

Pointers along the way

Vol. 11

Jacob Ninan

POINTERS

ALONG THE WAY

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#1001 Hearing God's call

When we are born again, one of the things we desire is to serve God. Sometimes people think of serving God only in terms of becoming a pastor, preacher or missionary. But just as there are many parts in our human body with different functions, there are many parts in the body of Christ also to serve God. Nothing is superior or inferior to another, because God needs all of us and He assigns unique roles to us according to His choice (1Cor.12:4-7). Our aim must be to be faithful with whatever God entrusts us with, not to desire any role that someone else has, or to think that our work is insignificant. When God chooses to ask one of us to do something, let us remember that He will give us whatever we need to carry it out. One question that usually comes up in many minds in this context is, "What does God want me to do?"

There is an answer some people give that appears to be logical. They say that if God calls us to do something, He would have already given us some natural abilities or skills that we require to do that particular task. Or we may have some hidden abilities that we are not yet aware of, and so, they say, God looks at our potential and decides what we should do. Therefore, if we can identify our skill set by looking at ourselves, we can then proceed to identify what God wants us to do.

But this is just a natural way of looking at the subject. If Peter took this approach, he would have remained a fisherman instead of a fisher of men, Jeremiah a priest rather than a prophet, Amos a shepherd and a grower of figs and not a prophet, etc. Yes, many times God uses our natural abilities (which He has given us). But isn't the call of God supernatural, asking us to do some things we cannot do without a supernatural help from God? For example, if a speaker is to be effective in the church, is what he needs a Bible college degree, or an anointing from God to know what exactly is required to be spoken at different times, and to have the spiritual authority of God behind what he says? Isn't it better to say that God

does not call us looking at our potential but at the plan He has for each one of us? He told Jeremiah, "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, And before you were born I consecrated you; I have appointed you a prophet to the nations" (Je.1:5).

God calls us in different ways. Sometimes it is through making some word come alive to us as we read the Bible or as we listen to a message. The Holy Spirit may directly place an impression in our heart. We may see some need around us and become burdened about it. When we start praying over it and doing something small, we see it slowly becoming bigger and bearing fruit. Whatever way we hear God, there will be a growing assurance in our heart that this is what God wants us to do. This assurance will keep us when we face challenges or opposition.

If we make up our own plans and start serving God that way, that is bound to end up as hay or stubble (1Co.3:12,13).

#1002 God's laws on our heart

One of the promises of the new covenant that Jesus made was to write God's laws on our heart (Je.31:33). For Israel, the old covenant was through laws written on stone, concerning their external behaviour. For example, as long as they did not kill someone or commit adultery they were acceptable. But now under the new covenant, even if we 'just' hated someone in our heart or lusted after someone with our eyes, we would be guilty (Mt.5:21,22;27,28). What God desires for us is a life that is pure at the level of the heart, and He offers to help us with that. He helps us when we are tempted to sin, and then if we fall, He is willing to forgive us (He.4:15,16).

Remember, the real good news that Jesus came with is that, as our Saviour, He can save us from our sins (Mt.1:21). In the last letter that God inspired John for us, He reminds us that what He wants us to do is to stop sinning. At the same time, He knows that as weak human beings we may fall, and He has provided for that also (1Jn.2:1). But as the godly man of old, A. W. Tozer, wrote, "Every man is as holy as he really wants to be."

Some Christians have only heard of forgiveness of sins, and that is all that they look for. Sometimes we are unwilling to pay the price of having to deny ourselves when we are tempted to please ourselves, even when we know clearly what the Lord wants us to do (Lk.9:23). There are Christians who say that as long as they kept the Ten Commandments, God will be happy with them. But if we want to go beyond the laws of external behaviour and start judging ourselves concerning our thoughts, desires, ambitions, motives, attitudes, etc., we will begin to seek God for that kind of salvation. God will not disappoint us, because that is the pathway of holiness Jesus has prepared for us. Of course, as long as we are on this earth, carrying with us our sinful nature which we have inherited from Adam and Eve, we are not going to become without sin or failure. But the difference is that we will be able to see a progress from year to year. Sins that we were in bondage to earlier cannot now hold us down, and we are able to enjoy the freedom even within our mind to become more and more pleasing to our Lord. His laws are getting written into our heart, replacing the laws of sin and death we had earlier.

At this level of life, we find ourselves making choices within our heart concerning things that did not bother us before. The Lord Jesus becomes more important to us than other people, things and even our own self-life. For example, selfish desires for pleasure, attention, appreciation and applause become things we now learn to lay on the altar, and now we choose to seek for God's kingdom and His will in everything. We become content to make sacrifices in secret without drawing attention to ourselves. We pay attention to

what God thinks of us, and become content with Him, even when people misunderstand or ignore us. Our goal now is to fulfil Ga.2:20.

#1003 Who are chosen?

Some Christians believe that God has chosen or predetermined before creation itself, who would be saved and, by implication, who would not. This is supposed to be according to His sovereign wisdom. But it does not occur to them that if He did so, that He chose some people for salvation and others for condemnation, without any choice by these people, that would be unjust and unreasonable. Then people will be just like robots, without any choice, but moved by the whims and fancies of the programmer. Then we will have to live in uncertainty, not knowing clearly which group we fall into, and in fear, not knowing what this God will do next.

It is very clear that God chooses certain people and even nations to do certain tasks. This does not mean that He loves these people more than others. He chose Israel to be a model nation in the midst of all the other nations. When He says He loved Jacob and hated Esau, it was concerning this choice of Israel for this role, and not about their personal salvation. When Israel turned away from Him and went after idols, He rejected them. God does not choose or predetermine people individually for salvation. He wants all people to be saved, He presents the gospel of salvation without prejudice, and accepts everyone who turns away from their sins to the Saviour (1Ti.2:4;Re.22:7). What He has predetermined and predestined before the foundation of the world is that whoever will come to the Saviour in repentance and faith will be saved, and not about electing individuals.

We must be careful not to take verses out of context and interpret them as if they are stand-alone truths. For example, "But we should always give thanks to God for you, brethren beloved by the Lord,

because God has chosen you from the beginning for salvation through sanctification by the Spirit and faith in the truth" (2Th.2:13). It may look as if Paul is addressing individuals collectively here, implying that God chose each of them from the beginning, sort of arbitrarily. But the context is about people who heard but rejected the truth and therefore could not experience salvation (vv.10-12). And how did these people whom Paul is addressing here come to their salvation? By responding to God when they heard the gospel (v.14).

God calls people through the preaching of the gospel. When people hear it, some are cut to their heart by a conviction of their sins and sinfulness (Ac.2:37). But others harden themselves and reject the gospel. They reject the truth they see about themselves as sinners in the sight of God, and the love of God which He is offering them in spite of their sins. This choice is what makes the difference. It is a choice people make in response to the gospel which is God's way of drawing them to Him.

It is ridiculous to imagine that we are just like puppets in God's hands, where He manipulates some people to respond well towards Him and hardens most others and causes them to reject Him. Can we love such a God?

#1004 Conversion is not complete until

In the days of Jesus, when many people started following Him, He was not impressed because He knew that many of them were only after getting earthly blessings from Him (Jn.6:26). To such people He said that only when they started doing what He taught them would they truly become His disciples (Jn.8:31). He also described two types of foundations. The difference was not that only one heard the Gospel and followed Him. Both heard the Gospel, but only one acted upon what they heard from Him (Mt.7:24-27).

Even now many assume that they are believers in Jesus, and some say they are His followers. These people have distinguished themselves from others in some form so as to believe that now they belong to Jesus. Some of them believe that Jesus died and rose again from the dead, and so they have accepted Him as the true Son of God. Some have accepted that Jesus has died for their sins and accepted Him as their Saviour for the forgiveness of their sins. Some others have come to believe in Jesus because they have experienced, or they have seen or heard about miracles He has done for other people. In some sense, they all have 'accepted' Jesus.

But it is possible that many of these people have not experienced true conversion to Jesus. Some may have been drawn to Jesus in different ways, but it is possible that their conversion is not really complete.

Jesus has come to save us from our sins (Mt.1:21). His name itself means 'Yahweh saves'. The message He preached was that people should repent from their sins and enter the kingdom of God (Mk.1:15). The apostles preached clearly that people should turn from their sins to God (Ac.26:18). Unfortunately, this message is preached only rarely by modern preachers. The so-called gospel we hear nowadays is that if we go to Jesus, He will heal us, solve all our problems, and take care of us. As a result, even many of those who have come to Jesus have not repented and turned from their sins. Their conversion is, in many cases invalid, and in many other cases incomplete.

When we get to 'see' God in His holiness, we will become aware of how sinful we are, and how many sins we have committed. That is when we see that we cannot save ourselves and we need a Saviour. Then we are relieved to accept Jesus as our Saviour. Then we are willing to give up all our sinful ways and subject ourselves to Jesus. One test we can apply to ourselves to see if we have truly come to experience this conversion is to ask, "Have I made a decision to say to God, 'Not my will but Yours, Lord,' in every part of my life?" If we

know who God is, and who we are in front of Him, and still imagine that we have the option to do whatever we like, really we are not believers, followers, or disciples. Then our conversion is imaginary, false or nominal. If we choose Jesus as our Saviour but we are unwilling to choose Him as our Lord, our conversion is really questionable. We still have a chance to set things right.

#1005 Boys and girls growing up

One major challenge boys and girls face as they enter into their teenage is when they encounter an attraction towards each other. They find themselves in a transition from when they 'hated' the opposite gender to a serious interest in them. How they accept themselves and learn to adjust with others has a great part to play in their lives as they grow older. Many children obtain their information from their friends who are themselves ignorant of the best standards they need to adopt. Many parents do not recognise the struggle their children are going through in this phase of life, and fail to guide them properly.

Boys begin to 'look' at girls and get attracted towards pretty girls. Some of them go into porn to satisfy their curiosity and get hooked into it many times. Girls, on the other hand, like it when boys notice them, and they have a natural tendency to want to be noticed. So they begin to pay a lot of attention to their appearance and dressing. Some of them fall for showing themselves off by revealing as much skin as possible, or using tight dresses to accentuate their curves.

In many places, it has become such that if a teenager does not have a boy or girl friend, their friends will consider them as being somewhat odd! But the fact is that at that age they do not know enough of themselves, others or the world to make the decision about who they want to live with for the rest of their life. They do not also know what they should look for in a prospective person for

marriage. In addition, these relationships are many times held without the knowledge of their parents. As a result, many of them go through the experience of break-ups, and even many of those who marry their childhood friends end up in disappointment. What are Christian boys and girls to do?

"As a ring of gold in a swine's snout So is a beautiful woman who lacks discretion" (Pr.11:22). If a man marries a woman for her good looks, without examining what kind of a person she is inside, he gets to experience this! It can also apply to a woman who is attracted by a man's attractive smile or good salary and finds that she has got married to an abusive, self-centred, pleasure-loving man!

Many Christian boys and girls start developing friendships with unbelievers, and allow these to develop till it becomes difficult to give up, even when they realise what God warns about this (2Co.6:14). When God instructs us, what He warns against are things that will hurt us, and what He tells us to do are for our good. But under the pressure of emotions, these young people get into situations they find it difficult to wriggle out of. But isn't it better to go through a painful break-up when you realise that you are making a mistake, than to sign up for a lifetime of confusion, regret and pain?

Isn't it always safe to submit to God when He tells us what to do, than to make up our own mind or allow people pressure to control us? He knows what is good for us.

#1006 Jesus remains faithful

"It is a trustworthy statement: For if we died with Him, we will also live with Him; If we endure, we will also reign with Him; If we deny Him, He also will deny us; If we are faithless, He remains faithful, for He cannot deny Himself" (2Ti.2:11-13). This is a much misunderstood passage for many Christians, because modern

preaching has distorted the presentation of God. He is portrayed as loving, forgiving, merciful and patient, without telling us about His holiness, righteousness, justice and impartiality. As a result, many people get the idea that no matter how we live, even if we are faithless, He will only show us love and mercy, saying, "He remains faithful, for He cannot deny Himself." Look at another passage, "Who will render to each person according to his deeds: to those who by perseverance in doing good seek for glory and honor and immortality, eternal life; but to those who are selfishly ambitious and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness, wrath and indignation" (Ro.2:6-8). That is also a description of His nature. He cannot deny Himself in the sense that He cannot go against who He is.

"If we died with Him, we will also live with Him." What will happen if we don't 'die with Him' but please ourselves and do not do His will? Will we receive His life? "If we endure, we will also reign with Him." If we give up along the way? Will we still be among those who will reign with Him in eternity? We can see that in looking at it in this way we are not going against what is written, when we read plainly, "If we deny Him, He also will deny us."

If we think of it, what this false gospel of cheap and exaggerated grace has made people believe is that God has no integrity. We know people who overlook the sins of those they love and pretend as if they did not do them. Can we go on to think that because God loves us, He will simply cover our sins with the blood of Jesus and pretend as if we have not done them? Every sin is an offence to God, whether we have done it before we were born again or afterwards. Because God has forgiven us and accepted us as His children, does it mean that our sins now do not matter?

How can we have such a careless attitude towards sin if we have seen that Jesus had to go through such a painful death to earn forgiveness for us? That should show us how serious sin is to God. Some people may think that they are exalting the grace of God

when they say He will be faithful even if we are faithless in the sense that He will continue to treat us just as if we have not sinned. Whenever we choose to please ourselves and sin, when we know we are disobeying and ignoring His commandments, aren't we denying Him? What will He do then? He will deny us!

Yes, God is patient, merciful. He gives us time to repent. He wants us to stop sinning. He warns us, disciplines us. But if He sees that we are taking advantage of His goodness, His justice and impartiality will come into play (Ps.18:26).

#1007 Checking with reality

"God has not given us a spirit of timidity, but of power and love and discipline" (2Ti.1:7). Paul wrote this as a personal letter to Timothy, which was accepted afterwards as a part of the Bible. Timothy was a young man who was Paul's closest and most trusted coworker who did not seek his own gain (Php.2:19,20). But it appears that he had not overcome his timidity yet, and so Paul tells him not to continue to live on with timidity because God's provision for us is to walk with power, love and discipline.

Some people read this verse and claim that according to this they already have power, while in reality they are still struggling with timidity. Some affirm that they have a sound mind (KJV) when they should be dealing with a mental disorder. But in choosing to affirm Bible verses and override reality, they show they have misunderstood it.

There are many things like this in the Bible where God describes the kind of experience we ought to have, and what provisions He has made for us. If we do not recognise such words as the provision of God and deny what we are actually going through, we move into a world of imagination in our mind. Some of these people claim that they are accepting this by faith, even though all can see easily that

this is not true in their life. Some misquote the verse that says, "Let God be found true, though every man be found a liar." When people claim that they are fully healthy when in fact they are seriously sick, matters become very critical.

God never wants us to tell lies or pretend. If we are timid, He does not want us to claim we have power. If we have a mental disorder, He does not like it if we say we have a sound mind. If we are sick we must be honest enough to admit it and look for healing – if God does not heal us through prayer, He may heal us through doctors. Pretending that things are different from reality because we think we have faith shows a misunderstanding of faith. If we have faith that God will heal, our confession can be that God will heal us, rather than that He has healed us.

Even when we believe that the Bible is the word God has given to us by inspiring the authors through the Holy Spirit, we must know that we need to understand it correctly. All words in the Bible cannot be taken as truths simply because they are in the Bible! When the Bible says there is no God, we must see that it is what fools say and that the Bible is only making a statement about what fools say. In the same way, when the Bible describes what all God has done for us people in general and what provisions He has made, we must be able to understand them as such, and not start declaring them as if they are true in our life. God loves honesty. If we go to Him and tell Him, "Lord, You tell me in Your word that I should not have a spirit of timidity but power, love and discipline. But I don't see it in my life. What shall I do?" That is when He will help us. He will be dishonoured if we pretend.

#1008 Has God shut His eyes to our sins?

A serious misunderstanding has come into the minds of many Christians because they are not able to differentiate between two phases of salvation, justification and sanctification. God placed our

sins on Jesus and that was what killed Him. What happens when God justifies us who place our faith in Jesus is that the righteousness of Jesus is credited to us (Ro.4:5). This cancels out our debt of sin with God and allows Him to accept us. God also tells us that He will not hold our sins against us (He.8:12). But when it comes to sanctification, where we are to overcome sin, do God's will, and become more and more like Jesus, we cannot assume that God looks now only at the robe of righteousness covering us, not seeing our present condition. When preachers try to comfort people by telling them about such a grace, they make people think that our present sins are taken care of and so they do not have to worry about sinning. This is a huge mistake.

The whole goal of salvation is to save us from sin (Mt.1:21). How can we say we are being saved from sin if we are going on sinning? Paul was shocked that people would think like this (Ro.6:15). If we are sinning day by day, thinking that the blood of Jesus covers us, we have not even understood the meaning of salvation. The chances are that we have not really repented from our sins. Has Jesus only managed to forgive our sins but He really has no power as our Saviour to help us to stop sinning? No, He is able (Jude.24). God wants us to stop sinning (1Jn.2:1). God does not want sin to rule over us (Ro.6:14).

Through sanctification, God works in us through the Holy Spirit to separate us more and more from sin and uncleanness, and make us purer and purer like Him. As God works inside us, giving us a desire and strength to overcome sin and to do His will, it is our part to turn away from sin and to do the will of God. In doing this, we have to deny ourselves what we feel like because of our sinful nature, and choose to do God's will every time we are tempted (Php.2:12,13).

But we see that this is not what many preachers teach their people. Anything to do with obeying God's commandments is considered as going back under the Law. So people preach only about the grace of God and His love. But see how Paul understood his responsibility to

lead people to obedience (Ro.1:5). If our faith does not lead to obedience to God and turning away from sinning, we have to realise that somewhere along the way we have received a false faith. No repentance, no turning away from sin to obeying God, and we are happily sitting around thinking we are covered by the blood of Jesus! A large number of Christians have heard this false gospel and are deceived with a false hope.

Sanctification is a path from the bondage of sin to victory. It is not immediate as in justification but a daily process. So God has provided for forgiving us when we fall along this way as we learn to overcome (1Jn.2:1).

#1009 Free from the wrath of God

"Much more then, having now been justified by His blood, we shall be saved from the wrath of God through Him" (Ro.5:9). Why is it that this verse sounds very strange to modern Christians? Why are they shocked to hear that God might have wrath towards them? The gospel which they heard and on which they have based their salvation talked only about the unconditional love of God which was waiting there to accept them as they were! This God who has forgiven not only their past sins but also their future sins – how can He be angry with them? When the blood of Jesus Christ is covering them, what can He be angry with them about? At best, Paul must be talking about the heathen or the Old Testament people. This is the age of grace, isn't it?

In short, this is the single biggest flaw in the preaching of the gospel these days that is causing all problems for the individual Christians as well as churches. People are not being told the full truth about God and His dealings with people but only a selected number of features that are aimed at attracting people to God. Who doesn't want a God who always loves them, who gives them all the goodies they want, who protects them from all harm and who has promised

to prepare mansions for them in eternity? But, the saddest part is that a large number of people who imagine they have accepted Jesus and think that all is well with their souls are deceiving themselves, because they have not entered through the True Gate into the sheepfold of the Good Shepherd, but have been smuggled in some other way by preachers who wanted more numbers in their churches (Jn.10:1;7).

The old-fashioned evangelists used to begin by telling people how their sins had caused them to come under the wrath of God (Col.3:5,6). It was only then that the good news about God's remedy for us was presented. One reason then for people to want to get right with God was to escape His punishment. Then it made sense to them that the love of God had made a way for them by taking the punishment on Himself through His Son dying in their place on the cross. This caused them to cry out for salvation first, before they received the assurance that their sins have now been forgiven. The relief of feeling their burden getting lifted was real. This was real conversion.

But what is happening now? People are apparently able to walk into God's kingdom swinging their hands, as they are, and continue the same way of life as before, revelling in this overflowing love of God that does not waver or cease! Lives are not transformed. The best that happens in many cases is that they become a bit religious, following church activities. But the fact is that they are still on their way to face the wrath of God because they have not really turned from their sins to their Saviour!

Where do we stand individually? What kind of a gospel are we preaching? Isn't it good to be honest before God rather than to fake it? This may be your warning from God.

#1010 Really, what is repentance?

Salvation, as it comes out from the Bible, is about being saved (delivered) from sin (Mt.1:21). We have all sinned, and we need, first of all, to be saved from the guilt and the consequent punishment for our sins. But to be really saved from sin must also include God helping us to stop sinning (1Jn.2:1). God has provided for our forgiveness by His Son bearing the punishment in our place (v.2). His Holy Spirit works inside us to give us the desire to stop sinning and to start doing the will of God, and also by empowering us to overcome sin when we are tempted (Php.2:12,13).

We receive this salvation when we turn to Jesus and trust Him as our Saviour. But to turn to Him, in the first place we must realise that we are sinners in God's eyes and that we stand under His wrath (Ro.5:9). It is when we realise we are unable to save ourselves no matter what we do that we turn to Jesus by faith. At this point, this faith in Jesus and the salvation He has come with causes us to repent. Without this repentance, our faith is not complete. John the Baptist, Jesus Himself and the apostles afterwards tell us to repent (Mt.3:12;4:17;Lk.24:46,47).

The most common word used in the New Testament for repentance is metanoia which means 'changing one's mind and purpose, as the result of after knowledge'. When a man knows that he stands under the judgment of God for all his sins, he changes his mind and attitude about sin. He feels a deep sorrow about the sins he has already committed, along with a strong desire not to sin again. He also wants to set things right with people whom he has wronged, as far as possible. This change of mind shows everyone around him that his faith in Jesus has begun to change his whole attitude towards life. If this repentance is missing, his faith itself becomes questionable (Mt.3:7,8).

This repentance leads him to seek God for help to stop sinning. That is a lifelong process where he begins to receive victory over sins in a

progressive manner. There are some sins he can give up immediately, and others that take longer. In some cases of sin, it may even take a very long time for victory to come. As such, repentance is not about ceasing from sin immediately, but wanting to stop sinning for which he constantly seeks God. As we continue to go this way in life, God shows us more details of where we have been sinning without knowing it, and leads us increasingly towards victory.

Some teach that repentance is 'works' that we try to earn salvation with. Of course, not. Repentance is our sorrow over our sins and a strong desire to stop sinning. "For the sorrow that is according to the will of God produces a repentance without regret, leading to salvation, but the sorrow of the world produces death. For behold what earnestness this very thing, this godly sorrow, has produced in you: what vindication of yourselves, what indignation, what fear, what longing, what zeal, what avenging of wrong!" (2Co.7:10,11).

#1011 Real freedom from law

Some Christians react strongly when they hear someone talking about something we must do, saying that we must not go back under the Law! For them, grace is totally incompatible with any law we might talk about. But this is because they have not understood the difference between working for our salvation and working out our salvation. Working for our salvation is a way of following some rules or laws and hoping to qualify for salvation. This is what most religions teach, but no one can actually find salvation this way because our sins are irreconcilable before God (Ro.3:20). Salvation can only be a free gift from God that we can receive through faith (Ep.2:8,9).

When we come to God through faith in Jesus as our sin bearer, the Holy Spirit gives us a spiritual new birth. This places a new spiritual law within us (Ro.8:2). This is a shift from walking according to

external laws to govern our behaviour, to walking according to the law of the Spirit within our heart and mind (v.4). So, we do not become without any law but under a superior law from the Holy Spirit who can now teach us higher and deeper aspects of life that are pleasing to God. For example, we move from merely avoiding adultery physically to becoming free even from lusting after someone in our mind (Mt.5:27,28).

As the Holy Spirit guides us, we find ourselves wanting to give up many things we used to do before, and having our mind set on newer and higher things (Co.3:1). We now work out through our behaviour what the Spirit is teaching us inside (Php.2:12,13). So, there are many things we ought to do now and other things we must stop doing. In no way are we without a law! We follow the law of the Spirit because we want to be pleasing to the Lord, and not because we want to earn His favour or because we are scared of His wrath. That is the difference between working for our salvation and working out our salvation.

There is another wrong way some Christians react against any mention of the laws of life or about things we must do. They imagine that all laws are restrictive to our freedom, and that Christ has set us free! But the freedom in Christ is from the bondage to the corruptions of our sinful nature and not a freedom to do whatever we like. We must not forget that we have a sinful flesh to overcome even after we are born again, and that if we just 'follow our heart' and do what we like, we are most likely to end up in sin which will certainly hit us back with its consequences (Ga.5:17;6:7). There are deceiving spirits at work these days that tell us to break out from under laws and become free. But the law of the Spirit is the law of life (Ro.8:2). The more we learn to come under this law, the more we can enjoy the fruit of the Spirit (Ga.5:22,23). In placing ourselves under obedience to the laws of God we become free from bondages and able to enjoy the highest level of life. That will give us the best

and greatest form of pleasure and satisfaction.

#1012 Our inner quest

All of us in the body of Christ do not have the same tasks, and we focus on doing the work of apostles, prophets, evangelists, shepherds, teachers and many others, as the Lord tells us to. Here, our work and therefore our outlook cannot be the same, and we must not compel others to follow us. But as children of God, we all have a common goal that we need to pursue in our heart at all times. Unfortunately, many of us are not even aware of this and therefore we end up neglecting this.

"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" (Ep.4:13). Actually, the purpose of all the 'ministries' mentioned above is to lead everyone towards this goal (vv.11,12). God is also trying to cause everything that happens to us to make us like Jesus (Ro.8:28,29).

After we repent from our sins and receive forgiveness and acceptance from Jesus, if we have truly repented from our sins, our goal is to stop sinning and become more and more like Jesus. This is not really about the external things we do, which we may control for even wrong reasons such as the fear of being seen by others, but the choices we make in our heart every moment when we are tempted. Even if we imitate Christ externally, that is different from becoming like Him inside. This is a quest that must be going on inside us all the time which other people cannot be aware of, but which our Lord sees. This was the same quest that Paul also had (Php.3:7-11).

Why is it that we don't count all other things as loss and run after this? Two reasons. We may not know what pathetic condition we are in at present and we may not see what God has stored for us. Right

now, while we are here in this life on earth, everything about us is corrupted with sin – what we do and say, how we think, make plans, our feelings, attitudes, values, etc. – and we are far from being Christlike. God paid the price of the blood of His Son in order to purchase us from the domain of darkness, given us the Holy Spirit to work in us, and still there is a whole lot of corruption that is affecting every part of our life. But since this is the hidden part of our life, we have a sinful tendency to be more concerned about what people notice about us.

To be faithful here is to be faithful in secret. Here we have the opportunity to be faithful even in the little things, and to receive the crown of life, which is nothing but the life of Christ in us. But even when we are serving God we have a tendency to neglect what is going on inside us and think about achievements, name, applause from people, etc. Aren't selfishness and self-centredness some of the big giants we need to be free from if we are to become like Christ who gave Himself for us?

If we love Jesus, and have come to know what He suffered to show His love for us, let us learn how to show Him our love in return (2Co.5:14,15).

#1013 Stay out of danger

"For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but wanting to have their ears tickled, they will accumulate for themselves teachers in accordance to their own desires" (2Ti.4:3). All through church history, there have been many types of wrong teachings that turned people away from the narrow path of God that leads to life. Writing in the early days Jude felt a strong need to warn the church to stick with the faith that had been handed down to them (Ju.3). 'The faith' here refers to the doctrines that were given to the church that set the framework for the personal faith of individuals. Some people imagine that as long as they have their

own faith, they can leave doctrines to experts. But we need to know the right doctrines so that our lives can go in the right direction (Ps.119:105).

As the world goes openly downwards in sin, and we see it creeping into the churches increasingly, one way to safeguard ourselves is to stick to the teachings that have been accepted and followed by godly people in the universal church through the centuries. These people have sought to live their lives for God, following the path they saw in the word of God. For this, they depended on the guidance of the Holy Spirit who had originally inspired the authors of the Bible to write down what God gave them. We realise there are small differences in the understanding of all these people, but it is not difficult to see that they all agreed on the major and significant aspects of the ways of God. Such people can be discovered if we look for them.

We can also see that there are many others who mostly use their intellectual strength to interpret the Bible. We must keep in mind that mere intelligence cannot comprehend the things of God (1Co.2:14). The more people lean on their own understanding, the farther they will go from the kingdom of God (Pr.3:5). What we ought to look for when we come across the teachings of different people is 1) if it has served to make them more like Jesus in character, and 2) if following it will lead us towards a truly godly life (1Ti.6:3). If we look around, we can see that simple people who sought after greater godliness of life have received greater understanding of God than what highly esteemed scholars have achieved. We can even see Bible scholars bringing out new and strange teachings that may be impressive but which have no use to lead people towards godliness.

"Thus says the LORD, 'Stand by the ways and see and ask for the ancient paths, Where the good way is, and walk in it; And you will find rest for your souls. But they said, "We will not walk in it"' (Je.8:16). Ways of godliness have not changed with time and godly

people have all taught them. But theological concepts have seen many changes, and scholars who want to be in the front line of their profession keep up with the times. Our safety is to stay with the proven paths and keep our eyes fixed on walking closer to Jesus daily (Pr.22:28).

#1014 Trust vs. understanding

Our Christian life is a relationship with our Creator that begins through our trust in Him as the One who took the punishment for our sins through the sacrifice of His Son, forgave our sins and adopted us as His children. We know that this was through His love that we did not deserve. We can never do anything to earn this favour from God. When we enter into this relationship, we must not forget that it is not primarily a matter of understanding doctrines or accepting certain facts such as how Jesus was born, died and rose again from the dead. These facts helped us to know who God really is and how much He hates sin but loves us, and then we responded by putting our trust in Him.

Then we begin to face many types of situations that attack this trust in God. They can be painful situations in our life that make us wonder where God is, why He is not helping us, why He is not doing for us what He has done for others, why our sincere prayers are not being answered, etc. These are truly difficult challenges we are forced to face. We don't start with unbelief or lack of faith in God, but we may slowly find ourselves doubting God.

Another set of challenges to our faith is that we cannot find answers to genuine questions concerning God's nature, His word, His dealings with people, etc. Many intellectual people come on the scene and try to prove that we cannot rely on God or His word. We are genuinely perplexed even though we don't want to stop believing in God or even to question Him.

"Trust in the LORD with all your heart And do not lean on your own understanding" (Pr.3:5). Let us realise that as created beings we cannot ever expect to understand everything, and that if we try to base our decisions of life on our limited understanding, we may go wrong completely and not even realise it. This happens to many Christians when they face difficult situations in life which they cannot figure out. They come to conclusions about God based on what they think, which seem to be perfectly reasonable to them, and give up their faith in God. To them it looks very clear that they cannot trust in God because of certain things that look wrong to them. What they don't realise is that if only they had sought God, without leaning on their own limited understanding, He would have taught them and given them understanding. But depending proudly on themselves takes them away from God.

God had told Adam and Eve that if they ate the forbidden fruit they would die. But instead of trusting Him and His word, they chose to lean on their own understanding which made them to imagine that the fruit would be good for them (Ge.3:6). They gave up their trust in God who had created them, and chose to depend on their own limited understanding.

We will remain unable to figure out many things, but let us not doubt God or what He has revealed. If we can take the position that God is trustworthy, we can run to Him as to a fortress and stay safe with Him.

#1015 Only acknowledge your sin

Imagine what could have happened if, instead of putting the blame on Eve, Adam had admitted that he had disobeyed God's commandment and sinned against Him! World history would have been different! But when we look at our own nature, we can see where it has come from. The Pharisees put Jesus to death instead of admitting that their religion was hollow and superficial. Haven't we

also been guilty of frantically looking for some excuse or explanation for our sin instead of quickly admitting that we have sinned against God?

This is at the root of our problem when it comes to getting into a clear relationship with God and growing in our likeness to Jesus. If we can't recognise and admit that we have actually sinned in what we did, how can we get forgiveness? How can we expect to become different next time?

"Only acknowledge your iniquity, That you have transgressed against the LORD your God And have scattered your favors to the strangers under every green tree, And you have not obeyed My voice,' declares the LORD" (Je.3:13). Instead we say it was not serious like murder or adultery, everybody does it, God knows our weakness, it was because of our tiredness or other circumstances, it was because another person provoked us, etc. As long as we look for ways to excuse our sin or to justify it, we cannot even receive forgiveness. If we confess our sin, acknowledge what it was, God is willing to forgive us. But do we expect Him to keep on covering up for us even when we tell ourselves that we have not actually sinned in our particular situations?

"But You offer forgiveness, that we might learn to fear You" (Ps.130:4 NLT). The reason why God forgives us is to give us another chance to learn not to sin against Him. But what will He do if He sees that we are not really interested in stopping sinning but only in avoiding the punishment? He will place us under the category of people who are only interested in God to the extent that He will give them a good life. They want Him to provide everything for their life and look after them. But they do not know what it is to fear Him to fear to sin against Him, disobey Him, grieve Him, disappoint Him and also to face the consequences.

"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"

(Ro.8:13). "Because of your stubbornness and unrepentant heart you are storing up wrath for yourself in the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God" (Ro.2:5). If someone goes on sinning assuming on the availability of forgiveness, there is really no conversion in heart, and he may still be a child of the devil who is deceived into thinking that he is a child of God (1Jn.3:8).

Our journey towards victory starts by acknowledging our sin whenever we fall. Whether our sin is big or small, whether it is in action or only in our thought, whether other people know about it or not, sin is sin.

#1016 The rich and the needle's eye

"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" (Mk.10:25). This is because he has such confidence in his money to handle every situation that he does not see any need for God. It is difficult for him to imagine that there are things that are beyond him and that his life itself is dependent on God. But until he comes to see that he is really so small that before God he is nothing, he will not reach out to God.

It is not just wealth that gives such feelings to people. Awareness of their intelligence, position, power, name, etc., can do the same thing. Think of how educated, intelligent men consider themselves to be capable of thinking their way through any challenge that comes their way. When they look back at the way they have been able to handle things in the past, they feel confident that they can manage things. They too do not reach out to God.

A part of this confidence is about their understanding of God. Based on the exposure they have had and the thoughts they have spent on this subject, they think they have got God figured out. Even many Christian intellectuals fall into this category. The result is that they are not seeking after God, wanting to know Him better, checking out

their own understanding, etc. They don't read the Bible much because they think they already know it enough, they are not regular at church because they think they know exactly what to expect, and now they are into looking at other religions, philosophical positions, arguments against the Bible, etc., seeking to expand the horizon of their knowledge. But they are stagnating spiritually, and they do not realise that under the pressure that is coming on them from every side to compromise their faith, they are in great danger of backsliding.

"But the Spirit explicitly says that in later times some will fall away from the faith, paying attention to deceitful spirits and doctrines of demons, by means of the hypocrisy of liars seared in their own conscience as with a branding iron" (1Ti.4:1,2). The second part tells us how Christian preachers are themselves becoming influenced in their preaching when their eyes are set towards bigger churches, greater collection, best-seller books, TV shows, etc., and become no more constrained to keep strictly to the truth in their preaching.

Whether we are preachers or listeners, don't we need to go earnestly after the knowledge of God and His truths, rather than the latest fashions in doctrines? We will do that when we are not oozing with self-confidence, but we recognise our fallenness, the smallness of our knowledge, our gullibility, and the crookedness of deceiving spirits to lead us astray.

If we want to get closer to God day by day in our personal life and to understand His ways better and more clearly, there is no other way than to spend time and energy seeking them (2Pe.3:17,18). We may be backsliding without realising it.

#1017 If you can't forgive someone

Suppose there are people in your life whom you cannot forgive for what they have done. You feel your anger rising whenever their memory comes up, and you recollect the immensity of the hurt and damage they have caused you. You may be still suffering from the consequences of their acts. You think it will be totally unfair to let them go free, and you are hoping that they will get the punishment they deserve. Your sense of justice has been violated, and you feel right about feeling this way about them.

But then suppose God were to look at you like that, with His sense of justice towards every sin you have committed. As the holy, righteous and just Judge of heaven, His righteous anger will rise up against every sin on your record. He will be totally justified if He were to throw you into hell. You will have no excuse to make.

But what has happened is that God's love for you has overcome His sense of justice (Ja.2:13). His love for you wanted to find a way to show you mercy and forgive you even though your sins deserved judgment (Ro.6:23). He met the requirements of justice by punishing your sins, but instead of you meeting that punishment, His Son took it on Himself (Jn.3:16). God could not have overlooked the demands of justice and just forgiven you. His love took the cost on Himself. He suffered in order to forgive you. You receive that forgiveness freely when you admit to Him that you deserved the punishment and accept that it was Jesus dying in your place that earned you this free forgiveness.

When you receive this forgiveness as an unmerited favour from God, you lose your right to judge others. You can no longer say they deserve punishment, because the moment you take that position towards others, your own forgiveness comes into danger (Mt.6:14,15). You cannot ask for forgiveness as an unmerited favour from God if you are not willing to show that same favour to others.

If you are truly a child of God, you will be aware of your status as one whom God has forgiven only because Jesus has died in your place. Without taking that humble position before God, God cannot forgive you. If you have taken that position, you will also know that it was an act of sheer grace from God, something you don't deserve. Then you will no longer be able to imagine that you can deal with others in the way you think they deserve. If you cannot forgive someone because they do not deserve it, it must be clear to you that with that same way of thinking you cannot ask God for your forgiveness.

If, in spite of all this understanding you still decide that you cannot forgive someone, your own status as a child of God becomes questionable. You do not seem to have actually gone through an experience of seeing how your sins appear to God, repenting from your sins and gladly receiving the offer of salvation from Jesus. Unfortunately, there are many like that who just imagine that they are Christians but who have never been born again.

#1018 Milk and meat

To be born again is only the beginning of the Christian life. This itself is a great privilege that God offers to all people as an unmerited favour from Him, by paying for our sins with the death of His Son Jesus Christ. But the greatest promise from God is that we can be free from the corruption of sin in our life and be changed to become godly, partaking of His character (2Pe.1:3,4). But comparatively few Christians have heard about this, because the gospel they have heard told them only about the starting point. As a result, they remain as spiritual babies, knowing only starting level doctrines such as forgiveness of sins, going to heaven, Bible reading, prayer, etc. The Bible refers to this as only being able to drink milk and unable to eat stronger food such as meat. "For everyone who partakes only of

milk is not accustomed to the word of righteousness, for he is an infant. But solid food is for the mature, who because of practice have their senses trained to discern good and evil" (He.5:13,14).

Notice two things here. The first is that solid meat is referred to as the word of righteousness, and the second is that the process of eating and digesting this meat is referred to as getting our spiritual senses trained to discern good and evil. Milk doctrine tells us how God forgives our sins and clothes us with the robe of the righteousness of Christ. But meat is about actually partaking of that righteousness in our practical life. The whole purpose of salvation, in a nutshell, is to deliver us from the bondage of sin and to transform us into the likeness of Jesus. Being born again is just the beginning, and the rest of our life we are to progressively experience the transformation of our character and behaviour.

Having received forgiveness of sins as an unmerited favour from God, many Christians assume that God will do the rest of the work of transformation also without anything they have to do from their side. This is a huge mistake. Before we were born again, we walked according to our flesh with all its sinful desires. We were dead towards God. But when we are born again, God gives us a new heart and His Spirit because of which we become dead towards sin and alive towards God (Ro.6:11). Now we have a new mind that does not want to sin but wants to do the will of God. If someone does not have this mind, he is not yet born of God (1Jn.3:8). With this new mind, God expects us to make a choice whenever we are tempted, to deny ourselves and to do what God says. We have to choose between what we desire, and what God wants. That is what makes the difference between people to make one more godly than another.

This word of righteousness is not popular. People denounce it by calling it legalistic, anti-grace, etc. But what we have to do is simply to choose to do what is right in God's eyes, in every practical situation. It is not difficult to see where people will go if they are not

willing to exercise their senses this way.

#1019 "I don't have enough faith for that"

God is almighty and for Him there is nothing too hard to do. But that does not mean that He will automatically do whatever we ask Him. He will do only what He considers to be the best in our situation. That is the wisdom of our Father who will not give to us, His children, whatever we foolishly ask for.

But one serious mistake is to imagine that if we have faith, God is compelled to do 'according to our faith' (Mt.9:28,29). So people try to make themselves believe that God is going to do what they want, and once they think they have 'sufficient faith', they expect that it will happen. At the root of this mistake is the assumption that our faith has the power to accomplish what we want, misunderstanding Mt.9:22. When we go through the gospels, we can see that sometimes the words of Jesus have to be understood as things which He said in specific contexts and not as universal truths. In the above example, He was only telling the woman that what she wished for was going to happen. Let me explain.

For us to obtain something from God, we must believe that He is able to do it (He.11:6). Unbelief restricted Jesus from doing miracles (Mt.13:58). But such faith is not enough. It must also be God's will to do it. When we believe that He is able to do what we ask for, we tend to think that God will do it because we have faith, or that He has to do it according to our faith. But He will only do what pleases Him, and no one can manipulate Him (Ps.115:3). Many times when we pray we do not know His particular will in our situation. We trust in His love and wisdom, and hope He will do what we ask for. If, when we pray, He gives us an assurance in our heart that He is going to do it, then we can be sure that He will do it (Ro.10:17). One mistake is to assume that since we have faith that God is able

to do what we have asked for, He will do it, even when we have not heard from Him saying that He will do it.

Sometimes when people say they have faith, they only mean that they believe God is able to do what they want. They have not really heard from Him and do not really know if He will do it. Some other people believe that their faith has the power to accomplish what they want, and they think they have sufficient faith to receive this particular thing. But when it comes to something bigger, they think their faith is not big enough for that. What that shows is that their confidence is in the amount of faith they have accumulated for themselves, and that is not faith in God. If their faith was in God, obviously they could not have thought that there was any limit to what He could do.

If God has to do whatever we have 'faith' for, will He not be like a car which we steer? If it is our faith that will make things happen, where is the place for God? This is just like some people thinking that their words have power to make things happen. Power belongs to God alone (Ps.62:11). We created beings must surely recognise that.

#1020 Playing tricks with our mind

We have to admit to ourselves that we have a tremendous capacity to deceive ourselves, by making ourselves believe what is convenient to us, irrespective of whether it is true or not (Je.17:9). It is possible to convince ourselves that we are right, when we are actually wrong (Pr.21:2). Doesn't this give us sufficient reason to want to allow God's truth to search us? It is also good for us to listen to feedback we get from others.

One thing some Christians do when they are sick is to tell themselves that God is going to heal them. They know God is able to heal and also that He has healed others miraculously. That is true.

But can they be sure they will be healed, unless God tells them specifically? Many people do die of sickness even after they pray. We cannot be sure by claiming to have faith and holding on to it (Ro.10:17). Claiming faith blindly is a way of escaping from the reality that is very painful for people to face.

Some imagine that they are doing a great act of faith when they commit some problem into God's hands, and think that now it is God's responsibility to resolve the matter. Committing things to God in the sense of recognising His almighty power and love, and becoming willing to do whatever He tells us is a good thing. But that is different from passing the responsibility to God for dealing with the problem and unconsciously ignoring our own responsibilities in the matter. For example, people refuse to take the treatment God has made available to them, do not take responsibility for disciplining children or handling money, etc. We must not run away from what we need to do, by passing things on to God.

Young people ask God to help them find the right person to marry. But when someone comes along their way, they just assume that this must be the one whom God has sent, and do not make the effort to find out what kind of a person this is. People whom we meet in life are not all from God, are they? But it is easier to 'trust in God' in this way than to make the effort to check things out to see if this is according to God's revealed will.

Many Christians think salvation is entirely by grace, and that we must not do anything on our part but leave it all to God. "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" (Ti.2:11,12). If we don't deny ourselves when we face temptations and make the choice to obey God's ways, can we really expect that God will mystically transform us into His image?

Self deception is at work. God's plan of salvation for us is that He will forgive our sins, and give us power to deny ourselves and make the choice for God every time we are tempted, in order to make us to be the kind of people He originally wanted, who will trust Him, depend on Him and do everything He tells us. It is easier to leave things to God thinking we have faith.

#1021 Part time Christians

I am not referring here to nominal Christians who go to church and assume they are Christians. There are those who believe in Jesus as their Saviour, who have been born again and become children of God, and attend Bible studies, prayer meetings and evangelistic activities, who have given Christ control only over a part of their life. If their life can be pictured as a house with many rooms, all rooms have not been submitted to the Lord but are still managed by their own desires, ambitions, preferences, likes and dislikes, etc. Here they make their own plans, follow their own rules and standards, and set their own priority for things. The sad fact is that they think this is the normal Christian life.

There could be several reasons for this. One is a wrong impression they have that being born again is everything, and that God will take care of everything else after that and take them to heaven one day. Another is a false distinction that people make among children of God thinking that only a certain class of people are privileged to enjoy a deeper life with Jesus because of their position in life, Bible knowledge, etc., while the rest have to make do with an 'ordinary life'! But Jesus wants everyone to become His disciples who will follow Him and obey everything He tells them (Mt.28:19,20:Lk.9:23). That is how they are to become like Him.

For some people, there are other considerations. Some do not want to have to suffer any loss in their earthly life, in terms of money, position, comfort, popularity, ambition, etc., as a result of standing with Jesus. Their willingness to stand with Jesus is there only to the extent that they can have these also. Some others are not willing to give up certain pleasures even when they know they are displeasing to God. For some people, the people they love are more important than God, and they would rather displease God than displease them (Mt.10:37).

All these people have not yet seen Jesus as the Pearl of greatest value for whom they are willing to give up all else (Mt.13:45,46). As a result, they have not become willing to choose Him above everything else. They are apparently only thinking in terms of their earthly life, because they believe that their life in eternity is taken care of by their faith in Jesus. But they are losing all the blessings they could have had in eternity if only they had been faithful (Ja.1:12). Imagine their regret when they stand before the Lord and see the opportunities He had given them and realise how they had squandered them away for passing pleasures (He.11:24,25).

We all struggle against temptations, and the only One who has been a complete success is our Lord. As we carry with us the remnants of our old sinful nature, we may face failures even in the future. But that should not stop us from setting our heart on complete loyalty and faithfulness to our Master in every area of our life in our life's race without giving up in trials (He.12:2).

#1022 When godly virtues clash

You must have come across parents who protect their erring children because they think they love them. Love is a great virtue. But if we allow love to overrule honesty or justice, we go wrong, don't we? In the above example, such a misplaced love will harm the children in the long run. But we can see how this tendency is in our sinful flesh

to justify the wrong we do by thinking of some virtue we are supposedly trying to uphold. We are deceived into thinking that we are right even when we are doing wrong, because at that moment our focus is on a real virtue. In the process, we ignore or negate another virtue.

The great thing about God is that He is always, simultaneously, a personification of all virtues. The Bible says that He is light and there is no darkness in Him (1Jn.1:5). There can never be anything wrong or bad about anything He does. But until we think deeply about this, we cannot really understand the implications. That is why many people question God about, for example, how a loving God can allow His children to suffer injustice or how He can discipline them.

Christians have heard that God is love. We associate His love with His mercy, patience, compassion, kindness, etc. But along with that, at the same time, God is also completely holy, righteous, just, sovereign and impartial. For example, He could not ignore His justice on one side and forgive our sins, saying He loves us. He had to punish our sin because of His justice and righteousness. But in order to demonstrate His love and mercy towards us, He took the punishment on Himself through His Son dying for us (Ro.5:8). Thus He was both just and loving at the same time. Do meditate more on this with reference to different questions we may have about this.

A father who denies his child's wrong behaviour before the teacher, thinking that this is how he shows his love for his child does not understand that we cannot deny one virtue in order to follow another. What a child learns from such a father are 'cheap grace' and 'forgiveness without repentance'! But if the father accepts the truth about his child and makes amends with the teacher, he can show his love to his child by standing with the child in the shame and humiliation that come from it. On one side he can take on himself the repercussions such as paying a fine or expenses for damages. On another side he can take time to explain to the child what was wrong with his or her behaviour, teaching the child how to

behave in the future in such situations, disciplining the child and explaining how that discipline is coming from true love and a desire for the child's eternal good.

By nature, all of us have different inclinations towards some virtue more than other virtues. For example, some find it easier to overlook someone's faults, while some others cannot let go of a sense of justice. We have to learn not to remain 'natural' in this way, but to become balanced in order to become really godly.

#1023 Take responsibility

We know that there are many false teachings going around, but sometimes we can also detect some common trends underlying some teachings. Let us look at four different examples in which we are tempted to absolve ourselves of the responsibility that God has given us. God has created us in His image, and He expects us to be responsible people who live in such a way that we will be ready to give an account to Him for everything we do with our life (Ro.14:12).

As a result of the sinful inclinations we have in our flesh which we have inherited from Adam and Eve, we are tempted every day in many ways to please ourselves and sin against God (Ja.1:14). After Adam and Eve sinned, they did not own their own responsibility for what they had done, and blamed each other. If we do not admit our sin, but try to find excuses or justifications for it, we cannot even receive forgiveness for it. The starting point for our salvation is when we acknowledge our sins and our sinfulness and admit our need for the Saviour (Je.3:13).

After God forgives us and adopts us as His children, He expects us to take responsibility for making the right choices in every situation in

our life. We need wisdom to know what to do, and the strength to do it. Isn't it our responsibility to ask God for these and then finally carry out His will? Many times we see that our situation has come up because of foolish decisions we have made in the past, and then we have to take steps to repent and start doing the right thing. But a great deception here is to just pray and tell the Lord about our situation and expect Him to take the responsibility for miraculously sorting out our problems!

Another thing that looks very humble is to tell our pastor about our problem and then expect him to tell us what to do through his prayers. Some of us are also willing to join in fasting and praying for this. But if we are not willing to do what we need to do from our side to humbly recognise our sins and mistakes, correct them, and learn new ways to deal with life, we are likely to be disappointed with the pastor's prayers! I see this often when couples come for marriage counselling, but instead of changing their old ways, they expect that just because they have come for counselling, they will experience healing in their marriage.

Haven't you heard people complaining about a teacher being unfair and not giving them proper marks, a boss showing partiality and not giving them promotion, people cursing them or doing black magic against them, etc., as the reason for not doing well? Isn't this a common way of shaking off their own responsibility for doing well in life, and blaming everything, everyone and God Himself for all that goes wrong for them?

Of course we ought to ask God and people for help because none of us is sufficient for oneself. But then that does not excuse us from taking responsibility for what happens in our life and doing what we ought to do from our side!

#1024 Purifying servants of God

If each one of us who has received grace, the unmerited favour from God, for cleansing from sin and adoption as His children, understands the value of this grace in contrast to what we truly deserve, we will have the desire to serve Him with the rest of our life (2Co.5:14,15). Each one has a particular role and task in the body of Christ, and it is our desire to fulfil those, whether they are among the publicly recognised positions such as pastors or preachers or not (1Co.12:18). But we can become more efficient and successful in carrying out our individual tasks only as we allow the Holy Spirit to purify us within (2Ti.2:20,21).

We get a great example from Paul who made himself willing to do whatever was needed to draw all people to the Saviour. He was able to do this because he was not serving God in order to gain anything for himself (1Co.9:16,17). His heart was so free from seeking his own that if he could exchange his life to bring others to salvation, he was willing (Ro.9:3). We cannot serve others if we do not value them and we care only for ourselves.

The more we seek things for ourselves while we imagine that we are serving God, our ministry will only be a powerless, superficial one. If our goal is to impress others with our spiritual gifts or natural talents, we may even succeed in that. But our so-called ministry will have little value in eternity (1Co.3:12,13). Sometimes we may get into ministry with all sincerity, but as money, pleasure or fame begins to draw us from within the ministry, we can fall, unless we are aware of such possibilities and watch out against them.

Satan tempted Jesus by offering Him the glory of the world, if He would just bow down to him. We will also be tempted to compromise godly values here and there in order to please people or to avoid offending them. We may go for what is politically correct or what people like rather than what will save them from sin or folly. If we want to serve God, we have to look out for the trap of wanting to

be pleasing to man (Ga.1:10). Our goal is to always keep a good conscience before God rather than to create a good name before people.

Comparing ourselves with others can be a great snare. But we are different members in the body of Christ. We have different functions to carry out and accordingly our abilities and opportunities will also be different. Rather than compare oranges with tomatoes, we must learn to be faithful to the particular work God has entrusted to us. But here is where a great work of purification has to be going on inside us, where we must constantly learn to keep the focus on our Lord and what He wants us to do, rather than what will bring us accolades from people.

The reward of serving God is knowing that what we do will have an eternal impact on people, even if they themselves may not recognise that or we do not get any earthly benefit. We need to be purified from serving ourselves to serving God and His people.

#1025 There's no standard Christian experience

None of us is big enough to hold all of God's wisdom, and so He gives a little to one and a little to another (1Pe.4:10). He has made it both possible and necessary for us to learn from one another in order to grow in wisdom, and it is the church as a whole that is meant to manifest the many sided wisdom of God (Ep.3:10). The experiences each of us goes through are different, and from all of our different experiences we can get more glimpses of the glorious wisdom of God.

Let us take some simple examples. One man is healed of his sickness supernaturally, and it is now as if he was never sick.

Another man takes a long time getting healed through medical help. Still another man does not get healed but dies of his sickness. An addict goes to Jesus and his transformation is instantaneous, and he does not have any desire at all now for the thing he was addicted to. He has a great testimony for the miracle working power of God. Another addict is delivered through a long battle with his lusts through which he learns many spiritual lessons and gets purified too.

One mistake is for us to insist that what we have experienced is what everyone must look for. Another mistake of the same category is to expect that we must experience the same thing that someone else went through. God could have made things in a standardised manner which becomes simple to understand. But when the same God lets different ones of His children go through different experiences, things may appear to become complicated. But that confusion disappears when we look at the bigger picture of God dealing with mankind rather than with a set of individuals. Once we become aware of this possibility of diversity of experience, our prayers, expectations and conduct become open to learning. We then need to have a personal relationship with God and allow Him to mould us into the particular form that He has designed for us. We will be forced to look at the wider world around us beyond our small world where we sit like a frog at the bottom of a well!

No two of us are alike, and our experiences are also varied. There is nowhere else where this becomes obvious more than in a marriage! But our foolishness becomes evident when we insist on our own ways and refuse to consider that there could be an equally valid viewpoint for our spouse, which our situation demands that we ought to understand. If we go about it in the right way, we will grow in wisdom!

When it comes to Christian doctrines, there is so much dogmatism coming out of the assumption that we are right and there is nothing more to it. Job made fun of his friends who kept insisting that anyone going through a calamity must have some sin behind it,

saying that they seemed to think that there was nothing beyond their wisdom and that when they died, wisdom would also disappear (Job.12:2). Certainly we cannot agree with everyone, but we can remember that maybe they know something we don't!

#1026 When we are not so sure

There is a joke about men that when we are at crossroads and want to find someone for direction, we should not ask men because men will guide you even if they don't know the way! Men's ego does not allow them to admit that they don't know something! But the fact is that none of us knows everything, and we never will. We are only puny little people who have been given the grace to know certain things, but then we should not get the idea that we know it all.

This is something we must remember when we study the Bible and especially if we teach from the Bible. Obviously the Bible does not tell us every detail about all things which we may be curious to know. God has revealed to us what we need to know now about God and our salvation, and He has stored many things to show us later (1Co.2:9). Naturally, there are also many things that we will never know while we are on earth, and other things we may know only in hints. We have to learn to accept the situation that we cannot be certain now about many things. We may have our opinions about what might be true, but if God has not chosen in His wisdom to reveal some things to us we cannot be dogmatic about them. "The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but the things revealed belong to us and to our sons forever, that we may observe all the words of this law" (De.29:29).

When God showed the prophet Ezekiel a valley of dry bones and asked him if they could live, his answer was truly humble (Ez.37:3). Is this how we would behave when it comes to different questions about the Bible, God, life, etc.? Think of how confidently people state their opinion about who the sons of God were in Gen.6 or

when the day of the rapture will be! Churches get split on differences of opinion like these!

On one hand we must be clear about what we believe concerning God and our salvation. We need to be sure that the God we worship is the true God and we are in a right relationship with Him. We need to keep learning about what is pleasing to Him in order to do them. But then there are also many things which the Lord has left vague about which we must not be argumentative. We can even discuss our different opinions among like-minded people in order to improve our understanding. But let us acquire discernment to see what we should boldly stand for even if it comes to losing friends and what we should avoid fighting over.

This discernment is not easy. We tend to consider what we have understood or received as a revelation as being precious to us and we find it difficult to see why some others are not as excited about them as we are. In our excitement, we may forget to check how really important our understanding is in the overall scheme of things, and end up making minor issues look major. Church history is full of splits, and many of those splits have been following differences of opinion about minor issues. Let us be quick to listen, slow to retaliate and slowest to break fellowship.

#1027 Taking up our cross

Sometimes we hear of some misguided Christians carrying a wooden cross, and some others even being nailed to a cross. That is their understanding of 'taking up the cross'. Jokingly or otherwise many people refer to some difficult person or situation as a cross they are forced to carry! But these are not what Jesus meant. "And He was saying to them all, 'If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross daily and follow Me'" (Lk.9:23). This is what everyone must do if they want to follow Jesus in order to learn from Him and become like Him. This is something for us to

do daily, and it is what we must do voluntarily and not out of necessity or compulsion. What exactly did Jesus mean?

The primary purpose for which Jesus took the form of a man and came here was to make the way for our salvation (Mt.1:21). Many people are impressed by the miracles He did and think of Him only as Someone to go to when they are in trouble. But those who have seen themselves as sinners in the sight of the holy God, repented and received the salvation that Jesus brought, now want to stop sinning and to become like Jesus in His character. When they step out to do this, the greatest hindrance they find is from within themselves, from their sinful flesh (Ja.1:14,15). If we want to be saved from the power of sin in our life and to experience victory over sin, what we need to do is to learn to deny ourselves what we are tempted to do from our flesh in order to do the will of God (Ro.6:12-14).

This was what Jesus meant by telling us to deny ourselves and take up our cross daily. He is not asking us to deny ourselves and become ascetics, but to deny ourselves so that we can instead do the will of God (Ga.2:20). This is the picture of all who have chosen to follow Jesus as His disciples as those who are crucified with Christ. If the world draws us to it with its offer of glory, we hold ourselves in the position that we are crucified to the world (Ga.6:14). There is also the picture of those who have crucified their flesh with its desires so that the desires will not be fed and the flesh will eventually die (Ga.5:24).

Many Christians wonder why after they have put their faith in Jesus and committed their lives to Him, they are still finding themselves overcome by their fleshly desires. When we are born again, God gives us a new heart that does not want to continue in sin. As we saw earlier, we are now expected to stop yielding our body to its desires but to present it to God as instruments to do His will in different ways. For this there are two steps. Just as in the example of entering the narrow gate and then walking along the narrow way,

we have to begin by making a decision to keep our flesh on the cross, and then we have to deny ourselves and take up the cross daily in order that every single fleshly desire is put to death (Ro.8:13). What happens if we just put our trust in Jesus and wait along for Him to save us?

#1028 Leaving it to God

We have all sinned. We did that by making wrong choices when we were tempted. Now God is willing to forgive all our past sins and give us a fresh start by teaching and helping us to make the right choices. That is what it means for God to save us from our sins. We are wrong if we thought that salvation meant that whenever we sinned we could get forgiveness.

God does not compel anyone to be saved. He has prepared the way to forgive anyone who wants, by paying for the sins of the whole world (1Jn.2:2). That was why Jesus who lived a sinless life died, when all our sins were charged to Him. Anyone who accepts this sacrifice of Jesus, admitting his sins and acknowledging that it is something he does not deserve but a free gift from God, will receive forgiveness and cleansing for his sins, and adoption as His child (Jn.1:12).

If this was an act of giving up our sinful ways and entering into a life with God, represented by the narrow gate that Jesus spoke about, we must not forget that there is a path we must walk on for the rest of our life, following Jesus, which is what the narrow path is about (Mt.7:13,14). On this path we continually make choices, between what God wants us to do and what we feel like or what people of the world or the devil tell us. That was what Jesus said about denying ourselves and following Him (Lk.9:23). That is how we will be increasingly set free from the power of sin that used to hold us earlier and become transformed to become like our Lord and Master.

There are many people who leave this all to God because they recognise that by themselves they will be unable (Jn.15:5). While it is good to realise that we cannot overcome sin without help from God, we should not jump to conclude that therefore we need not do anything! If we think so, we will passively wait for God to do miracles in our life without doing the part we have to do. Our part is to make the right choice when we are tempted by anything displeasing to God (Ja.1:14).

When we are tempted to tell a lie, aren't we expected to choose not to? When we don't feel like forgiving someone? When we feel like watching a little porn? Teach someone a lesson? Did we think that when we pray and ask God to help us, suddenly we will stop feeling the temptation? God is working inside us giving us teaching, correction, encouragement, strength, etc., and then when we are tempted, we are expected to say no to that temptation and choose the way of God (Php.2:12,13). But many people who ask God for patience, for example, are disappointed with God when situations arise which tend to cause them to be impatient! No, these are training opportunities God gives us to learn to choose Him and His ways above everything and everyone else.

The devil likes to fool us into thinking that we are being very humble when we transfer our problems to God in prayer. When God answers our prayer by giving us wisdom and strength, aren't we supposed to take the right action?

#1029 Falling away from God

There are some who believe that once a man has been born again and become a child of God he cannot lose his salvation. When they see someone fall away from faith they say he must never have been really born again in the first place. That is sadly true in many cases nowadays! That is because of the watered down preaching of the Gospel which is aimed at increasing the number of so-called

converts for the success of a ministry. Many people are given to believe that they have become children of God merely by accepting certain ideas or repeating a prayer. They have never experienced the supernatural work of God for salvation in their lives. Then when the going gets tough, they get offended and 'fall away from God'. But since they were never really with God to begin with, these are not really cases of falling away.

To be born again is an absolutely necessary experience for entering into a relationship with God (Jn.3:5). The usual sequence is like this. When someone hears the story of Jesus, the Son of God, he becomes aware that he is a hopeless sinner who stands accountable to the holy God who created him. That is when he hears the good news that Jesus has come and died on the cross in order to pay for the forgiveness of his sins. Filled with the conviction of his own sins and the hope that Jesus will forgive him, he repents from his sins and receives Jesus as his only hope of salvation. At this point God forgives him by washing his heart with the blood of Jesus, wiping away the record of his sins, and giving him a new heart that does not want to sin any more (Ez.36:26,27). The Holy Spirit begins to dwell in him and give him the strength to overcome temptations and to do what is pleasing to God. If someone does not experience the work of salvation from God in this way, he cannot afford to assume that he is a child of God.

This entry into salvation is like entering through a narrow gate, and walking with God for the rest of life is like walking on a narrow path (Mt.7:13,14). Salvation is not just about entering, but also walking through life towards the destination of becoming more and more like Jesus. From God's side He promises that He will preserve His children from being taken away from Him (Jn.10:29). But that alone does not ensure that we will not fall away from our side. We who have a free will with which we choose to repent and place our trust in Jesus have also the possibility to later choose to leave Him (Ro.11:20). That is why God gives His people many warnings in the New Testament to take heed lest they fall, for example, Heb.3:12.

Jesus warns about those who receive the seed of the Gospel which begins to grow in their lives, who later fall away when the pressures of life come upon them (Mt.13:22). Some people lose faith when they cannot figure God out philosophically or cannot explain some experience. Isn't this happening all around us? But if we cling on in faith, we can be assured of staying on with God.

#1030 The spiritual Christian vs. the natural

In one sense, it is easy to decide between good and evil. So, when a choice comes between what God wants and what our fallen nature wants, it is obvious in most cases. But when it comes to choosing between what we naturally like, where there is nothing wrong involved, and what would be a spiritual thing to do, many Christians have not even entered into that plane of life. Many are used to thinking only at the level of the Ten Commandments and still imagining that they have become spiritual. There we are told not to commit physical adultery, but Jesus tells us that a spiritual man will not even look at a woman with desire (Mt.5:27,28). Let's not put away this idea saying that it is unreachable, but realise that Jesus tells us to live like that because He knows that we have the potential to live like that. He is not teasing us. What we need for that kind of life is the power of the Holy Spirit (Ro.8:13).

When a spiritually-minded young man considers marriage, he looks beyond the pretty face to her heart to see if she will be the right companion for him in his journey with Christ and the ministry he is called to. There is nothing wrong with a pretty face, but for this man, his spiritual life takes priority (2Co.5:9). Those who choose to live at the natural level will always ask if there is anything wrong with what they do, rather than what would be pleasing to the Lord.

A spiritual man allows the word of God to penetrate deep into his life, questioning not just about right and wrong, but also at the motives and intentions of the heart (He.4:12). When he makes

decisions based on such matters, he may come into conflict with other Christians who are only living at the level of right and wrong. They call him super-spiritual, legalistic, unrealistic, living in an imaginary world, etc. But the approval of his Lord is his comfort and strength, helping him to face opposition and misunderstanding.

"Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, so that we may know the things freely given to us by God, which things we also speak, not in words taught by human wisdom, but in those taught by the Spirit, combining spiritual thoughts with spiritual words. 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. But he who is spiritual appraises all things, yet he himself is appraised by no one" (1Co.2:12-15). There are many different types of Christian leaders who impress others with their charisma, but they are only operating at the natural level, using earthly wisdom, knowledge, techniques and natural skills. Only those who have open spiritual eyes can see through their hollowness, while many are impressed with their 'great' natural accomplishments. One simple way to check is to see whether they are walking towards godliness and are leading others along (1Ti.6:3).

#1031 Leaders who won't judge!

God places us in different leadership positions – parents over children, teachers, pastors, etc. We know that these are not positions for making us feel important, but where God entrusts us with responsibilities to take care of those He has given to us. Sometimes this responsibility requires warning them about danger or correcting them when they go wrong. If we don't judge the situations as they come by and decide to take appropriate action, people will not get the help they need. If our children are getting

mixed with friends who can harm them, is it not our responsibility to tell them why those friends are bad and why they should stay away?

But many times, especially leaders in churches, take the position, they should 'not judge'. They will say, "We can't judge. Who are we to judge?" In that sense, who are we to judge? We have given up our right to judge other people when we received grace, unmerited favour, from God. God has put aside His right to judge us and shown us mercy, and now we cannot judge anybody in the sense that we cannot pass judgment on them (Mt.7:1,2). We have no right to send them to condemnation, we can't despise them, we aren't superior, we can't cast them out.

But we ought to have judgments as those who are leaders over others! We have to judge (form opinions) according to righteous judgments, Jesus said (Jn.7:24). If we are not willing to do that, we are failing the people in our care. Of course on a personal level, we have no right to judge anybody. But when we say, "We cannot judge, who are we to judge," we are mixing up our personal position with our leadership responsibilities. We have no right to judge as individuals but we need to make judgments and guide those we care for. Here we are not working on a personal level. We are working officially in that responsible position and people who are under our care depend on us to make the decision and guide them.

When a godly man stands up to preach, he is aware of his past sins, the corruption of his sinful nature, and he may be also aware that some of his hearers also know about them! But it is still his responsibility to pass on what he has heard from God and the lessons he has learnt from his own foolish experiences to tell the people so that they can be spared from making mistakes. Think of a father who has been delivered from drinking. Should he think he has no right to tell his children to avoid drinking, or that he has all the more responsibility to warn them?

Paul told the young Timothy, "Do not receive an accusation against an elder except on the basis of two or three witnesses. Those who continue in sin, rebuke in the presence of all, so that the rest also will be fearful of sinning" (1Ti.5:19,20). Can we apply this, for example, to leaders who have been exposed publicly, and then warn people in our care to take some lessons from that? Or should we say, "Let us not judge!"? Bad examples are there to learn from (1Co.10:6-10).

#1032 God's word and our opinions

Some Bible studies, in order to encourage participation, invite everyone to look at different passages and share together what they think about them. This has its value as far as participation goes, but we must not forget that the word of God is not open for private interpretation. The Holy Spirit who inspired the authors to write things down had some specific things which He wanted to convey (2Pe.1:20,21). Our own opinions are not important there, but only what God has in mind.

This helps us to keep our focus on hearing from God, as we meditate on His word. Our primary aim must be to receive some more 'life' from God through His word, rather than to increase in knowledge. That is the reason why God has given us His word (2Ti.3:16,17). References to Hebrew and Greek words or to commentaries can all be done with this primary aim before us.

Our primary focus must not be on discovering 'new' things, but hearing from God what we need to hear at different times, whether it is for comfort, encouragement, guidance or correction. Unlike people in Athens who came to listen to Paul, we must not be looking for hearing new things from the Bible as 'revelation' (Ac.17:21). They could be our own fanciful ideas. Such ideas can 'tickle' people's ears but be of no use in sanctification. People who read or hear the word with a view towards growing in godliness develop ears to pick

up God's voice, while others around them are looking for entertaining words from gifted speakers (2Ti.4:3). Sometimes it may be a simple word from an 'uneducated' person what God is sharing with us!

Preachers and writers especially are tempted to extract something novel or out of the ordinary from even mundane passages in order to impress others. I remember once hearing a one hour sermon from, "When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy." God is certainly not happy with such gimmicks, and neither will discerning listeners be. The apostle Peter did not mind sharing the same message again, at the risk of people telling him they had already heard it, because he was keen on reminding them again and again lest they forgot (2Pe.1:12).

In one sense, there has never been a time like now when the word of God is freely, widely and easily available for anyone to read. But at the same time, there is a 'famine' for a word from God that will edify and build us up (Am.8:11). Yet, it is still the time of grace when anyone can reach out to God and hear from Him the word that leads to life (Re.22:17). But, to be able to discern between the word from God and the words from man or even deceiving spirits, we must be clear in our mind what we are looking for. We must not be afraid of 'judging' what so-called 'prophets' speak, if we have to preserve ourselves in the truth (1Th.5:20,21). Even doctrines of demons are going around churches and there is no shortage of the opinions of man. In the words of Jesus, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear."

#1033 The goal that drives a Christian

It is good to examine ourselves and see what things are driving us in our life. Some Christians like to imagine that they have surrendered their life to God and that now it would be wrong to make plans or decisions about their life. Hasn't God said, they say, that He will

complete what He has begun? The problem is that such people may not even realise it if they are being driven by a pursuit of money, fame, pleasure, people's opinions, etc. Their philosophy tells them that since God is in control over their lives, He will take responsibility for every detail of their life and they don't have to worry. Actually, when we say that God is in full control of everything, we must not think that it is He who is responsible for everything that happens. That will make Him the author of evil too! No. He is in control in the sense that He is able to do whatever He wants, and He is able to intervene in man's affairs whenever He wants. But since He has created us with a free will and He allows us to do whatever we want to the extent that He permits, we are responsible for a lot of things that happen, especially for the things that go wrong.

We mustn't fool ourselves; whatever we do will have consequences, good or bad (Ga.6:7). It is because we are the ones who choose what we do that we are rewarded or punished for what we do (Ro.2:6). Our sins are not automatically 'covered by the blood', but all of us have to give an account to God for what we do (Ro.14:12). This is not a loose statement, because Jesus clarified that we are going to be held responsible even for any careless word we speak (Mt.12:36).

But to live in fear of punishment or seeking reward is a low way of living. God has granted us a much higher privilege of being recognised as His children, making us co-heirs with the Lord Jesus Christ, and of becoming transformed into His character (2Pe.1:3,4). To see what kind of a privilege this is, all we have to do is to look at what we were before God gave us His grace, and think of where we would be if we had not come to the Saviour.

What God wants to do for us, in this life, is primarily to save us from our sins and make us like Him in our character. If we agree with this, but then go on to living our life the way everyone else lives, pursuing money, pleasure, greatness, etc., we cannot expect to automatically receive what God has planned. We will only reap what

we have sown. "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" (Ro.8:13). If we don't put down the sinful desires that come up from our flesh and instead do the will of God in our daily life, we will not become like Jesus, just because we believe. When God works inside us and gives us understanding and power, it is we who have to actually do what is pleasing to Him (Php.2:12,13).

This itself will not happen unless we set our mind on it, and run towards that destination.

#1034 I will never leave you

This is a promise God gives as Father to those who have become His children. Yet this is a point on which many children of God are attacked by the Devil at different times. Remember how he tried to tempt Jesus to wonder if He was really the Son of God. Just as Jesus did not budge a bit from His knowledge of who He was, we need to learn to hold unwaveringly to God's promise that He will not leave us.

There will be times when we are aware of our sinfulness in the presence of the holy God. It will then be natural for us to wonder how God can tolerate us, let alone be close to us. But that is only one part of the facts. When we came first to God through faith in Jesus, God not only transferred the guilt of all our sins to Jesus, but He also robed us with the righteousness of Jesus (Is.61:10). It is the spotless record of Jesus that God looks at when He thinks of us. If that was not enough, there is Jesus our Advocate standing at the right side of God and pointing out to Him the atonement He has made for us (1Jn.2:1,2).

But we know that even after we have become children of God, we can still fall into sin for various reasons. God was aware of this when He made His plan for our salvation. So in addition to making

provision for a complete wiping of our record of sin at the time of our coming to faith, He has arranged for us to confess each sin as we become aware of it and receive forgiveness (1Jn.1:9). This provision is available to us even if we have backslidden from God for a period and want to get back to Him.

It is possible that even when we know these things, we feel unclean at times when the Accuser throws his fiery darts at us from unexpected sides. The above facts of God's forgiveness and acceptance are still valid even though we don't feel as if they apply to us. This is where we have to train ourselves to hold on to facts in spite of feelings that tell us otherwise. Remember, we cannot control our feelings directly, but we can change them by redirecting our thoughts to cling on to facts.

Sometimes we may feel that we have disappointed our Saviour who gave Himself for us. It seems logical for us to assume that He would have given up on us. But God is not like us. Jesus has come to save us, and not to judge us. Think how ridiculous it would be if our Rescuer sees our struggles and goes away because we failed to follow one of His instructions! No. He has come to rescue us from sin, and as long as that is not complete, He will continue to work in us. He will not forsake us.

What we have to watch out for is if we allow ourselves to be attracted to the things of this world and give up following God. There may be times in the middle of storms that we give up our faith in Him. Even when we turn away from God, He will come pursuing us without giving up. But if we take this for granted and continue to ignore Him and go after our own pleasures, it will not be God who gives up His promise but we who choose to leave Him.

#1035 Called and chosen

When we hear the Gospel, that is how God calls us. Not everyone who hears, responds to God in faith. In the parable of the king who invited many people for his son's wedding feast, many of them did not turn up! Then Jesus gave us this warning, "For many are called, but few are chosen" (Mt.22:14). And then, is responding to the Gospel enough? "Those who are with Him are the called and chosen and faithful" (Re.22:14). After God forgives us and adopts us as His children, He expects us to be faithful to Him and walk according to His ways. It is to save us from our sins and to help us to live lives that are pleasing to Him that He gives us this call. Jesus goes on to say, "Because lawlessness is increased, most people's love will grow cold. But the one who endures to the end, he will be saved" (Mt.24:12,13).

Sad to say, for many Christians, this kind of a presentation of the truths of the Bible seems to be harsh, legalistic and going against the Gospel of grace. They have only heard of the love of God, His mercy, grace, longsuffering, etc., and verses such as the above do not seem to fit with that impression of God. They have heard about God as coming with unconditional love and offering us eternal life! Now they don't like someone telling them that they need to be faithful, along with the hidden threat that if not, they may get lost again. The problem is that many have not actually heard a full presentation of the Gospel of the love of God to undeserving sinners in a way that calls them to repentance and faith in the Saviour. Many have been told that Jesus is waiting to come into their lives, solve all their problems, heal all their sicknesses and bless them with wealth, prosperity, promotion, the pleasures of life, etc.

The blood of all those who have been deceived like this by attracting them to Christ with this kind of offers will be certainly on those preachers who falsified the Gospel for the sake of money or fame (Ez.33:6). The reason why many people are leaving the church and going back into the world after coming in recently is that they came to realise that they have been conned into accepting Jesus with false promises which they now have seen through!

God's love is offered to all people. But all are not therefore saved automatically. Only those who see themselves as sinners, repent from their sins and give their lives over to Jesus and follow Him in order to obey Him will receive forgiveness. This is all involved in putting our faith in Jesus. If they fall into sin afterwards, they need to confess it to God and receive forgiveness, implying that they do not want to sin again (Ps.130:4;1Jn.2:1). God watches every part of our lives (Pr.15:3). If we neglect to be faithful to God in every part of our life, including our thoughts and motives, and assume that God's grace will cover us and His love will finally take us to heaven, we deceive ourselves (2Ti.2:11-13). God cannot deny His holiness or righteousness.

#1036 Faith is a much misunderstood word

Someone says that he has faith that God will do something for him, and another says he does not have enough faith for something. The implication is that it is their faith that is going to make something happen. That cannot be what Jesus meant when He told a woman that her faith had healed her (Mk.5:34). We know this because we know we have no supernatural abilities to make things happen. Then we can see that what Jesus meant could be that it was because He saw her faith that He did this miracle for her.

If we get this wrong, we will try to prepare enough 'faith' in our mind so that we can make what we want to happen. We try to make ourselves believe that it will happen, by keeping away doubts from our mind and keeping away from people who can cause us doubts, by repeating to ourselves that it is going to happen, by holding on tenaciously to some verse in the Bible that seems to show that God will give us what we want, etc. It is this process that makes us conclude that we have enough faith for certain things and not for others.

Instead of connecting faith with what we want to happen, if we think of it as trusting in God, will that not make a huge difference in our life? We trust God when we get to know Him as who He is and His character, and then know that we can rely on Him and His word. He is not only almighty, but He loves us and His wisdom is sufficient to deal with everything in our life. Then we become willing to obey what He says and also to leave decisions to Him. Then instead of making our plans or deciding what we need, we are willing to learn from His word which things are pleasing to Him and which not. In any given situation, we can ask Him what we should do, and also for help to do it. God may guide us in different ways, and sometimes He knows that we have enough understanding to make our decision, and then watches us to see what we will do (Ps.32:9).

Growing in faith is not to increase the quantity of our faith to do more difficult things, but to learn to trust God in all our situations. Faith is to be in God, as a Person, instead of in the quantity of our so-called faith. We can think of how as children we have held on to our father's finger and let him lead us. We trusted our father and knew that he knew what he was doing and where he was taking us. None of us would have thought of our 'faith' as for getting things from him.

What would be the result if our understanding of faith is not correct when it comes to salvation through faith? Is our confidence in Jesus as our Saviour, or in our faith? Is it in our knowledge of the story of His life, death and resurrection as if believing that will be acceptable to God? Or, have we come face to face with Jesus, seen His holiness and His love for us, seen ourselves as sinners before Him, turned away from our sinful lives and placed our trust in Him to be our Saviour? Salvation is personal, and takes place through this relationship with Jesus.

#1037 Entering into God's rest

What God did in the Old Testament was a shadow of what He really wanted, and we need to understand that it was a part of a step by step unveiling of God's plan of salvation for man. It was Jesus Christ who brought forth the reality that the shadow pointed to (He.10:1). What was seen as the Sabbath rest actually stood for something deeper than not doing any work for one day. "For if Joshua had given them rest, He would not have spoken of another day after that. So there remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God. For the one who has entered His rest has himself also rested from his works, as God did from His. Therefore let us be diligent to enter that rest, so that no one will fall, through following the same example of disobedience" (He.4:8-11).

For us under the new covenant, it is our privilege to enter into the rest of God now, which was not available to people earlier. The first step is to cease from our own efforts to become acceptable to God, and instead to receive salvation as an undeserved gift from God. We find rest by realising that we have no condemnation for our sins because our punishment has been borne by the perfect Lamb of God when He died on the cross, and knowing that God has robed us with the righteousness of Jesus which gives us perfect acceptance before God (Is.61:10). Another part of this rest is to realise that God has a plan for our life, in an overall sense and also about how we must live moment by moment. We can learn to live by submitting to God instead of making our own plans for our life apart from God and doing whatever we like. As we submit to Him we find peace and rest for our mind (Ps.37:5).

What gives us this rest in our mind is from knowing that we are safe in God's love. He has accepted us fully knowing all about us, about our past and also our present situation. He knows what is best for us, and He is almighty to do for us whatever is necessary (Je.29:11).

We experience this rest as we walk faithfully before Him. That is why there is an exhortation for us to be diligent to enter this rest. One mistake many Christians make is to think of all that God has

provided for us and to assume that they will automatically experience all of that. But we must understand this, that Adam and Eve sinned when they made a choice to ignore what God said and to follow a step that they thought was going to make them happy. Now, in order for God to take us back to Himself, He has to not only forgive our sins that stand between us, but also to help us to become able to make the right choices now.

Once we understand this, it will be clear that there is a part that we have to do in order to experience God's rest. We have to first repent from our sins and turn to Jesus to receive free forgiveness. After that, for the rest of our life, we must find rest by doing the will of God in every part of life as we learn from Him. For this, we have to deny to ourselves what we feel like doing (Lk.9:23).

#1038 Are we getting stagnant?

Sometimes lack of clear teaching or wrong teaching gives people the impression that they are safe and secure after whatever experience they have had already, and they lose motivation for pressing on and making further progress. Perhaps the most common mistake people make in this way is to assume that now that they are 'saved', everything is OK. They have been told that they have 'eternal life' that cannot be lost, and they imagine that this means that how they actually live will have no consequences. Some others are thinking that Jesus who has started a good work in them will make sure to complete that work in them, and that they only have to believe in Him.

If our salvation cannot be lost no matter what we do, what is the meaning of, for example, "Take care, brethren, that there not be in any one of you an evil, unbelieving heart that falls away from the living God" (He.3:12)? It is very clear here that we can fall away from God if we allow unbelief to take over our heart. Or, if Jesus is going to do everything for us and we only have to believe in Him, all

the exhortations we have in the New Testament to do what we need to do from our side become meaningless! For example, if we just believe that Jesus has given us rest from our works, what does it mean to be diligent to enter into that rest (He.4:11)?

We know we have to see ourselves as sinners in front of the holy God and go on to receive the salvation that He is offering freely to those who believe in Jesus as their Saviour. But then, how do we actually receive this salvation except by turning away from our past sinful life, and learning to depend on the forgiveness that the Saviour has brought through His death on the cross?

After God has made us right with Him by His grace and through our faith, don't we have to follow Jesus and become more and more like Him? If this has to actually happen in our life, don't we need to deny ourselves whenever we are tempted to please ourselves and then actually do what God wants us to do (Lk.9:23)?

Don't we need to start this journey with Jesus by getting baptised in water and identifying with His death and resurrection (Mt.28:19,20)? Don't we need to wait on Him to fill us with the Holy Spirit and receive power to do His will (Ac.1:8)? When the Holy Spirit gives us different spiritual gifts, don't we need to recognise our responsibility to function in that capacity and serve Him as members of the body of Christ (1Co.12:7).

As we live our lives under God's watchful eyes, don't we become aware of more and more sinful, selfish tendencies in us that we were unaware of earlier, and don't we need to respond by overcoming them as we receive that light?

As children of God, don't we see our responsibility to reach out to other people, share the Gospel with them, and help them in the different parts of their life as God burdens us and equips us?

What an active life we have, and then how can we afford to get stagnated?

#1039 Entering into light

"For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life" (Jn.3:16). Some preachers give the impression that this is a one-time experience that settles us into eternal life. But is eternal life only about living forever, (remember, those who go to hell also live there forever), or is it about partaking of the divine life (2Pe.1:3,4)?

The Bible calls this experience as coming into light from darkness (Jn.12:46). Darkness represents ignorance and sin where sinners hide their secrets, and light stands for life before the eyes of God where everything is open and nothing is hidden (Jn.3:20,21). In this sense, entering into life, or light, is not just about confessing our sins and receiving forgiveness, but it is also about letting more and more of our life come under the rule of God and becoming more and more like Him.

It is not just that we confess our sins because we need forgiveness, after which we live forever. We have been born with a sinful nature and when we sin, it comes naturally from that nature (Ps.51:5). Watch any child growing up and beginning to tell lies, steal, fight, etc., without any training! Now God wants to transform us by replacing this nature with His divine nature.

"For everyone who does evil hates the Light, and does not come to the Light for fear that his deeds will be exposed" (Jn.3:20). We need to understand this as referring not just to sinners who refuse to come to Christ, but also to where we can get stuck, after becoming children of God.

When we are born again God forgives our sins, adopts us as His children, and gives us a new heart that does not want to sin but to do the will of God. This is such a great elevation for us, from being

children of the devil to becoming children of God, and being taken from the domain of darkness to light. But then we must not forget that there is much more to it that God is offering us, to make us like Him in His character.

This transformation does not take place all of a sudden when we are born again, or when we are resurrected to be with God. But this is a slow process that takes place every time we are tempted.

Temptation is basically to be faced with a choice, between what we would like to do and what God wants. Since we have the remains of our old sinful nature even after we have been born again, what we ourselves want is usually selfish, sinful, and against the will of God. What we need is to choose to do the will of God at such times, after denying ourselves (Lk.9:23). This is when we move a little more into the light and away from the darkness.

But what do we naturally feel like when we are tempted, or after we have yielded? We try to justify ourselves, blame things on others or our circumstances, or to find excuses. That is how we can resist the light and stay on in the darkness. If we do that, we cannot become more like Jesus. But we stagnate or backslide.

#1040 Confusion about repentance

Jesus began His ministry by exhorting people to repent from sin towards God. This makes good sense when we remember that the mission of Jesus was to save us from our sins (Mt.1:21). This cannot begin unless we want to turn away from our sinful life to a life of obedience to God, which is the opposite of sin. But there is a lot of false emphasis these days about just believing, to the extent of eliminating repentance. If people think that salvation is only by believing and nothing else, they tend to conclude that repentance is like making ourselves right with God, doing something to qualify for receiving grace, replacing the idea of salvation by grace alone, etc. That is where the confusion is.

Salvation is by grace, unmerited favour, from God, which we cannot earn by anything we do. But how do we receive this free gift? By faith (Ep.2:8,9). The emphasis in this verse is that we cannot get salvation by anything that we do, about which we can boast. But if we don't understand salvation properly, we are in danger of treating faith as merely believing certain facts. They like to quote Ro.10:9, as if it is a standalone statement about salvation. It is not. Isn't it easy to say things with our mouth that we don't understand or mean, and isn't it easy just to believe that Jesus rose from the dead without understanding its significance for us personally?

The result of such thinking is that many people imagine that they are on the way to life without actually entering through a narrow gate and deciding to walk along the narrow path (Mt.7:13,14). See how strongly Jesus has warned about that! What is missing is repentance, the choice they have to make to give up sin and follow Jesus.

The whole point of salvation is to save us from our sins. How can we think of wanting to be saved unless we are trembling under the conviction of the Holy Spirit telling us that we are sinners and that what we deserve is judgment (Ac.2:37)? But it is only when we are told that it was our sins that killed Jesus on the cross and that a holy and just God will be compelled to punish us unless we repent, that we repent. But what people hear mostly these days is that Jesus is waiting to bless us and help us with all our earthly problems, and that all we have to do is to 'accept' Him!

Repentance is simply to turn away from our old sinful life to the life of God that He offers us through Jesus. It is a decision, or a choice that we make when we hear about our sin and salvation that Jesus has come with. After that, our wanting to deny ourselves and to do God's will show that this repentance was real. It doesn't mean that we have to confess every single sin in our life, which is impossible because we can't remember them all, nor do we recognise all our sins as sins because of ignorance. Repentance does not also mean

that we must have ceased from every sin we confess, which is, again, impossible. But it is a change of heart from sin to God.

#1041 Jesus didn't come for the righteous

Everyone in the world had sinned and none was righteous. That was why Jesus came into this world and offered salvation for people from their sins (Mt.1:21). What is the biggest hindrance for man to come to this Saviour? It is that people think they don't need to be 'saved'! They are already righteous enough for God! They consider themselves to be better than sinners (Lk.18:11). Some of them count on religious practices to qualify with God, and many imagine they are Christians because they go to church, read the Bible and pray. They admit they are not perfect, but they feel sure that God cannot reject them after all the good they have done and all the bad they have avoided at great cost!

If only they could admit that they were sinners in the sight of the holy God, they could have been saved. But because they will not admit their sin and go to the willing Saviour, they throw away their only chance of salvation. Jesus compared this to those who would not recognise their sickness and avoided going to a doctor (Mk.2:17).

But my concern is for those who have come to the Saviour already but who now assume that they are already saved and do not need any more salvation! In their mind they have already received eternal life, their relationship with God has been freely settled for them by Jesus, and their eternity is kept ready for them in heaven. They maintain this status by attending church, reading the Bible, etc., and assume everything is ok.

When we come to God through faith in Jesus, God washes away our sins by the blood of the Lamb, He adopts us as His children and

gives us a part in the body of Christ. What is remaining except waiting for the coming of Jesus?

We have not become like Jesus! We still have struggles with our sinful nature, and in many ways we are unable to do what we know we ought to be doing, and we do what we know we must not be doing (Ro.7:15). The apostle Paul was honest about this and as a result he reached great heights of godliness. The apostle Peter called becoming like Jesus as the most precious of all of God's promises (2Pe.1:3,4). But we people excuse ourselves by blaming our human weakness or others who provoke us. Whatever excuses or justifications we give, it remains a fact that we have not become like Jesus in many areas of our life. If we admit this honestly to God and to ourselves, there is still hope for salvation. God's promise is that sin will not be able to rule over us after we have come into His grace (Ro.6:14).

But it doesn't mean that this will happen automatically after we come to Jesus in the first place. Neither can we imagine that it will happen in the twinkling of an eye when we are resurrected. What that means is only that our body will be replaced by an imperishable body.

When we choose to deny ourselves and do the will of God whenever we are tempted, that is the means through which we are given the opportunity to become like Jesus (Ro.6:11-13).

#1042 Overlooking a transgression

Many times the difficulty we experience when we try to forgive someone is when we remember again and again what they have done to us, and relive the hurt and pain we have suffered from them. We feel it is unfair that apparently they are going on with their lives as if they have not done anything wrong, and we are suffering. We wait, perhaps even pray, for them to recognise their wrong and

come and settle things with us. But it often happens that it is we who are suffering on our side, and it appears to be so unjust.

Forgiving others is a natural sequel to our receiving forgiveness for our sins from God. We know we have sinned against God and perhaps others, and that what we really deserve is punishment. We are very happy to receive forgiveness from God as an undeserved favour from Him. But when it comes to forgiving someone else who has done wrong to us, it is often that we feel that they don't deserve to be forgiven. But God helps us by reminding us to think of the way He has forgiven us when we have to forgive others (Co.3:13).

Forgiving others is a decision we make to withdraw our complaints against them and to leave them to God. This does not mean that automatically God forgives them. Even if we have forgiven someone, unless they go to God in repentance, God cannot forgive them. But that is God's business. We do our part by letting them go free from us, remembering that we have no right to judge them.

After forgiving someone, we are often troubled by the memory of what they have done to us, and reliving that in our mind makes us suffer all over again! That is when this verse helps us, "A man's discretion makes him slow to anger, And it is his glory to overlook a transgression" (Pr.19:11). We must learn to overlook the other's sin. When we do that, it is like ignoring it. Then we can treat the others in our mind just as if they had not done that sin. We stop thinking of their sins again and again and reliving the pain, but we put them in the past and move on. Whenever that memory comes up, we tell ourselves that we have already dealt with it and that we are not going to go down that path and waste our time again. That will give us peace.

There are chances that the other person has not even realised that they have done anything wrong! Or they have, but they do not want to deal with it for various reasons. If they are friendly with us, we

can deal with them by overlooking their sin and behaving as if it never happened (Ro.12:18).

But there may be other cases where the other person is hostile towards us still, and does not want to settle things with us. Then we have to accept that as a fact and behave wisely towards them. Sometimes we may be in a position to win them over with our goodness, and at other times we will be wise to avoid them. That is decided by their attitude towards us. Our heart will be right when we have forgiven them and put away the old habit of reliving those incidents in our mind.

#1043 The great omission

Most Christians are familiar with what is called the Great Commission given by Jesus just before He was taken up to heaven. "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 observe all that I commanded you" (Mt.28:19,20). Sometimes the emphasis given by different church groups differs. Some emphasise going (or sending). Some focus on making disciples of some kind, some on baptism, and some on teaching. But very few seem to emphasise 'doing' or observing what they have learned from Jesus! Hardly any preacher is telling them to 'do' something about the way they are living. But that is such a serious omission! After saying everything that He said in the sermon on the mount, Jesus said that the wise man was the one who acted upon what he heard (Mt.7:24,26). What is the use of missionary projects, disciple training, baptism and teaching if finally people do not bother to do everything they have learned? But people seem to be satisfied thinking that they are active in Christian work. Are they assuming that 'the doing' must be taking place automatically?

So we develop people and churches where there are lots of activity and Bible teaching, but where people's lives are not being changed

to show more and more of the fruit of the Spirit, the life of Christ.

When we are busy with Christian activities, is our life just like that of other people to whom we are sharing the Gospel – worried, anxious, angry, quarrelling, unforgiving, revengeful, lustful, backbiting, gossiping, going after money, position, fame, pleasure and possessions, etc. Then the gospel gets fitted into this way of life, offering people comfort with the love of God and an eternity with Him, while not showing them how their practical lives can be changed. People learn instead how to find justification for their defeated lives by blaming their human weaknesses, other people, circumstances, etc.

People are not being shown their personal responsibility for the choices they are making in the time of temptations. They are not taught the way of having to deny themselves in order to do God's will (Lk.9:23). Instead they are given to imagine that the Holy Spirit will automatically transform them as they trust in Jesus. They learn to trust in Jesus for forgiveness, but they are not even told that Jesus wants to give them victory right here and now (Ro.6:14). Just check how many times words like sin, victory, overcoming, self-denial, taking up the cross, obedience, humbling ourselves, etc., occur in the usual sermons and messages!

Yet without self-denial there is no obedience, without obedience there is no victory and without victory there is no becoming like Jesus. People remain who they are, and then that leads to misunderstandings, envy, quarrels, discouragement, backsliding, divisions, etc. Are we moving away from following Jesus? Will our house stand without obedience?

#1044 False prophets are popular!

Who doesn't like to hear prophets say nice things - God is going to do great things for you, God is going to enlarge your borders, God is

going to lift you up and let your enemies see that He is with you, etc.? Usually the prophecies are vague to the point that we cannot outright point out that they never happened! But if we would like others to respect us as prophets, aren't these the kind of prophecies we can safely make?

All of us are not meant to be prophets (1Co.12:29). But there are people who even teach how everyone can prophesy, totally misquoting 1Co.14:31. It does not mean that all of us can prophesy, but that all who have the gift of prophecy can take turns so that all of them can speak! See the context of the verse!

There is a kind of prophecy that is open to all of us and that is to speak from the word of God in order to bless others (1Co.14:1,3). We don't have to do this publicly unless we have that calling, but we can all encourage one another as we meet together in person.

But real prophets - who hear from God and pass on His message to people - do not desire to impress others or to seek recognition. Just think about the kind of messages that are actually needed to be spoken in churches these days. "Avoid the wrath of God, turn away from sin and pursuing your pleasures, fear God, get things right with God and people, remember your time is short and repent before it is too late, etc." These words are hardly heard among God's people.

The impression being given out by many preachers is that God loves us, He is delighted over us, He has planned wonderful things for us, He understands our weaknesses, etc. In effect, there is really nothing for us to learn, change, seek after, or do, except that we should not miss meetings, we should pay our tithes, we must contribute to the programmes of the church, etc. Have you heard someone tell the church that some of the people really do not know God (1Co.15:34)?

Admonition and rebuke can only be done in church by fathers who love God and His people. But many leaders love their reputation more than the people whom they are supposed to love. What a

great responsibility it is to speak to the people in such a way that they will turn from their sins to God, change their attitudes and behaviour and allow the Holy Spirit to mould them into the character of Jesus!

Paul's heart was, "Am I now seeking the favor of men, or of God? Or am I striving to please men? If I were still trying to please men, I would not be a bond-servant of Christ" (Ga.1:10). "The fear of man brings a snare, But he who trusts in the LORD will be exalted" (Pr.29:25). We have to be constantly on the watch against, "What will they think about me, or do to me," and moving away from the path of keeping our heart right before the Lord always, and doing what He wants us to do, irrespective of how it will affect our reputation. One day, we will have to give an account before the Lord (Ro.14:12).

#1045 When there is conflict

Conflict is inevitable when we have to deal with others who are very different from us in many different ways. But when it happens, it is not easy for us to keep a proper perspective about it because the conflict affects us in some way and we are by nature self-centred. It is quite natural at such moments to consider how wrong the other person has been towards us and how much we are suffering. The more we think about it, the stronger we feel that the others have been unfair towards us, not understood us, not cared to listen to us, they have judged us too quickly, exaggerated what we said or did, etc. Sometimes it is even possible that we allow the devil to fan up our anger towards them and cause us to take extreme measures.

Our natural tendency is sinful (Ps.51:5). This slants everything we do towards self-defence, self-protection and placing the blame on others. We think of how our earliest ancestors, Adam and Eve, started blaming others after they themselves had sinned against

God. What we need to do is to acknowledge this tendency in us and to be always on the alert to detect it and overpower it.

But it is not enough just to recognise and acknowledge this tendency in us, because this tendency will deceive us into thinking we are right, even when we have been wrong. "Every man's way is right in his own eyes, But the LORD weighs the hearts" (Pr.21:2). Our sinful nature provides us with excuses or justification for whatever wrong we do, and it is easy to imagine that we have examined ourselves and found ourselves to be in the right. So, when we know that there is such a tendency in us, we have to make a deliberate effort to look at ourselves with an open mind and honesty. Many times we may need special help from the Holy Spirit to see and understand where we were wrong, in what we did or the attitude we had. If we are not used to taking this approach, it will not be easy at all when we start. It is possible that we will quickly become convinced that the other person was wrong and give up the effort. But remember, even if there are things the other person has done wrong, that does not exclude the possibility that we too may have done wrong in other ways. Even if it was the other person who started the conflict, our response to it may have been wrong!

As Christians, we may be used to admitting easily that we are not perfect, and also saying that we want to become like Jesus! But a very common mistake we make about this is to assume unconsciously that God will do it for us. But this transformation can be done by the Holy Spirit in our life only as we cooperate with Him in daily situations (Ro.8:13). What happens is that in every situation we are faced with the choice between doing what we like and what God wants. We can become like Jesus only if we regularly choose to deny ourselves and to do His will (Lk.22:42). It is kind of silly, isn't it, to do what we like and then to expect that we will become like Jesus?

#1046 Victory made simple

In their struggle against sin, many Christians make the mistake of praying and expecting God to take away their tendencies towards sin, so that they will no longer feel tempted. But victory does not mean the absence of temptation, but overcoming the temptation and not yielding to it (Jas.1:14,15). Everyone will agree that Jesus never sinned but enjoyed victory all His earthly life as a Man. That Jesus was tempted like us tells us that it is not a sin to be tempted, and also that it is possible to overcome (He.4:15).

So, temptation is to be presented with an option to disobey God and please ourselves, when we are attracted by the pleasure or earthly advantage that sin offers. Then victory is simply to deny ourselves in order to obey God. Without this, we cannot follow Jesus or become like Him (Lk.9:23). God's plan for us is that we should get victory and stop sinning (1Jn.2:1). Obviously, this cannot happen all of a sudden but only as we face each temptation as it comes to us, deny ourselves and obey Jesus.

"Therefore, since Christ has suffered in the flesh, arm yourselves also with the same purpose, because he who has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin, so as to live the rest of the time in the flesh no longer for the lusts of men, but for the will of God" (1Pe.4:1,2). If we want to experience victory and live our life no longer pleasing ourselves but doing the will of God, the secret given here is that we must have a determination to 'suffer in the flesh'. One mistake is that some people do not understand the meaning of flesh here, and assume it is referring to the body (See NIV). But it should be obvious that those who suffer in their body do not stop sinning, but most people sin more!

The word flesh (Gk. sarx) is different from body (Gk. soma). Many times the word flesh is used for the place from where our sinful lusts come (Ga.5:24). When we deny these lusts, the flesh will suffer – they are placed on the cross and assigned to die. As we know, the

cross does not kill anyone on it instantly but over a long period of time. But if we place our sinful lusts on the cross consistently and refuse to feed them, they will ultimately lose their power in our life. That is what Peter is saying in the passage above.

Long prayers or even fasting will not give us the victory unless we deny ourselves when we are tempted. We need to pray much, sometimes with fasting, in order to plead with the Father for strength to deny ourselves and do His will. The other mistake people make is to imagine that they are going to get victory without the help of God. When we pray, God gives us power through the Holy Spirit and then we are able to deny ourselves and do His will (Ro.8:13). God works in us, giving us the direction to do His will and the power to do it, and then we learn to follow in His ways and receive the victory (Php.2:12,13). Sin came when Eve chose it above God, and we get victory when we choose God over sin.

#1047 Forks in the road

A man falls in love with a woman and then realises that she doesn't have a heart for God. But then he decides that he can't give her up. A preacher is prompted to speak some truth in the church, but then he keeps silent about it because he fears that some people might get offended. One man gets a job offer with a great salary, but then he will have to do some shady things. One man gets converted, and is apparently on fire for the Lord. But when he comes across the question of water baptism, he decides that he can't afford to lose the support of his family. When we make many such choices in our life, when we face a fork in our life, we may not realise that we are choosing one path at the cost of another. The Tempter tries to fool us by highlighting the advantages we will have, just as he did with Eve, when he is effectively asking us to ignore God and choose him instead. But these choices have a lot to do with the direction our life will take from there. The decision which Eve made, however

innocent it might have looked at that time, led to worldwide destruction. Wrong decisions such as the examples given above will slowly take us away from the path of blessing which God had prepared for us. We may not recognise that we have made choices over God to follow earthly advantages!

God is a God of mercy. He is willing to forgive us and give us another chance. This grace was available even to the thief on the cross who had nothing from his side to plead with God. But he acknowledged his life of sin and placed his life into Jesus' hands and got saved. But what do most people do after they have made a wrong choice? They will invariably justify themselves and try to show, for example, how they have become great or rich in this world. But do they think of what they have lost in the bargain? Have we learnt to take our choices seriously, look ahead at the ways they would lead us?

Many people who consider themselves as Christians are assuming that they 'believe in Jesus' and therefore they are safe before God. But if this belief has not produced a recognition of who God is, how we stand before Him, what He expects from us, and lead us to decide to submit to Him in every part of our life, it is just like the belief in God that demons have, and which does not give us salvation. "You believe that God is one. You do well; the demons also believe, and shudder. But are you willing to recognize, you foolish fellow, that faith without works is useless?" (Jas.2:19,20).

When a man comes to the point of true conversion, he makes a clear choice for God against everything else. He realises that his problem is his sin, and he decides to turn away from sin to God. And then, every decision he makes is constrained by looking at whether it is what God wants from Him. Now we can see that many have not been born again like this, but only walked partially near to God. But it is still the time of grace, for us to make things right with God at least now.

#1048 The essence of conversion

"For even though they knew God, they did not honor Him as God or give thanks, but they became futile in their speculations, and their foolish heart was darkened" (Ro.1:21). When we get to know God, what this verse says is that it is expected from us that we would honour Him as God. How do we honour God as God?

Let us look at what a majority of people do when they claim to have come to know God. They start making requests to Him to bless them in different ways. They start going to church and taking some part in its activities. But for the most part they live their own way, pursuing pleasure, greatness, wealth, etc. Is this honouring God as God? When we come to know God the Creator of the universe, who is almighty, all-knowing, all-wise and sovereign as the One who gave His Son to die and make a way for us to get back to Him, how do we honour Him as God? "He died for all, so that they who live might no longer live for themselves, but for Him who died and rose again on their behalf" (2Co.5:15). The only meaningful way to honour Him is to stop living for ourselves and start living for Him.

Isn't it easy for us to sing songs of praise and worship to God and tell Him how much we love Him? But Jesus says, "He who has My commandments and keeps them is the one who loves Me" (Jn.14:21). He did not just mean the Ten Commandments. "Whoever then annuls one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever keeps and teaches them, he shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven" (Mt.5:19). When we are properly converted, we will be eager to keep even the smallest of His commandments. But if there is no such desire in our heart, is it correct for us to imagine that we are born again and become children of God? A proper conversion will bring about a drastic

change in the direction of our life, from living for ourselves to living for God.

Most preachers do not tell people to give up their old way of living and to surrender to God, because they are afraid that not many will make that choice. But Jesus accepted that as a fact (Mt.7:14). These preachers lower the admission criteria for the kingdom of God to just believing in Jesus, and as a result, large numbers of people imagine they have entered the kingdom of God, when in reality they are still outside. Now it becomes extremely difficult to preach these truths to them because they think it is the voice of the enemy!

Giving up our own life and seeking to live always and in every way for God is the mark of a true conversion to God. It was when God saw that Abraham was willing to submit to God even to the extent of sacrificing his only son Isaac that God certified that Abraham loved God (Ge.22:12). Isn't this the way we must honour God as God? If we think of God as One who is out there to take care of us, we are the honoured ones. For many of us, this may be the last chance God is offering us to repent.

#1049 Faith and works

"For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from works of the Law" (Ro.3:28). "Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up Isaac his son on the altar?" (Ja.2:21). Some Christians have then jumped to conclude that the Letter of James should not be in the Bible! This is an example of reading the Bible superficially and then finding contradictions! Since both these verses tell us truths of God, we need to see how they can be reconciled with each other.

Most religions believe that it is by accumulating good deeds or religious activities that one can please God and qualify for His acceptance. A common description for this approach is that one

banks on his works of the law – whatever law a man thinks he has to follow in order to find acceptance with God. So then we can see that what Paul is trying to bring out is that no matter what we do in this way, it is of no use, but faith in God is what is required to please Him.

But when we look at that, we can see that a lot of people have misunderstood 'faith' to be just a set of beliefs about Christ. They believe that Jesus is the Son of God who took the form of a Man, lived on earth, died and rose again from the dead, and that if someone believes this, God will accept him. They may also believe that this sets Christianity apart from all other religions, and start showing allegiance to the Christian religion. Then, holding on to the verses that talk about faith as the only way we can be saved, they believe that any mention of works is contrary to faith.

Isn't it easy to see here that it is possible for people to just agree intellectually with such ideas and then assume that they have been accepted by God? It may be in order to correct such wrong ideas that James balanced faith with 'works'. He is not talking about works that are aimed at getting acceptance from God, which we referred to earlier as works of the law, but works which result from having genuine faith and which prove that such faith is genuine (Ja.2:21,22).

Isn't this something which needs to be specially addressed these days? Churches nowadays have lots of people who profess faith in Jesus but whose lives do not show any real change towards godliness after they professed faith. The chances are that their faith is merely of an intellectual kind, and they have not experienced being born again. They need to see themselves as sinners, repent and yield their life into the hands of the Saviour who gave Himself as a sacrifice for their sins.

James points out that because Abraham believed, he was willing to obey God to the extent of sacrificing his son. When Rahab knew that

Yahweh was the true God, she was willing to risk her life and support the spies of Israel who had come to see Jericho. So the kind of works that must be seen in our life after we have come to Jesus can be understood as our willingness to give up our old way of life and submit to God in every part of our life (2Co.5:15).

#1050 Our wedding dress

There was a man sitting at the wedding feast that a king was giving for his son. But the king threw him out because this man did not have a wedding dress (Mt.22:11,12). It appears that in those days it was customary for rich hosts to provide special dresses for the wedding guests. But possibly this man thought that his own dress was good enough. This teaches us a very important truth regarding our salvation.

There are many people who consider themselves to be good enough for acceptance by God. They think of how good they are in comparison to gross sinners, the good things they have done, the religious duties they have followed, their church attendance and service, etc., and conclude that God cannot possibly reject them when He forms His kingdom. What they don't know is the standard of God according to which no man is good enough for God (Ro.3:12).

Jesus came to save sinners from their sins. We need to understand that He cannot save anyone who thinks he is good enough and who thinks he does not really need any salvation (Mk.2:17). Such people need to hear the story of the king who threw out one man who thought his own dress was good enough.

When people come to Jesus for salvation, if they don't realise and acknowledge that they are hopeless sinners who need a Saviour to deliver them out of the dominion of sin, the implication is that they think they are good people, or that at least they are not as bad as

some of the gross sinners. They think their dress is good enough for the wedding. Imagine their shock when the King throws them out!

Contrast this with the criminal on the cross along with Jesus. This man was very much aware of who he had been and what all sins he had done in his life. On the point of death, he had nothing good to point out to Jesus and try to bargain with Him. But he was honest, and acknowledged to Jesus the utter hopelessness of his situation. But at the same time he acknowledged Jesus as One who was able to save him (Lk.23:40-42). He had no wedding dress of his own, but he was humble enough to accept what Jesus offered him.

For all of us, the wedding dress that Jesus offers is the robe of His righteousness that He is willing to give us as a free gift of grace (Is.61:10). Whatever righteousness we may claim for ourselves, that will be like filthy garments compared to His standards (Is.64:6). What we deserve is the judgment of eternal separation from God for our sins, and here is God offering us forgiveness, cleansing and a robe of perfect righteousness that provides us acceptance with Him.

This is the gospel that used to be preached till it got sidelined by other so-called gospels offering us easy salvation and blessings for this life. All we had to do was to raise our hand, go forward for prayer, and 'accept' Jesus. Jesus doesn't need our acceptance, but we who are sinners and have gone far away from Him need to have an honest admission of our condition, repent and place our trust in Him.

#1051 You don't have to stay down

It is possible in the life of a Christian that he falls down because of sin, foolish choice, unbelief, confusion, doubt, etc., and then becomes hopeless thinking that he has disappointed the Saviour or that he has gone too far to get back to Him. Perhaps it has been too long in backsliding, or one fall has led to many others. It seems

reasonable to think that the Lord has no time for failures or half-hearted people.

God wants everyone to be overcomers and stop sinning (progressively). "My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin." But God is not unrealistic as to expect that everyone will go from victory to victory without failing! That is why He has concluded His exhortation with His comfort. "And if anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous" (1Jn.2:1). Jesus came to save us from our sins, or pluck us out of sin, not only to forgive us but to save us from the power of sin over our life and to transform us into His likeness (Mt.1:21;2Pe.1:3,4). As He takes us through this process, He knows that like little children learning to walk we are not going to walk straightaway in victory without stumbling. If we fall, He is not going to throw us out but come running to our aid to teach us to be more careful and wise next time (He.2:18).

Our job is to run to Him for help. Every time we fail in a big or small way, we need to go to Him, admit our failure and ask Him to teach us how to overcome next time. Sooner or later, He will make sure that we learn (Jude.24). But if we try to cover up our failure, justify ourselves or give up in unbelief, that is what will hinder us from becoming victorious.

One reason some people give up is because of a wrong understanding of victory. They believe that salvation is entirely a work of God. Naturally they expect Him to grant them victory. But when that does not happen, they conclude either that the whole gospel is a hoax, or that they are too bad for God to save. This is a trap of the devil.

Think of how Jesus saved the criminal on the cross by His side at the very end of a life of crime and wickedness. There was absolutely no reason for that man to expect any mercy from God. But then he came to experience grace – mercy from God for people who did not

deserve it. God offers this grace to everyone without discrimination (1Jn.2:2). Those who gladly receive this grace find salvation. This grace now teaches them to turn from their old life of sin and to learn now to live for Jesus (Ti.2:11,12).

Then there are others who scoff at grace, live their own way and perish. It is a choice they make. Those who start on their way to walk with Jesus also have a choice to make when they fall – to continue to lie down there and lose out, weep over their misery and sink deep into hopelessness, or to turn to the Lord and ask for forgiveness and help to continue their journey with Him. This is possible if we understand grace!

#1052 Conscious and unconscious sin

"The one who practices sin is of the devil; for the devil has sinned from the beginning. The Son of God appeared for this purpose, to destroy the works of the devil. No one who is born of God practices sin, because His seed abides in him; and he cannot sin, because he is born of God" (1Jn.3:8,9). To practise sin is to go on sinning even when one knows it is sin. Another thing is to fall into sin accidentally, or getting overtaken in a fault, when it is not what one desires (Ga.6:1 KJV). We can see that there is a huge difference between going ahead and committing sin when one is conscious that it is a sin, and falling into sin when one actually does not want to.

There is another possibility still. We have been born into this world with a nature that is inclined towards sin, and even after we are born again this old nature does not disappear automatically. It is for us to battle against this sinful nature and overcome it, and be transformed into the nature of Christ little by little (Ga.5:17). This is a lifelong process. What happens is that all of us are doing many things wrong all the time, which originates from our sinful nature but we are currently unaware of as being wrong. Many times we realise that what we have just done was sinful, only after we have done it.

Many times we become aware of our sinful tendencies as we read or listen to the word of God, or when the Holy Spirit points them out to us. Then we realise that we have been doing those things all our life and that only now we are learning that they were wrong in God's eyes all the time!

All of us, however long we have been born-again Christians, how well we know the Bible, or how powerfully we have been filled with the Holy Spirit, must admit that there is sin in us (1Jn.1:8). We are conscious of some of it, but we are unconscious of a whole lot of them. That is why we must keep pressing on to perfection (He.6:1). How foolish and ignorant we will be if we think that since we have been robed with the righteousness of Christ all is fine with us, or even that God has given us victory and we are not knowingly committing those old sins!

When we observe other people and see many things they are doing wrong, should we not remember that they may not even be aware that they are doing something wrong? Then we can show them mercy and compassion rather than judgment. Is this not true even when it is about Christian leaders?

When we have received light and understanding about some areas of sin as we have walked on the way of sanctification, and we see others doing things we have stopped doing, do we consider ourselves to be superior? We and they may be at different places in our journey, and learnt different aspects of life at this time from our experiences. It is good to consider the possibility that they may be ahead of us in some areas where we are still in the dark. Let us press on ourselves, and also stop judging others ahead of time (1Co.4:5).

#1053 Serving with dignity

Many people are conscious of their position before others, and sometimes their hesitation to serve others is because they consider it below their dignity. For example, some think that some acts of service are 'menial' jobs meant only for 'low class' people to do. When it comes to such things, they wait to be served by others and would not do such things even in their homes.

Then comes Jesus, the Lord of all. He takes a basin of water and a towel, and starts wiping the disciples' feet clean! Peter's immediate reaction was to tell Jesus that He shouldn't be doing things like that (because of His position)! But read what was going on in Jesus' mind, "Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into His hands, and that He had come forth from God and was going back to God, got up from supper, and laid aside His garments; and taking a towel, He girded Himself" (Jn.13:3,4).

Jesus knew who He was, and He was not afraid that by doing this menial work He was going to become any less. His identity, meaning and purpose of life were not dependent on what people thought about Him. Even if some people thought less of Him because He was doing what only the lowest of slaves in society were expected to do, He knew He would still be the Son of God and the Lord of lords. Those who have spiritual insight are able to recognise the greatness of Jesus in being willing to humble Himself (Php.2:5-9). But even if other people thought less of Him for stooping down like this, it did not matter to Him because it would not in any way change the reality of His being. He was secure in His identity.

The insecurity people have about their position, dignity, etc., comes from basing their value on what people think about them. For the people of the world who have excluded God from their mind, that is all the value they look for. We know how unpredictable people's opinions can be. One day they would praise Jesus and want Him to be their King, and a few days later they would want Him to be crucified. This is why God warns us not to place too much value on people's opinions but to live remembering that it is only to God that

we will finally have to give an account (He.4:13). If we don't learn to pay utmost attention to what God thinks about us and keep away fears about man, we won't be able to be secure in our thinking (Pr.29:25).

Many times people 'serve' others in different ways in order to receive attention and praise (Mt.23:5). But the real value of our service depends on the motive that God looks for in our heart (1Sa.16:7). If we love them and therefore we are concerned about them, when we see some need we can pray for them and also serve them in any other way. A godly way to do this is to try and do it as secretly as possible, and not to draw attention to it, because then we only want to bless the others in some way and we are not looking for praise.

People want to be great, but the greatness Jesus values is when we serve (Mk.10:43,44).

#1054 Willing to be corrected

What is our natural response when we have made a mistake and someone points it out? Denial, excuses, justifying ourselves, blaming someone else for it? That is what we can expect from our flesh, the sinful nature which we have inherited from our ancestors Adam and Eve. Both of them would not accept that they had just disobeyed God and committed a huge mistake. They started blaming others. All of us were born into this world with this nature, and this becomes obvious as we watch children grow up, even children of godly parents who have prayed for them and dedicated them to God!

We all know in theory that we don't know everything and that we have many weaknesses. This inevitably leads us towards producing mistakes. Even ungodly people recognise it and say, "To err is human." But it is quite another thing to admit that we have made a mistake, or that we have sinned in any particular situation! Our

natural desire is to protect our self esteem and our reputation before people.

But can we ever hope to change and become better people, if we will not face up to our mistakes and sins, acknowledge them, understand why they happened, seek God for forgiveness and help to overcome, and become more careful in the future? We must understand that this will not happen automatically once we come to Jesus. While God is working in us to give us new desires and power, is it not our responsibility to work it out in the daily situations of our life (Php.2:12,13)?

When we think about it more we can see that one major reason why people refuse to come to Jesus is that they don't see themselves as sinners. They have been excusing and justifying themselves and blaming others for everything that has gone wrong, and they do not see any need for a Saviour. They think they are fine and that they know how to handle things. But apparently they have not thought through the matter and realised their Judge is going to be Someone who sees through everything and who cannot be deceived.

There are others who have repented from their sins and come to Jesus for salvation. But then our spiritual progress may be hindered because we have not understood this problem and learnt how to overcome this self-defensive behaviour. Then we are stuck at the same point in our spiritual progress where we repeat the same mistakes, commit the same sins and keep blaming other people and our circumstances for all the trouble we are facing.

"But the path of the righteous is like the light of dawn, That shines brighter and brighter until the full day" (Pr.4:18). This is a picture of how, as we get nearer to God through the light of His word, the hidden things of our life get exposed, and we are able to see the sinfulness of our previous actions, current attitudes, motives and goals more clearly. This gives us an opportunity to admit our sins and to overcome them. But there will be no progress if we refuse, or

even if we leave the work of sanctification entirely to God.

#1055 Why no spiritual progress?

When Jesus met a man waiting for healing for 38 years, He asked him whether he (really) wanted to be healed. The man replied that there was nobody to help him. We wonder why he was waiting year after year for someone to help him and why he didn't do anything at least when he realised that it was not working out.

Think of a Christian who is caught in a sinful habit – hot temper, worry, laziness, sexual lust, overspending, overeating, drinking, anything – who is the same year after year. What excuses can he give? His parents were like that, he had a bad childhood, his wife is very troublesome, his work pressure is too much, etc.? His problem is that he is not owning up his own responsibility for his sins. He thinks his sins are forced on him by other people and circumstances. He considers himself a victim of his circumstances, and even blames God for not giving him victory.

Of course, sometimes our sins are a response to the provocations coming from outside. But we are badly mistaken if we think that it is those who provoke us who are responsible for our sins. Then we keep on praying and waiting for them to change. It is no wonder then that victory eludes us.

Isn't sin a choice we make? A temptation can come to us from the desires we have in our fallen nature, or because of the provocations from outside. But it doesn't mean that when that happens we have no other option but to yield to it. No, we have another option, to deny the temptation and do what is pleasing to God. Jesus too was tempted like us, yet He did not sin even once (He.4:15).

But perhaps we wanted to overcome the temptation but we lacked spiritual strength to resist sin. Perhaps we have been yielding to

such temptations before and that has become our habit, or we fall before we even realise we are facing a temptation!

Then why don't we rush to the Lord and ask for help? God is waiting to forgive us when we confess our sins and to help us with overcoming (1Jn.1:9;He.4:16).

But perhaps we are so convinced that it is the fault of other people, circumstances or even the devil that we are sinning, that we aren't really seeking to overcome. Perhaps we are not really eager to stop sinning. We may have assumed that certain sins are part of our nature and that we can't really change. We may be misusing God's provision for forgiveness. We may have prayed and handed over the matter to God to take away our sinful tendencies and we are beginning to lose hope that He will.

A lack of desire to overcome sin is usually proof that a person has not experienced being born again (1Jn.3:8,9). Those who are born again have been given a new heart that hates sin like God does, and so they will do whatever they can to stop sinning (1Jn.2:1). What will they do when their best efforts are failing? They know that God has promised victory (Ro.6:14). With that confidence they will cry out to God till they get victory. Won't it be sad if Jesus asks us, "Do you really want victory?"

#1056 Dealing with condemnation

"Therefore there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (Ro.8:1). The condemnation that was due to us because of our sins has been taken up by our Saviour, Jesus Christ. Instead, when we placed our trust in Him as our Saviour, His righteousness is credited to us on the basis of our faith (Ro.4:24). God accepts us as His children.

What happens if we fall into sin afterwards? Jesus is our Advocate pleading for us with the Father (1Jn.2:1). If we confess our sins, He will forgive us, because His death on our behalf was the once-for-all atonement for the sins of the whole world (1Jn.2:2;1:9). Walking in the light like this will ensure that even our unconscious sins are forgiven (1Jn.1:7). But we need to remember that our sins are not taken care of automatically after we come to Jesus. There is provision for forgiveness, but we can receive it only when we own up to our sin and ask Him for forgiveness.

If we do not admit our sins or confess it, we show up to God as unrepentant people, as those who are not serious about wanting not to sin again. But starting from Adam and Eve, it has been our human nature to try and deny that we have sinned, or to make it as if someone else is responsible for it. Just think of it from God's point of view. He is willing to forgive our past and give us a chance to learn to stop sinning, but if we will not even admit that we have sinned, we cannot think that we want to stop sinning. Such behaviour is to take advantage of grace. In that case we only want to avoid punishment for our sins, but we are not really interested in overcoming sin.

When we fall into sin, it should give us a sense of guilt, disappointment and grief to realise that we have sinned against God. At this point we don't have to feel rejected or condemned by God. When He promises that He will not forsake us, it applies especially in the context of our fall. He is right there with us waiting to forgive us, lift us up and help us farther along the way.

But what seems to happen is that some people tell themselves that there is no condemnation for them, and then reject the feeling of guilt that their fall has brought them. They assure themselves that the blood of Jesus covers them and that they are justified before God, and refuse to reckon with the fact that they have failed God.

Some others claim that since everyone's sins for all time have already been paid for when Jesus died, they don't have to even ask for forgiveness when they fall! Here again what is lacking is a sorrow for their sins and desire to overcome sin.

A part of what drives us forward towards ultimate victory is the sorrow and guilt we feel when we fail (2Co.7:10,11). If we avoid feeling this sorrow because of wrong teaching, what we will miss is the forgiveness we could have got by confessing our sins. Ultimately we will also remain slaves to sin.

We must be honest about our sin and our sin nature if we wish to overcome it.

#1057 The most crucial decision

This is a decision most Christians have heard about, but it seems that very few actually make it. It looks like something good to preach about, but difficult to practice. But this idea is no good if we don't choose to follow through. Every part of Christian life starts with a choice we make, and then there is a time to follow up in the direction of perfecting its practice. Just because we are not going to become perfect, it should not stop us from going in that direction. In fact, if we are not walking in this direction, it shows that we have not entered into a proper relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ.

The free and gracious salvation God offers us is about delivering us from the guilt and power of sin and giving us the opportunity to become like Jesus in the way He lived (2Pe.1:3,4). When Adam and Eve sinned against God, it was they making a decision to come away from submission to and dependence on God to a self-dependent, self-sufficient way of life. They thought becoming like God was to be independent like Him. They did not remember at that time that He was their Creator, everything they had was from Him, and that they

were nothing and could not do anything apart from Him. That choice was the essence of sin.

Jesus came and showed Himself to us as the Door as well as the Way, leading back to God. Salvation comes when we get back to God. For this, we must receive forgiveness for our sins which we have already committed, and turn back from our life of independence and come back under God, submitting to His ways and depending on Him for all of our life. Jesus gave us the example (Jn.5:19;8:16;12:49;18:11). How Jesus lived with the Father was summarised in this phrase, "Not My will, but Yours be done" (Lk.22:42).

When we come to Jesus, the most important decision we have to make is to give up our old, sinful way of life, doing whatever we liked, and to choose to live in submission to God. If we understand who God is, who we are before Him, how we have been living for ourselves apart from Him, and what the consequences will be if we continued that way, we would be utterly foolish if we did not make that decision. But when we understand what God has done, going through the sacrifice of His Son in order to offer salvation free to us, our natural response will be to choose gladly to receive His mercy and submit ourselves entirely to Him (2Co.5:14,15).

This is the clear Good News from the whole of the Bible. But sadly, many preachers have tried to make it simple and easy for people by telling them that all we have to do to receive salvation is to believe. This appears to be an exponentiation of grace by which all credit is given to God. Certainly all credit goes to God for offering us salvation which we do not deserve at all. But we can receive this free gift only if we want it, and we choose it. That implies that we forsake our old, foolish ways and come back to God through Jesus as our Saviour and Lord.

#1058 Responding to correction

We get corrected a lot by different people. Our well-wishers tell us when we go wrong, and our enemies attack us by pointing out our faults. Without doubt, we are not perfect and we all make many mistakes which other people notice. But what we also need to remember is that we have a built-in psychological response called defence mechanism which gets activated when someone points out something wrong in us. We try to deny it, justify it, excuse it, or even turn it around to attack the one who is telling us about it. The moment Adam and Eve sinned, the mechanism seems to have got triggered inside them, and we all have received it passed down through the generations.

Think of when Jesus took a whip and drove out the merchants from the temple. Do you think these merchants repented, learnt their lesson and started doing things right? We can imagine that they did no such thing, but started discussing among themselves how harsh Jesus was, the One who taught forgiveness, mercy and gentleness – how His eyes burnt with fury, how rough His actions were, how raised His voice was, etc. There was no thought at all about what they had been doing wrong, and how the Son of God was giving a demonstration of His righteous judgment for their correction. But in their mind, they turned Him into a villain and themselves as victims.

Even though we know, and many of us will admit, that this kind of response from us is not correct and we should not behave like that, we see that it pops up even before we have time to think! But Jesus came not only to forgive the sins we have done, but to take away our sinful nature and to give us His divine nature (2Pe.1:3,4). If we can allow ourselves to look at our nature because of which we sin, acknowledge it before God and ask for help, He is waiting to change us (He.4:15,16).

If we are serious about it, it will not even matter to us if it is an enemy who is accusing us. The only thing to do is to sit before God, examine ourselves to see if what he says is true, or there is some truth in what he is saying, and ask God to help us to change.

Just think of what happens if we behave in self-defence. We come away thinking that we have not done anything wrong, and that we are right in assuming that whoever told us otherwise has something wrong with them. In the end we don't even ask for forgiveness, and we block our path that would have taken us to become a little more like Jesus.

But as children of God that is not what we want. But this shows us that just to have good desires is not enough. What we do in different situations makes the difference. If we confess our sins, God will forgive us and also cleanse us. If we defend ourselves by turning the tables on the one who tried to help us, perhaps we even end up alienating him, and blocking all the help he could have given us in the future.

Our sinful nature has blind spots. We cannot always see things that are obvious even to others around us.

#1059 So far as it depends on you

"If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men" (Ro.12:18). This is about trying to keep the peace on our side even when others do not give or receive peace. But that opens up the subject of so many other things that we cannot control. A lot of things do not depend only on us but also on others. For example, if one person in a marriage is bent on creating trouble, the other spouse will find it frustrating, however much they try. It will bring us great relief if we accept the fact that we are not meant to be in control of everything around us. For example, God does not expect us to ensure peace in every situation we are involved with. God specifically asks us to give an account of only our own life, because we are really not in control of things outside of us (Ro.14:12). Even when God gives us authority over others, as in the case of parents over children, since we are not the only ones who influence them,

we must recognise the limits of our responsibility and not take the entire blame for anything going wrong.

When we do not reconcile with this fact that we cannot control everything, we open up possibilities where we are going to be frustrated. For example, when we have apologised to someone and he does not forgive us, we can become so agitated. But we have done our part, what is within our control, and the agitation is because we cannot control the other person's response! But that is not something God expects us to control. That is really this other person's problem, not ours!

When we think deeply about this we can understand that a lot of anger and frustration are coming because we are unable to control other people's reactions. But the more we recognise that we cannot have peace from everyone, some people may never change, some relationships may never improve, some people have to be borne with, it is safer for us to keep a safe distance from some, some must be avoided, etc., the more we make place for peace in our own heart and mind. One common mistake we can make is to unconsciously hold ourselves responsible for other people's behaviour.

There are things we can change, and there are many other things we have no control over. Many people spend a lot of energy and time trying to change things that must be, instead, accepted as a reality of life. Then our focus will shift from trying to change those people or situations that we cannot change, to changing our approach to dealing with the others in a way that will not lose our peace.

Think of the almighty and sovereign God after He created us with having our free will. This has resulted in so many things that have gone bad from His point of view. But He anticipated this even before He decided to create us. Now when He deals with all the chaos, His own heart is at perfect peace. Even though this is not an exact

parallel for us, because we are not God and there are limits to what we can do, isn't there something we can learn from this?

#1060 Judging ourselves

"But if we judged ourselves rightly, we would not be judged" (1Co.11:31). The context here is of examining ourselves before taking part in the holy communion. But there is a wider application to this. When we are born again, God gives us a new heart that wants to be always pleasing to Him. But we also know that because of the sinful nature we have, which we carry even after we have been born again, we are far from being perfect in His eyes. Much of it comes from not knowing the right thing to do, and sometimes we say or do something even when we don't really want to. God's plan is that we should be making progress in overcoming sin and becoming more like Jesus in our character. It is easy to see that for this to happen, we should be becoming increasingly aware of what is pleasing to God and where we are failing. This is God sending us 'light' so that we can see ourselves as He sees us and move forward towards His nature.

This is where judging of ourselves comes in. If we sit as judges over our own life, then we can see where we are going wrong and take steps to overcome. But we need to be sincere in wanting to become like Jesus and honest in looking at our real condition. Some Christians seem to have misunderstood grace merely as providing forgiveness of sins, and not seen the offer of victory over sin (Ro.6:14;1Jn.2:1). Some others expect that God will automatically work in them and make them like Jesus once they are children of God. But our salvation depends very much on what we choose to do whenever we are tempted. Remember, the first sin came when Eve chose to disobey God and obey Satan. When we are tempted all through the day, our choice is also between doing what God tells us to do, and what our natural desires want (Jas.1:14,15).

If we really want to stop sinning and become like Jesus, it follows that we need to be ruthless towards our sins while we examine our own life from the position of a judge. We cannot afford to take them lightly, justify them or find excuses for them. If we compromise here, we will remain in defeat.

At the same time we will find that merely deciding to overcome sin will not give us victory, because our fleshly desires are stronger than we imagine, and we have allowed them to become stronger by giving in to them in the past. So now when we want to stop sinning, we need to learn to cry out to God for supernatural help (He.5:7,8). If we fail, there is forgiveness available, but we cannot lean on that and slacken our fight against our sinful desires. The Holy Spirit is given to us to help us especially in this way (Ro.8:13).

Some people shy away from judging themselves because they satisfy themselves with the good opinion people have about them from observing their external behaviour. But to judge ourselves truly, we must look also at the motives, intentions and attitudes of our heart. God knows these already, and only honesty before God can help us to deal with these (He.4:12,13).

#1061 Going super spiritual

There are some who wish to be 'all-out' for Jesus, and end up doing ridiculous or even stupid things. But if we make fools of ourselves while seeking to glorify Jesus, our 'special acts of zeal' will backfire. Think of someone who refuses to take medical treatment saying that God will heal them miraculously, without hearing from God. God does sometimes heal miraculously, but we are not to jump off from the top of the temple expecting angels to carry us safely, as Satan tempted Jesus. Jesus saw through this and said that we were not to put God to a test. Perhaps people are deceived thinking that they

are somebody special before God and that everyone will soon realise that! This kind of idea must raise a red flag. Some others are sincere in their belief that they have to make this sacrifice for the glory of God, but it turns out they were also deceived.

"Do not be excessively righteous and do not be overly wise. Why should you ruin yourself?" (Ec.7:16). This is about going overboard with trying to be spiritual, even though being righteous is a very good thing. Let us look at confessing sins openly and how it is misunderstood by many Christians.

When we sin in any form, in word, action, thought, motive, intention or attitude, we sin against God. As our Creator and Judge, every single one of us has to give an account to God for it (Ro.14:12). He knows every detail (He.4:13). We cannot hope to deny, justify, find excuses or blame others when we stand before Him because He has a complete record with Him (Re.20:12). So it is obvious that that we need our account to be absolutely clear with Him to avoid punishment. Praise God, He offers us forgiveness for all our sins when we confess them, because Jesus has already taken our punishment (1Jn.1:9). It is also important that for the sins we have committed against others, we must seek for their forgiveness and make restitution where possible (Mt.5:23,24).

We have done many sins in our life which we don't even remember now, and we are not even aware that some things we have done were actually sinful. We don't realise now that many things we are doing right now are sins according to His standards. So if forgiveness is based on confessing every single sin, we are in trouble!

So, when we come into God's presence and admit we are sinners who have sinned in many ways before Him, He forgives us ALL our sins (1Jn.1:7). God is reasonable as well as realistic. If we try to add to this by saying we must disclose all our sins publicly before people, we go overboard. 'Coming into the light' essentially means to come out of our hiding place and to face God honestly and sincerely,

owning full responsibility for our actions. This is crucial. After this, our confession must be to those people we have sinned against. Public confession is required if our sins were against the public. To confess private sins publicly is to give occasion for the enemies of Christ to shame His name (Ep.5:12).

#1062 Looking for the Messiah

The people of Israel were under the rule of the Romans when Jesus was born. They have had prophecies from hundreds of years ago about the coming of the Messiah (Christ, the Anointed One), whom they have been expecting to save them from foreign domination and to give them independence. When people saw Jesus doing miracles and proclaiming the kingdom of God, many Jews thought that this could be the promised Messiah. As Jesus rode into Jerusalem sitting on a donkey, many thought that He was making His entry there to proclaim His kingdom.

Jesus was the promised One and the fulfilment of the prophecies. But He came with a different kind of kingdom (Jn.18:36). He had come to offer Himself on the cross as a sacrifice for the forgiveness of sins so that we could have an opportunity to enter God's kingdom defined by divine character (Ro.14:17). But when the people did not see Him leading them to deliverance from their political problems, they became so angry that they crucified Him.

Sin was the root of all the problems in this world, and God's solution was to take people from the grip of sin (Jn.1:29). But even now people do not realise this, and they are still looking for someone to take away their problems, whether they are sickness, poverty, unemployment, broken relationships, etc. They are therefore happy to hear about a miracle working Jesus whom they see as the solution. They are happy to come to Jesus, 'accept Him' or even get baptised and join a church, if only they can be freed from their problems. So they gather around in large numbers to listen to

preachers who present to them this Jesus whom they are looking for. As in the time of Jesus and the Jews, they 'crucify' other preachers who proclaim the Jesus of the Bible, the Saviour of the world.

Where do we stand? How do we see ourselves? What are we looking for? What kind of Jesus are we really following? The Bible warns us not to be deceived by news about 'another Jesus' than the One who is real. Are we looking to be free from the problems of this world and become able to enjoy a good life, or are we looking for forgiveness of our sins and victory over sin? The sad truth is that a large number of people who consider themselves to be Christians are not so in God's eyes because they have not repented from their sins and rested in Jesus as their Saviour to give them victory. They are walking on the broad way that leads to destruction, but imagining that they are headed for heaven, because there are large crowds going with them (Mt.7:13,14).

But the real Jesus came to suffer and die so that those who want salvation can now be forgiven their sins and set free from the bondage of sin. He does not offer a problem free life but freedom from sin. Very few people see this Jesus because that is not what they are looking for. But those who recognise themselves as sinners, as themselves being a part of the problem and not victims, come humbly to Jesus and get saved.

#1063 Bearing fruit

If God has adopted us as His children when we turned from sin and accepted the salvation He offered us, we are convinced that this was purely by His grace, or unmerited favour towards us. What must be our response then? It should be a strong desire to bear fruit for Him, because that is what will glorify Him (Jn.15:8). The most common understanding among Christians is that we should share the gospel with others and bring as many people as possible into the kingdom of God. For them, the question that is often asked is, "How many

people have you brought to the Lord?" After I became a Christian, what people told me was, "We are saved, to save!" But this is a narrow way of understanding salvation.

Certainly, announcing the Gospel and leading people to salvation is a great way of bearing fruit for Christ. That is the ministry of evangelism. But there are many other ministries also through which we are to serve God, according to the gifting God gives each one of us (1Co.12:6,7). All of us are not equipped to do everything. We must bear fruit in whatever ministries God entrusts to us, and we must aim to do it better and better so that God can receive glory.

But salvation does not end with forgiveness of sins, and it remains for us to be set free from the power of sin and be transformed to become like Christ in our character. So, another way we all ought to glorify God is through our witness as representatives of Jesus in the different aspects of our daily life. If we don't pay clear attention to this, what will happen is that our sinful nature will cause us to produce fruit of the flesh through our life, instead of the fruit of the Holy Spirit working in us. Instead of bringing glory to God, this may bring shame.

Jesus said that we could not produce this fruit unless we abided in Him (Jn.15:4). We must remember that the fruit we are thinking about here are not the development of our natural talents or abilities but the result of the work of the Holy Spirit in us. Then we must also realise that the Holy Spirit will not be able to do His work in us unless we are 'abiding' in Christ. This is where many Christians seem to be making a mistake, when they seem to be assuming that once they have come to Christ, the Holy Spirit will sanctify them and make them like Jesus without any requirement on their side. No. God will never force us to choose salvation or behave in a certain way. He works in us empowering and guiding us, but then we are expected to work it out in practical action (Php.2:12,13). We must see these two verses together.

If God finds that we from our side want to bear fruit for Him, He will begin to prune us (Jn.15:2). Pruning is a way of removing parts of a tree or plant that will hinder its growth. When God prunes us, by showing us how He wants to remove certain parts of our thinking, speaking or behaviour, we have to agree with Him and cooperate. If we resist this work of God, we cannot glorify God by bearing fruit.

#1064 Confusion about salvation

We can't afford to be confused about our salvation because it affects our life now and also our eternity. The most common mistake is for someone to think that he has to earn his salvation by following some laws or rituals. The wrong things we have already done and the punishment they deserve from the holy and just God will rule out this possibility, and we have to conclude that no one can be 'saved' in this way. The good news that Jesus brings is that God is aware of this, and that He now brings salvation available to everyone who will own up to their sins and receive salvation as a free gift of grace from God because Jesus has made it ready by taking our punishment on Himself.

One confusion at this point is about what salvation offers. Different people think of it as forgiveness of sins, going to heaven when they die, getting God to provide for all their needs, etc. But the Bible explains the truth, "She will bear a Son; and you shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins" (Mt.1:21). To be 'saved' from our sins is more than any of the above aspects. It is to be delivered from every aspect of sin in our life. For example, when we experience salvation, sin will lose its power over us (Ro.6:14). God's goal is that we should be able to stop sinning (1Jn.2:1). God wants to save us from sinning and make us like Him in our character (2Pe.1:3,4). We can experience this in an increasing manner.

Now the question comes up about how to obtain this salvation. We must keep in mind that it is a gift from God which we don't earn

(Ep.2:8,9). But how shall we receive it? There are many places in the Bible that tell us that we receive this through faith or believing, which is correct. But it is obvious that what we believe is critical. Some are confused here thinking that they are safe as long as they have faith, irrespective of what they believe. What we believe has to be true! If what we believe is false, how can that save us?

Salvation is from sin because sin is what separated Adam and Eve from God. God wants to become our Father and give us the possibility to have fellowship with Him (1Jn.1:3). We can't have fellowship with Him if we are going on sinning. If we recognise ourselves as sinners, we turn away from our old way of life (repent) and receive the sacrifice of Jesus for taking away our sin from God's sight. We also understand that we were in a life of sin before because we had been living our life independent of God, pleasing ourselves and doing whatever we liked. When we come back to God asking for salvation, we can't continue to live as before. We must bring our life under God's authority, choosing now onwards to live as He wants (2Co.5:14,15).

Many people hold up verses about faith and believing, and say that repentance and submission to God are not necessary to receive salvation. But think of it. Without repentance and wanting to obey God, how can they say they believe in Jesus?

#1065 Taking a horse to the water

You may have heard the proverb, "You can take a horse to the water, but you can't make it drink!" Many people are invited to the church, using different ways to attract them, but many don't take the spiritual nourishment that is offered there. The leaders try to arrange different programmes for the children, teenagers, youth, men and women, but even though people come for fun things, many of them have practically little interest in Bible study, prayer, learning how to overcome their sins, serving others, etc. It is frustrating to

watch all the effort being put into drawing people to the water, but very few actually drinking!

Why would anyone lack interest in drinking water, to use the same metaphor? Because they are not thirsty. Think of offering people living water freely, without cost, and they don't feel thirsty for it. Actually everyone needs this living water, without which they are dead in sin, away from God. We would imagine that when it is offered to them, they would be very eager to drink more and more of it. But a lot of people are not interested in drinking it, because they are not thirsty for that water. They are only trying to fill themselves with fun and games, from programme to programme, even though they will still be thirsty after they drink that. "Jesus answered and said to her, 'Everyone who drinks of this water will thirst again; but whoever drinks of the water that I will give him shall never thirst; but the water that I will give him will become in him a well of water springing up to eternal life'" (Jn.4:13,14).

Isn't this because such people have not been awakened from their spiritual sleep? They have not seen themselves as sinners who desperately need salvation. That is why they are not looking for living water. But they assume they are Christians because they come to church and they enjoy many things there, such as good music, nice and short messages, opportunity to make friends, etc. When they come, they are warmly welcomed and made to feel at home. In some churches, their talents are quickly identified and they are given suitable responsibilities so that they will feel obliged to remain.

This is happening all over the world as evangelists and pastors are playing the number game, and not looking at the quality of their people. The foundational truths about sin, judgment, repentance, confession of sin, faith, denying oneself and following Jesus, etc., are not preached, and the message people hear is, "All are welcome!" They don't see their need to be born again, baptised, filled with the Holy Spirit and grow. They have been brought to the water, but they are not thirsty!

God looks for messengers who will speak the truth and who are keen to ensure that people hear it clearly, even if it brings down numbers. Jesus knew there would be only a few who would find life (Mt.7:13,14). How sad He must be when He sees people planning to convert whole nations and neglecting spiritual food!

#1066 Does baptism save us?

In order to interpret different verses in the Bible, we must follow some rules. For example, we must see if they are meant to be understood literally or as figures of speech. It is obvious that verses must be seen in their context. Also, many times when some verses convey just one side of a truth, they can be understood properly only when we place them along with other verses, perhaps from elsewhere in the Bible. Let us look at some examples.

"Therefore we have been buried with Him through baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life" (Ro.6:4). On first glance it appears as if this is saying that it is baptism that buries us with Christ and what will bring us into newness of life. If this interpretation is true, it will mean that baptism is an absolute necessity for salvation. Some people interpret it even to mean that if they can get someone to be baptised, that is how that person can be saved.

Now we know from other parts of the Bible that salvation is through faith and not through anything we do (Ep.2:8,9). This is actually illustrated with two clear examples in the Bible. The Gentile Cornelius was 'saved', followed by being filled with the Holy Spirit proving that he has been saved, as he listened to Peter presenting the Gospel. It was only afterwards that he was baptised. Baptism was not what saved him but his faith in Jesus (Ac.10:47,48).

There was this criminal on the cross next to Jesus who was promised being with Jesus in Paradise, after he repented and believed in Jesus. If baptism was necessary for salvation, this could not have been. So what did Paul mean when he wrote about baptism? Once we understand that baptism is not a requirement for salvation, we can then understand that this is what we signify or testify to when we get baptised, that our old man is buried and we are now going into a new life with Christ.

Using the picture of Noah and his family being saved from the flood through the ark, Peter says, "-- baptism now saves you--not the removal of dirt from the flesh, but an appeal to God for a good conscience--through the resurrection of Jesus Christ" (1Pe.3:21). People mistakenly take it to mean that baptism is required for salvation. He is actually saying only that baptism is an appeal to God for a good conscience. When we already know that baptism is not what gives us a good conscience but it is faith, we must try to understand it right. Is not baptism an outward expression of our desire to live now onwards with a good conscience?

"He who has believed and has been baptized shall be saved; but he who has disbelieved shall be condemned" (Mk.16:16). The first part may look as if baptism is required for salvation. But the second part points out that faith is the issue. When we see salvation as an ongoing process, remember that Jesus Himself gave us an example (Mt.3:14,15), and command (Mt.28:19,20).

#1067 Who can throw stones?

One day I was sitting and thinking of all the sins I have committed, the mistakes I have made, the foolish words I have spoken, the wrong decisions I have made, and I was overwhelmed! I realised once again that it was just this amazing grace from God that saved a wretch like me. But then I also realised what pain and hurt I would have caused others knowingly and unknowingly, and I felt like

disappearing into nothingness. I thought of this more, and understood that we are all in a similar situation, and the difference is that some realise this, and others walk around as if there is nothing wrong with them. This second group of people are quick to take up stones and throw them at others at the very first opportunity. I know I have also done this, like everyone else, because that is a part of our sinful nature, inherited from our ancestors (Ge.3:12).

"But when they persisted in asking Him, He straightened up, and said to them, 'He who is without sin among you, let him be the first to throw a stone at her'" (Jn.8:7). The more aware we are about our past sins and our present fallibility, the slower we will be in wanting to condemn others. In reverse, if we are quick at judging others, we must know that the more serious problem is that we have not seen ourselves in the light of God. If we have not learnt the habit of constantly examining ourselves as we read the word of God, and letting the Holy Spirit bring conviction to us in our heart, that is a sad state as a Christian. In theory we may admit we are imperfect, but if we don't really believe that, it will be seen in the way we focus entirely on the faults of others.

Certainly, the others have their faults. It is also true that we suffer from the sins and mistakes of others. We do have to think about such things and decide what we need to do. But if we are brooding all the time about how bad the others are, or how much we are suffering, we would have missed the whole point of sanctification, the second phase of our salvation, where we are to be increasingly set free from the hold of sin in our thinking, speaking, doing and imaginations, and be transformed into the nature of Christ. We may claim that we have been born again, or even that we are active in church. But we are not thinking of bearing fruit for Jesus.

Do we think that the fruit of the Holy Spirit will come automatically to us? God, the Gardener, sees that we are affected by rotting leaves, drying branches, weeds around us and pests trying to destroy us, and He is always in the business of pruning us. All that is

un-Christ-like in us has to be pruned away in order to replace them with love, joy, peace, etc. (Ga.5:22,23). If we want this fruit, we must at least be willing to admit where we need pruning. We need to become sensitive towards the voice of the Holy Spirit telling us where we are going wrong, and then ask for His help for our transformation (Ro.8:13,14). Above all, we must truly want to be changed.

#1068 Reading the Bible legalistically

"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). Does this mean that instead of reading the Bible and learning from it, we must go for an experiential approach to know Jesus? No. But what it tells us is that if we read even the Bible, which is the word of God, without connecting with the heart of Jesus, what we find will not be what God wants. We must realise that it is possible to spend hours trying to study the Bible, looking at Hebrew and Greek meanings from the original, looking up cross references and commentaries, and still miss what God is trying to speak to us. Studying the Bible like this is good, but through all this we must be looking for the heart of God.

Let us take an example. "Likewise, I want women to adorn themselves with proper clothing, modestly and discreetly, not with braided hair and gold or pearls or costly garments, but rather by means of good works, as is proper for women making a claim to godliness" (1Ti.2:9,10). "Your adornment must not be merely external--braiding the hair, and wearing gold jewelry, or putting on dresses; but let it be the hidden person of the heart, with the imperishable quality of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is precious in the sight of God" (1Pe.3:3,4). Aren't Paul and Peter essentially saying the same thing, that instead of giving undue importance to

outward appearances, women who want to be godly must focus on godliness of the heart?

But instead of learning that, we can focus on what all are 'forbidden' for women and insist legalistically on ensuring that they follow these restrictions to the letter! I have heard one preacher say that gold is forbidden, but platinum is not! Isn't that to miss the whole point?

We see people turning the New Testament into a Book of Law for Christians! Instead of following the rituals and practices of the Old Testament, now they say these are the commandments we have to follow. Now the discussions turn to whether to offer the other cheek once or more times, whether forgiveness should be seventy times seven, and so on! One denomination split on whether they are allowed to play musical instruments in church or not. In such cases the focus is mostly on external conduct, missing the heart of the Gospel.

Many people have not understood the Gospel properly. They think of going to heaven, escaping the punishment, receiving earthly blessings from God, etc. But the good news that Jesus brought us is that we can be saved from our bondage to sin and be transformed to become like Jesus in our character (2Pe.1:3,4). Instead of working out this salvation by submitting to the inner work of the Holy Spirit in us, people are very much occupied with this life. It is no wonder that they can only see do's and don'ts in the New Testament. There is need for repentance in the church at all levels.

#1069 Who can receive forgiveness?

Is forgiveness something that we can assume will be available to us whenever we ask? No. We must not assume that God puts aside His justice when He has to forgive us. Justice is a part of His character, and He can never be unjust. He is able to forgive us freely only because the demands of His justice for our punishment have been

met by our Saviour, Jesus Christ, taking our punishment in our place. So, first of all, we must not assume that anyone can receive forgiveness from God, even if they go to Him through some other way, other than faith in Jesus (Ac.4:12). People who imagine they can be forgiven through religious rituals of any kind or based on their overall goodness are deceived.

Even as disciples of Jesus, we must know that whenever we now go to God for our forgiveness for the sins we fall into, there are at least two conditions to be met. The obvious, first one is that we must own up to our sin, that is, take responsibility for our sin (1Jn.1:9). Merely saying things in words does not help. If we do not acknowledge that we have sinned, there is no meaning in asking for forgiveness. People go into detailed explanations of what happened, how what they did was really not a sin, how someone else caused them to do it, and how they ought to be excused because of their particular situations, frame of mind, bodily weaknesses, etc. But God is waiting for us to admit our guilt and our recognition of the punishment we deserve, so that He can forgive us justly.

The second thing to understand is that if we truly repent of our sins, we will have a strong desire to stop sinning and to live for God. If we know this, we can also see that there is no meaning in going to God and asking for forgiveness for what we have done, if we have no desire to stop doing it. Some people take forgiveness for granted and assume that the next time they sin, it will be available to them. Some are consciously choosing to sin at times, believing that they can ask for forgiveness afterwards.

But God cannot be mocked in this way. He looks not only at what we do but also our thoughts and intentions of our heart (He.4:13). If He sees that we don't fear Him and are trying to mock Him or take advantage to Him, He is really not going to forgive us (Ps.130:3,4).

There is such an over-emphasis nowadays on the love of God, in an attempt to draw people to Him and to comfort them, that many

times people do not get to know the fear of God. Actually, if we do not understand the fear of God first and realise where we stand before Him with our sins and what judgment we face, we cannot appreciate the unmerited favour that He is willing to show us. Many people do not see the grace of God towards them at the same time as realising what they really deserve from Him. Therefore, they take grace lightly and assume it will be always available for them. But when we see how holy, righteous, just and impartial God is, then we can understand His grace towards us.

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.

#1070 Believe and be saved?

"Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household" (Ac.16:31). The beauty of this message is that we do not have to struggle to earn our salvation and that it is a free gift from God to us. This distinguishes the Gospel of Jesus from all the man-made religions of the world. God gives us salvation from our sins and eternal life when we place our trust in His Son as our Saviour. This is almost unbelievable, but it is shown to be true because Jesus who offered Himself on the cross rose from the dead proving that He is truly the Son of God.

Since receiving salvation is the most important event for all of us, we must make sure that we actually receive it and not just assume it. So, it is important to make sure that what we believe is correct, and secondly, that we believe it in the right way. We can immediately see that we must not just assume that what we believe is right, or that our faith is genuine. It is worth all our effort to make sure.

Many people seem to think that as long as they believe in God it should be fine because there is a very popular concept that says that all religions ultimately lead to the same God, like different rivers run into the same sea. But there is a true God and many different false ideas about God. This true God created the whole universe, including us, and when we went away from Him made a way for us to get back to Him. That is why the Son of God came as a Man and died on the cross, to bear the sins of the whole world (1Jn.2:2). We must believe that we have sinned against God, and therefore deserve punishment, and believe that it is only through Jesus that our sins can be forgiven. Jesus came to deliver us from the guilt and power of sin (Mt.1:21).

If we are 'believing' in a casual way, we may imagine that as long as we believe that Jesus died for our sins on the cross we will be alright. But how this belief influences us makes all the difference. For example, many people who were born in Christian families believe these facts about Jesus, but it is obvious that for many, this belief has not made any difference in their life. They live like all the others, except that they consider themselves as Christians.

If we really believe that Jesus died for our sins, we will have to admit that our sins required Him to die. Our sins are not something God can just put aside. He and His Son together made a plan for this sacrifice which alone could pay for our sins. When we understand this seriousness of our sins and see the love of God in offering salvation for us in this way, we will not want to sin again. So, if we have the right kind of belief, it will lead to repentance from our sins and a cry to God for forgiveness and also help to overcome sin.

When someone comes to God like this, God gives him a new heart. Our old heart used to like the pleasures of sin, but this new heart gives us a hatred towards sin. This is what proves that we are born again (1Jn.3:9).

#1071 Ask and it will be given

What do we do when we come across Mt.7:7, "Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you"? Do we just think this is what God promises, and believe it? Many have done that, and then some have even fallen away from God because they did not get what they asked for and concluded that God could not be trusted. So, what shall we do when some verse in the Bible does not seem to work in real life? We must realise that we have not understood the verse right. Or it may mean that we have not understood for whom those verses are meant or if we need to do something from our side.

When Jesus asked the Father to take away the cup of suffering from Him, He finished the prayer by adding, "yet not as I will, but as You will" (Mt.26:39). This gives us an example to follow, knowing that we don't always know what is best for us, and being willing to submit to God's will. This means that we can ask God for anything, provided we are willing leave it to God to make the decision.

To get better clarity on what Jesus really meant with the promise we read earlier, we can then look at what other parts of the Bible say about it. This is very important, because the Bible was not written like a text book, and we have to gather different sides of the truth from other places in the Bible. So we read in 1Jn.5:14, "This is the confidence which we have before Him, that, if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us." Now we can understand that we can be confident of receiving what we ask for only if it is according to the will of God. Just as a wise father will not give his child whatever he asks for, our Heavenly Father knows what He should give, and should not.

If we don't understand this approach to the Bible, we can even go wrong totally with respect to our salvation. For example, someone reads, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household" (Ac.16:31), and takes it as if it is the whole truth. It

is true that salvation is a free gift from God which we can receive when we put our trust in Jesus as our Saviour. But our understanding of 'believe' may not be clear or sufficient. When we look at other parts of the Bible we see that believing in Jesus as Saviour accompanies seeing ourselves as sinners before God, recognising the punishment we deserve and turning away from our old life of sin to following Jesus as our Lord and Saviour. These sides of the truth come out only as we read other parts of the Bible. People who simply hold on to this verse can even miss salvation completely. Another similar verse that does not provide the complete truth is Ro.10:9. This is a part of the truth, but as we have seen above, is not the full truth.

We see we need to make efforts to understand the word properly, check with general experience, see if we meet God's conditions, and also look at other parts of the Bible in order to get a better, overall understanding of the truth.

#1072 Maintaining status quo

When Jesus came to earth, the greatest opposition He faced was not from the Romans, but from the Pharisees. These were religious people who had studied the Law and had interpreted everything to great practical details. They had defined what distance one could walk on a Sabbath day, how to tithe even the garden herbs, etc. This had established them as the recognised religious leaders of the day whom the people feared.

Then Jesus came and exposed their hollowness, pointing out how their religion was external and missed the inner values (Mt.23:23). They presented an appearance of godliness while their inner core was corrupt with self-indulgence (v.25). What Jesus was actually doing was not to condemn them but to show them the right way so that they could be blessed. But to them, it appeared as if Jesus was trying to destroy them and all their work which they had

accomplished through many years. Their response was to get rid of Jesus, in order to be able to maintain their position, power and influence. Imagine what could have happened if they recognised and accepted the change that was needed!

During the course of marriage counselling, it becomes obvious many times that they are not willing to make any changes, but that they are only waiting for the other person to change. Each one expects the counsellor to change the other person. Unfortunately, in many such cases, they do not really learn anything even after many sessions.

None of us is perfect, and we all make many mistakes. James was honest enough to publicly admit that (Js.3:2). But very few are willing to look for identifying their particular mistakes and make changes. On the contrary, they justify their wrong by blaming it on others or circumstances. Just like how we cannot get cured if we are not open before the doctor, even God cannot save us and make us like Jesus if we are not willing to accept our sins and change (Je.3:13).

Many times, we get to know our mistakes when someone else points them out. But unless we are careful, our tendency will be to deny what they say, and turn the tables on them by calling them names such as false prophets, Holy Joe, accusers of the brothers, Job's friends, etc., and blaming them for our problems. King Asa started out as a good man, but when he strayed away from God and God sent him the prophet Hanani to warn him, Asa put Hanani in jail!

God loves us so much that when we are unable to hear His direct warnings to us, He sends us messengers. Some people say that if God were to tell them something they would listen, but that people don't have any right to point out their faults! They fail to hear the voice of God because they have trained themselves only to hear promises and appreciation, and assigned all words of correction and rebuke as from Satan! But if we truly love God, we will realise that

His greatest desire for us is that we become like His Son Jesus, and that we are a long way from getting there (2Pe.1:3,4).

#1073 Carrot dangling in front

One sobering fact about life is that sincerity is not enough. We must know the truth first and follow it sincerely (Jn.8:32). Many Christians sincerely seek victory over sin in their life and becoming like Jesus, but even after many years of knowing Jesus as Saviour they are still defeated. They have sincerely asked God to give them victory and believed that He will grant it to them (Ro.6:14). They have recognised that they cannot achieve it by their own strength, and they sincerely expect God to give it to them. But years have gone by, and many of them still keep holding on their expectation that one of these days God will grant it. They are waiting and waiting for their 'breakthrough' or a mighty work of God that will set them free.

They hold on to verses such as, "For I am confident of this very thing, that He who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus" (Ph.1:6) and "But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as from the Lord, the Spirit" (2Co.3:18). They are sincerely confused thinking about why no real transformation is happening in their lives. Just think, if it was up to the Holy Spirit, all of us would have become like Jesus long ago! No, we cannot blame Him.

The truth they have missed is that while God does many things for us for our salvation, there are things we ought to do from our side too. We have not been doing them properly, and that is the reason for our condition. It is not even that we did not have faith for victory. So, we must understand what we need to do from our side and then do that, and stop waiting passively for God. God works in our heart

through the Spirit to give us both the inclination and the power to do His will, but then we are the ones to actually do His will in our practical life (Ph.2:12,13). We can see what will happen if we just sit and wait for God to transform us by Himself, while we do not make the choice to deny ourselves and actually do His will every moment of our life.

God wants to give us victory and transform us into His nature. But in order to experience that, we must choose to deny our sinful desires and then do His will in practical ways (Ro.6:12-14). It is by pleasing ourselves and disobeying God to get pleasure that we sin against God. To experience salvation, we must do the opposite, deny ourselves in order to obey God.

Jesus made it very clear that this was the only way anyone could follow Him as a disciple (Lk.9:23). This is the way He Himself showed us with His own life. Look around at the kind of preaching that hides this truth and proclaims all God's promises, how He loves us, how He has great plans for us, how He will give us a great breakthrough, how He will open the windows of heaven and pour out His blessings on us, etc. This is pleasant for our ears, but they will be like carrots always just out of our reach.

#1074 Making choices through faith

When God offers us salvation through His grace, unmerited favour, it is through our faith in Him that we get to actually experience it (Ep.2:8,9). But, as we see in Heb.11, real faith leads us to making serious choices in our life. Unfortunately, what happens many times is that people think they have faith, because they believe certain facts about God, but they don't proceed to order their lives according to those beliefs.

Take the example of anxiety. People believe that God loves them and that He has promised to take care of them. But when they become

anxious about something, this belief about God doesn't help them. They say they believe in God and His promises, but they can't understand why they are still anxious.

Sometimes, the idea they unconsciously have in their mind is that since God has promised to take care of them, they should not be in the situation they are in. But since they are actually in that situation, they think they have every reason to be anxious! Some others are looking for an experience where, even when they are in the midst of situations that can make them anxious, God should be helping them so that they should not be feeling anxious. They feel let down by God for not helping them in that way.

But the problem is easy to see. These people have not learnt to use their faith in real situations. They are finding that their faith is inadequate for the situation. The solution is not to look for more faith, but to make sure that they are walking according to their faith. James reminds us that if our faith does not produce action in our life, we must realise that our so-called faith is practically 'dead' or useless (Js.2:26).

So, what can we do when we are anxious, if we have true faith in God? We think of who God is, what He has done for us and others, what He has promised, how we can trust in His wisdom, and how we can trust Him even when we cannot understand Him. Then we make a choice in our mind to hold on to our faith in Him and to let go of our anxiety. In the beginning, it may not go away so quickly, but if we insist on holding on to God, anxiety will finally disappear.

This is important to learn how to choose by faith. When Satan tempted Eve to disbelieve what God had told her, what she did was to make a choice by faith. She chose to believe in Satan and her senses, and gave up her faith in God. It may sound like a harsh truth, but if we choose to agree with our anxiety, we are giving up on our faith in our Father, in that moment. When we see it like this,

we will begin to fight anxiety and ask God for help when we see our weakness.

But if we give in to our anxiety saying that it is natural or our usual weakness, and not fight against it seeking God's help, doesn't it show that we don't really trust in God in a practical sense?

We may have been deceived in the past thinking that when we have faith, God will do all things for us. But there is a fight of faith (1Ti.6:12).

#1075 The word of the cross

"For the word of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God" (1Co.1:18). Its power transforms us from continuing to sin. In these days, to say that the death of one Man 2000 years ago is the way of salvation for us looks very ridiculous to people. The question appears to be valid, till we realise that it was the death of the Son of God, and that this was proved by His coming back to life. Then we see that this was a plan from God who was dealing with man's sin with justice and mercy. The more we understand God's word, the better we understand His plan for our salvation, and see that there is no other way by which we can be saved.

For many Christians, the cross refers only to the one on which Jesus died. They think about it, and celebrate it on Good Friday every year, and some people even travel to Jerusalem to see the spot. But there is also another side to the cross which is important for us to know. When we submit to the fact that when Jesus died on the cross our sins were placed on Him and His death was the punishment for our sins, God responds by changing our heart and giving us a new heart (Ez.36:26,27). In that sense, our old way of life died on the cross, and our new heart aligns with God. Now we no longer want to sin, but we seek God's grace to overcome in our temptations. Our dying

with Jesus on the cross has accomplished this transformation of our heart, and now it is to be seen in the practical way we live every day (Ro.6:7,8,11).

The life we now live, or ought to live, is where we live the life of Christ in us, doing His will. What opposes us when we want to live like this is our old sinful flesh, which has all selfish, sinful desires in it (Ga.5:17). Until we deny ourselves these desires, we cannot do God's will. Then we will not become like Jesus in His character no matter which verses we hold to or how much we pray. That is why Jesus said very clearly, "And He was saying to them all, 'If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross daily and follow Me. For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake, he is the one who will save it. For what is a man profited if he gains the whole world, and loses or forfeits himself?'" (Lk.9:23-25).

This word of the cross appears to be foolish for many Christians because they were given to believe that Jesus has done everything for them, and that they just have to receive everything by grace. Some of them have been taught to dream big and live out their lives, and self-denial is not something they are familiar with. Some teachers are there who quickly call out any mention of self-denial on our part as 'works' to earn salvation. But the fact will remain that without taking up our cross daily with the determination to die to our selves and then obeying Jesus in everything, we cannot say that we are following Him or being disciples.

#1076 Small faith, big faith

Many Christians confess that their faith is small, and they are hoping that one day it will become strong. Especially when facing anxiety about the future, they say they believe that God has promised to keep them, but they are not able to take hold of that in a practical

way. They pray to God and ask others to pray that their faith will become stronger.

What is happening is that this kind of 'faith' depends on their state of mind, sometimes optimistic and at other times tied down with a sense of pessimism, uncertainty or hopelessness. What they hope is that God will help them in such a way that they will no longer feel like this, but they will feel strong. Some people make attempts to think positively, reject negative thoughts and hopefully achieve a strong sense of 'faith'. This is not the faith that God wants from us. Some people have described this as having faith in the quantity of our faith!

But the kind of faith that God is looking for is where we trust and depend on Him, instead of depending on our own strength. Without Him, we can do nothing (Jn.15:5). Faith means that since we have no confidence in ourselves, because we have an almighty, loving and wise God with us, we lean on Him for everything.

If we ask ourselves whether God is mighty, loving, wise enough and in control of everything to take care of us, many of us know enough to give the theoretical answer 'yes'. But if in our time of crisis, that knowledge of God seems distant and we are still down in fear, we are not really putting our trust in God. When we trust in Him, we can honestly believe that He will take care of us, He will always be with us, He will not allow us to be tested more than we are able to bear, etc., and then our fear will disappear. What really happens here is that when we are faced with a crisis, knowing our own weakness and helplessness, we are making the choice to trust in God instead, and then cast our burdens on Him and know that He knows what is best for us. That is faith. Jesus scolded the disciples several times when they did not trust Him like this, and He called them those of little faith. But He appreciated the faith of those who did, calling their faith 'great', for example the Roman centurion who trusted that Jesus' word was enough to save his servant, and the woman who

believed that Jesus could deliver her daughter from demons even though she did not deserve it.

Mere acceptance of truths about God and the Gospel of Jesus will not produce this faith. But if we think deeply about the implications of these truths to our personal life and make the decision to choose God as our Lord and Master, that is when true faith begins. Then we hand over the ownership and control of our life to Him, and expect that our Heavenly Father will take good care of us. If anyone does not know Him like this, here is an opportunity for you to humbly repent from your sins, receive true salvation and choose Jesus as your Saviour and Lord.

#1077 Are we being saved?

When Peter preached on the Day of Pentecost, did the 3000 people who got 'saved' come into a full salvation at that time? Essentially what happened was that they became convicted that they had crucified their Messiah, and then they repented. God accepted them as such, and added them to the church. Then He continued to teach them through the apostles (Ac.2:41,42). Just think of it. They knew hardly anything more about who Jesus really was, what He taught, why He died and what that had to do with the forgiveness of their sins. The apostles themselves were discovering these truths from the Holy Spirit, and even they did not have a New Testament Bible with them. But as people got to understand more and more, they also began to get saved more and more, from their ignorance and their wrong understanding about God and themselves, followed by changes in the way they lived from day to day.

Isn't this happening even now? Maybe some have just experienced a miraculous answer to their prayer, and they come to 'believe' in Jesus. But that is not meant to stay there. They can now learn more, and the more truth they get to know, the more opportunity they have to be set free from their old ways and to become more like

Jesus (Jn.8:32). But some Christians have a wrong idea that once they come to Jesus, He will do everything for them. Some also imagine that 'accepting Jesus' is like paying an insurance premium to assure us a place in heaven. The result is that apart from attending church, they continue to live like everyone else in the world, following their desires, seeking to enjoy themselves, only coming back to Jesus when they have problems.

How are we ourselves doing in this matter? Is our heart set on things above as our highest priority and not on the things of this life (Co.3:2)? How much does 'following Jesus' practically mould the way we live? Are we daily learning to apply in real life the truths we keep learning from God's word (Php.2:12,13)?

This kind of change will come only as we know the truth about God and ourselves. It is when we understand that God suffered the death of His Son because only that could pay for our sins, that we begin to see the sinfulness of our sins. It is then that we fall in love with this God. It is then that we decide that we will live the rest of our life for Him, doing His will, serving Him in whatever way He calls us to, telling others about this Saviour, etc.

Now we can see what damage it does for people who do not study God's word, and in churches where such truths are not being made clear in teaching as well as in practice. Surveys show that most Christians these days have not read the whole Bible even once. On the top of this, there are many false teachings going around in the media which people swallow because of lack of better understanding.

There are also those who are unwilling to make any changes even after they see the truth, for various reasons! We need to examine ourselves.

#1078 The curse of heresies

Knowing the truth and responding to it is the way of being set free from ignorance that leads to bondage of different kinds (Jn.8:32). We must face the harsh reality that we are all ignorant of many truths, and some things we believe may be wrong. Salvation starts with the forgiveness of our sins which used to keep us separated from God, and then we can find acceptance from God. The next part of our salvation is to grow into becoming more and more like Jesus. This is to be transformed from our actual sinful, selfish ways to godliness. This is where growing in the knowledge of God in contrast to understanding who and what we really are helps. Jesus has sent the Holy Spirit to dwell in us and guide us into all this truth (Jn.16:13).

Satan hinders this work of the Holy Spirit by spreading falsehood, even using the word of God and misinterpreting it. Many people read the Bible superficially or merely listen to preachers, and simply believe what they understand, because they are persuaded that it is the word of God. They do not consider the possibility that their own interpretation or what the preachers say may be false.

Take the example of this extremely common false teaching known as word of faith. Preachers quote verses like Pr.18:21 to teach that we have power in what we speak, and that by speaking out what we want to happen, we can make them happen. Actually this proverb is only warning us to be careful with what we speak, because it has the potential to cause damage to the listeners. We do not have creative power, which is supernatural, and we must learn to think of ourselves not as God but only created beings.

Now let us look at the damage this false teaching produces. When people start believing this and start making declarations, sooner or later they will have to recognise that it does not work! Then comes disappointment, disillusionment, questing of the words in the Bible and its preachers, etc. On one side preachers tell them that it is because they do not have enough faith or because there is some sin in their life that nothing is happening, and on the other hand they

feel condemned and hopeless because they have confessed every sin they are aware of and tried their best to believe that what they say was going to happen. This whole drama gives outsiders something to mock at.

Falsehood cannot produce good. We need to know the truth. Knowledge of true doctrine becomes important, not only for the salvation it offers, but also to protect ourselves from the damage that false doctrines can bring. We are in times where there are lots of false doctrines going around, and we cannot assume that every pastor knows his Bible. Satan has a vested interest in causing confusion among Christians, and we must be aware that if he would not hesitate to misquote words from the Bible to Jesus, nothing less can be expected towards us. We need to cultivate the habit of checking doctrines for ourselves to see if they are true.

#1079 Can Christians have demons?

Some Christians emphatically say no, pointing out that the Holy Spirit and a demon cannot be in the same heart. But think some more. When we ask Christians to yield (dedicate, consecrate) themselves to God, what that implies is that at this time, they are only partly yielded to God, and now they have to become more fully yielded to God. This shows that Christians can be divided in heart, even though in principle they have given their life to Jesus and have the Holy Spirit living in them (Ro.8:9). Going further, we know that some born again Christians are slaves to hot temper, porn, drinks, etc. They have the Holy Spirit in them, and we can observe some fruit in their lives, but they are not totally yielded to the Holy Spirit.

"In your anger do not sin: Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, and do not give the devil a foothold" (Ep.4:26,27 NIV). The Greek word here means a spot (in a place). If we become angry, for example, we need to make sure that we do not end up in sin. That is the practical meaning of the figurative language about

not allowing the sun go down while we are still angry. If we let the anger grow, it will lead us to more and more sin. We can see that anger here is only a typical situation. It can be any sin that is not dealt with quickly but allowed to grow. Then we are keeping the moral boundary concerning that sin open, and this will allow demons to find an entrance into our life. Then they begin to exert their control over that particular area of sin they were given permission to. That person becomes demonised (daimonizomai - vexed and troubled by demons) in that area. This explains how born again Christians can have some part of their life yielded to demons, while generally speaking they have the Holy Spirit in authority over their heart. It is true that if demons take over full control over the person, he is possessed, and then, obviously, he cannot have the Holy Spirit also within him.

It may be difficult to understand theoretically how the Holy Spirit and demons can be together in the same person. Just look at how the Holy Spirit lives in us while we still carry an old sinful nature within us (Ga.5:17). The Holy Spirit does not forcibly take control of everything in our life when we invite Him in, but only where we yield to Him. We can say that as long as we are on earth, we will not be perfectly yielded, and there will be things in our life that are still not under the rule of the Spirit. Once we see that this is possible, it becomes easier to understand what would happen if a Christian yields some part of his life so much to sin so that evil spirits take control of that part. If a Christian takes part in the occult, or has not broken off with idol worship from the past, then also he can give place to demons (1Co.10:20).

All who claim to be Christians are not. But true Christians can also go wrong. Jesus has overcome Satan, and He offers us freedom from all bondage.

#1080 Self protection

There is an instinctive tendency we have to protect ourselves from mental pain. Many people tell lies when they are confronted with some fault, and others use techniques like changing the subject, turning the tables on those who confront them and making it out as if it is the fault of the latter, and various other ways. Many Christians come up with 'Judge not' as an all-time protection from getting blamed, and many leaders use 'Touch not the Lord's anointed'. What people do not realise is that in these ways they themselves may be blocking the way for their greater salvation.

The term 'accusers of the brethren' is thrown around frequently to discourage people from questioning anyone. Whistleblowers in churches and organisations get this treatment so that others dare not come forward with evidence. But none of us is perfect, and if we have been born again through the grace of God, we should be interested in overcoming our faults and living more and more like Jesus. "The one who says he abides in Him ought himself to walk in the same manner as He walked" (1Jn.2:6). Sometimes we become aware of our faults or where we are lacking something, as we read the Bible or listen to a sermon. Then the goal is that we must examine ourselves, and decide to seek God's help and put a stop to our wrong behaviour or thinking. But many times we are tempted to be happy to receive the extra knowledge, and then we promptly forget about it.

Another time we may feel the conviction from the Holy Spirit just after we have done something wrong. Here is a chance not only to receive forgiveness but also to determine to change for the future. We may need to learn how to do it right next time, pray for God's grace to change, and sometimes seek the counsel of more experienced people. But many people stop with forgiveness.

The more challenging situation is when someone comes and shares with us something we ought to change. Even if this is done totally from love for us and pure motives, we must remember that we have a natural tendency to want to avoid hearing about our faults. So we

must learn to watch out for such self-protective measures, but to examine ourselves honestly before God and humbly acknowledge our sin or mistake. "Now when Abram was ninety-nine years old, the LORD appeared to Abram and said to him, 'I am God Almighty; Walk before Me, and be blameless'" (Ge.17:1). Remember, it is not people to whom we finally have to give an account, but God (Ro.14:12). People may sometimes be wrong, some people may accuse us falsely, and sometimes it may even be our enemies who are accusing us. But our goal must be to be blameless before God, and our being right or wrong is finally for Him to decide. If the charges against us are false, we can ignore them and forgive those who brought them. But isn't it important to go through this exercise of standing before God openly, without self-justification or manipulating the situation, and listening to His verdict?

#1081 Sensing the presence of God

Some people place too much emphasis on 'experiencing' the presence of God. On the other side, there are others who give importance only to understanding things in their mind. But both understanding and experience are necessary parts of our life. To rephrase James, if understanding does not produce experience, that kind of understanding is dead, ineffective or useless (Ja.2:26). Also, a wrong understanding cannot produce the right experience. But we must have the right understanding if we have to have the right experience.

If we only look for experience, we are on dangerous grounds. For example, someone who felt excited singing a song imagines that he has met with God, and assumes that now he is a child of God, even though he has not seen himself as a sinner before God and repented. Another man who has experienced a supernatural answer to prayer then believes that he has become a Christian. The danger

here is that such people may stop looking for God and even close themselves to any word that tends to convict them.

Let me repeat. We must have the right understanding if we are to be sure that our experience is right. God has given us the Bible as His word to us, to teach us about Himself, His ways and to mould us into Him (2Ti.3:16,17). If we understand His word and direct our life to follow its teaching, we will be on the right path, and we will also have the right experience (Mt.7:24;26).

Our feelings can be excited in many different ways. If we think of excited feelings as a measure of our experience of God, it is possible that our natural feelings that excite us, such as when we sing some songs, when we repeat the same chorus again and again, when the rhythm picks up, when someone tells us that something good is going to happen to us, etc., may tell us that it is the presence of God. The presence of God does produce joy in us (Ps.16:11). But looking for thrilling feelings or excitement can be dangerous if it is not accompanied by a sense of falling down before God. (I am not talking about when preachers push people down.) Falling down before God in fear and trembling, in our heart and mind, when we recognise His awesome nature and at the same time seeing how sinful we are, is a clear mark of being in the presence of God. Remember what Isaiah experienced when he saw a vision of God (Is.6:5). Paul explains that such an experience is what would happen when there is a true spirit of prophecy in the church (1Co.14:24,25).

This is essentially in our heart and mind and not so much in our physical posture. It is easy to imitate the physical postures such as falling or kneeling down, raising hands, etc. Because many leaders emphasise physical actions from the people, because they are easier to reproduce, many people follow them and then get the impression that they have felt the presence of God.

Jesus said that true worship would be in spirit and truth (Jn.4:23). Let us preach the word of truth and obey it.

#1082 The end goal of the church

The Gospel that Jesus brought to the world was that sinners could be saved and restored to God (Mt.1:21). After the first man sinned and turned away from God in order to satisfy his own pleasures, subsequently the whole world has suffered from the consequences of sin. Jesus came with the remedy. In order to provide us forgiveness, which was absolutely necessary for man to get back to God, Jesus paid the cost with His blood. But forgiveness could not complete the redemptive process, which then needed man to be set free from the power of sin ruling his nature, and help him to live like Jesus and be transformed to the nature of God (2Pe.1:3,4). This alone could enable him to have more and more fellowship with God.

The 'church', which is now the body through which Jesus works on the earth, is God's tool for executing this plan of salvation. It is to proclaim the Gospel, receive people into it who respond to the Gospel and then train them to grow in the likeness of Christ, till each of them attains to the maturity of Christ. "We proclaim Him, admonishing every man and teaching every man with all wisdom, so that we may present every man complete in Christ" (Col.1:28). This is the end goal of the commission God has given to the church (Mt.28:19,20).

This commission is not addressed to individuals to carry out but collectively to the church. So God gives us different spiritual gifts, enabling each member to carry out specific tasks as different parts of the body of Christ (Ep.4:7). God also provides leaders in the church to equip and train the members so that they can together carry out this great task with each doing their part (Ep.4:11-13). There are so many aspects to this process of growing up to the maturity of Christ, and that is why so many different types of trainers/leaders are involved.

If we don't realise that the end goal is the transformation of the individuals into becoming like Jesus in character, it is possible to get over-occupied with the smaller tasks which catch the fancy of different leaders according to their gifting. So we see churches that emphasise just one or two aspects such as Bible study, evangelism, prayer meetings, youth ministry, church planting, social work, etc. Do we see that while all these are necessary components of the work of a church, without a proper emphasis on personal growth, people are not likely to become mature? If some of these activities are flourishing, but people continue to remain more or less the same in their character and behaviour, we must see that we have lost sight of the end goal. Then individuals and families with problems remain as undercurrents while the church is known for its different activities.

Like all of us individuals, churches also need to grow in character, to be seen as the body of Christ. But the church consists of us individuals, and if it is to flourish, we must be flourishing individually! We can see, ministry goes deeper than activities.

#1083 Placing God under obligation

When someone works for another person, he deserves his wages which he earns. Most religions in the world follow this idea that they have to earn the blessings of their gods by doing some kind of 'works', whether they are long prayers, carrying out rituals, making sacrifices such as giving money or going on pilgrimages, self-denial, etc. After they do them, these people assume that they have earned favour with their gods, and now they can expect the gods to do for them what they ask.

But the truth is, there is nothing we can demand from God because we have sinned against Him, and what we deserve from Him is only judgment. Then comes Jesus with the Gospel, offering salvation to us as a free gift which we do not deserve. We are delighted to receive this, especially when we understand the meaning of grace—

undeserved favour from God to us—which was totally beyond our reach earlier.

But it turns out that it is difficult for us to properly appreciate grace, and we find ourselves continuing to live under the religious concept of works, trying to earn some favour from God. Let us look at some common examples. We hear that it is through our faith that we receive God's grace (Ep.2:8,9). Now we start building up our 'faith' for what we want to happen, by claiming it by repeatedly speaking out that it is going to happen, getting rid of negative thoughts and people who raise doubts, quoting all kinds of promises from the Bible, etc. We fast and pray. We get as many people as possible to pray for us. We 'sprinkle' the blood of Jesus and declare things in the name of Jesus. We make vows to God and tell Him what we will do if He answers our prayer. Etc.

When we do such things, at the back of our mind is the assumption that now God cannot ignore us because of all the things we have done for Him. We think, now that we have earned His favour, like wages, He cannot say no to us. He is now obliged to do what we ask for!

In this way, we have turned 'faith' into works. But isn't faith to trust in God and not in ourselves? It is one thing to believe that He can do anything He wants, but that does not tell us what He will do? If we believe that He is good and wise, isn't it wise and humble on our part to learn from Him and His word what is good for us and then for us to do it? But if we decide what we want, and try to place Him under obligation to do that by different things we do, we are not dealing with Him as our God but as our servant.

God is doing His work on earth using us, the church, the body of Christ. Our part is to do what the Head wants, and not to try to manipulate the Head to do what we plan. Many people are thinking up all kinds of bright ideas and then praying that God must do things for them. Some imitate what some others have done and expect

God to do what He did for the others. Without obeying God, we cannot trust in techniques, like Israel taking the ark to battle thinking that God was in the ark!

#1084 The most needed message for Christians

The reason why Jesus left heaven, came as a Man to this earth and died on the cross was, simply and succinctly, to bear the punishment for our sins and to offer us the possibility of being restored to God. But we Christians seem to take this for granted, and for many of us, what comes uppermost to our mind when we think of Jesus is as a Person who can give us a comfortable life here in the face of all the different struggles we face. Let this shock you. If you don't find in yourself a strong desire to stop sinning and to devote yourself to doing the will of God, the chances are that you are not even a Christian (1Jn.3:8,9). It is not that Christians do not sin, or more correctly, fall into sin against their wishes, but that those who have been born again do not practise sin, or continue in sin as a normal way of life.

Jesus calls everyone to come to Him, so that they can be saved from the guilt, shame and penalty of sin, and also from the power of sin in their life which makes them slaves to sin (Ro.6:14). God gives a new mind and spirit to those who go to Him in repentance for their past sins (Ez.36:26,27). This is the evidence of someone who has come to Christ, and not baptism, church membership or activities.

Those who have truly repented from their old, sinful way of life and realise what it cost Jesus to provide them salvation have it as their ambition to be pleasing to Him in every way, even in their thoughts and imaginations. They enter into a battle against their own sinful, selfish desires when the Holy Spirit leads them in this way (Ga.5:17).

This is a battle we will be in all our life because we never stop discovering new areas in our life where sin has corrupted us and which we were not aware of as being sin earlier. That is spiritual growth, which every true Christian must be able to recognise in their own life. Even though we will never become perfect or without sin in this life, the direction of our life towards increasing heights of perfection indicates that God is at work in us.

It is all right to come to Jesus looking for healing or some other miracle. He will not throw out anyone who goes to Him (Jn.6:37). But coming to Jesus in this way must become the start of a lifelong journey of following Him as His disciples. How sad it will be for those who do not get to know Jesus as their Saviour, but only as a Miracle-worker! According to Jesus Himself, the majority of the people who came to Him were not really seeking Him but only what they could get from Him (Jn.6:26).

Don't you think that a large majority of people who consider themselves to be Christians need to hear this? Some may get offended, but hopefully some others may hear and understand, and go to Jesus in true repentance and sincere faith. God is looking for such people, and He is not impressed by large numbers, great buildings and mega programmes. Isn't it also necessary to make sure that we ourselves truly know Jesus?

#1085 I can do nothing!

Our sinful nature still clings to us after we are born again and become children of God, and the new nature which God has sprouted in us has to slowly grow up and replace it. One major aspect of our sinful nature is to avoid owning up to our sins and taking responsibility for our part in salvation. Because of this, it is exciting for us to hear about what God has done for us and what He will do. The good news of God's undeserved favour towards us is very appealing to us. Our salvation is a gift from God and there is

nothing we can do to earn it. He who began a good work in us will complete it. Our sins are all covered by the blood of Jesus, and there is no condemnation for us even if we fall now into sin. God will work all things for our good, and a mansion each is reserved for us in heaven in eternity. We are weak, and there is nothing we can do from our side, and all we need to do is to be thankful for God's grace.

So what do we do now? Sing songs of praise to God and rejoice?

All these 'truths' above are taught in the Bible, but they are not the only truths we find there. One thing that should disturb us here is that, if it is up to God, He is working in us, and there is nothing for us to do about our salvation, why is it that all of us have not become like Jesus after all these years of knowing Him? It can't be that God is not doing His work properly! He cannot fail His promises and He is almighty too! But we are still struggling with some sin or the other, and we are also having problems in marriage, with children, church, workplace, etc.! The mistake is in assuming that salvation is entirely a work of God from His side, without any cooperation from us. It is wrong to think that we cannot do anything from our side and that humility is to leave it all to God.

There are many places in the Bible telling us what we ought to do from our side and warning us what will happen if we don't. Just look at one example. Some people like to quote Php.2:13, "It is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure." Is it not saying that He is totally responsible for giving us the right desires and working them out in our life? But v.12 completes the picture, "Work out your salvation with fear and trembling;" Together these verses are saying that when God works inside us giving us good desires and the power to do His will, it is our responsibility to actually carry them out in our practical life. We can immediately see that it is because we are leaving everything to God to work out that no transformation is taking place in our life.

Jesus has stated very clearly that the only way we can follow Him is if we take up our cross and deny ourselves in order to do His will (Lk.9:23). It is because our desires many times are contrary to what He wants that we have to learn to deny ourselves (Gal.5:17). What happens if we 'leave everything to God' and continue to please ourselves, saying, "I can do nothing"?

#1086 Forgiving others is a test

Why would the loving Father be so strict on His children whom He has got through the sacrifice of His Son, as to tell them that He would not forgive them if they would not forgive others? (Mt.6:14,15). In one place He has assured us that He will never leave us or forsake us. But then, from the parable of the king and the two servants it is clear that He might even take back the forgiveness that He has once given (Mt.18:34,35)! These passages emphasise the fact that our own forgiveness from God is conditional on our forgiving others. But that is not what most preachers tell people. They present the unconditional love of God to sinners that will assure eternal life for them which they will never lose. But true prophets warn people to take God seriously and to forgive others who have sinned against them.

Have you thought about why forgiving others is so much linked to our salvation? Of course it is not that we need to forgive others first before we can receive our own forgiveness from God. Our salvation is not based on being good enough or doing any good works. But once we receive forgiveness, it is then important for us to forgive others. This is due to the nature of forgiveness from God. It is an unmerited favour from God which He offers to us as a free gift. It is important to understand how we can receive this free gift. It is a free gift for those who believe in Jesus as their Saviour (Jn.3:16).

What does it mean to believe in Jesus? We believe that Jesus, the Son of God, came as a Man to this earth and died on the cross to bear the punishment of death on behalf of all people. This implies that our sins deserved this punishment, and that God is offering to forgive us our sins and take away our punishment. That is grace from God towards us who actually deserve to be punished.

After receiving this free gift from God, if people say that they are not willing to show the same grace towards others, what it shows is that they have not understood the meaning of grace from God. They seem to think is that these people who have sinned against them do not deserve to be forgiven, while they themselves are saying they need forgiveness from God even though they do not deserve it! They have not understood grace nor appreciated it, and therefore God cannot consider them worthy to receive grace.

In the usual presentation of the Gospel these days, the place for convicting people of their sins and sinfulness has disappeared, and it has been replaced by offers of free blessings from God. No wonder people do not understand how God forgives sinners.

When God tells us to forgive others, He tells us to remember how we ourselves have received forgiveness from Him (Ep.4:32;Co.3:13)). That is what will help us to forgive others. But if we have not seen the value of the sacrifice of Jesus for us, the chances are that we have not actually received forgiveness, but we are presuming on it. Take this seriously before it becomes late.

#1087 Tax collectors and prostitutes

Jesus was talking to the chief priests and the elders at the Temple when He told them the parable of two sons. One of them did not agree to do what the father told him, but did it later. The second one told the father he would do it, but did not do it. Then, obviously referring to religious leaders who professed to follow God faithfully,

like the second son, Jesus said that they were actually ungodly in that they did not do what they professed (Is.29:13). He said that tax collectors and prostitutes would enter the kingdom of God before them (Mt.21:31).

It is simple enough to understand because tax collectors and prostitutes knew very well about their sins which were so obvious, and so it was easier for them to repent and turn to God. But the chief priests and the elders assumed that they were already acceptable to God because of their religious activities, and never saw their need to repent. Isn't this such a profound parable that we should sit up and examine ourselves? Are we taking God for granted, or have we seen ourselves as sinners before Him and turned eagerly to the Saviour for salvation?

The world around us is going through a process of minimising and then normalising sin, so as to make sin look like something acceptable. Some time ago, the word prostitute would cause people to shudder. But now it is fashionable to call them sex workers, giving them an acceptable place among others who work for earning a living. Homosexuals were considered to be an abomination for God, but they are now acceptable as being gay!

How has this trend affected our dealing with sinful tendencies inside us? For example, what do we think of lying? Is it our way of handling difficult situations, like everyone else around us? Have we forgotten that Satan is the father of lies, and that Jesus has come to deliver us from Satan's hands and give us a heavenly Father? Even though Jesus said that looking at a woman (or man) with desire amounted to adultery, have we come to believe that flirting and watching a little bit of porn are ok? Such things are still sins we must repent from, and our Christian work will not compensate for them. You get the picture. Have we become like the chief priests and the elders in the parable who were only making profession of faith even though their hearts were far from God?

Why is it that people can be active in the church but still have not repented from their sins and turned to Jesus for salvation? The blame is on the preaching. The preaching in many churches is about blessings which God wants to shower upon them from His love. People don't have to turn around from their old way of life, but they can find thrill and amusement in the church! The result is the pathetic representation of the body of Christ, where actually what is going on are honour seeking, making money, seeking fun and pleasure, etc., instead of humbling of ourselves before God, turning from our sin and seeking to do God's will.

#1088 Our role in the body of Christ

After I was converted to Christ as a young man, I was associated with a Christian ministry that emphasised evangelism, teaching that we are 'saved to save'. I enthusiastically threw myself into evangelism, sharing Jesus with strangers on the road, giving tracts, writing letters to my relatives and friends, etc. But at the end of two years I realised that not even one person had come to Christ! I was devastated, questioning my own salvation. I asked God about it, and what I understood was that my spiritual gift was not in evangelism. Later I realised that my role in the body of Christ was as a minor teacher and a counsellor, sometimes prophetic when I taught, and sometimes receiving words of knowledge when I counselled people. In trying to carry out evangelism, I was trying to do what I was not equipped to do but what others in the body were to do. I understood that if I focussed on doing what the Lord had enabled me to do, that was what would please the Lord. At the same time, I learned to respect others who were carrying out other functions.

"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 observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age" (Mt.28:19,20). This is not just

about evangelism, but bringing people out of darkness into the light of Christ and nurturing them to grow up to the mature stature of Christ (Ep.4:13). All of us cannot do all of these tasks. But when each of us carries out the small things that we can do, the church, as a whole, will be able to carry out this commission.

But what we see often is that many leaders are engaged personally with some particular aspect of the work of God, and they want everyone else to do what they like to do. So we see churches that have a favourite theme, whether it is Bible study, prayer meetings, evangelism, church planting, deliverance, healing, or social work. Those who have other gifts in the church are not generally recognised by these leaders, and some strong leaders even ask them to leave, seeing them as those who oppose the move of the Spirit! But don't we need every part of the body to work together? "If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole were hearing, where would the sense of smell be?" (1Co.12:17).

In the human body, all the different members work together in harmony. But in the body of Christ it is challenging to work together with those who see things differently. The solution many people choose is to group together with those who are like them and be separate from others! But it is easy to see that each member in the body has to receive something from the others and also give something to the others. But each separate group will grow up lacking something, and may also go to extremes in what they do. But when we grow together, we can grow with balance, nourishing one another.

#1089 An unrealistic expectation

What if we read the Bible and understand that God is Truth and it is Satan who is the father of lies, but carry on with our white lies? What if we learn that even to look at women with desire amounts to

adultery, but we keep on enjoying dirty thoughts in our mind? Of course, then we are not spiritually minded. Then we are not going to get victory over sin or become like Jesus. The chances are that we have been taught to believe that we only need to 'stand still and see the salvation of God'.

Many people keep waiting for God to change them. They pray, "Lord, give me patience. Take away my anxiety." Etc. Then when they continue to be impatient or anxious, (or any other sin they are dealing with), they begin to have complaints against God, thinking that He does not answer prayers, He cannot be trusted to keep His promises, etc. They may adjust themselves to a nominal Christian life or give up their faith altogether.

But aren't these unrealistic expectations from God which people are holding? God tells them the truth, about what they should avoid doing and what they should start doing. But they just expect God to do everything for them. They have been taught that what we need to do is to believe, and then God will do everything for us. Then we have misunderstood grace.

"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, looking for the blessed hope and the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Christ Jesus" (Ti.2:11-13). There is another part of grace that offers us undeserved mercy and forgives our sins because Jesus has taken our punishment. Then God gives us a new heart that hates sin like He does, and which wants to become like Him (1Jn.3:8,9). But after that, when we come to know the truth, concerning God and ourselves, we ought to deny ourselves and follow Jesus (Lk.9:23). No spiritual progress will take place if we carry on with our old life and expect God to give us a new life.

One parable of Jesus is very relevant here. There were two people who built houses, one on a rock and another on sand. Many

Christians only understand from here that Christ is the Rock on whom we must build our life. But that was not the theme of this parable! Go ahead and read it! The difference between these two builders was that even though both heard the truth, one acted upon it, and the other did not! (Mt.7:24,26).

Which way are we building our life? Mere Bible study or prayer are not enough. It is only when we put into practice what we learn from the Bible, with the strength that we receive through prayer, that our life will begin to change. There are mighty spiritual forces at work to placate us with 'believe, believe' and forcefully turn us away from doing what God wants us to. God is working in us, but based on that, we need to obey Him in practical life (Php.2:12,13).

#1090 Very few are going to be saved

"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.7:13,14). These are words of Jesus. But the way the Gospel is being preached, it gives people the impression that most people are going to be saved. According to common misunderstanding, all one needs to be saved is to believe that Jesus died on the cross for the sins of the world and rose again on the third day. But even demons believe that, because it is true, but they are not saved! At the end of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus clarified that it is not enough to hear (and believe) the truth, but also to act according to it and reorder our life (turn from sin) (vv.24,26). But preachers don't mention about doing anything, but only believing! The sad result is that a large percentage of people who assume they are Christians on the way to heaven are deceiving themselves. They have not come to salvation. It is the responsibility

of everyone who loves the truth and who love people to warn others and show them how they ought to be saved.

There is a small gate to enter in, and a narrow path to walk the rest of our life on. The gate is where we have to confess our sins and trust in Jesus for forgiveness, and also make the choice to leave our life of sin behind and follow Jesus. The narrow path is the rest of our life where we deny ourselves whenever we are tempted to please ourselves, and choose to follow Jesus by doing His will in every part of our life (Lk.9:23). Many who think they are Christians are not keen on doing the will of God but only on having a good life here on earth. But those who know that God has shown them grace and given them a chance to be saved from their sinful way of life will be very keen to find out what the will of God is in the different situations of life and to do it. The one sure test to see if we have been born again and become a child of God is to examine if our attitude to sin has changed. Earlier we used to like sin for the pleasures it offered us, and only wanted to avoid getting caught, but now we ourselves do not want to sin and grieve our Father in any way (1Jn.3:8,9).

The sad thing we can notice is that many 'Christians' like to keep up some level of activity going on in their life, like Bible reading, prayer, church programmes, etc., and this makes them believe that God must be pleased with them. But they are not serious about obeying God in every detail of life. They tell lies, pretend, pilfer from the workplace, entertain lustful looks and flirting, cheat on taxes, gossip, spread scandals, do not keep their words, will not forgive others, etc. They keep their spiritual and ordinary parts of their life separate and do not see anything wrong about it.

We who know the truth ought to tell them to repent. Let us not become compromisers.

#1091 Doubting God

It is obvious that as created beings we will never be able to understand all of God's ways because they are far above and beyond us. That is where trust comes in. When we have come to know God, we can trust that God is good, wise and in full control of everything, even when we cannot figure out what is happening or see where it is going. Questioning these aspects of God's character, His goodness, love, power and wisdom, is a mark of not knowing God for who He is. It is a mark of immaturity if we imagine we have valid reason to question God. Then we don't know God as God, and our knowledge is very limited. So, if we have questions or doubts about God, what we must be looking at is how much we know Him and how much we trust Him.

Imagine we are feeling anxious, not knowing what is going to happen or what we are going to do. On one side, we are anxious because we are uncertain about ourselves or because we are aware of our limitations. But then we have the privilege of leaning on God and not on ourselves. With God there are no limitations. He knows exactly what is to be done, and He is well able to do it (Ps.115:3). When we transfer in our mind our attention from looking at our limitations to looking at Almighty God who is our Father, anxiety cannot remain any more in our mind. He has promised never to abandon us (He.13:5). By faith we can leave the matter to Him and stop worrying. If we still worry, it shows that we are not looking at God but our own limitations (Mt.14:30).

Let us learn a little more by looking at an example. Suppose we are anxious wondering if we are going to be healed from some sickness. We know Jesus is able to heal us, but we don't know if He will, and we know many cases where He has not healed! Then, if we are able to leave the decision to Him by faith, believing that He knows best, He is able to do whatever He wants, then we overcome anxiety. That is what the three Hebrew men showed when they were threatened to be thrown into the fire. They knew God could take them out of the fire, but they did not know if that was God's plan at that time.

But when they left that decision to God, they overcame anxiety, and became bold before the king (Da.3:16-18).

If we cannot know the outcome in a situation, or what happens is not what we expected, faith is our answer for overcoming doubts about God. If we hold on to our need for certainty of knowledge, and we can't have that, can we afford to put the blame on God, doubt His goodness, wisdom or power? We dare not! We are dealing with God who always knows best and who is always powerful to do whatever He wants, and we puny people must not sin against Him by doubting Him. Especially when we know God as One who has demonstrated His love for us through the sacrifice of His Son, we must not dare to cast doubts about His character or the reliability of His promises.

The problem is, many do not know God as God, but they think of Him as if He was just like them (Ps.50:21).

#1092 Living in doctrinal bubbles

Jesus came to set us free from sin (Mt.1:21). This means more than to just forgive us and save us from the punishment of sin. God wants us to actually stop sinning (1Jn.2:1). He does not want us to be bound to sinful ways (Ro.6:14). Forgiveness is instantaneous when we repent and accept salvation as a gift from the Saviour, while actually overcoming sinning is a slow, progressive process which continues throughout the rest of our life. Sadly, many people have not even heard of this possibility because their preachers have only told them about forgiveness and going to heaven.

Forgiveness will not come merely by accepting the fact that Jesus died and rose again, but only through repentance, as we see ourselves as sinners for whom the Son of God had to die, and accepting the offer of salvation as a free gift, knowing that there is no other way we could have been saved. There must be a turning

away in the heart from the old sinful life to following Jesus. After that, in order to experience deliverance from sinning, we must learn to deny ourselves and obey Jesus whenever we are tempted (Lk.9:23). One of the most common mistakes Christians make is to think that God will save them by His own power, because we are totally unable to save ourselves. But if God was entirely responsible for saving us, everyone who believed in Jesus would have become like Him fully quickly! The reason why that is far from reality, and why we can observe this in us and all around us is that while God is at work inside us through the Holy Spirit, it is our responsibility to practise what we have learnt (Php.2:12,13). We all differ from one another in how much we cooperate with God, and that is what explains the differing results!

We will be shocked to find how much resistance people offer to this simple practical truth! Some people say that if salvation depended on us in any way, then it would not be grace! Some say that as we behold the beauty of Jesus in His word, the Holy Spirit will silently transform us into His image! Going with such ideas, we hear that since God has started a work in us, He will complete it! Since God has caused us to be born again and become children of God, He will also cause us to grow! We are already seated in heavenly places, aren't we? We are joint heirs with Christ, and there are mansions waiting for us in heaven!

When we read the Bible, we must make the effort to distinguish between what God has planned for us and prepared, and what we need to do to receive it. We must not take what is promised for us as if they have already become true in us. We see some people insist that certain things are true in their life, quoting verses, when everyone else can see they are not! This will not happen if we don't lose sight of what we really are in practical life, in our thoughts, words and action, and we are honest enough to face reality. It is when we see how we come short that we are drawn closer to God in

greater dependence.

#1093 Waiting for victory

We know the story of Abraham to whom God promised a son when he was 75 years old. But after that, Abraham and his wife Sarah were only getting old, without any sign of a son. The thing about Abraham was that he held on to the promise of God even as he became more and more aware that he and his wife could not have any child. After 25 years of waiting, during which his faith was tested severely, God gave him the promised son. This story is given in the Bible as an encouragement to trust in God's promises even against all odds (Ro.4:18-21).

God has given us a promise that He will bring us to a place through His grace, where sin will not rule over our life (Ro.6:14). But many people fail to experience this in a real sense. We are not referring to doctrinal games some people play to assert that in Christ they are already victorious, because it is obvious to people around them that there is no actual practical victory to be seen! Some others have been waiting for years for God to remove their weaknesses from them so that they will no longer feel the temptation and thus have victory! This is not a real victory by definition, because there cannot be any victory without battles. Many give up hope of victory after some time. There are others who are fighting for victory, but years go by and some of them also give up.

Whether it is anger, lust, worry or anything else, even when sin clings to us and refuses to leave, we can still believe that what God has promised has to happen. We may be tempted to accept natural explanations how things are there in our genes or built into us through years of abuse or neglect, and why we cannot change. But it is God Almighty who has promised, and it will happen, if we don't give up our faith (He.10:23).

Abraham did not give up, even if it looked impossible for God's promise to be fulfilled. But it was not a passive waiting like what we mentioned above. He expected God to give him the promised son, and kept having a normal relationship with his wife. Isaac was not born like Jesus, but through God using natural processes to work miraculously.

When we hold on to faith, we will not give up. We will pray and pray for help because we are convinced of our own inability to fight against the lusts in our own flesh. Even if we fail at times, we will keep fighting against our lusts to overcome them and gain victory (Ro.6:12,13). God works in us to give us direction and power, and we fight to overcome in temptations that come our way (Php.2:12,13). Victory must come because God has promised it, even if it is taking time and we taste utter defeat now and then. God will do it for us, just as He did for Abraham.

The more defeat we experience, the more we will learn not to expect anything good from ourselves, and then we can depend more entirely on God's power. That is how He will be glorified. He will also give us the glory of victory over our enemies that have ruled over us in the past. His grace will win in the end.

#1094 If we lack love for the truth

Imagine if we can avoid losing a lot of money in tax if we just make a false statement. Many people, including Christians, will go ahead without a second thought. For them, money is tangible and so is its immediate usefulness. But they don't think about failing in the test God had placed before them, losing the anointing and usefulness they could have had if they had passed the test, and the indescribable loss they would face in eternity! How do they justify themselves? Everybody does it, God understands our practical difficulties, we can always confess it and receive forgiveness? Some of these people have never even been born again, but they are on

the broad way leading ultimately to destruction that Jesus described, counting on the love and mercy of God that presumably overlooks all failures (Mt.7:13,14).

Let's say we have been truly born again, having repented from sin and decided to follow Jesus. Do we think that that is it, and the next thing we will experience is being with Jesus when we die? Haven't we realised that even after being born again, we are far from being like Jesus in the way we think, speak and behave, and don't we want to be rid of our sinful behaviour and become like Him? That is what is to happen now if we deny ourselves and follow Him (Lk.9:23). What will happen if, on the contrary, we keep pleasing ourselves and don't bother to be faithful to God in the little and big decisions of life? (Lk.16:10,11).

After we are born again, it is a life of obedience to the things God shows us. Many disobey God by refusing even to look at the matter of taking water baptism. Many others refuse the spiritual gifts God wants to give them and the ministries they can do using them. People search the Bible to find verses to justify their infant baptism or their cessationist views, not realising what treasures of spiritual life they are forfeiting in the bargain! Some tie themselves with chains after choosing to marry an unbelieving person, because of which they are going to bring in many conflicts and limit their usefulness to God. This kind of resistance happens not only by individuals resisting the truth which God presents to them here and there. Churches also resist truths that God wants to reform them with, and hold on to their old practices and tradition.

God's desire is to save us from our sins, not only from its punishment, but also in all the consequences there are in our flesh that cause us to come short of His glory. But it appears that very few 'love' truth in such a way that they are willing to obey that truth at all cost. "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). Can we see that in spite of God's loving plans for us to

be saved in every way, we can be the ones who resist and even oppose different steps He takes us to. He wishes that every one of us will be saved, but let us not resist Him.

#1095 Saved through faith

The unique character of Christianity is that unlike all other religions that require pleasing God through various means, such as rituals, ceremonies, good works, etc., here Jesus comes down to man offering a free salvation to whoever will believe (Jn.3:16). This is, indeed, amazing grace being offered to us who actually deserve eternal judgment. But it should be immediately obvious that this salvation depends on 'believing', and its meaning can be understood differently by different people! What a tragedy if someone thinks he believes, but because he has misunderstood it, does not get saved!

The devil also, in a sense, believes in Jesus (Jas.2:19). He knows without a doubt that Jesus, the Son of God, came and lived as a Man on earth, was crucified for the sins of the world, and rose from the dead on the third day. He knows the Bible, and he knows that there is no other way for man to go to God except through Jesus. Yet the devil is not saved! But this is the kind of 'faith' a lot of people have, who therefore imagine that they are saved! A large number of people who are born in 'Christian' families have this much belief. But they have never been born again, and without that, we cannot enter the kingdom of heaven (Jn.3:5). So, this kind of accepting truths about Jesus in our mind is not enough to receive salvation. What is missing here?

Salvation is offered to us as a free gift to those who believe, which we cannot earn or qualify for by anything we do (Ep.2:8,9). So what we need to do here is to see what is missing from 'believing' as we saw above.

Let us imagine in our mind that we are going to meet with Jesus in person for the first time. We have heard about Him that He died on the cross for taking the punishment for our sins, and He has proved Himself to be God by rising from the dead. How will we feel about standing before Him if we knew how pure, holy, righteous He was and how He hated sin? Will we not immediately become aware of our sins? Will not our first words be to plead for mercy and forgiveness? Will we not say that we don't want to sin any more, but we want to obey Him in everything in our life, even though we know that by our own strength we cannot do that? Then what He will do graciously is to wash away the record of our sins with His blood, and tell us that the Father has accepted us as His children because of our faith in Him. That is how we get born again.

So what is missing in the previous understanding of believe is repentance from our sins and commitment to following Jesus as our Lord. Are these separate from believing, as some people say? No. That is a part of believing in Jesus. He is the King of kings and the Lord of lords, and He is offering to be our Saviour.

Our faith is to be in Jesus, who He is as a Person. Can we just believe things about Jesus and be saved? If we believe in Him, our response will be according to who He is as Lord and Saviour and who we are as sinners without hope of our own.

#1096 Moving from knowledge to faith

Here is a key that can unlock salvation to countless number of people who imagine they are safe in the salvation that Jesus came with, even though they are still outside the kingdom of God. The tragedy is that they have been taught to think that all is well between them and God, even though they have not really entered into a relationship with God. I hope this will help them to respond to the love of God in the right way.

Many people think that they have been saved because they have accepted the truth that Jesus the Son of God came as a Man, died on the cross to bear the punishment for the sins of all people, and rose again from the dead proving that He was indeed the Son of God. The basis they hold for this belief is from Acts.16:30,31, Jn.3:16, etc., which state very clearly that believing in Jesus will save us. But the sad fact is that even though they say they believe in Jesus, their lives are not showing any transformation into the character of Jesus, indicating that the Holy Spirit is not in them producing His fruit. How can this be, because many of them show signs of piety such as regular attendance at church, Bible reading, prayer, etc., and many are active at church too?

The answer is that merely believing facts about Jesus cannot save us. We know that the Devil knows more facts about Jesus than we do (Ja.2:19)! To be born again, become a child of God and to enter the kingdom of God requires us to believe 'in' the Lord Jesus, that is, to believe in Him as a Person that will start a relationship with Him. This is something each of us has to do individually and personally, and not collectively as a family or church.

Of course, in order to believe in Jesus in this way we have to get to know Him personally. Either someone tells us about Him or we get to know Him from the Bible. We see His greatness as the Son of God almighty, all knowing, without bounds of space or time, holy, righteous, just, loving, merciful, kind, compassionate, etc. and as the Son of Man who gave Himself up for us on the cross to pay the price for our sins and to offer us salvation from our sins.

At this point we can intellectually accept these truths, park them in one part of our mind and move on. Or we can think about these and consider what they mean to us personally. If we do that, then the Holy Spirit will be able to show us that we are ugly, filthy sinners before Him, and also how God is reaching out to us to forgive us and accept us.

This is crucial. If we now confess our sins, ask for forgiveness, and express our desire to turn away from our old sinful life and instead to follow Jesus and do whatever He says, God will wash away our sins, accept us as His children and give us a new heart that hates sin. It is this decision to submit to Jesus and follow Him what will make the difference from merely believing. This faith is our response to God's grace (Ep.2:8,9). This alone will bring us into a proper relationship with Jesus.

#1097 The war against the Gospel

I am not talking about the attacks on Christians by unbelievers. But preachers and so-called Bible scholars are rising up to attack the preaching of the Gospel brought by Jesus Christ. The Good News which Jesus brought was that He had made a way for us to be saved from our sins (Mt.1:21). Giving an appearance of exalting the value of the grace of God, these preachers are saying that those who teach repentance from sin as a requirement for salvation are heretics! If those who come to Jesus for salvation have no repentance from their sins, what kind of salvation are they looking for? It is very clear what Jesus taught. "Now after John had been taken into custody, Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the gospel of God, and saying, 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel'" (Mk.1:14,15). And yet, these preachers have the audacity to say that the only requirement for receiving the Gospel was believing!

The world does not want to give up sin. Its goal is to make sin acceptable and declared normal. Many people in the church who should know better are going along with it, probably because they want to be considered progressive. But this is not progress at all, but downright depravity. Jesus had no hesitation to call out people who followed Him merely for material benefits (Jn.6:26,27). But now the

trend is to be inclusive and not to turn any away. As a result, even the Gospel is being stripped of its power. The modern 'gospel' is attractive to people, offering great music, fun and games, friendships (calling it fellowship). Who talks about sin these days? Where are the prophets who bring the word of the Lord to rebuke and convict people? So-called prophets these days are flattering the hearers and predicting a good future without any warning to turn away from sin.

The church is becoming so worldly that even the world is mocking it. The reason is that the word of the cross is not being preached in the church (1Co.1:18). You may say that is not true, because Jesus is still being preached as having been crucified. But what is not being preached is that we are to live crucified lives ourselves (Ga.6:14;2:20). Do we hear much in our preaching about taking up our cross daily, denying ourselves and following Jesus (Lk.9:23)? Aren't we having too many preachers telling us to follow our dreams, make up bucket lists, etc.? Instead of the world seeing us as being their light and salt, they see us increasingly as one of them. No wonder young people are wondering if all religions may be just different ways to the same God!

When we understand this trend, we can see why preachers are avoiding the preaching of repentance and turning to God. But if we don't see ourselves as sinners before God who need a Saviour, we don't see any need to repent, and we find it convenient to 'just believe'! We like singing songs, fun and games and meeting people, as long as no one is telling us to turn away from sinning!

#1098 Accountable to God

There are many clever scientists and philosophers who take pride in being atheists. They characterise themselves as those who are pursuing truth through investigation of facts and logical thinking. But they are unable to find enough proof to convince them that there is

a God. There are also many other people who come to the same conclusion after thinking about things in their own way. But the fact is that there is a God, who created the whole universe and everything in it including people. How is it that such clever people cannot see that?

One simple reason is that we cannot find God through natural means and none of us is clever enough to figure God out. But there is a spiritual reason. Jesus said it when religious leaders questioned His ability to know spiritual truths and to teach them. "If anyone is willing to do His will, he will know of the teaching, whether it is of God or whether I speak from Myself" (Jn.7:17). Spiritual truths can be understood if we are seeking it with a good heart, that is, with a sincere desire to obey it and live according to it once we know it.

What is the problem with atheists? They realise that if they acknowledge God, they will immediately become accountable to Him, and they won't be able to live doing whatever they like! So they will find some excuse in their mind to steer away from the concept of God.

That is the problem, and not that there is not enough evidence to prove God's existence. There are countless number of people who have sought God and found Him. Many have searched for Him even through scientific knowledge, and recognised that there is more than enough evidence around, if only we look in the right direction. If we are searching with an aim to disprove the existence of God, there are enough things we can find, which we cannot understand, and then claim that they prove there is no God. But if they are honest they can see that they are only coming to conclude what they wanted to believe. It is different if we are looking for God among all the facts, and then He will reveal Himself to us. "You will seek Me and find Me when you search for Me with all your heart" (Je.29:13).

There is a fashionable trend among some people to 'deconstruct' their faith. Obviously no one knows all the answers to questions, and

if we decide we cannot believe till we get them, we will have to give up. But think of it. Faith is not make-believe, and it is based on truth we have come to believe. If we have really come to God through faith in Jesus, it would have begun to change our life little by little. Just because there are lots of things out there we don't know the answers for, are we foolish enough to throw away what we do know?

There is a growth involved in Christian life, as we study the Bible more, apply the truths we learn, interact with others, and learn from experience. There will always be things that puzzle us, but are they sufficient for us to put away things we have already come to know?

#1099 A typical, nominal Christian

Churches have lots of people who are Christians only in name. They have never been born again. That is not a question they usually consider, but they are satisfied that they believe in the true God, and that God must be generally happy with them. The reason they give is typically like this, "I am a good man. I read my Bible every day, say my prayers regularly, and attend church. I have not killed or raped anyone, I have not robbed a bank. Because I am a good man, God cannot refuse to take me to heaven." If you ask them if they are good enough for God, they say, "I am not worse than anybody else. Of course, if you ask me, occasionally I have told lies, shouted at my wife, or looked at some woman with lust. But everyone does that. God can't refuse me because of that. Then there will be no one in heaven!"

If you ask them, you will also see that they believe Jesus died for the sins of the world and rose again. For some Christians who have not thought deeply about such things, this is faith, and these people are already children of God! They can't understand the fuss I seem to be making.

But what makes us sad to see is that while they see that Jesus died for sinners, they do not see themselves as sinners. They think they are good people! They think that it would not be difficult for God to overlook their little sins, and that it would be unfair if He found fault with them.

"And Jesus answered and said to them, 'It is not those who are well who need a physician, but those who are sick. I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance'" (Lk.31,32). Actually no one is righteous in God's sight, and every one of us is guilty. In that sense there is no one for whom Jesus did not have to come. But what He meant was that He could not help those who were actually sinners but who imagined that they were righteous! He could not be Saviour to those who did not think they needed any Saviour.

If we just think of why Jesus had to die on the cross, things will become clear. Why didn't God just send prophets and teachers telling people to change their behaviour so that they could become acceptable to God? Why did Jesus have to suffer like He did, and actually die?

Jesus was making a payment for sin. What we must see is that sin is so deadly in God's mind that only death could pay for it. What we have not understood is that severity of sin, if we think that our sins are minor and we are actually good people. He loved us so much that He was even willing to pay the price of His own death to redeem us from sin (Jn.3:16).

It is then that we will see ourselves as sinners, and when we will understand the depth of the love of God for us. It is then that we will loathe ourselves for thinking we were good, and humbly confess the truth to God. We will feel so relieved that Jesus came for us. Then we will ask for forgiveness, and express our desire not to sin again. That is when God gives us a new birth and calls us His children.

#1100 Esau and repentance

There are some spiritual lessons we can learn from the example of Esau, Jacob's elder brother. In those days, it was customary for the eldest son to inherit the father's wealth and blessings. But one day as a young man, when Esau was tired after a hunting trip, he casually traded his birthright to Jacob for some porridge. The Bible describes this as Esau 'despising' the birthright. He realised the seriousness of the loss only when it came to the actual time when his father was to bless him. We know how Jacob cheated his father and stole the birthright from Esau. When Esau knew about this, he begged with tears for his father to bless him, but it was too late. Esau's reaction was to hate Jacob and decide to kill him.

But think of what happened. First Esau despised the birthright and gave it away. When the consequences hit him, he blamed Jacob. He found no place for repentance because he was not being honest before God. Blaming someone else is a trait we have inherited from Adam and Eve. But if we want salvation, we need to first acknowledge our sins (Je.3:13). If we will not even admit our sins, where is the question of forgiveness, and victory? First we have to recognise this tendency in us to want to pass on our blame to someone else, and then we must honestly and deliberately face the reality of our situation, standing before God. We can see how deep rooted this blaming technique is in our flesh, when it should have been so plain and obvious to Esau about the bad choice he himself had made. We need to train ourselves to stop doing this, and learn to judge ourselves honestly and fairly.

The commentary the Bible gives on Esau's behaviour is in He.12:16,17, "that there be no immoral or godless person like Esau, who sold his own birthright for a single meal. For you know that even afterwards, when he desired to inherit the blessing, he was rejected, for he found no place for repentance, though he sought for it with tears." In spite of doing wrong, Esau did not want the consequence but desired a good outcome. Isn't this another thing

we need to be careful about? Even if we repent and receive forgiveness, we cannot usually escape from the consequences (Ga.6:7,8). Consequences help us to humble ourselves and learn from our mistakes. But Esau did not acknowledge his mistake, and he could not tolerate the consequences.

If we read the passage in Hebrews casually, we might get the impression that Esau sought to find repentance with tears, but could not receive it. The original passage in Genesis makes it clear that what he sought with tears was the blessing, and not repentance. Repentance was for him to choose, but since he could not see any need to repent, he was fighting to change the consequences, if possible. Even the fact that Jacob had cheated him should not have excused him from repenting from his own blunder in throwing away the birthright in the first place. We need to learn from this and avoid the same mistake in our life.

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) where he has published a large number of articles on practical Christian life and counsel. With advanced training in Christian counselling, he has been counselling individuals and couples, and also facilitating in counselling training programmes for many years. Jacob Ninan has been married to Susan from 1975. They stay in Bangalore, and they have five grown up children and nine grandchildren.

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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, 1100 messages have been compiled into 11 volumes carrying one hundred pointers each and published as e-books. They are also available on the web site www.c-n-c.org. New pointers are available on the Facebook page www.facebook.com/waypointers and on the WhatsApp group 'Pointers along the way'. You can subscribe to the email distribution by writing to jninan@c-n-c.org