into our mind as temptations. We need to recognise them as temptations and resist them.

When we are zealous to hear from God and to do whatever He tells us, our zeal deceives us into thinking that God is speaking to us even when He is not. For example, when we have set our mind on obeying whatever He tells us, we may assume that even when crazy ideas pop up in our head they must be from God. Then we put away even our common sense and end up doing even weird things such as taking up snakes or drinking poison to demonstrate how God would supernaturally save us. But if only we are familiar with the word of God we can see that this is similar to the temptation

Jesus faced when Satan asked Him to jump off from the top of the Temple.

That is why God has given us His word as our guide for our teaching as well as for protection (2Ti.3:16,17). "For the word of God is living and active, and sharper than any two-edged sword, even penetrating 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" (He.4:12). Here we see how the word of God is to divide between soul and spirit, to enable us to discern between what comes from the Holy Spirit and what comes from our natural mind. How important this is for us, especially for preachers who influence many others!

Therefore, the written word of God must become our benchmark against which we judge all ideas that come to our mind. That is how we can ensure that what we teach or follow is according to what God has already revealed. When we think the Spirit is guiding us, it must be in line with the word. We need to be extremely wary of extra-biblical ideas and practices.

### #903 Curing the sickness or the symptom?

Suppose we have a cancer that causes a lot of pain, will we just be satisfied with taking pain killers and reducing the pain? No. We will have to deal with the cancer that causes the pain. Then how is it that we try to deal with the consequences of sin instead of dealing with sin itself? We have accumulated a lot of debt because we have been giving in to greed and extravagance, and now we want a pastor to pray for a miraculous clearance of the debt. Our habit of watching pornography has distorted our relationship with our wife, but now we want marriage counselling to heal the relationship. Etc.

"What is the source of quarrels and conflicts among you? Is the source not your pleasures that wage war in your body's parts?" (Js.4:1). Psychology points out that whatever we do, we do it either to gain pleasure or to avoid pain. When we seek pleasure of various kinds, and go beyond acceptable limits and sin in order to get it, we suffer the consequences which we did not want (Ga.6:7,8). Then we try to wriggle out of those situations by different tactics. Why don't we learn to prevent these consequences by taking care not to sow into them in the first place?

"But each one is tempted when he is carried away and enticed by his own lust. Then when lust has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it has run its course, brings forth death" (Js.1:14,15). The starting point for our problems is when we are enticed by pleasures. Then we are tempted to do something wrong to get those pleasures. Here we have the opportunity to listen to our better sense and say no to those desires because they are going beyond normal, acceptable limits. If we succeed here, we win over the temptation and we have victory! But if we give in to the temptation, we sin, and then the consequences will hit us. Shall we treat the cancer or the pain?

Even much of counselling looks at dealing with the consequences, because that is what appears to be expedient! But Jesus came to lay the axe to the root of the tree, instead of just plucking off rotten fruit. We have to be saved from inside, and that is why we need to be born again. Then we receive a new heart that gives us a hatred towards sin, and the Holy Spirit who makes us alert to recognise when we are being tempted. He gives us strength, as we seek it out of a desire to somehow stop sinning, and helps us to say no to temptations.

Some people content themselves with forgiveness of sins and looking forward to being in eternity with Jesus where we don't have to fight with sin. But we need to realise that we cannot follow Jesus and become like Him unless we learn to take up our cross, deny ourselves and do what He does ([Lk.9:23](#)). Here we will learn to deal our thoughts, desires, intentions, etc., that draw us towards sin and learn to deal with the root itself. That is what deals with the cancer of sin. Let us not be spiritually lazy and foolishly expect everything to happen automatically.

### **#904 The sinfulness of self**

A couple comes for marriage counselling. They say they want to improve their relationship and resolve their issues. But what happens often is that the husband wants the wife to be changed and the wife the husband. Even when both say that they are willing to change, it becomes obvious that they both want the other to be changed. Neither of them is able to see that they are a part of the problem and also that their own wrong attitude or behaviour is triggering the other person to respond badly. This is an example of how blind we are to our own faults.

We learn from psychology, which has mostly derived its findings from observing large numbers of people over time,

that we are conscious of only about 10% of what is going on in our mind, with the other 90% also contributing to our decisions and behaviour but about which we are unaware! So, the husband thinks he is doing everything right and he can observe what his wife is doing wrong, but the wife can see many things he is doing wrong. When she reacts to those, he thinks she is behaving badly and cannot imagine that it was he who triggered her response. We agree that her response was wrong, but that is only a part of the story until we also understand what he did wrong. But he is not aware of anything he has done wrong! Think of it also as if it was the wife who did something wrong and the husband reacted.

Our self-image, or the picture we have of ourselves, is far from the real image which God sees. Another person forms an image about us from what he sees us doing, but he is not able to see what was going on inside us, what our intention was, etc. So, both what we think about us and what others think about us are far from accurate. Trying to correct what others think about us is a futile exercise which will never get completed satisfactorily. What we need to do is to allow God to show us what is going on inside us, accept that verdict and make changes in our thinking and behaviour.

"Then the LORD said to Cain, 'Why are you angry? And why is your face gloomy?'" (Ge.4:6). Cain's answer in his mind would have been that God was unfair to accept only Abel's offering and to discard what he himself had offered. In turn, Cain would have become angry towards Abel. He could not see at all what was wrong with himself and his offering (v.5). What God wanted Cain to do was to look at himself and to deal with the sinful thoughts and feelings that were bubbling up from inside him (v.7). If he had done that, he would have been able to overcome his anger towards Abel.

When we are worked up with feelings about someone else, it is very difficult for us to think properly and to look at

ourselves instead. That was what happened to Cain. But we can ask the Holy Spirit to help us by giving us insight into our own thinking and behaviour and to ignore the other person for the moment. When we have removed the log from our own eyes first, then we can also see clearly about the other person.

## **#905 Why grace should not be hyped**

God's grace as an unmerited favour is extremely attractive to people when they think they don't have to earn it, every wrong thing they have done is freely covered, and nothing they do now can remove this grace over their life. The worst of criminals will be happy to hear of this grace and they appeal for the President's pardon as a matter of course. But this is to abuse grace.

Even among Christians who have had the opportunity to receive grace from God at some point in their life there are many who have not thought through the implications of grace. For them, grace is just like God overlooking their sins. One way they show their misunderstanding is by demanding grace from others for wrong they have done to them and getting angry when they don't give it.

A typical misinterpretation of grace is in terms of making out God to be totally gracious, ignoring all the other characteristics of God such as righteousness, justice and impartiality. People expect Him, in effect, to just overlook or ignore sin because He is a God of grace! But of course, He cannot be unrighteous or unjust even when He is being gracious! In order to show grace to us, He had to satisfy His justice by placing the punishment of our sins upon His Son, Jesus Christ. Another part of His righteousness is that He cannot forgive anyone just because He wants to. We have to acknowledge our sins before Him, accept that we deserve death as our punishment and only thus become eligible to receive His grace.

Because of a one-sided preaching of grace that is going on, many people do not get to understand the balance of justice in God's dealings with them. They begin to expect forgiveness without repentance. They imagine that no matter how they live now, God's grace will cover them. They don't see any need

to repent now when they sin. They don't confess their sins or seek to keep their heart right before God at all times (1Jn.1:9). They don't seek to overcome temptations so that sin will not be allowed to rule over them (Ro.6:13,14). They don't realise that this way of life is, in the meantime, accumulating consequences to them (for which they blame God later) (Ga.6:7,8).

They sin against others and then demand that others should forgive them and deal with them as if nothing has happened. When that doesn't happen, they call these others legalistic and ungracious. Suddenly, the focus reverses and the victim becomes labelled as the perpetrator!

Grace is a free gift from God without being based on any merit on our side. If it was not, then we could have demanded it (Ro.4:4). But, at the same time, we must not forget that God had to make an unimaginable sacrifice in order to become able to give it to us as a free gift.

Let us make sure we have personally received this grace with the acknowledgement before God that we don't deserve it. Let us also not demand it from others. But let us show it to others freely even when we think they don't deserve it.

## #906 Living under a higher law

The religious leaders of the Jews in the time of Jesus knew only the old covenant and its laws, but Jesus came to introduce the law of the new covenant, the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus (Ro.8:2). After this law took over when Jesus had died, shed His blood and ratified the new covenant, the old covenant laws became obsolete (He.8:13). Till this happened, the Jews thought, for example, that the law on tithing was important and the Pharisees tried to tithe even the garden plants (Mt.23:23). But Jesus proclaimed that there were higher laws and values they were neglecting in the process, such as justice, mercy and faithfulness.

One thing that constantly provoked the Jews was the habit that Jesus seemed to have to do miracles on the Sabbath days. From this they even assumed that Jesus could not be from God since He did not keep the Sabbath (Jn.9:16). They could not understand that the laws such as tithing and Sabbath were temporary and only for the Jews meant to teach them to give priority to God in their lives and not meant to be obeyed everywhere and at all times. When we move into the new covenant as children of God and walk under the leading of the Holy Spirit, the law of the Spirit of life takes over, helping us to live on a higher plane than following mere external practices.

We see Jesus getting exasperated and angry when leaders in a synagogue preferred to keep a man under bondage to a withered hand rather than break what they thought to be a law preventing them from doing any work on a Sabbath day (Mk.3:1-5). Jesus went on to demonstrate a higher law of goodness and kindness by healing that man (Mt.12:12).

The Pharisees thought that Jesus was breaking the law of the Sabbath and teaching people to ignore that law, and they

started planning to kill Jesus. But what was Jesus actually trying to do?

Jesus had come to fulfil every tiny aspect of the Law (Mt.5:17,18). But not in the way the people of those days expected. Jesus did it by fulfilling the real intention behind every law. In the case of tithing, He taught that all that God had given belonged to God and not just ten percent (Mk.10:21). In the case of the Sabbath law, Jesus demonstrated that we ought to be good and kind always, irrespective of the day of the week.

Can we check ourselves to see how much we have entered into the new covenant? Are we living in such a way that our concern is about keeping many external practices and making rules like the Pharisees about what can and cannot be done and how something needs to be done, etc.? Or are we now concerned about the state of our heart that God looks at, and seeking to become kinder, more patient, more quick to forgive, thinking about helping others rather than seeking things for ourselves, etc.?

"For all who are being led by the Spirit of God, these are sons and daughters of God" (Ro.8:14). The more we are being changed to walk in this way, the more mature we are growing to be.

## #907 Why did Paul speak in tongues?

Here is this apostle Paul who wrote a large part of the New Testament, started many churches, did miracles in Jesus' name, who was given revelation of mysteries that others did not know, etc. Why did he have to speak in tongues, and that too to such a great extent (1Co.14:18)?

Many intellectual Christians don't see any need of speaking in tongues and deride those who do. But Paul was certainly an intellectual of the highest class, and a scholar. He could have accomplished much with his knowledge and skills. Why did such a person resort to this 'questionable' practice?

Yet the fact is that not only did he speak much in unknown languages, but he also wished that everyone else did too (v.5). The reason is that he found it to be great for personal edification (v.4). He was not trying to impress anyone with this gift, and he avoided speaking in tongues in public (v.19). Even though there is clear instruction that unless there is an interpreter present, we should avoid speaking in tongues in public (v.28), many cannot resist the temptation to slip in some 'tongues' in the middle of their sermons or prayers! He was not satisfying himself that he too could speak in tongues, using some repetitive syllables. When he prayed in tongues, he did it in faith, not understanding what he was praying (v.14), but leaving it to the Holy Spirit to intercede, who knew the mind of God (Ro.8:26,27). Just think of how humbling it must have been for Paul to spend such a lot of time doing something he could not understand! But he continued to do it, believing that his prayers were bearing fruit in ways he could not see.

Compared to speaking in tongues, Paul desired that people should prophesy (1Co.14:5), aiming for the building up of others through exhortations and consolation (v.3). In ministering to the others, our aim should be to edify them,

and by speaking in tongues privately, we can edify ourselves. Paul spoke in tongues a lot because he recognised he needed that edification for himself. He got connected with God through this act because it was done entirely by faith. There was no reward from people, and there was no intellectual satisfaction. He was entirely dependent on the Holy Spirit to give him utterance, interceding for things he had no idea about, and then he depended on the Father entirely for results. Many of us resist this idea altogether because it looks ridiculous to our mind, and also because of many counterfeit tongues people exhibit.

God may also give us some interpretation (v.13). The Spirit speaks through us mysterious things (v.2). God may reveal answers as we pray. He could give us words of knowledge or wisdom (1Co.12:8). This may be what we need for our situation or to help someone else. The more we recognise our limitations in every direction, the more we can learn to depend on God. This is one way we can put into practice such a total dependence on God, putting aside leaning on ourselves altogether.

### **#908 It's all about the heart**

Once when the Pharisees pointed out to Jesus that His disciples were eating food without washing their hands ceremoniously, He gave them an explanation about true spirituality. He told them that honouring God through words (or even external actions) was not sufficient if their hearts were far away from God (Mk.7:6). Think about how we might imagine we were truly worshipping God when we sang songs and raised our hands, while our life was not really right in God's eyes! We might go away thinking God must be really satisfied with our 'sacrifice of praise' while we even had sin hidden in our heart (Ps.66:18). The Pharisees imagined that they were very spiritual because they were very strict with

washing of hands and tithing even mint and dill from their garden. But Jesus told them that their heart was far away from God.

This is the difference between religiosity and spirituality. Spirituality is of our heart relationship with God. If our heart is not clear and right before God, no matter what sacrifices we make or how much we 'serve Him', we are merely religious and we are very displeasing to God (Is.59:1,2). Looking at our external behaviour, people may call us 'godly' or 'spiritual', but actually God is unhappy with us. In such a situation, we cannot afford to presume on grace to cover us (Ro.6:15). Grace is an unmerited favour God gives to us when we are sorry about our sins and repent, and not if we try to cover them and pretend that God does not mind them.

Jesus clarified that what was going on in the heart was the root of sin, and a religious following of external holiness did not make us holy (Mk.7:15). He said that if the heart was full of evil thoughts, sexual impurity, hatred, deceit, etc., that would make us sinful, even if we washed our hands ceremoniously (vv.21-23). Imagine if we are regular in reading the Bible, praying, participating in the church, etc., but if our heart is wicked as Jesus described above! Do we then have any right to consider ourselves as spiritual?

But it was not only about the Pharisees of those days, but about us who call ourselves Christians and enjoy a good name before our fellow Christians. Can we look at our heart honestly and identify what all is going on inside there? Or are we satisfying ourselves with the reputation we have before others for all the 'good works' we do?

David, the man after God's own heart, fell into adultery with Bathsheba. When he repented, he realised that the act of adultery and the murder that followed came from impurity in his heart. Now he began to cry out to God for a clean heart

(Ps.51:10). This is a revelation that should grip our heart and mind that what we are before God is what He sees in our heart and not so much about what all we do externally (1Sa.16:7). It is in our heart that our salvation should start. Our sanctification, or being set apart to God, should be first in a change of attitude in our heart, and that is where we must focus.

### **#909 Making sense of God**

If we start from the knowledge of God as an infinite being who created from nothing everything we see now, then we can also see that this God is able to do anything He wants (Ps.115:3). He knows every detail of everything, including all that is going on in the minds of all people. He can make the earth stop its rotation, produce water to flood the whole earth and remove it afterwards, walk on the water, turn water into wine, bring dead people to life, etc. It is not difficult at all for Him to have created all the world in six 24 hour days, and He could have placed everything in its right place before He created man.

In this way, we can see that nothing is impossible for Him and that He could have actually done everything just as He has described in the Bible.

But those who think that they cannot accept anything that they cannot explain forget that it is finite men who are attempting to explain the infinite God. They cannot accept statements just because they are in the Bible – that Jesus actually lived and did all those miracles, the virgin birth, resurrection, etc. Then those who believe in Jesus and yet want to be able to explain everything enter into a formidable dilemma.

The problem is that no matter how they try, they cannot find all the explanations they need. All they are left with are theories that cannot be proved, and then one theory gives way

to a new one as people discover flaws in the older ones. But through assertive statements and media support, they convince others and themselves that what they say is actually true. But they are stuck with knowing that they don't really know that what they believe is true.

Our Christian faith is not about a logical conclusion based on evidence, even though there is sufficient evidence available for those who look for it honestly. It is based on a real relationship with God through Jesus. Once we recognise who God is and who we are, and come to know Him personally, everything else falls into place.

But for those who approach their faith (everyone has faith, even atheists) as based on scientific or logical evidence find it hard to read the Bible. They wonder which part of the Bible is reliable, and where science or common sense is more reliable. As a result they have core problems with their faith and their relationship with God remains nominal, philosophical, intellectual or superficial.

If we want to relate to God, we must submit to God and recognise that He is the highest truth and reality there is. If He says He did something in a certain way, that is how it was. His word settles things for us. Then we can take our proper place before God as small, finite created beings who even exist at God's pleasure. We must also recognise how we stand as sinners in the presence of the holy, righteous and just God and realise that there is no way we can relate to Him except through His unmerited favour He is willing to show us. The other way is to trust in ourselves.

## #910 Experiencing more of salvation

Salvation begins with the forgiveness of our sins. We can receive this instantly when we repent of our sinful life and surrender to Jesus as our Saviour. But this is just the beginning of salvation through which God wants to restore us to the original plan for man, and that is for us to become like His first Son, Jesus. Forgiveness is not enough for that, but our sinful behaviour has to get transformed to a godly life in every aspect of our life, in our thoughts, words and deeds. This is the second phase of salvation called sanctification. Salvation will be perfect when we finally stand before God in eternity when we receive glorified bodies without sin.

So, as long as we continue to sin, our salvation is not complete. Some Christians think that all they need is forgiveness whenever they sin, but Jesus came to save us 'from our sins' and not just from its punishment (**Mt.1:21**).

Another way of looking at the progress of our experience of salvation is to be born again, to get baptised in water, to be baptised in the Holy Spirit and to become disciples of Jesus who seek to learn from Him and follow His example in every part of their life. It is when we receive forgiveness from God that He causes us to be born again with a new nature and He accepts us as His children. We then testify to that when we get baptised in water, recognising that our old life is now buried with Christ and we are going to live with Him in the new life (**Ro.6:4**). Then we seek to be baptised in the Holy Spirit in order to receive power to live as His disciples and become witnesses for Him (**Ac.1:8**).

There is still another way of looking at the progress of salvation. Not everyone comes to Jesus at first repenting from their sins. Some come to Him for some practical help such as healing or answers to some problems in their life. They begin to follow Him when they see that He is real and He answers

prayers of helpless people. But they may not be born again yet. Hopefully, now that they have come near to God they can hear the Gospel and respond to it with repentance and faith.

For all these groups, when we come to sanctification, we have to learn many things on a daily basis about what sin means in our life and how we need to become more like Jesus. This is a never ending process as long as we are on earth. We need to understand God's nature and His ways, learn in a practical way how to deal with temptations through the help of the Holy Spirit, etc.

There is so much to learn and so much to grow into that it is a most foolish thing to imagine that 'we have been saved' and there is nothing more to be done. God was working in us to draw us to Him, convict us about our sins and to show us the salvation that He had prepared for us. Now He is working in us to give us the desire to do His will and the ability to do it. It is our responsibility to respond to Him and work it out in our practical life ([Php.2:12,13](#)). Isn't this a wonderful calling?

### **#911 The sieve we use**

A sieve or strainer is used, for example, to remove tea leaves from tea, or to separate the coarser particles from the size we want. Jesus used it in an exaggerated manner to illustrate how religious people were so careful as to strain out gnats from their drink while they were swallowing whole camels at the same time ([Mt.23:24](#))! This meant that they were committing major crimes in their heart while they were supposedly very strict and legalistic when it came to adhering to external forms, rituals, ceremonies, etc. Isn't this common among us Christians too? For example, can't we be very careful to see that our doctrines are correct, while we are committing murder or adultery in our heart?

There is another way we can look at the use of sieves, as the mental standard we set for ourselves concerning what is sin or not. For example, we think that to be violent with others is wrong and we would not do that. But then the Holy Spirit shows us that even if we are not physically violent, we can be very violent with our tongue! It is not easy to tame our tongue, but with much prayer and the help of the Spirit we learn over a period of time how to be careful with how and what we speak. But that is still not the end! Now we see that even though our speech is better and others think we have changed a lot, our thoughts and feelings have much wrong with them. We are still very much agitated with others and we cannot easily calm down when we think of what others have done to us. It takes time and a lot of progress before the Holy Spirit is able to teach us to calm down quickly after a provocation. But is that the end? Have we learned to love them and pray for their welfare (Mt.5:44)? What has been happening is that we are slowly learning to use sieves with smaller and smaller holes!

This can apply in other areas like lust, love of money, unforgiveness, etc. The danger is that because we are using some sieve it makes us think that all is fine, without realising that in the eyes of the Lord we are letting many things pass through which are unacceptable to Him. But as we walk with more sensitivity to the voice of the Spirit, He is able to tell us that we need a finer sieve.

This is the way of life. The path towards perfection is long and even our life on earth is not long enough to complete it. God justifies us by crediting the righteousness of Jesus to us (Ro.4:4,5), and His blood keeps cleansing our sins (1Jn.1:7). But it is only when we take up our cross daily with the intention of dying to our self and deny ourselves when we are tempted that we can make progress on this path (Lk.9:23). But we must remember that it is a path where God's light

increases over us and we are continually set free from the darkness of our old life (Pr.4:18). We should neither get discouraged at the slow progress nor expect that we will get fully sanctified in one special experience. But we need to be honest before God and walk in the light that He gives us.

### **#912 By grace through faith**

"For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast" (Ep.2:8,9). These are words that define the path of salvation, telling us that God gives it to us on the basis of grace or a favour that we don't deserve, and that we can receive it freely through our faith. But these are also words that some people twist to imply that salvation is entirely a work of God and that there is nothing we can or need to do from our part. They think that God determines whom He will save, then regenerates them from His side at some point in their life and causes them to have faith in Him. The assumption here is that faith is also something that God causes people to have, and not something that people choose to have when they get to know God. They also believe, following the same line of thought, that when God chooses to give someone grace, no one can resist it.

This assumption about grace based also on the phrase here 'that no one may boast' places the whole of salvation on God and takes away any idea of man's own responsibility for his salvation. It appears to exalt God overall in the frame of things, but what they do not admit is that at the same time it reduces man to a mere robot who has no ability of his own to receive or reject this salvation. If it were so, then why would this God punish man for rejecting this great salvation (He.2:2,3)?

In general, 'religion' seeks to attain 'salvation' by man doing different things that ultimately qualify him to be acceptable to

God. What God did through giving the law of the old covenant was to demonstrate the total failure of this approach by letting people realise that no matter how they tried, they could never achieve salvation. Then He came with the offer of salvation by grace to people who were willing to admit that only in that way could they ever hope for salvation! That is the meaning of grace.

At one point, Adam and Eve who had the freedom to choose between a life of complete dependence on God or independent of Him made the wrong choice. Now God is offering us the choice between restoration to God and continuing to be independent. That is the choice we make by faith. So, once we see this, we can see that this is not entirely up to God, but our response to His grace also comes into the picture. That explains why many are not getting saved even though God has made the offer open to all, and why many are going to receive punishment for rejecting this free offer from God (Jn.3:19).

Once we bring the free offer of God and our choice into the picture, everything begins to make sense. But those who imagine they are giving glory to God by exaggerating the grace of God and removing the responsibility of man find themselves with many inconsistencies for which they have to find inconsistent explanations!

We can glorify God by recognising the glory of His grace, and then submitting to Him.

### #913 Eve and Satan today

In the garden of Eden, God had told Adam and Eve not to eat from the tree of knowledge of good and evil, warning them that if they ate it, they would die. But when Satan tempted Eve to disobey God and eat that fruit, he assured her that she would not die. What was he saying here? That even though God had specifically warned them that they would die, they would not die. In other words, God's words were just a bluff, and nothing would actually happen even if they disobeyed them! But in fact, they did die. All mankind that came from them were also born dead.

Satan's lies to us these days may not be so straightforward! But they are essentially the same, implying that even if we disobey God, even if we sin, there will not be any consequences. Satan does this through the use of an exaggerated form of grace. Now he paints up God as a very gracious God who is so willing to forgive and accept people, that He would not actually punish anyone. If we sin, all we have to do is to ask for forgiveness and all will be fine. God will cover us up in His grace so that there will not be any negative consequences to our sins. Sometimes Satan even manages to convince people that even the sins they are going to commit in the future have already been forgiven, which will give people such a confidence that now they don't have to be careful to avoid sinning.

But God is true, and His words also are completely true. Along with being gracious and forgiving, He is also just and righteous, and so His warnings about the consequences of sins are true ([Ga.6:7](#)). Sin has serious consequences for now and eternity. When we repent, God is gracious enough to forgive us, but the consequences may remain for a long time to remind us about God's warnings. We may wish for grace to take them away, but it is actually gracious of God to leave them with us in order to teach us not to sin again. But Satan

has defiled many preachers today to make them imagine that when grace comes, all old things will be taken away and we will only have good things to enjoy!

Have we understood God's word that says, "If we are faithless, He remains faithful, for He cannot deny Himself" (2Tim.2:13)? God has to be faithful to who He is because He cannot change. He cannot be unrighteous just to be nice to someone! He cannot go back either on a promise He has given or a warning! He cannot say anything without standing by it always! But Satan gets to us implying that God does not actually mean what He said or that finally He will not do what He has threatened!

God's grace is there for our forgiveness and for helping us in our need (He.4:16). But if someone tries to misuse His grace or take advantage of it by being careless with sin, that person has to suffer the consequences (Ps.18:26). "You will not die," says Satan, even now. We all have to learn to become more careful against sin, and also not to take grace for granted. While seeking to admire grace, we must not forget to fear God too!

### **#914 Knowledge based Christians**

Perhaps you have come across some Christians who seem to be always keen to learn more and more. They read many books, watch debates on many controversial subjects, and are up-to-date on the latest theories and ideas. They are never at a loss when they come across questions that others might have, and they present convincing answers. It might appear that these are more spiritually minded compared to many others who imagine that they have already come to know all there is to know!

From the point of view of scholarship, they may be very versatile and advanced in keeping themselves aware of all

that is going on around them. But what could be a danger here that goes unnoticed? Isn't it possible that for some of these people, all this knowledge remains merely as knowledge, without affecting their practical life or character much? It may affect them in their attitudes, becoming smug in knowing that they know so much, and they may look down on ordinary people who are ignorant of all the lofty things they are concerned with. But they have not become more diligent in ordering their lives meticulously according to all the truth they have come to know.

Jesus made a huge distinction between two groups of people, both of whom took trouble to listen to what He had to say, but only one group took the trouble to 'do' what He taught them, or to put into practice what they understood. Haven't the others made themselves more accountable to God because of all the knowledge they have acquired, and then more damnable because they have not acted according to what they knew? (Mt.7:26)

When Paul was passing through Athens, one thing he noticed was that many of them had a curiosity to hear about new ideas (Ac.17:21). But when they heard the Gospel from Paul, some of them only sneered because it did not fit with their way of thought. Isn't this truly tragic that when God gives people the chance to hear the truth that can save them, they sit in evaluation of it as expert scholars and reject what could have changed the wrong direction of their lives?

For some people, it looks as if knowledge is just something that they add to the idea compartment of their mind, without allowing any connection to take place to practical life. When they keep hearing the truth but harden their mind against its practical implications, they become deluded in their understanding and become more insensitive to the truth (2Th.2:10).

One requirement God has for us is to have a heart that is willing to respond to the truth that He gives us. It will be only then that we will be able to get true knowledge, in the proper meaning of the word (Jn.7:17). Otherwise, knowledge will lead to puffing us up, making us imagine that we have become great, while we are far from being in the place where we can know the truth and the truth can set us free (Jn.8:32). Jesus has come to set us free, but do we want to be free? Let's not accumulate knowledge merely for its own sake.

### **#915 Our challenge in dealing with others**

Forgiving others when they have done wrong to us is one thing. But bearing with them when they continue to trouble us is another level. We need both. "With all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love" (Ep.4:2). If we can unpack this, we can learn a lot about the practical aspects of living with other people.

It starts with humility. A mistake we can make when we think of humility is to connect it with how we appear before people in terms of our external behaviour. But it is actually connected with what we think of ourselves in our mind. Isn't it possible to think of ourselves highly in our mind, look down on others and still behave humble in front of them? But the more we recognise where we stand in relation to God, we cannot help but have a humble opinion of ourselves. On one side we are conscious of our utter sinfulness and on the other we are taken up with God's unmerited favour towards us.

It is when we are humble that we become able to deal gently with others. The prouder we are, and the less we know about our actual position before God, we tend to be hard on others. Then we are quick to judge them, show no mercy, demand perfection from them etc. But when we know who we ourselves are, we cannot be hard on others. This is why Jesus said that if we are not willing to forgive others, our heavenly

Father will not forgive us too (Mt.6:14,15). When we find it difficult to forgive others, it is an indication that we have not understood on what basis God forgives us.

It is when we realise how patient God is with us, while He continues to be long-suffering towards us, that we find it possible to be patient with others. When we mentally demand that the others should change immediately, we forget how long God has been waiting for us.

Sometimes forgiving another person can be very difficult for us. But let us imagine that finally we learnt how to do that. But then comes the next challenge to bear with him, and continue to bear with him as he continues to be the same in his attitude or behaviour towards us! This can appear to be too much for us! But we need to turn our eyes towards God and recognise how He has been bearing with us regarding every imperfection in our life! He has been not only forgiving, but also patient with us, and bearing with us as we have been taking a long time in our imperfections.

"Bearing with one another, and forgiving each other, whoever has a complaint against anyone; just as the Lord forgave you, so also should you" (Co.3:13). It is when we look at God dealing with us that we get help to deal with others in the same way. We have a tendency to forget this and focus our attention on others. Then we get worked up in our mind concerning the specks we can see in others' lives, while forgetting altogether the beams in our own life. Let us work on becoming more humble before God so that it can in turn affect our relationship with the others too.

## #916 The tendency to cool off

We hear of radical conversions – maybe we have had one ourselves – or about the way some churches are exploding in size, and we may be happy to know that more people are coming to Christ. But if we look at church history, or watch enough number of people who came to faith, it will strike us as a tragic fact that many of them faded away. Many of them have not totally disappeared from the scene altogether, but they have become over time churches or Christians only in form and profession. A good start is not the same as a good finish. There are many things at work pulling us back from God.

Jesus was fully aware of this possibility. He said, 'Those on the rocky soil are those who, when they hear, receive the word with joy; and these have no firm root; they believe for a while, and in time of temptation fall away. The seed which fell among the thorns, these are the ones who have heard, and as they go on their way they are choked with worries and riches and pleasures of this life, and bring no fruit to maturity' (Lk.8:13,14). This tendency is in our flesh. Jesus is not referring to any fault in the preaching, but how different people responded from their hearts. Another problem we face is that the Devil is always on the lookout to drag people back from God to his kingdom (1Pe.5:8). All the attractions of this world, which seem more tangible to us than the things of God, also entice us away from God (1Jn.2:16). With all the zeal of a new convert or a new church movement, if we don't recognise the weakness of our flesh, we will not survive (Mt.26:41). We can also see that the second generation invariably becomes more casual about God than their 'parents'.

Therefore God warns us not to take our faith for granted, but to watch over it constantly lest it degenerates into unbelief given enough time (He.3:12). We must take a warning from

the parable of the ten virgins – all of them believed in the bridegroom, they were all waiting for the bridegroom, and all grew sleepy with waiting. The wise virgins were ready for the delay with extra oil in their lamps. In other words, they took extra effort to store up oil, hoping not to get caught unprepared.

What happens when Christians think that they have started well – believed, baptised, in a good church, reading the Bible and going for prayer meetings – but do not think that they need to put in extra effort to fight in their spiritual battles? The enemy's arrows catch them unawares. An unexpected calamity, a tough intellectual question, or an unanswered prayer is enough to trip them. Perhaps some supposedly great scholar comes up and gives them a different explanation from the Bible and they are thrown out of their track! Isn't this happening all around us? Perhaps we ourselves have faced such situations and almost gave up our faith!

'If anyone walks in the day, he does not stumble, because he sees the light of this world' (Jn. 11:9). Let us walk before God with real humility and honesty!

## #917 How we start is crucial

There are many options when it comes to religions. People imagine that any way that suits you will work for you. But here comes the surprise – there is no way to God except through Jesus (Jn.14:6). But then there are so many people who point out different ways to come to Jesus, and because of their eagerness to get more people, many times they make these ways acceptable to people but they do not actually bring them to Jesus. Then people spend the rest of their life assuming they have come to Jesus, and find out only in eternity that they were mistaken. So, it is extremely important for everyone of us to be sure that we have come to Jesus in the right way.

Jesus said, "Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the way is broad that leads to destruction, and there are many who enter through it. For the gate is small and the way is narrow that leads to life, and there are few who find it" (Mt.7:15,16). This is so important to understand. There are many ways people present, even while they imagine they are presenting the Gospel, that are too broad by God's standards, and which lead ultimately to destruction. Basically they make coming to Christ broad in order to enable more people to enter, without people having to pay any cost at all. Many people may be shocked at what I just said, because they have been given the idea that Jesus has done it all, and that there is nothing we can do from our side. So they are shocked that I mention a cost we have to pay. Think about it, why very few find the narrow way that leads to life is because they are fooled by the broad way that they don't have to pay any cost for!

Jesus offers us salvation from sin and eternal life, which refers to His life and nature. What we have to do in order to receive this life from Jesus is to give up our own life. "For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it; but whoever loses

his life for My sake will find it" (Mt.16:25). First of all we admit to God that we have lived a life of sin, pleasing ourselves, and what we deserve is judgment. Then we also declare to Him that from then onwards we want to live our life for Him, doing what He wants. If we are not willing to make this exchange with God, He cannot accept us. Now we can see why so many people are only assuming wrongly that God has accepted them because of some superficial thing they have done, like repeating a prayer mechanically, lifting hands in a Gospel meeting, etc. We cannot be a part of the kingdom of God unless we are born again (Jn.3:3). Some came to Jesus because He did some miracle for them, but still they have not known anything about being born again.

Whatever our experience till now has been, each of us must make sure that we have come into a real relationship with God through Jesus (2Co.13:5). Ask God to show you where you stand, if you have doubts, and then make sure you know Jesus personally and experientially as your Saviour. Don't take this matter for granted.

## #918 Faithful with money

It is sad that many Christians consider that once they have given a tithe of their income to God, the rest belongs to them! They then think that they have total freedom to do whatever they like with what is left with them. Then they tend to be guided by the society around them, the standards their friends follow, and they try to live at the highest level of luxury which they can afford, even buying things on loan to match the standards of their peers. They don't feel anything awkward about this because they think they have already met their responsibility towards God!

This is why it is very important for us Christians to understand why God started with the old covenant and then moved on to the new. The old covenant was at the introductory level suitable for the people of Israel who had lost touch with God during 400 years of stay in Egypt. It emphasised only external behaviour and gave many rituals, festivals etc., symbolising what God had in mind. But it did not actually come to His standards. Two such examples are God asking for just a tenth of their income and a seventh of their time. But when Jesus came, He introduced the new covenant which touched every part of us, including our heart and mind, dealing with the attitudes and intentions. It was no longer enough to avoid physical adultery, but to be free from adultery in the heart.

The new covenant came into force when Jesus shed His blood to purchase us from the hands of Satan. Now, the whole of us and all that God had given us became His again. The independence that Eve had declared from God is now reversed when we surrender ourselves as living sacrifices to Him to do His will (**Ro.12:1**). Now we cannot get away with the old covenant law of tithing and consider the rest of the money as ours to spend as we like.

Now we can see that all the money we have as well as all the possessions we have are given to us as a stewardship. Just as we have to give an account to God for every word we speak (Mt.12:36), we have to give an account of how faithful we have been with His money (Mt.25:19)!

"He who is faithful in a very little thing is faithful also in much, and he who is unrighteous in a very little thing is unrighteous also in much. Therefore if you have not been faithful in the use of unrighteous wealth, who will entrust the true riches to you? And if you have not been faithful in the use of that which is another's, who will give you that which is your own? No servant can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or else he will be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth" (Lk.16:10-13).

Jesus has not clarified details about how we ought to handle money. He has entrusted different amounts with us, and our circumstances, needs, abilities, opportunities, etc., are different. But we must each learn to be faithful to God, recognising that everything belongs to Him and that we have to give an account to Him.

## #919 Love God or people?

Many people seem to have the idea that God is so nice and merciful that He is willing to forgive everyone. When they go to Him and ask for forgiveness, they take it for granted that it will be given. Following the same line, they think that when someone else is caught doing something wrong, he should be shown mercy, and punishment, if any, should be minimal. Except when someone does wrong to them! Then they say that it is not fair, and that this man should be punished! Suddenly they bring justice, and right and wrong into the picture!

Justice and righteousness are always there with God, even when He shows mercy. That is why our sins had to be punished in order to fulfil His justice before we could be forgiven. He could not just decide to forgive everyone just because He is merciful.

Think of this when it comes to dealing with some loved one or friend who has been doing wrong. Because of our love for him, we want to show him mercy. Then we are also tempted to ignore righteousness and even defend what he has done, even when we know what he has done is wrong. We think that is just our love for him and that it excuses our being unrighteous for his sake!

This is why Jesus said that one of the marks of His disciples would be that they did not allow their love for any of their relatives to become stronger than their love for Him (Mt.10:37). He said the same thing in another place in a stronger manner, that we would even need to 'hate' our loved ones when it came to following Him (Lk.14:26). Of course, this does not mean hatred in the way we normally understand, but that if we had to choose between Him and anyone else, and we chose Him, it would look as if we hated that person.

God is true, righteous, just, impartial, loving, merciful, kind, compassionate, etc. If we think we can be unrighteous or partial, for example, to show love for someone, we are not being true to God. For example, if we were to tell a lie in order to defend someone because we think we love him, we are choosing to 'hate' God. Jesus said we could not serve two masters; in situations like these we would show who our real master is. A similar thing happens when some leader does something wrong, and people think they are being loyal to him by defending him without questioning whether he is right or wrong.

Someone falls in love with an unbeliever. Actually God warns against such a thing because a disagreement between them on such an important issue like faith is going to bring unimaginable tensions between them in the future. But how many people have argued that 'the love they have between them' is so strong that they would easily survive any such differences, and discovered the misery that followed later!

We cannot afford to emphasise one part of God's character to the extent that we override another part. No. God is One, He is unchanging, and He cannot deny Himself. We must learn to know Him and deal with Him as He is in all His manifold nature.

## #920 Waiting for things to change

Jesus said, "These things I have spoken to you, so that in Me you may have peace. In the world you have tribulation, but take courage; I have overcome the world" (Jn.16:33). But none of us likes tribulation or any kind of trouble, opposition, discomfort or inconvenience. So we pray for such to be taken away! There was some 'thorn in the flesh' that the apostle Paul had to endure, and he kept praying for God to remove it from him. But God's answer to him was that it was intended to help him remain humble in spite of all the revelations he was receiving (2Cor.12:7).

How many are praying for someone or some circumstance to change so that their life can become happy! It seems to be a good and reasonable prayer, but God does not seem to answer it even after a long time. The answer which Paul received was in effect that this thorn was good for him!

It is as if we have decided that until the difficulty goes away, we cannot have peace or happiness. The implication is that it is other people or circumstances that decide our happiness. In our mind we have allowed them to decide for us! Then, till they change, we cannot be happy! We keep praying and even begin to lose our faith in the usefulness of prayer when things continue the way they are.

We need revelation to understand this. How can constant difficulty do us any good? Think about Jas.1:3,4, "Consider it all joy, my brothers, when you encounter various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith brings about perseverance." Till now we were thinking that it is comfortable circumstances that will make us happy. But when our eyes turn from earthly glory to eternal glory, then we see that the present difficulties can serve to train our character which is what will contribute to our riches in eternity (2Cor.4:17).

Think of this also from the point of view of our mental outlook. If we are constantly waiting for things to change before we can become happy, and, for example, there is someone who constantly irritates us, we will be in effect choosing to remain in a state of constant frustration! But on the other hand, if we choose to accept the fact that this person is like that, and stop waiting for him to change, we can concentrate more on how we should respond in a godly way to him as he is. Now, instead of holding him as the key to our happiness and suffering in frustration because he is not changing, we can start reconciling in our mind with the actual situation and working out our own salvation.

The old saying comes to mind, "God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference." If we try instead to change what we cannot change, we will be constantly beating ourselves up in frustration. But now we can learn to enjoy the peace that Jesus gives us in the midst of our difficulties, not waiting for them to disappear, which is what the world thinks of as peace ([Jn.14:27](#)).

## #921 The circumcision of the heart

We know that circumcision was a mark God gave to Abraham and his descendants as a mark of the covenant He was making with them. There were people like Abraham among them who believed and trusted in God, but for most others, it was just a physical symbol of belonging to Israel. But when we come to the new covenant which God has made with all people through the death of Jesus Christ on the cross, there is no more such an external symbol. The new covenant has to do with our heart. When we go to God after being convicted of our sinfulness and receive His forgiveness by faith, God gives to us a new heart and a new spirit (Ez.36:25-27). This is regeneration. We who were dead in sin now become dead to sin.

This gives us new desires, a hatred for the old sinful ways, and a new direction of following Jesus and walking in His ways (1Jn.2:6). This is the evidence of the new birth, and not having repeated a prayer, taken baptism, or joined a church. Since, unfortunately, there are so many people who have not really heard the true Gospel, many are just assuming that they are Christians, without any such regeneration from God's part.

This circumcision of the heart – cutting away the old way of life in our heart – will continue to be our mark as children of light (Ro.2:29;Php.3:3). We must be aware of this, and be careful to maintain this characteristic about us. We must not become people who can only look back to a date when they were born again but who now live just like everyone else. God is constantly working in us in this direction, and it is our responsibility to cooperate with Him every time (Php.2:12,13). The tendency to take things for granted is always around, and if we just allow our eyes to move away from Jesus we can easily backslide, just as well as the next person.

One very common mistake that happens among us Christians is that instead of maintaining the circumcision of our heart, we satisfy ourselves with merely watching over our external behaviour – what we do and speak, which others can notice. Then we are actually more careful about what people think about us than what God sees in us. But if we follow in that direction, we will soon lose the circumcision of the heart, and slowly become as if we were never born again. The right way to live is before the all-seeing eyes of God who examines even the motives and intentions of the heart. For this we have to train ourselves to be totally open before God, humble and honest, not seeking to hide or find excuses for ourselves.

Walking before God will produce changes in our life. For one thing, we will become less worried about what people think about us, but very sensitive about what God thinks. Just think about what God has prepared for His children, that we can have the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit abiding in us ([Jn.14:23](#)). This is the fellowship John the apostle was talking about ([1Jn.1:3](#)). How foolish it would be to settle for less or other things?

### **#922 The God shaped vacuum**

According to Blaise Pascal, everyone has a God shaped vacuum in his life which only God can fill. Many try to fill their life with entertainment, hour after hour, but find themselves empty at the end of it all. Some pour themselves into achieving a great record, or a name for themselves, but after it is done, they don't know what else to do. Some psychologists have identified three things we crave for in our personal life, namely security, significance and self-worth, without which we feel empty inside of us. By security it means a sense of being loved or wanted, or as belonging to someone. Significance is a sense of importance in our life when we realise that we are someone special with certain

abilities that others can recognise and appreciate. We feel self-worth when we recognise a meaning and purpose for our life that makes our life worth living. We are generally not aware of this vacuum existing within us, but if we look at ourselves we can see that these are what we are seeking through various things that we do.

Before Adam and Eve fell, they did not feel any such needs in their lives because all these needs were getting met automatically, without their becoming aware of them, by the presence and fellowship of God with them. But the moment they got separated from God, these needs manifested themselves painfully, and they began to devise various ways to satisfy them. Since then, all of us are 'born in sin', with this distance from God, and we immediately start the pursuit of these needs through diverse means. For example, seeking pleasure of various types is one way we try to fill the vacuum of not being loved.

The Gospel of salvation through Jesus Christ is God offering a way back for us to Him where we can walk in fellowship with Him and enjoy His unceasing love for us, recognise the value He has shown us by letting His Son die for us, and learn of the individual plan and purpose with which He has created us. The closer we walk with Him, the better these crucial needs get met, and the less we want to run after other things.

But have you thought why people try to keep God out of their life by all means, while going to great lengths to find alternative means of meeting these needs? Why is it that evolution scientists will do everything possible to avoid looking at the possibility of creation, even when they know the gaps in their theories and find errors again and again in the best of their models? One reason is that people don't want to bring God into their lives and then have to give an account to Him for everything they do! They don't mind having a God

who will take care of them, but not one who will lay down laws for them and call them to account!

On the other hand, salvation is meant to deliver us from the hold of sin in our lives and fit us into God's plan. As we allow His word through His Spirit to renew us, we can become conformed more and more into His ways and fill the vacuum in us (Ro.12:2).

## #923 Thinking outside the box

Have you understood that many times our ideas are moulded by our family background, denomination, community, culture, etc.? Then, any idea that seems to be outside these boxes instinctively seems to be 'wrong' to us! Some of us will be so loyal to what we have always believed that we are willing to fight for it. But isn't it possible that at least sometimes, our so-called sense of loyalty is actually preventing us from knowing the truth? We may imagine we are standing loyal to our family, our denomination, our leader, etc., but we may be actually standing against the truth!

One point we must be clear about in our mind is that none of us is completely right, neither we ourselves, our families, our denomination or the Bible teachers we are following. We were all born in sin, and even after we have been born again, we have only started coming slowly out of the ignorance, corruption, superstitions, wrong teachings, etc. I have come to see that there is not even one church or one Bible teacher (including me!) who has got everything right, but we all ought to be willing to receive correction and learn always.

What would you do if you discover one day that one doctrine you believed was wrong? Would you admit it, or would you consider your reputation or the position of your church to be more important? Going a little further, if you are employed by a church or a para-church organisation and you find that some positions they have been taking are wrong, what would your reaction be? If the leader you respect has reportedly made a mistake, will you think it is unthinkable, and try to justify him at all costs?

Of course, every difference in doctrine or interpretation is not worth taking up a fight about (Ro.14:1). We have to reckon with the fact of life that as long as we are on this earth, there will always be differences of opinion, and we will need to bear

with the people who hold many of them. But there are also points on which we cannot compromise. As someone said, wisdom is to know the difference!

Until we face the truth and accept it and allow it to change us, it will do no practical good for us. But if we submit ourselves to the truth, it will set us free from ignorance and bondage (Jn.8:32). At this point, let us make a determination in our heart that personally we will always seek the truth and be willing to be corrected and taught new ideas. Don't you think that this would be the minimum position we can take as individuals? Whether and how we would take it up with the others needs wisdom and guidance from the Holy Spirit.

Ignorance of the truth or wrong understanding of parts of the truth are parts of the imperfection we have. We will never be perfect in this area on earth. On our side we need to press on towards perfection, and we need to be patient with the others as much as we want them to be patient with us too, perhaps about other parts of the truth! In love we can grow together along with the others.

## #924 When they say peace and safety

"For you yourselves know full well that the day of the Lord will come just like a thief in the night. While they are saying, 'Peace and safety!' then destruction will come upon them suddenly like labor pains upon a woman who is pregnant, and they will never escape" (1Th.5:2,3). This refers to those who continue to sin, thinking that all is fine and nothing will happen. The context is about the coming of the Lord, but doesn't the idea relate to the consequences of sin suddenly coming upon people? Many times, when people sin and nothing happens - they aren't caught, they seem to get away with it - they imagine that nothing can happen, and they continue to sin (Ecc.8:11). But God tells us not to fool ourselves; there are always consequences, whether now or in eternity (Ga.6:7). If anyone thinks he can manage to avoid getting caught, yet he is not getting away from God.

At the beginning of the church era, God demonstrated in what seemed to be an extreme manner how He looks at guile and hypocrisy. Ananias and Sapphira sold some property and gave a part of the amount to the apostles, pretending that they were donating the whole amount, seeking greater honour. But God killed them on the spot. After giving that example, God has not been repeating a similar judgment on everything that has been going on since then. It is not that He has changed. He has given this warning and now He is waiting to see who will take sin seriously. Nobody is going to be able to get away with sin.

Towards the end of the church era now, as the time is short before the Lord Jesus comes again, God seems to be giving warning shots again. Of late, there has been a series of exposures of big names in the church who have been hiding behind their names and committing sin, presumably lightly. They seem to have thought that since they were able to get away with it for many years, they never would get caught.

The warning is not basically for them, but for the rest of us. We are being given the opportunity to sit up and take sin seriously in our own lives. Churches and organisations too can now examine whether their ways have been right, where they need to change, etc.

The Bible talks about scoffers who deride the Bible saying that Jesus has not returned after many years since He went up. But the explanation is not that God has failed to keep His promise, but that He is giving people more time to repent. His judgment is strict and without partiality. But His mercy compels Him to give people enough time to repent (2Pe.3:9). But that is not to be taken for granted. As someone said, if you are planning to repent at 12am, remember you may die at 11pm.

Our attitude to sin in our own life is a clear proof of whether we have truly been born again, or we are just religious followers. All who are truly born again have been given a new heart and spirit (Ez.36:26,27). The presence or absence of this spirit shows who really belong to God and who do not.

### **#925 Followers or disciples?**

Have you realised there is a difference between following Jesus and becoming His disciple? Many people seem to think of disciples as only referring to the twelve disciples. But the goal of Jesus is to make disciples from among all the nations (Mt.28:19,20). He said that they would be those who would obey all that He had commanded the first twelve.

People follow Jesus now for various reasons. Many in the days of Jesus followed Him hoping to receive healing, deliverance, provision of food and other things. Some followed Him because they wanted to watch His miracles, and others because they wanted to hear the new things He was talking about. Jesus did miracles because He wanted people to

realise who He was, or because He was moved with compassion when He saw their need. He does these things even now. But as it was then, and even now, His main goal with people is to deliver them from sin in their lives and to lead them to eternal life (Jn.6:26,27).

Those who have chosen to follow Jesus now may have, at the same time, chosen to give up other gods, recognising that Jesus is the only way to God (Jn.14:6). But it is not sure that they can consider themselves as His disciples. A disciple has committed himself to his master, in this case, Jesus. The question by which we can find out about our commitment is this: have we committed ourselves to doing 'all' that our Lord tells us to do? Is He our Lord? If we read His teachings, and then pick and choose what we like, what will be comfortable for us, what will not cause any disturbance in our family, work or society, we cannot say we have chosen Him as our Lord and Master. Actually, the fact of the matter is that we are still the lord of our life, and it is our decision that is final. If our decision goes against the commands of Jesus, just too bad? If this is the case, then let us realise that we may be followers, but definitely we have not become His disciples.

There is some controversy about the term some people refer to as 'lordship salvation'. Its emphasis is that those who simply believe in Jesus have not been saved, but only those who have submitted to the authority of the Lord in their lives. How I understand this subject is like this. A man hears the Gospel of salvation from sin, recognises himself as a sinner in God's sight, repents and submits to Him in every part of his life. But those who come for healing, deliverance or solutions for their problems hopefully hear the Gospel subsequently and respond. In some cases, the progress is radical, and for some others, it may be slow. For some people it may never happen that they find Jesus as their Saviour or learn to submit to Him.

Jesus wants, first of all, to save us from our sins (Mt.1:21). For that repentance from sin and faith in the Saviour are crucial. There must also be a total submission to Jesus as our Lord. Let us have that clear in our mind, and not be stuck in any lower level of relationship with Jesus.

### #926 Dead to the Law

Paul talks in Romans 7 about the Jews, who used to be under the Law of Moses, becoming 'dead to the Law' and becoming united with Christ. There are other phrases he uses, such as dead in sin and dead to sin. If we understand these clearly, it will help us with a practical understanding of the Gospel and the way we ought to live now.

Since we have all been born in the family of the original parents, Adam and Eve, who chose to sin against God and got disconnected and distant from God, later on we were all born 'dead in sin' – disconnected and distant from God (Ep.2:1). This means that from birth our nature was sinful; our inclinations were towards sin, and we sinned as a result of that. Then we heard the Gospel of Jesus Christ and responded to it by humbling ourselves before God, confessing our sins and wishing to stop sinning. God then caused us to be born again through a work of the Holy Spirit inside us, and we received a new heart and a new spirit that had a hatred for sin and a desire to be pleasing to God (Ez.36:26,27). This was how we became 'dead to sin' (Ro.6:11).

People who don't know God make up different rules for behaviour or rituals by which they hope to please God. These become a kind of law for each religion. The Law of Moses was given by God Himself to the people of Israel to define certain boundaries for their behaviour by which they could distinguish themselves from the other nations around them. Those who are religious minded among all the different religions believe that it is by keeping their laws as well as they

can that can make them acceptable to God. In other words, for them, salvation is by the keeping of laws.

But when we come to the one and only God who created the universe including us, we realise that He is perfect in an infinite way, and no matter how anyone tries to keep laws, no one can meet all the requirements of His laws. So, actually, seeking salvation through keeping of laws is a non-starter! The reason behind God giving Israel the ten commandments was to illustrate this through their failure.

When that fact became evident that no one could save himself by trying to keep the Law (Ro.3:19,20), God revealed His plan of salvation for all mankind – through grace. Here God recognises man's inability to keep the Law, and waits for man to acknowledge that he has, in fact, failed. Then God forgives such people, as a gift of unmerited favour towards them, instead of as something they have earned (Ep.2:8,9).

To be 'dead to the Law' is to have a recognition and acknowledgement that we do not rely on that way of salvation any more, of keeping the Law in order to attain to salvation. Then we become 'alive to God' when God causes us to be born again and to be connected back with Him in a Father-child relationship. When the Holy Spirit opens our heart and mind to be gripped by this truth, and it sinks in, we can overcome the temptation that comes to us because of habit, to rely on our own merit!

## #927 Going to extremes

Spiritual truths are not like natural facts that can be expressed precisely. They can only be understood with the help of the Holy Spirit. That is why the Bible talks of getting the eyes of our understanding opened (Ep.1:17,18). This begins to happen only after we are born again and the Holy Spirit regenerates our spirit which was dead towards God till then. When people discuss doctrines according to their natural intellect and individual experiences, they tend to go astray and reach different conclusions. Spiritual truths are metaphysical, transcending physical matter and the laws of nature. So, when we try to express them with human words we cannot be precise as in the case of scientific facts. We must keep this in mind when we try to understand the Bible, and avoid falling into extreme positions.

Look at the truth of the Trinity, that God is only one and yet He has three Persons in Him, namely the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. We cannot understand this with our natural limitations. But then some people try to explain this as one God appearing at different times as three different forms. This is a heresy called modalism. Some others think of God as three beings who are entirely different from one another, with independent wills. To remain within the balance of the truth in this matter, we must learn to remain within what the word of God says, rather than try to find plausible natural explanations.

Look at the subject of the husband being designated as the head of his wife in marriage (1Co.11:3). Especially in the face of pressure from feminists, some have negated this and taken an egalitarian view in marriage. Some others have taken man's headship to an extreme, implying that he has absolute authority over his wife. The balance of truth lies in recognising the position of responsibility that the Lord has given to the husband and the complementary role of the wife

in submission to him. But we can argue this with mere human ideas, until we are willing to come under the authority of the scriptures that God has given to us.

When we try to look at any difficult subject like the above from the Bible, isn't it necessary for us to be conscious of our natural limitations, and subject ourselves to the Holy Spirit giving us 'revelation', willing to do what He tells us (Jn.7:17)? Of course, we recognise that we are not looking for revelation that contradicts the Bible or is extra-biblical. But we look for the true meaning and application of the things that are given in the word.

It would be helpful for us to know first what the author originally meant when he wrote to particular audiences. Understanding the meaning of the Hebrew and Greek words will be helpful for this. But then, we need to avoid looking at words or sentences by themselves, and seek to see their context within the particular book of the Bible and in the overall revelation of God to man through the Bible regarding His character and His plans for man.

## #928 Sanctification God's work or ours?

"Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to keep all that I commanded you" (Mt.28:19,20). If we just preach the Gospel to people and get them to believe in Jesus, have we completed our responsibility? Can we think that once God gives them the new birth and the Holy Spirit starts dwelling in them, then God will cause them to grow and make them to become more and more like Jesus? No. Here itself it says that it is not sufficient to make them believers but disciples. Disciples are those who have chosen to follow their Master in order to do whatever He says and to become like Him. Will the Holy Spirit do that automatically for them? Just for clarity, just take a look around at ourselves and others to see if this has happened.

Yes, God is keen to sanctify us, set us apart to Himself more and more, and He is at work in us daily. But it is one thing to have a great teacher but another for the student to be distracted with so many things in his mind! If we are honest, we will have to admit that if only we had listened to and cooperated with God better, how much closer we could have become with God and what all He could have accomplished through us. The problem is that while God is at work in us, it is our submission to Him that has been lacking (Php.2:12,13).

"Everyone who has this hope fixed on Him purifies himself, just as He is pure" (1Jn.3:3). This is the part of sanctification that we need to focus on from our side, because this is our responsibility. There is a need to depend on God to give us the strength and also to ask for it in prayer. But having prayed, we cannot afford to think that now God will take care of it and we just have to wait for Him. With such a wrong mentality, what we are doing is to 'pass the buck' to God, absolve

ourselves of our responsibility and take no action from our side.

A part of the Great Commission tells us to teach people to keep (do) all that Jesus has commanded. A part of our responsibility after we have become His disciples is to learn what all He has taught, and then to make sure that we carry them out in real life. Bible study is good, but if it only gives us more information and we are not making any effort to obey what we have learnt, it will only make us believe that we have become better people just because we have more knowledge. No. Greater knowledge gives us greater accountability before God, but also, it gives us greater opportunity to practise things and become more like Jesus in reality.

Some churches focus on preaching the Gospel and bringing people to Christ, some others on teaching people from the Bible. But if we do not focus also on 'doing' what we have learnt, we will just be as foolish as the man who built on the sand. His problem was that even though he had heard the truth, he did not actually obey it (Mt.7:26). What he learnt did not really help him!

### **#929 Magic stuff Christians do**

Do you think keeping a Bible under your pillow or hanging a cross on the wall will keep off demons? A cross from a folded palm leaf bring you blessing? Making a sign of the cross will keep you under God's protection? Putting a sticker on your car that says, "Jesus saves," hoping you won't have accidents? Walking around a house 'sprinkling the blood of Jesus' to ward off witchcraft? Buying 'anointed handkerchiefs or prayer shawls' to bring you blessing? Blowing the shofar over the city to bring revival? Worshipping God facing the east? Etc., etc. Do you imagine that doing things like these will make you a Christian or earn points with God? Superstitions and magic.

At one point, when Israel was fighting with the Philistines, someone had the idea that if they took the ark of the covenant with them into the battlefield, they would surely get the victory, since the ark was the place of God's presence with them. But what happened was that not only did they lose the battle, but the ark was taken away by the Philistines! So much for depending on things or certain actions to assure God's favour for us! But Israel may have learnt this from looking at what all the nations around them did, and it may be the same way that we Christians have picked up similar ideas, even though our ideas and practices are more Christianised! Nevertheless, no such thing can ever make us acceptable to God or find favour. The people who place their confidence in such things are totally mistaken if they assume that God must be mighty happy with them for doing them!

It is possible that these people who hold this kind of ideas have never really heard the true Gospel of Jesus Christ, or even if they have, they have not really understood it. In effect, they are still depending on things they do to find acceptance with God. That is the essence of every religion. But knowing that no one would ever be able to find their way to God like this, God Himself came down to us offering the way of grace for us – unmerited favour. His Son Jesus took the punishment for our sins in our place, and if we are willing to accept that we deserve that punishment, and we want to give up our earlier life of sin, God will forgive our sins, and Jesus will become our Saviour from sin (Ac.13:39).

This concept is contra-intuitive for man. We have almost an inborn idea in us that if God has to accept us, we will have to earn it by certain things we do, and different religions, including nominal Christianity, devise different ways for this. But the Gospel of grace is being offered to anyone and everyone who will recognise the impossibility of becoming pleasing to God by our own effort.

The idea that we have to earn favour from God by things we do sometimes continues even after we receive salvation through faith in Jesus. Isn't that why we attribute magical values to different practices to 'earn grace'? Why don't we begin to learn the way of faith to build our relationship with God?

## #930 Healed through His wounds

"By His wounds we are healed" is a part of a verse quoted by some Christians to affirm faith in God to give them physical health and to claim healing when they become sick ([Is.53:5](#)). After a sincere examination of the Bible and consulting different people's views on this, I have concluded that this is not the right way to interpret this passage. I know some brothers and sisters will not agree with me on this, but I hope they will be willing to look at this with an open mind.

Most people will agree that Isa.53 is a crucial part of the Bible prophecy about the death of the Messiah as a sacrifice for our sins. By taking our death on Himself which we deserve for our sins, He offers us salvation from the guilt and power of sin in our life. The above phrase occurs in the middle of that prophecy, and because of the use of the word 'healed' some are prompted to think that His salvation also includes our physical healing. Some take it that if we become sick, we can therefore claim healing, and some others think that it offers us total health without sickness.

If physical healing is meant here, it will be a most powerful part of salvation apart from that from sin. But there are problems. 1. Why is it that there is no detailed teaching about it, asking us to claim and enjoy it? 2. Why did believers such as Timothy, Epaphroditus, Trophimus and possibly Paul too, suffer from sickness? 3. When Paul proclaimed the Gospel, if physical healing was a part of the Gospel, how could he leave behind anyone sick? 4. Peter referred to Is.53:5 and connected it to spiritual healing ([1Pe.2:24](#)).

The conclusion we have to arrive at when we consider the above is that there does not seem to be any backing in other parts of the Bible for the teaching that salvation includes physical healing. If we conclude that, and hold the position that all of scripture must hold together, we will have to

explain what Matthew meant, where he says that Jesus did miraculous healings to fulfil Isaiah's prophecy, "He Himself took our infirmities and carried away our diseases"

(Mt.8:16,17). Matthew seems to want to show that Jesus was the One Isaiah was referring to, rather than to prove that healing is included in our salvation.

Jesus healed all kinds of diseases supernaturally, and it goes with the nature of God to heal. He heals now too, but what we see is that there is no blanket guarantee for healing or health as some conclude from Is.53:5.

My aim in writing this is first of all to deliver people who misunderstand Is.53:5 and expect miraculous healing always and even refuse medical treatment. Secondly, those who put their hope on this verse and got disappointed should not stop believing in God and His word. Surely sickness was one of the results of sin, but so was death, climate change, etc. Full redemption from sin waits for us only in eternity (Re.21:4). A lot of confusion, unbelief and disappointment can be avoided if we understand things rightly.

### **#931 Wish, hope, faith**

Think of a man wishing for a car and he doesn't have the money. He hopes he might win a lottery or someone would give a gift. But then he hears a preacher saying, "All things are possible to him who believes" (Mk.9:23). Now he tries to make himself believe that he is going to get a car. What he has is only a wish, and he is hoping that he can get a car by believing it will happen.

Making oneself believe that what he wishes for is going to happen is not faith! A superficial reading of the verse might give the impression that it is so simple. But we realise that the one who has true faith has that assurance that what he hopes for will happen (He.11:1). Can this man have that

assurance, except that he imagines he does, based on a wrong understanding of the previous verse?

Sometimes people say, "I am praying for faith that I can be healed." They wish and hope for healing, but they are not sure. They could have prayed, "Lord, please heal me," which would have been doctrinally sound. But to think that what they need is more faith so that when they have enough, they will be able to get healed, is to (unconsciously in one's mind) transfer the power for healing from God to man's faith. We ask God for healing because we believe in Him, and without this faith we cannot be pleasing to Him. On the contrary, if we think that it is our faith that is going to achieve the healing, that would be totally wrong.

We must also differentiate between believing that God is able to heal us and thinking He will. Whether He will heal depends on His sovereign will which He exercises according to His wisdom, which, at the moment, we cannot always understand. So, when we know He has healed many in the Bible and even around us, we cannot guarantee He will do it for us. We pray, believing that He is able and also that He is good, compassionate, kind, merciful, etc., but not really having faith that assures us He will heal us. But then He reveals His will to some people that He is going to do what they ask for. Then they have the assurance of faith. Faith comes by hearing from God (Ro.10:17).

What a lot of confusion there is among Christians on this subject! People have heard words such as, "Your faith has made you well," and "According to your faith be it to you," and thought that it is their faith that has the power. Some people go on to assert their faith by declaring words with their mouth. What they are not able to see here is that, in effect, they are making themselves gods who can make things happen by their faith and words. This was not how Christians

used to pray, till the new age teachings began to infiltrate the churches.

Once we recognise that the final authority, power and sovereignty are with God, we must stop trying to pump up our faith and try to accomplish what we wish for. We must submit to God, and pray to Him to grant us what we are asking for, if it pleases Him. Let us go back to, "Not my will, but Yours be done, O Lord."

## #932 The voice of the shepherd

"To him the doorkeeper opens, and the sheep hear his voice, and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out.

When he puts forth all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice"

(Jn.10:3,4). How can the sheep recognise the voice of their shepherd and refuse to go with anyone else? He knows each one of them by name because he has taken the trouble to get to know them, their condition and their needs. During this interaction, they have come to see that he is sincerely interested in their welfare and that he is not looking out for what he can get out of them! A preacher who knows the names of the people in the church but does not know them personally is not really a shepherd even if he officially holds that office. The sheep will also know that while he is good at giving impressive sermons exhibiting his Bible knowledge and speaking skills, he is not really concerned about feeding them, leading them to still waters and protecting them from the wolves. He may even run off to more lucrative sheepfolds or run away when he sees a wolf coming.

The apostle Paul had many roles as teacher, prophet, shepherd, evangelist, etc. His pastor's heart can be seen from the fact that he was always thinking of what he could do to benefit the people he reached, and that he never held back anything that could help them (Ac.20:26,27). Contrast this with those who watch the politics in the church and play according to its wind! When discipline is what is required and they play 'peace', God will hold them responsible for the blood on their hands (Ez.34:2). When correction might result in less offerings or numbers, where can God find shepherds who would stand faithful to their calling?

On the other hand, things are turning out these days in such a way, that many who appear to be true sheep in God's fold are only there for fun and games and not for salvation for which God has paid the ultimate price. As long as there is good music and also there are social opportunities, they are not worried too much about the food that the shepherd offers. This results in a comfortable place for the shepherd and the sheep where everything is pleasant and enjoyable.

If the shepherd does not realise that a lot of sheep in the fold have just wandered in or come because of biological increase, and notice that many of them do not even know the Chief Shepherd, he will find out soon when problems develop and fences get broken, sheep scatter or wolves come in.

True shepherds have a direct calling from the Master and for them it is not a profession for making their livelihood where they will produce sermons, conduct weddings and funerals, say professional prayers for whoever wants them, etc. They see it as a responsibility that the Master has entrusted to them. They carry a burden for the sheep in their hearts and constantly seek God for help and direction. Many times God gets disappointed ([Ez.22:30](#)).

### **#933 Elephants never forget?**

Some say that elephants have a long memory, quoting incidents when they have taken revenge on those who hurt them years ago! On the other hand, they say pet dogs come back wagging their tails even to masters who have spanked them. Let's examine ourselves and see if we have any of this elephant nature in us.

Many Christians seem to so take forgiveness for granted that, except perhaps on Good Friday, they don't think about what

it cost God. This is because the Gospel has been presented to them as a free offer from God by which they can receive everything good from God in return for their accepting Jesus as their Saviour. Some even imagine that poor Jesus is waiting outside the door, pleading with them to let Him in!

No one has pointed out to them the seriousness of every single sin they have committed, but 'evangelists' have instead hidden the hideous picture of the everlasting torment waiting for them in hell, seeking to use pleasant and acceptable language so as not to cause any distress to their hearers. As a result, any time these people hear about sins they may have committed, they come out with their ubiquitous shield, "Judge not!"

Only those who realise the agony of pain and death that Jesus had to undergo in order to purchase their forgiveness can learn to truly forgive others. They realise that they can no longer argue, "They don't deserve to be forgiven!" when they have been given forgiveness as a gift of grace, as a totally undeserved favour from God (1Pe.1:18,19). As they grow in their closeness to the Lord, they become quicker and quicker in forgiving others and overlooking a lot (Co.3:13).

If we find ourselves not growing in this direction, it is crucial for us to examine how we started with the Lord, whether there was a serious recognition of our own sins and inherent sinfulness, whether we genuinely repented and received forgiveness with gratitude. If the starting point itself was wrong, obviously we can't be now in the place where we ought to be.

It is one thing if we have experienced serious wrong from someone for which we are suffering even now. God understands our struggle, wanting to forgive but finding ourselves unable. He can teach and strengthen us when we go to Him for help. But this is very different from being unable

to talk to someone for days afterwards, who "didn't greet me when he passed me on the other side of the road." Doesn't it occur to you that perhaps he was preoccupied with his own thoughts and didn't even see you?

Of course, we cannot always forget incidents that have happened. The more we try to, the stronger we establish that in our memory. But to forgive someone is to let go and not to hold it against him afterwards. The thing that helps us to do that is to remember how the Lord has been towards us, quick to forgive, and even blessing us in the place of the curses we deserve. Remember how we may lose forgiveness ourselves if we don't forgive others (Mt.18:32-35).

### **#934 Where the Bible is silent**

When theologians say that the Bible is sufficient, they do not mean that it contains all the information we need. But it is sufficient when it comes to the revelation from God for our salvation. Another practical implication we need to be aware of is that the Bible has been written in such a way that we wish it had been more elaborate about many things. Scientific texts focus on precision and legal documents seek to cover all possibilities. But the Bible has not been written that way. It tells us important things clearly or in ways that can be surmised when we put the information from all the parts of the Bible together. But at the same time, we have to recognise and admit that there are many things on which it is silent or incomplete.

When different Christians dispute with one another about the interpretation of certain passages, a common danger is that they start speculating about what is not clearly written. They begin to bring in their imaginations (which are influenced by which denomination they grew up in, which Bible college they

were in, their own personal experience, etc.). They may not even recognise the possibility of these diverse influences for different people and how each one perceives things. As a result they find themselves unable to come to any consensus on many subjects, and even part from one another and form new groups!

Why can't we recognise the limits of what God has chosen to reveal to us and protect ourselves from being dogmatic about other matters (De.29:29)? We can't help having our own opinions and feeling convinced about them from our side. But should we not also be convinced in our mind that there could be many things that we are not even aware of, or that we may have our own biases or prejudices when we look at different things, and then be cautious about asserting our views? Can't we hold some of these views in a tentative fashion instead of being adamant about them?

At the same time, we must remember that spiritual things can only be understood by spiritually minded people (1Co.2:14). If we use our natural intellectual abilities and rely on our own experiences, we can end up far outside of the truth. Another warning Jesus gives us is that only those who are keen to obey in practice what God reveals to them can have their spiritual eyes opened by God to see spiritual truths (Jn.7:17).

A major problem that comes about during arguments is that in the process of presenting what we imagine to be the right interpretation of subjects, we may even negate what is clearly written in the Bible. People bring in obscure meanings of the Hebrew and Greek words or still more obscure references from ancient history, not realising that using such things they are actually trying to circumvent what is clearly revealed in scripture. They forget one of the cardinal rules of biblical interpretation that less clear words in the Bible must only be interpreted in line with words that are already clear.



## #935 Our choice matters

One of the most serious deceptions believed by Christians is where they think that Jesus will do everything for them. Our inability to save ourselves, and God's plan to save us through unmerited favour towards us and not through anything we can do, have been emphasised so much that believers imagine they should not be doing anything from their side concerning salvation. They attend church, read the Bible and pray, but that is the extent to which they are willing to take responsibility.

We need to understand that the choice Eve made in the Garden was not merely an act of disobedience to God, but a choice she made to have knowledge within herself of what was good or evil, and to become, on that point, independent like God (Ge.3:5,6). Now that we human beings are all fallen creatures with a sinful nature, God wants to reverse what happened, by offering us a choice again – whether we will choose to go back to God, and submit to Him at all points in our life. The first thing happens when we realise our sinfulness, recognise the sins we have done, repent and place our trust in Jesus as our Saviour. But the second thing needs to happen after we have been accepted by God and been made children of God, when we choose daily to follow Jesus (Lk.9:23). This is how we progressively bring our life under the lordship of God, and become transformed into His character, in the process called sanctification.

The majority of believers preach and teach the first part. But then the mistake is to assume that God will complete His work of sanctification He has started in us, without any cooperation from our side, based on a misunderstanding of several verses. People just love that kind of preaching, where the emphasis is on the finished work on the cross and various

promises. But take a simple test. Have we fully become like Jesus in the years we have known Him as our Saviour? Have we never backslidden or become lukewarm in our love for Him? If sanctification was entirely God's work, is this the best He could do?

The fact is that God works His will in us only if we cooperate. He works in us showing us from His word the path we have to follow, placing before our view the consequences of walking on the narrow or broad paths. Then come the situations in our daily life where we have to choose between pleasing ourselves or denying ourselves in order to please God. Our choice determines the result. We can ask for forgiveness when we fail, and ask for more grace (help), but finally it is still the choices we make in the time of temptation that decide whether we are going to be sanctified or hardened.

In spite of the many warnings in the Bible concerning this, preachers prefer to talk only about the pleasant things God is going to do, thereby leaving a huge gap in the understanding of the people. But once we realise that we, not God, are responsible for the lacks in our life, we will seek Him for help in the right way, to make the right choices.

### **#936 The Holy Spirit and the world**

Jesus said that the world did not know the Holy Spirit ([Jn.14:17](#)). The Holy Spirit is holy, and He is also the Spirit of truth, neither of which the world is interested in. As we watch, the world is moving farther and farther away from holiness and truth. People run after pleasure of all types and do not seem to care what boundaries God has laid down. In the comparatively recent past, we have seen almost an absolute decay of moral values where sins which everyone considered as gross are being practised openly as normal.

God's values which everyone used to recognise in their conscience are even being blamed for generating hatred and divisions among people.

The pressure on us, those who know God because of His grace towards us, is increasing, to make us compromise. We are being pushed towards accepting the new norms of society or at least keeping our silence and offering no resistance. Many Christians and even some denominations have accepted the new norms, thinking that they are being progressive in their thinking and moving with the times, and not holding on to archaic ideas that are no longer relevant to the modern world.

Will we remain with the 'Holy' Spirit and stick with His truth? It is becoming increasingly difficult to do so. But we can't say we haven't been warned ([2Ti.3:1-5](#)). Let's read this passage and understand God's desire for His children to remain close to Him, and thus safe from being carried off with the flood of immorality and falsehood.

In the guise of an angel of light, Satan is parading through the streets of the media, proclaiming tolerance, acceptance and graciousness, even while peddling lies calling them truth. This attack begins in our mind and finds an entrance because we certainly don't want to be bigoted, narrow-minded or to hate anyone. The 'virtues' Satan calls us to are attractive to us as Christians because they appear to be a part of Christ's nature. But the poison is hidden in asking us to give up certain parts of God's truths in order for us to show those virtues. This should expose Satan's tactics to us.

Something that has been slowly making Christians vulnerable towards this attack on the truth is their unfamiliarity with the Bible and the truth God has revealed there. As the pace of life has gone up, people have begun to satisfy themselves with the titbits they receive from the pulpit once a week. If we don't

know the truth ourselves, we will naturally find it difficult to discern when falsehood is presented to us. We can't leave that discernment to the leaders.

Let us get back to the Bible, each of us, personally, spend time with it, listening to God speaking to us, and reordering our lives whenever we find a discrepancy with us. The Bible is actually more accessible for us than ever before, if only we want it. Let's rebuild our spiritual temple and walls and get back to God to worship Him in truth, and offering ourselves as living sacrifices to Him (Ro.12:1).

### #937 Jesus in our context

When the 'rich young ruler' asked Jesus how he could obtain eternal life, Jesus told him to keep the commandments (Mt.19:16,17). Yet, when some other people asked Him how they could do the works of God, His reply was to believe in Him (Jn.6:28,29). To clear up the suspicion that Jesus was contradicting Himself, what we need is to understand the context. For example, in the first case, the young man had a rather self-righteous attitude, and Jesus wanted him to really try to keep all the commandments and finally come to an end of himself. Only then would he recognise the need for a Saviour. In the second case, these people were following Jesus because they wanted to benefit from His miracles, and they wanted to know what they should do in order to get that benefit (vv.26,27). Wouldn't it be a great mistake if we don't recognise these two different contexts, but we try to take up one word or the other, saying that they were the spoken words of Jesus?

God is so huge, with diverse aspects to His nature, and He shows the particular aspect that fits the context. "With the kind You show Yourself kind; With the blameless You show

Yourself blameless; With the pure You show Yourself pure,  
And with the crooked You show Yourself astute"  
(Ps.18:25,26). The more we know about God's dealings with  
different people, the better we can know about God's  
character. But then, we can't take a position that what He  
spoke to or did for someone is directly applicable for us!

This is the danger of second-hand knowledge of God. For  
example, a certain man may have seen himself as a wretched,  
hopeless sinner before the Lord, and overflowed with gratitude  
and joy when he learnt that God had accepted him through  
unmerited favour. Then he sings, "Amazing grace!" Now  
another man also likes that song because he realises that God  
cannot accept him as he is, and so he is grateful for grace!  
However, in this case, there is no deep conviction of sin or  
true repentance. It is sad if he assumes that he is on the  
same level as the first man just because they are both singing  
the same song about grace!

It is a great privilege God offers to all people that we can have  
a personal relationship with Him. One example we can think  
of is Abraham who became a friend of God, possibly by  
walking before God (Ge.17:1). If we bring every part of our life  
open to the eyes of God, and judge and cleanse ourselves as  
He shows us more and more of the things of our sinful nature  
which we were not aware of before, we can then have a clearer  
picture of what God thinks about us. That will help us to  
relate to God and to people in a more realistic manner. In our  
reading of the Bible as well as in listening to messages, this  
knowledge of what God really thinks about us can help us to  
discern what applies to us and what not.

How we actually live matters, because that is a true reflection  
of our actual relationship with God. Let us not live in an  
imaginary world of doctrines.

## #938 Responding to revelation

What do we think of when we hear the word revelation? About the Holy Spirit showing us some hidden truths in the word of God, perhaps concerning the future? But there is another very common way in which God reveals Himself to us many times during our days, which we may even fail to see! God who is Truth in person, wants to set us free from the falsehood that is in us and which we have nourished for years in our life, and He reveals this truth about us to us a little at a time. What He wants from us when we see what we are really like, as He shows us the sinful ways in which we have been living till then, is that we should acknowledge our reality and ask Him to change us to become like Him. That kind of response to the truth will result in our sanctification and the transformation into the character of Jesus.

In different situations of life we may see how selfish we were, how we were only thinking about what we could gain instead of how we could serve someone, how we tried to impress others with how good we were instead of being willing to see how short we came from doing what Jesus would have done, how difficult we found it even after many years of knowing God's forgiveness to forgive someone else, etc. Isn't that God revealing His truth to us? Instead of humbling ourselves before God, acknowledging our failures and seeking more grace from Him, do we justify ourselves before God, try frantically to pass the blame on to others, excuse our behaviour by downplaying its sinfulness and calling it our human weakness, etc.? If so, we can easily understand why we have been stagnant in our spiritual life even after years of knowing Christ, or even why we have been backsliding.

On the other hand, have we been congratulating ourselves because we have increased in our knowledge of Biblical facts

and figures or even that we are able to handle controversial subjects with other denominations? When we put things in this way, it should be simple enough for us to see where we have 'missed the bus' altogether and we have been comforting ourselves with false priorities!

"You will know the truth, and the truth will make you free" (Jn.8:32). What kind of truth have we been running after if it has not really set us free but only puffed us up?

Some preachers have given the impression to people that judging and examining ourselves before God will lead us to condemnation, discouragement, etc., because it is the negative way of legalism. No. Legalism is the attempt to find acceptance from God by keeping the law, but when we have been accepted as children of God as a gift of grace, our present desire to live in a way that is totally pleasing to God has nothing to do with legalism. But it comes from our love and gratitude to God, and leads us closer and closer to Him in the process of sanctification as we respond to the truth God reveals to us from day to day. Let's not allow the devil to deceive us here and keep us away from the truth.

## #939 The essentials of conversion

On one side, people think of conversion as a change of religion and the associated external practices. But true conversion, as the Bible describes, is a return to God from a life of sin through faith in Jesus. This starts as a supernatural transformation of one's heart by God in response to our faith, which then shows itself as a change of behaviour on the outside too.

There is such a lot of confusion on this subject. On one extreme, people make the process of conversion so simple as to assume they have become children of God by a matter of belief, when they have not. On the other extreme, others make it look so complicated and beyond the reach of ordinary people, almost making salvation look like something we have to earn! What I would like to do here is to describe the essential elements that are involved in a true conversion, so that we can examine ourselves to see if we lack something, and at the same time point out the simplicity of conversion that makes it available to anyone who sincerely wants it.

These are the essential characteristics of a true conversion from being a sinner to a relationship with God as His child. 1. A recognition of the holiness of God and the simultaneous realisation of our own sinfulness. 2. A realisation that as we are, we stand damned before God because of our sins. 3. A hope that comes when we hear the good news that by dying in our place, Jesus has made possible for God to forgive our sins. 4. A sincere cry from our heart to God to forgive our sins and to accept us as His children. 5. A strong desire that God gives us in our heart, to stop sinning and instead to obey God in everything.

We realise that very few of us came to God with all these factors fully in place at the start itself. Perhaps we were drawn to Jesus for healing or to be delivered from some practical problems. But the point is that after we came to Jesus some way or another in the beginning, we were able to get to know Him more and more through His word, and finally we have come to understand and experience all of these factors. Our prayer of repentance as a sinner or asking Jesus to be our Saviour may not have covered all these subjects but may have been the first step in this direction, but can we now see all these factors in our life?

This is the point. If our assurance of salvation is merely based on a past date or event, and we have not grown to experience all these different aspects in our relationship with God, there is something seriously lacking. We need to make the effort to understand what these mean in practice, and if we find gaps in any area, we ought to get back to God in honesty and sincerity and set those things right.

Spiritual conversion is the result of the work of the Holy Spirit in our life and our proper response towards it. The whole goal of God in salvation is to take us back to Him to the original relationship He had intended for man. Is this true in our experience (Ro.13:11)?

### **#940 Looking for religious solutions**

If a teenager shows a rebellious streak, what can parents do? Some parents try to become stricter with him, withdrawing some privileges, and some others try to give in to his demands out of fear. Both are attempts to deal with what they see as *his* problem. What they many times fail to see is their own part in the problem, how they neglected correcting him or had been unduly strict when he was small (Pr.29:15). When they

see it as his problem, they try to take him for counselling. Another way many Christians try to deal with the situation is to go to God.

Some spend a lot of time praying for their son that somehow God should miraculously change his mind and suddenly he would become good. Some fast. Some make vows to God promising Him something sacrificial if only He would resolve the situation. This is a religious way of seeking a solution.

Of course, God is the one we should immediately turn to when there are problems we cannot handle, whether it is a rebellious teenager or anything else. But what goes on many times when people think they are turning to God is that they are seeking a miraculous intervention from Him without seeking His counsel. We ourselves may be a part of the problem, and our own past mistakes may have contributed to it if not caused it directly. Perhaps there are things we need to change first from our side before God can work His part.

Using again the above example, perhaps the parents should recognise that their teenager is no longer a child whom they can command around, but a budding adult they have to learn to deal with increasingly as with an equal. It is foolish to ignore this reality and blindly quote that children should obey their parents! So, there may be a lot the parents have to repent about, and a lot they have to change now. If they avoid these altogether and expect God or counsellors to change their son, they are going to find it does not work.

Seeking a religious solution gives us a feeling that we are acknowledging God, bringing Him into our situation and admitting our helplessness apart from Him, which are all good things normally. These are common lessons we hear in the church. But if we are also avoiding in the process our own responsibility in the matter, how we may have contributed to it and how we may need to repent and change now, that

would be like 'passing the buck' and holding God responsible. Let us be honest and realise that God is not the one who has caused our mess, but everybody else who is involved. Isn't what we need to do first is to recognise whatever part we have had in the situation, humble ourselves before God (and others) and ask God for help for us to change? Then we can also ask for help with the rest of the situation.

One part of our sinfulness is to try our best to avoid looking at our mistakes, faults, sins. We even blame God when things go wrong, and of course, all the others around us. That is not going to bring us salvation.

## #941 What we consider as virtue

One man says he doesn't want any conflict, and that at the first appearance of one, he walks away! Another man will stand there and make sure that the other person gets to know what is wrong with him! The problem with the first man is that he is not contributing anything to resolving the conflict, and the second man doesn't realise that the way he does it is only fanning up the fire! One man takes pride saying that he is a man of few words, not realising that he is also silent even where he should be speaking, and another man says it is necessary to tell others what we think, and so he expresses his opinions without restraint! He doesn't seem to be bothered about the storms he creates by speaking out where he should have been quiet. All these people think they are right in what they do, and convinced that there is a good reason behind what they do.

This shows us that just because we think we are right, it doesn't necessarily mean that we are fully right. From the above examples, we can see that many times we think only about certain factors that are involved, and not all of them. It hasn't even occurred to us that there are other factors we haven't considered at all! Our ignorance is causing a lot of problems, but we think we have done the right thing!

At the first level, we have to reckon with the fact that even when what we do is outwardly right, there could be things wrong with our motives (Pr.21:2). But in examples like the above, our motives are right, but still our actions are far from being perfect. One way to notice this is to observe that the final outcome is not what we expected. We may blame the others for that, but don't we need to learn that we too ought to grow in understanding and become rounded off in different directions?

This also works in another way, "The first to plead his case seems right, Until another comes and examines him" (Pr.18:17). Unless we are very aware of this danger, this could affect us when we are trying to counsel or mediate between two people. The problem is that when one person tells us the story, he naturally enhances his good points, downplays his wrong, and exaggerates the other person's faults, and when we listen to the other person, we may even get a totally different picture!

All of us are broken in many ways because we have sinned, and we live in a broken world. This has affected how much we know, how biased we are, the prejudices we carry, the twists in our personality, etc. We can't become perfect just by being born again, but we have to grow towards perfection. How important it is to be humble, and acknowledge to ourselves our limitations in every direction, and keep learning at all times! The world wants us to build up our self-confidence, and when we deal with others, give off an impression of perfection. But, instead, as Christians, let us give up our confidence in ourselves and lean more and more on God, willing to be corrected and then also to learn.

## #942 Exaggerating the work of God

The greatest favour that God has shown us is to offer us salvation, when what we really deserve for our sins is fiery judgment. We cannot earn this salvation, no matter what religious rites we go through or however many good things we do. Salvation by grace is completely counter-intuitive to us because it is natural for us to think that since we get what we deserve, somehow we have to earn our way into heaven. But what happens then is, once the idea of grace gets accepted in our thinking, the Devil tries to hype it up, taking it to extreme ideas, and many preachers and listeners have fallen for this deception.

One false concept that is presented to us is that, since salvation is by grace and not by anything we do, therefore there is nothing we *need to do* from our side (Ep.2:8,9). Acknowledgement of our sins, confession and repentance all get thrown out as 'works'. We are told that we have to only believe in what Jesus has done on the cross, and count everything as having been already given to us by grace. Since Jesus has died once for all for all our sins, some preachers say that if we sin in the future, we don't have to confess it but believe that it was forgiven on the cross. Some extreme ones preach that even suggesting that we must receive this salvation by faith is wrong, because salvation is entirely a work of God. But faith is not a work, but a response to God's gracious offer.

Things are really simple to understand, if only we would think about it. It is an irrefutable fact that we have sinned, and we deserve judgment for it. Now in God's grace, He has taken our punishment on Himself (through His Son), and now that the righteous requirement of the law has been met, He is in a position to grant forgiveness and all other things associated

with salvation to anyone who wants it. For us to want it, we must first realise we are sinners and we need salvation. That is when the fact that Jesus has taken our punishment and that God wants to forgive us and accept us as His children looks attractive to us. Once this good news grips our mind, it is only natural that we desire strongly to stop sinning in future. In this way, repentance is a part of putting our faith in Christ. (Can He forgive anyone who intends to go on sinning? **Ps.130:4**) When we go to God with this faith, He washes us clean with the blood of Jesus, adopts us as His children, and gives us the Holy Spirit to dwell in us to help us to walk in His ways.

All this is missing if someone only follows some mechanical steps or repeats a prayer without really meaning it. Then he is not born again, he does not have the Holy Spirit in him, and his life shows no transformation. What a grand deception!

It also happens to those who have been truly born again, that if they believe God will do everything for them and they do not take up their cross daily, deny themselves and follow Jesus, sanctification will not work for them. God works in us and we respond.

## #943 Decent sinners

Comparatively few people have done sins like murder or adultery. A large number of the others consider themselves as being fairly decent. They will not say they are without sin, but they think that there is nothing seriously bad about them, because if you have to call them sinners, then everybody will be sinners! But that is exactly what God says, "There is none righteous, not even one; There is none who understands, There is none who seeks for God" (Ro.3:10,11).

In the essence of sin, there is a choice we make to please ourselves rather than God. For example, these decent looking sinners may choose to tell a lie and escape when they are caught in a delicate situation. They may think this is an everyday affair that people don't even think about twice! But we can see that they were at the same time choosing to disregard God and His ways. That is sin. Looking at it this way, no one can escape conviction, including the pious looking religious people as well as the out and out sinners.

As long as we imagine that we don't really need any salvation because we are not that kind of sinners, the harsh answer from Jesus is that they will be excluded from His salvation (Mk.2:17). It is when the Holy Spirit's conviction cuts into our heart that we become aware of our need for salvation, and when we realise we cannot save ourselves, we look for a Saviour (Ac.2:37).

Friends and relatives who have gone through this conviction and experienced salvation from Jesus are usually very keen that the people they know should also be saved. But many times they come across a block from the others that says they are alright and they don't need any salvation. It is our duty

and privilege to share the Gospel, but we can't force them to understand and respond.

So there are many people sitting in churches thinking of themselves as decent people, acceptable to most people, and therefore they assume, to God too. Preaching is needed to expose the fact that in God's eyes, He sees hatred as murder, and looking at women with desire as adultery (Mt.5:21,22,27,28). God thought that the small lie that Ananias and Sapphira said was serious enough to deserve death (Ac.5:1-10). Then we will all become convicted in our hearts that we stand as sinners before God.

While churches think of sharing the Gospel with those in faraway places where people have never heard it, sometimes we forget that there are people sitting right in our midst who have not heard it in the right way so as to convict them, even though they have listened many times to what looks like the Gospel, but without the required effect. We who have experienced the truth that has and is setting us free have an obligation to share it with the others.

Such preaching will make us unpopular among those who do not want to look at the possibility that they may not be saved, but assume that 'it is well with my soul'. But we are bound to share it because if we didn't, it will bring guilt upon us.

## #944 Dangerous deconstruction

I was listening to a young woman who grew up with a strong, Christian trust in God, describing how she left that faith. Those who believe that she must not have been a true Christian to begin with have only to look around to see many who have fallen away. She said that this process began with theology professors teaching her to do critical thinking (deconstruction) concerning everything that she believed. Later on, when she could not figure out certain adverse situations that she faced, she decided that the Christian faith did not have all the answers. Then she chose to be 'true to her self' and taught herself to rely on what was meaningful to her. The result was that she gave up her faith.

This was sad to listen to, because I knew there were answers to the questions she was facing, but she did not seek the right people to get those answers. Rather, she trusted her own understanding and insight and considered them to be sufficient to help her to make her life choices. On the other hand, God's word tells us, "Trust in the LORD with all your heart And do not lean on your own understanding" (Pr.3:5). Her limited knowledge and ability restricted her from getting the answers that were yet beyond her. If only she realised that her own limitations should draw her beyond herself to God, she could have been safe. God has His teachers, apologists, counsellors, etc., to help us in such situations.

Deconstruction is good to a point. It helps us to ask questions and get clear about what we believe. It is especially helpful when we have to deal with all kinds of faiths and doctrines that are all around us. But then we must have a foundation on which we can stand, without which we are going to be totally unstable. Think of the scientists who are trying to discover the origin of the universe. When they make an

assumption that their understanding must be only based on natural facts, and thus leave God out of the picture, their conclusions become very unstable – any theory they find gets disproved and they keep looking for another without reaching any certainty. If, instead, they directed their efforts to understand the things God has created, they could have been more successful.

If we can accept the fact that we are created beings with many limitations who cannot ever fully find explanations for everything, we can also learn to leave what we cannot understand, to God. We also accept that God has also not chosen to reveal in the Bible all the answers we are looking for. Then, instead of assuming that if we cannot get the answer to some questions, we cannot believe the Bible itself, and going further and giving up on God Himself, shall we not humble ourselves and start by believing what the Bible *has actually revealed*? That is enough to introduce us to God the Creator and Jesus the Saviour. If we allow that knowledge to become our foundation, we can look for further answers. Even if we don't get answers, we can still cling to God!

### **#945 When a brother sins**

When a brother sins, do we ever consider the possibility that he may not have sinned at all, but we are imagining it? Lots of times, that is a possibility, but in our thoughts we are almost sure he has done wrong. Jesus has given us two suggestions for us in such situations, to go and talk to him in private ([Mt.18:15](#)), and if the sin is real, to rebuke him ([Lk.17:3](#)). Jesus also gave us an example to just forgive people and move on ([Lk.23:34](#)). But we may be scared of confronting him because of how he might react, and instead of forgiving him or bearing with him ([Co.3:13](#)), we may judge him in our heart. When this happens, the chances are that our imaginations

spring up and feed us with many memories of what he has done in the past and paint him as a villain. If this goes on, it will be just a short time before we start talking about him to others.

All this time, this brother may not have sinned in the way we are imagining! Perhaps we have misunderstood him. We may not know him well, communications may have been poor between us, we may have extrapolated our previous experiences with someone else on him and come to wrong conclusions, etc. But essentially, we have not taken the trouble to listen to his story or given him any chance to explain himself.

Of course, we cannot be going around to people to clarify every little offence, because that would take away a lot of our time. Most of the time, it may be some small issue which is best to ignore and move on. But we are thinking here specially about issues that have developed that are causing us tension or anguish that will not just go away. Then is it not better to talk things over and clear up the matter?

On another occasion, Jesus told us to go and set things right with an offended brother, before we can offer 'sacrifices' (Mt.5:23,24). The implication is that we have done something wrong to someone because of which they are offended with us. We need to set that right before we can proceed with a clear conscience. On the other hand, if we have not really done anything wrong from our side, but another person is offended with us because of their imagination, there can be practical limitations on how much we can do. In some cases, especially if we have to deal with that person regularly, it is good to make an attempt to clarify things and make for peace. But there are others we know who are not interested in peace even if we offered it to them, and in such cases we may have to leave them aside and move on. God realises that it may not be possible for us to have peace between us and all people. He

wants us to seek peace only to the extent it will be possible for us (Ro.12:18). At least we can be at peace towards them.

Isn't this an idea where we have to grow in practical wisdom all our life, because we keep coming across different people and situations? Let us ask God to lead us in the path of wisdom, peace and love, with all people, or at least from our heart and mind?

## #946 The law of the Spirit of life

Before we were born again, we lived according to our 'old self' which was corrupted by sinful lusts, easily yielding to the temptations that came by, in order to enjoy the pleasures they offered. But when we heard the Gospel and saw ourselves as sinners in the sight of God, we repented from our sins and received Jesus as our Saviour. Then God did a miracle by giving us a new heart and spirit that did not want to sin, but wanted to be pleasing to Him (Ez.36:26,27). Now that we have received the 'new self', we are expected to put the old self aside and be led by the Spirit (Ep.4:22,23).

We could wish that once we are born again, the Holy Spirit would take over the control of our life, we would not be even tempted to sin, but we would be transformed to become like Jesus automatically. Certain verses seem to give us that kind of ideas. "For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death" (Ro.8:2). "However, you are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God dwells in you" (v.9). But then there are other verses. "for if you are living according to the flesh, you must die; but if by the Spirit you are putting to death the deeds of the body, you will live" (v.13). "Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its lusts, and do not go on presenting the members of your body to sin as instruments of unrighteousness; but present yourselves to God as those alive from the dead, and your members as instruments of righteousness to God. For sin shall not be master over you, for you are not under law but under grace" (6:12-14).

What it means for the Spirit of life to have set us free from the law of sin is not that we no longer have any problem with sin. But He has given us a new heart and spirit that is set against sin; we no longer want to sin, whereas our old man wanted to

enjoy the pleasures of sin. Armed with this new mind, whenever we are tempted, we choose not to yield the members of our body to sinful desires, and we decide, instead, to yield to the Spirit and do His will. If we won't deliberately make this choice, we cannot be disciples of Jesus nor become like Him (Lk.9:23).

One mistake which many believers commonly make is to look at sin only as external acts such as the ones given in the Ten Commandments. They are satisfied when they keep that standard, and are not aware how sinful desires control their thoughts, attitudes or motives and defile them in the sight of God. They consider themselves as being good Christians. But as long as we do not allow the Holy Spirit to lead us in our inner life, we cannot be transformed to become like Jesus.

Others think of being led by the Spirit only in terms of ministry. We must allow Him to lead us, rather than make our own plans. But not seeking to be increasingly set free from sinning by allowing the Holy Spirit to work inside us will cause us to miss out on sanctification.

## #947 Will God heal?

This is a question that comes up in our mind when we ourselves are sick or someone else is sick. We know God can heal supernaturally because God is almighty, and also from the examples in the Bible. So, the question, whether God will heal, is different from the other one, can He heal? Once we are convinced in our mind about God's ability to heal, that cannot automatically lead to thinking that therefore He will. The factor that becomes crucial here is what God's will is in this particular case.

Many assume that God's will is always healing because of various reasons. The most common reason given out in this context is "By His stripes we are healed" (Is.53:5). But the full verse says, "But He was pierced through for our transgressions, He was crushed for our iniquities; The chastening for our well-being fell upon Him, And by His scourging we are healed." The next verse says, "All of us like sheep have gone astray, Each of us has turned to his own way; But the LORD has caused the iniquity of us all To fall on Him." The whole context of the chapter is spiritual healing which the Messiah would bring, and it is somewhat strange to take out a part of one individual sentence there to refer to physical healing. Another verse is, "Bless the LORD, O my soul, And forget none of His benefits; Who pardons all your iniquities, Who heals all your diseases" (Ps.103:2,3). Is not the meaning here to say that it is the Lord who heals our diseases, rather than to say He always heals all our diseases? Still another way healing is automatically expected is based on Jesus telling a leper that His will was to heal him (Mt.8:2,3). Can we afford to take this one case and generally apply it to all cases?

In other words, there is no clear promise from God that He will heal every single disease that we, His children, come across. On the other hand, there are many examples in the New Testament where God's people did not get healed. In the present time, there are cases of miraculous healing in answer to prayer, but there are also cases of sickness leading to death. So, how can we answer this question, "Will God heal?"

We pray for healing because we know our Father can heal, and also that He loves us. But can we be sure we will be healed? Let us look at one case. When Jesus heard that Lazarus was sick, one thing He said was that the end of that sickness was not death (Jn. 11:4). If we hear such a promise from God in a particular situation, then we can have the assurance that the sickness would be healed. That assurance is the mark of this special faith God has given us (He. 11:1). But if we don't hear it from God, we can't have that faith (Ro. 10:17). Then, however much we try to convince ourselves that we will be healed, we can't have that assurance. It is then good to honestly admit we don't know!

If we don't make this distinction, we may follow or give a false hope, and some people may even avoid the medical treatment that could have helped them.

## #948 Is our heart in our ministry?

"Now if any man builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw, each man's work will become evident; for the day will show it because it is to be revealed with fire, and the fire itself will test the quality of each man's work" (1Co.3:12,13). The quality of the spiritual work we do will be found one day when the Lord tests it. Paul is saying that different people can appear to be doing a lot of ministry, but the value of the ministry is not all the same when the Lord evaluates it. Paul compares our work with the use of expensive or cheap material in the construction of a building. When we see ourselves on that day, looking back on our life, will we have regrets? Remember, no matter how we wish we had done things differently, at that time it will be too late to change anything.

Take the example of worship about which Jesus has said that the only worship acceptable to God is what is given in spirit and truth (Jn.4:23). Isn't it possible to appear to worship from the posture we take, raising our hands, the way we sing and sway, etc.? But Jesus looks for truth – where we are thinking of and meaning what we sing, and our heart is absorbed with admiration and gratitude to the Lord. External forms can be very deceptive because they give us the feeling that we are doing everything right, but the Lord who looks at the heart may find emptiness. It is possible to interpret 'spirit' in this verse as the Holy Spirit, and then it would mean for us to be led by Him. But it is also possible to understand it to mean our spirit, and then Jesus would be emphasising the need to be 'real' by saying 'in spirit and truth'. In simple words, if our heart is not in what we do, but we are carrying out the right form of things, it is a deception.

Imagine if this reality is missing from our ministry, whatever ministry we are doing, and it has become all a matter of the form. Then we would be deceiving ourselves if we thought that we were serving God. We cannot serve God unless we do it in spirit and truth.

Another aspect of our ministry God is going to examine is our motive (1Co.4:5). Ministry means to serve, God and His people. But if our secret goal was to gain something for ourselves, whether it is money, name or power, we have not really been serving God, even if we appeared to do things sacrificially (1Co.13:2,3). If we were doing ministry for selfish gain, how foolish we would look when the Lord examines us!

We know we are not perfect, doing everything perfectly in spirit and truth all the time. That is a reality that should make us more careful to examine ourselves, and then to press on to perfection in every direction. Our humanness is not an excuse to continue with a mere form, but our awareness of it should compel us towards becoming more real and genuine. Everything we do and say must come from our heart (1Co.10:31). If we are leaders, this is what we must practice and also teach the people.

## **#949 Doctrines based on proof texts**

What do we think when we say God has inspired all scripture (2Ti.3:16,17)? We would be wrong if we thought that therefore every single word in the Bible can be taken literally or as stand-alone truths. Actually, the way the Bible is written, we need to put together all the different truths revealed in the different parts of the Bible in order to understand truth in its balance. For example, if we don't bring the fear of God side by side with the love of God, we will end up with a totally distorted view of God. When people take single verses or

passages out of the Bible to form their doctrines, they go into error.

Let us look at some of the common examples. Someone is impressed with God's desire that everyone should be saved (1Ti.2:3,4), and then conclude that therefore everyone will be ultimately saved. If such people just looked at the rest of the Bible, they would have seen the holiness, righteousness and justice of God which demand that sin must be punished, and realised that those who will not repent and believe in the Saviour will not be saved.

Those who are taken up with God's willingness to forgive and receive the vilest sinners (1Co.6:9-11), sometimes go on to imagine that no matter how they live, the grace of God will cover them. They forget that if they don't have a strong desire to stop sinning, it is possible that they have not even been born again (1Jn.3:9).

There are many who think that once they have been forgiven and accepted by God, they will never lose that relationship (Jn.10:28,29). But then they have to ignore the many warnings given in the epistles, such as He.3:12, for us to take care lest we fall away.

You get the idea. It is unfortunate that some churches get their identity from some such narrow doctrines, and imagine that it makes them unique. One church claims they are the only ones who celebrate Saturday as the sabbath, and another as those who wear white clothes, and yet another as not taking medicines, etc. Each one takes some verse or a few verses to prove their stand, but ignores the bigger picture of the truth that is revealed in the Bible. Each one is convinced that they are right, because they quote certain verses as the word of God, and they even consider anyone who tries to point out their error as an enemy of Christ.

It takes time and effort to study the Bible and understand its different truths in their right level of importance and in relation to all other truths. Not everyone goes to Bible schools, and not every church takes the time to teach theology systematically. Modern life is very much rushed, not allowing people to have time to sit down, read the Bible and study it for themselves. So it becomes easy to assume that the pastor has done the research and simply accept whatever he preaches.

But that is risky, and if we fear for our life, it becomes necessary for each one to search the Bible and learn its truths. Dangerous times call for serious action.

## #950 Do we have to get baptised?

There are some things we can learn from the story of Abraham's faith and circumcision. Do read Romans 4 slowly and understand the principle. No one is good or righteous enough to be accepted by God because His righteousness is perfect. We receive salvation as an unmerited gift from God through faith when God credits the righteousness of Jesus to us. It was that way for Abraham too. Then, circumcision was a sign of the covenant that God had entered into with Abraham.

Many people who have not understood the concept of grace seem to imagine that water baptism is a step they should go through in order to receive salvation, not realising that, like circumcision following Abraham's faith and God's acceptance, baptism is only to be a mark of having received salvation from God. For those who have not yet experienced salvation, baptism is meaningless, taking the form of a ritual. The symbolism behind baptism, of our old life being buried with Christ, and the 'resurrection' life which He gives us now, is totally irrelevant to those who have not experienced that (Ro.6:4).

Many others who think they have been 'baptised' as babies do not realise that it was done without their choice at all, and that at that time they had no knowledge of God or experience of salvation. Also, that ritual has no magical power to make people Christians.

Another sad thing that happens is that in many families of believing parents, it is expected that children need to get baptised as they come to a certain age. Many times the young people comply due to the pressure from parents and peers,

before they are really born again. Then they assume things are fine, but without the true experience.

Just as Abraham believed first and then got circumcised, it is faith that should come in our heart first. This faith is not just a mental acceptance of certain truths, but consisting of seeing ourselves as hopeless sinners before God, turning away from our life of sin to God, and putting our trust in Jesus as the One who provides this salvation to us through His death. Then God responds by forgiving our sins and giving us the seed of His life in our heart. It is when we have experienced this, that we can assure ourselves that we have begun to enjoy His salvation. It is then that we are fit to testify to our experience before others through baptism. The Bible teaches us that baptism is also a way of expressing our determination to live for God keeping a good conscience (1Pe.3:21).

In coming as our Forerunner, identifying with us and showing us an example, Jesus took the effort to get baptised in water. He was born of God, and He did not need to earn any salvation, but He did this to tell us that it is an important step for us to follow. He also made it a part of His Great Commission. It is not to be a speciality of certain denominations. Things are clear enough if only we would set aside traditions and men's arguments, and seek to obey God (Mt.28:19,20).

### **#951 Are we indeed dead to sin?**

"Are we to continue in sin so that grace may increase? May it never be! How shall we who died to sin still live in it?" (Rom.6:1,2). Those who have become dead *to* sin cannot have an inclination to continue in sin. On the contrary, now their desire is to stop sinning. They know that before they came to Christ they were dead *in* sin, and it was that recognition that

brought them to Jesus for salvation. So how can it be that they can still think that it is alright to continue in sin?

The most common reason is that they have not actually become dead to sin. Perhaps it was not the sin issue that brought them to Jesus, but a desire for some benefit such as healing. Such people have not really seen Jesus as their Saviour, but only as a Provider. Perhaps some just wanted to escape the punishment of sin in hell; they realised they were sinners deserving punishment, but they did not really turn away in their heart from sin. Becoming dead to sin or towards sin is to have a hatred for sinning in future, now that they have received forgiveness for their past sins. This is a distinguishing mark of a born again person.

It is not that a born again person may not fall into sin, because of ignorance or weakness. Perhaps the ignorance is because he has been taught that sin does not matter, because of an exaggerated interpretation of grace. But for a person who has truly experienced the new birth, in his heart he wants to stop sinning (1Jn.3:9). God's plan is also to save us from sinning, and not just from the penalty of sin (1Jn.2:1).

The gospel that many bring to people is not the one that Jesus came with. Even though Jesus did many things for people because of His compassion towards them, His real mission was to save us from our sins (Mt.1:21). In many cases, the preaching is aimed at adding more people to the list rather than bringing them to salvation. So the invitation is towards a Jesus who will provide all that you want, or it can even be to present the grace and love of God in such a way that it appears that sin does not matter any more. As a result, many people have been told by the preachers, and many assume on their own, that they have been born again. There are many ways by which it can be tested, by looking at our life. One sure component is to see if we have really become dead towards sin. If we can be honest with ourselves and

before God, the Holy Spirit can give us the answer, for getting an assurance of our salvation.

We should not get into a defensive position here, as if we were trying to fight an accusation against us. If we are honest, we can see where we stand, and then if we find ourselves lacking, we can take whatever steps we need to come to assurance. If we are scared to examine ourselves and face the possibility that we are not children of God as we imagined, consider the possibility that we may have to face that situation in eternity when we will not have any more opportunity to set things right.

## #952 Justice versus forgiveness

When someone hurts us, some of us who have a strong sense of justice instinctively feel a desire to retaliate. We think that what has been done to us is not right or fair, and we want to correct the other person, teach him a lesson or at least let him know that he did wrong. We may be right to think that we have been treated wrongly, and it may also be that what the other person needs is to learn a lesson so that he will not repeat his mistake.

But then we bring grace into the picture. That is what we want when we have done wrong. What we deserve is punishment, but still we go to God and ask for forgiveness. We know that God is in a position to legitimately do that, because our sins have been already punished through Jesus' death. God does not have to do anything unjust or unrighteous to forgive us because such requirements of His nature have been addressed on our behalf by Jesus. So, what we receive from God is totally from an unmerited favour He shows to us.

Now we come back to our subject about others hurting us. When we feel this sense of justice rising up within us and we feel it would be totally unrighteous if we let him go, what we need to remember is our own status as recipients of undeserved mercy from God. Can we then afford to assume a position of authority over the others as executors of justice? No! We lost that place when we asked God for forgiveness on the basis of grace. This is why, if we struggle to forgive others, God reminds us to think about how we received His mercy (Co.3:13).

But if we allow our sense of justice to overpower us and we refuse to forgive someone, Jesus warns us that God may be

forced to take back the forgiveness He once gave us. He said that while teaching about prayer in the sermon on the mount, as well as through the parable of the king and two servants. In the parable we see the case of a servant who was forgiven by the king, going ahead and refusing to forgive another servant. This made the king take back the forgiveness for the first servant which he had given earlier, and put him in prison. The final warning that Jesus gives us there is that the Father will respond in the same way to us if we refuse to forgive anyone (Mt.18).

When it comes to forgiving others, it becomes a test for us to see how much we have actually seen and experienced grace. Have we seen ourselves as those who totally deserve punishment, and have we seen God as One who graciously suffered in our place and gave us forgiveness freely? The first truth helps to so humble ourselves that we see that we have no right at all to judge others. The second truth causes us to worship God and surrender ourselves to Him in gratitude. These truths together prompt us to become faithful to God in every aspect of our life. It becomes possible for us to freely forgive others, and it become easier with time.

Our forgiving someone is personally good for us, but he remains subject to God and human authorities.

## #953 A wrong way to interpret the Bible

"Whoever believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God" (1Jn.5:1). Is this the inspired word of God? Yes, it is a part of the inspired word of God and we can believe it as such. But what we should not do is to take this as an independent, stand-alone statement of truth to mean what it appears to say, that all we need to do in order to be born again is to accept that Jesus is the Messiah. That would nullify what the Bible says in other places about being born again. Another verse that is quoted independently in the same manner is, "if you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved" (Ro.10:9).

If we take verses such as these to understand what we need to be saved, we will come very short of salvation. The whole Bible has been given to us to show us the way of salvation which God has prepared for us. It is when we read all of it that we understand what salvation is, and what we need to do to receive it. (Some people will stop me right there, telling me that salvation is a gift from God, and that I am teaching 'works'!)

First of all, salvation is primarily from our sins (Mt.1:21). The death of Jesus on the cross was for the punishment of our sins. We cannot earn this salvation with rituals, penance or good works, but God offers it as an unmerited, undeserved favour towards us. Not everyone receives this gift, even though it is offered to the whole world, except those who go to God in humility, acknowledging that what they deserve for their sins is judgment and showing gratitude for what Jesus has done for them. Since they realise that it was their sins that placed Jesus on the cross, they wish with all their heart that they could stop sinning. It is going to God with this

attitude that qualifies them to receive the gift of salvation. If someone just believes that Jesus is the Messiah whom God raised up and declare Him with the mouth as Lord, has he dealt with the subject of sin in his life at all? Has he gone to God as a sinner seeking salvation?

Those who go to God for salvation know that Jesus is the Messiah and that He died and rose from the dead. That is a part of their belief about Jesus. But does just knowing those facts bring anyone salvation? No!

There are several other examples where people take parts of the Bible and bring out doctrines, claiming that they are basing their teachings on the inspired word of God. However, by not seeing everything as merely parts of the big picture revealed in the Bible, and not seeking to see the big picture first before looking at the smaller parts, they go wrong. If somebody has not had the opportunity to go to a Bible school in order to get the big picture, at least should they not study the Bible themselves in order to make sure that what they preach is in line with the whole purpose of God? When we hear preaching, let us also examine it from the viewpoint of the whole Bible.

## #954 The greatest gift to the children

Anyone who has come to know Jesus as his Saviour and Lord will realise that his life before that was meaningless, empty and without a real future. But for the grace of God that opened his eyes to see the love of God and salvation from his sins, he knows that he was on the way of destruction. Now one of the desires that have sprung up in his heart is to tell others also about this good news of salvation. He now has a strong desire to bring his close family members to experience the new birth.

If he has seen things in this way, then it automatically follows that he is going to do the maximum he can to speak to his children about it and to lead them to repentance from their sins and faith in the Lord Jesus. Knowing how, as growing children, they are going to be faced with claims from other faiths, philosophies, pleasures, and activities that can draw their hearts away from the Saviour, he will use every opportunity to teach them from the Bible, explain to them the principles and laws of life, and to develop their own habits of Bible study, prayer and fellowship. This is exactly what God told the people of Israel to do, after revealing Himself to them and giving them the Law. He told them to take care of themselves (De.4:7-9). He also told them to pass on their knowledge and understanding to their children (De.6:5-9).

Sadly, the spirit of the times has influenced many Christians in this context, making them believe that they should not force their views on their children. A pernicious idea came from a psychologist in the middle of the 20th century saying that each child has a unique personality, and that what parents should do is to give them the freedom to develop without meddling from the parents. Those who believe this unconsciously believe another theory that every person is

good at his core and given the right ambience will grow up to his potential. Those who give such freedom to their children to make up their own mind concerning faith do not realise how dangerous the world is, how sinful every man is born as and how children do not have enough knowledge to be able to come to the right conclusions. God warns us saying that a child left to himself will go astray (Pr.29:15).

Many children growing up in Christian families know details of the movie, entertainment, books and the sports worlds than what the Bible says. Some of them may follow their parents in their religion, but it is unlikely that they learn to love God or to serve Him. Didn't Jesus say that if we try to serve two masters, we will end up choosing one over the other (Mt.6:24)?

If we have seen the Lord and fallen in love with Him, and also realised that this is the only God and Saviour, wouldn't we take steps to guide our children to Him? Or, have we been influenced by the idea that all religions ultimately lead to the same God? Take care. If we have seen the truth, let us do all we can to pass it on to others, especially our children.

## #955 Choices made in secret

When Lot was parting from Abraham, he chose the fertile lands near Sodom and Gomorrah, even though the people in those places were known to be wicked. But apparently he considered becoming wealthy important enough to take the risk of the negative influence the culture would have on his family. Finally he lost his wife and his two daughters went astray. When he faced the choice of the land, its impact on godliness did not come to his mind, or he might have convinced himself that they were two different compartments of life.

To walk before God, to be concerned about His truths and values, more than people's opinions around us, is required in order to become pleasing to God (Ge.17:1). This will imply becoming more and more separate from the world's opinions and values, and even what many Christians follow. We cannot serve God and something else at the same time. Many times we come to crossroads in our life, where we have to decide which direction we will follow. We are tempted to seek earthly gain and compromise towards God. The job we take, the one we marry, the locality where we stay, the church we want to join – don't they all have an impact on how close we will be to God? But it appears that many people do not connect such things with being faithful to God. It is not that I have never compromised, but I have learned from my failures more of the seriousness of the loss I have incurred, and to seek with greater earnestness not to compromise again.

Only God knows many of these choices we make, and most people may not even realise that we have made a compromise, and they may still regard us with respect. But we must know one thing. Nothing escapes God's notice. He not only sees what we have done, but also why we did it (1Sa.16:7). People

may admire what we do externally, but they may not know how we have moved away in our heart from God (Re.2:4). If we are clever, we can maintain an appearance of a great ministry, but it may be like substituting bronze shields in the place of the golden ones we used to have (1Ki.14:27). We are the losers.

One man leaves a responsibility God has given, and chooses 'greener pastures' in terms of money or position. One man who is called to be a preacher chooses subjects that tickle the minds of people rather than what they need to hear. Another man chooses not to speak about certain truths he has learned from God because he wants to be popular with a wider audience. One family moves to a rich country, arguing that they will have more money to give to missions. One church chooses to maintain its traditions rather than make changes as they learn more of God's ways, because they don't want to disturb things.

Choices may have long-lasting consequences. Sometimes we may be ignorant, but many times we know in our hearts what we are doing and why we want to do it. But then we try to convince ourselves and also others that we are following the will of God. But God looks at the heart.

## #956 God is not like us

If we look at the gods people have imagined about in the ancient times, we can see that they are physical extensions of what we already know on earth. But in order to attribute supernatural powers to these gods, people imagine them to have special physical features. This illustrates the fact that the God who created the universe is far beyond our understanding, and all human ideas will fall short. God is Spirit, without form, and it is blasphemous to represent Him through physical forms (De.4:15,16).

But there is something deeper we need to know. Even when we learn about the character of God from His revelation in the Bible, we have a tendency to interpret it according to our own experiences. For example, we have a tendency to favour our loved ones in a way that we are willing to overlook their faults or to even cover for them by speaking lies! We imagine that this is the way we show our love for them! But God is totally different from us here. He cannot tell lies in order to cover His children or to overlook their sins, even though He loves them so much. His love was such that He was willing to suffer in our place, but He cannot be unjust or unrighteous even for a moment to show us love.

God has to discipline us sometimes, even though it pains Him to do that, because He loves us and He does not want us to go astray but to get back to His ways (He.12:6). What do people do? They let their children go without discipline when they have done wrong, because they think they love them.

We find it difficult to understand this God because of our natural inclinations that have been corrupted with sin because of the Fall, and also because we imagine God is just like us in His character. Another example of this mistake is

when we excuse our anger by saying God also gets angry. But have we thought that His anger is of such a kind that there is no selfishness or sin in it?

Let us make this simple enough for us to understand. God has some 'soft' parts to His character, such as love, mercy, kindness, patience, etc., but He also has some 'tough' parts, such as holiness, righteousness, justice, impartiality, etc. All these aspects of His character work together simultaneously, and none of them can be compromised in order to exercise another aspect. When God shows us mercy, He cannot ignore His justice or righteousness at the same time. In order to be righteous in forgiving us, He had to see to it that our sins also got their punishment, which He did by taking it on Himself.

God recognises our tendency to think of Him by relating Him to our own experiences, and warns us specifically against it (Ps.50:18-21). We need to understand God and His ways by learning from what He has revealed to us through His word. There we find not only descriptions about God and His character, but also examples of how He dealt with different people and situations. We will find that we need to know God as being much more than love, and also to become like Him.

### **#957 Made for man**

Have you thought of these facts of nature that have made it possible for us human beings to live comfortably on earth? The earth is at a such a distance from the sun that if it was less or more, life could not have been sustained. The earth rotates giving us day and night, enabling us to work and rest. The axis of rotation of the earth is tilted in such a way that it produces the different seasons as we go around the sun once a year. Water evaporates from the sea, is taken by the wind as vapour to the land where it rains, flows down rivers and

returns to the sea. We breathe in oxygen and let out carbon dioxide, and leaves take it in and return oxygen. There are so many such factors that cannot be brushed aside as coincidences in a natural process of evolution. As the psalmist says, the heavens, and all the rest of the universe and especially the earth, point to the glory of God in His creation (Ps.19:1)!

Yet we have turned against this God and gone after our own pleasures. We did not acknowledge Him as God or give Him thanks. All these years after Adam, people have fought with one another and trampled others under them for their own gain. Immorality and violence are only increasing with time. For temporary advantages, people have neglected to think of the long term consequences of their mishandling of nature, and now we experience chaotic weather, and pollution of the air, water and food resulting in new diseases.

It is due to the love of God for human beings whom He has created in His own image that even when this image has been marred, He has prepared a way of salvation and restoration for us. This salvation is meant not only for forgiving our sins and giving us a relationship with Him as His children, but also for transforming us to His character (2Pe.1:3,4).

However, it can be observed easily that even after this offer of salvation at the cost of the death of His Son Jesus Christ, very few 'believers' are interested in it. Most want an escape from hell, and many others want God's blessings for a comfortable and enjoyable life on earth. People are willing to do the minimum necessary, such as repeating the sinner's prayer, for an assurance that everything will be fine afterwards.

Is this not because of the preaching of a minimal kind of gospel? Where is the preaching that will cause the hearers to be cut into their heart in remorse and fear of God? How many

who consider themselves as believers have actually seen themselves as hopeless sinners before the holy God and trembled? How many have turned around and decided to give up their sinful, self-centred lives and start living as living sacrifices for God? Does our gratitude towards the Saviour, who came searching for us lost ones, and did not give up when we showed hesitation, reluctance or backsliding, but kept loving us, warning, correcting, exhorting and encouraging us, motivate us to consider Him as the Pearl of greatest value, above everyone and everything else?

## #958 Until we come to zero

Jesus said that very few people would find the way to life (Mt.7:13,14). We can see that out of the many who hear the Gospel, very few have actually come to life. Many of those who think they have come to Jesus have not actually experienced His grace, because there are no real changes in their lives. One reason is that many of them have not seen themselves as sinners in the sight of God and repented. The reason for it is that the modern preaching of the Gospel has largely omitted addressing sin.

Our sinful nature delights in finding fault with others, and then when we compare ourselves with them, we feel good! We don't think we are as bad, and we even think that we are in fact better. We may think that God must be very happy with us because we are not like all the others (Lk.18:11). That is our undoing! Unfortunately for such people, Jesus came only for saving sinners and not for those who think they are not bad sinners (Mk.2:17). Actually, every single one of us is a sinner before the holy God, but only those who realise that in their heart seek a Saviour. Until we come to see that if Jesus had not come there would have been no hope for us, repent from our sinful way of life and turn to Jesus, we cannot be saved.

Another side of this matter is that most people, including born again Christians, have not come to realise that without God's help we cannot do anything worthwhile. Jesus, the Son of God who had never sinned at all, recognised that He could do nothing without God the Father (Jn.5:30). Of course, by ourselves we are able to do many things, sinful or natural, with the strength and abilities which God has given us. But can we do anything at all that is eternal, heavenly, spiritual, without God prompting us, guiding us and strengthening us?

Some of us have a lot of 'natural' skills and abilities, and we can seem to shine even in 'spiritual' ministry. We make up our grandiose plans for ministry without first waiting on God. But on the final day when everything is 'tried in fire' by the piercing eyes of the Lord, it may turn out that many ministries get burnt up (1Co.3:12,13). What God expects from worship – spirit and truth – is the same that He expects from us about everything that we do (Jn.4:23). All else is going to burn up.

Even when we don't realise this, God knows it. So, He keeps trying to bring us to zero regarding our self-righteousness and self-reliance. Think of how He dealt with Moses or Jacob, just to take two examples. When God does that with us, many times what we actually see is failure, things not going as we planned, blocking of plans we have made, etc. Instead of recognising what God is trying to teach us, do we allow ourselves to get discouraged or give up? Instead of giving up on God, can't we learn to give up on our own plans and understanding, and lean on God (Pr.3:5,6)? Then our failures will actually become stepping stones to lead us to a closer walk with God and allowing Him to lead us.

### **#959 Taking forgiveness for granted?**

"But do you suppose this, O man, when you pass judgment on those who practice such things and do the same yourself, that you will escape the judgment of God?" (Ro.2:3). Has this thought ever come to your mind that since you are a child of God, made so by the unmerited favour of God, God will not punish you if you sin? Doesn't God say that He will not bring any charge against you (Ro.8:33)? But what Paul is saying in the context of Rom.2 is that if we do wrong things, we too deserve judgment from God, just like any unbeliever. Just

because we have been brought into grace, it has not changed the fact that the wrong we do does deserve punishment.

This is a clarity that we do not get from hyper-grace preachers! They make out grace to be such that once God has brought us into His grace, nothing we do will change anything between us and God. But this is a false teaching Paul fought against even in his time (Ro.6:15). This lack of understanding about grace is what prompts some to say that the God of the New Testament is different from the One in the Old Testament, meaning that in the OT God is seen to be strict and harsh, while in the NT, He is full of love and grace. This is because of a lack in the popular understanding of God.

When modern preachers talk only about the love of God and the consequent grace and mercy, they do not seem to realise that God is also holy, righteous, just, without partiality, etc. In fact, when we consider this big picture of God, we can see that God could not have just forgiven our sins by taking a decision. Everything He does is a fulfilment of every part of His being; He cannot ignore His justice while deciding to show mercy. So, when He wanted to show us mercy, He had to make sure that His justice also got fulfilled. Jesus died in our place, bearing the punishment we deserved, so that now God can forgive freely.

Therefore, after God has brought us into His family as His children, when we sin, the same justice has to prevail; it cannot be ignored. That is why we have to confess our sins and ask God for forgiveness (1Jn.1:9). In doing this, we are making use of the suffering of Jesus on our behalf as our proxy. But, if we take our forgiveness for granted, we end up ignoring the justice of God.

Another thing that is essential when we ask God for forgiveness is our deep desire not to sin again. "If You, LORD, should mark iniquities, O Lord, who could stand? But there is

forgiveness with You, That You may be feared" (Ps.130:3,4). We fear the just God who is able to execute judgment upon us for the sin we have committed. He will take away that judgment only when there is a 'sacrifice' we present to Him on our behalf, the blood of Jesus that was shed for us.

Modern preaching, in general, does not cause the hearers to 'fear' God. Anyone who dares to present that side of God is mocked as a 'fire and brimstone' old fashioned preacher! But let us learn to look at God as He is.

## #960 God will always be righteous

God's righteousness is an integral part of His character, and He can never do anything unrighteous. He cannot be partial or show favouritism towards someone because that would be unrighteous. In all He does, He has to be righteous.

Sometimes we people do not think of God like this, because people usually imagine that if we love someone, we can be justified if we bend the rules, such as telling a lie, in order to show 'love'.

Just look at one example of how this works out for God. Without any exception, all human beings have sinned, and we all fall short of His standards so that God cannot accept any of us and be still righteous about it. If He just decided to forgive us, it would be unrighteous and unjust because we ought to be punished. We know the way He worked this out. He saw to it that our sins were punished, by placing them on Jesus and getting Him crucified. We can go to God on those terms, by accepting the fact that we deserve punishment for our sins and receiving forgiveness freely through the death of Jesus in our place. If God just forgave everyone because He loves them, as some think, but they would not go through Jesus for salvation, it would be unrighteous.

Now think of another way in which the righteousness of God is manifested in our salvation. Here we were lost in sin, with no way to work our way back to Him through pilgrimage, penance, sacrifices, rituals, or anything else we could do. It would have been unrighteous of God if He gave us the Law and expected us to keep it and find our acceptance with Him, because we could not. So, while we see that it was God's undeserving love towards us that made the way of salvation through Jesus, we can also see that He was manifesting His righteousness also through it! "But now apart from the Law

the righteousness of God has been manifested, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets, even the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all those who believe; for there is no distinction; for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, being justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus" (Rom.3:21-24).

After receiving this salvation freely as a gift from God, if we went about sinning as usual, or living for ourselves or to enjoy our life on earth, will that be righteous from our part? There is a huge difference between someone trying not to sin in any way and still falling here or there because of ignorance or weakness, and another man thinking that God's grace will cover for him and living an unconverted or compromising life. The second man is trying to take advantage of God's grace, and that is to be quite unrighteous!

"Lovingkindness and truth have met together; Righteousness and peace have kissed each other" (Ps.85:10). God makes this happen through the way of salvation He offers through Jesus. Let's not forget it's not lovingkindness alone that is at work, but also truth and righteousness.

## #961 The secret tunnel to victory

It is a part of our sinful nature, which we are born with, to recognise other people and circumstances as the reason for our problems. As a result, if we are believers, when we face problems our immediate response is to ask God to remove those problems. We recognise that we cannot control those other sources of our problems, and so we go to God. Prayer becomes focussed on asking God to change those people or to remove those circumstances. We may get other people to pray for us, and we think fasting may help in getting an answer from God. Sometimes this works, especially if we are new believers who do not know God's ways yet. But a lot of the times, our problems do not go away, because we are going in the wrong direction!

The wrong assumption we make is that the problem is outside of us, and that 'poor we' are suffering from it. The danger in this is that we may see only this part of the situation, and not realise that our own response is creating the greater problem for us! For example, someone may do some harm to us and we are hurting. What we don't see is that when we don't forgive them immediately, bitterness builds up inside us and that continues to trouble us. We may lose sleep, and we may pass on the complaint to friends and defile them also. Just think of it. We have, by our ungodly response, caused ourselves and others a lot of damage!

We cannot escape trouble in this world (**Jn.16:33**). Since our nature has sinful passions and desires in it, we cannot help but feel the provocation. This provocation is the temptation for us. If we yield to it, we sin (**Ja.1:14,15**). The provocation may have come from outside, but our response has come from within! So, if we focus all our attention on dealing with the

problem, we miss this secret tunnel inside us through which we can get to victory.

By careless spending or foolish decisions, one man ends up in a heavy debt. Another man has been selfish, neglecting his wife and children, and is now facing a broken family. Now they fast and pray for the Lord to gift money or change their family. How different it is if we can see the secret tunnel through which to go!

When we become used to this tunnel, problems may still keep coming, but we will have learned to 'take up our cross, deny ourselves and follow Jesus'. If we 'crucify' our flesh, its lusts will lose their strength and die. "For you have been called for this purpose, since Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example for you to follow in His steps, who committed no sin, nor was any deceit found in His mouth; and while being reviled, He did not revile in return; while suffering, He uttered no threats, but kept entrusting Himself to Him who judges righteously" (1Pe.2:21-23). Shall we learn to bear the sins of others against us in this way and find healing for our souls? Leave the others to God to deal with, and let us work out our own salvation. That is how we will find rest in the face of problems.

## #962 Why does God want our worship?

We would be completely off the mark if we thought, as some do, that God is trying to feel good about Himself by getting people to worship Him! That would be to think of Him as if He were like us with our selfish, sinful nature! But He is God, and not man, perfectly holy and without even a trace of selfishness in Him (1Jn.1:5). He is also 'love' that inherently wants to give and bless rather than to seek things for Himself (1Jn.4:16). From these we must understand that whatever He asks from us is essentially for our good, for blessing us, and not for getting anything from us for His benefit. He is perfect in Himself and is not looking for anything to add to His fulfilment or satisfaction! So what is God trying to do when He asks us to worship Him?

When we worship God, it is essentially expressing our admiration for who He is. As we discover the greatness of God in different dimensions, for example, when we see the majesty of His almighty power, the completeness of His knowledge, the perfection of His wisdom, the richness of His grace towards us sinners, etc., we cannot but fall down and worship Him. When we worship God, it brings us to the right position in our relationship with Him. We see ourselves as being small, insignificant, unworthy in our relationship with Him, and also as those who have received forgiveness, acceptance and adoption as His children, made worthy by His grace for fellowship with Him through eternity. Isn't this a good place for us to be in? It is also the right place for us from where we too can grow into His nature more and more.

Think of how this would protect us from thinking too much of ourselves, as if we were great, independent or sufficient in ourselves to run our lives! That is a great danger from which God wants to save us. Think of people, even Christians, who

have followed the example of Lucifer, the chief angel, who think almost as if they were gods themselves who can speak and make things happen! When Christians do this, they don't realise that instead of becoming more dependent on God for everything in life, they are imagining that they are their own masters.

How sad it is to see that for many Christians, worship is a programme of singing and music that gives them an emotional high! Some are even deceived into thinking that this emotional thrill is an indication of a spiritual connection with God. Some of them are then shocked to find out that similar experiences are also available from worldly sources that even atheists can enjoy!

The only way back to God for fallen, sinful people is through repentance from sin and turning to God through the atonement made possible by Jesus' death in our place. After we receive a new spiritual birth from God, worshipping God is one means by which our relationship with God gets strengthened. To reduce this to a show put up to entertain people, where unconverted musicians stir up people's emotions, is really a movement away from God!

## #963 A lot depends on us

Long ago, God raised up a nation called Israel to make it a special example for the people around it. But the tragedy was that instead of Israel recognising their calling and privilege, they began to mix with the other nations around them and adopt their gods and practices. Many times God gave them prophets to warn them, disciplined them through defeats, calamities, etc. But every time they had a serious problem, they would return to God, and then when things became comfortable they turned back to the nations. Finally God had to give them over to exile under captivity. Even though God gave them many chances because of the covenant He had made with their father Abraham, they continued to break it from their part.

Now it is our turn, Christians. Through Christ, God has made a new covenant of grace, and He has entrusted to us the responsibility to be His witnesses to the world. We are not only expected to go into the ends of the world and proclaim His Gospel, we are to conduct our lives in such a way that seeing us people should get drawn to God through Jesus (Jn.13:34,35). Through our relationships and our working together as one body in the church, the many sided wisdom of God is to be demonstrated to the powers of darkness (Ep.3:8-10). We are the body of Christ through which He is to take action in the world, against the world and against the works of darkness.

But we have gone astray just like Israel did. We have mingled with the people around us, joined in celebrating their festivals, intermarried with them, and behaved just like them in many practical aspects of life. We made one famous philosopher to say, "When it comes to money, all religions are the same." In relationships, business deals and personal

morality, we have adapted ourselves to the world so that others can see practically no difference in us except in the external religious practices. We have humbled ourselves with fasting when things have become difficult for us personally, but when comfort returned we have gone back to our pleasure-loving, thrill-seeking, challenge-avoiding lives, and become irresponsible towards the Saviour, who we proclaim, has given His life for us. Have we learned anything from Israel?

Satan is romping around the world almost freely, deceiving and destroying lives, and producing more immorality and violence than ever before. Of course, in one sense this is as we should expect as the end of the world draws near. But how would things have been if we had been more effective in our witness, and being able to proclaim with power the Gospel of freedom and victory?

But we have failed our Lord. None of us can change the whole system. But what the Lord wants each of us to do is to take up our personal responsibility to cleanse ourselves, separate ourselves and to become effective witnesses for our Lord, doing whatever tasks He has entrusted to us. We remember the words of the Lord, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear."

## #964 Receiving a ministry from God

A Christian ministry is not to be a position to aspire for or a profession to make a living from. It is a service to people that God entrusts His people with. In the body of Christ, everyone is given a ministry to serve one another (1Co.12:6,7). Some of these ministries are public and prominent, but most of them are small and usually unnoticed except by those who are blessed by them. There are many who do things for others in secret, and many times those who receive the blessings are not even aware who their benefactors were. But every ministry has its value before God.

It is not for us to choose the ministry we would like to have. God chooses how He wants to use each one of us (1Co.12:11). We are tempted to choose prominence and power through 'ministry'. But if we go according to our desires, we may end up in failure, frustration and confusion. When God gives us a task to carry out, He also empowers us accordingly. Our natural abilities are not always a sure guide to our ministry. But we will get to know what God wants from us when we surrender ourselves to Him.

A ministry usually gets 'born' in our hearts over a period of time. The conception shows up with a burden for some need in others that we observe. This concern increases as time goes on, and it bothers us so much that we start praying for the need we see. God trains us in many ways, and then opens doors for us to minister. The beginning is usually small.

See how it went with Nehemiah. He was a cupbearer to the king when Judah was in exile in Babylon. One day he heard that the people left in Jerusalem were in great distress and that the walls of the city were broken. This news made him so sad that he wept, fasted and prayed for several days.

Remember he was in the palace, living in luxury and the problems of Jerusalem did not actually hurt him personally. But Nehemiah was concerned for his brothers who were going through distress, and that concern was so strong that it led him to fasting and praying. In the end he asked the king if he could go to Jerusalem and rebuild it. The cupbearer became a construction supervisor, and more importantly, a key person in the restoration of the people of God.

Just as Nehemiah faced opposition, we too may come across hindrances or opposition as we commence our ministry. Opposition does not necessarily show that we have made a mistake. If we know that it is God who has given us this task, we can stand without giving up. In the meantime, we can learn how to serve with greater wisdom, tact and better understanding of the people we are dealing with. Not everyone can understand what we do, and they may ask us to do things their way. This gives us scope to get back to God and learn from Him. There is wisdom we can learn from others, but we must not at the same time give up the uniqueness of our ministry. God gives each of us a different task. A large part of our growth comes from learning from ministering to others.

## #965 A believer and sin

"What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin so that grace may increase? May it never be! How shall we who died to sin still live in it?" (Ro.6:1,2). This is a most crucial matter we must examine ourselves about, if we consider ourselves believers in Jesus. Our attitude of mind here indicates whether we have entered into a relationship with Jesus as our Saviour. There is a strong chance that we may be wholly or partly deceived because of the predominance of false grace and false gospel being preached these days.

A distinguishing mark of a man who has been born again is that God is in him producing in his heart a hatred towards sin (1Jn.3:9). Due to this, he does not practise sin. What this means is that even though he may fall into sin, it is not his lifestyle. He desires not to sin, but he fails because of ignorance or weakness. When he realises that he has fallen, he rushes to the Lord asking for forgiveness and help not to repeat that sin (He.4:16). He then becomes watchful towards that sin and learns to overcome the next time he is tempted. Then he finds himself strengthened more and more until that sin no longer has dominion over him (Ro.6:12-14).

But this does not happen if we have misunderstood grace and imagine that it is a cover under which our sins are automatically hidden away. What that kind of an idea does to us is to make us think that sin is not such a serious matter. Then it follows that we continue to sin, but we do not think anything is abnormal with us. This could be the result of modern preaching which either misses the main point of the Gospel, which is to save us from our sins, or gets confused with the details.

'We who have died to sin no longer want to live in it.' This death to sin is one of the things that happen when we are born again. Before that, we were 'dead in sin' and used to sin as a very natural and normal thing, trying only not to get caught. That was our old man. The new man is from God, from His nature beginning to grow in us, which hates sin. Now we are dead towards sin in our heart, even though we may fail sometimes when we are tempted through the sinful desires that come up from our flesh (Ja.1:14,15).

If we are not dealing with temptations and sin in our own life, the chances are that we are blaming other people and God Himself for our problems. Then we are not addressing the main issue (Ja.4:1). It follows that our problems are not getting dealt with and our lives are becoming more entangled and complicated. Then we wonder why our fasting and prayers are not being answered in the way we expect. Perhaps this is the answer, that we must, first of all, learn to humble ourselves and deal with our own sins.

It is a sad situation, and the result of wrong preaching, that even believers are interested more in their earthly life than in their eternal welfare. Prayers are usually all for this, and testimonies too! Jesus came to save us from our sins, but who wants that?

## #966 Two types of testimony

Look at Abraham's testimony that when he and his wife Sarah were too old to have children, God gave them a son supernaturally. Or the people of Israel stuck between the Red Sea in front and the Egyptian army at the back, and then God making a way for them miraculously through the sea! These are the kind of things we would like to see happen in various forms in our lives, and this is the type of testimony we usually hear in churches. These are about unexpected or sought-after miracles we experience in our lives. The ending is always pleasant.

But look at the apostle Paul who was being buffeted by Satan giving him daily trouble through a thorn in his flesh, and the final answer God gave him at the end of serious prayer was that this trouble would continue! The good news was that God's grace would see Paul through, enabling him to bear the trouble graciously, and bringing about the spiritual benefit of keeping him in humility (2Co.12:7-9). This kind of testimony is not something that appeals to us naturally. Another example we see is Job who lost all his children and wealth in a single day, and the testimony that God gave about him was that he had passed the test (Job.1:22).

Many Christians are not aware of these tests going on in their lives because they are focussed too much on avoiding problems. For them, 'overcoming' refers to dealing with difficult situations by getting miraculous answers to their prayers. They have not been taught, and thus many of them are not even aware, that there is a higher level of overcoming. If, instead, our eyes are focussed on what is happening in our spirit, victory would refer to overcoming temptations in the spiritual realm. That is the kind of tests we should be interested in passing.

"For what credit is there if, when you sin and are harshly treated, you endure it with patience? But if when you do what is right and suffer for it you patiently endure it, this finds favor with God" (Jas.5:1 1). What does it naturally occur to us to pray for? That people should stop treating us harshly. That would be one type of victory. But we must also become aware of the other type, referring to spiritually overcoming our temptation, such as to take revenge, refuse to forgive, teach them a lesson, etc., and to learn to be gracious.

In the so-called chapter on the heroes of faith, Heb.11, the first part talks about those who were able to give the first type of testimony. But the second part mentions some who apparently lost out in their difficult situations of life. But God's testimony about them was that they had triumphed over the situations through faith! We don't wish to be in such situations, naturally speaking. But when we do go through them when God permits them for us, shall we turn our focus to overcoming in our inside? As God told Paul, His grace will be sufficient to take us through, and make us more mature and able to stand till the end. That can be our testimony during such times.

## #967 Make sure you are truly a Christian

The title 'Christian' is really not suitable for someone who has accepted Christianity as a religion or even someone who has been born in a Christian family. The first time people were called Christian was in the church in Antioch which came into being when Jewish disciples of Jesus went there, preached the Gospel and non-Jewish people became disciples (Ac.11:25,26). We can roughly translate the word as 'belonging to Christ' or 'follower of Christ'. It is plain that most of those who consider themselves Christians have not consciously chosen to follow Christ.

But a sadder fact is that among those who have chosen to follow Jesus, a large majority is following Him only superficially. This will be the greatest shock that we can have as people, if we have believed that we belong to Christ, to find on the day of judgment that our name is not in the Lamb's book of life (Re.21:27). This is what Jesus referred to as causing 'weeping and gnashing of teeth' (Lk.13:28).

If we consider ourselves as Christians, one way to see if we have truly become Christians is to examine what goes on in our mind. A drastic change occurs there when we become Christians. Before that, some of us were used to sinning as we wished, seeking only not to get caught. Some others were religious Christians, keeping the Law externally, such as not killing or committing adultery, and contenting ourselves with Bible reading, formal prayer and church attendance. But when someone is converted in the right way, repenting from his sins and turning for salvation to the Saviour, God causes him to be born again in his spirit. One main change that takes place is that now the Holy Spirit begins to disturb him even about sinful thoughts, attitudes, desires, etc. Jesus talked about getting angry with someone as being equal to

murder and looking at others with sexual desire as equal to adultery. The new Christian begins to be concerned in his heart about the sinful things that are going on inside him even when no one outside seems to aware of them.

The Bible refers to this as changing from being dead in sin to becoming dead to sin ([Ep.2:1](#);[Ro.6:11](#)). If this has not taken place in our life, whatever else we may excuse ourselves with, the fact is that we have not become Christians in God's book. Needless to say, no matter what we think or what others think about us, or whatever position or reputation we have in the church, if God does not consider us as Christians, our names are not in the Lamb's book of life and our future is not going to be with Christ in eternity.

This simple truth is really a fundamental one. In order to deal with doubts and to make sure that we get things right with God, the simple way is to humble ourselves before God, acknowledge our sins that have separated us from Him, and ask for salvation on the basis of Jesus paying our penalty on the cross. It is not complicated, but it needs humility and honesty to admit we need Jesus.

## #968 If we stop learning

If we are not looking for new knowledge and understanding, it tells us something about our attitude. Outwardly we will admit that we are far from being perfect, but here we show that we actually believe that there is nothing more we need to know. The implication is that we think what we know and practice is all correct and there is nothing we need to change.

But if we examine this idea we can see how ridiculous it is! How dare we claim that what we know is the most correct, most balanced approach to every part of life!

Looking a little deeper, we can see that usually it is not merely that we think like this. But what happens often is that even when we understand something is wrong with our understanding or practice, we don't like to actually make a change. Change is inconvenient, and we human beings try our best to see if we can avoid a change and maintain *status quo*.

This was one of the things the Jewish leaders did when Jesus came into the scene and proclaimed truth so clearly that they would be practically admitting their hollowness, hypocrisy and superficiality to the public if they made any changes! So, in order to maintain their *status quo*, they explained to themselves that Jesus was threatening their faith and even their nation. They shot the messenger rather than humble themselves and correct their errors.

But if they had made those changes, they would have become pleasing to God, a blessing to the people and received a blessing themselves. But pride prevented them from learning and they thought that maintaining the appearance before people was more important than becoming more pleasing to

God. "The fear of man brings a snare, But he who trusts in the LORD will be exalted" (Pr.29:25).

"So then each one of us will give an account of himself to God" (Ro.14:12). Wouldn't it be advantageous for us to be right before God than to maintain an appearance before people?

Each time we make a change, we acknowledge that we were wrong earlier! Isn't this what makes it difficult for us to make a change? But if we really subscribe to the fact that we are fallen, imperfect people who do not know everything and who are mistaken about many things, it should not be that difficult, should it? But now we can see if we actually believe that teaching and if we really want to press on towards perfection.

This applies to us at all levels, as individuals, families, churches, organisations, political parties, etc. Nobody wants to admit a mistake. Therefore, whatever wrong we have been following, we continue to do them. On top of that, we make up explanations and excuses to justify our wrong positions. We have been sinning unknowingly, and now we are making sure that not only will we prevent change but also that we make our position harder to retreat from.

How simple life would become if we are quick to admit we could be wrong in many things and then humbly change when we become aware of our mistakes! How blessed are the poor in spirit!

## #969 When scientists went wrong

Science and technology have made great progress, and we now enjoy their benefits to an extent that our ancestors could not have imagined. This causes many people to hope that science will one day find an answer to all our problems. Some scientists have even made claims that the the current gap we have in knowledge will soon be covered so that after that there will not be any need to propose God as an explanation for anything more. But this has not happened, and let us be clear that this will never happen. Why? Because scientists have made some wrong fundamental assumptions which ensure that this gap will remain.

Defining science as the "systematic study of the structure and behaviour of the physical and natural world through observation, experimentation, and the testing of theories against the evidence obtained," their mistake at the starting point itself is that they consider only the physical and natural world in their quest for knowledge. In this way they completely ignore the spiritual world which is also a reality in which we live. God has existed from eternity, and He is the one who created the physical and natural world and all their laws. When He has been excluded, how can we ever expect to understand the world completely? Doesn't this explain why scientists are always coming short in their theories and explanation, having to frequently discard and revise them? Imagine scientifically studying a multi-dimensional phenomenon after discarding the most important dimension to start with! It is not just God that is ignored, but also the spirit in man apart from his body and mind (soul - Gk. psuche), angels and demons.

A Christian scientist has pointed out that actually scientists do not even know how to describe 'life' while they go on

explaining how life started from chemicals. For example, when a living cell dies, scientists cannot explain what the cell just lost, with all the chemicals remaining intact in the cell, and what they can add back to the cell to bring it to life!

Another serious mistake some scientists make when they try to understand the origin of the world is to assume that all the natural laws that can be observed now have always been like that. Won't things immediately begin to become clear if they thought that it was God who created those laws and He could have used different laws earlier? Even recently He has shown that He can instantly turn water into wine! So, imagine how God who created and fine tuned the whole universe to make conditions suitable for man on earth, did not need to wait for billions of years for light to reach earth from distant stars!

If these scientists had included God as a part of reality, how much easier, more realistic and more complete their studies would have become! But they are determined to keep God out of the picture, so that they won't have to be accountable to Him (Ro.14:12). Therefore they are not even able to be honest to themselves as scientists.

## **#970 The word or the One who spoke it**

"You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; it is these that testify about Me; and you are unwilling to come to Me so that you may have life" (Jn.5:39,40). The Jewish leaders who were experts in the law could not recognise the Word standing in front of them! They could hold debates about the nuances of Hebrew words, but not understand what God was speaking through them. This made crucial truths of life slip through their minds while they thought they were great scholars (Mt.23:24). Sad to say, this is extremely common among today's Christians too! The

problem is when we depend on the written words in the Bible without relating to God as a Person, we are not able to hear from Him what He has to say through His word.

Take one common example. When a ruler came to Jesus thinking that he was perfect in all his ways, Jesus pointed out his reliance on his wealth that was coming in the way of depending entirely on God. The man was unable to see that, and went away. Then Jesus said, "It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God" (Mt.19:24). See how many teachers misunderstand and mishandle this saying, showing a lack of connecting to the heart of God.

Some wonder how it could be that rich people would find it difficult to enter the kingdom of God. In order to reduce the tension in that idea, some have even invented the story of a small gate in Jerusalem at the time of Jesus where camels could be made to pass through with difficulty. Some preachers beat around the bush by focusing on the layout and the culture of Jerusalem in those days, trying to give an impression that what Jesus said does not apply now! They assume that they are just explaining the 'context' according to the rules of hermeneutics!

But they miss the real context. Coming to Jesus, this ruler was self-righteous and self-sufficient, perhaps expecting praise or recognition. If they had contrasted this with the attitude of people who recognise their own unworthiness and come to depend entirely on the grace of God for their acceptance, they could have understood what Jesus really meant. They could have also seen that this would apply not only to money but also to any other thing in ourselves that we might boast in or depend on for acceptance from God.

Many times, the understanding of the word is intellectual, even with looking at Hebrew and Greek words. People look at

words and sentences in the Bible in the same way as scholars study secular subjects. "But a natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually appraised" (1Co.2:14). But when the starting point of our connection with Jesus is a recognition of our need for His grace, the eyes of our understanding get open. Then our understanding goes on to a spiritual realm and beyond intellectual thinking.

## #971 Extreme responses

Do we give up on God when our prayer is not answered? When we see some pretence in one church member, do we classify the church as a place of hypocrites? When we encounter one fault in our spouse, do we conclude that our marriage is a failure? If one relationship breaks up, do we think we will never be able to get married? Etc. We have this tendency to be so moved by emotion when we face difficult situations that we jump to conclusions and take drastic decisions.

Look at God not answering our prayers. As our heavenly Father we can go to Him freely and ask anything we want. But He may think what we have asked is actually bad for us, we are not yet ready to handle it, it is not the right time to give it to us, etc. So, if we judge God based on this one experience and conclude that God cannot be trusted to answer prayers, won't we be way off completely?

The point is that we are so affected by the adversity that we feel like responding to it impulsively. This may take different forms, such as to spite others, teach others a lesson, hurt ourselves to support our self-pity, get sympathy from others, etc. But in all such ways, the fact is that we are not being real. We are exaggerating our situation and making things blacker than they are.

When we are emotionally moved like this, we are not thinking of other factors that are involved in our situation, which can give us a proper balance in our understanding. We can safely say that in all situations there is always more than one factor at play. It will be most foolish for us to take action after having looked at only one factor.

Look at another situation. "The first to plead his case seems right, Until another comes and examines him" (Pr.18:17). Isn't this a common situation we come across? Considering our bigger context, the problem is that the one factor that is in front of us is so convincing that we believe at that moment that we have enough facts to make a judgment with. But actually there are many other sides we need to look at before we can see things clearly.

Once we understand this principle, we can start learning to be slow to draw conclusions but to look for more understanding (Ja.1:19). We have to teach ourselves not to be impulsive. We can take the matter before God and ask Him to show us what He thinks and how we should respond. "The plans of the diligent lead surely to advantage, But everyone who is hasty comes surely to poverty" (Pr.21:5). "Do you see a man who is hasty in his words? There is more hope for a fool than for him" (Pr.29:20).

There are so many sides to our God that a whole lifetime is not enough to know His ways fully. When we come into situations where we are unable to figure out what He is doing, it is extremely important that we don't jump to wrong conclusions about Him. If we react negatively with the limited understanding we have about God, it can hurt us very badly. Let us wait on God, ask Him to teach us more of His ways (Is.40:31).

## **#972 The Gospel replaced**

There was a reason why the Son of God had to take human form, suffer and die at the hands of the people He had created. When He was facing death in Gethsemane, He wished He could achieve the Father's goal some easier way. But that was the only way He could save us. He gave His life,

suffering our punishment, so that He could offer salvation freely to us.

Salvation is free for us in that we do not have to earn it through rituals, sacrifices, good works or any such things. No one can. However, because it is free, many people treat it as if it is cheap, available for everyone without any conditions. Some even go to the extent of thinking that since God is love, He will finally save all people and no one will be punished. Others think that when God saves someone, nothing he does will affect his relationship with God. But those who preach this false gospel will surely have the blood of many people on their hands (Ez.3:18). This is to completely misunderstand the Gospel.

God loves everyone He has created and does not want anyone to be lost. But He knew that He could not simply decide to ignore everyone's sins and take them to be with Him, because God's justice demands that our sins must be punished. That was why Jesus had to die in our place. At the same time, just because Jesus has died for the sins of the whole world, everyone does not get saved automatically. Only those who recognise their need for a Saviour will go to Jesus and get saved.

When we unpack this, what we see is that first we need to see ourselves as sinners in God's eyes, who deserve His judgment of hell. When we see that it was our sins that caused Jesus to die, we not only feel remorse for the sins we have already done, but we also get a desire not to sin again. It is such people who see Jesus as the Saviour who not only took our punishment, but as One who will help us to overcome sin in our life. This is what is involved in repenting from sin and believing in Jesus.

But the preaching of the Gospel these days has been configured to make things easy for everyone to be 'saved',

even without true repentance or faith. There is no talk about sin for fear that it may upset someone. As a result, a large number of people have been led to believe that they have become children of God, headed for heaven, even when others can see that there has been no real change in their lives.

Many take some experience with God such as healing, a miraculous answer to prayer or even the excited feeling in a worship meeting as a sign of relationship with God. But without repentance there is no forgiveness, and without yielding to Jesus as Saviour, no deliverance from the power of sin.

The time is short before Jesus will return to judge the world. We have the responsibility now to make sure that our salvation is genuine, and we must share the Gospel with love and without compromise. The dying world needs the life saving truth that Jesus has come to save us from our sin.

## #973 Each one of us

Are you familiar with this thought, "That's the pastor's work"? Also, perhaps, "That's what we are paying him for"? We think we are just 'ordinary' people, we work for a living and we pay for the leaders of the church. When we have any problem that needs prayer, we can go to the leaders, etc. Of course, the Lord Jesus is the Head of the church, and He has appointed some people to have special responsibilities in the church (Ep.4:11,12). If we look at these verses, we can clearly see that their responsibility is to help us to grow so that we can carry out the work of building the church! We, the members of the church, are more in number than the leaders. While they equip us with whatever gift God has given them, it is really our responsibility to make sure that the church grows! What God means by the growth of the church is not primarily an increase in number, even though that is also important. "Until we all attain to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ" (v.13)! The most important aspect of church growth is that the members become more and more like our Lord and Saviour, in our character.

If the leaders don't understand this, but think of growth in terms of increase in size, number of churches, types of activities in the church, impact on society, etc., all of which are important, the church will miss out on the primary goal of the Head. He gave His life to restore us to a living relationship and fellowship with Him. That is not possible if we remain carnal, natural or only interested in earthly blessings. The commission that Jesus gave to the church was to make disciples from all parts of the world. It becomes clear when we remember that a disciple is a learner, who is following the

Master to become like Him. That term 'disciple' is meant to be applied to all of us, and not just to the apostles.

There are two parts to this for each one of us as 'ordinary' members. The first is to grow personally and become like our Lord. The way this can happen is when we recognise that our fleshly desires are opposed to what the Lord wants, and learn to deny ourselves in order to obey our Lord (Lk.9:23). Reading the Bible for ourselves, listening to messages from godly people, praying for the daily help of the Holy Spirit, and following the Lord must be the norm in our life.

Secondly, each of us has a role in teaching, guiding, comforting, encouraging and helping one another according to the special gift and responsibility God gives each one of us (1Co.12:4-7). We are all different and what we do may not be prominent or even noticed by others. God uses the illustration of our body where different members carry out their function and help one another. We receive, we also give. Our faithfulness is in how we carry out our special tasks for the Lord and one another. Now we can see how we cannot just leave it to the leaders.

### **#974 The real reason**

One of the important things we need to remember all the time is that God is watching every part of our life (Pr.15:3). We may be able to deceive people with our external actions that they can see. But it is possible that we can do something that appears to be very good to people, while our real reason for doing it may be hidden to them. For example, we may act very helpful at times, while our real goal inside our mind is that people must get impressed with us, they should remember this and help us in turn when we need it, God should add this good deed to our account, etc. These kinds of devious

motives may be the ones prompting us at different times, and not only do people get a good impression about us, but we also get a satisfaction thinking that we are good. We can't really think we can get away with this because we have a God who sees our hearts, and He is not fooled by what we say or do externally (1Sa.16:7).

We have this problem because even after we have been born again, we still carry with us our flesh, which is our old nature. God has given us a new nature in a baby form. But now both these natures constantly clash with each other, and it is only as we yield to the Holy Spirit that we can put the old nature to death and allow the new nature to grow (Ga.5:16,17). This battle goes on secretly inside our mind, away from the sight of man but before the eyes of God. It is here that God judges our faithfulness.

Because of our old nature, our heart has a great capacity to deceive ourselves (Je.17:9). By pointing ourselves to the actual deed we have done, we can blind ourselves to the ulterior motive we had! We can convince others to think that we had some noble intention for what we have done. For example, we may make a decision with the intention of making more money so that we can live in luxury, but we convince others that we did it in order to have more money to give to the missions!

If we say we want to become like Jesus, and continue to be hypocrites by focusing on our external behaviour while neglecting our motives, we will only harden our hearts against the Holy Spirit. The Pharisees in the days of Jesus trained themselves to become excellent in this direction (Mt.23:25). We Christians are not far behind.

Let us examine ourselves. Where is our focus? Is it on what people will think about us, or God? Are we very careful to ensure that our words and actions are unquestionable before

people, while we allow selfish motives and secret agendas to slip through in our heart? What about Christians who say we will be ok if we follow the Ten Commandments? They can only come to the level of the Pharisees!

Jesus came and showed us what God really wants from us. He said it was not enough to avoid murder and adultery while we tolerated hatred and lust in our hearts. Once we understand this, it takes us to a whole new level of practical life. There is forgiveness if we fall, but we want to be truly pleasing to God.

## #975 What exactly is grace?

It is crucial for us to understand what grace is, because it is by grace that God saves us. In the world, people understand different things by 'grace'. But when we want a biblical meaning, there are two places that we can learn from. "For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast" (Ep.2:8,9). "Therefore let us draw near with confidence to the throne of grace, so that 1) we may receive mercy and 2) find grace to help in time of need" (He.4:6). Grace is how God saves us, and it takes away from our side all reason to boast. He gives us salvation as a gift, and it is not something we earn from our efforts. One way grace acts is by giving us mercy from God for the forgiveness of our sins, and it is also by helping us in various forms when we are in need.

In the world, sometimes grace is used to refer to giving some extra marks to a student to help him to reach the minimum required for passing. From there, some people get the idea that in a Christian context, God gives us grace to cover our lack so that we will always remain acceptable to Him. So they think that since we are under grace, we don't have to worry about our actual life. They think that we are 'under the blood' or 'covered by the blood' (which are unbiblical terms) with similar meaning as being under grace. But this is to misunderstand grace.

More commonly, there are people who exaggerate grace by emphasising the fact that under grace there will be nothing that we can boast of, and then thinking that therefore grace means that our salvation is entirely a work of God. He chooses unconditionally whom He must save, and then saves them without their having to do anything from their side. We

can see immediately that this is wrong because salvation is by God's grace *through* our faith. Faith is our response to this offer of grace. It is not a work that we do about which we can boast. But when we realise how we stand hopeless before the holy God and hear the good news that Jesus has made a way to forgive and accept us, we respond by humbling ourselves and receiving it. We fully know we don't deserve it, and that there is nothing we can boast about.

When we understand grace like this, we will not want to take sin lightly and think that whatever we do, God's grace will cover it. "For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all men, instructing us to deny ungodliness and worldly desires and to live sensibly, righteously and godly in the present age" (Tit.2:11,12). God helps us by giving us understanding and empowering us to deny ourselves and to do His will (Php.2:12,13).

This is how God is able to justify us and then lead us into sanctification. If we misunderstand grace and assume that God will do everything for us, we stop short of responding to His work in us. Then, of course, He will not be able to produce the results that He wants to produce in us.

## #976 Why do people get offended with Jesus?

Very few people are getting saved, and many of them fall away later. But the fact is that some people are getting saved, and their lives are actually being transformed, becoming more purposeful, peaceful and joyful. So, why are these others getting offended with Jesus? The apostle Paul points out that there are basically two reasons for this. One is intellectual and the other is experiential. "For indeed Jews ask for signs and Greeks search for wisdom; but we preach Christ crucified, to Jews a stumbling block and to Gentiles foolishness" (1Co.1:22,23).

For many people, their claim is that the Gospel of Jesus does not make sense or explain everything. For example, one common question is, "If God is almighty and loving as you say, why is there so much evil and injustice in this world?" It is not that there are no answers to such questions or that only the dumb ones will believe in God. There are highly intellectual, knowledgeable and capable Christians all around. But these people with questions are not looking in the right direction.

For others it is about their personal experiences. They are disappointed with God because He did not answer their prayers in the way they expected. They want God to prove Himself to them by doing the miracles they want. When people brought up this demand to Jesus, His answer was that He Himself would be the miracle they could look at and believe (Jn.2:18,19).

If anyone reads the Bible and notes the teachings and the miracles there, they are enough to help them to believe. A comparative study of the various world-views that different people have demonstrates that the Christian view of life, God

and the future is more comprehensive, cohesive, reasonable and fitting in with the facts than all others. So it is not that intellectuals do not have enough explanations for them to believe. The life of Jesus that fulfilled many detailed prophecies given hundreds of years earlier, that even His enemies could find no fault with, and His final death and resurrection are more than enough for us to take note of and conclude that He was who He claimed He was.

So, where does all the stumbling come from? The reason that is hidden deep inside the human mind is that people do not want to admit that they are sinners who have no hope apart from God. Even those people who imagine that they can qualify for God's acceptance if only they tried a little more will have to finally come to the conclusion that they need God's mercy. As long as people are unwilling to go to God in humility admitting their need of Him, they cannot find explanations for their questions or experience all that God offers.

Sad to say, the preaching of the Gospel is being done in such a way that it should not offend anyone! The whole offer of the Gospel to save us from our sins is camouflaged, and the advertisement is for how God can enrich their earthly life, help them to fulfil their dreams and avoid all trouble.

## #977 Cannot get away with compromise

People expect that their close friends will close their eyes when they do wrong. It is not so with God. He is righteous as well as loving. He cannot be unjust momentarily in order to show kindness to someone He loves. Let us learn from the example of Solomon. He valued wisdom to manage his kingdom more than riches and fame (1Ki.3:9). Yet later on, he did not use this wisdom to obey the instruction of God to kings not to multiply wives for themselves (De.17:17). He then let his foreign wives lead him to worship their false, abominable gods (1Ki.11:4). He fell out of favour with God, and God was absolutely angry with him (vv.9,10).

But even though Solomon lost out with God as an individual, God kept him as king, in view of His plan for the Messiah. People may have thought that Solomon did all those horrible things with false gods, and yet God allowed him to continue as king. Now we can see Christian leaders who have openly compromised continue with their ministry. We wonder how God supports such a ministry and people are getting blessed. The answer is that ministry is a task God gives some people to bless others, and God does not want to entirely remove that blessing. He will certainly deal with the leaders on a personal level. They may have imagined that because their ministry is continuing, God must be fine with them. No, the two are different. Ministry is coming from God who uses these individuals to bless others, but these leaders will have to give an individual account of themselves to God. The mark of God's anointing over us is not our ministry, but the growth of the fruit of the Spirit in us.

God told Solomon, "Therefore the LORD God of Israel declares, 'I did indeed say that your house and the house of your father should walk before Me forever'; but now the LORD

declares, 'Far be it from Me--for those who honor Me I will honor, and those who despise Me will be lightly esteemed'" (1Sa.2:30). Here we see another passage that gives us understanding of the difference between the task God has given us and our personal standing. David was promised that someone in his lineage will sit on the throne. God's top level plan in this was that the Messiah would be born in David's family. He accomplished that, even though in the kingly line of David there were many individual kings who were unfaithful to God. But we must see the other side of the story that every individual was going to be judged or evaluated on the basis of his own personal life.

Some people consider their personal life and ministry as two different compartments. The tendency then is to pay more attention to the success of the ministry which can be noticed by the others, and neglect the personal life which is carried out in secret away from the sight of people. What God is saying is that it does not escape His notice. No matter how successful we seem to be in our ministry, what finally matters for us is what God thinks about us individually.

## #978 Grace vs. works

All religions, including nominal Christianity, teach some form of works to earn salvation through different things we do. As opposed to this is grace, which is a favour that God offers to us because of His goodness and love towards us, even though we don't deserve it. But even with all the studies on Greek and Hebrew original words of the Bible, many people are still confused about salvation. Some people focus on the grace that God shows us, and they think that to think of anything that we have to do from our side comes under works for earning salvation, and therefore to be rejected. But the truth is, salvation is by grace, through faith. Grace is the unmerited favour that God offers us for our salvation, and faith is our response to that grace through which we experience that salvation.

First of all, we need to be clear of what salvation is. It is to be saved from sin. This includes being set free from the penalty of sin, based on the fact that Jesus has already taken that penalty on Himself in our place. Even though we are guilty of all the sins that we have committed, now God takes away that guilt by telling us that our record has been totally wiped clean by the blood of Jesus. What remains is the power of sin in our old nature, which we still carry, which needs to be replaced with God's nature.

Our faith in the Lord Jesus as our Saviour includes believing in what He has done for us and what He wants to do for us, and also our response in turning away from sin to godliness in our heart. Believing like this in Jesus is not a work, it does not earn salvation for us, but it becomes the channel through which we can receive salvation. Similarly, our turning away from sin towards godliness is the result of our believing in the Saviour rather than our attempt to earn our salvation. The

Bible is very clear, and common experiences prove, that without this response, we cannot experience salvation, and then our so-called faith is not real.

When we hear the Gospel of Jesus Christ, some respond by faith and get saved, and some reject it. It should not be thought that those who had faith earned salvation. No, salvation was given by Jesus freely, and all these people did was to trust Him and receive it with grateful hearts. There is no merit on their part over which they can boast, and all who have genuinely experienced salvation are only too aware that it was by God's grace. Faith produces works, but faith is not works.

We respond to the Gospel by having remorse over the sins we have done, and wanting not to do them again. In that way repentance is a change of attitude towards sin. God gives us a new heart that hates sin and wants to be pleasing to Him. So, repentance cannot be looked at as something we do that can earn merit for us, but it is a response to the goodness of God. The actual change in our life will happen as the Holy Spirit starts working in us and we submit to Him ([Php.2:12,13](#)). This is also a response of faith.

## **#979 The immediate cost of sin**

Many people's attitude towards sin seems to be as described in Ecc.8:11, "Because the sentence against an evil deed is not executed quickly, therefore the hearts of the sons of men among them are given fully to do evil." Even many Christians who know about the seriousness of sin seem to think only in terms of the last judgment day, and imagine that they have plenty of time to receive forgiveness. But let's not forget the justice of God and fool ourselves into thinking that we can make use of God's mercy and get away with our sins! Sin kills

us every time we yield, and we suffer at different levels as a consequence. We get farther away from God in our heart, our mind gets corrupted, our relationships suffer, we face natural consequences, and then the final judgment will also come (Ro.2:5-8). But if we look only at the final judgment, we will not be aware of all the damage we are accumulating for ourselves right now! "Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, this he will also reap" (Ga.6:7).

If our heart is tender, the moment we sin we begin to feel guilt, shame, fearful about God, wanting to hide, anxious if we will be found out, etc. Think of the tension we will carry in our mind as a result, and the peace we lose. Think of how our sin may result in spoiling our relationship with other people, including those we love. Think of how the justice system of this world may catch up with us. When we look at how these work out, can't we see that the pleasure or the advantage our sin gave us was not worth it? Sin's pleasure is temporary, but the consequences last a very long time.

The more we sin, the less sensitive we become in our heart towards it. If we have not been caught earlier because of our sins, we become bolder to believe that now nothing will happen. Our guilt and shame were inside our heart, and when we see that others have not noticed them, we begin to think that we don't have to worry much about such things. Slowly our conscience becomes hardened, and sin troubles us less and less. We deal with the future problem of God's judgment by saying a quick prayer for forgiveness, and we think we are all set to move on, continuing to sin and heaping more and more damage to ourselves, which we learn to ignore. But God's laws of life are still working (Ro.2:9,10).

Our heart and mind become more corrupt, peace and joy leave us, relationships become more distraught. Is sin worth it?

Now think of how we ought to live after we have been born again, and God has given us a new heart that makes us sensitive to sin again. We learn that God's plan for us is not merely to forgive us but also to set us free from the power of sin (Ro.6:14). We recognise our need to learn not to give place to sin our life (Ro.6:12,13). Then we will find joy and peace increasing in our life, and our relationships becoming stronger. We will slowly discover that God's ways are best and deviations are troublesome for us.

### **#980 Leaning on stray verses**

A huge cause for absence of spiritual growth is the lack of personal knowledge of God through the scripture. Even though God's word is within easy reach for most of us, and we can even carry many versions in our phone, many do not do any serious study for themselves. The result is a spiritual catastrophe. God is glorious in combining different aspects of ability and character. But unless we take the trouble to search Him out, we may get mistaken with knowing just one or two aspects without the balance that comes with the knowledge of the other aspects too. Of course, that will lead to a distorted view of God in our thinking, and then in our expectation of what He wants to do for us. A very common example is when people imagine that God will do everything that is connected with salvation, and that their responsibility is only to believe. Another is to exaggerate the grace of God and negate His holiness, righteousness and justice.

Another contributing factor is the assumption that since the Bible is the inspired word of God, we can take every word in it literally and in a stand-alone way. This removes the context of verses – to whom they were addressed and in what situation, and whether they are directly applicable to us. It also takes away the consideration of the different literary styles used in

the Bible. For example, a proverb, which is a general observation of some aspect of life, is taken literally and sometimes treated like a scientific statement or a promise. Our tongue does not have any supernatural power to make things happen (Pr.18:21). God is not making a promise that parenting is all that is required to guarantee the children's future (Pr.22:6). Parables are to teach us moral principles and not to be taken as teaching detailed truths. The story of the rich man and Lazarus cannot teach us truths about life after death. (Compare how people talk about Peter at the gate of heaven!)

If we mentally accept Jesus' resurrection and say that Jesus is Lord, is that really sufficient for salvation (Ro.10:9)? What about important factors that are missing here, such as conviction as sinners, turning away from our sinful way of life to following Jesus (2Co.5:15)? When this concerns our eternity, can we just assure ourselves with mere positive thinking that it is well with our souls?

It is really amazing how God can love sinners like us, who, if we only try to look at ourselves honestly, do not deserve any mercy from Him. But after having been freely forgiven and accepted because God took the impact of justice concerning our sins on Himself, how can we now assume that we don't have to worry any more about a life of sin because 'we are under the blood', 'nothing can take us away from the love of God' etc.? Aren't we then effectively trampling the Son of God under our feet for our advantage?

Only a serious study of the old and new testaments fully can give us a proper understanding of God and His dealings with us.

## #981 If we love Jesus

"If you love Me, you will keep My commandments" (Jn.14:15). There are many other things we do for Jesus when we love Him, but this is what He expects from us. Now we can see that if this is not happening in our life even though we say we love Jesus, things are not right in His sight.

The way many people present the Gospel these days, it looks as if when we 'accept' in our mind Jesus as our Saviour, He will start blessing us in every way. His love will flow into our life, mercy and grace will abound, and everything negative will be taken away. It is no wonder that this appears like a real good news to many people.

But the true good news is that Jesus has come to set us free from our sins (Mt.1:21). What does this mean in practice? We who have been born in sin, i.e., with a sinful nature right from birth, have all done many sins in our thoughts, motives, intentions, words and actions. The problem is not just that this makes us guilty and subject to the judgment of God, but that we keep doing the same sins again and again. It should be obvious to us that saving us from sin must include not only forgiving us and saving us from our guilt, but also delivering us from the power of sin in our life so that we can stop sinning. It is when we realise how guilty we are and how sinful our nature is that we look for a Saviour. When we understand that Jesus has taken our punishment on Him so that He can now forgive us, we feel sorrowful about our sins and we want to stop sinning and start following Jesus by doing all that He says (2Co.5:15). It is to such people that God gives forgiveness, and not for others who think they have found a way of avoiding punishment for their sins (Ps.130:4).

Isn't this such a crucial point in the process of salvation? Isn't wanting to give up sinning and to do whatever the Lord Jesus wants a mark of our love for Him? But people confuse it for works. 'Works' are things people do hoping to earn merit with God. But repentance is just the fruit of our love for our Lord who has given Himself for us. Others insist that salvation is only by faith, which they think means only to believe certain things about Jesus. But that can be just an intellectual belief, whereas true faith is our trust in Jesus as the One who died in our place to take away the punishment that we deserve. When we trust Him like this, won't we want to lay down our life for Him, in denying ourselves and doing His will (Ro.6:12,13)? If someone's so-called faith does not result in this turning away from sin towards doing His will – it doesn't produce this work, it is just an imaginary or dead faith (Ja.2:20-22).

The spirit of this world has confused many people, distorting the meaning of salvation words such as repentance and faith, and substituting them with positive thinking, avoiding the negative, refusing questions, etc. We must fight our way through this deception to the truth, if we are to find the way that leads to life (Mt.7:13,14).

## **#982 Agonising over salvation**

In one sense, there is no good works, sacrifice, or religious ritual that we need to do to receive salvation. We can freely receive it through faith (Ep.2:8,9). The only basis on which we receive it is by accepting that there is no way we can be saved except through Jesus taking our punishment when He died on the cross. In this way, salvation is made available to everyone. But we must not forget an entirely different aspect that is involved, without which we cannot experience this salvation.

"Strive to enter through the narrow door; for many, I tell you, will seek to enter and will not be able" (Lk.13:24). If we believe that Jesus said this, and that He warns us that many will not be able to enter even when they seek to, we need to make sure that we enter, and also that we make it clear to others. If we present the Gospel as bringing health, wealth and freedom from hell, it is no wonder if 'many' seek to enter. But Jesus said that if we presented the narrow door, very few would enter (Mt.7:13,14).

'Strive' used here represents the way someone agonises over reaching a goal, such as an athlete aiming to win the prize. The prize is what motivates him to take all the discipline to train for the race. Perhaps we can split our striving for salvation in two parts, entering into salvation and experiencing its fullness. We are not thinking about earning our salvation by our works, but making sure that we receive salvation by putting ourselves in the group of those who are seeking it.

Who will seek salvation? Those who know they need it. They have become aware that their sins and their sinful nature keep them away from God and eternal life. That is why they seek salvation. Then they hear the good news that a Saviour has prepared it for them and is now waiting for them to ask for it. But the other group of people are not very worried about their condition because they think they are good, religious-minded people whom God will be pleased with. Some say they have been with the right crowd in the right places, and some others say they have done many good things. But what they lack is a conviction that they are sinners who need salvation (Lk.13:26,27;Mt.7:22,23). There is no striving or agonising for salvation.

Some see themselves as sinners and come to Jesus for forgiveness. But then some of them think that their salvation is settled for eternity and then focus on their earthly life. But

as Paul began his Christian life after his encounter with Jesus, he saw the sinful tendencies of his old nature opposing the desire of his new nature to always do what was pleasing to God. This made him cry out in agony, "Wretched man that I am! Who will set me free from the body of this death?" (Ro.7:24). He saw that all his life he had to battle the desires of his flesh with what God wanted him to do (Ga.5:17). Now his agony was to make sure that he was victorious in temptations and took part in the divine nature. Check where we stand.

### **#983 Leaving all battles to the Lord?**

When we struggle with issues that are too much for us, it is comforting to hear the word that the battle belongs to the Lord, and cast our problems into the Lord's hands. We have many examples in the Bible that describe times when things were too difficult for God's people and they cast themselves into the Lord's hands, how He delivered them miraculously. The popular song, 'The battle belongs to the Lord' has helped many people to have this printed on their minds. But if we think that all we need to do in difficult situations is to transfer our problems to the Lord, we will be sadly mistaken. We would be shirking our own responsibility and imagining that we do not have anything more to do.

Salvation is a gift that God offers us who do not deserve it, and there is no way we can earn it. But we can see that the Bible is full of things that God asks us to do, to receive salvation and also to grow in it. Some preachers try to make things simple by saying, "Just believe," expecting God to do the rest. But, as Jesus said, there is no proper faith without having repented from our sins (Lk.24:47).

Growing in salvation means to be transformed from our old sinful nature to God's character in every part of our life. This will not happen automatically when we believe or by a mystical work of the Holy Spirit (Ro.6:12,13). That is the way we can go towards victory over sin (v.14). Further, it is only by our making choices each time we are tempted, to do what is pleasing to God, that our old nature gets put to death and the divine nature grows in us (Ep.4:21-24).

Let us just take a look at samples of what we are expected to do. We are to actively flee from our desires and run after virtues (2Ti.2:22). As the Holy Spirit exposes our sinfulness, we must submit to Him and refuse our body's desires to enjoy ourselves (Ro.8:13). We must not allow any unforgiving attitude to remain in us but become patient with the weaknesses we see in others, remembering how the Lord is dealing with us (Co.3:13). Jesus warns us particularly about this, saying that if we take double standards here, our own forgiveness will be jeopardised (Mt.18:34,35). He knows very well about our weaknesses, and so He exhorts us to be vigilant, as well as to depend on God's strength (Mt.26:41). God tells us to flee from the love of money as well as allowing things to become idols in our heart (1Ti.6:10,11;1Co.10:14). If we thought that participating in communion in the church was a casual thing, God gives us strict warnings about our attitudes and behaviour (1Co.11:27-32).

If we 'just believe' and wait for God to do everything for us, is it any wonder that we remain clueless about the deeper things of God? Why are we remaining in defeat in many areas in our life? Where is our becoming more like Jesus? Are we growing in wisdom and the knowledge of God? Are we growing up from being infants in Christ to those who can teach others and point out the way?

## #984 Disproportionate reactions

One day I was walking on the road lost in thoughts, and a distant relative drove by in a car. She waved out to me, but I didn't notice her or the car. She was so upset that she drove straight to my house and told my wife that I was an arrogant man!

These kinds of reactions are very common, aren't they? Someone gets upset because the pastor didn't greet him or visit when he was sick. Or when they get cut off on a phone call or any of a thousand other things. Friendships break up and sometimes these result in attacks, spreading stories, teaching the others a lesson, etc.

This happens even towards God. People know theoretically that God is good all the time, He will never leave us, etc. But when He didn't answer a prayer, people are ready to quit on Him. When something goes wrong, they put the blame on Him. They think He is not managing things for them well enough. Even those who have been evangelists and Bible teachers have quit when their expectations were crossed.

Our knowledge and understanding are very much limited. None of us really knows what the others are thinking or why exactly they do certain things. The problem is that with our limited knowledge we assume that we have got them figured out. We are so convinced about our conclusions that without giving the others any chance to explain, we just throw them out.

Haven't we also had occasions when we had come to conclusions about someone, and afterwards we felt like fools when things became clear about what had actually happened and why people did what they did? Yet it seems we are slow to learn.

When we know that God is good and He will never leave us, why don't we believe it when we feel we can't trust Him? Is it any fault on His side? Never! There is never a fault on His side and He never makes a mistake. What then is the problem? It is just that we can't always understand or figure out what He is doing. If we can't always figure out people, do we imagine we can ever fully understand God's ways? But if we are wise, we have to admit that He must still be good even when we have doubts, and there must be some valid explanation He has for all His actions. Even when we can't understand what He is doing, we must believe that His plans for us are always for our welfare (Je.29:11). Even if He is disciplining us, it is still out of love for us (He.12:10). Taking this position in our mind as an anchor from which we will not move is the only way we can be safe in the storm, even when we are in darkness not knowing what is happening to us. Just think how we will be the losers and not God if we go for a wrong reaction.

With people too, why don't we give people the benefit of doubt, knowing that we don't know everything? They may have good intentions even when they sometimes go wrong, just like we do. Or it may be one of those blind spots in their mind, just as we also have. Just think of how ridiculous we can look afterwards when the real facts come out!

## #985 Practical perfection

There is no way we can become sinlessly perfect while we are still in this body of sin, but that does not give us an excuse to give up pursuing perfection (He.6:1). There is a level of perfection that is nearer to us which we must press on to. Let us differentiate between sinless perfection and the perfection we can aim for. Sinless perfection is something we can have only in eternity when God gives us a glorified body. Till then, even after we are born again, we carry around with us our 'flesh' (which was the apostle Paul's way of referring to the remnants of our old nature), from which sinful desires would tempt us (Ga.5:24). Since we have this store of lusts within us, and we are not always aware of the sinfulness of the thoughts that come to us, we may many times end up doing things that we later realise were wrong (Ro.7:19,20). We cannot be sinlessly perfect in this situation, but we can learn and become increasingly aware of how we are being deceived by our lusts, and stop falling for the same tricks again and again.

"For I joyfully concur with the law of God in the inner man, but I see a different law in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin which is in my members" (vv.22,23). The first part of this passage shows us what is possible for us, and the second part tells us our limitations because of the presence of sinful desires within our flesh. To joyfully concur with the law of God in our inner man is to wholeheartedly accept God's ways and desire to do everything in a way that pleases Him. This is our goal and intention. Perfection at this level is what is within our reach, where our heart is pure towards God (Mt.5:8). If we compromise here, by thinking that once in a while we have to give in to our desires or make other people

happy, that will show us that we are not pressing on towards perfection.

One mistake some people make is to imagine that they have reached here, and now sin cannot trouble them any more. They use various verses to convince themselves mentally that they are entirely sanctified. But then the reality of sin will hit them sooner or later, and then they are tempted to hide behind verses, redefine sin as mistakes, claim grace, etc. That is where we must be honest and realistic.

We are not going to be sinlessly perfect here. Our intentions can be pure, and they must, but due to reasons such as ignorance or weakness, we will find ourselves doing things which we did not want or intend. We have to accept this reality, and then keep dealing with it honestly if we are to really press on to perfection ([Php.3:12](#)). We will keep finding in our life things we used to do earlier without knowing that they were displeasing to God, and now we can overcome those. As we work with the word of God and keep listening to the Holy Spirit, the area of our life that needs transformation becomes bigger in our eyes. We can now purify our hearts better.

## #986 Unreasonable debates

We know that for any debate to succeed, both sides should aim at reaching the truth. This means that both sides may have to concede some mistakes or wrong ideas and also accept new ideas from the other. But our fallen human nature is such that most people are only interested in telling others what they think, and not in listening or learning from the others. Even when we watch some well known people debate theological issues, the sad thing to see is that when their turn comes, many times both keep saying what they had come prepared with. They don't seem to make any serious attempt to consider what the other has said, modify what they had wrongly assumed and adapt to the truth!

Another thing that happens when it comes to doctrinal issues in a church, is that many people take a black or white approach. For example, someone says there should not be any use of musical instruments in the church because the New Testament does not directly ask us to use them! Then the church gets divided! One leader has a particular interpretation of a verse, and anyone who disagrees has a spirit of rebellion! We may think that these are extreme examples, but these show our fallen nature.

A very common thing in discussions, especially on interpersonal matters, is that when one person says something, the other person catches on to one particular word and takes the discussion entirely in a new direction. In that process, they get completely diverted from the original subject. This is one way things turn into a quarrel and go out of control!

We may say glibly that none of us is perfect. But why don't we recognise that for ourselves and let that knowledge guide our

interactions? But our selfish, sinful nature compels us to focus our attention on other people's faults and do all kinds of things to protect ourselves from realising any of our own faults. Think of marriages where each person is trying to prove the other's faults, and becoming too busy with that to consider their own faults! Obviously, this can only cause more problems.

We have to consider two aspects of this situation. The first thing is to be able to survive in our life together with other people. The second is to make progress in our own life and to constantly improve our relationship with others. Remember, we are all of us imperfect. Just as others are causing us problems by the way they behave, we too are giving them trouble. But we can do very little to change others. We should be focussing on becoming better in our own personal life as well as in our interpersonal relationships. "So, as those who have been chosen of God, holy and beloved, put on a heart of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience; bearing with one another, and forgiving each other, whoever has a complaint against anyone; just as the Lord forgave you, so also should you" (Co.3:12,13). Much of this needs to happen in our debates and discussions, doesn't it? Let us be eager to learn.

## #987 When intellectuals stray from God

Our intelligence is God's gift to us to use carefully in order to do what is pleasing to Him. Some people neglect this, and lazily choose to 'leave everything to God' and end up with spiritual blindness, deception and slavery (Ps.32:8,9). Some others recognise their ability, exercise it, but end up with too much of self-confidence, not realising that they are becoming proud. King Uzziah began well, but when he became strong, his heart became proud. He crossed into the boundary of the priests and tried to burn incense in the temple (2Ch.26:18).

"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. Do not be wise in your own eyes; Fear the LORD and turn away from evil" (Pr.3:5-7). God is the only all-wise Person, and the knowledge and understanding that He has given us do not make us self-sufficient. We are to be subject to God at all times, and not to think that at some point in time we have become mature or knowledgeable enough to make decisions by ourselves.

Look at the study of the Bible. Can we ever come to a place where we know enough of it that we are able to independently form our opinions? Even if, by human standards, we have come to be recognised as experts or authorities on different aspects of the Bible, can we afford to forget to ultimately lean on God? Isn't the Bible the word that God has given to us to reveal Himself and His ways to us, which is then to be the ultimate reference and authority for us to submit to?

But we see people going beyond the Bible, perhaps with a sincere intention of understanding the context and the culture of the times to help us to interpret different parts of the Bible. The sad thing we see happening to many experts in

theology or biblical languages is that now they are reading many things apart from the Bible. They study obscure meanings of the Hebrew and Greek words, read up the writings of other religions, philosophers, etc., and begin to reinterpret the Bible with their extra-biblical knowledge. Slowly they move away from believing in the inspiration of God behind the Bible, and start thinking that Moses, Paul, etc., have written their own opinions or only what was pertinent to their own times. Instead of submitting to God by upholding His word, these people are sitting as experts and critics and judging the Bible and its teachings.

This was not how godly men of old read the Bible, some of them standing on their knees out of reverence to God while reading God's word. They used to think that once the Bible was clear in stating something, their duty was only to submit to it. But think of how things are now. Now people are becoming 'experts' to say that many parts of the Bible are not applicable to us, and that certain parts are mythological just like the other religious writings.

Scholarship is being considered as being more authoritative than godliness.

## #988 A form of godliness

There is a huge difference between what most religions teach and what true Christianity is all about. Through pursuing the rituals and practices of religion, people seek to appease God or get right with Him. This is also true of nominal 'Christians'. True Christianity is a real, personal relationship between us and God who made this possible through His Son Jesus taking the penalty of our sins in our place. He then adopts us as His children. Now we can talk to Him, listen to Him, ask Him questions, make our requests to Him concerning our needs, etc. He becomes very real to us, and we begin to enjoy fellowship with Him, opening our whole life to Him and letting Him guide, teach, correct, rebuke, encourage, and comfort us.

Those who only have an intellectual knowledge of Him, including many who have college degrees studying about Him, do not have this relationship. But they are able to conform to the external form of a believer because of their knowledge. Many are so impressed with such people's knowledge of Scripture and their adherence to the external forms in the church that they consider such people as being 'godly'.

In the days of Jesus, the Pharisees were those who appeared to be experts with the things concerning God. But it was very clear to Jesus that they only had an outward form without any reality inside ([Mt.23:27](#)). When they listened to Jesus, it also became obvious to them that they did not have the life that He had. Instead of seeking Him humbly like Nicodemus, they rose up against Jesus. So it happens even now.

If we ourselves have been made children of God through His grace, and we have a living relationship with Him, let us take it to heart to realise that it is easy for us also to slip back to a formal, religious life as time goes by. That can happen without

our realising it, when we get used to the external practices such as reading the Bible, praying, going to church, participating in different church ministries, etc. We may also get a name that we are godly, and we can slowly get used to thinking of ourselves like that, even when our fellowship with the Father is declining. We may think everything is fine because our activities are going on as usual.

But how are our conversations with the Lord? Is our fight against sin in our behaviour, speech and thought not as strong as it was before (Ga.5:17)? Is the Lord able to show us new things to deal with in our life that we were unaware of before (Pr.4:18)? When we have problems with other people, do we just assume that it is all their fault? We may even 'forgive' them, while we are unable to see any need for change in our own life!

Backsliding begins when our love for God cools down (Re.2:4). Then we become less careful about 'walking in the light' with God (1Jn.1:6,7). Our fall-back can then be our 'form' which we are careful to hold to. Usually it is only when that form breaks that others notice. Let us learn to be careful in our heart (Pr.4:23).

## **#989 When we hear the truth**

It took a great fall for King David to realise that sin was not just in his act, but in his very nature (Ps.51:5). When Jesus came to save us from our sins, it was not sufficient just to forgive us. He made a way for us to be delivered from the power of sin our life (Ro.6:14;1Jn.2:1). One problem is that we are only aware of certain sins that we have committed, and we don't realise that we are constantly doing many things every day that we don't recognise as being sinful in God's eyes (Ro.7:19,20). How does God try to free us more and more from

our sins? By showing us the truth about what we are doing, what He is like and how we can change (Jn.8:32). We can describe this also as God giving us more and more 'light' on His being and ourselves (Pr.4:18).

How we respond to the truth will decide if we will become free from that particular sin that this truth is exposing to us. This is where we will find resistance from our sinful nature which does not want to be put to death, and the deceptions of the Devil who wants to keep us in bondage. There are several ways we can resist the truth. The most common way is to try and deny that we have sinned. It is 'painful' for us to admit our sin and to face the guilt. So, an automatic attempt comes up from our nature to deny it to ourselves, God or other people.

But when we are not able to get away with denial, another attempt is to try and make excuses for our sin. Just like Adam tried to say that it was because of Eve that he ate the fruit, our human tendency is to look for something as a special reason why we did wrong. What we try to imply is that normally we don't do it, but that the circumstances forced us. In other words, the guilt is not ours!

Still another attempt is to say that we were justified in this particular situation for what we did. For example, people say that we are living in this corrupt world and that we have to do certain wrong things just to survive. However, whatever attempt we may make to dodge the issue, until we acknowledge our sin, salvation cannot begin (Je.3:13).

Once we recognise our sin, we have to own our responsibility for it and confess it to God to receive forgiveness (1Jn.1:9). If we have hurt other people we need to confess it to them and set it right. That is how we can respond to the truth about ourselves that we have just seen. Then we seek God for grace and understanding in order to overcome this sinful tendency

we have seen, and we allow the Holy Spirit to teach us His ways. It is then that the truth will set us free.

One danger for Christians is to receive the truth, and then treat it merely as a doctrinal explanation or theology. In this way we can become greater in knowledge and not see that as long we don't work out the truth that God has given us, it will not really benefit us. Another mistake we can make is to convince ourselves that 'Jesus has done it all' and avoid our own responsibility. Then how will truth set us free?

## #990 Is the Bible inspired?

As a new believer in Christ, one question I faced was about the reliability of the Bible. Is it just a religious book of Christians, or is it the word of God? If it is the word of God, then it is to be studied and obeyed. The Bible itself claims to be inspired by God. As I began to read books by many Christians I noticed that those who had become godly in their lives believed in the inspiration of the Bible, while others had an intellectual approach that was separate from their life. I learned about why we could believe in the the Bible as God's word, such as the same storyline that comes from the 66 books, the miraculous fulfilment of prophecies, the resurrection of Jesus, the conversion of sinners into saints, the Bible as a live communication channel with God, etc. I also learned that since God had used human authors to write His word, we need to be careful in interpreting what we read.

As I got to know God better and studied His word, I realised that imperfect men could not produce a perfect medium for God. Some Christians assume a perfect Bible without considering the part imperfect men played in writing it. Many others tend to treat it essentially as a work of man. As academic studies increase, this latter approach seems to be overtaking the devotional approach, even while they profess to believe in the inspiration of the Bible. In their studies into the meanings of words and cultural contexts, these scholars do not seem to realise that they tend to ignore the role of God in inspiring these writers.

To me it is clear that if the Bible is really the word of God which He has inspired men to write down, it is to be given the utmost respect, accepted as being true and reliable, and followed in daily life. Then the Bible becomes the basic source of truth and the ultimate standard for our life. Whenever we

have to deal with things that are not addressed in the Bible, we ought to stand with the Bible and see if we can accept or reconcile them to the Bible. But many scholars are trying to adapt the Bible to popular theories and opinions, showing that they do not think of God as being the Author of the Bible.

Look at the variety of opinions Christian scholars have expressed about the different narratives in the Bible. For example, instead of examining scientific theories about the origin of the universe and life with reference to God's narrative of creation, Christians are trying to force-fit the Bible to science, eliminating in the process Adam and Eve, the Flood, and all the miracles of God for man. On the other end, Paul's writings are depicted as his opinions coloured by the culture around him! What has happened to the idea of the inspiration of God that makes the word living for us?

Is scholarship our goal or godliness? Will we conform to the world or stand as witnesses of God to the world (Ro.12:1,2)? Or will we sacrifice our living relationship with God in order to find respect and acceptance in the world?

### **#991 Make-believe is not faith**

It is most tragic to see a terminally ill man claim God will heal him, refuse treatment and then pass away in the end. He may have sincerely believed what he said, based on what He knows God to be capable of and what He has done for others. But in the end we see that it was only a 'hope' which he mistakenly called faith. The fact that God is able to heal and He has healed many is not enough when it comes to believing that He will heal in any particular case, because there are also many examples of people who were not healed even when they thought they would.

The difference between hope and faith is that faith has an assurance (He.11:1). It is not about assuring ourselves that what we hope for will happen. But when God gives us an assurance about something, then we can be sure that it will certainly happen. If God speaks to us particularly about something we are praying for and tells us that He will do it for us, then, and only then, we can have that assurance (Ro.10:17).

Of course, we are not thinking only about healing here but anything that we hope God will do for us. Unfortunately, many preachers have given an impression that faith is something we have to produce in our mind which will then make (compel or force) God to do what we want. There are those who think that, just as we trigger natural processes by something we do, we 'activate' our 'faith' by the words we speak, and when we have produced faith, God cannot do anything but answer our prayer! Not at all! God is not a force or energy that follows natural laws, such as having to give what we want when we present faith to Him. He is a Person who decides what He should do from case to case. For example, He allowed Herod to kill the apostle James while He sent an angel to deliver Peter!

Faith has an assurance because it is based on truth and reality. One type of faith is in God as a Person whom we trust in (He.11:6). From that we are assured that He is true and real and that He will do what He has promised. But there are many things we pray for where we don't have a clear promise in God's word specifically addressed to us. We still pray because we know God is our Father who loves us and He is able to do whatever He wants. But that is not enough to give us an assurance that He will do it for us. But then, God can speak personally to us in our situation, directly in our heart or with reference to something in the Bible. For example, when Lazarus was sick, Jesus told the disciples that he was

not going to die. If we hear something like that from God, then we can have an assurance that God will do what He has told us.

But if God doesn't tell us something promising to do what we are praying for, we cannot claim to have faith that God will give us what we have asked for. We may even miss what God wants us to do from our side, thinking that God is going to do something He hasn't promised. But we can still have faith in God, and wait to see what He will do.

The more we learn to choose to 'suffer in our flesh' rather than to give in to sin, the stronger we also become able to bear the other kinds of suffering that there are in this world. We learn to overcome temptations and reduce the suffering that could have come from yielding to them. When other people sin against us, we become able to forgive and bear with them which reduces our suffering drastically, instead of harbouring anger, bitterness and malice towards them and suffering in our mind with all such thoughts.

The highest plan that God has for us is that we can partake of His nature – His character (2Pe.1:3,4). He cannot just give it to us but just as we made choices that led us to sin, He wants us to choose to behave like Him. His master plan includes using every form of experiences and suffering that we go through, and how other people mistreat us, to work this for our transformation into the image of His Son, Jesus Christ (Ro.8:28,29). Once we see this master plan that God has for us, we will be so gripped with it that we will 'happily' go through our sufferings in such a way that this can be accomplished in our life (Ro.5:3;Ja.1:2,3). This is a new and life-giving way.

## #992 Doctrinal differences, big and small

I am convinced that no two Christians can agree on every aspect of doctrine! That is because we human beings are all so different in many different ways, and our understanding is influenced by many factors. It is important that we agree on the major aspects of Bible teaching about God, Christ and God's plan of salvation for us. Even here, there is a growth that we go through, and the experienced Christian is expected to have greater clarity than a newborn child of God. We can see the apostles also going through this growth, even as they started teaching the church from the beginning with the understanding they had. It is also unavoidable that as we grow we come to see that some of our earlier ideas were wrong. A willingness to always be learning is the mark of an honest and humble Christian.

Since there will be differences of understanding concerning many peripheral issues, our aim must be to preserve our unity in 'spirit' with one another even when we cannot agree on everything (Ep.4:2,3). This comes from recognising that none of us knows it all, and also that the things that we differ on are minor or peripheral. Some of us can be 'passionate' about even the small things, and this can create some animosity towards those who disagree with us. But then we have to be able to distinguish between what are key issues and others that are peripheral. God's intention is that all of us, starting with these differences in understanding, may grow together towards a unity of 'the faith' (v.13). 'The faith' here refers to the different facets of our faith that form our unique Christian worldview. As we grow, we are expected to come into deeper agreement about these aspects too.

Do we need to always confront someone who has a different understanding on peripheral issues? Apollos was eloquent in

sharing the gospel of Christ with the limited knowledge he had, but he needed an Aquila and Priscilla to tune him up on details (Ac.18:26). But if we do not keep the focus on important issues but we get taken up with minor aspects, we may end up creating confusion and stirring up strife. Once we understand something is a minor issue, we can mostly ignore it. If we think that both of us have enough unity of understanding between us, we can consider discussing it without getting worked up on it! Can we think of a modified version of the Serenity Prayer like this? "Lord, give me the courage to help my brother get a better understanding on important doctrines, the patience to bear with him as he holds different views on peripheral issues, and give me the discernment to know the difference."

When it comes to understanding doctrine, one requirement for us to get to the truth is to have a willingness to obey what we learn (Jn.7:17). Many times the reason why people cannot 'see' the truth is that their interest in that truth is merely academic or casual. They are not seeking it as if they are looking for hidden treasure (Pr.2:4,5).

### **#993 Believers without wedding dress**

In the parable about the wedding feast, Jesus mentions a man who was thrown out of the wedding place into outer darkness because he had not come in wedding clothes (Mt.22:11-13). What can we learn from this? In another place, Jesus said that shepherds who did not enter through the gate of the sheepfold but climbed in some other way would be thieves (Jn.10:1). Though these two things are different, the idea that we can take from the second example is that there is a proper way to enter into God's presence. In the case of the wedding feast, it involved being properly dressed for the event. If we understand that participating in the marriage feast of

the Lamb is only for those who have become a part of His bride, what we need to learn is that there is a proper way to become that (Re.19:7,8). Even though the invitation is open to all, we also must know that not everyone is finally able to enter (Lk.13:24).

We must be concerned that because of the variety of ideas which people have about entering into salvation, there is a strong possibility that many who think they have become children of God are mistaken. We can imagine their shock on the final day of judgment when they find that their names are not there in the Lamb's Book of Life (Re.21:27). This may include even some who have been active in the church (Mt.7:22,23).

It is clear as we read through the whole Bible that God's goal in offering us salvation is to save or to deliver us from sin (Mt.1:21). Adam and Eve lost their access to God and fellowship with Him when they made a choice to ignore the warning of God, believe Satan instead, disobey God's command, and opt for an independent life. The salvation God offers us is meant to restore us to what God had planned for man before sin came. Can we see that if that is to happen, we have to now make choices to trust Him, obey Him and live our life according to His wishes? What happens to those who 'just believe', 'accept Jesus', 'get baptised', 'join a church', etc.?

Some people believe that when they came to Jesus, they have been robed with the righteousness of Jesus (Is.61:10). But, obviously, *'how'* they came to God is crucial, isn't it? If they have not 'entered through the gate of the sheepfold but climbed in some other way', they are going to be rejected in the way, shocking as it will be, as in the case of the guest at the wedding without the wedding clothes. What does it mean to have the wedding clothes?

The robe of the righteousness of Jesus is given to people who exchange it for their filthy garments of sin and self-righteousness. When such people hear the Gospel, they are cut to their heart as they see their sinfulness before God (Ac.2:37). They see that there is absolutely no way by which they can qualify for God. They are willing to acknowledge their sinful state to God and beg for forgiveness. They decide to turn from their sinful life to God. Without such repentance, 'faith' will be useless!

### **#994 When we aren't healed**

It is quite comfortable when we are healthy to tell others, "By His stripes we are healed," and talk to them about faith or lack of it. But what do we do when we become sick and our prayer does not bring healing? If God tells us specifically that He will heal us miraculously, we can afford to avoid medical treatment and wait for it, even when people ridicule us. But if there is no clear guidance from God in our particular situation, isn't it better to receive medical help which God has provided us, than to act as if we have faith? We may know people who have done this and died. For us to have this kind of faith in extraordinary situations, we must have specifically heard from God (Ro.10:17). Just believing that God is able to heal is not sufficient, because we can still be unsure about His will in a particular situation.

Isa.53:5 is not a clear, unambiguous promise for physical healing, as the whole passage is about the coming of the Messiah who will save us from our sins. If it was really a promise for physical healing as a part of salvation through Jesus, it would have been truly important and we could have expected a lot of clarification and teaching about it in the New Testament. But it is not there. Jesus healed many out of

compassion and because that was a sign of His being the Christ. But there is no promise of healing for every believer.

The fact remains that God is able to heal anyone, any time, miraculously. It is because we have faith in Him that we ask for healing. But for mysterious reasons, He does not heal everyone who asks, and many even die. Then we cannot say that He did not heal us because of lack of faith! It is possible that sickness has come because of some sin in our life that we have not dealt with, as in the example of people taking part in communion without judging themselves (1Co.11:29,30). It could also be God disciplining us in order to catch our attention because we have been careless with some sin even after many warnings (He.12:10).

If God heals someone miraculously, it does not mean that therefore we too will be. God allowed the apostle James to be killed by Herod while He saved Peter from the prison miraculously. There are things that God does not make clear to us. So, when we find ourselves in a difficult situation, it will be good for us to trust our Father in that we believe He knows what is best for us (Je.29:11). It will be a mark of our faith in our Father if we can pray for healing with an attitude of submission to Him whatever His will for us is going to be. If He chooses, He will heal us miraculously, or He may tell us to receive medical treatment. But when we trust Him, we believe that if He allows us to go through sickness He will be with us all through, and His grace will be our comfort and strength. If we trust Him, we will also have no fear of death standing over us as a frightful thing, because death will only take us to be with Him forever without any separation.

**#995 Are you a progressive Christian?**

For Christians who have not heard this expression before, to be progressive may sound like something good to be, meaning they are not rigid, they know how to adjust with the changing times, they can live peaceably with people of other faiths, etc. They don't want to be confrontational but peace-loving, loving, caring, thinking and accepting kind of people. But that is not what this term progressive implies now, because it is a label denoting Christians who do not want to be fundamentalists basing everything on the authority of the Bible but who want to recognise the views of experts in different fields, look at religions as alternative sources of truth, etc. Many of such progressives ultimately come to look at the teachings and life of Jesus as sources of great inspiration, but without any personal relationship or commitment to Jesus. Progressive Christians are coming up all around us, and unless we are very watchful, it becomes difficult to separate out such views from many popular Christian preaching or teaching. We must know that without a personal relationship with Jesus and a life of submission to Him, there is no Christianity.

Let us look at three examples where this progressive trend takes people. It looks very regressive to believe in God having created everything as the Bible teaches, in view of the advancement of scientific knowledge. But actually, the more scientists discover scientific facts, they are dismayed to see that their gaps in knowledge are only expanding and that their theories cannot be validated in spite of the exaggerated claims some scientists make. But we do see that it is extremely unpopular and regressive to claim that the intelligence and the fine tuning we see in the universe point away from arbitrary processes but towards an intelligent Designer and Creator.

The feminist movement started because of the general oppression, neglect and lack of recognition women faced. The fight was to earn recognition for their equality with men. But

that has now gone out of proportion to demand from everyone that men and women cannot be differentiated at all in any sense, thereby seeking to obliterate the differences there are between the genders in roles and functions. One cannot be seen as a progressive Christian without joining with the feminists in their campaign.

The sexual revolution took shape as an attempt to decriminalise and then normalise homosexual ideas and behaviour. But then it took off to giving recognition to people who define their own concepts of sexuality. Someone who wants to be recognised as a progressive Christian is compelled to accept these ideas or at least not to oppose them.

We can see that this path of 'progress' is in a direction away from the revelation of God in His word, which believing Christians have held on to for centuries. Some Bible scholars have joined this path, finding alternative explanations to Bible teachings to support their ideas (2Ti.4:3).

### **#996 If we pretend to ourselves**

There is a verse that should make us sit up and take a look at ourselves, "with all the deception of wickedness for those who perish, because they did not receive the love of the truth so as to be saved" (2Th.2:10). If we want to be saved, we must love the truth. We may even learn much truth about God, but if we don't like to look at the truth about our own spiritual condition or situation, how can we get saved? The general truth about us is that we are sinners in the sight of God. Until we realise that and admit it to God and turn away from our sinful life to living to be pleasing to God, we cannot even receive forgiveness from God. Even after being forgiven, if we do not recognise the particular sins we are falling into, we will

not seek God for victory. But because many Christian teachers are over-emphasising how God has justified us, credited the righteousness of Jesus to us and taken away all condemnation from us, many Christians are not encouraged to examine their present, actual situation.

If the doctrine we believe says that God sees the righteousness of Jesus when He looks at us, but we see that we are still struggling with sin in ordinary life, we are tempted to pretend. We can start declaring that we are the righteousness of God in Christ, etc. (2Co.5:21). If we *are* righteousness, then, of course, we cannot be sinning at the same time. And then we do not look at the actual sinfulness we can see, if we looked, in our practical life. Pretending to oneself is deceiving oneself, and that deception is stronger than even that from outside. We then shut ourselves away from any more truth that God wants to give us.

Satan is using God's word to deceive us into believing things about us that are really not true in us. What we need to do is to understand the difference between justification and sanctification. Justification is what God does in order to accept us as His children. For that, since He cannot accept us with our sinfulness, He places our sins on Jesus and credits the righteousness of Jesus to us, making our account book clear. That makes it possible for Him to accept us. But then, sanctification is the next process by which God wants to make us actually righteous in our behaviour. He does that by giving us help to stop doing the sinful things we have been doing and to start doing the will of God. This can happen only when we deny ourselves when we are tempted to do wrong, and obey God (Ro.6:12-14). Obviously, this will not happen if we are telling ourselves we are already righteous in Christ and refuse to face the reality in our life.

What we must remember is that our acceptance by God is a matter of accounts which the Judge looks at. But when it

comes to sanctification, it is about the actual way we live. God wants not only to forgive our sins, but also to save us from our sins. For this we must have a love for the truth or reality, and allow the Holy Spirit to show us where we are wrong.

## #997 What we think of ourselves

We can learn something from the mystery of God that the Gospel revealed to the Jews and the Gentiles. The Jews were shocked to learn that the Gentiles who had been outcasts till then were now welcome to a relationship with God on the same level as the Jews. The Gentiles could not believe that they who did not have any access to God at all were suddenly being lifted to the same level as the Jews! The advantage that the Jews used to have was the knowledge of God and His ways. The disadvantage for the Gentiles was that till then they had had no true idea of God and what He wanted. But now it was being made clear to both groups that the access to God for both of them was the same, based on an unmerited favour He was willing show them. The Jews had nothing to boast and the sense of unworthiness that the Gentiles had was removed. The Jews would have felt like the labourers who had worked the full day and yet were equated with those who had worked only one hour. The Gentiles were like those who received a full day's wages even though they had worked but little (Matt.20).

When we have knowledge, name, position, etc., we may feel like how the Jews felt towards the Gentiles. But then, without basing our acceptance before God on such things about which we can boast, we need to remember that it is purely God's grace to undeserving sinners like us that we have been brought near to God. On the other hand, when we consider our sins and our sinful nature and we wonder how we could find acceptance with God, we must remember that it is about Him accepting us because of His love rather than we qualifying for His acceptance.

In course of time, those who enter the kingdom of God as undeserving sinners find themselves receiving knowledge,

position, reputation, etc., something they have not been used to, and they were not prepared to find themselves in such a battle against self-righteousness or self-sufficiency. On the other hand, those who started out this journey with assets of knowledge, etc., find themselves unprepared to deal with the sin that they find in themselves! Some of them fall into sin that they never imagined would affect them, and they are caught unprepared. Others merely discover a deeper reach of sin in their inner being which others around them cannot see!

For all of us, there is a battle for sanctification, where we have to be increasingly set free from the power of self and sin in our life and become more and more like Jesus. If we rest in our knowledge or reputation or if we give up because of our self-awareness about our sinful nature, they both tend to hinder us on this path of spiritual growth. Some satisfy themselves with knowing that God has accepted them, and some others make no attempt to move forward because they are too conscious of their failures and weaknesses. But our Saviour Jesus has come to 'save' us from our sins (Mt.1:21). Let us overcome every hindrance that comes across our paths (He.6:1).

### **#998 Thus far, and no farther**

This was a phrase that God used to explain to Job how even the waves of the sea have been given a limit to how much they can come into the land. But I was thinking of another way we can use the same phrase to describe how we can limit God from entering into our life. Contrary to a popular heresy that teaches that God controls each of us in His sovereign way, the fact is that how much influence He can have in our life depends on how much we invite Him to enter and how much we yield to Him.

God's intention towards us is for our good. He created man and woman good in every way, and He also gave them good facilities and environment to live in. But when Adam and Eve sinned against God, they not only got separated from God, but their nature also became tainted with sinful tendencies. Needless to say, that is why all of us who are their descendents find our nature corrupted by sin in every way. We sin, because our nature is sinful (Ps.51:5). Now God's plan of salvation is to restore us to the relationship He had planned for man from the beginning. It begins with forgiveness for our sins, but then God teaches us to deny ourselves when we are tempted to sin in any way, in order to do His will and become like Him in our character.

When God tells us to do something, that is because doing that will bless us, and when He tells us not to do something, that is because doing that will cause us harm. But Satan, the current ruler of this world, has blinded people's minds so that they think that doing whatever they like is what will bring them happiness. Then they think that God's commandments are restrictive and designed to take away all fun in their life. They do not recognise that the immediate pleasure that sin gives them will disappear, and that they will then be left with problems that will hurt them, sometimes for the rest of their life (Ga.6:7,8).

We too were like that till we were born again through God's grace. He gave us a mind that desires to stop sinning and to do God's will. But we cannot do that without denying ourselves when temptations come. We know that denying ourselves will also cause pain. But afterwards will come joy and peace. But sometimes we think of the fun we will miss and the pain we will have to bear if we deny ourselves, and then yield to the temptations without choosing to deny ourselves.

Sometimes people say that if we are to live in this world, there are certain compromises we will have to make. Some others say that if they did something God wants them to do, some of their relatives or friends will be upset with them. Some even imagine that even if they disobeyed God, they could still manage to protect themselves from consequences. They imagine they can do what they want, and then ask God for forgiveness!

If we fall for this kind of an approach, we cannot get closer to God or let His good plans work for us in our life. Remember, we ourselves draw the line beyond which we will not allow God.

### **#999 Being subject to one another**

"Be subject to one another in the fear of Christ" (Ep.5:21). This has become a favourite verse for many preachers who want to nullify the teaching of the Bible that says, "Wives, be subject to your own husbands, as to the Lord" (v.22). They say that based on v.21, it is a mutual subjection that is required, e.g., husbands to their wives too! They also point out that v.22 in the original Greek does not have the phrase 'be subject', and that therefore, there is really no instruction for wives to be subject to their husbands! Some people are going to be very thrilled by this teaching! But what does the Bible really say?

Read it together. "Be subject to one another in the fear of Christ, wives, to your own husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife, as Christ also is the head of the church." The wife is not the head of the husband, or the church the head of Christ! So, haven't we been wrongly extending the meaning of v.21? The proper understanding is that there are different situations in life where we have to be

subject one to another. And then it goes on to take specific examples of wives to husbands, children to the parents, and servants to masters. Nobody has so far interpreted it to say that masters must submit to the servants and parents to the children also!

Wives and husbands are equally important to God, and one is not inferior to the other, but both have different functions and roles. Having accepted that, God has placed certain hierarchies and subsequent authorities among us so that life can go on smoothly. Clarity about the order of authority in every situation is needed to avoid confusion about who is in charge. The other side of authority is responsibility. For example, it is not for husbands to treat their wives without any respect because if anything goes wrong, he is the one to be held responsible. Knowing that men may have a tendency to misuse their authority, God particularly instructs them to love their wives, as Christ with the church.

The teaching of egalitarian marriages has come up from the pressure of society to oblige the feminists, and also because many husbands have abused their wives. But the question is, should we take the Bible as the inspired word of God and follow its teachings, or adapt what we will apply depending on the current mood of society? Yes, understanding the culture in the times of the authors of the Bible and the present will be helpful in understanding the application, but do we have the right to adapt God's word according to our times, throwing out what is not convenient, what society will frown upon, and accepting only things that will cause no offence? Don't we have to stay true to what God says, unperturbed by opposition by people around us? It appears that such voices of those who are willing to be pleasing to God at the cost of ridicule from others is fading down. May we remain faithful to the Bible which we claim as being inspired!

## #1000 Forgiveness

God gives us forgiveness as a free gift, as an undeserved favour, because He knows we can never earn it. But it cost Him the life of His only Son, Jesus. Jesus took our punishment and made the way for the Father to extend His mercy to us. We receive it when we realise that our sins deserve the punishment of hell, and go to the Saviour who came looking for us. Then His blood cleanses the record of our sins, and we receive adoption as children of God. A miracle of love and grace.

A mark of those who have experienced this grace is that they tend to become less and less hard on others who sin against them. Those who take pride in their righteousness, abilities or achievements may not even know God like this. But those who realise they have received mercy learn how to show mercy.

On the other hand, those who refuse to forgive others show that they do not know what it is to be under grace, or that they have forgotten how they received grace. Those who have not been born again may still be active in church and pass off as those whom many consider as godly. But their so-called godliness is merely external, lacking power. They are religious-minded, but they have not come to know God. Sometimes, even those who were once born again through grace become self-righteous again as they gain recognition, go slow on their working out their salvation, and eventually forget from where God picked them up (2Pe. 1:9). Now they find it difficult to forgive others, especially when someone has done them serious harm, and may sometimes even lose their salvation which they once had. When they decided that some did not deserve to be forgiven, they showed that they had forgotten how they themselves had been forgiven.

It is good to check ourselves now and then to see where we stand in relation to grace and forgiveness, both in our attitude towards God, and also with respect to the quickness with which we forgive others. Think of the parable of the servant whom the king forgave graciously, and how he found it difficult to forgive another servant (Mt.18:32-35). This man was indeed forgiven, but he did not see the grace the king showed in forgiving him. As a result, he lost his forgiveness.

Growing in the knowledge of God must also result in seeing ourselves more, as we stand in front of Him. Do we think we are better than others that God should take notice of us, or do we understand the value of God's undeserved favour towards us? Do we think that after we were born again, our knowledge and Christian service have now made us 'more deserving' than others, or that we still stand with God purely because of His grace (Ro.11:19-21)? If God was 'fair' towards us, we could only have found ourselves in hell. But He took away what we really deserved, and gave us eternal life which we did not deserve. Do we still find ourselves thinking that some people do not deserve to be forgiven? "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing" (Lk.23:34).

### **About the author**

Jacob Ninan has master's degrees in engineering, and counselling and psychotherapy. He retired in 2008 from the Indian Space Research Organisation. He met with Jesus while studying in Bangalore in 1972, and from then onwards has been an ardent student of the Bible, reading hundreds of Christian books, listening to hundreds of messages, and being very active in the church in speaking, counselling, writing, editing, etc. He runs the 'Comfort & Counsel' web site ([www.c-n-c.org](http://www.c-n-c.org)) where he has published a large number of

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## **About the book**

***Pointers along the way*** are brief messages on the practical Christian life, originally sent out weekly through email to those who asked for them. Now, 1000 messages have been compiled into ten volumes carrying one hundred pointers each and published as e-books. They are also available on the web site [www.c-n-c.org](http://www.c-n-c.org). New pointers are available on the Facebook page [www.facebook.com/waypointers](https://www.facebook.com/waypointers) and on the WhatsApp group 'Pointers along the way'. You can subscribe to the email distribution by writing to [jninan@c-n-c.org](mailto:jninan@c-n-c.org)