



Pointers along the way

Devotionals that
make you think

Vol. 3

Jacob Ninan

Pointers along the way

Devotionals that make you
think

Pointers along the way

Devotionals that make you
think

Vol. 3

Vol. 3

Jacob Ninan

Jacob Ninan

Title: Pointers along the way Vol. 3

Devotionals that make you think

Author: Jacob Ninan

Published by: Comfort & Counsel

69, Hutchins Main Road,

Bangalore 560084,

India

© 2016

All quotations from the Bible are

taken, except when noted otherwise,
from the *New American Standard
Bible* (NASB) © The Lockman
Foundation 1960, 1962, 1963, 1968,
1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977, 1995

Contents

Can faith save us?

Learning from the opposition

Why aren't we thankful to God?

More of God!

Why aren't we seeking after God?

Shortcuts for hearing God?

Why do we lack discernment?

When someone fails us

Risk taking and faith

Power corrupts

When God doesn't seem near

Keeping the commandments

No ask, no get

Know them by their fruit

Rules or principles?

The mark of the beast

Unexpected twists

Living for ourselves

Accepting forgiveness

My punishment is too much!

Living from a knowledge base

Faith in action

A question of priorities

As the deer pants...

To be sure of eternal life

Serving the Lord

We and our five loaves

Not my will

The easy way out?

If God were to ask...

Bearing with God!

Deeper than what meets the eye

Getting to the heart of God

The great commandments

Emerging from the past

The problem of being different

The one and only foundation of
grace

The treasure and the vessel

Our reasonable response

True through and through

Guilt as a driver

How do we read?

Willingness to change

Quick to judge!

When we disagree

Real transformation

A desire to serve

Forgiving and forgetting

Serving God with submission

Straying off from the centre

When things go wrong

Who is righteous?

Attitudes in hiding

Wiser than God!

Eroding values

The God we ignore

To have faith like a child

Living in acceptance

God's marvellous ways

"Jesus, come into my heart!"

Looking for a quick fix

God who answers prayer

To bless or impress?

The problem with the others!

Turn the other cheek?

Dealing with pride

Are you waiting for an apology?

What is our life worth?

God as He is

A righteousness not my own

Our adversary, the devil

Are you on the way in or out?

The problem of literal
interpretation

Turning grace into law!

Spiritual giving

OT men in NT times

Boldness or familiarity?

Hating father and mother

Love our enemies, huh?

Relaxation techniques

Every time we sin

The leap of faith?

An issue of compatibility

How we blind ourselves

The Saviour of the weak

Great is your faith

Which race are we running?

What does the word say?

Blind belief can lead us astray

A lie behind every temptation

Dealing with personal financial
problems

Determined not to sin

How 'almighty' is our God?

True grace is a dangerous doctrine!

The problem with being radical

What *is* a normal Christian life?

Why pray and read the Bible?

Who is our brother?

Why do we call Jesus 'Lord'?

What makes God happy with us?

Pointers along the way #201

Can faith save us?

Many will react to this by saying, "Of course! What a question for a born again Christian to ask?" Some may add that we can only be saved through faith and not works (Ep.2:8,9). Will a person from another religion who has faith in his religion be saved through his faith? Of course no one can be saved except through Jesus (Jn.14:6;Ac.4:12). So, can 'faith' save us? It is God who saves us, and not our faith, when we go to Him in repentance and faith in Jesus.

Jesus said on different occasions that someone's faith had made him or her well. Was it their faith that made them well or Jesus made them well when He saw their faith? Our faith is the confidence or trust that we have in God that helps us to go to Him to receive from Him different things that He has

promised (He.11:6). But the one who gives us what we ask or does miracles such as healing is God. If there was no God, we can have as much faith as we like and nothing will happen according to our faith.

Some people who have not understood that the English language has changed in the meaning of several words from the time of the King James Version have thought that faith is a 'substance' like money or gold that can be accumulated (He.11:1). Even others, like the father of the demonised boy, think in terms of the quantity of faith, and pray, "Increase my faith" (Mk.9:24;Lk.17:5). Why then did Jesus say that even if we have faith like a mustard seed we can see a mountain moving to the sea (Mt.17:20)? He was saying that it is not the quantity that matters. What matters is whether our faith is in God. When Jesus said, "It

shall be done to you according to your faith," He meant, "I'll do for you the thing that you have trusted Me for," and not, "I'll do for you exactly in proportion to the quantity of your faith" (Mt.9:29). If we look at the miracles Jesus has done, most of the time we see that people were not sure what exactly to expect from Jesus, and His response was far beyond their expectations!

Someone may ask why Jesus rebuked His disciples for having little faith. He wasn't, in fact, referring to the quantity of their faith, as if it was a substance. He was, in effect, asking, "You hardly have any confidence in God, don't you?" Faith is our confidence in God, and it is God, and not our faith, that accomplishes things.

Our faith is the response to what we know of God when we get to know who He is. If we say that we have faith

to expect from God healing of a cold but not raising a dead man to life, we insult God. We can't escape by saying that our faith is small. We don't know our God well, and *that* is a serious matter. It is a different matter if we have faith in God to do supernatural miracles but He chooses not to do them on different occasions. This is fine because He is the one who has power, and He is also sovereign to act according to His own choice. Instead of hiding behind our 'small faith' let us admit that we need to know our God better.

Pointers along the way #202

Learning from the opposition

You may have heard the imaginary story about a visitor to heaven and hell. He first went to hell and saw a sumptuous feast laid out on the table before the people. But each person had

his arms straightened out by tying a stick along the arms. And they were cursing and swearing in frustration because they could not bend their elbows to take and put food into their mouths. When this man next went to heaven he saw that even there the same food was laid on the tables and their arms were tied in the same fashion. But they were enjoying the food, because each one was feeding his neighbour with his long arm!

This story came to my mind when I was wondering about how to understand the Bible accurately. I was coming to some clear conclusions on the subject.

1. No one understands the Bible completely.
2. Every one of us has errors in our understanding.
3. True understanding of the truth is distributed among different groups.

No group or person holds monopoly over God's truth. Those who are born again agree on certain baseline truths concerning the nature of God and His plan of salvation. But beyond that, all of us hold some part of the truth, and there are others who hold other parts of the truth. The funny part is that there are those with whom we may disagree on certain concepts and interpretations who have some part of the truth that we do not have. Without admitting this fact to ourselves or to the others, we tend to stand in our own groups and keep the others at a distance away from us. And then we struggle to understand certain parts of God's word without realising that some of these others in the 'opposition party' may have better understanding on those parts we are struggling with!

It looks like our wise Father has planned these things in such a way that

without cooperating with one another we will never be in a position to understand the length, breadth, height and depth of His truths (Ep.3:17-19)! Like in the story it looks as if we have to feed the others *and* receive from the others. We may be eager to feed the others since we think that we know a thing or two to share with the others. But are we also willing to receive from others what they have to give us?

I think what most of us are actually doing is to stand in our own group and point out where all the others are wrong. We don't even try to listen to what they are saying, or read what they have written to see where we could learn something from them. Once we have classified them as being in error on some issues, we totally keep them out of our circle. We don't think that while they may be wrong about some things, they may be right about some

things we are wrong about! What they have to say may be just the right pieces to complete some part of our jigsaw puzzle!

Certainly great balance and caution are required to keep out error while trying to learn new things. But keeping away from the 'opposition' is not the solution.

Why aren't we thankful to God?

Most of us know the story of the ten lepers whom Jesus healed, and how only one of them returned to thank Him (Lk.17:12-17). Jesus asked him, "Where are the nine?" We can imagine the sadness in His voice. It was hardly possible that He was surprised, because He knew our nature so well. We rarely give thanks to God spontaneously, because we rarely feel really thankful. Civilisation and Christian preaching have taught us to say, "Thank you." But for many of us those are just formal words, or at best those we wish to mean. When we get answers to prayer or even miraculous interventions from God on our behalf, we seem to take them for granted. When we are in the thick of trouble, we are conscious of the need for God's

help, and we pray. But when the trouble has passed, we may not even think of God.

David was different. Whenever he realised that the Lord had taken him through nets, oppressive burdens, men riding over his head, floods, or fire, and finally brought him out to a place of abundance, he took time for burnt offerings and to give to God what he had vowed (Ps.66:11-14). How come David didn't feel relieved that the pressure was off, and go on to new activities? I think of two reasons.

He was a man who knew hardship and difficulties, and he also knew God as a reliable help in times of need (Ps.46:1). Whether he killed a lion or a bear with his hands, or Goliath whom everyone else feared, David knew that God was his help (1Sa.17:34-37). And so it was that whenever he came into need he spontaneously cried out to God

for help, and when he received that help he could immediately acknowledge that it was God who had helped him. How is it with us? Is our confidence based on our strength - our intelligence, skill, knowledge, experience, wealth, the number of influential people we know, etc.?

The other reason I think of is that David was a man whose life revolved around God. He did not go to God only in times of need, or when everything else failed. He had fellowship with God all the time. He earnestly sought to get to know God *more and more*. When we read his psalms we see his heart's true longings, we see that they were not after wealth, power or pleasure, but after God. As a result, whether he was going through good times or bad, he kept communications going on with God. He could recognise when God intervened, as well as when

He seemed far away; when he was in trouble as well as when things were going well. Even though there was a time when David left God's paths and went his own way, on the whole he was indeed a man after God's own heart.

We cannot become thankful to God in our heart just by disciplining ourselves to give thanks. Thankfulness is a matter of the heart and not how we behave externally. God is altogether lovely, and not just a help in times of need. The more we get to know Him, in our understanding as well as in our experience, the more we will become thankful to Him.

Pointers along the way #204

More of God!

It is a sad fact that most people, including many believers, are seeking

more of the things of this world - wealth, fame, pleasure - rather than the things of God. It is just as if our life on earth was the only life we would ever have and we should make the most of it. Our call is to pursue after more of God in our lives. But here again the Devil shows us an alternative - where the daily life will be full of excitement, miracles, supernatural interventions from God, etc. Is that what it means to have more of God?

When Jesus was on earth, He did many supernatural things. But He did many of them as signs - to signify who He was (Jn.2:11). When multitudes began to follow Him everywhere He was not deceived into thinking that they were all interested in godliness. He knew that they were only interested in seeing miracles (Jn.6:26,27). At other times Jesus did many miracles because He felt compassion on people who were

suffering (Mt.14:14). Our God is just the same as He was from the beginning, doing wonders for His people, whether it is by parting the Red Sea, stopping the River Jordan from flowing, stopping the Sun in its track, destroying His enemies, delivering His people from their enemies, healing the sick, raising the dead, changing governments, and taking care of hundreds of practical needs. But is it that part of God that we should look for when we say we want to know more of God?

Think of what each of us can accomplish for God if we do every day what He has planned for us for that day! All of us doing 'small' things for God according to His will may not even realise how we are contributing to the big picture He has in mind. Is the best thing we can do for God to set up a 'mega church' or a global ministry or

something that will impress those who see them? God may call some people for such tasks. But for most of us, the best thing we can do for God is to be faithful in the little things - things that only we can do in the small corners where we are placed.

Suppose instead of seeking after things that are great and impressive in the form of seeking 'more of God' *we let God have more of us!* Then our passion in life becomes to accomplish the will of God for our lives, whether it turns out to be big or insignificant in the eyes of people around us. To be practical, can we ever manage to do a better task for God than the ones He has planned for us from day to day?

This is a path where we make Jesus the Lord of our lives - where we surrender our lives to following Him and doing just what He wants. Then it is no longer what we want, but what He

wants (Lk.22:42). How significant our lives can be in this way, rather than in seeking to do 'great' things for God! At the same time, God does not want us to be passive, always waiting for His voice to direct us (Ps.32:9). Many times our common sense or our understanding of the Bible is enough to tell us what God wants us to do. The main thing is an attitude of wanting and willing to do God's will at all times.

Why aren't we seeking after God?

I am not thinking about people seeking God when they are in trouble. Most of us do go after God at such times. In fact, those may be times God is trying to catch our attention by shaking us a bit. He wasn't able to get through to us by ordinary means, and so He hopes that at least 'problems' may cause us to take notice of Him. My question is why we aren't seeking after God all the time. The answer is that we have dozed off, spiritually speaking.

Jesus said that it was only the sick and not the healthy ones who needed a doctor (Lk.5:31). We may think that we have come to the Saviour, we are already saved, and now we are OK! Are we, really? What about the "sins that easily beset us" (He.12:1)? We are justified, but have we become like

Jesus yet? Aren't there a lot of spiritual sicknesses in us that need to be dealt with by the Divine Physician? But we may have dozed off, and become insensitive to the pricks of our conscience. Perhaps we even tell ourselves that feeling convicted of sin in our life has to do with the 'law' from which grace has set us free! We need to wake up!

Isn't Jesus the One we declare to be *altogether lovely* and the One everybody ought to know? Do we know Him so well that there isn't much more that we need to get to know? I am not referring only to the knowledge that comes through study, but also to personal experience. Here we have the most wonderful, interesting, wise and powerful Person in the universe, and we don't have time to get to know Him better!

How is it that when we are in a

difficult situation and we seek God we aren't able to hear His voice? Isn't it because we aren't so used to hearing His voice at other times that we are unable to recognise it when we hear it in the midst of many other voices? Even though we are His sheep, we haven't been paying much attention to Him while we were in the green pastures (Jn.10:27).

On the other hand, when we are taken up with many people and things of this earth, don't we realise that they are distracting us from the *one thing* that we should be seeking after (Lk.10:42)? What was the one thing that Jesus told Mary was needed? That we should sit at His feet and learn from Him - in other words, to get to know Him better.

Things can even become so bad because we have neglected going to Him and sought instead other 'gods' - people and things we value and spend

out time for - that when we finally turn to God He closes His ears towards us (Je.2:28).

Most of the world lies in darkness not knowing the One who loves them and has given Himself for them. We pride ourselves in claiming that God has made us His children through His grace. But through our neglect of Him in our daily lives, and the limited time we have for Him in the midst of all our work, 'relaxation,' and other 'unavoidable' commitments we seem to be giving an impression to the world around us that our God is just another philosophical concept! How sad for us!

Shortcuts for hearing God?

God uses different ways to communicate with us. He has written down in the Bible eternal truths and also many do's and don'ts. The more we are familiar with the Bible, the easier it is for us to know God's will in many situations of life. But we also need to know His will in specific situations for which there may not be any clear instructions in the Bible. When we sincerely desire to please the Lord in everything, it can be a problem that we aren't always clear about God's will.

We would very much like it if God would physically tell us what we should do. We would like Him to at least give us guidance through a voice, vision, dream, prophecy, etc. God does communicate sometimes through such means, but comparatively very rarely.

If we are bent on getting such supernatural guidance for our decisions, especially after we have heard someone else's testimony, we may get frustrated, because we can't insist that God should answer us according to our whims and fancies!

Whether we are reading the Bible, listening to a preacher, praying or waiting on the Lord, God speaks to us in our heart - our spirit. When we hear Him, our heart 'burns within us' (Lk.24:32). In other words, something becomes 'alive' in our spirit that tells us it is God speaking to us. People may explain it as 'having eyes (or ears) opened,' 'light dawning,' 'experiencing peace,' etc. But such a 'spiritual' event cannot be explained in words even though every born again Christian experiences it.

The ability to hear God like this matures with experience, and there is

no way we can learn it overnight. When we realise that God's voice is not the only one ringing in our mind but that is mingled with voices from our own flesh and mind, people around us, and Satan and his demons, it becomes clear that there is a possibility for us to make mistakes. The only way we can get to recognise God's voice is through getting to know Him better. And the way to get to know Him better is through sincere and serious study of the Word, and by learning about His ways through our own and other people's experiences. This takes time and effort.

We can see that if we are impatient and would like to jump classes we could have a lot of interest in supernatural guidance. This can be dangerous, because God is not the only one doing supernatural things now! Just like high school students imagine that they know everything about mathematics, we can

also think that God is speaking to us in visions, dreams, prophetic words, etc., when actually we are imagining things or Satan is feeding us with counterfeits.

God wants to *instruct* and *teach* us the way we should go (Ps.32:8). In other words, He doesn't want to give us instructions to follow without understanding (v.9). He wants us to make mature decisions based on His word, our sanctified understanding of His ways, the prompting of the Holy Spirit and the counsel of the mature. Let us not look for shortcuts.

Why do we lack discernment?

It is just as important to grow in discernment as it is to grow in love (Php.1:9), because 'love' without discernment can be quite disastrous. Discernment is a mark of maturity (He.5:14). It was one of the things Solomon asked of God (1Ki.3:9). I am not talking about the discerning of spirits which all may not have, but an ability to distinguish between right and wrong, good and evil. All of us need to have this and grow in it. We all have some level of discernment, because it is a part of our conscience. We can dull this conscience by constantly neglecting it, or kill it to lesser or greater extent by going against it. It is only by exercising our spiritual senses that we can grow in discernment (He.5:14).

So why do we lack discernment? Let me put up a few suggestions to think about.

Perhaps we don't have sufficient reverence for the Lord and His commandments. If we had, we would naturally desire to be more and more pleasing to Him, keep His commandments more diligently and avoid things that are displeasing in His eyes (Ps.25:14;111:10). If we are on that path of life, we would be seeking more and more discernment! It is possible that we have emphasised the grace of God towards us so much that we have missed this aspect of living before Him?

The devil misuses Scripture to lead us astray. One example is, "Judge not" (Mt.7:1). We can see from the context that Jesus was not talking about discernment but about condemning others or looking down on them. In

another place Jesus mentioned the need for judging with righteousness (Jn.7:24). This is about discerning the truth, not being fooled by outward appearances. When Jesus said, "Judge not," He did not mean, "Discern not!" We do need to discern between right and wrong even as we observe what people do and what is happening in the world.

Another way the devil fools us is by reminding us when we see something wrong, either in the way some people are doing things or the way things are going on around us, that we ourselves have many faults. Of course we do, all of us (Jas.3:2). The devil tells us that we have beams in our eyes, and we shouldn't be looking at specks in someone else's eyes! But that doesn't mean that we should agree that the wrong that we see is all right. It means that we shouldn't be quick to judge

others, and also that our judgment should be mixed with humility and mercy. If we fall for this trick of the devil we would lose our own fear for the wrong we have seen, make ourselves more tolerant towards sin in general, and perhaps end up inching towards that wrong ourselves. Have you noticed that when we live among increasing rates of divorce our own attitude towards divorce cools down?

Isn't it good to have an increasingly clear opinion about what is right and wrong, good and evil, in order that we may keep ourselves to be pleasing to the Lord? Or is it sin to have an opinion? Let us not whitewash over the wrong and evil we see and imagine we have love.

Pointers along the way #208

When someone fails us

When someone fails to meet our expectations, disappoints our trust, brings grief to our hearts, frustrates our longings, shatters our hopes - how are we tempted to react? By keeping our distance, giving silence as a punishment, putting him/her on the shelf, looking for someone else? Perhaps sometimes we would be justified in such responses. Perhaps we have no other alternative because this is just not one such incident but a pattern. But how can we help him/her in such a situation?

How would Peter have reacted if after he had betrayed Jesus the Lord turned away from him, or looked the other way when Peter looked at Him? Probably, even if he did not go and commit suicide, he would have hated himself for the rest of his life and turned himself away from all contacts with other believers. But one look

from the Lord made all the difference (Lk.22:61,62). Not only was Peter saved from discouragement, but he became the cause of encouragement to millions of others.

When Jesus said that He would never leave or forsake us did He mean also when we fail Him? (He.13:5). Of course! That is the time we need Him more than at other times. He is not a fair weather friend. He sticks closer than a brother (Pr.18:24). He is there with us when we are in deep mire and it looks as if He has forsaken us. He will never betray our trust in Him. Sometimes He may stand aside to see how much we can handle (2Ch.32:31). But even then He will not allow us to be tested beyond what we are able to bear (1Co.10:13). Especially when we have failed Him and it stands to reason that He must be disappointed with us He stands with us there. The

knowledge that His love and loyalty to us are stronger than our failure breaks our heart in a good way. It is as if our eyes are opened to see Him in a clearer light of grace than we have ever done before. Our response then is to love Him more and to give ourselves to Him more willingly than ever before.

It is at such times that grace become amazing in our eyes. We ask, "How can God do this to me?" in a way that is very much contrary to the way that question is usually asked. The recognition and experience of this grace give us an entirely different picture of God, ourselves and other people. It melts our self-righteousness, self-sufficiency and holier-than-thou attitudes.

Shall we not do this for some of these other people who do much less to disappoint us than we do to the Lord?

Our warm acceptance, our overlooking of disappointment and pain, and our offer of yet another chance can make all the difference to such persons. It is not a blind toleration of wrong, but a compassionate approach that gives hope to the one who has failed.

It is easier to learn this lesson through painful experience than through a Bible study. The next time we fail the Lord, let us look into His merciful eyes that beam out love and compassion, and draw strength. Then let us learn to show that same acceptance to others around us.

Risk taking and faith

There are people who are willing to take risks, whether it is in their business or other aspects of life. But there are others who are 'cautious' and think more than twice before taking any action. The risk-takers are usually the ones who achieve great things, because the others are many times too scared to make a decision. Of course risk-takers make many mistakes because their hunches do not always work out. That is also one reason why risk-averse persons who watch them are hesitant to take risks.

Does this have any effect on Christians walking by faith? Is it possible that some of those who propose fantastic sounding projects 'by faith' are risk-takers by nature? Perhaps some of the others who question these proposals are risk-averse by nature?

The essential issue is about what faith is. Is faith something given to us from God, or is it something that we can initiate from our side? It is clear that faith comes from hearing God (Ro.10:17). Therefore the process of receiving something by faith from God is like this: God reveals to us what He is planning to do; we respond in faith believing that what He has said will happen (He.11:1). For this process to take place we must have another basic form of faith, which is a sincere trust and confidence in God (He.11:6).

When a person receives faith like this he is really not taking any risk even though it may seem so, because God is trustworthy and He cannot lie (Nu.23:19). But what if we have not really heard from God and we are trying to muster up faith by ourselves in order to get something from God? We may imagine we have heard from

God, or think that if God has done something for someone else He will do it for us too. If we are mistaken in thinking that God has spoken to us, then of course we shall not receive what we are asking for. Even if God has done something for someone else, it does not mean that He will do it for us too, unless it is something He has promised for all of us.

When we have received faith from God we don't have to worry about the negative things the others tell us about. But if we have not heard from God and we are about to go ahead with our own schemes it will be very good for us to listen to the suggestions from others, especially those who appear to be negative. If we are natural risk-takers with a tendency to jump into things on impulse without much thinking we have all the more need to pay attention to what the others are saying.

Is it not possible for us to imagine we have faith when we don't? Can't we make a mistake about hearing God? It may be humbling for us to admit that we can make mistakes, but it is a fact nonetheless. Why don't we have a check on ourselves by being open to correction and advice (Pr.15:22). Hasn't God provided others who see things from a different point of view so as to balance those of us who want to forge ahead without delay? Shouldn't the risk-averse ones learn to listen to God and expect greater things from Him?

Pointers along the way #210

Power corrupts

There is a saying in the world that says, "Power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely!" We usually associate this with politicians and others in positions of authority (including in spiritual circles). But have we seen it for ourselves with regards to our spiritual life?

How power corrupts is to make us think that we are now above certain rules and regulations which apply to other 'ordinary' people. We think that at our level of spiritual maturity we can handle things in a different way than what others are restrained to. We may tell ourselves that we understand the 'spirit' of the matter and that we are not to be restrained by the letter of the law! We can take certain liberties with the law because we have a special relationship with God!

Do we imagine that God needs us so much because we are so useful to Him that He would have to overlook our 'little' lapses? Perhaps we imagine that in our 'higher' levels of responsibility and activity we cannot be constrained by rules and restrictions that 'ordinary' Christians have to follow? Perhaps we can even preach high standards to others without batting an eyelid even though we know very well that we are personally not keeping those standards?

What is happening? We have fallen a prey to Satan's devices. He went to Jesus and said, "If You are the Son of God, turn this stone into bread" (Mt.4:3). Perhaps this was a suggestion to Jesus to test and verify His authority and power as the Son of God. But perhaps this was also a subtle suggestion to use His special position as the Son of God to bypass

the restrictions placed on 'ordinary' people! Of course Jesus didn't fall for this.

Another great example we have in this context is Paul. Instead of taking liberties with the law because of his superior position, he took on himself extra rules and restrictions. Think of how he decided not to eat meat on any particular occasion if a brother watching him was going to be led astray (1Co.8:13). He had no problem with eating meat (v.7,8). But he would restrict himself for the sake of others. Think of how he worked and supported himself in order to preach the gospel without cost to the others? (1Co.9:18). These are just a couple of examples to show how Paul lived sensitively, going beyond what was strictly required of him.

What then is the anti-dote to the poison of corruption that comes with power?

To recognise the principle, "Others may, but we may not." The more 'power' we come to in our spiritual life, the more accountable we become towards God. Jesus made it very clear that those who have been given much, from them more would be required (Lk.12:48). Judgment will be stricter for those who know more (Lk.12:47,48). Every failure will require deeper repentance. Let us also remember that God has no favourites. Even a Moses can be put aside.

Pointers along the way #211

When God doesn't seem near

We face these situations often. It isn't always that we can be at the worship service where we can 'feel' the presence of the Lord and we feel reassured that He will always be there with us, even through the waters and the fire (Is.43:2). Many a time we are in danger, or we come face to face with sickness or death, loss of job, breakdown in relationships, uncertain future, dire shortage of cash - you name it. Then when we call on God He doesn't seem to be there. It seems as if all that we have believed could have been wrong!

There are very few Christians who don't face such times. If you haven't so far, thank God, but chances are that you will face them sooner or later! Thankfully most of the time there are others around us who stand with us

when we are going through these toughies. But it isn't always so. Sometimes we have to face them alone. Or the circumstances are so tough that even with all the encouragement others are able to give to us, we feel the question that pushes us back against the wall - "What if there isn't any God, after all?"

If, at this point, we try to focus on our problem situation and imagine what would happen if God doesn't intervene and also what we would like God to do, the chances are that we become more and more anxious, because, remember, at the back of our mind what we feel is that God isn't responding. It is like the much used example of Peter trying to walk on the water and beginning to sink when he looked at the waves instead of Jesus (Mt.14:28-31).

Instead, like David, we can strengthen

ourselves in the Lord (1Sa.30:6). We can strengthen ourselves by, as it were, rebuilding our foundation of faith from scratch. Stone by stone we can put up the basis for our faith. Think of God who has existed always, who has created the heaven and the earth. Think of Him who has done all the wonderful things that we have read from the Bible. Think of various people we know and have read and heard about who have experienced great and miraculous things from this God. Remember how this God touched our own life in the past, forgave all our sins and cleansed us. Thank Him for making us - who were fit to be damned to hell - His own children. Think of all the ways in which He has led us in the past, answered our prayers, watched over us, guided us in supernatural ways, protected us from much harm that came our way, etc. And then think that if we are not able to see God

standing with us *now*, it is something that is perhaps difficult to understand, but not something that negates all these things that we have been thinking about!

What we need to do is to stand firm and say, "I don't know what's going on, but I know the One who knows." That is enough for us now. As we wait on Him with trust, He will slowly unravel to us what good He has been planning for us through this tough time. When the time comes that we are able to look back on this period, we would ask why we ever doubted this God at all!

Pointers along the way #212

Keeping the commandments

Some people think that the ten commandments are also meant for Christians to keep. These are not the same as those who think that keeping the ten commandments would qualify us for heaven. They know that no one can qualify for heaven by being good enough, by the standards of the ten commandments or higher (Ga.2:16). We can find acceptance with God only on the basis of God granting it to us as an act of mercy, when we acknowledge ourselves as sinners and receive forgiveness because Jesus has already taken our punishment. What these people imply is that the standard of the ten commandments is what we have to live by as Christians. No, our standard is much higher.

Jesus said in the sermon on the mount that under the old covenant it was good

enough if one did not murder anyone, but that under the new, one had to be careful about getting angry (Mt.5:21,22). Under the new covenant we should not even be looking at a woman with lust, leave alone physically commit adultery (v.27,28). The new covenant standard is *way higher* than that of the old.

What then did Jesus mean by saying He had come to fulfill the law? (v.17,18).

Think of what Jesus said about worship. He said that (under the new covenant) we would worship God *in spirit and in truth* (Jn.4.23). Does this not indicate to us that this is also how we have to keep the law, *in spirit and in truth*? If we see the 'law' as a shadow, Jesus came with the 'substance' where the requirements of the law are met *in spirit and in truth* (Co.2:17).

This is not something God *demand*s of us now, but something He now *enable*s us to do. When we are born again by the Spirit of God, He gives us a new heart and spirit and also writes His laws on our heart and mind (Ez.36:26;He.8:10). This transforms our desires, interests, values, likes and dislikes, etc., and we *want* to keep all God's commandments, ten commandments and more. But we want to keep them *in spirit and in truth*, and not just externally. We get to see the core truth about what the law really means rather than just the external requirements. For example we can see how Jesus kept the law regarding Sabbath. Just keeping the ten commandments is out of context. Our life now comes out of inner compulsions rather than controlled by external forms or patterns.

We can see how this is a life of inner

values, integrity, attitudes and a desire to please the Lord. As long as we guide our lives by questions about what we are allowed to do and not, we are only living at the level of the old covenant. Instead now when we are driven by a strong gratitude and love to Jesus and we long to please Him, honour Him, and to fulfil His plans, we can be at a much higher plane than we have been before.

This is something we grow in as we allow ourselves to be transformed in our minds when the Holy Spirit works in us (Ro.12:2). But the more we taste in, the more we have a longing for it.

Pointers along the way #213

No ask, no get

The Bible says that many times we don't get what God wants to give to us, because we don't ask (Jas.4:2).

Someone has said that when we stand before God in heaven and realise what all He had planned for our lives and how we missed them because we didn't ask, that would be a most tragic moment of our existence. Why *don't* we ask?

Perhaps we don't think we *could* or *should* ask. We may be imagining that God is so far above us that He couldn't care for us, that He is such a strict Person that we wouldn't dare to approach Him, that He might bring out all the lists of things we had done wrong in the past, that He might ask us to do some difficult things, that He would take away all the fun from our life and make it full of fasting, prayer and Bible study, etc. In other words, we don't trust God. Actually, we don't really know God, because God is not like any of those things we have been imagining about Him.

The Bible says that if we would come to God, we must first of all believe that He exists and also that He is the kind of Person who meets with those who seek Him (He.11:6). How can we know what kind of a Person He is? First of all by reading about Him in the Bible, and then by experiencing a relationship with Him in our daily life.

The Bible is, of course, the authority in telling us who God is and what He is like. Different people may have their own opinions, and Satan may whisper lies about Him in our mind. We may ourselves misinterpret things that happen to us and come to wrong conclusions about God. But God has revealed Himself to us through His word and especially through His Son Jesus Christ (Jn.1:18;Mt.11:27).

If we know about God only through the Bible without actually getting to have a personal relationship with Him, that

kind of knowledge will have no life in it. If we don't know God in a personal, intimate way, and we try to ask Him for many things, is it any wonder if we are disappointed? If we ask Him something suddenly when we are in dire needs and all the time before that we have been living just as we pleased, God says He won't listen to us (Judg.10:13,14). (What we need to do is to first repent and come trusting to God (Is.1:16-18)). When we are born again and have a living relationship with God as one of His children, we get to know Him and His ways first hand. Then we also get to know what kind of things we should ask for, and how and when we should ask (1Jn.5:14).

Of course, there are things we may ask for and still won't get because God knows better than to give us all the wrong things we ask for (Jas.4:3). He

is a wise Father who has our interests at heart, and not bound to some law that says, as some people make out, that He *has* to give us the things we ask for.

But when we deal with God as our Father, cast all our burdens upon Him, acknowledge Him in all our ways, lean on Him with all our heart and not our own understanding, and seek His will and His honour, God will give us *all* that we need out of the riches of His glory.

Pointers along the way #214

Know them by their fruit

When we read the warning from Jesus about identifying false prophets by looking at their fruit (Mt.7:15,16), I think we usually look for fruit in terms of love, joy, peace, etc., because we are conditioned to associate 'fruit' with

the fruit of the Spirit. So when we find some good things in the 'prophets' we are examining, we conclude that they can't be false prophets. Or at least we give them the benefit of doubt and refrain from making any judgment. But I think that is not what Jesus meant!

Jesus was trying to warn us about *ravenous wolves*! Isn't that the 'fruit' that should trigger our alarms? Ravenous wolves are not interested in blessing the sheep (!) or feeding them! Their only aim is to devour the sheep. In other words, false prophets are seeking, primarily, to get something out of us who are listening to them! But Jesus also pointed out that they come dressed in sheep's clothing. They use the right words, they do everything 'in the name of Jesus,' they quote from the Bible, they have choirs and bands singing moving songs, and they even perform miracles, cast out demons and

prophesy (in the name of Jesus) (v.22,23). They are extremely careful to make every part of their presentation to look like sheep. But just as we can make out a wolf when it opens its mouth and shows its teeth, we can also make out false prophets when we see them trying hard to get something out of us.

Most false prophets are after our money. Apart from forceful pleas they offer ingenious schemes to entice us and to make us sign off our money for their 'ministry.' Many preachers who offer us prosperity in return for our seed money are living in styles that can only be termed extravagant. It would seem that they would be in a position to fund some poor believers instead of having to cajole even poor believers into funding their ministry. Many even peddle snake oil of the spiritual variety such as holy oil, anointed

handkerchiefs, etc., while more respectable looking ones are selling CDs and DVDs at exorbitant prices. How come many preachers never come out fully with what they promise can bless the hearers but keep the final details of their techniques on CDs and DVDs which seekers have to buy? The sad thing is that many innocent sheep are getting devoured because they have been warned 'not to judge,' 'not to touch the Lord's anointed,' etc.

It may not be always money that false prophets seek. Some may seek fame and glory at our expense. The common factor is that instead of seeking our welfare, they are using us for their own gain.

The apostle Paul felt that there was only one Timothy who loved and served the Lord and His people faithfully and sincerely, when all others sought their own (Php.2:19-21).

Seeking one's own is a sinful tendency we all have in our flesh. That in itself does not make us wolves. But when we take advantage of others in order to seek our own and we do it in the name of Jesus, that's serious, isn't it?

Pointers along the way #215

Rules or principles?

Peter asked Jesus how many times we should forgive someone (Mt.18:21). Suppose Jesus had given him a number, that would have made things simple for us, wouldn't it? We would know when we still have to forgive or when we have forgiven enough! It is easy to understand rules (mostly!) and it is easy to know if we have kept them or not. We can even say that we feel mentally safe and relaxed when we know exactly what we are supposed to do or not. That would save us from having to decide each time whether we can do something or not.

On the contrary imagine what we have to do with 'loving' someone. Does anyone know what exactly it is to love? When we love someone does it mean that we agree with everything he does? Can we disagree with him? Can

we have an opinion that tells us something bad about him? Should we *like* everything he does? Things seem so vague and abstract, don't they? But actually when we love someone we know it in our heart, don't we, even if we can't understand or explain rules about love. That is the difference between following rules and living according to virtues or by principles.

The Old Testament (or covenant) has given a set of rules - the Law. We shall do *these* and not do *those*. They are easy to understand and follow. But when it comes to the new covenant, we come to standards, principles and virtues. Most of the time we cannot know exactly what is to be done. Let us look at some examples.

In the Old Testament people were asked to give tithes to God. It was easy to understand, and to know if we have given. But when we come to the new

covenant it only says to give cheerfully! (2Co.9:7). It also says our reaping will be in proportion to our giving (v.6). Now how do we know how much to give? Will we know if we have given enough? Can't we make ourselves to think we have given much when we haven't? Things can be quite confusing without rules, can't they?

How did Jesus live, according to rules or principles? Just think of what looked many times like the breaking of the Sabbath. But we know that He had come to fulfil the law, and so He wouldn't have broken the law in any way any time (Mt.5:17). In other words, He always kept the principle of the Sabbath while the Pharisees were looking at the rules.

Once at Cana He told Mary that His time had not come, but almost immediately afterwards went on to turn water into wine (Jn.2:4). On another

occasion He told His brothers that He was not going to Jerusalem, but soon after that He set off for Jerusalem! (Jn.7:8). Of course He was not talking loosely, but He moved according to the leading of the Holy Spirit.

This tells us that if we want to live according to the new covenant, we need to be led by the Spirit rather than by rules (Ro.7:6;8:14). Walking according to rules is the old way, and was meant for spiritual children (Ga.3:24,25). The Spirit wants to lead us to a deeper knowledge of God's mind and a closer fellowship with Him.

Pointers along the way #216

The mark of the beast

Over the years many people have tried to identify the Antichrist ahead of time, and failed. On the other hand many

others have been trying to understand what the mark of the Antichrist is and what the number 666 means (Re.13:11-18). Many years ago when computers were just being developed there were stories written about some huge computer 'somewhere in Europe' which would control all the financial transactions of the world. One computer even had the name '666'! These stories warned Christians that these computers would be used by the Antichrist to control all their money transactions. Then came the credit cards, and these story makers had another bonanza in their hands to write about. And now comes the turn of bio-chips that can be placed under the skin on our right hand or head - *just as the Bible foretells!* These bio-chips can contain personal information as well as all data related to our money. One warning which I received tells us not to allow these chips to be placed on

our bodies at any cost, because we will fall into the hands of the Antichrist!

With the use of all the technical jargon about memory chips and how they can be used, about which the authors themselves get muddled with regards to accuracy, general Christian readers are 'impressed' and start believing straightaway that they now have a clue to the Antichrist and his operations. But I believe that this approach is totally misleading, because it misses the main point concerning the Antichrist and gets locked on to peripheral issues.

What is anti-Christian about money transactions? Does it then make any difference whether these transactions are made orally, on paper or electronically? It is not the medium of the transaction that makes it righteous or unrighteous but what it is for. Does

it make any difference whether a smart chip is placed on a card or under the skin? Is it sinful to place a chip under the skin? Would it have been all right if instead of the hand and the head the chip was placed on our leg? Can't we see that we are missing the whole point by focussing on the hand and the head?

The passage in Revelation is about the Antichrist, and the prophet of the Antichrist trying to get everyone to worship the Antichrist. His anger is towards those who refuse to worship the Antichrist. He tries to kill them. Another thing he does is to try to prevent such people from being able to buy or sell anything (Re.13:15-17). The point here is about *worshipping the Antichrist*. If we refuse to worship him, we will find it difficult to buy or sell anything, including food. (I say 'difficult' as against 'impossible' because this is only the Antichrist's

plan. We don't know yet how God will take care of His people at that time!)

Now, what we need to do is to learn how to avoid worshipping the Antichrist by action or thought (hand and head). Then God will be with us. We cannot avoid the Antichrist just by keeping away from things like bio-chips!

Pointers along the way #217

Unexpected twists

We know how Peter asserted confidently before Jesus how he would never leave Him even if everyone else did (Mt.26:33). He declared that he was even willing to die for Jesus (v.35). He was not boasting, but he meant it sincerely. We see that even when all the other disciples left Jesus and went away, Peter followed Him around, even though at a distance (v.56,58). When soldiers came to capture Jesus, Peter took out his sword and attacked, demonstrating his desire to protect his Master at the risk of losing his own life (Jn.18:10). Then came the unexpected twist to the story. A servant girl confronted him about his association with Jesus, and Peter made the first of his three denials (Mt.26:69,70).

What could have happened? Perhaps

he was preparing himself in his mind about what all he could do to save Jesus and was not expecting this turn of events. It took him by surprise, and he may have reacted in his normal impulse of self-preservation.

We know also about David, the psalmist of Israel who knew the Lord intimately even from childhood, who became the young man who did exploits through faith. Now he was king and his mind was occupied with matters of kingdoms which were fighting with Israel. One afternoon he took a walk on his terrace, thinking about the things that were pressing his mind. Suddenly he saw a woman bathing, his feelings got aroused, and he fell into adultery. Can't we assume that David would not have done such a thing in the normal course of his life? But this was an unexpected twist.

If we have any experience with life,

we know that life has many unexpected turns for which we are not prepared. Many times we are *caught in a trespass* because the temptation catches us off guard. Isn't there a way around this, so that we don't have to fall?

The answer is from Jesus Himself who has the distinction of not having fallen even once even though Satan tried all his tricks to trap Jesus. Jesus said that we need to *watch* and *pray* in order to avoid falling into temptation (Mt.26:41). We have to be on the *alert* at all times (Ep.6:18) because the devil is waiting around the corner to catch us (1Pe.5:8). We are not careful all the time, are we? When things are peaceful we assume that it is going to continue like that! We may even think that now finally the time of God's favour has come and we are safe! But God warns us saying that we have to

be all the more careful at such times (1Co.10:12).

The other thing is to *pray*. Prayer is an acknowledgment of weakness and need. We recognise that however clever we are, we are no match for Satan who is most brilliant and who has been studying and deceiving people for thousands of years. We cannot outsmart him or anticipate what he will do. The only way we can be safe is by depending on God to be our Protector. Even if our heart were entirely right, which we can't be sure of always, our flesh is weak. That is why Jesus has told us to pray (Mt.26:41).

Pointers along the way #218

Living for ourselves

Most people in the world live apart from God, even if they pay lip service

to God now and then. When we are born again, God enters our life in a personal way, or rather, we enter into a life with God. But even then, we all are at different levels in our life with God. All of us would like to think that we want to produce hundred fold fruit in our life. But most of the time this wish does not match with our actual lives. In down to earth terms we may still be living a self-centred life even though we proclaim our desire for a deep life with God.

Of course we want God to be for us and with us. We know that we cannot get far in this world (or the world to come) without Him. We want His favour, blessings, protection, help, etc., in everything we do. Is there anything wrong with this?

Imagine two Christians. One asks God for His blessings and help in everything that he does. The other one

makes himself and everything he does subject to what God wants him to do. For the first one, he himself is the boss and God his Helper. For the second one, God is the Boss, and he himself a servant. Which way do we live?

Jesus said that His food was to do the will of His Father and to accomplish His work (Jn.4:34). He was explaining Himself concerning what He said, "I have food to eat that you do not know of" (v.32). For Jesus the goal was clear as well as the way of life. His Father was the Boss, and Jesus found His spiritual strength and growth in doing what the Father wanted.

The first type of Christian lives his life just like all the other people of the world, making his own plans, deciding on the course of his life, doing what he thinks he should do. The difference between him and unbelievers is that he considers whether God would approve

what he does, and asks God's blessings on whatever he does. On the other hand, the second type of Christian first finds out what the Father wants him to do - which subjects he should study, what job he should take, who he should marry, where he should stay, how many children he should have, how he should spend his time and money, how he can be of use to God and people, etc. He believes that God has a detailed plan for his life and that the best life he can have is when he is fulfilling that plan (Ps.139:16). He constantly interacts with God to know His will, to see whether he has strayed away from His plan, to understand the changes he needs to make in his life, and to seek for more power and wisdom to do His will.

We have a tendency to become like the first man, and we need constant vigilance to live like the second man.

Attending church, reading the Bible and praying, and giving money will not turn the first type of Christian into the second type. The focus of our life has to shift from us to God.

Many times we have to deny ourselves in order to do God's will (Lk.9:23). People may not always understand us. We may not become big in this world. But don't we want to fulfil God's plans and to glorify Him?

Pointers along the way #219

Accepting forgiveness

Have you ever thought that false humility is a weapon Satan uses to keep us down? One form of false humility is where we deprecate ourselves. We like to think of ourselves as being less important, more sinful, less capable, etc., than we really are, thinking that we are being

humble! With a mistaken understanding of Php.2:3, we try to make ourselves out to be worse than others. This kind of approach also hinders us from freely receiving forgiveness from God. (Actually a correct translation (NASB) tells us to consider others as being more important than ourselves, meaning we should place other people's needs before ours.)

We think it is humility to consider that we are too sinful for God to forgive us, or that some particular sin we have committed is too heinous to merit any forgiveness. Of course we never merit any forgiveness. God gives it to us as a gift, free, because its punishment has already been taken by Jesus.

Due to some twist in our thinking we believe that it would be unrighteous to take forgiveness for our sins because they are no light matter. By punishing ourselves by belittling ourselves,

continuing in condemnation, and not doing anything that might give an impression that we are saints, we derive some perverted pleasure! We think we are humble!

As much as we deplore ourselves for having sinned the way we have, we ought to magnify God for the greatness of His grace in preparing a way of salvation for sinners like us. Otherwise, while we may be right in thinking that we are wretched sinners who do not deserve any mercy, we insult God by thinking that His heart is not large enough or His love is not deep enough.

Jesus died for the sins of the *whole world* (1Jn.2:2). By sacrificing Himself, the Son of God as a Man, the Lamb without blemish, He has put behind the problem of sin once for all (He.9:12,26). Now we can receive this forgiveness freely, for all of our sins

and the worst of our sins.

The first step is to confess our sins. If we do that God will do His part, to forgive and cleanse us (1Jn.1:9). Though it is sufficient to confess only to God the sins we have done only against Him, it may be helpful sometimes to share it with someone who is mature, who can keep secrets and who can help us. If we have hurt others through our sins, we need to confess those to them too.

Once we have acknowledged our sin, we must realise that the only One who has the right and authority to forgive sins has Himself promised to do that for us when we confess our sins. There is no higher authority. And there is nothing else we can do to get forgiveness. Do we imagine that by letting ourselves feel miserable we can earn this forgiveness?

Let us learn to continually bask in the sunlight of God's forgiveness. If we fall at any time, there is still forgiveness kept ready for us (1Jn.2:1). We don't want to treat forgiveness cheaply, do we? Let us then be thankful for it as a most precious gift from God!

Pointers along the way #220

My punishment is too much!

When Cain heard about the punishment God was giving him after he had killed Abel, Cain's response was that the punishment was too much for him (Ge.4:13). Imagine, he had just brutally killed his own brother, and he felt that the punishment of having to get less crop from the ground and having to wander around on the earth was too much! But before we criticise him let us look at ourselves and see how our response is when we face some difficulty or calamity in life. Do we ask God what we did to deserve such harsh treatment?

There could be a few things wrong with this response. One is our mistake in assuming that every trouble or calamity is a punishment from God for some sin that we have committed. It is wrong to assume that God is the type of

Person who takes delight in catching us with our sins and taking out His anger on us. He is the One who loved us enough to suffer sending His Son to death for us. He does discipline us sometimes, if He thinks that we are not taking His warnings and corrections seriously (He.12:6). But He is certainly not the type to bully us and make us squirm under His superior power. Actually He knows how frail we are, and it pains Him to see us suffer (Ps.103:13,14). If He is disciplining us will He not let us know in our heart why exactly He is doing it? If we have only a vague feeling of guilt condemning us, it is from our real bully, Satan. There is no need to waste our time listening to him.

Why do we straightaway assume *God* is responsible for every bad thing that happens to us? We live in a sin corrupted world, and many things are

the natural results of our own or someone else's sins. If a drunken driver hits us God is not responsible. If we became sick because we did not take care of our bodies, why blame God? Someone may ask why God didn't protect us. He does that a lot. But sometimes He allows such things to come to us to test or train us, as He did with Job. But He does that comparatively rarely, and He will also cause that to work for our good in the end (Ro.8:28).

Another mistake we make is to think that our sins are 'small' and do not deserve serious punishment. We can see this from the example of Cain. He thought that he should have got a less severe judgment. We make this mistake because we do not understand how serious sin is in God's eyes. Someone has said that only when we stand face to face with Jesus and see what He had

to suffer for our sins will we understand the seriousness of sin. Our sins are things that caused the Son of God to die such a cruel death. Our natural mind cannot understand this, and the casual attitude we see all around us nowadays also makes us think that God should just overlook sins. But the closer we get to God, the more clearly we see the sinfulness of sin. From thinking that only actions are sinful, we begin to be careful with our words, thoughts and our attitudes also. Then we won't be so quick to say that we don't deserve punishment.

Pointers along the way #221

Living from a knowledge base

With the coming of computers and the spread of the internet, 'knowledge base' has become a common phrase,

and the 21st century is hailed as the beginning of a knowledge based society. Knowledge gives one 'power,' and the IT savvy guys have an edge over the others. This way of life seems to apply even in the spiritual realm, as those who are better read and have more knowledge of the jargon seem to be more powerful as servants of God. If you also have the gift of the gab, you are made out for it, guys! But is *this* the way of the Lord?

God predicted through Daniel that in the last days knowledge would increase, as also travelling (Da.12:4). But place by side with this the prediction that there would be a famine for the *hearing* word of the Lord (Am.8:11). Applying this to our Christian life, we see that while knowledge of the word of God has increased to an all time high, possibly very few are actually hearing directly

from God. Trying to separate chaff from the grain, we could consider distinctions between 'head knowledge' and 'experiential knowledge,' 'written word' and 'rhema word,' 'first hand revelation' and 'second hand knowledge,' 'superficial knowledge' and 'in-depth knowledge,' 'knowledge to preach or write about' and 'knowledge to live by,' etc.

The right type of knowledge is something God values very much, as can be seen throughout Scripture. Think of it as the knowledge of the Lord and His ways that is intertwined with our daily life. This is coupled with the fear (reverence) of the Lord, integrity, uprightness, sincerity, discernment and the fruit of the Spirit. People with this kind of knowledge are very rare, but that is our goal to become as sons and daughters of God. How easy it is to feel smug and

comfortable with mere knowledge and a reputation for it!

This kind of knowledge can come only by sitting before the Lord and listening to Him (like Mary - Lk.10:39), walking before Him (Ge.17:1), judging oneself in the light of the Lord (1Co.4:4), seeking for it as for hidden treasures (Pr.2:4,5), meditating on the word of God (Ps.119:99), and listening to correction (Pr.1:23;15:32). Acquisition of knowledge has to go in line with application and life itself. This is where we can deceive ourselves. The more knowledge we acquire, the tendency is to get puffed up (1Co.8:1) and to imagine that we have also reached the level of life that the particular aspect of knowledge represents. 'Life' follows from knowledge only when we put it to practice in the testing situations of life. Sitting in an armchair with knowledge

of great truths in our mind is different from acting according to those truths when we are tested. It is very humbling to recognise that the lofty principles we have held or even preached to others are not automatically strong enough to help us to make the right choices in practical life. Spiritual muscles can be built up only through exercise. How we need to daily depend on the grace of God to be able to carry out this exercise!

Pointers along the way #222

Faith in action

Faith is not a 'substance' as a careless reading of the KJV might indicate (He.11:1). It is an *assurance* of things hoped for (NASB). It has no power of its own, as some might conclude from the statement that Jesus made, "Your faith has healed you" (Mt.9:22). If we had faith and God was not there, our

'faith' can do nothing! God is the One who heals us when He sees our faith. What did Jesus mean when He said, "According to your faith be it done to you"? (Mt.9:29)? He was just telling them that *He* was going to do for them what they trusted Him for.

Isn't our faith in God a trust and confidence that we have in Him? Those who have *great* faith in God can expect Him to do great things for them, and obviously those who hardly trust Him cannot expect anything from Him (Jas.1:6,7). But we must be clear that it is not our faith that accomplishes anything but God who responds to our faith, sometimes even beyond our asking or thinking (Eph.3:20). He is sovereign. He is not *bound* to respond to us in any way that we choose. But He responds in the fullness of His love for us and seeing what is best for us according to His wisdom.

Many people who are not aware of this try to manipulate God by working up faith for themselves, trying to show their faith by praising God, verbalising what they hope to receive, getting other people to 'agree' with them, planting some 'seed' sacrificially, etc. It is all a self-effort to force God to do something for them. But ultimately it is God's wisdom and love that prevail. We cannot twist His arms to get our way.

But there is another interesting side to this. When God sees faith - trust, confidence - in someone, sometimes He responds in ways that might even appear to us as improper! When a simple person cries out to God in a meeting where a false faith-healer is manipulating people, he gets healed! This may be explained as God's sovereign response to someone who sought Him, rather than as a miracle

from the faith-healer. In the same way, simple people who pray touching the TV screen, holding 'anointed' handkerchiefs, etc., get what they are seeking God for! Aren't these responses from God to His people who seek Him, rather than an endorsement of such gimmicks? When the woman in the crowd touched Jesus, was it His garment that healed her, or God's power that responded to her simple faith (Mt.9:21)?

God's heart is so full of love for the people He has created that He doesn't even wait till they fulfil certain 'norms' before He does good to them. Of course He has a special relationship with those who are born again and have become His children. But that does not stop Him from even answering the prayers of outsiders when they seek Him (Ac.10:34,35). Aren't there many cases of people from

other religions praying to Jesus in their need and Jesus revealing Himself to them even while they continued ignorantly worshipping other gods? God looks at the heart, and faith is something that God looks for there.

Pointers along the way #223

A question of priorities

We all have a tendency to take God for granted when things are going fine, and to seek God frantically when something goes beyond our control. The sad thing is that when we try to seek Him like that it is not easy to find Him because we have not become acquainted with Him enough to recognise His voice, His ways, His will and His presence. God is a spirit, and it takes time to get to know Him through the exercise of our spiritual senses (He.5:14). If we have not gone through this process of making our friendship with Him and getting to know Him, it will be difficult for us to recognise Him when we are being bombarded with voices from the world around us, the lusts of our flesh and the devil. God Himself says this to us (Pr.1:27-29).

On the other hand, how good it is to get to know Him closely and to experience His dealings with us daily, during the good times and the bad! He is the one who loves us more than everyone else, who has wisdom for all our situations, who knows even our future and can guide us to avoid wrong directions and to take the right ones, who watches over us and plans all things to work for our good, etc. The more we get to know Him, the more we want to know Him, because He is like no one else (Ps.16:11). How foolish it is for us to miss all this and get occupied with things that pass away (1Jn.2:17).

The world has enough mechanisms in place to try and keep us away from God. Our work is so demanding that it takes us a lot of time and effort just to keep going. Financial uncertainties and the cold blooded rat race push us to work harder and longer hours. Coming

home brings us up against the demands from the family and the home. We may also have social and other commitments that demand our attention. Then we need time to relax. Our attempts at relaxation can keep us occupied and add their own demands on us till we finally manage to fall asleep exhausted. None of the things mentioned here may be sinful or ungodly, but the net result could be that we do not get any free time with God.

Some keep away from God out of a sense of guilt, thinking that they dare not face wrath or shame from God. They don't realise how deep and wide God's mercy is, and how much He longs to meet with us. Some others are afraid that God would ask them to give up some pleasures they enjoy. But God is not a spoilsport, and His desire is that we should have an abundant life here on earth and enjoy the things He

has provided for us (Jn.10:10;1Ti.6:17). If He wants us to give up something it is only because it would be harmful for us. Some others are scared that God would ask them to make some sacrifices, send them off as missionaries to some dreadful places, get married to some ugly person, etc. These are lies of the devil because God plans only for our welfare and not for our calamity (Je.29:11).

Finding time to spend with God is a matter of priorities. When we begin to see how good He is, He will certainly become the top priority in our life.

Pointers along the way #224

As the deer pants...

Look at these facts. *We don't know everything. Some of the things we think we know are wrong.* One of the pivotal moments of my spiritual life was when I heard how God had answered the prayer of a nominal Christian who had cried out to Him in helplessness. To me it was somewhat similar to what Peter felt when the Holy Spirit fell upon Cornelius and the others. It opened my eyes to see something about the largeness of God's heart (Ac.10:34). Another time was when I was with some believers from other Christian groups some of whose doctrines I did not agree with. It humbled me to recognise that some of these people loved God much more than I did! I got another glimpse of what God values most. Incidents like these taught me that I need to know

God much more, and also that many times it will be through other people that God reveals Himself to me (Ep.3:18). We need God, and we also need other people.

Just as high school students imagine that they know everything, some of us may think that once we have received Jesus as our Saviour and get involved in some Christian activities we know all that is there to know. (Of course I am exaggerating it to make a point.) But the truth is that we know so very little. Everyone who pursues after the knowledge of God comes to this conclusion. It is not just that we don't have all the answers to give to the world, but we also don't know enough to manage our own life well.

How many mistakes we make each day, and how much we add to the misery that is already too much for the world! Doesn't this prod us to seek

after God more earnestly? On top of this, we find that when we seek to help others in need around us we do not always know what to do or say. Even when we know the right thing we many times lack the power to convince or motivate them.

We need more of God! But are we desperate enough to seek after Him? Casual prayers or occasional retreats cannot take the place of a heart's cry. *Keep on seeking, and we shall find* (Mt.7:7). Seek for the knowledge of God as if for hidden treasures (Pr.2:4,5). Recognise our need and cry out to God. Listen to God, and listen to Him through His people as they speak and write. Seek God for wisdom to pass on to those who come to us in need, as in the story of the man asking for bread for his visitors (Lk.11:5,6). One of the things that should challenge us is this call from Jesus, "Who then is

the faithful and sensible slave whom his master put in charge of his household to give them their food at the proper time?" (Mt.24:45).

Is this only applicable to pastors and such others who are involved in a public ministry? What about when we need wisdom and understanding to deal with the issues that come up in our daily lives? What about it when we come across friends, relatives, colleagues, or strangers who need the salt and light that only we can provide? Don't we 'ordinary' people need something more than what we have now in order to represent our extraordinary God?

Pointers along the way #225

To be sure of eternal life

This is the life and death question, "Are we sure we have eternal life?" God has made the answer as simple as possible - those who believe in Jesus have eternal life (Jn.3:16). The religions of this world cannot offer such an assurance. They all talk about *earning* salvation (or whatever they offer) through good works or rituals. But then one can never know if one has actually earned sufficient merit to have attained to it. But those who believe in Jesus have an inner assurance - a witness - that God has accepted them (1Jn.5:10). This is what gives us confidence and boldness as we face different situations in daily life or even death.

'Believing in Jesus' is so simple and yet so life changing that we need to make sure that we believe in the right

way. The right way is to trust in Jesus as the only basis for our salvation. In other words we do not have any confidence or consider any merit in our 'good life' (you know, I am not like the others, I haven't done any of those sins, etc.), good things we have done (remember how I helped someone or gave some money), good things we practice (I pray every day and never miss church!), our heritage (we have been Christians for so many generations), etc. We are not thinking of placing our good stuff on one side of a balance (scales) and hoping to outweigh the bad things we have done which are placed on the other side. On the contrary we are convinced that nothing can make us acceptable to God except being washed by the blood of Jesus. We are convinced that if Jesus had not died in our place we would have no hope of eternal life at all.

On one side we are fully convinced of our own sinfulness and the punishment we deserve for our sins, and on the other side we are eternally grateful for the unmerited favour God has shown us by taking the punishment on Himself. The world - and unfortunately some parts of Christianity - tries to tell us not to dwell on *negative* things such as sin, punishment, hell, etc. But we cannot appreciate the salvation offered by God until we see the wretchedness of our sins and our sinful nature. If we try to avoid thinking about such 'unpleasant' subjects such as our sins, it will be no wonder if we cannot have this blessed assurance of eternal life.

Those who content themselves merely with intellectually believing the stories about Jesus or 'accepting' Him cannot have this assurance. The publishers of the Amplified Bible point out that the word 'believe' used in the New

Testament in this context refers to 'adhering, cleaving to, trusting, having faith in, and relying on.' Accordingly, they explain that believing on the Lord Jesus Christ means to *have an absolute personal reliance upon the Lord Jesus as Saviour*. It is this exclusive reliance on Jesus that marks true belief. God responds by giving us the assurance in our heart that He has accepted us. It is our privilege to have this assurance, and if we lack it, we can ask God to give it to us.

Pointers along the way #226

Serving the Lord

Serving the Lord is everyone's call in the body of Christ. It is irrelevant here that some have a prominent ministry while the others are more hidden. All of us have a part to do, and the essence of serving God is to do whatever *He* wants us to do (1Co.12:11). It is not for us to do what we consider to be interesting to us. *He* is the Lord, and we are just servants. He makes the plans, and we can be sure that considering His wisdom and foreknowledge, we can never make a better plan.

Very few are called to 'full-time' Christian work, even though all are called to serve God full time - whatever we do, we are to do it as unto Him (Col.3:23,24). We are to do all things with our whole heart into it, because we are ultimately serving God

and not man. He who watches our hearts can see what we do and *why* we do it. It is our motives that are more important in His sight than what we do, because we can do even good things with selfish motives.

The most important criterion with which God examines us is whether we are seeking to serve Him or seeking our own. It was true even among Paul's co-workers that most were seeking their own and not Christ's interests (Php.2:19-21). When we seek money, fame, recognition, power, authority, etc., we are seeking our own, and that negates any service that we do for God even if people cannot see through us. Those who serve in God's kingdom are eligible to receive financial and other support for it (1Co.9:14). But it is quite another thing if we 'serve' in order to make money. The motive makes the difference. If we think that

the success of our ministry is measured in terms of numbers, and our goal is to expand till we are comparable or better than the big names, we forget the commitment to doing what the Lord wants us to do. We then start adopting techniques and gimmicks and cutting corners here and there in order to reach our ambition. God says that wherever there is selfish ambition there is also disorder and every evil thing (Jas.3:16). We may start saying and doing what the crowd wants than what the Lord wants (2Ti.4:3). Paul's ambition, on the contrary, was to be always pleasing to the Lord (2Co.5:9). This is something we need to constantly examine ourselves on because the tendency to seek our own clings to us.

When we want to serve God don't we like to think up new things to do for Him? But a good servant does not

make his own plans but listens to his master and does what he is told. Isn't what the Lord wants from us to be faithful to Him rather than do a whole lot of things which He never asked us to do? (1Co.4:2).

Jesus said that true greatness in His kingdom came from serving the others (Mk.9:34,35). The greatest is the one who serves *all*. This means to place their interests before ours. Is this easy for us to do always? Not at all. That is why we need to work on it, seek God's face to learn more about what He thinks about us and how we can do things better.

Pointers along the way #227

We and our five loaves

When the little boy gave his five loaves and two fish to the disciples of Jesus, did he have the slightest idea that Jesus was going to use them to feed about 15000 people - 5000 men plus women and children (Mt.14:21:Jn.6:9)? In a sense it was good that he did not know, because he gave them away not knowing what was going to happen. Imagine what would have happened if someone had told him that he was to give his five loaves to feed 15000 people! It would have appeared to be too incredulous. What if it was us, grown up men or women, standing there with the loaves? Would we have moved away from there with our loaves because we would think how foolish we would look if nothing happened! We would not expect our

five loaves to feed even 50 people, would we?

On the other hand, sometimes the Lord tells us to do something small - like giving someone a verse, writing an email or praying for something. Do we wonder what good can come from that, because it is so small and insignificant? Do we think that if only the Lord had given us some supernatural power that we could demonstrate before other people we could do mighty things for Him? Our mistake is in expecting us to have power in us and not realising that our Almighty God is in the business of taking our small loaves and turning them into miracles. We don't like to remain only earthen vessels and let the supernatural power always be His (2Co.4:7). This unbelief and natural

way of thinking hold us back from doing the small things that we *can* do. We don't mind making a loud and impressive prayer in a large gathering because *that* is something great. But what about praying for someone in secret or giving some help without the left hand knowing what the right hand has done (Mt.6:3,4)? We don't realise how much result our small action can bring about in the kingdom of God. For example, our small witness may convert just one man and that man may turn out to be the next great evangelist who will bring thousands into the kingdom of God! One small word which we speak to one man may cause a blessing for many generations in his family! How much we can miss by looking for the big things and neglecting the small!

Jesus said that if we were not faithful

in the small things we could not be entrusted with bigger things (Lk.16:11). The reason why we don't show interest in small things may be that they don't bring us any recognition before others. In that case there is something seriously wrong at our root level itself, because we are looking for glory before men and not before God (Jn.5:44). Then the chances are that we are fooling ourselves if we think we love God (v.42).

Faithfulness in small things comes only from the roots of a deep faith in God and a genuine love for Him and His people. Faith helps us to expect that God will take our small offerings and multiply them. Love helps us to do even small things for Him and the others. May God help us to grow in these virtues.

Pointers along the way #228

Not my will

It was not just at Gethsemane that Jesus said, "Not my will, but Yours be done" (Lk.22:42). It was His entire way of life (Jn.5:19,30). How is it for us? Is it only at the really difficult times that we turn to God and seek to know His will? Or perhaps it is only at major junctures of our life such as getting married or taking up a job that we seek His will. But why don't we live our lives in such a way that we are always subject to His will?

Is it that moment by moment we must ask God what He wants us to do? That is to take this in an unrealistic and legalistic manner. When we are asked to pray without ceasing do we pray all the time? No. It is not possible for anyone to do that literally. It refers to an attitude of prayer and dependence on God, and an attitude of submission

to God's will. It is the same attitude that causes us to say, in effect, "Not my will but Yours, Lord" all the time. We cannot go around saying that all the time with our lips, of course. But it is an attitude where we are submitted to do God's will. We do ask Him now and then, whenever we are faced with choices, what we should do. At other times we place ourselves in the place where we are open to hearing His voice and taking action on whatever He tells us.

If we try to find out God's will at special times without having lived with this attitude of "Not my will but Yours" at other times, we will find it difficult to hear His voice or to know His will. Jesus said that it is those who were keenly interested in doing His will who would understand His ways (Jn.7:17).

It is true that many times we feel

strongly about our own will and it is difficult to say, "Not my will, but Yours" with meaning. But we should remember that His will is always much better. The fact that we trip and fall at times should not hinder us from continuing to seek God's will. There is forgiveness for our sins and a clean white-board for us every time we confess our sins (1Jn.1:9). Our failure should only teach us to cling more tightly and walk more closely with the Lord. We also have others walking along with us who can pick us up, dust off our clothes and hold our hands as we move on.

It is only those who trust God who are willing to place every part of their lives into His will. The more we get to know God the better we are able to trust Him. He never lets us down even though at times it may look as if He has because we cannot always understand

His ways. He plans only for our good, and He will never let the control go out of His hands (1Co.10:13). He has a plan for our entire life and we can do nothing better than following it as closely as possible (Ps.139:16). Even when we mess up something in our life He comes out with Plan B (and Plans C, D, E, etc.) that will still cause us to accomplish His purposes for our life. Think of Moses who *blew it* at the age of 40, but was still enabled to take off again at the age of 80, and many others like him. There is nothing so satisfying as knowing that what we have done is God's will.

The easy way out?

One of the prayers older people make is, "Lord, give me health so that I don't become a burden to anyone." But after praying this prayer many keep on indulging themselves in many ways without taking care of their bodies. Isn't this typical of how we pray many times, passing the responsibility to God without taking any for ourselves? Of course there are many things we cannot do, and it is only good to ask God to do such things for us. But if we neglect to do the things we *can* do, will we not suffer the consequences, even if we foolishly blame God for them at that time?

When we are pursuing after victory over temptations it is good to ask God for help because we are very weak in our flesh (Ro.7:18). If we hope we can gain victory by striving for it, we will

discover soon that we just don't have what it takes. At the same time if we don't bother to flee from temptations (1Co.6:18;10:14;1Ti.6:11;2Ti.2:22), can we blame God when we fall? After praying "Lead us not into temptations" if we ourselves walk into them, won't we deserve what we get?

There are so many things we *can* do and need to do. Otherwise the Bible would not give us so many commandments and instructions. But we think we have found the easy way out by praying for help! No, we can't put the ball in God's court like that. If it was up to Him, we would all have become sinless, perfect people immediately after we were born again. But God wants *us* to gain the victory and attain to the crown. Of course we cannot do this without His grace. At the same time we *must* do all things through Christ who strengthens us. *We*

have to put to death the deeds of the body *through* the Holy Spirit (Ro.8:13).

There has always been this question in the minds of believers about what God will do for us and what we should do. Even though there are many promises about what God will do, there are also many instructions about what we should do. Many people take one side or the other, and many others keep moving from one to the other. The fact is that both sides are necessary for our lives. We know that we can do nothing without God, but also at the same time we should realise that God will do nothing without us. This is a law that He has imposed upon Himself.

Of course God can do anything He wants to. But He has planned things in such a way that *we* should get the victory and accomplish great things for Him. This is the way He will put the

devil to shame but letting weak and stupid people like us gain the victory over him. When God makes a move towards us we make the choice for God in our lives and also choose to depend on His grace. We manage to do this exclusively by the grace God gives us.

It is impossible to draw a boundary line between God's domain and ours. There is such a fine mixing between the two that it is difficult to distinguish. But at the same time, there is need for both to exist at the same time. As we seek to depend on God, let us also do what He enables us to do.

Pointers along the way #230

If God were to ask...

We know the story of Solomon who asked God for wisdom when God appeared to Him and asked him what he wished to have (1Ki.3:5,9). God was so delighted with this that He also gave him wealth and honour (v.13). Probably we have also heard this question from preachers, "If it was you, what would you have asked for?" Knowing this story well, we can give the correct answer, thinking that God would also give us what we really want - wealth, health, honour and prosperity! Of course, we can't fool God with words because He can see our hearts.

God may never actually appear to us like that and ask us that question. But what is the answer that He finds in our heart and mind from day to day? Don't we need to be clear about it ourselves

whether God asks us or not? This question is actually a part of the series we ask ourselves - "Who am I? What am I doing here? Why am I here? What am I living for? What is it I like best? What should I be doing? ..."

If our answers to these questions are based on our relationship with God, shouldn't it be automatic that the desire of our heart - what we would ask for if God were to give us a blank cheque - is, "Hallowed be Your name; Your kingdom come; Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven; give us this day our daily bread; etc.," in that order?

The reason why this is not so in many cases and at different times is that we have become blind, deceived, careless, callous, etc. (Re.3:17,18). We have not been listening to the Spirit of God in our hearts drawing us to God, but listening to the pull of the world and the flesh and following the

practices of the people of the world. We have forgotten that we have a higher calling - to be kings and priests and joint heirs with Christ - and we have allowed ourselves to seek for things that will all perish one day.

Let us also not be super-spiritual and imagine that we don't need things of this earth - money, health, prosperity, etc. - and that we only need 'spiritual' things! We are still on this earth and have not yet ascended to heaven! But what we need to ask ourselves is about the deepest longing in our hearts. What are the things that would give us the maximum level of joy in our hearts? What are the things we would like to have even if everything else was taken away from us? For Jesus the most precious thing was fellowship with the Father which was the most difficult thing for Him to give up when He wanted to carry out the plan for our

salvation (Mt.27:46). The next thing was to always do the will of His Father in heaven (Jn.4:34).

For the carnal Christian the struggle is to give up the pleasures of sin in order to please God. For the growing Christian the struggle is having to do the things of this life while he longs to sit and worship the Lord. But for the mature Christian the question is what the Lord wants him to do and what will glorify Him, irrespective of whether it is 'earthly' or 'spiritual.' May we seek this kind of maturity.

Pointers along the way #231

Bearing with God!

It is one of the biggest challenges of inter-personal relationships to bear with other people's weaknesses, differences, irritating mannerisms, inexplicable behaviour, character

flaws, etc., and to continue to love them. One of the things that help us in this direction is the fact we ourselves are ridden with faults that others have to bear with (Col.3:13)! But even though some will hesitate to acknowledge it openly because of a vague fear, isn't it also difficult for us many times to bear with God and His ways? It is not because He has weaknesses or character flaws that we have this problem, but because we are so different from Him and we fail to understand Him (Is.55:9).

God is certainly one who has no fault. He does everything with precision and perfection. His thoughts towards us are only for our welfare and never for our calamity (Je.29:11). He is always planning good things for us because He treats us as very valuable persons (Zec.2:8). Yet there are times when we get offended with Him because we

cannot understand what He is up to.

Think of how Jesus deliberately delayed His going to see Lazarus when He heard about his sickness (Jn.11:6). We know from the end of the story why He did that, but can we really blame Mary and Martha for getting upset before they came to that point? How would we feel if we prayed with fasting for 21 days according to (what we knew was) the will of God and were clueless about what God was doing? This was what happened to Daniel (Da.10:12,13). What would we think about God if we were in Jerusalem and heard about how James got killed after having undergone special apostolic training with Jesus as one of the inner core of disciples? Would we not wonder why God wasted such a good resource person (Ac.12:1,2)? How would it affect us if we were in the family of James and

John? Aren't there many such occasions where we could get offended with God?

When we are in the middle of situations like the above where God's ways hurt us personally, it is different from what we understood and agreed to when we were doing a Bible study. Satan also knows how different things become for us when we get touched personally (Job 2:4,5). Then all that we have believed, confessed and proclaimed get placed under test. We can imagine how our faith in the forgiveness of our sins and in eternal life gets tested if the doctor tells us that we have a terminal illness!

Our faith in Christ is the only thing that can keep our heads high through all the situations of life (1Jn.5:4). We place our trust in God, and our faith becomes stronger and stronger as we go through different tests in life. We become more

and more convinced about the love of God towards us and His eternal wisdom and power. This enables us to stand without wavering when we can't figure out what is going on. We are also able to commit things into God's hands without getting worked up about what others are doing to us (1Pe.2:23). Let us reciprocate His love by trusting Him.

Deeper than what meets the eye

No one would deny that our life is full of perplexities where even when we want to do the right thing we do not know what to do. We would think that when we want to do God's will the least thing God could do was to tell us what it was. But many times He doesn't, straightaway. From our point of view it appears as if He takes some sadistic thrill by delaying answers to prayer, not giving explanations, etc. We know He is not sadistic at all. It just looks like that at times.

We know how Jesus *deliberately* delayed coming to Lazarus when He heard he was ill (Jn.11:6). Of course Mary and Martha were upset about that. The story ended dramatically with an outstanding miracle and everyone was happy. But the sisters could have

wondered why the Lord let them go through those six days of agony.

Peter was praying one day at noon time, hungry and waiting for food. Then God showed him the vision of a great sheet coming down from the sky carrying creatures of all types. God told him three times that he should take and eat. Each time Peter replied that he was not used to eating unclean things. The sheet was taken back, but Peter was left in perplexity about what this meant (Ac.10:17). The men from Cornelius were at the door of the house and it was only a matter of minutes before Peter could understand the application of the vision. But the question is why the Lord did not explain the vision to Peter.

The answer is that God does not merely want us to *do* certain things, but He wants us to *become* a certain type of people. He wants to train us to

become mature in our thinking, applying of truths, and decision making (Ep.4:13). It is not enough to know Bible truths, but we need to learn to think in a mature way, and make proper application (2Ti.3:16,17). It takes perplexities to force us to flex out spiritual muscles and to become strong. We cannot learn this if God were to spoon feed us all the time.

Think about how Jesus had to become a man and live on this Earth and go through all the difficulties and temptations we face in order to understand the feeling of our weaknesses (He.4:15). Though it is not an accurate analogy we can think that just as He had to become a man in order to taste and understand the life of men even though He knew everything as God, we too need the rough and tough of life in addition to our Bible knowledge.

This is especially true in the matter of understanding what others go through. We tend to be self-centred in our thinking, and without understanding what others feel we take decisions from our point of view. Adversities and perplexities break this stronghold. I remember reading about one of two ladies in a church who was asking God why she was not as fruitful as the other. God said it was because the other had gone through much hardship in life. Maturity and hardship come as a package. When we go through hardship with trust and patience we can also emerge mature and fruitful.

Getting to the heart of God

We Christians get into a lot of unnecessary problems in personal life and inter-personal relationships because we do not know God well. We start with a lot of pre-conceived ideas about God, and even when we search the Scriptures to find out what God says about something we mess things up because a) we ignore what the Bible says when we don't like it, b) we squeeze Bible verses into our own mould, c) we take verses out of context, d) we take verses independently apart from what other verses say, e) we take verses strictly according to the letter without understanding the spirit, f) we don't wait on God and try to understand what He is trying to say, etc. (Jn.5:39,40).

We must remember that God is spirit, and He is trying to convey spiritual

truths through the limited medium of written words. We know that even in human communications words alone are not often enough to convey the true meaning, without taking in the tone of voice, the expression on the face, gestures, body posture, etc. We can imagine how limited mere words are in conveying spiritual truths, even in a book such as the Bible. When we believe that it was the Holy Spirit who inspired the writers of the books of the Bible, isn't it good for us to seek Him out to reveal to us the ideas which He has tried to convey through the words (2Ti.3:16;2Pe.1:21)? Spiritual truths can only be understood spiritually (1Co.2:14).

Even if we use cross references, concordance, commentaries, dictionary, Hebrew and Greek lexicons and writings of many scholars and godly men, we can go only to a certain

extent in knowing about the character and ways of God. It is good to understand the exact meanings of the verses so that our faith can rest on accurate knowledge of the truth (Ac.17:11). It is also good to learn what God has revealed to godly men who have known Him. But is this anything like getting to know God personally and directly? Isn't that one of the privileges of all children of God under the new covenant (He.8:11)?

In order to experience that kind of knowledge, a few tips may be in order. a) Take the attitude of a learner and sit before God humbly, saying, "Lord, here I am. Reveal Yourself to me. Show me Your paths and teach me Your ways" (Ex.33:18;Ps.25:4). Acknowledge that we could be wrong in some of our understanding and be willing to change. b) If we cannot get the answer to some of our questions,

let us not force an answer but wait for the right time. c) Look beyond the words and see *what* God is saying, and *why*. Get to know the heart of God. Don't limit God to mere words. d) Listen to the Holy Spirit who brings to our mind other verses that support or contradict what we believe (Jn.14:26). e) Make sure that we are willing to obey whatever God tells us (Jn.7:17). f) Check what godly men have to say on the subject to make sure that we are not running wild.

God is much bigger than His word. Let us reach out to Him (Jn.5:39,40).

Pointers along the way #234

The great commandments

A legal expert asked Jesus which the great commandment was (Mt.22:36). His reply was that the great and foremost commandment was to love God with every part of our being. But we notice that He did not stop there but went on to tell them about the second most important commandment (v.37,38). That is to love our fellow human beings just like we love ourselves (v.39). Jesus was indicating that keeping the first commandment would not be complete without keeping the second also.

When we look around at sincere Christians, we find that we sometimes focus on loving God more than everything else or on showing love to fellow human beings. It is possible for us to focus so much on one that we neglect the other. In our single minded

pursuit after pleasing God people can be neglected, despised, trampled upon, and pushed out of the way. While we seek to show love to people we may cut corners with some of God's commandments.

But God does not want us to be either way. He wants us to love Him more than everyone and everything else *AND* love other people too. He wants us to develop and grow in both directions at the same time. He sees these two commandments as two sides of the same coin, so that we cannot really have one without the other. John emphasised this saying that if we did not love our brother whom we could see, we should not imagine that we loved God (1Jn.4:20).

The reason why we fall into one of these two tracks is that our vision is narrowly focused on one of the two goals instead of seeing that they go

together. Think of a man who makes it his ambition to live before God, doing everything right in His eyes (Ge.17:1). This is so important to him that he has no time to think about, e.g., whether his actions and attitudes hurt anyone. He has no time to meet the needs of people because he is busy with his Bible studies and prayer meetings. On the other hand, think of another man who is busy doing things to help others in various ways. He is, e.g., thinking up new ways to 'bless' people and perhaps neglects the need to have personal integrity or to find out what the Lord would want him to do.

Jesus scolded the Pharisees for concentrating so much on the exactness of obeying God through their tithes that they missed out on showing compassion, mercy, justice, etc. (Mt.12:7;23:23). He illustrated this with the story of the Good Samaritan

where the religious leaders neglected the robbery victim lying on the road. On the other hand He spoke of how unfaithfulness in handling money will block spiritual blessings (Lk.16:11). Social action without the love of God will still bless people. But those who do it will not receive any blessing from God (1Co.3:11-14).

When we love God with all our heart, all that we do will come from the love of Christ that controls us (2Co.5:14,15). That is why it is the first commandment. But something is wrong if our so-called love for God does not lead to blessing and serving others.

Pointers along the way #235

Emerging from the past

One mistake which many of us make is to let our past mistakes or bad experiences hold us back or slow us down to various degrees from attaining to the full potential that Christ holds out for us. We tell ourselves that nothing better can come from us who have made such stupid blunders or demonstrated such terrible incompetence in the past. In effect we let our past unnecessarily ruin any chance of a perfectly beautiful future. This is a well used strategy of the devil, who trips us up at times, and then causes us to either lie there pitying ourselves in our guilt or drag ourselves forward with weights tied to our feet! One of the resolutions that we need to take is that by God's grace we are NOT going to let our past ruin our future.

First of all, do we imagine that all these great heroes of faith must have been some super men or women who never made any serious mistake in their lives? Ha ha! We just have to read the honest depiction that the Holy Spirit has given in the Bible about their lives. Those stories tell more about the grace and patience of the Lord than anything else! If they trusted in their own greatness they would not have become such heroes in the first place. But the thing is that they got up and went forward, whenever they fell, and scaled great heights *by their faith*.

We know that when we come to Jesus in repentance and faith, He causes us to be born again (1Pe.1:3). Our record is wiped clean, just as if it had never been dirty before (Is.1:18). Even if our record showed things such as fornication, idolatry, adultery, effeminate or homosexual behaviour,

theft, greed, addiction to drinking or drugs, etc., He blots them out and treats us as if we are absolute saints (1Co.6:9-11). That is the power of unmerited favour from God! Can we not hold up our heads and look our Father in the eye *boldly* because we know that He has accepted us as His children? Hasn't He told us that He will never again hold our sins against us (He.8:12)?

When we fall or fail afterwards don't we have the right to go to Him, confess our sins and get our slate wiped clean all over again (1Jn.1:9)? The sins and mistakes that we make unconsciously (which we do not recognise just yet in order to confess) are also washed away graciously by our Father because He knows that we are *trying* to walk with Him all the time (v.7)?

Instead of letting our sins and mistakes drag us back we can let them become

stepping stones to greater wisdom and understanding, can't we? We recognise how small we are, how much we need God, what things to avoid in future, what all to be careful about, how to be more gracious and patient towards others, how to be like signposts for the others, etc. All these things can work *positively* for our future, while we got fooled into thinking that people such as us can never make it! Let us put our faith in the Lord's mercy and grace and put the devil to shame!

The problem of being different

When we look at ourselves we can rejoice that God has made us so unique that there is no one else in the whole world just like us. But when we deal with other people and find that they are so different from us it can irritate us and cause a lot of problems. It is difficult to understand one another, communicate the ideas in our mind to others in a way they can understand, accommodate differences in perspectives, etc. It leads to a lot of misunderstanding, quarrels and divisions.

Even among us Christians who believe in the same God, have the same Spirit and read the same Bible differences are so many that we exist in a multitude of churches, groups and denominations. It is sad that this gives occasion for the

unbelievers to mock us, but the sadder thing is that differences among us cause us to part company.

It is inevitable that coming from such different backgrounds as we do, we disagree on the interpretation of different verses in the Bible or the approach we should take on different subjects. But the question is, should every such disagreement cause us to leave one another? If I believe that 666 is symbolic and another man believes that it is a real number connected with the Antichrist why should we leave each other's company? Is it not possible for one who believes in pre-tribulation rapture to love another who holds the post-tribulation view?

Two persons cannot walk together unless they are agreed (Am.3:3). But agree on what? Where they are going, how they should get there, etc. For example, if two people disagree on

whether salvation is by faith or works, whether Jesus is the only way, etc., they cannot walk or work together. If they disagree on whether it is right or wrong to tell lies, they cannot enjoy each other's fellowship. The Bible tells us to keep away from those who cause divisions, heretics, unruly Christians who will not listen to anyone, etc. (Ti.3:10;2Jn.1:10;2Th.3:14,15). Those who keep troubling us like thorns in the back also come under this category. We will have better peace of mind if we keep away from such. But we do stand to lose if we push people away or withdraw from them just because we see certain things differently.

When we disagree, we can certainly discuss our different points of view, if we are open to seeing the truth and changing. We can argue passionately about the things we are convinced

about. But when we find that we are just not able to agree on something, we are still required to let brotherly love continue (He.13:1). Perhaps as time goes by we will be able to see the other person's point of view more clearly, and he ours too. But even if we are unable to agree on something, unless it is one of those serious issues, can't we accept that person as someone Christ has accepted (Ro.15:7)? Don't we realise that while we pursue after perfect agreement in a realistic manner on all matters concerning faith, our emphasis should be on oneness in spirit (Ep.4:3,13)?

The one and only foundation of grace

Many Christians are not clear about their spiritual foundation, and so have no surety regarding their eternal salvation. They hope that God will show them mercy on the final day because He is like that, they have not been such bad sinners, He will remember the good things they have done, etc. In this way they live in uncertainty not knowing about how it will actually turn out. But this is because they have not understood or experienced *grace* that Jesus came with. God wants us to know that we *have* eternal life, now (1Jn.5:13). Do *you* know that in in your heart?

The Old Testament amply demonstrated that man does not have it in himself to keep God's commandments (Ro.8:3). All those

who imagine that they can find acceptance with God by living a good life are mistaken, because they neither know God's standards nor their own weakness (Ro.3:20). God knew this already, but He went through the Old Testament to convince us people before He came out with the New Testament (new covenant). But many people have not 'seen' just what God is offering through the new covenant.

What can bridge the gap between God's lofty moral standards and man's weakness? Grace. Through grace God accepts us sinners just as though we were saints without any sin (Ro.5:8-10). When He washes us with the blood of Jesus Christ, our record of sins becomes white like snow (Is.1:18). All God asks us to do is to admit that we are sinners (who do not deserve this grace) (Je.3:13), turn from our sins and believe that it was for our

sins that Jesus died (Ac.2:38;1Jn.2:2). What God is doing is expressing His immeasurable love for us whom He has created, recognising our helplessness in being unable to reach up to His standards, taking His own initiative in suffering the punishment for our sins and offering His free acceptance to those who will humbly receive it as a gift.

Now there are two types of resistance coming up against this offer. Religiously minded people typified by the Jews, who are used to working for and earning their acceptance from God, think it is unfair for God to offer it free, and rationally oriented people typified by the Greeks, think it is illogical that Jesus dying on the cross can have anything to do with *our* acceptance (1Co.1:23). But honest, humble people can recognise that they could not have been saved any other

way, and God could not have done anything better.

When we have come through this narrow gate and found that it opened to the eternal riches that God has prepared for us, we realise how foolish we had been to despise it earlier. On the inside of the gate we find unconditional acceptance from our Father, forgiveness for our sins, an intimate relationship with the Father, Son and the Holy Spirit, transformation of our nature into that of Christ, fellowship with others walking with us on this new path, help for all our needs, etc. How blessed are those who have found this way!

The treasure and the vessel

When God works through us, people see the treasure - the greatness of His work - and the earthen vessel - we who carry that treasure (2Co.4:6,7). Those who know us well are so familiar with our weaknesses - the earthen vessel - that they hardly expect anything great to come from us (Mt.13:57). Those who hardly know us are so impressed with the greatness that when they come across a weakness they are shocked! In a sense we cannot help this; we cannot control what people think about us. But the important thing is what we think about ourselves - whether we think we are great because of what God is doing through us, or we are aware of our own weaknesses so much that we are quick to give the glory to God. The danger is that when we are appreciated

and admired by people we begin to accept that as something we deserve or that we bow down before our weaknesses and give up serving God.

The apostle Paul has given us a good example here. He was an apostle of apostles, brilliant in his mind, scholarly in his understanding of Scriptures, endowed with many gifts of the Holy Spirit, outstanding in his accomplishments for the kingdom of God including many supernatural interventions, widely known and admired by many Christians of his time, so powerful in the hierarchy of the servants of God that his word was almost the end of discussions, author of half of the New Testament, responsible for reaching the gospel to many new areas and starting many churches, etc. I am not aware of any person of this stature living at this time. What did he think about himself? What we see is a

rare combination of honesty, realism, humility and uprightness. We do not see any false pride, any demeaning of himself in trying to act humble, any giving up of self-esteem for fear someone might misunderstand, any mechanical giving of glory to God, etc. This is something that should challenge any of us.

Paul was absolutely clear that in himself there was nothing good but was also confident that whatever he was accomplishing came from Christ who was living in him (Ro.7:18;Ga.2:20). In other words, he knew that apart from Christ he could do nothing, and also that with Christ he could do everything (Jn.15:5;Php.4:13). This confidence in Christ did not cause him to take a passive role, because he worked harder than all others. Yet this did not make him think that he was greater than

the others because he knew that it was God's grace that enabled him to work (1Co.15:10). He recognised that God had anointed him as an apostle with authority over the churches, yet he realised that as a man he was just a recipient of grace as one of the chief sinners (1Ti.1:15). He knew he had the right to demand the churches to take care of him, but chose to earn his own livelihood to become an example to other servants of God (1Co.9:14;Ac.20:34). Though he could have commanded others, he chose to plead to them (Phm.1:8,10).

Let us examine ourselves to see where we stand.

Our reasonable response

When we stand before God and recognise who He is and what He has done for us, our natural response is to worship Him (Ro.12:1). But is it not possible for us, in these days of abundance of praise and worship songs, to imagine that worship is to sing those songs or to join such times in the church? This verse points out that true worship involves giving ourselves to God as living sacrifices to do His will all the time. This same concept is brought out in 2Co.5:14,15 where it says that if we really believe that Jesus gave His life for us, our attitude and behaviour should be such that we live our lives for Him instead of for ourselves. The whole of our Christian life is summarised here - *living for Him!*

When we make major decisions in our

life, what is the primary consideration that drives us? Is it how it will affect us - just like everybody in the world thinks - or what Jesus would have us to do, and how it would glorify Him? When we have extra money in our hands, what is the thought that guides us to decide on what to do with it? Is it to spend it for something that we have been dreaming about or saving for our future needs, or asking what the Lord would have us to do? When we recognise that God has given us some talents and skills do we plan on making ourselves richer or more famous with them, or how we can use them in God's kingdom? When we get some free time do we think of enjoying ourselves or about what we can do to get to know God better or do good to someone else in God's name?

The issue is *not* about whether it is wrong to think of how things would

affect us, buy something useful for us, earn money or enjoy ourselves. These are all legitimate things. But the question is what drives us - *compels or constrains* us. What is our primary concern?

Jesus taught us to ask for our daily bread - representing everything we need for our earthly life (Mt.6:11). It is legitimate (and necessary) for us to think and plan about such things. But Jesus taught us about the priorities that we should have in our life, above and beyond these daily needs. We are to think, first of all, about God's honour and glory, His kingdom and His will (v.9,10).

Have we allowed our salvation to go deep enough into our lives so as to bring us to this attitude? Can the fruit of such an attitude be seen in our behaviour? Others watching us should be able to see that we do not belong

here altogether even though we are here right now. That is the witness - ourselves as the living gospel - that we can give to others.

Do we not need to press on towards perfection both in this attitude and its practical working out? We face opposition from our comfort and pleasure loving selves, the world system that preaches at us that we need to look out for ourselves and that we deserve a better deal for ourselves, and from Satan trying to deceive, divert our attention and keep us busy. But to love Jesus is to live for Him.

Pointers along the way #240

True through and through

That is integrity, isn't it? No guile, no hypocrisy, no pretence, no giving false impressions, no secret agenda, no double talk, no hidden meanings, but true through and through! This is the human equivalent of what God is - light without any darkness (1Jn.1:5). The apostle John went on to say that if we claimed we were in fellowship with such a God and still had things to hide, there was no integrity in us (v.6)! In that case we would be liars without any truth in us.

Actually there is not much of integrity around us, is there? We are so used to mixtures of truth and falsehood packed off in impressive style especially among Christian leaders that we may have lost the sharpness of discernment in this area. We have almost come to accept straight faced double talk as a

norm that it no longer disturbs us. Worse still, we may have come to adopting such attitudes and approaches ourselves. There has to be a U turn and quickening of pace as we move towards integrity, without which we shall not see the Lord (He.12:14).

Our difficulty may be in taking that U turn. It will cost us some painful admission that there are things we need to give up and stop doing. We wonder how we can manage to be upright in a world such as this. We are not so sure that we will be able to keep it up once we start. But 'difficult' as the way appears to be, there is no denying the fact that it is the only way to be pleasing to the Lord. We are not going to be able to hear the Lord telling us, "Good and faithful servant," without that.

On the other hand it is much easier to walk in truth than with guile, isn't it?

What a strain it is to walk with guile, to make sure that our pretences are consistent at all times and convincing enough, and to walk carefully so that we do not get exposed or caught! If we go on with it for a long time, we may become blind to the fact that others can see through us and despise us. What a pitiable, miserable life!

We may be fooled into thinking that integrity is alright for men who (so we secretly imagine) do not have what it takes to get on in this world - you know, the innocent, gullible type. But the uprightness that God values is not incompetence or a form of weakness, but a deliberately chosen way of life. When God asked Abraham to walk before Him and to be perfect, was that not a call for integrity (Ge.17:1)? Job declared that he would not let go of his integrity till he died (Job 27:5). Solomon understood that what God

valued most in a man was faithfulness and integrity (1Ch.29:17). David knew God as One who looked for integrity (Ps.15:1,2).

David's integrity was compromised severely when he fell with Bathsheba, but vindicated again after he acknowledged his sin, humbled himself and turned towards God. That was the U turn he took when he was convicted in his heart, and even though it looked humiliating for the moment it gained approval from God as "A man after My own heart." Encouraging, isn't it?

Pointers along the way #241

Guilt as a driver

Modern society is trained to avoid all forms of guilt. Some secular psychologists tell us that guilt is a 'learned behaviour' based on moral standards others have thrust upon us.

They suggest that we should ignore those standards so that they no longer judge us! Of course there are many times we may unnecessarily feel guilty because we listen to accusations from others as well as our imaginations. But all guilt is not 'learned.' If we look into the eyes of an 'innocent' child who has just told a lie do we not see guilt there? That is from the conscience which we are all thankfully born with.

The drive to be positive and to avoid all things negative has also served to push guilt out of our set of acceptable feelings! Christians tell themselves that there is no condemnation in Christ Jesus and turn away from every twinge of guilt (Ro.8:1)! The problem is not with that truth but the wrong application. The truth is that once God has forgiven us, there is no more place for guilt. For God to forgive us there is need for us to confess our sins to Him

(and others if necessary) and to forgive others (1Jn.1:9;Mt.6:15). Once we have done these, we must believe that God has kept His word and forgiven us. Then we must reject feelings of guilt as an enemy.

There is yet another thing we can do after we have been forgiven. That is to change our course for the future. This is actually implied in our confession which includes "I won't do it again" along with "I am sorry." That is repentance. If we are not to do again whatever we have done wrong, we need to take some action. As a great scientist said, if we repeat an experiment without changing any of the parameters and hope to get a different result we will be disappointed! We need to understand how and why we fell the last time - or the past trend - and make necessary changes in our attitude and behaviour if we are to be

different in the future.

This is where guilt can become a great helper! The most immediate need is to get right with God, and that settles most of the issues. But now we need to take steps so that we will minimise the possibility of falling again. One thing that can drive us in this direction is a healthy sense of guilt. I mean by this that we face guilt in a bold, rational way and take action to prepare ourselves for the future. "And now, isn't it wonderful all the ways in which this distress has goaded you closer to God? You're more alive, more concerned, more sensitive, more reverent, more human, more passionate, more responsible. Looked at from any angle, you've come out of this with purity of heart" (2Co.7:11 The Message). We can take steps to get closer to God, learn how He looks at us, change our way of thinking and our

approach to temptations, and take practical steps to avoid temptations. Guilt can drive us to take action so as to avoid having to face it in future. We remember how Paul's recognition of his past drove him to serve God all the more (1Co.15:9,10).

Pointers along the way #242

How do we read?

You know the story. Jesus and the disciples had set out in a boat into the Sea of Galilee, and a great storm arose that threatened to sink the boat. Jesus was sleeping, and the disciples woke Him up, asking Him why He was not bothered that they were going to perish. Jesus got up, rebuked the wind and the sea became calm. You also remember how the Sunday School teacher told us about how Jesus was so much at rest in the middle of the storm that He could sleep calmly, and you have never questioned it! This is an example of how we accept things from Bible teachers without questioning, and how afterwards whenever we read that portion we merely recollect the teaching and go on. Have you thought about the fact that Jesus was sleeping, totally unaware of the storm going on

till He was woken up? It was not a matter of being calm in the midst of the storm! (On the other hand, when He woke up suddenly and found Himself in the midst of a storm and He kept His presence of mind - that's something else, isn't it?)

Is this typical of how we read the Bible? If it is, we have placed ourselves at the mercy of our teachers! If they are wrong, so will we be! This was the case when only the teachers had the Bible with them, and the rest of the people had to simply take what was spoken to them. But fortunately now we all have Bibles with us, and also access to all kinds of translations, concordances, dictionaries, etc. Now there is no excuse for us to take things second hand from the teachers. Even the least of us can read the words ourselves and ponder over them. We can ask the Lord to enlighten our eyes

(Ep.1:18), speak to our hearts and give us the understanding that can equip us for life (2Ti.3:16,17). Why is it that we still let the teachers do our thinking for us? Either we are lazy or we honour them too much!

This is in spite of God warning us that in the last days there would be all kinds of *false* teachers and prophets around, and even the elect may get deceived (Mt.24:24;2Pe.2:1). There are many such going around nowadays, aren't there? Can we afford to place our lives at the mercy of such people who try to impress us with their forceful personalities and emphatic deliveries? Don't we need to check things for ourselves (1Co.14:29;1Th.5:20,21)?

Of course, not all of us are teachers, and we need to value those to whom God has entrusted such ministries. But that does not absolve us of our

responsibility to check what they teach. It is my considered opinion that no teacher - even good ones - is 100% correct on everything. We don't have to agree with everything that people teach just because they are well known preachers or writers (even though we give more weightage to the ones we trust). But now we have *false* ones too, and we have to be especially careful about them.

Many point to the Bereans who checked with the Scripture even when the apostle Paul spoke ((Ac.17:11). Actually Paul was a new teacher on the scene at that time! Ha ha!

Pointers along the way #243

Willingness to change

There is no progress without change. However averse we are to change, change we must. But we are so accustomed to demanding that the others and the circumstances should change, that we do not immediately realise that it is we who need to change. Perhaps others need to change, but we too need to change. People who have not learned to accept themselves as those with many faults, lacks and sinful tendencies and yet accepted by God as His beloved children will try to fix the blame on others. But if we have accepted the fact that there will always be need for change for the better, we will find it easier to make changes. This was about changes we need to make in our attitudes, behaviour, etc. But many times we are faced with having to make changes of

other kinds too.

We would need to make changes in order to accommodate others who are different from us. This is one big area, and many of our problems are here. We can clamour, "It is obvious it is *they* who need to change." Agreed. But what if they are not mature enough to recognise the need for change, or are not willing to make the change? Don't we need to, many times, ignore the thing that offends us, go out of our way to be nice to them, adjust our own ways to keep in step with them, etc. (Co.3:13;Ro.14:21)? This can be especially difficult when we know better and have to fall in line with someone whose is weaker. It is difficult for us to understand why someone should be so taken up with something we don't consider to be important, wondering at the same time why he doesn't have the same burden

as we have for something (because we don't have the same ministries)!

Another need is to change with the times. The recurring war between parents and teenage children about dress, hairstyle and music is typical. Most parents think their children are *wrong*, and the children think they are *only changing with the times*. Older people tend to think that what they are used to is the right standard and are unwilling to change.

When God wants us to relocate - in terms of place, job, ministry, emphasis or focus - or to change our approach or style, that can be very difficult for us. We sympathise with Peter's agitation when he was asked to eat 'unclean' things about which he had clear words from God Himself! But think of Abraham in Ur when God asked him to leave for a promised land without even telling him where it was! Moses had to

go from palace to wilderness to palace and again to wilderness! How difficult it can be for us to make changes in the way we do things - in our personal life or ministry - when we are convinced that it was God who taught us in the first place!

When we come across those who hold different views on (minor) doctrines, do we look at the possibility that there could be *some* truth there we could learn, or do we straightaway train our guns at them?

I think the older we grow, the more open we must make ourselves to change.

Pointers along the way #244

Quick to judge!

Paul said, "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the course, I have kept the faith; in the future there is laid up

for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day" (2Ti.4:7,8). I would say, "I stand just because of the mercy and patience of God. I could have perished except that Jesus lifted me up again and again." I think more Christians would identify themselves with me rather than with what Paul said. But isn't that because we have just taken a portion of what Paul has said about himself, out of its context, and we are ignoring so many other things he has said about himself? Paul said also that he was the chief of sinners (1Ti.1:15), the least of the saints (Ep.3:8) and that he didn't deserve to be an apostle because he had been a blasphemer and persecutor (1Co.15:9). But when we come across his words about how he fought the *good* fight, *finished* the course, etc., we conclude that he is boasting, and start picking up stones.

I have had the experience with my articles where I start with the position or ideas that some others hold and go on to argue against them, I get comments from people who criticise me for holding those 'other' views and others who go to lengths to explain to me how I am wrong about those views! It is obvious that they have jumped their guns and have not read my full article. I am not writing this now to get back at them (!) but to illustrate the tendency we have to jump to conclusions.

The more we know a person, the less we make this mistake, showing that we tend to make this mistake more with people we don't know! We also make the mistake with our close friends when they come up with some new-fangled ideas (as we consider them). When we hear a new preacher or read a new author we can jump to

conclusions before he has had the opportunity to develop his ideas.

When it comes to doctrines we have a whole set of issues about which we fight tooth and nail with others. Do we realise that some of the ideas that we hold could be wrong? Our doctrinal background in which we grew up and the terrains we have traversed during our spiritual journey have a lot to do with our doctrinal positions! Some of our strong opinions are there because we have not even examined the opposing views. Even our temperamental slant plays some role in deciding which camp we follow! (An extrovert finds it easier to raise hands and dance in worship!)

Of course there are fundamental truths we will not debate on. But aren't there issues on which we can agree to hold different views and still continue in fellowship? What is required is not

compromise but maturity. Someone has said that it is the immature person who finds it difficult to bear with the imperfections in others. Think of God how He not only bears with all of us with so many different sets of imperfections but actually loves us! He values us. Now we can understand why He is slow to judge (Ex.34:6).

Pointers along the way #245

When we disagree

Many of us go blundering along, sure of ourselves, with opinions on everything and everyone, waiting impatiently for the others to stop talking or even interrupting them so that we can put in some words of wisdom, etc. And along comes someone who dares to disagree with us! If we think we are more powerful, we just bulldoze over him and continue. If we are shaken up a bit we change the subject and try to avoid embarrassment. And if we are exposed we sit there biting our nails and thinking about our image taking a beating. We don't know how to deal with disagreements.

If we think of it, it is not difficult to see that because we don't know everything we are likely to be found wrong here and there, and that some others know

more about certain things than we know. But perhaps this recognition has not sunk deep enough that it affects our behaviour. Or perhaps our ego is so strong or so fragile that we don't want to entertain any threat to our complacency. But we should know that disagreements are a help for our development and growth. God has designed life in such a way that we all can help one another. Paul talks about getting to know more about the love of God along with other Christians (Ep.3:18), and growing into maturity by giving and receiving what each one can provide (Ep.4:16).

Our particular personality make-up, the experiences we have gone through, our spiritual ministry, the gifts and talents we have, and many other factors contribute towards our particular view point and understanding concerning any subject. As a result there are so many

differences of opinion about doctrines and practices even among godly people. When we come across any such disagreement isn't it good for us to pause and consider what our brother with an opposing view is actually saying and *why* he has that view? Many times it is not easy to *appreciate* another person's point of view unless we make some efforts towards that. But that exercise can provide us with a broader perspective, tone down the animosity that accompanies our view, change our approach to people and situations, and make us happier. Iron can then sharpen iron (Pr.27:17).

It can be that two of us holding seemingly opposing views can serve to balance each other and protect us from going to extremes. It is not easy to see this when someone opposes us. Instead we tend to consider him as an enemy or at least as a nuisance. It is natural

that if we have true convictions about what we believe we also have strong emotions connected with them. And emotions can rise when we face opposition. But if we can recognise, perhaps even after the emotions have calmed down, that there is some truth in what our brother is saying which we could take heed to, it will keep us from going astray. Who knows, perhaps it was a prophet sent from God to warn us against turning to the right or left? Perhaps we have considered only 6 out of 10 factors, and he is coming with one or two more.

Real transformation

The religious fashion of the day is to go for special experiences, and there are hundreds of preachers out there who have made themselves experts at manipulating the crowd and creating and promoting special feelings and action. Some years ago speaking in tongues was the major experience to be sought after. But now we have variety, ranging from the sober to the weird and wild! We can pick and choose the one we like best. Doctrinal checks seem to be no longer very relevant nowadays because people go for these experiences nevertheless.

God wants to transform our lives to conform to the image of Christ (Ro.8:29). What kind of image are we getting conformed to by shaking wildly, falling down, laughing uncontrollably, rolling on the ground, jumping up and

down, etc.? I can grant that we might lose some inhibitions (perhaps good to an extent) and prudence (certainly not good) through this process, but I cannot relate that to the character of Jesus into which I long to be changed (2Co.3:18).

Real transformation requires changes in our mind and will. This implies changes in our understanding and judgment too. Mere change of behaviour is also not enough to change the person inside us. Inner transformation takes place when we understand what is right and good, and choose to give up the wrong and adopt the right. Change of behaviour will follow till it becomes natural for us to do what is right. Now we can see why real transformation has to start with our understanding. That is why God, when He taught us the way to be transformed into the image of Christ, talked about the transformation of our

mind (Ro.12:2) according to the light of His word (2Co.3:18).

Is this what these preachers are aiming to achieve? Unfortunately, no. Many of them are scheming and trying to build up an emotional high at the meeting and achieve a breakthrough in whatever form of behaviour they are promoting. They do it through emotionally moving songs and rhythms, getting the audience to participate by repeating words and doing little things like turning and speaking to the neighbour, etc., and getting people to loosen up (and let down their guard)!

Do we see the Old Testament prophets, Jesus and the apostles doing anything like this in the Bible? No. They spoke to the mind and heart, seeking to convince them about the truth, and encouraging and exhorting them to take appropriate action. Then there was transformation. What Paul prayed for

the church was for the eyes of their heart to be *enlightened* so that they would *know*, and not for some moving experience (Ep.1:18).

Even when the aim is not emotionalism, much of present day preaching is aimed at mere tickling of ears - to impress the hearers rather than to bless them and to draw them closer to God (2Ti.4:3,4). Why do we listen to such, or be such?

Pointers along the way #247

A desire to serve

As you know, people have all kinds of aims when they seek to have a 'ministry.' Many times there is a strong desire to 'make it big' in Christian circles, and to be admired and sought after by large numbers. We know it is a snare because that is the very opposite of wanting to serve (minister). As someone said, we need to be clear in our heart and mind what we want to do--to impress or to bless. There is no anointing in following techniques or imitating others, and God who searches our hearts can support us only if we are men and women after His own heart (2Ch.16:9).

God found Paul to be trustworthy who used to be a blasphemer and persecutor, and entrusted him with a ministry (1Ti.1:12,13). Wasn't it because he was true to what he

believed even in those days? There was no guile or hypocrisy there. This is what God primarily wants from us rather than abilities or resources when He seeks to entrust us with His ministry. This also teaches us that even a dreadful past need not hinder our ministry, but a double-minded heart will (Jas.1:7,8).

God tests us before He can entrust us with responsibilities over others. These tests will show us what actually dwells in our hearts (De.8:2). When we see dirt there, or mixtures of good and bad, it is not for us to despair but to seek more earnestly to prepare our hearts before God. That is how we become equipped to serve in His vineyard.

One of the qualifications we need if we are to minister to others is a *good* heart (Ro.15:14). Righteousness and holiness have a tendency to turn off

people in the absence of goodness (Ro.5:7). Love for God is not sufficient when it comes to serving people because we need that to be balanced with love for people (Mt.22:37-40).

However much we know or however capable we are, we cannot really serve people without the anointing from God. If we desire to minister to the others, we ought to keep 'pestering' God for His gifts and grace just like the man in the parable requesting his neighbour for bread to give to his visitor (Lk.11:5,6).

There is also a continuing education or on-the-job training, where we need to clean out the muck that comes up from the flesh and also to wash our feet. Dealing with others is one sure way of seeing our own need. Working out our own salvation has to go on in parallel as we work with others because

otherwise we might end up getting disqualified in the end (1Ti.4:16;1Co.9:27). Also, if the food we serve to the others is to be edifying, it must be what we have received fresh from the Lord.

There is much work to be done in God's vineyard and each of us has a different task. We do not need to envy the brother who has a bigger ministry nor despair because our ministry is small (but significant!). But we need to keep cleansing ourselves if God has to entrust us with more responsible tasks (2Ti.2:20,21). And whatever our hands find to do, let us do it heartily and as unto the Lord (1Co.10:31;Co.3:17).

Pointers along the way #248

Forgiving and forgetting

One of the most difficult things for us is to be able to forgive others *from the*

heart. Yet it is very crucial for us to learn to do that because we cannot even ask for forgiveness from God if we are not willing to forgive others (Mt.6:14,16;18:34,35). As we see from the parable of the servant who was forgiven much by the king and who was unwilling to forgive his fellow-servant for a small debt, we do not understand what it is to receive 'grace' if we cannot be gracious towards the others. The first thing we need to do is to *decide* to forgive. We do not have to worry if we are struggling to get over the feelings of hurt even though we want to forgive. God who looks at the heart sees that we have decided to forgive. He accepts that (2Co.8:12). Feelings will cool down, once we have decided to forgive. Thoughts of hurt may come up again and again in our minds. But once we have chosen to forgive and hold on to that position, the strength of

temptation will become less and less each time. Forgiveness is not based on feelings but it is simply a choice to withdraw all demands for vengeance from our side on the other person. In other words, we are letting him go free.

But forgetting is another matter. When some people tell us to forgive and forget, we must know what is practically possible and what is not. We *can* forget in the sense of giving up all our just demands for vengeance on the other person, and we can leave that matter to God (Ro.12:19). But we cannot forget in the sense of coming to a place where there is no memory of the things that have happened. In fact the more we try to do that, the more we remember them! When God says that in the new covenant He will not remember our sins any more (He.8:12) what He means is that He will not

bring them up against us anymore; He will not remember them in an active sense. Of course being God He knows and remembers all things forever!

Another naive way in which we try to forget is to look at the other person just as if nothing bad has happened between us in the past. This is unrealistic if the offence is serious. If he has hurt us badly in the past, we can forgive him without waiting for him to repent and have an open heart towards him, but we cannot simply assume that he will not do that again to us. We need to be convinced that he has changed, and it may take time for normal relationships to be established. It may take only one mistake or sin in a moment to make one fall in another person's eyes, but it takes a long time to regain one's reputation. This is one of the unpleasant consequences of sin (Ga.6:7,8).

If it is we who have hurt someone else, it is unrealistic for us to expect that just because we have apologised he should treat us as if nothing has happened! We must realise that our present behaviour should demonstrate our repentance and change of heart, and that it may take time for the other person to get confidence in us again. We must walk by faith, but in a real world.

Serving God with submission

These days when many so-called servants of God are flaunting themselves and fleecing the poor sheep, there is an emphasis coming up on *servant* leaders. Jesus came to serve us - those whom He created and who ought to serve Him, those who were His enemies and those who were only interested in our own welfare - and not to be served (Mt.20:28). If we wish to serve Him and His people, we cannot do it effectively without a spirit of humility and submission (Ep.4:2;Php.2:3;Ep.5:21). We must remember that in this relationship we are the servants who have to serve the better interests of those whom we serve - God and people.

Many times 'submission' is misunderstood to be the same as obedience. But it is an attitude of heart

that recognises our small (minuscule) part in the large body called the Body of Christ, remembers that we are but recipients of mercy and grace from God without which we are nothing, constantly reminds us that we know so little and there is much we can learn from other members of the Body, and helps us judge ourselves and keep learning. 'Obedience' comes when we see there is need to change or take action according to what we have learned. But submission comes even when we do not agree with the others and decide not to do what they say, when there is a willingness to examine other points of view and change if necessary.

Some of us are proud, and think that what we know is *the* truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth! This, of course, is far from the truth because we do not know everything and what we

know is also partial and probably partially in error too. With this kind of attitude we are always found teaching others but not listening to them or trying to see their points of view (1Ti.1:7). We are also unwilling to change, or acknowledge errors that we have made in the past. One of the most gracious things that we can do as servants of God is to admit where we have been wrong in the past, remembering that when we as leaders have been wrong, we have possibly affected more people than just ourselves with our wrong.

Some of us are insecure, not able to face possible loss of face and ridicule from people when they come to know that we have made some mistakes. As a result we hold on tenaciously to our positions even when our conscience tells us that what the other person is saying may have some truth. The

earlier we recognise and acknowledge that we are fallible human beings with lots of limitations - to err is human - the more we can accept ourselves and make faster progress.

Another thing is to recognise that others who have ministries that are different from ours have better insight in their areas than we can have from outside. We need to value them. (Also we realise that our own insights into our ministries can be difficult for others to understand who have different ministries.) What we need here again is a spirit of submission. O that all of us can grow in this.

Straying off from the centre

Many new teachings are coming up from around the world that appear to be curious and interesting, and many Christians are lapping them up without pausing to examine their validity (2Ti.4:3). Some teachers seem to be vying with one another to come up with sensational revelations that appear to be *the* truth for the times. If these were things that would build us up and draw us towards the goal of loving God and His people more, praise the Lord (1Ti.1:5)! But sad to say, a lot of them are only serving to distract people's attention by focussing on irrelevant issues and misleading interpretations.

My guess is that the New Age philosophy with its emphasis on mysticism, rituals, forces, material-divine relationships, etc., has infiltrated Christian minds so much that

distinctions have become very much blurred. Without understanding that the essential purpose of God in our lives is to purify us from sinful ways and to transform us into His character, people are getting taken up with issues that ultimately cause us to stray away from this (Ro.8:28,29). Of course Satan tempts us towards sin, but he also tries to take us away from the path that leads closer to God.

A lot of teachings border on superstition and magical effects. The upsurge in teachings about holy oil, blessed handkerchiefs, Jewish prayer shawls with their blue tassels, the seven spouted lamps, the blowing of the shofar (a Jewish horn), gadgets with seven drops of blood to be placed above doors, etc., *which were used as symbols in the Old Covenant*, shows us how special powers are being attributed to *things* instead of a

relationship with God.

On the other side, people are being taught to *fear* certain things, such as wind-chimes, pyramid shapes, Egyptian paintings, etc.! Do these have any powers that can harm us? It is one thing if we use or have used them in connection with religious systems (1Co.8:7). But they themselves are inanimate things that have no power. Why are we living in fear when we have Jesus Himself in us who has conquered all the powers of darkness (Col.2:15;1Jn.4:4).

Some are getting into numerology! They delve into the numerical values of Hebrew and Greek letters and come up with discoveries of hidden meanings in words! Some use computers to try out different combinations on the King James Version (!) and discover hidden messages in the Bible! Some people

teach as if the number 12 has some magic powers (remember the 12 tribes and the 12 disciples?) and propose that all governing bodies should have 12 members, and suddenly people accept this all over the world!

The common factor in all these things is that we are forgetting the focus on our relationship with God and people, the condition of our heart (spirit) which God looks at, the authority that comes from being men and women after God's own heart, etc., and getting occupied with external things. This is the essence of idolatry, isn't it?

Pointers along the way #251

When things go wrong

Things go wrong all around us all the time, and that is just the way this world is. But when things *keep* going wrong or go seriously wrong for Christians, usually one of two things happens. People come to us and practically accuse us of some hidden sin in our life, lack of faith, etc. Or we look to natural solutions ignoring any spiritual context. We get so used to such accusations that we immunise ourselves against them by ignoring them. This is good and necessary most of the time. But there may be times when we need to go before God and see if He is trying to get our attention.

It would be wrong and foolish to get into discouragement or condemnation and assume that God must be getting at us because of something we have done. That is what Satan would like us to do.

We must stand firm on the foundation that God, our Father, has accepted us once for all. He has not only forgiven us all our sins, but He has also promised not to bring them up against us (He.8:12), condemn us (Ro.8:1) or accuse us (Ro.8:33,34). But since He loves us so much that He wants us to become like Him, He will discipline us now and then if we need it (He.12:10). That is something we need to take note of, and not confuse it with accusations from Satan or people.

God disciplines us only rarely, when normal warnings through His word and the Spirit do not reach us. He tries first of all to get our attention by letting something go wrong, and if we continue to be foolish and neglect His correction, He may let things continue to go wrong. This may take various forms, such as unusual sickness, people or things that keep troubling us,

etc. Without letting it take us to confusion or discouragement we can ask God if He is trying to say something to us. If He tells us something, we can take action. If He does not, we must give up this line of thought and go on to facing things in a natural way.

Jesus spoke about what happens if we will not forgive others in our heart even though He has forgiven us much. Using the parable of a servant who did not forgive his fellow servant, Jesus said that just as his master the king sent torturers to him till he repaid his debt, the Heavenly Father would do the same with us if we would not forgive others (Mt.18:34,35). What are torturers in our context but things that keep on troubling us without let up? We must also remember that even though this parable addressed the matter of not forgiving others it could

be indicative of what God will do for other serious sins too.

The important thing is to be honest enough to face up to the possibility that God may be trying to say something to us, and also to be bold enough to rest in His love even when He chastens us. God warns us not to take His discipline lightly nor to allow it to condemn us (He.12:5,6). We must also be able to leave this possibility aside once we have placed the matter before God and He has not indicated anything in this direction.

Another rare possibility to consider is whether we are facing an attack from Satan.

Our foundation must be God's love for us.

Pointers along the way #252

Who is righteous?

One amazing truth about God's grace is how He accepts us just as we are, instantly, as we go to Him repenting, confessing our sins and trusting in Jesus' sacrifice on our behalf, and clothes us with His righteousness (Ro.4:5;5:17). But that is just the beginning of the story, and not the end. We do not continue in our sinful ways and keep claiming His righteousness (Ro.6:1,2). God begins a work of sanctification in us by which He changes us from the inside little by little to make us like Jesus (Ro.8:29;2Ti.2:21). If this is not taking place in our lives, if our life is going on just the same as before, we must recognise that something was missing in our 'salvation experience.'

After observing Christians for more than 60 years, the apostle John warned us not to be deceived about this. He

pointed out that it was those who were practising righteousness who were really righteous (1Jn.3:7). This is, of course, not contradicting the truth about righteousness being credited to us when we believe. This is about what happens afterwards. If our life shows no change towards righteousness, the chances are that we missed something in the beginning. This is sadly true about many people nowadays.

What happens in such cases is that there are changes in one's religious behaviour. Going to church, reading the Bible and talking religious language may happen, and those who see them may think that they have become Christians. But they may still be in the category of those who say, "Lord, Lord," and practise sin (Mt.7:21). John points out that those who practise sin (still) belong to the devil (1Jn.3:8). It may sound like a harsh message but it

is still true.

Practising sin is, of course, not the same as falling into sin. Everyone may fall into sin because of various reasons. The process of sanctification gives victory on an increasing scale. When someone is struggling against habitual sin, that also is an indication of new life coming out from within. But those who continue in sin show that there is no inward fight against sin, and no inner change has taken place.

The most common reason is that salvation was superficial. Probably there was no recognition and admission of sin, no repentance (a turning away from sin to righteousness in the heart), and no sincere and grateful faith that received Jesus' sacrifice in one's place. The Amplified Bible points out that true belief in Jesus involves *adhering to, cleaving to, trusting, having faith in, and*

relying on Him. Obviously merely repeating a prayer, raising one's hand or signing a card will not do.

We can rejoice (with joy unspeakable and full of glory) over having been accepted as righteous by God just because we placed our trust in Jesus. There is no condemnation or fear of uncertainty regarding our acceptance. But the point of this article is to encourage us to make sure about our own salvation and also to help us to convey the right way of salvation to others we seek to introduce to Christ.

Pointers along the way #253

Attitudes in hiding

We have this experience many times that when we confront someone who has spoken badly to us he quotes his words and vehemently insists that we are accusing him falsely. Even though

it is very apparent to us that what he said was wrong, it is also apparent that he believes he is innocent! This is true in the other direction also, and if we look at what others are confronting us about what we said to them, we are sure we are innocent because the words we spoke were all correct!

The problem in both cases is the attitude that is behind the words. Generally speaking we are unaware of the attitudes behind our words and actions. When wrong attitudes come up from our heart to the mind we tend to repress (put out of our consciousness) or suppress them. We then evaluate ourselves on the basis of our words and behaviour and think that we have done well. But the fact of the matter is that it is easy for the others to sense our wrong attitudes and judge us as being wrong even when our words and actions are all fine! This is the same

way we evaluate others too.

Suppose a friend of mine writes an article which many people praise very highly. A feeling of envy comes into my mind. But since I am a mature Christian who is not supposed to have things such as envy in me (!), I don't admit to myself that I have such feelings, and I put it out of my mind. Then another friend comes and asks me what I think about this article. I reply that it is very good. But the slight hesitation I had before I spoke and my lack of enthusiasm convey the fact of my wrong attitude to my friend. This is applicable to all sorts of wrong attitudes.

When we recognise a wrong attitude in us we need to humbly acknowledge it to ourselves and to God and ask God for forgiveness (Je.3:13;1Jn.1:9). We mustn't think that it is only a feeling and we haven't actually done anything

wrong. No. Our attitudes are a clear indication of who and what we are inside. When God looks at the heart He sees these. We may fool a lot of people with good words and behaviour on the outside. But God may think that we are rotting inside (Mt.23:27,28). We need to become pure in our spirit too and not just on the outside (2Co.7:1).

But it is not enough to get forgiveness for our bad attitudes. We need to get *good* attitudes! The way to get them is through the word of God. By filling our thoughts with the words of God and meditating on them day and night will give us godly attitudes which will then begin to control our words and action. Ps.119 gives us many exhortations and much encouragement (e.g., v.9,11) to spend time with God's word. The more we do that the more our mind gets transformed to think like He does. The more we think like Him the more we

find it easy to have fellowship with Him. Like Abraham we too can become friends of God.

Let us not satisfy ourselves with a reputation before people for good words and behaviour but be able to present to God hearts that are blameless.

Pointers along the way #254

Wiser than God!

We will not dare to say that we are wiser than God, but many times we behave as if we know better than God! When God tells us something in His word, we ignore it and go ahead with our own ideas, thinking that we know better in our special context. We show more 'love,' 'kindness,' 'wisdom,' etc., than God and think that we are justified in our behaviour, not realising that we are actually ending up doing more

harm than good in the process.

Jesus said that the way to life was narrow and few would find it (Mt.7:14). We must remember this comes from the heart of God who does not want *any* to perish but want *all* to come to the knowledge of the truth (1Ti.2:4;2Pe.3:9). With a heart as large as His, He still recognises that only a few are finally going to be saved. But we don't like the word 'few.' So what we do is to somehow make the gate and the way broader so that more people can get in!

When John the Baptist came preaching he asked the people to repent (Mt.3:1,2). Jesus preached the same thing (Mt.4:17), and so did the apostles (Ac.2:38). But what do we preach? Nothing about repentance but only about 'accepting' Jesus and how He will solve all our problems! We mention about how Jesus would heal

our sicknesses, solve our financial crises, and would generally be at our beck and call to run errands for us. But nothing about turning away from our sins or starting to live lives that are pleasing to God. We may think that once God begins a work in these people He will do a perfect job, and also that they will get to hear about repentance and such things in the course of time as they come to church. But what actually happens is that people continue with their old lifestyle and on top of that they believe that now they are immune from punishment and guilt because they have come to Christ!

If we preach repentance in these modern days we might become somewhat unpopular compared to some of the famous preachers out there, and certainly our 'results' would be less impressive. So we compromise the message, and make problems for

both our hearers and for ourselves. Our hearers get a very shaky start in their Christian life, and we get a 'mixed multitude' in our churches who create all kinds of problems later on.

Of course we would, just like God, want all men to be saved. If we would truly save them, we should give them the true gospel of salvation which includes repentance from sin and their old way of life, true faith and trust in Jesus for their salvation and a genuine commitment to following Jesus for the rest of their lives. By taking time and effort to make these issues clear to them we will save them from a lot of confusion and trouble later on. We also need to help them to be protected from the many wolves out there who are just waiting to pounce on the new sheep with their 'gospel' of seed money and harvest. Let us not shirk our responsibilities in this direction and

palm it off to God to fill the gaps in our message.

Eroding values

When strong waves beat against the seashore there is a chance that the shoreline gets eroded. Drops of water falling incessantly on rock will make a dent on the rock! Something similar happens in our Christian values, and we can already see how far down they have come. Christians are more tolerant about issues such as divorce, abortion and homosexuality, not only tolerate corrupt practices in money matters but resort to them themselves, watch movies and read novels that would have been totally unacceptable earlier, listen to comedians who go vulgar or blasphemous and either laugh with them or continue, etc. How did this happen? Not all of a sudden, but over a period of time because of the continuing pressure from the people around and the media.

There is a triangle that becomes bigger with time. At one corner is the Christian's lack of knowledge of God and His values, and in the next corner is the pressure from the world and in the last corner are the eroding values. The sad thing is that when the pressure of the world becomes strong, instead of seeking to know God better people tend to seek to understand the world better! People recognise the cost of going against political correctness and public opinion, and try to adapt themselves to the standards promoted by the world. The fear of being labelled narrow-minded, fundamentalist or fanatical keeps many Christians silent or even causes them to avoid thinking on their own.

God needs His witnesses, His salt and light (Mt.5:13-16), the salt to give the right flavour and to preserve true values and the light to dispel the

increasing darkness. We cannot be His witnesses without knowing Him and His heart. Much more than we are exposed to the media of this world, our hearts and mind need to be filled with the knowledge that comes through His word and His Spirit. That alone can preserve us, and also make us useful to Him in this world.

The world system is under the rule of its prince, Satan (Ep.2:2;Jn.12:31). Satan is behind the media, the governments, the institutions, the think tanks, scientific research, etc., guiding the minds of those who do not know God to think in the direction away from God and towards corruption, debauchery, immorality, violence, etc. We remember how the scientific world was driven to support the theory of evolution even ignoring the use of common sense, and now similar things are happening regarding

homosexuality. In one sense we cannot stop that. But what we can stop, and what we *need* to stop, is our own flow in that direction, being pushed and pulled by the things around us.

We cannot be renewed in our minds (Ro.12:2) without taking time to think over these things, and without first taking time to get to know God and His heart through His word. In times such as these, there is all the more need for us to seek God's heart. We also need to remain bold in the knowledge of God and His values even while showing compassion on the ignorant and perishing.

The God we ignore

God's character has many sides to it, and we know that two things that seem almost to be on opposite sides are His love manifested through grace and His holiness that cannot tolerate any sin. As Christians it is possible that we favour one of these two more than the other, and suffer consequent losses in our personal life. It is also possible that we swing from one to the other periodically as the Holy Spirit convicts us that we are deviating to the right or to the left (Is.30:21). One mark of growing in maturity is that we become able to hold both together in balance at the same time.

Many Christians suffer because they continue to behold God as a Judge who promptly and meticulously points out their smallest failure and frowns at them every time. They struggle to keep

themselves in the good books of this God, even while recognising that it seems impossible to be able to do so. They are actually right in that, because no one can qualify himself before God by trying to be holy enough (Ro.3:20). Joy, peace, boldness etc., which other Christians speak about are foreign to these people. What we need to see here is the side of God that has the love and grace with which He accepts us just as we are. When He accepts us as His beloved children it is not because we have become acceptable to Him, but because we acknowledge our unworthiness and cling to His offer of grace through Jesus Christ. If we still feel 'unacceptable' or 'unworthy' after being accepted by God, we need to only look at the basis on which we are accepted -- Jesus Christ -- and reassure ourselves that God has indeed accepted us without reservation (Ep.2:4,5). If we fail, His *everlasting*

love (Je.31:3) does not cease. If He accepted us when we were dead in our sins, He is not going to reject us once we have become His children (Ro.5:8,9). He who is the beginning and the end knew what all we would do in future when He picked us up, and is not shocked by our failures.

Many other Christians forget the holiness of God, taking His grace for granted. They don't think of how much God hates sin, and make no attempt to live a life that is pleasing to Him at all times. What we need to remember is that it is our sin that killed Jesus. What was crying out to Pilate, "Crucify Him"? Your sins and mine. Do we want to repeat that? We agree in principle, "God forbid!" (Ro.6:1,15). But if we are not making any effort to stop sinning it just shows that we are not actually concerned about it.

Yes, God has made provisions for our

weakness in the flesh by giving Jesus as a continuing atonement for us (1Jn.2:1,2). But He does not want us to forget that He wants us to be holy because He is holy (1Pe.1:15,16). A life under true grace must also pursue after holiness. Otherwise we show that we have a false understanding of grace (He.12:14).

Paul knew grace and also how to keep a blameless conscience (1Ti.1:13;Ac.24:16). Let us not look at one at the cost of the other.

Pointers along the way #257

To have faith like a child

It is not just that we cannot please God without faith (He.11:6), but we ourselves cannot survive testing times without it. Trials come to all of us, and sometimes they come with such pressure that we are tempted to give up. We don't know what is happening or why, and how things are going to turn out. It looks like God isn't there, and He certainly doesn't seem to be getting us out. Many Christians come to us with clichés and simplistic answers, and some others like prophets saying there must be some secret sin in our lives or we lack faith. We may feel so lonely even in the midst of our friends because no one seems to understand. Promises of God seem to mock us, and the Devil also whispers fears, doubts and self-pity into our mind. Nothing works for us at such times except a

simple, childlike faith in God Himself.

I believe the faith that Job had was such. According to the theology that people including Job held those days, bad things only happened to bad people, and it was inconceivable that somebody would be suffering who had done no sin. Job himself was very much confused with what was happening to him because, try as he might, he could not find anything wrong he had done. He couldn't convince his friends about that, and they kept insisting that he was hiding something. In such a situation what comes through is Job's deep knowledge of God's nature and his unrelenting faith in Him. Look at the spontaneous expressions of his faith. "Though He slay me, I will hope in Him" (Job.13:15). "As for me, I know that my Redeemer lives, And at the last He will take His stand on the earth" (19:25). "Even after my skin is

destroyed, Yet from my flesh I shall see God; Whom I myself shall behold, And whom my eyes will see and not another" (19:26,27). "But He knows the way I take; When He has tried me, I shall come forth as gold" (23:10). Imagine! Job was going through a level of testing you and I have not come anywhere near, and even though he was confused and frustrated with God's ways as he saw them, he knew that God was good, righteous and just, and placed his hope on Him.

When the pressure goes up, our faith may falter at times. Doubts, fears, anxiety, discouragement and gloom may cloud our mind at times. Even if we lose temporarily like this, if we have a deep rooted faith at the bottom of our heart it will surge up again and give us hope so that we don't give up. This was what happened to Job. Our momentary failures should not be

allowed to put us down. We mustn't come to the conclusion that we have no faith at all. We must recognise the fact that even though we don't have answers to a lot of questions, we still believe in the love of God for us, His wisdom in all that He does and His sovereign control over all things.

One thing that can help us at such times is to recollect what God has done for us in the past and draw strength from them. We know that they are real, and they help us to remember that God is real.

Pointers along the way #258

Living in acceptance

It is emphasised often that we are saved by grace through faith and not by our good works (Ep.2:8,9). We are encouraged to come to Jesus *just as we are* because He loves us and we don't have wait and clean up first before we go to Him. It is a miracle of grace that God accepts us at that point because we are all messed up within us, and there are so many things in us that are abhorrent to God (Ro.5:8;4:5). This is such a powerful truth of God's acceptance that our whole mind gets liberated once we 'see' this. Many Christians live a joyless life because they have not understood this.

What should also be emphasised is the truth that it is on the same basis that we have access to God even after we have come to God! We can access God boldly now, fully confident of

acceptance and without fear of rejection, on the basis of 'just as we are!' This is because the basis of our acceptance is still, even after we have become God's children, the blood of Jesus Christ and not some acceptable level of behaviour (He.10:19-22). When the devil accuses us after we have fallen into some sin or made a blunder, he tries to hide this fact from us and highlight how bad we are. This is one place where we need to learn to fight the 'fight of faith,' hold on to God's truth and put aside our feelings and reasonings.

Think of what happens when we try to pray. Do we go straightaway into God's presence and start talking to Him? Or do we hesitate wondering if our life is at an acceptable level before God? Certainly if the Holy Spirit reminds us of something that needs to be set right that is the first thing that

needs to be attended to (Mt.5:23,24). But the issue I am addressing here is whether there is a struggle inside wondering if we are acceptable to God or not. If it is there it shows that we have not yet become rooted and grounded in the knowledge of God's acceptance *through grace!* At that point we are still switching to finding our acceptance on the basis of our own righteousness. And *that* is impossible.

What about thinking that maybe if we ask some godly person to pray it would have better results than if we prayed? We seem to have lost confidence in our acceptance! We think it is our level of godliness and not the blood of the Lamb that decides our acceptance!

How the devil can keep us down and make us ineffective in God's kingdom through these tactics! In spite of the fact that we have been redeemed by the blood of the Lamb and everything

wrong with us has been wiped clean in God's eyes to the extent that it is as if they never existed we are practically living as if it never happened! Paul would have said, "You foolish Christians!"

Yes, surely we should not forget about our accountability towards God, take grace for granted and live as we please. But we must not play that into the hands of the devil and allow him to keep us bound. Let us live and enjoy the life Jesus has purchased for us.

Pointers along the way #259

God's marvellous ways

Many times I sit down and marvel at the brilliant plan that God has made for our salvation, thinking about how He was able to demonstrate His immense love for us while meeting the demands of His holiness and righteousness, and how He chose the way of grace instead of waiting for us to measure up to His standards. I also think about the detailed planning that went into it even before the foundations of the earth (Ep.1:4) and how God executed His plans at different times of man's history. When we trace the types and pictures He has left all through the Old Testament history and all the prophecies He spoke through the prophets of old, we can understand that He was but unravelling His great plans little by little. He could not have made a better plan. He has taken care of

every aspect I can think of (and all the rest too). It is obvious that no one but God could have thought this up.

One point that has caught my attention is that when we confess our sins it is not just His faithfulness that compels Him to forgive us our sins, but also His righteousness (1Jn.1:9)! It may be somewhat easy to imagine how His faithfulness helps Him to forgive us. But His righteousness? Especially when forgiving us who do not deserve it does not look like being righteous! But think of it another way. Here we are who have no way to measure up to His standards. It would be unrealistic for God to demand from us what we cannot do, and hence unrighteous too! So He is righteous in forgiving us when we confess our sins.

Ps.31:1 says, "In Your righteousness deliver me." What would be righteous about delivering us? We would think

that the righteous God would have every right to punish us and He would be inclined to do that. But think of Him dealing with helpless ones like us. When we are helpless to deliver ourselves and when He has the ability to deliver us, would it not be unrighteous of Him if He did not deliver us?

Have we seen ourselves as being weak and helpless, unable to keep God's commandments and come up to His standards? Then we can also see that our God is on our side, willing to forgive us and deliver us from things that are too strong for us (Ps.18:17). The world believes in thinking great thoughts about themselves. The popular technique is to proclaim to ourselves that we are strong and capable (where we are actually weak), hoping that such thoughts would lead us to better self esteem and success! But a godly

man clings to a recognition of helplessness causing him to cling to God more earnestly and sincerely. Then he experiences that when he is weak, then he is strong in Him (2Co.12:9). We are not timid or without confidence, because we have great confidence in His strength, even though we place no confidence in ourselves (Php.3:3). What an amazing wisdom of God to have planned it this way!

The man who is 'rich' in himself finds it difficult to enter the kingdom (Mt.19:24). But when we acknowledge our need, we find His sufficiency.

Pointers along the way #260

"Jesus, come into my heart!"

The story of the repentant criminal on the cross is truly amazing (Lk23:32-43). Mathew and Mark called the two of them robbers. But they might have been guilty of much more than robbery. One of them was hurling abuses at Jesus and the other one rebuked him saying that while they deserved their punishment Jesus was innocent. This second one turned to Jesus and asked Him to remember him when He came into His kingdom. Jesus replied immediately that he would be in paradise with Him that same day. What a sudden transfer from sin and hell to eternal life and heaven!

This story illustrates how simple salvation is, and how even the worst of sinners can come into eternal life in a moment when they repent and believe. But many times people stretch the point

beyond its validity, applying it without understanding the root principles. In an attempt to simplify things for sinners they tell them, for example, to just say, "Jesus, come into my heart."

God who always looks at the heart (2Sa.16:7) saw something in the second criminal that made Him to give salvation to him on the spot. This criminal acknowledged that he deserved his punishment. Remember that God exhorted the backsliding people of Israel to at least acknowledge their sins (Je.3:13). This was the minimum response that He wanted from them, and this was what He found in this criminal. This criminal also expressed his knowledge of Jesus and his trust in Him. He probably did not know much more theology or the doctrines of salvation. But he repented from his heart at the point of death and placed his trust in

Jesus, and that brought him his salvation.

Nowadays many people who repeat, "Jesus, come into my heart" may know many things about Jesus. But if they neither acknowledge their sin nor commit their lives into Jesus' hands, how do they get saved? Many times it is not their fault, because that is the only thing that the evangelist asked them to do! Wherever the fault may lie, when God looks into their heart and does not find repentance and faith there, how can He go ahead and offer them salvation? As a result, what happens is that the sinners continue to be sinners, living just the same lives they used to live, but now imagine themselves to be Christians! Perhaps the only difference in their life is a little touch of religion--church, Bible, prayer, etc.

Our God is so large-hearted that He

does not wait for people to study theology and get their doctrinal issues right before He would accept them, if He sees a repentant heart and faith in His Son. They can grow in knowledge and understanding later. But at the same time, He cannot accept people who may have their theology and religious forms right if they lack the right heart--repentance and faith. Will you please examine your own experience to see where you stand? Will you preachers or those who share the gospel please check whether you are showing the right way to people you deal with? Better be extra plain than subtle.

Pointers along the way #261

Looking for a quick fix

We see people all around who are looking for ways to fix their problems, whether they have to do with finances, marriage, kids, job or anything. But most of them are looking for some quick fix by which their problem situation will change for the better. This is natural, and this is usually the first approach we try. And there are many out there who seem to offer such fixes for a price. Preachers talking about the financial crisis have one quick remedy--give your seed money and see how God multiplies it! How many preachers have you heard telling the audience that they would need to tighten their belts, change their spending habits, downsize their pleasure targets, plan for saving schemes, etc.?

When couples come for marriage

counselling they expect the counsellor to give a recipe that will--presto!--send them back beaming with smiles. They don't expect to be asked to make changes in their attitudes and behaviour. When they hear about change, they want the counsellor to change their spouse!

Why do we take this approach? It is because 1) it is very painful to acknowledge that we are in the current mess because we have done things wrong, 2) it is difficult to make changes to the patterns that we have developed over the years. But like a scientist said, we can't repeat an experiment in exactly the same way as we have done before and expect different results! We have to change our attitudes and walk in paths we have not travelled before, if we want better lives in the future.

Jesus said that if we wanted to learn

from Him and become like Him--to become His disciple--we need to take up our cross, deny ourselves and follow Him (Lk.9:23;14:27). Our cross--contrary to common understanding--is not this person who troubles us or the unbearable situation, but an attitude in which we are willing to die to our own likes, preferences, choices, etc., in order to do the will of God which is far better. When we take up this cross and deny ourselves, we become Jesus' disciples and start learning from Him and doing His will. But if we are waiting for the other person or our situation to change, we will be waiting and waiting as things get worse and worse!

Who has been affected by sin? Not just all those gross and crude sinners out there, but all of us. We are all blind to our own faults even though quick to notice those of others. But at least

when we reap the unpleasant fruits of what we have sown in the past (Ga.6:7), shouldn't we wake up and admit that there must be things we have done wrong? Then we can see what we can do about them now.

There are many things we can change and should change. But then there are also things in the past that cannot be undone. What God expects us to do then is to at least acknowledge that we are only reaping what we have sown (Je.3:13). Isn't this what the repentant criminal on the cross did (Lk.23:40,41)? If we take that position, God will also give us grace that can change the situation.

Pointers along the way #262

God who answers prayer

Prayer is one of those things which are very difficult to figure out. Some

people hold the view that God always gives what they ask for (Jn.15:7), and if they don't get something it is because of their lack of faith. So they try to muster up enough faith to get what they want. The problem with this approach is that God has not promised to give us whatever we ask for, even if it appears to be like that from certain verses, because it is ultimately His will that needs to get done (1Jn.5:14). And it is not the quantity of faith that matters (Mt.17:20). The fact that we pray shows our faith, doesn't it? Some people ask for something in prayer, and when they don't get that they stop praying altogether. What do *we* ought to do?

Jesus wants us to pray *always* and *never give up* (Lk.18:1). This is not always easy, especially when we have been praying with burden for something and there does not appear to

be any encouragement for hope. But this is a test of our faith in God. The question is whether we would trust in God whether we get answers to our prayers or not. This appears to be illogical to those who hold that God always answers prayer. It can't be, according to them, that we have faith in God and He doesn't answer our prayers. But what does His word say?

Faith believes in God--His being, His character, His word--and also believes that He rewards those who seek Him (He.11:6). God certainly rewards those who seek Him. But is that always in the form of giving what we pray for? The answer is in what Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-nego said to Nebuchadnezzar (Da.3:17,18). *They would trust God even if He did not do for them what they thought they needed at that moment.*

Once we acknowledge that God is

infinitely bigger and wiser than we, we give up the notion that we should always understand what He is doing with us. When we trust Him, we are willing to leave His actions to His wisdom. Let Him do what He chooses in the way and at the time He chooses. That is faith and trust.

When we trust Him like this what do we pray for? We continue to pray for what we think we want or need, leaving the decisions to Him. We don't give up our trust if we don't immediately see the answer. We believe that He *hears* our cries always (Ps.34:4-6), and will answer it according to His wisdom and in our best interests (because He loves us immeasurably) at the right time. The fact that He has *heard* our prayer and it is recorded in His heart is enough for us to have confidence that He will work things out in the best way.

We mustn't also forget that sometimes what we pray for involves other people, and God won't force His way on them. He will answer our prayers by influencing them, but He will still leave the choice to them. We must believe God is at work even when we can't see any perceptible change.

Let's not give up the battle. We'll keep trusting and praying.

Pointers along the way #263

To bless or impress?

I don't know who said this first, but I remember these words related to why we do Christian service. Do we do it sincerely to serve people in Jesus' name, or to get a name for ourselves? This is not a question that we can settle once for all, but we need to go back to it once in a while. It does make a world of a difference, literally, because it shows which world we live for--the world down here or heaven above.

Every sincere person who seeks to serve knows that it also brings recognition from the people around. It can be thrilling to think about it and let the imagination fly, assuming that it doesn't do anyone any harm just to imagine. But it does. We become more enslaved to the opinion of man, and we also end up relishing the glory that

rightfully belongs to God (Is.48:11). The shift in our focus--from serving God and men to making ourselves great in the eyes of men--is subtle and slow, but it leads to disastrous results.

God and men's honour are two entirely different types of masters. We get into different sets of ethics, standards, strategies and styles depending on whom we seek to serve. If we start serving men, even intermittently, our service of God will be compromised (Ga.1:10). On the other hand, if we seek to serve God wholeheartedly we must be prepared to give up some popularity with men. We cannot serve two masters (Mt.6:24).

Those who seek to impress people tend to become dishonest before God and man. They would rather be in the good books of man than be accountable to God. They do not do or preach what is really needed for man but select

things that will impress man. They would not like to 'hurt' or 'offend' people because that will not help their popularity, but convince themselves that this comes from a gentle and loving nature. In the process they deprive people of what they need to hear and what will ultimately bring them blessings. They focus on the promises of the Bible--and maintain that whatever they say is from the word of God--and omit mentioning things such as repentance and obedience to God's commandments. In this way they collect a large group of admirers who are kept always 'hoping' for better things in the future. These admirers are happy because they always receive 'encouraging' words from them.

But don't we have to give an account of ourselves to God (Ro.14:12)? Can we fool God by saying that we were seeking to comfort people with His

word when He knows the motives and intentions of our heart (1Co.4:5)? Is this love when we deprive others of what they really need because we want to preserve our reputation for goodness? Are we doing the kingdom of God any good if we bring in many people without helping them to be weaned from the kingdom below? How can we be role models to the newcomers if we ourselves are double-minded? Or, are we so taken up with making ourselves great that such issues are never addressed or are always pushed aside? Of course we cannot afford to do that.

Pointers along the way #264

The problem with the others!
The biggest problem with the others is that they are so different from us! They talk and behave differently, and they can't even understand what we say and

do! We keep hoping that they will 'come to see the light' and change. But that doesn't seem to happen even after long. Some people try to explain things and correct the others. But apparently all these others are so dumb and don't even seem to understand! Hopefully, sooner than later, a light comes on in our own mind that perhaps it would be easier if *we* try to change.

There are just a few places in the Bible where we are asked to admonish or exhort one another, and that too only in love. But think of the large number of passages which tell us that we need to and ought to change. The more we change our ways and allow the Holy Spirit to transform our lives into the character of Jesus, the happier we will be ourselves, and we will also know how to deal with the others.

We are all so different from one another. Our gender makes a huge

difference in the way we think, behave and respond. On the top of that we have differences in our personality types which we are born with and our experiences during our growing stages. As a result each of us is a complex combination of characteristics that are not easy to figure out, let alone classify accurately. This makes inter-personal exchanges a great challenge. We grow up without realising these differences, and till light dawns on us we keep expecting that others are just like us. When we realise there are differences, we try to change them and bring them over to our ways. Usually it is only after a lot of failures in this that we come to understand wisdom, that we need to change our own approach to others if we want to live and work with them. Unfortunately many people don't realise this at all and make life miserable for themselves and for others by saying that others ought to

accept them as they are, while they themselves don't make any efforts to accept the others!

Self-awareness is something that God gives to those who wait on Him (Ps.36:9). As we sit before Him with His word He shows us where we go wrong and what we can do about it (Is.30:21). In this process of learning we also begin to understand the others. We begin to see many faults which we were holding against others as limitations they are struggling under. Our judgments come crumbling down while empathy and concern take over. We learn to walk side by side with them, sharing our strengths and weaknesses, going towards the common goal of fulfilling God's plans.

This becomes a learning process. As we learn and make progress, the others are also changing--for the better or for the worse. We have to keep tuning our

approach or even change it sometimes if we are to work with them successfully.

We could say, "How blessed is the man who accepts others and adapts to them. He will also pass on his blessings to them" (Ro.15:7).

Pointers along the way #265

Turn the other cheek?

There is this passage where Jesus told His disciples a few astonishing things to do with those who bully us. If someone slaps us on the cheek, we should turn the other cheek to him. If someone sues us for our shirt we should give him our coat also. If someone forces us to go one mile, go two miles with him. If someone asks us for something, give it to him (Mt.5:39-42). Many of us are troubled with these 'commandments' because we think that

behaving like this would only cause the bully to take advantage of us. To understand this passage, let us also look at another passage.

Jesus said that we should cut off our hand and pluck out our eyes if they caused us to sin (Mt.5:29,30). In this case we know that He didn't mean these words to be taken literally! Isn't there a similarity between this and the passage we looked at earlier? Was Jesus really expecting that we should follow to the letter what He said there? If so, why was it that when somebody struck in front of the High Priest He didn't turn the other cheek? On the other hand He questioned why He was struck (Jn.18:22,23)! Was He going against His own teaching? It can't be.

This is an example of how we go wrong when we limit our understanding to only the words that are written in the Bible without

seeking to understand the spirit behind them. The bigger context of the first passage is about changing from an attitude of taking revenge, getting even and teaching a lesson towards those who do wrong to us to an attitude of forgiving them and returning good for evil and love for hatred. If we are to be forgiving, loving and kind to our enemies we would certainly need to overlook many wrongs they have done to us, and suffer loss in many ways. Being willing to suffer injustice in order to be forgiving, to lose material things in order to gain peace, to demonstrate our love in the face of hatred, etc., comes from an attitude change inside us. Jesus was only trying to illustrate this attitude with examples. He was using the techniques of exaggerating or dramatising the issue in order to catch the attention of the people who listened to Him. He was not at all expecting any of them to

actually resort to those acts literally.

If we don't understand this, instead of seeking to get such an attitude of mercy and generosity, we would be trying to figure out the limits of how far we should go in different situations in obedience to these 'commandments.' This was the approach of the Pharisees in those days. (To consider these as 'commandments' is also a misunderstanding. Instead we could consider them as part of a teaching.) Nobody actually manages to follow all these literally or exactly in all situations, and as a result some get confused and guilty. Instead, why don't we seek to become more forgiving, merciful, kind, loving, etc.? We can work on enlarging our hearts so that we would want to do good even when others do wrong to us. That is to obey Jesus and to become like Him.

Dealing with pride

Some Christians try to repress pride and act as if they have no problem with it. Some others suppress pride whenever it comes up and try not to act in pride even though they feel quite proud inside. But the apostle Paul knew how to deal with pride. He knew that if he didn't do anything about it one day it would ruin him (1Co.9:27). As a result, even though he had things that could have made him extremely proud he kept himself humble. Even though he knew that he had worked more than everyone else--it means that he was more successful in his ministry than all others--he had no doubt that it was the grace of God that had helped him (1Co.15:10). God also helped him by giving him some nagging problem in his life that kept reminding him how weak he was in himself and how much

dependent he was on God (2Co.12:7). He kept remembering what he really was apart from the grace of God (1Ti.1:12,13).

The more we pursue after becoming like Jesus or serving Him, it is inevitable that we also get a name for ourselves as a result of it. It is no use imagining that this does not happen *in our case*. We cannot imagine also that it does not affect our thinking. Even if we try hard to ignore thoughts of pride coming up within us, the devil is not going to leave us alone without reminding us now and then about how great we are becoming, how people are saying good things about us, etc. Doesn't it give us pleasure to go over these thoughts in the way a cow chews the cud? If we fail here to balance out these proud thoughts, we will find that slowly we also begin to talk and act in pride, become careless in our ways

and less watchful towards temptations, become more critical and despising towards others, etc.

Some people try to deal with this by telling themselves that others are better than themselves. It is true that every other person is better than us in some aspects. But it is also true that we are better than others in some other aspects! Even when we think about how bad we were before Jesus picked us up, we will have to admit that now we are not like that any more but *much better!* It must be obvious that we cannot manage to keep ourselves humble by comparing with other people.

We can keep ourselves humble by thinking of how *dependent* we are on God at all times. We exist because of Him, and we can even cease to exist if he so chooses. We cannot do a thing without His enabling. It is not only the

good things that have come from God (Jas.1:17), but even if we decide to do evil we still cannot do it without the body and strength God has given us. It is He who gives us strength to make wealth and grace to succeed (De.8:18). It is He who picked us up from our sin and made us His children. It is He who watches over us, plans ahead for us and guides us. Without Him we can do nothing (Jn.15:5).

When we are successful and others notice it, we may forget these things (De.8:17). We must make it a habit to cultivate sober thoughts about ourselves.

Pointers along the way #267

Are you waiting for an apology?

We know that if we have done or said something wrong to someone the least we could do is to apologise (Mt.5:23,24). In some cases we need to make restitution too. We can also take that opportunity to forgive others who have done wrong to us, because we know that we can't go to God for forgiveness if we are not willing to forgive others (Mt.6:14,15).

But when we think of forgiving others some people find it hard when they think of what they have suffered at the hands of some others. Of course it's not right to belittle the hurt, pain or losses we have gone through because of what someone else did. They are real, and our sense of injustice is genuine. Instead of trying to ignore it or tell ourselves that it is really nothing, what

we can do is to share it frankly with Jesus. He understands, because He has gone through it all Himself (He.4:15,16). He knows what it is to be treated unjustly, cruelly and callously, to say the least. What was His reaction at that time?

He forgave--freely, unconditionally, and without waiting for any sign of remorse from the crowd that crucified Him. He said, "Father, forgive them, because they really don't know what they are doing" (Lk.23:34). It may appear that what He did was unreasonable, unjust, unrighteous, unwise, and even weak. But, in fact, it was the highest point of His life as a Man, when He chose to forgive those who had done this to Him who had done no wrong to anyone.

Some people say that they are waiting for the others to come and apologise first. They feel justified because that is

what God demands before He would forgive anyone. But we shouldn't forget that God is *God!* He is perfect, without fault, and He does not need anyone to forgive Him because He hasn't done anyone any wrong. He is also the One who has *made* the law. He would negate His justice and righteousness if He forgave us just like that. You remember how He had to first pay for our sins with the death of His Son before He could forgive us? So in every way He has the rights to ask us to repent and confess our sins before He forgives us.

But what about us? We are just recipients of God's mercy and unmerited favour. Our own sins have been forgiven as a gift from God and not because we had any rights. If we have been forgiven so freely, how dare we think we can demand that others should first apologise or set things

right before we forgave them? Look at the example Jesus has given us as a Man. The Jews who crucified Him did not repent or acknowledge their sin. They were so blindly confident of themselves that they even said His blood could be on them and their children for all they cared (Mt.27:25). Yet Jesus forgave them freely.

We mustn't also forget that most people may be unaware of the sinfulness of their words or action towards us as we perceive them--just as we are also about ourselves! So if we wait for them to apologise first, we may never be able to forgive most people.

Pointers along the way #268

What is our life worth?

The foremost truth here is that we are so valuable that God gave His only Son to die for us. Jesus did not die for us because He saw something good in us, either in terms of present good or a potential good (Ro.5:7,8). But He gave His life for us because He had created us and we were too precious for Him to let go of us to the devil. This is what gives us worth in life--people who are otherwise made of dust, and for whom anything good has come as a gift from God (1Co.4:7).

At the same time, what kind of worth are we pursuing after? There are two entirely different scales on which worldly and godly people rate themselves. The people of the world think they are worth something when they have money, goods (houses, cars), fame (as a great person who has

achieved something, someone who will leave a great name, organisation, or work behind), beauty, skills, popularity, large number of friends, large number of people working for them, large number of people who will come for their funeral (!), etc. Is there anything sinful about these? But what will their value be in eternity? Can we take these recognitions with us to eternity?

There comes a time when all that is of this earth will get burned up and a *new* earth and heaven will get created. Then where will all our earthly gain and glory figure in that new earth?

Only that which is done according to the will of God, through His grace and power and for His glory will last forever. When we know this as Christians, don't we need to align our lives with the will of God--the whole will of God and nothing but the will of

God? I am not talking about an unrealistic goal of perfection but a desire and earnest effort to go in that direction.

There are different ways in which Jesus talked about this subject. There are these narrow way that leads to life and the broad way that leads to destruction (Mt.7:13,14). Jesus was talking of more than entering through the narrow gate--choosing Jesus and His ways--but also a lifetime of *walking* in the narrow path. Don't think about the narrowness of the way and become hesitant. Our focus is on the life that comes through walking in that path! Jesus also talked about the man who gains the whole world--goes way up in the worldly scale of measuring one's worth--and loses his eternal soul in the process (Mt.16:26). The Message Bible says, "What kind of deal is it to get everything you want but

lose yourself? What could you ever trade your soul for?"

The devil told Jesus that if He would bow down to him he would give Him all the glory of this world (Mt.4:8,9). Many times that is the price we have to pay for getting some greatness in this world--just bow a bit to Satan, compromise a bit. But what would we be losing in the bargain?

On the other hand, think of a life spent in doing the will of God and serving Him according to His plan for our lives? Everyone is not called to be preachers. But everyone can serve God (Col.3:23,24).

Pointers along the way #269

God as He is

Have we wondered why God who once asked Moses to execute a man who had disobeyed the Sabbath law by collecting wood (Nu.15:32,35) and killed Ananias and Sapphira when they lied to Peter about the price they had sold their property for (Ac.5:3-5), does not do such things nowadays? It is not that God has changed--as some people think--from being hard and strict to being loving and kind. No, God does not change. He is eternally the same. It is also not that He shows different sides of His nature at different times. (It would be terrifying if it were like that because we would never know what to expect!) He is loving, merciful, just and righteous *at the same time*. He cannot stop being loving, just as He cannot stop being righteous or just. It is that He *always*

does what is good for us, and what we need for our good varies. We may imagine that it would be nice if God would always show His love and mercy to us and never showed His anger towards sin against us! But we have to agree that sometimes it is good for us to be shaken up a bit, rebuked or even chastised (He.12:10;Ps.119:71).

In these new covenant times we tend to take God's love for granted and treat His grace cheaply (Ga.5:13). Since God has chosen not to punish us as soon as we sin we think there is no punishment involved (Ecc.8:11). We know that if we confess our sins God will forgive us (1Jn.1:9). But do we think that it doesn't matter so much if we sin because we can always confess it afterwards (Ro.6:15)? This is not so much about what we think but the attitude we have about sin and God. If we have heard only about the love of

God and His forgiveness and nothing about His hatred towards sin, we don't know God as He is (1Co.15:34).

Grace is a magnificent thing. There has been nothing like this in all the world till Jesus came. Through grace God shows us His love towards us who do not deserve it. He takes sinners who repent from their sins and puts their trust in Jesus, washes them with the blood of His Son, makes them white as snow, agrees not to remember their sins against them anymore and to forgive them when they confess their sins. He transfers blood-washed sinners from Satan's kingdom to His kingdom as His children and makes them co-heirs along with Jesus of everything He has. All this and more with grace. We can appreciate the magnitude of His grace towards us when we look at examples like that of the man who gathered wood and

Ananias! If we don't suffer the same fate as they it is just grace!

What should this revelation do for us? Fill our hearts with gratitude? Make us want to please God all the more? Count everything else as worthless compared to getting to walk with this God? Have a strong desire to tell others about this God?

Can we take sin lightly or flirt with it anymore? Do we want to cause more pain to the heart of our God who has already suffered death for us? Can we cheat on grace and disregard His commandments?

Pointers along the way #270

A righteousness not my own

The apostle Paul was not only scholarly and clear in his doctrines, but he was also down to earth honest about himself. While he took strong doctrinal positions, he also made it a point to recognise and acknowledge where he was in real life. He guarded himself from the extreme of living in a world of doctrines without any touch with reality and also the other extreme of trying to act being realistic while discarding doctrinal positions. For those who go merely by the letter, it may appear as if Paul is contradicting himself in several places. But if we learn to look at doctrine not just from some proof verses that we are partial to but as a part of the big picture God is trying to reveal to us, we can see how our practical experiences fit in with them.

Paul is well known for standing for the truth of justification by faith in Jesus Christ as an undeserved gift of mercy from Him in contrast to the common concept that we have to qualify in some way before God by the things we do (Ep.2:8,9). He was so strong about this that he was willing to 'fight' against anyone who tried to dilute or distort this truth. But honest man that he was, he realised that it is one thing to believe in the doctrine of free grace and the consequent justification and acceptance, and another thing to live believing that. He recognised that it was possible to hold that doctrinal position and at the same time live as if justification depended on our performance! He understood that accepting the doctrine did not automatically remove the grooves that our long experience had made in our thinking. What does it tell us when we feel accepted sometimes and

unaccepted at other times?

As a result, Paul fought a battle with his own thoughts as he sought the Holy Spirit to renew his mind into the new way of thinking (2Co.10:5;Ro.12:2). He noticed how he would slip into glorying in his own righteousness and how he would need to get back to the position of unmerited favour from God (Php.3:8,9). Instead of imagining that because he believed the right doctrine he was right in his living, he sought to bring his life in line with the doctrine. This is nothing new for us who keep hearing, "Walk the talk," and "Practise what you preach." What may be new is that Paul was honest enough to acknowledge the disparity between the two, and also sincere enough to fight to narrow the gap.

Don't we have a problem with doctrine, when our life does not match with it? We may try to focus on the

doctrine and repress the truth about our life. Some of us even keep confessing the doctrine so much that the differences in our life fade into the background. Some others think they are very honest with themselves and stop looking at the doctrines. This is not just about the doctrine of justification but everything else too. Where we need to change is to have an honest and sincere approach to doctrines, giving up the dogmatic as well as the don't-care-too-much attitudes.

Our adversary, the devil

Some Christians think the devil is just a fancy notion that has no reality, and some others are so scared of the devil that they see him everywhere! But the devil is very real in the New Testament, and all those who take their Christian lives seriously are bound to come across him as a deceiver, accuser, tempter, and an enemy who is out to attack us (Re.12:9,10;Mt.4:1;1Pe.5:8). He works directly or through his demons to inject ideas into our mind. He does this so well that often we imagine that they are our own thoughts. If we look back and examine our thoughts, we realise that we would not have thought such thoughts on our own. In fact we disagree with or hate such thoughts. But they do come in, apparently out of the blue, and try to mislead us.

The devil knows that his time is very short, and that soon he will be thrown into the lake of fire (Re.20:10). So he is out to do the maximum damage he can to God's people. Can't we recognise his presence through the increasing rate of violence, sexual attacks, suicides, etc., these days? Even small things seem to trigger unreasonably violent responses from people. People hit out verbally or physically at the slightest provocation, and murders and suicides take place very easily. What is happening seems to be that when we get under pressure due to difficult circumstances, Satan places suggestions into our mind to take strong action. If we don't have clear boundaries in our mind about what we will not do, we can get fooled into following his ideas.

We don't have to live in fear of the devil because Jesus has already

conquered him on the cross and stripped off his power over us (Co.2:15). Jesus has also given us authority over all the power of the enemy (Lk.10:19). We now have the authority in Jesus' name to stand against all the hosts of Satan, not because of anything in ourselves but under the authority of Jesus that has been delegated to us. If we are under submission to Jesus and we resist Satan he *has* to flee (Jas.4:7). We may remember the picture from 'Pilgrim's Progress' that shows us that the devil may try to frighten us with his roars, but he is chained, and he cannot reach us unless we go too near!

We are no match for the devil when it comes to strategy because his intelligence and experience are far superior. Our strength is in Christ when we abide in Him. The Bible talks about avoiding unforgiving attitudes or

anger which can give a foothold for the devil (2Co.2:10,11;Ep.4:26,27). We can also take it that the same warning will also hold if we consciously hold on to any other sin (Ps.66:18). Our constant aim must be to live with a clear conscience towards God and man (Ac.24:16). If our heart is right we will have confidence before God (1Jn.3:21).

On a practical note, let us see that when the devil comes to our thoughts there will usually be a 'push' behind it, trying to force us into action. It is never good to be hasty in words or action.

Pointers along the way #272

Are you on the way in or out?

Some of us are pressing on to get to know Jesus better, to walk more closely with Him, to do His will more perfectly, to bring honour and glory to His name, etc. These are the ones who have had their hearts sprinkled clean with the blood and have boldness to enter into the holy of holies, who are seeking to enter more deeply into the heart of God (He.10:19-22). Having been brought in by grace into the kingdom of God they are *striving* to 'enter' more deeply in every sense of the word (Lk.13:24).

Some of us, who also have entered into the kingdom through the same grace as the others, are actually moving towards the way out. We may not recognise it or acknowledge it, but we are getting farther away from the centre of the kingdom as time goes on. We have lost

the initial thrill, things have become routine, other things have begun to occupy prime time in our mind, we have become a little weary of having to deny ourselves daily and we feel that we need to be able to indulge ourselves a bit now and then, etc. We are on the way out.

Some of us like to think that even though we are not actually pressing on towards the centre, we are more or less stable in our routines and that there is no need for alarm. But here we are fooling ourselves. If we are not actively moving in the direction of God, we are really on the way out, whether we know it or not (Re.3:15,16). Pressures are mounting up in this world. Even ordinary life is beginning to become a fight for survival. On top of that Satan and his demons are on the lookout to see how they can make us fall (1Pe.5:8). It is

becoming increasingly difficult to live in this world as Christians (2Ti.3:1 LB). Jesus warns us that we should watch and pray at all times if we are to be able to 'escape' and 'stand' before Him at the end (Lk.21:36).

There is no such thing as a complacent, easy going Christian life. Those who think that they are 'saved' and 'headed for heaven' and begin to take things easy and enjoy the (transient) pleasures of this life as if everything is safe are going in for a rude shock. Without the grace of God we will not have the strength to face the pressures that are coming, and we will become an easy prey for the devil. It is a myth to think that we can have a level, plateau like path once we climb the small hill of repentance and faith and get 'saved.' No, what we have come to is not salvation in its full sense but just forgiveness of our sins and

justification before God. There is a long path ahead through battle zones, where we are going to have to deal with the lusts in our flesh that try to pull us back into the old life and attacks from Satan who tries to pull us away from God. This again is an upward journey, and any time we think we can pause and take a nap, we begin our slide downwards (1Co.10:12).

If we don't believe this, experience will teach us. But it is not so pleasant to learn it the hard way, is it? And hopefully it won't be too late.

The problem of literal interpretation

As we know, one of the reasons for so many divisions among Christians is that we interpret the Bible in different ways. One way some people interpret the word of God is to take it too literally. Some boast, "I read it exactly as it is written." Of course there is a big problem when people read it carelessly and interpret it adding or removing words and meanings from what is written. We must take care to use an accurate translation, and use all the help available to get as closely as possible to the exact meaning. But then we must also take into consideration the context of the particular passage in the whole Biblical revelation. We must also note the fact that words are part of a language, and that the author or the one who spoke the words recorded by

the author used those words in the usual way people use words--and not in the precise manner of legal or scientific people.

For example take the following sentences Jesus spoke. "It shall be done to you according to your faith" (Mt.9:29). "Daughter, your faith has made you well" (Mk.5:34). A literal interpretation of these words has caused some people to develop wrong concepts of faith altogether. At one extreme end some people consider faith to be like a substance, according to whose quantity we can get different results. In the context of the blind men to whom Jesus said these words, if they had only half their faith would they have got only one eye opened? But did Jesus really mean that we would receive answers from God *in proportion to* our faith, or did He mean the same as when He said to the

Canaanite woman whose daughter was healed, "O woman, your faith is great; it shall be done for you as you wish" (Mt.15:28)? Wasn't Jesus telling the blind men also the same thing, that they would get *what* they had faith for, and not that it would be in proportion to the quantity of their faith? When Jesus told His disciples that if they had faith as small as a mustard seed they could order a mountain to go away, wasn't He saying that it wasn't the size of their faith that mattered (Mt.17:20)? Faith is a trust and confidence that we have in Jesus as a result of our relationship with Him, and not any substance with which we could bargain for blessings from God. We cannot add up faith to meet the requirement of some blessing!

"Daughter, your faith has made you well" has also been misinterpreted to mean that faith has power in itself to accomplish things. This is so contrary

to the fact that there is power only with God, and it is He who does things for us when He sees faith in us.

In both these cases if we only look at the words it is possible to come to such conclusions. But if we understand what faith really means--from the rest of the Bible--and then look at these verses we will see that these words cannot really mean what they seem to. It is clear that we need to understand the Bible as a whole if we want to avoid such errors. We also need to look beyond the words to the spirit.

Pointers along the way #274

Turning grace into law!

Grace is so amazing that God loved hopeless sinners like us so much that instead of letting us have what we deserved--hell and punishment--He sent Jesus down who took our punishment, washed us from our sins, clothed us with robes of righteousness and adopted us as His children. It is such a gesture of magnanimity that has no parallel. We receive grace as an unmerited, undeserved favour from God when we acknowledge our sins and trust and accept Jesus as our Saviour and Lord. This the exact opposite of the Old Testament (covenant) where blessings and curses depended on people keeping the law, or in other words on their performance.

But grace is so amazing that we sometimes find it difficult, even after

we accept it as a doctrine, to accept it as a way of life. Behind our actions there seems to be an underlying assumption that there must be something we must do in order to deserve it or earn it! In other words, we turn grace itself into a legal system!

Just look at one example. The Bible says that God opposes the proud and gives grace to the humble (Jas.4:6;1Pe.5:5). This states a fact from the point of view of God's sovereignty. But what if we think that humbling ourselves is the means to receive grace? The more we humble ourselves, do we receive more grace? If so the implication is that grace can be earned, has to be earned, and the way to earn it is by humbling ourselves! What a mockery of grace! The very thing that is meant to be undeserved is being made into a reward for good behaviour!

God tells us that we should not allow any part of our body to be used as an instrument of unrighteousness or allow sin to have dominion over us because we are under grace now and not under the law (Ro.6:13,14). But what happens if we turn this word around to mean that if and when sin overpowers us it is because we are not under grace, and *that* (not being under grace) is because we are not humble enough? We are back under a legal system even though we proclaim that Christ has redeemed us from the law (Ga.3:13;5:4).

Why do we get back into the law? Grace is too amazing to believe, and we are too self-righteous to receive salvation as being totally free. We are looking for some way by which we can show ourselves better than the others, and here is how we can humble ourselves more than the others!

What are some of the symptoms of treating grace as a legal system? When we don't feel adequate sometimes to go to God in prayer. When we feel that we need to 'appease God first' before we can request something from Him. When we think that we need some recommendation from pastors to get God's ears. When we think God has left us or stopped loving us after we fell. Etc.

Having lived a long time 'under the law' believing that it is our performance that makes us acceptable or otherwise to God, we need to understand the depth, breadth and length of God's love for us. This will come only as we meditate on grace and get our mind renewed (Ro.12:2).

Spiritual giving

'Giving' probably receives the greatest emphasis, statistically speaking, in sermons worldwide, especially on TV, and yet it looks as if very few Christians have understood its true spirit. Giving is commonly promoted as a means for receiving back multi-fold. Call it a business deal with God. This is beefed up on the other side with threats of judgment on those who don't pay up! What is happening in effect is preachers trying to pry open the closed fists of people who are very reluctant to give otherwise. One gets the impression that greedy men with determination are trying to persuade half-converted men with worldly interests to part with the thing they want more of.

God certainly wants us to learn to give. But He hates this giving under

compulsion. He loves those who give cheerfully (2Co.9:7). He wants us to understand that it is actually more blessed to give than to receive (Ac.20:35). In other words, God is looking for people who will be *delighted* to give--to the work of His kingdom and to those in need.

Someone has said that *we can know the genuineness of a man's conversion by the openness of his purse*. It takes a genuine conversion of our heart--from the greedy, self seeking, pleasure loving hearts to hearts that love God above all things, and love, value and respect other people as much as ourselves (Mt.22:37-39)--to start giving cheerfully. It is only then that we start *wanting to give*.

Look at the example which Paul gave to the Corinthians of the Macedonian church. They gave of their own accord,

according to their ability and beyond their ability (2Co.8:3). Their liberality overflowed with joy in the midst of their afflictions (v.2). How did this happen? Because of Paul's manipulative exhortations or fearsome threats? No, they first gave themselves to God and then to the others (v.4,5). It is where these are lacking that there is a reluctance or hesitation to give.

Another thing to keep in mind is that whatever we have is given to us by God as a stewardship--for which one day we have to give an account. We must get rid of the concept that once we have made a certain contribution to God, the rest belongs to us to use as we please. God has purchased us with the blood of His Son and He has the ownership rights to ask us to do whatever He likes, with our bodies, time, money, talents, etc. We need to live in recognition of this as 'living

sacrifices' (Ro.12:1). Without this acknowledgment from our side, our hands cannot really become open for giving--we will always be looking out for receiving. What is lacking is not exhortation but something deeper inside us.

God richly rewards those who give. If we sow sparingly or abundantly, our reward will be according to that (2Co.9:6). He rewards us materially and spiritually, and we value both. But when we give from the heart, our eyes will be on who or what we are giving to, and not what we will get in return. Slowly we learn that it is much better to give than to receive.

Pointers along the way #276

OT men in NT times

Remember the children of Israel with

whom God made the old covenant? From among all the hundreds of thousands of those who left Egypt to go to the promised land only two finally got there, Joshua and Caleb. What was wrong with the others? Sure they wanted 'out' from the slavery in Egypt. But were they pining for the promised land? No. What they pined for was the onions and leeks in Egypt, meat and drinks. So Moses had the task of trying to lead a crowd of disinterested people towards Canaan. Every now and then they would shout at Moses and God for taking them away from Egypt. What God finally thought about them is given in De.29:2-4. God was not able, at the end of forty years of blessing them, taking care of them, protecting them, and leading them, to do what He really wanted to do for them--give them hearts that knew Him, eyes that could see and ears that could hear!

So God had to start again, with a new covenant. Here He would give people a new heart, write His laws upon their hearts, cause them to walk in His ways, be merciful to their sins and cause them to know Him (Je.31:33,34). This is the new birth--being born again. This is nothing but a supernatural work of God in those who come to Him humbly acknowledging their sins, turning away from their old sinful ways, and trusting in Jesus for forgiveness of sins and acceptance before God. What we people could not do because of the weakness of our flesh, He does for us by giving us a new nature by a new birth (Ro.8:3). When this happens our spirit that was lying dormant because it was dead in sin gets life, and new desires and interests take shape inside us. "Things we used to do, we do them no more," and our whole life takes a new turn

towards God, His word and His people.

But what do we see when we look around now in the new testament times? Thousands of Christians who would rather watch a game or movie being cajoled to 'come to church'! Money, pleasure, thrill, fame, recognition etc., are the things they are pining for, and getting to know God better, becoming more like Jesus, doing His will, sacrifice, service, showing their love for others etc., are far from their minds. Even when they come to church their minds are far away. What is wrong? They are just like the people in the old testament even though they are in the new testament times. What is missing is the new birth.

Gospel messages do not reach such people who imagine they have no need

of them because they are already Christians! They have accepted Jesus as their Saviour, haven't they? But when they came to Jesus did they see themselves as sinners who deserved hell and needed a Saviour? Did a supernatural change take place when they accepted Jesus? Many second and third generation 'Christians' have missed the real encounter with Jesus, and so they are not really Christians after all. What they need to hear is what Jesus told Nicodemus, "You must be born again" (Jn.3:3). This was a loving invitation, and not criticism.

Boldness or familiarity?

Understanding the concept of holiness and the severity of punishment for defiling holy things that we find in the Old Testament can help us to value and appreciate the grace that is available to us in the New Testament. Think of the High Priest being able to enter into the Most Holy Place in the tabernacle only once a year, and that too after sacrifices and processes of purification. This can tell us something of the magnitude of God's love for us in giving us free access into His presence at any time. Yet this access is not because we are holier or better people than the high priests but because of the value of the blood of Jesus that was shed to cleanse us from our sins once for all (He.10:19-22). If any man dared to touch the mountain when Moses was with God receiving

the commandments he would have been killed (Ex.19:12). Only Moses could go right up to the top of the mountain and talk to God. Now we have been given the right to talk to Him, to let our requests be made known to Him, call Him, "Abba, Father," and know that the Creator of the whole universe and the One who can do whatever He wants has come to our level to have fellowship with us.

The least of God's children can have fellowship with Him (He.8:11). We don't have to cringe before Him in fear, or wonder if He would listen to us. We don't have to seek the mediation of any prophet, pastor, or great man of God to get to our Father. We know that when we talk to Him He listens (1Jn.5:14). We know that each one of us is precious to Him, because Jesus gave His life for us, washed us with His blood and made us acceptable to the

Father. We don't have to ask anyone to pray for us fearing that our own prayers may not be heard. This is how God has given us access to His throne and mercy seat.

When we consider what God had to pay in order to grant us this access, we will know that it is no cheap ticket to heaven. We can't just walk in casually before God as if He is our buddy. We can't address Him in cheap terms as if He is our servant who is at our beck and call to run errands for us. We can't even afford to refer to Him in a loose or casual manner (Ex.20:7). We need to remember who we are dealing with, and approach Him with love, gratitude and reverence (1Pe.1:17-19).

As Christians let us beware of the tendency to swing between attitudes of fear and diffidence and familiarity from time to time. God wants us to have a steady sense of boldness

coupled with confidence, holy fear and respect. When we are with fear and diffidence, we cannot receive and enjoy what God has for us. We also tend to get depressed, unbelieving, anxious, etc. When we take a familiar attitude towards God we will also take liberties with sin that will affect our relationship not only with God but also with people. There is nothing that can balance us except a constant feeding on the word of God and prayer. Let us also learn to recognise when we go off to either side and to come back to our safe position.

Pointers along the way #278

Hating father and mother

We need to understand the Bible as a whole first if we have to understand specific verses in it. Verses must be interpreted in their specific context and in the context of the entire Bible. Our religious background, training, experience and temperament all contribute something to the way we interpret scripture, and we need to make special efforts to get an objective view of what God says in His word without letting things get coloured by our individuality. This is not as easy as it sounds, and it is good to pay special attention to this factor.

Jesus said that if we were to follow Him as His disciples, we could not do that without hating our father and mother (Lk.14:26). If we look at this verse by itself we would struggle to understand what Jesus meant,

especially since we know that He stood for and preached much about loving others, including our enemies (Mt.5:44)! The first thing we need to do is to look at the context in which Jesus said this. He said this to the multitude after He spoke about the different excuses people would give when they were invited to the kingdom of God. One such excuse that some people give is that they could not hurt their parents who had brought them up with much love and sacrifice. Another verse quotes Jesus saying that if we were to love our father or mother more than Him we would not be worthy of Him (Mt.10:37). This was in the context of warning that there could be clashes between relatives when one chooses to follow Jesus. Jesus also reiterated that we are to honour our father and mother, which is one of the ten commandments (Ex.20:7), and this is also repeated in Ep.6:2. So it

becomes clear that the meaning of 'hating' father and mother is not what it appears to be at first glance, but another way of saying that our love for our father and mother should never be allowed to stand in the way of loving and obeying God. In other words, when it comes to a question of choosing between God and parents, we must choose God.

A similar issue comes up with Ep.6:1 and Col.3:20 where children are told to obey their parents in all things, in the Lord. First of all it becomes clear that children need not obey their parents when it comes to things that would mean disobeying God. However, another factor that we need to consider is that it is children who must obey their parents and not grown up people! When we grow up we become responsible to God directly and we are no longer under the direct

control of our parents. Parents who do not understand this do not let go of their 'children' even when they grow up, and insist that they should obey them. Some grown up 'children' also condemn themselves or feel guilty when they are not able to obey their parents in something. But the word for grown up people regarding parents is, "Honour your father and mother," which is not the same as obeying them! This means treating them with respect, taking care of them, helping them, etc. Another example of looking at the big picture!

Pointers along the way #279

Love our enemies, huh?

There are enemies all around us, even though some Christians boast, "I have no enemies!" I think this is because of poor semantics, or a lack of proper definition. If we define enemies as those waiting to kill us, or people in that class, maybe most of us can say we have no enemies. But if we think of 'enemies' so as to include those who oppose us, cause us trouble, irritate us, cheat or deceive us, use us, criticise us, hurt us, insult us, ignore us, etc.,--meaning those who are doing the opposite of blessing us--immediately we have to include a whole lot of people, including some of our closest ones who can be inimical to our interest at times! To love them means to be patient with them, not to get provoked by them, to do them good instead, etc. (1Co.13:4-8). It is a

fantastic standard--meaning it seems to involve fantasy! Who is adequate for such things?

Some people think of some particularly bad experience they have had and conclude that it is not possible to love their enemies, and actually treat it as a fantastic demand Jesus is making (Mt.5:43,44). Some others struggle to be loving in different situations and find themselves unable. Still some others find some peculiar way of explaining Scripture to believe that they do love everyone. But when we look at the way God loves us, and what He has said in His word about how our love ought to be, we see there is nothing for us to do but to seek for His love to be poured out into our hearts (Ro.5:5).

Think of how many people have been drawn to God by seeing some of His children. Invariably it is because they

(the people) saw something in these Christians that was extraordinary. They wondered at the inexplicable form of love in these Christians. How did we ourselves get to God except by seeing His amazing love for people like us! Then we can see how poor we are as God's representatives or witnesses when we fail to show His love to others in different circumstances. When we get 'easily provoked,' 'lose our patience,' 'cannot overlook a wrong suffered,' etc., how can we expect others to see Jesus in us?

Can we cover up this lack with other things such as Christian activities, knowledge, exercise of gifts, etc.? Unfortunately, no (1Co.13:1-3). All such things can give us an outward appearance, but inside we are hollow! Those of us who are active in 'ministry' stand specially in danger of thinking that the anointing in ministry is an

indication that God is pleased with us, even when we know that there is hollowness inside.

We can do many things with the talents and gifts that God has given us. But when it comes to love, we see that we cannot produce it or even 'act' it out. We really need the Holy Spirit to pour it into our hearts (Ro.5:5). What we *can* do is to present an empty vessel to Him and ask Him to pour it in. We won't do it as long as we don't recognise the emptiness or acknowledge it. But our trust is that for all who ask, He is delighted to answer that cry (Lk.11:13).

Pointers along the way #280

Relaxation techniques

Psychologists have many things to tell us about how we ought to relax, and get out of the stress that we face at different parts of the day, and doctors tell us how we may develop psychosomatic problems if we neglect to get rid of stress. Relaxing physically is the first step towards relaxing mentally, and people use techniques such as deep breathing, progressive muscle relaxation, etc. For mental relaxation people use music, visualising peaceful scenes, diversions, etc. But we Christians know the technique of spiritual relaxation also, don't we?

God says, "Be still, and know that I am Lord" (Ps.46:10 KJV). The Message Bible says, "Step out of the traffic! Take a long, loving look at me, your High God, above politics, above

everything." This is the best way to relax! Instead of thinking that somehow we should try to manage things, and finding ourselves losing control, can we not shift our gaze towards God? He is Lord; He is above all. He is not only omnipresent, omniscient and omnipotent, He also knows exactly what to do. He is the one really in control. All things are subject to Him. No one can stand up to Him and nothing can thwart His plans. Gaze at Him in adoration and worship. All the things of earth will grow strangely dim in the light of His glory and grace.

How foolish we are to imagine that somehow *we* have to work it out! Yes, many times our problem may be that we don't do what we *can* do, because we are too lazy to do anything or unwilling to own our responsibility. Yes, there are things that go wrong because we have done wrong in the

past or are doing things wrong now. Yes, there are things we ought to do.

But then many times we come across situations where things are way beyond us. There is nothing we *can* do. We can't understand what is going on, we don't know what to do, and we don't have the resources to do anything. It looks like we would be justified in giving up or getting discouraged. But then have we looked at God?

Perhaps we have shot prayers to God, hoping that He would dissolve the crisis into thin air. But have we relaxed first, sitting before Him, looking at His greatness and worshipping Him? Think about how big He is in every respect, and think about how much He loves us. Think about what all He has done for us and for others in the past. When we do that we recognise that we have the Almighty on our side, and our tensions

disappear. Then we are able to listen to Him as He tells us what to do next.

God says that if we acknowledge Him in all our ways, He will direct our paths (Pr.3:6). When we cast our burdens upon the Lord (Ps.55:22), our stress levels come down, and we also begin to see what is to be done. The worldly kind of peace can only come in the absence of problems; but there is really no escaping problems. We may keep them aside for a time, but they come back with greater force. The peace that God gives us can keep in in the midst of the problems, and also lead us on.

Pointers along the way #281

Every time we sin

Free forgiveness of sins and mercy are the hallmarks of the new covenant. But it was not so 'free' for the Saviour, because He had to suffer and die in order to gain this privilege for us. We tend to assume that we can bank on forgiveness when we sin, and as a result become careless with sin. But sin is a costly affair, for God and for us. Let us take a look at what happens when we sin, so that we can learn to be more cautious towards sin.

1. Every time we sin, we grieve God's heart which bled to save us from our sins. He has given us a new birth so that we will not let sin have dominion over us (Ro.6:13,14), and so that we can, in a progressive manner, stop sinning (1Jn.3:9). Yes, God will certainly forgive us our sins when we confess them (1Jn.1:9), but surely it

grieves Him if He sees us going on giving in to sin (Ge.6:6;Is.63:10;Ep.4:30).

2. Whenever we sin, it disgraces God because we are His children. Even when no one else sees us sin, we must not forget that Satan is eagerly watching us to see when we fall so that he can accuse God about us (Zec.3:1). What disgrace we cause to our Father by the way we choose the pleasures of sin instead of His good pleasure!

3. It breaks our fellowship with God (Is.59:1,2). Yes, we can get back to Him in repentance, confess our sins and be restored. But a break does happen and it causes us suffering. It looks to us as if *He* is hiding His face from us, even though it is we who have chosen that reaping by our sowing (Ga.6:7).

4. It confuses our mind. When we sin,

guilt comes in, and like Adam and Eve we feel like hiding from God. We lose our confidence before God and before people. Even though we know we can be forgiven when we confess our sin, it can be quite difficult to regain the sense of boldness we had earlier.

5. It distorts God's plan for us. God can cause even our failures to work for our good, by teaching us more of humility and leaning on Him (Ro.8:28). But our fall does damage our witness, ministry, and effectiveness to a little or greater extent.

6. There is a struggle back towards God. It is easy to break fellowship with God, but not so with gaining it back. God may resort to chastening at times (He.12:6), and the consequences of our sinful action may take long to get over. Certain consequences may not be reversible too.

7. Relationships with others may get affected. Adam and Eve became self-conscious and somewhat closed towards each other. We may put on masks in front of others and hypocrisy and pretence may come in.

We don't think of these things when we are tempted. What we see before our eyes at that time is only the pleasure or the immediate advantage that our sin might bring us. That is the deceitfulness of sin (He.3:13). But knowing this truth can set us free (Jn.8:32). Knowing the truth is not just by hearing it, but by assimilating it by meditating over it till our thought patterns themselves are changed. God transforms us by renewing our mind.

The leap of faith?

This is a phrase commonly used for challenging people to take action based on faith. The picture is that of not being able to see into the future, not knowing how this particular act is going to turn out, and in spite of that choosing to obey what the Lord has told us. There are many examples of this in the Bible. At the Red Sea Moses stretched out his rod according to the command of God, and watched the sea parting. The priests stepped into the waters of the River Jordan in obedience to God, and saw the water piling up upstream and the river bed drying up. Etc. When God tells us to do something, we can step out in faith, leaving the management of the consequences to Him who is in control.

Many times we may hesitate to do this, because we would like to have

something definite in front of our eyes before we step forward. But this is a test of our faith where we have to literally place our life's direction and future events into God's hands, simply trusting in God's omniscience, omnipotence, love and wisdom to take care of us, lead us and bless us. This is the type of choice we have to make many times in life, e.g., regarding our career or business, marriage partner, place of stay, ministry, choice of church, etc. But faith helps us to go forward without fear or anxiety, because we trust in our Father and our Saviour.

But some people take this to extremes, and leap where God has not asked them to. Perhaps many complex thoughts play up in our mind. "People may think that I don't have faith if I don't do this. Perhaps if I do this people will know that God is with me.

God can do anything, and so I will believe He will do this for me. God has done this for so-and-so, and so He will do this for me too. This prophet has told me this, and how do I know if I won't be disobeying God if I don't do this?" Etc.

Faith, in this context, is our trust in God, and we cannot have any real faith apart from God speaking in our heart (Ro.10:17). If we imagine we have faith for something, or we try to make ourselves to have faith by exciting our mind with stories from the Bible or testimonies of others, it won't really work. Then we will have a calamity, just as it would have happened if Jesus had listened to Satan by jumping off from the temple (Mt.4:5-7).

God *can* do extraordinary and supernatural things for us. There is no question about that. In such cases He will tell us specifically what we need

to do, just as He told Moses and Joshua in the above examples. Then we will experience a peace in our heart that goes beyond understanding (Php.4:7). We can also consult with mature believers to check if we are fooling ourselves. Then when we take extraordinary steps things will happen just as God has told us.

For God to be glorified, an idea must originate from God, and must be carried out according to the ways of God and in His strength (Ro.11:36). However clever our ideas may be, apart from these they cannot accomplish God's purposes.

Pointers along the way #283

An issue of compatibility

I think this could be politically incorrect these days. Yet I hope that it might help someone somewhere.

God warns in His word believers not to be unequally bound (yoked) together with unbelievers (2Co.6:14,15). This doesn't mean that believers should not meet, work with, or make friends with unbelievers, but that we should not get into a 'binding' relationship with them. Typical examples are marriage and business partnerships. If a business partnership doesn't work out, we can break away, even if it is with great difficulty. But a marriage is binding for life. It would be foolish to get into it impulsively and regret it all through life. Many people who ignore this warning and get married to unbelievers discover later that it was one of the biggest mistakes they made in their

life, when they face conflicts of value, principles, approach and strategy in decisions they have to make.

Many believers say when they consider marriage, "If the other person is a believer, then it's all right." Is that enough? That is to go strictly according to the letter and miss the point of God's warning. The issue is one of unequal yoking. Even believers can be unequal! One can be a fervent disciple of Jesus and the other can be a pleasure loving, worldly minded person. One can be a legalistic Christian and the other open minded, one ritualistic and the other informal. When we think of the quarrels within and among different believing churches, we understand that just believing is not enough.

Psychologists know that a large part of our personality is made up of things we have learned in our growing days, and another part from the temperament we

have inherited through the genes. This makes each one of us unique; but at the same time this can cause big conflicts in marriage because of clashes of personality, even when both spouses are born again believers. We also know that communication is the arterial system through which the lifeblood of marriages flows. If the spouses think and/or speak in different languages, we can imagine the potential sources of misunderstanding that can develop.

So what am I saying? That it is not enough to get married to believers; we also have to look at compatibility issues. We cannot glibly say that once we are born again all things are made new (2Co.5:17), because there is need for a slow and steady working out of this potential transformation; it is not sudden and automatic. Another point that comes up is that teenagers and other young people do not have the

necessary knowledge or experience to be able to choose wisely. Isn't it better that they wait till they are a bit older to make this lifetime choice? Isn't it also good to seek the advice of mature people?

Of course one can point out many cases where everything worked out well in the end. For example, an unbelieving spouse got converted. Thank God for His mercy and grace. But does that mean that we can presume on His mercy and disobey His loving warnings?

Pointers along the way #284

How we blind ourselves

The Bible tells us that our heart is deceitful above all things (Je.17:9). One of the ways we deceive ourselves is by finding different ways to avoid acknowledging and dealing with our sins. Lying is one way people use to get out of admitting their faults. We Christians don't like to tell lies, and so we find more devious ways to hide our sins and escape accountability. In my opinion we Christians develop an extra expertise in this compared to unbelievers, because we are more conscious of the consequences of sin. We like to think that we are godly, or at least not conscious sinners, and so we find ways of wriggling out of having to admit to others or to ourselves that we have indeed sinned.

Let us say we crave for more money in our heart, and we are trying to make

more money, get a bigger job, etc. Will we ever admit to other Christians that we love money? Oh no! Have you ever heard a Christian acknowledge that he is battling with the love of money? We will say, "This offer just came along and I thought it would be good to take it." "You know, we are told to be wise as serpents." "Doesn't it say we ought to be shrewd in the use the unrighteous mammon?" If we are planning some scheme to make more money we would start by spreading the word that we would have more money to give to the missions! Why do we justify ourselves like this? We may be trying to pacify our pricking conscience.

Suppose we are trying to impress other people with our wealth, abilities, skills, etc. Do we acknowledge that we are seeking the honour of man? Far from it! We say we need to have a good testimony for Jesus before the

others, that Christians should not be considered as poor, weak people.

By telling ourselves (and others) that we have a good reason for doing what our conscience warns us against, we deceive ourselves. Granted many may not do these things deliberately or consciously. But these are the workings of a deceitful heart. Our own heart deceives us.

Jesus came to save us from our sins just as a doctor comes to treat sick people. He has not come just to forgive our sins, but also to set us free from sin. The first thing we need to do in this process of salvation is to acknowledge our sins (Je.3:13). Then come repentance, confession and forgiveness. But the way we justify ourselves and avoid looking at our sins virtually holds us back from making any progress in this way.

On the other hand, once we acknowledge that we were born in sin, and that we need a transformation into God's nature, we need to make ourselves open to seeing more and more of our sinfulness. If we will not confess our sins to our Saviour (or the symptoms to the doctor), how will we ever get healed? When we sit before God reading and meditating on His word we can ask the Holy Spirit to show us the things that are lacking in our lives. In His light we see light (Ps.36:9). As we behold Him through His word and see ourselves, we can also seek for salvation and receive it (2Co.3:18).

The Saviour of the weak

Jesus said He had come for the sinners and not for the righteous (Mk.2:17). This was actually a rebuke of those who considered themselves to be righteous and not sinners, because there is not one righteous; all are indeed sinners (Ro.3:10-12). The problem is that some of us consider ourselves to be not as bad as some of the others and think that God would be happy to accept us on our own merit. But such people deceive themselves and miss the benefit of the Saviour who came just for sinners.

In a similar fashion God says that when we are weak, then we are strong (2Co.12:9). We tend to think of God only when we are really at the end of all our resources -- what we can do by ourselves, and what we can get done through money and influential people --

and we try to manage to handle things our own way. Actually in this way we manage to mess things up quite a bit now and then, and then we rush towards God. But God has a better way for us. He wants our burdens to be light (Mt.11:30), and our trials nothing more than we can handle (1Co.10:13). He is a very present help in the time of trouble (Ps.46:1). There are reasons why we don't experience things this way many times.

One major reason is that we don't recognise our weakness and cling to Him all the time. We think that most of the time we are OK, and that we need God's intervention only once in a while. As a result of such thinking we don't think of God or invite Him into the details of our life every time. We treat Him like a bell boy we can ring for whenever there is some baggage (burdens) to be carried.

But if only we realise how weak we really are, how dependent we really are on Him, and how willing He is always to be by our side and carry us through, we would remember to acknowledge Him in *all* our ways (Pr.3:6). On His part His promise is that if we do this He will make our paths straight for us. But this recognition of our own weakness -- or utter dependence on God -- usually comes only through much failure coming from our own efforts. We find that we cannot do even the things we are good at, for which we have special training and expertise, unless God gives us grace. We are dependent on Him even for our very existence, even the breath in our nostrils or the beating of the heart.

The humble ones who have learned this lesson know the blessing of bringing God into every part of their

lives by acknowledging Him, asking Him for grace and wisdom, and expecting His sovereign control over all things. Brother Lawrence who wrote 'Practising the presence of God' explained how he would ask God for grace every time he was to do something, thank God every time something went well, and acknowledged his own mistakes or God's sovereignty every time something went differently from expectations.

May we learn this lesson and keep on learning to put this into practice. We are all really weak, and our strength is in depending on God.

Pointers along the way #286

Great is your faith

The faith that is being promoted by many preachers is characterised by

'quantity' rather than 'quality.' Many teach faith as a means to get things from God, and the bigger the faith, the bigger the expected return. By this calculation, it requires more faith to get a house than a pair of shoes, and an extremely high level of faith to raise someone from the dead! Preachers try to stir up 'faith' in the hearers by whipping up their emotions, telling them examples of what happened to those who exercised faith, etc. People also try to increase their faith by repeating the promises of God, refusing to entertain negative thoughts or words, focussing on what God has done for others, etc. And when they believe that they have reached the level of faith that is necessary for the expected answer, they say they have faith for such and such a thing. What a distortion and mutilation of faith! Yet this is the only faith that many people know of.

True faith is *in* God (Mt.11:22;Ga.2:20;Ac.26:18). It is a trust and a confidence in God that results in relying on Him in and for everything. It denotes a spiritual relationship with God knowing who He is, the kind of Person He is, what He means to us, etc. This faith helps us to hold on to Him even when things are dark around us, when we don't know what is happening or how things are going to turn out. Job, at the lowest point of his life in a natural sense, held on to this faith that irrespective of what happened to him, he would continue to trust in God (Job.13:15). The three friends of Daniel held on to being faithful towards God even at the risk that God might not save them from the furnace (Da.3:17,18). Jesus found it extremely difficult to bear the fact that His Father had rejected Him on the cross when He bore our sins, but He trusted the Father enough to hand over

His spirit to Him (Mt.27:46;Lk.23:46). This is the faith that pleases God, and without this it is impossible to please Him (He.11:6).

If we have 'great' faith, it means that our confidence in God is great. It shows that God is really great in our eyes. If we say our faith is 'weak,' we may think that we are being humble to admit that our faith cannot accomplish great things. But what we actually imply is that our God is small -- our knowledge of God is small.

There were two occasions when Jesus praised people for the greatness of their faith. When a Roman centurion requested Him to heal his servant who was away at home, Jesus said that He had not seen such a great faith even in Israel (Mt.8:10). What the centurion expressed was his confidence in the authority of Jesus to do whatever He wanted (and not the faith he had to get

this request from Jesus). When a Gentile woman asked Jesus to cast out a demon from her daughter who was at home (Mt.15:28), the greatness of the faith was in believing that Jesus would meet her need even though she did not deserve it. Both had to do with the Person of Jesus rather than the person who made the request.

Let's not say our faith is small. Let's get to know our Lord better.

Pointers along the way #287

Which race are we running?

People say that the whole world is in a rat race, aiming to get ahead in life, pushing other people aside and even trampling on them. The aim is more money and material wealth, higher status, greater name, bigger influence, etc. We Christians object to this race in doctrine, but the chances are that we

are also influenced in our thinking and practice by this same goal, even if we shift our track to 'spiritual' things and 'spiritual' activities while running essentially the same type of race. We tend to forget in the process that God wants us to be engaged in another type of race as His children. *If we are actually running that race, the evidence will be seen in our thinking process -- in terms of planning for it, learning more about how to run it more efficiently, evaluating our progress constantly, etc.* In other words, if we aren't even thinking about this race often, we aren't actually running it even if we accept it doctrinally and make ourselves believe we are into it.

1. This race involves striving against sin (He.12:1-4). Jesus came to save us from our sins (Mt.1:21), not only from its guilt but also its power (Ro.6:14).

If we love Jesus, and we are grateful to Him for giving His life for lifting us from sin, we will be constantly striving to overcome temptations and to stop sinning (1Co.15:34).

2. One goal of this race is to become like Jesus (Ro.8:29). God causes all things to work towards this. Paul, as His master workman, strove to present every man perfect and complete before God (Col.1:28).

3. This race implies fulfilling God's task for us (2Ti.4:7). God has created each of us with a unique combination of abilities and experiences that fits us for the task that He has planned for us on this earth. Whether we labour in 'Christian' or 'secular' work, if we do things as unto the Lord we will glorify Him (1Co.10:31).

4. We will not only keep the goal in view, but also whether we are running

according to the rules (2Ti.2:5). We cannot make our own rules but we must follow the rules of the Race Judge. This includes keeping our testimony upright before God and people (Ac.24:16).

We can see that if we are to run this race and win (complete) it, it would call for a lot of thinking and effort on our part. We need to put our heart and soul into it, and we also need to encourage one another to run purposefully and without giving up (He.3:13). We will have no real chance of completing this race if we are too occupied with other things and have no time even to think about it. We must not forget that while this is a long duration race like the marathon, it is also like an obstacle race, with many things that come up which can stop or hinder us. Our adversary, the Devil, is also lurking around the corners to try

and catch us unawares. But the Holy Spirit is by our side, and Jesus is waiting at the end to receive us.

Let us run this race by choice, and consciously and deliberately. "Be on this earth and do as God wants us to."

What does the word say?

When a man is born again and becomes a Christian, he has the divine nature born into him in a seed form (1Jn.3:9;1Pe.1:23). Even though he has the potential to grow into the fullness of Christ (Ep.4:13), and all things have started to become new (2Co.5:17), it is not automatic that he grows up in his spiritual status nor it is that he understands everything rightly. He has a long way to go in terms of growth, both in knowledge and understanding, and also in his character and nature. One of the things we have to grow in is in terms of our world view. What is our understanding of ourselves, the others and the world, with respect to our purpose, goals, direction, values and ethics that influences our way forward? Where does God fit into this scheme of things, and what importance

does He get in each of these aspects in our thinking and actions?

It is obvious that not all Christians (born again believers) share the same world view. The Bible calls some carnal (living according to fleshly desires), some natural (perhaps decent, 'good' people but living according to reason or feelings) and others 'spiritually minded' (1Co.3:3;2:14;Ro.8:6). The category we fall into is decided by how much we have allowed God to transform our understanding and thinking (Ro.12:2). It is the Bible, the written word of God, revealed to our hearts by the Holy Spirit, that God uses to carry out this transformation in those who long for it and submit to it (1Pe.2:2;2Ti.3:16,17). As we sit under the leadership of the word and practise the things we hear, we get understanding, wisdom and character

(Ps.119:33-36).

But how is it with us in daily life? What do we do when we come face to face with a fork in the road, a crucial issue to decide on, a new teaching, a new idea that is becoming popular in the world, etc.? Do we basically mull over them in our mind considering what we think is right or best, what we *feel* must be right, what the learned men are saying, what the majority of our friends think, etc.? Then it will be no wonder if we slowly get sucked into the carnal or natural world view.

Shouldn't we first of all think, "What does God say in His word?" If His word is clear on the issue shouldn't that settle things for us? If things are still not clear, shouldn't we prayerfully seek to apply the values and principles in His word to our practical issues? It doesn't matter if we take time to come to conclusions, but we need to be sure

we are on the right track.

When Satan tries to squeeze us into the world's mould, and less and less Christians seem to be fighting to keep their heads clear, shouldn't *we* hold up the testimony? Why are we so afraid to displease our friends or colleagues in the workplace and not at all concerned about pleasing our Lord and honouring Him? Surely our strength is small, but we shall stand in His strength. Even if our outward circumstances limit our actions, we don't need to let that twist our inner being and our thoughts (2Co.4:16).

**Blind belief can lead us
astray**

The Devil is a liar, and also a deceiver. Once he sees that we have slipped out of his hands over to God's side, he will redouble his efforts to tell us lies and deceive us. He does this so cleverly that we think we are following the truth (2Co.11:14)! The problem is that when we hear something that appears to be true (especially when it is quoted from the Bible), we don't take care to think about it further and check it out. One such lie is thinking that using reason is against faith. We think it is great to 'believe without seeing' (Jn.20:29). Reason is something God has created us with, and found to be 'good' at creation. But it is bad if we use reason to object to things God tells us. What we should do is to remember that

because we trust God we can accept everything He tells us without questioning, even if we cannot understand them. It is a question of whether we trust Him or not. But it is very much necessary for us to use our reason to try and understand what He has said, because if we take something without proper understanding it could lead us astray.

Consider, as an example, someone saying we should give thanks for everything that happens to us because God will cause them to work for our good, quoting Ro.8:28. They can also quote 1Th.5:18 where it tells us to give thanks in everything. But *think* for a moment. Does God want us to give thanks for any of the thousands of evil things that may happen to us or our family? NO.

First of all, Ro.8:28 doesn't even tell us to give thanks for everything. What

it does say is that even when bad things happen to us, if we love God and respond to God in the right way, God will cause even those things to work out something good for us. All that happens to us is not good. We cannot give thanks for the bad things. But when such things happen we can thank God that He is there with us to make something good to come out of even those things.

We mustn't also forget that God cannot automatically work things for our good if we don't cooperate with Him. We make the difference by thankfulness or complaining.

1Th.5:18 does not tell us to give thanks *for* everything, but *in*. How can we give thanks in every situation? Not for the situation itself but for God who is always with us, planning good for us, and overruling bad things that happen to us. If we were to give thanks for evil

situations, we would be thanking the Devil, evil people and the corruption that is in the world through sin.

This teaches us to be careful about what we believe, especially these days when there is a lot of wrong teaching and practice. We cannot just accept what Bible teachers tell us (1Th.5:21). We want to believe what the Bible says. But then we must also make sure we understand it correctly. It is our responsibility not only to study the Bible but also to understand it right.

A lie behind every temptation

When Satan comes to us with a temptation, he slips in a lie along with the offer of 'reward' for yielding to the temptation. We may be so much enamoured with the 'offer' that we may fail to detect the lie. But it is the lie that should expose the nature of the temptation to us, and when we fail to notice it we make ourselves vulnerable.

One of Satan's most common lies is what is usually referred to as 'the lie' because of its prominent use. When he tempted Eve to disobey God and eat the forbidden fruit, he told her, "You won't die" (Ge.3:4). This was a blatant lie, openly contradicting God's word to Adam and Eve, that they would 'die' if they ate from that tree (2:17). But when Eve got hooked by the offer of Satan to

make her like God, she totally forgot God's word and believed Satan's lie.

When Jesus was tempted to turn a stone into bread, the implied lie was that He could be sure He was the Son of God only if He could perform miracles. God the Father had just announced that Jesus was His beloved Son when Jesus was baptised. Jesus countered this lie by saying that man had to live by every word he heard from God. When Satan suggested that Jesus should jump off from the pinnacle of the temple to demonstrate how the Father would take care of Him, the lie was more subtle. Satan was quoting a verse out of context from the Bible to show that God would protect Jesus, when the truth was that God's protection would only apply when we were doing what He wanted us to do. Jesus replied, in effect, that if He applied that verse arbitrarily to

anything outside of God's will He would be putting God to a test. The next temptation was to suggest that Jesus could win the whole world if He would bow down before Satan. Of course Jesus had come to win the world for God. But if He bowed to Satan the world would not have been won for God! Also, what Satan was offering was the glory of the world, and why Jesus had come was to save the people in the world. We must see that Jesus overcame each temptation not merely by quoting Scripture, as if there was some magic power in the words of the Scripture, but by countering the lies through the use of the truth in the Scripture.

How many times Satan has told us, "No one will know"! Even when no one on earth knows what we do, we know that God knows. If God knows what we are doing, what advantage is

it to us if people don't know about it? How many times Satan has fooled us into thinking that 'nothing would happen' (a common variation of "You will not die") even though the truth is that every time we sin we 'die'! How many time we are tempted to bend some law so that we can make a quick buck or gain some advantage over others! We forget then that such 'treasures' will be eaten up one day by moth and worms!

The Holy Spirit wants to warn us when we go off to the right or left (Is.30:21). He is the one who will expose Satan's lies. He can do it effectively if we are filled with the Word in our heart and mind.

Pointers along the way #291

Dealing with personal financial problems

A lot of preaching deals with financial problems with one standard answer -- learn to give (Lk.6:38). What you need to do, they say, is to give a 'seed' money and wait for the hundredfold harvest! Won't God honour your faith when you give from your little, trusting Him to do a miracle for you? You are so desperate you are willing to do anything to get out of your tight spot, even to borrow money and send it to the address on the screen! But one wonders if you are doing this in faith or as a step of desperate bargaining.

Sometimes our loving Father looks at our desperate condition and sends us a miracle when we cry to Him. He doesn't wait to get our theological views right first or correct us in different ways before He shows us His

grace. He loves us and wants to help us. But when He shows mercy to someone like this, it is not as if He is confirming that everything else in right in his life. This is just an emergency relief sent out to tide over the present need.

These days it seems to be unkind to suggest to a needy person that perhaps he should cut down on his expenses. These are days when what used to be considered as 'wants' are considered as 'needs' without which life is unthinkable! How can we live without that brand of shoes, or how can we wear last year's dress again? How can people of our status drive that model of car (or whatever applies)? What would people say if my cell phone can't play videos? And so we keep buying and buying until the financial burden crushes us. Greed and covetousness, like the horizon, deceive

us to think we are almost there.

Credit cards are very useful when we use them instead of cash to buy things for which we already have the money in the bank. But when we start imagining that somehow money will come by the time we have to pay up, we fall into the vicious cycle of borrowing and then borrowing to pay back what we have borrowed. Taking things on instalments instead of saving up till we have enough money is another scheme that makes us live in unreality.

While our desire to have more and more drives us towards ruin, it is the issue of people's opinion that makes it practically impossible for us to see clearly which our essential needs are and which of our wants can be put away, at least till there is more money with us. It starts at school age when kids just can't bear not to have the

things their friends have. When indulgent parents don't have the time to instruct them about the realities of life they won't know how to handle money even when they grow up.

The way back out of the devil's snare is usually painful and slow, even though we can pray for miracles. We have to eat the humble pie, acknowledge we have done wrong, and make what look like sacrifices to get on the recovery road. They aren't sacrifices but lifesavers. It is best not to get to there in the first place. But if we have, drastic measures are required to get out. We have to learn to put away our cravings and choose the way of life (Pr.10:3,4).

Pointers along the way #292

Determined not to sin

When a man is born again, he gets a change of heart inside. He no longer wants to continue to sin as he used to, but he wants to stop sinning and start pleasing God. This is the result of God's seed (1Jn.3:9) beginning to grow inside him. Earlier he enjoyed sin, but now he doesn't *want* to. It is not that he stops falling into sin altogether, but he doesn't *want* to. The elderly apostle John said that this was a mark of a child of God (v.6-10). The new born Christian is of course not able to overcome all temptations or be victorious all the time because he is weak as a baby and needs to grow in grace and in the knowledge of the Lord. God knows this very well. He wants to save us from our sins and He doesn't want us to sin, but He has made provision for us to confess our sins and

receive forgiveness (1Jn.2:1,2;1:9).

One danger we face after we have come to know the doctrine of unmerited favour from God and His unlimited love and mercy is that we slowly allow ourselves to lower our guard against sin. Satan helps us in this direction by warning us (as if he is an angel of light) that we shouldn't be legalistic about the commandments of God. But when we are not "watching and praying lest we should fall into temptation" (Mt.26:41) we fall! Temptation comes unexpectedly and in subtle ways, and we are caught off guard. We may fall not only because of this, but this is one of the main reasons why we fall, and one that Jesus has specially warned us about.

A well known military saying is, "In times of peace, prepare for war." Times of peace are when training gets done, equipment is bought or

refurbished, strategies are learned and tested, enemies are studied and analysed, etc. Most of us don't do this in our spiritual life. We tend to go on living just like every one else around us, and call on God only when we face a calamity. Our spiritual muscles don't get exercised, and our spiritual alertness cools down.

Let us make a distinction between severe calamities that force us to go to God and the daily temptations that trouble us in daily life. In our daily life we are tempted to tell lies, react in anger or irritation, become anxious, jealous or bitter, entertain lustful looks or thoughts, etc. Some of us may not even think of such things as temptations to sin! We aren't going to be able to overcome such temptations if we aren't determined to. But if we are determined to fight against temptations and overcome them, then

we will also get into the habit of watching and praying.

This is not just about praying. It is a whole attitude set against sin. This will lead to preparations against temptation -- getting to know God better, hearing His voice more clearly, understanding His mind and His ways better, understanding more about our own weaknesses and special tendencies towards sin, learning how others have managed to cope with temptations, etc.

We can't hope to get much further on this way if we have no time to 'spare' for such things!

How 'almighty' is our God?

If we are asked to describe God, we may come out with words such as omnipotent, omniscient and omnipresent before saying how He loves us, forgives us, cares and provides for us, etc. Perhaps many Christians relate more to God's character such as His love and grace, than to His essential being in terms of being almighty, etc. Otherwise how is it that some find it difficult to actually believe the supernatural things the Bible reports He has done? Do we find it hard to believe that God could create the world and everything in it as the Bible says? Or that He destroyed the world through a flood? That He actually parted a sea and stopped a river from flowing? That He stopped the sun for about a day for Joshua? That He can heal the sick with a word

and raise people from the dead? Etc.

There is nothing wrong in seeking to find detailed explanations of how He did things. We are happy when scientific or archaeological discoveries corroborate the Bible. But when we try to find out natural explanations so as to avoid having to believe that He did anything supernatural, we are actually catering to unbelief in God as God. In other words, instead of believing in God who created everything out of nothing, who created all the laws of nature which we are only discovering little by little, and who has the ability to outperform those laws temporarily for any reason (Ps.115:3), we are trying to configure a god who is just a little bigger than a man.

If someone discovers Noah's ark, that is great. But if no ark is found, will it shatter our faith in God? Do we need

NASA's computers to tell us that there is a missing day in history when God made the sun to stand still? (Incidentally, this NASA story is a hoax.) Why is it difficult for us to believe that God can easily pause all planetary and stellar movements for some time and resume normal operations afterwards? Can't He stop the earth from rotating, without everything on the surface being thrown off because of the momentum? How almighty do we think our God is?

The sad fact is that if we cannot believe in a really almighty God, it is also difficult to believe everything about His character. How can we be sure He will keep His promises? How can we believe He hears our prayers even if all the billions of people in the world are praying at the same time? How can we believe He knows the number of hairs on each one of our

heads, and also what is happening in every cell in our bodies, what we are thinking of every moment, our motives and intentions, etc? How can we believe He can turn around for our good everything that happens to us?

It is the clever ones who think they can understand everything who think God has to be explained before they can believe in Him. The simple ones who know Him through personal experience are not looking for explanations. Yet the clever ones think they are helping the simple ones to believe by creating natural explanations to bring supernatural things to natural levels!

True grace is a dangerous doctrine!

It's dangerous not because it isn't true, but because it's incredibly attractive and blatantly open to misuse. Perhaps this danger prevents many preachers from proclaiming it as it is, not wanting to be responsible for unwittingly leading their hearers into error. But it also causes many of God's people from experiencing its full blessings.

This fear is justified. Many, in fact quite a lot of God's people, are already into the error of taking the grace of God cheaply by taking sin lightly (Ro.6:15;He.10:29). We tend to be careless in temptation when we know there is forgiveness. Paul's question was, "Can we take sin lightly because grace gives us forgiveness and free acceptance?" He answers it himself

with a resounding, "God forbid!"

Under the law we try to keep up with God's standards hoping to get His blessings or avoid His wrath. But what do we do now when our acceptance is not based on our performance at all (Ro.3:28) but is a free gift from God (Ep.2:8,9)? If He showed mercy to us when we were sinners, how much more when we are His children (He.8:12)! Now He will *never* forsake us (He.13:5). Yet it doesn't mean that we can sin with impunity. Sin is still *sin* for which God's righteousness demands death, and the only way it can be forgiven is through the blood of Jesus. We can confess our sins and He will forgive us (1Jn.1:9), but it is not something that we can take for granted because if we go on sinning wilfully we will ultimately reach a point of no return (He.10:26).

On one hand grace is so free, generous

and wide that we don't need to be worried about our acceptance with God. On the other hand it is not as if sin doesn't really matter for us, because it did cost God the death of His Son. On one hand we aren't trying to appease God by trying to be good, but on the other hand we try our best to be pleasing to God because we love Him (Jn.14:15). It is only in this balance that grace ceases to be dangerous and becomes the greatest blessing that God has given us. If we lose this balance we go wrong and suffer the consequence of losing out on true grace.

We can test ourselves to see if we have understood true grace and experienced it in our life. Just see how confident we are about God's acceptance of us. Any hesitation to approach God in prayer because we feel we aren't fit enough for it shows that we haven't

understood what true grace is. On the other hand if we are hard towards the faults we see in others and find it difficult to overlook them it is clear that we haven't actually 'experienced' this grace in our personal life even if we agree with the doctrine.

God's grace is not just about unmerited favour towards us even though this is what we see first and what changes our entire life. Grace also refers to the 'enabling power' that God gives us in life's situations to behave in a godly manner. He.4:16 refers to grace as 'help' in our time of need. When we say, "By God's grace," we refer both to His favour and His help, and acknowledge our helplessness without Him.

The problem with being radical

I remember a young brother telling me how he believed in total health being God's will for everyone, quoting 3Jn.1:2. He challenged me by saying that if I didn't believe that verse I should tear it off from my Bible! The problem was not just in misquoting that verse, but a certain revelling in being radical. Certainly there is need to be radical in believing and acting on what we believe, but we tend to go wrong when we blow up a certain part of a truth to make it out of proportion to the rest of revealed truth. Or, if we focus on some aspect of truth without taking into account what the whole Bible says about that subject we become like some present day activists who are willing to let people get killed in the process of ensuring that trees are not

destroyed!

'Radical Christians' usually take proof texts in the Bible to stand valid universally, for all time and in their own right irrespective of what other parts of the Bible and common experience indicate. This is to essentially give the word a precision to mean exactly what it says as if it is a scientific equation, and validity as if it is a legal document. The word of God was not *intended* to be read in a scientific or legal manner but as a revelation from God to man in human words. The word of God is true, and its meaning is infallible. But its meaning is more than what the words imply, and one needs to understand the local context as well as the whole context of the Bible before one can get the real spirit of each verse or passage.

"Train up a child in the way he should go, even when he is old he will not

depart from it" (Pr.22:6). This is a proverb which expresses a general truth, and its intention is to exhort parents to pay attention to the training of their children, rather than to give a promise. Which parent can take this as an infallible fact, because he has to first make sure that he has trained his child perfectly before he can claim the result! The sad thing is when some children of godly parents go astray and some radical Christian assumes that they have failed in their training. Their godliness is unquestionable, and they have also done their best in bringing up their children. But some children still go astray because of several other reasons. But the radical Christian says, "Let God's word be true and every man a liar!"

It turns out that many such 'radical' Christians are targeting other people who don't come up to their self-created

standards, without recognising how they themselves are actually falling short in their own lives in many aspects (Ro.2:1;Jas.2:10,11).

To be a true Christian is to love God above everyone and everything else and to love everyone else with the same love that God has shown towards us. When we love God we will strive to keep every one of His commandments (Jn.14;15), without being unrealistic or arrogant about it.

What *is* a normal Christian life?

Is it one where we spend at least 2 hours a day in prayer and reading the Bible? Does every normal Christian share the gospel with at least one person a day? Is it wrong to read a novel or watch a movie? Is it abnormal for Christians to have feelings of anger, sadness, fear or worry?

Perhaps we should first differentiate among 'normal', 'ideal' and 'common.' If we equate 'ideal' with 'normal' we create an unrealistic demand on us. If we equate 'normal' with 'common' we may water down the standards of God. The ideal Christian is one we all ought to aim at being, the perfection we ought to press on to (He.6:1). While we press on we also recognise that we are not going to be 'perfect' as long as we have this flesh. On the other hand we

also recognise that the Christian life that is commonly seen is neither the ideal one nor what we *ought* to have or is *possible* to have with God's grace because it is sub-standard. So let us define 'normal' Christian life as something that God really expects us to have and which is within our reach.

The normal Christian life cannot be uniform for all Christians! This is because our own ministry calling places certain special requirements on our aims, burdens, preferences and behaviour. An evangelist has goals of winning people for Christ and he may very well think that he should share the gospel with at least one person every day. But is that something everyone can do? Can a mother with small children be expected to spend two hours in Bible study which a Bible teacher enjoys? But are there some things that are common for all who live a 'normal'

Christian life?

An active relationship with Jesus is the primary characteristic of a normal Christian. This involves constant interaction, whatever we may be doing on earth. Even when we are doing purely earthly things such as eating or drinking we can be in touch with Him (1Co.10:31). This relationship is constantly nourished through reading the Bible, prayer, thinking about Him, asking Him questions, casting our burdens upon Him, asking Him for help, etc.

A desire to be pleasing to Him at all times controls our entire planning, decisions and behaviour. We don't want to sin against Him, and we constantly want to express our gratitude and love for Him in different ways. We do feel the normal emotions just like other people, which in themselves are not wrong, but because

we want to be pleasing to God we are always learning how to do things better and better.

We want others also to know our Lord and Saviour. How we do this depends on our special calling, opportunities, etc. Some do it directly and openly, and others do it indirectly, making use of opportunities.

In brief, a normal Christian is different from others in terms of his heart, his desires, his values, etc. But what he *does* can vary greatly from person to person. One big problem we have is to want others to be like us, and one mark of maturity is to accept others as they are.

Pointers along the way #297

Why pray and read the Bible?
"You are reading the Bible and praying so much. But still you have many

problems and you are also not perfect," people tell Christians. Yes, it is true what they say, but that is not to say that we need not pray or read the Bible. A lot of people pray or do religious exercises to avoid trouble and to ensure a smooth life. But trouble still comes. God doesn't promise a trouble free life here on earth even to His children (Jn.16:33), and His Son Jesus didn't have it easy either! No amount of prayer or spiritual rigour can ensure a trouble free life. What Jesus promises is even though we will have trouble, He will be with us to take us through.

And we aren't going to become perfect either, while on earth. We are in a process of development and growth, and we shall be making mistakes even with the best of intentions (Jas.3:2). People have a way of looking at us with microscopes when we profess to be children of God, and they are quick

to point out when we fall. We can take these taunts as reminders to walk closer to the Lord, but we needn't lose our sleep over them.

But we go on reading the Bible, praying and seeking the Lord more and more earnestly as we see our own weaknesses and need. We need these to sustain and hold us up, and we also need to know the Lord better and walk closer with Him as times become more difficult (2Ti.3:1). It is our great privilege to know Him personally, and it is our relationship with Him that means everything to us. He is our strength and it is to Him that we run in the time of our need. Without Him we are weak and helpless, and we cling to Him for life itself. And it is through constant interactions with Him through prayer, reading His word, etc., that we grow in this relationship.

Christian life is like pedalling up a hill

on a bicycle. If we stop pedalling, we begin to slide down; we can't stand still. When we don't progress closer towards the Lord each day, backsliding is always close to us, much closer than we imagine.

People who don't care so much for prayer or reading the Bible are already on the slide down, without realising it. Their minds are getting away from the Lord and getting to be driven by human opinions, their own feelings, etc. They may think everything is alright when things are going smoothly. But they will suddenly recognise their spiritual poverty when trouble hits them. Then they will rush to their friends (who had been praying and reading the Bible seriously) for help like the foolish virgins to the wise ones in the parable (Mt.25:1). The foolish and the wise virgins both knew that the bridegroom was coming and that they would need

oil for their lamps. But the foolish ones imagined that everything would turn out OK anyway.

When we prepare ourselves spiritually, facing trouble is not our first goal, even though that is what many are concerned about. What we want is to get to know this lovely Person that our Lord is, and to enjoy our fellowship with Him better and better.

Pointers along the way #298

Who is our brother?

One day when someone told Jesus that His mother and brothers wanted to meet Him, He said that it was those who did His Father's will who were really His mother, brother or sister (Mt.12:48-50). Some have concluded from this that once they became children of God, they should only consider other born again people as their 'relatives.' Some even go to the extent of refusing all close contacts with anyone other than children of God, including family members.

That Jesus didn't mean annulling of earthly relationships in favour of heavenly relationships is clear from the fact that He took special care for His mother after His death (Jn.19:26,27). God also says that if anyone did not take care of his own family he would be worse than

unbelievers (1Ti.5:8). But Jesus did indicate here that He valued the fellowship of those who did the will of God more than of anyone else. In His priority, Jesus considered doing the will of His Father as more important than anything else (Jn.4:34), and those who did the Father's will more than the others.

We are also to do good to *all* men, and *especially* to the disciples of Jesus (Ga.6:10). While this shows us the priority for the disciples over unbelievers, it points out that we are not to shut off our heart towards unbelievers by saying that they are not in our priority list! Otherwise we would be very narrow minded compared to God who does good *even to the wicked* (Mt.5:45)! If we loved only the lovable (other disciples) and kept out other needy ones, how would they ever see the gospel in action and

turn to the Lord (Mt.5:16)?

Isn't it challenging for us to see that when a lawyer questioned Jesus about loving one's neighbour by raising the issue of who his neighbour was, Jesus mentioned a Samaritan, an outcast in the sight of the Jews, as the good man who showed mercy to His neighbour (Lk.10:33)? Jesus could have taught us the same lesson about showing mercy to those in need without bringing this additional factor. But He also wanted to break this Jewish prejudice, just as ours with regard to 'these unbelievers' (Lk.18:11).

Can we make a difference between 'brothers in Christ' and other human beings who have also been created in the image of God and are in that sense our 'brothers and sisters'? Of course we see a difference in terms of their relationship with God, and we need to deal differently with them in that

respect. We should also avoid marriage and such close ties with unbelievers (2Co.6:14). But can we withhold mercy and goodness from unbelievers? Can we afford to be angry with unbelievers (Mt.5:22), or don't we need to care about their grievances against us (v.23)?

So who *are* our brothers? We see that in many respects we are all brothers in the world, and it may be our openness towards them that will ultimately win them for Christ. But at the same time if we don't recognise a difference between believers and unbelievers in terms of our fellowship, we may also defile ourselves.

Pointers along the way #299

Why do we call Jesus 'Lord'?

Many times we use familiar language without realising what we mean. We

call Jesus 'Lord' and refer to Him like that as if that is just His name. Jesus once asked the people, "Why do you call Me 'Lord, Lord,' and do not do what I say?" (Lk.6:46). He went on to tell the story of one who built his house on the rock and the other who built on the sand, and explained that building on the rock meant hearing Him and then doing what He said, and building on the sand meant just hearing and not doing what He said (vv.47-49). So it is meaningless for us to call Him 'Lord' if we aren't doing, or even planning to do, what He says.

This can be a common problem for those who have grown up with the Gospel, who have always believed what Jesus said, and therefore consider themselves to be believers. They may have never come to crossroads in their lives where they had to choose between Jesus and something else they

wanted or give up anything for Jesus' sake. They have assumed they have 'faith' even though it has not been tested and shown to be genuine (1Pe.1:7). Many others who have only heard the good times gospel and accepted Jesus as one who would take care of all their needs, without seeing themselves as sinners, repenting and going to the Saviour, may also have never thought much of Jesus as Lord of their lives.

But Jesus *is* Lord, and not just a lord but the Lord of lords and the King of kings (Rev.19:16). He is the one who created the whole universe, and nothing was made without Him (Jn.1:3;Col.1:16). One day everyone is going to have to acknowledge Him as Lord and bow before Him (Php.2:10,11). One day everyone has to stand before His judgment and give an account for even every word (2Co.5:10;Mt.12:36). Jesus is not the

goody-goody genie who has to come running when we call, or the indulgent benefactor who never asks any questions. We ought to stand before Him in awe and respect.

While we honour and respect Him as our Lord and Master, we don't have to live in fear of judgment, because our sins have been already dealt with on the cross. We have boldness to enter into the most holy place with the blood of Jesus (He.10:19) and have fellowship with the Most High as our Father.

The Gospel has two sides. From God's side it is a great expression of love and undeserved mercy to sinners. From our side it is an access by grace to the almighty and exalted God who is to be loved, honoured and obeyed. We cannot have this access without acknowledging how far above us He is, how undeserving we are, and how

we ought to tremble before Him and yet exult in His mercy and grace.

Let us make this clear choice now. If we want Jesus as our Saviour we must also recognise His lordship over us. Otherwise we don't even recognise Jesus for who He is, and all our so-called faith is hollow.

On the other hand, why don't we yield ourselves completely to Him and submit ourselves to His lordship? Then we can truly enjoy the blessings of His love, wisdom and power that He has for those who believe and obey.

What makes God happy with us?

Is it how much money we give? Is it how much we read the Bible or pray, how busy we are in serving Him, how many others we have led to Him, or how holy we have become?

All these things are good. But the fact is that all of them can be done with wrong motives. If we measure ourselves by these we may see how 'important' we are, or how much greater we are in comparison to the others. But how does God think about us?

At one time I used to think of what the Bible says about Jesus, how the Father anointed Him greatly because Jesus loved righteousness and hated sin so much (He.1:9). I thought that was the way to go -- fight hard against sin in

my life and work for a holy life. That was fine, except that the more holy I wanted to be, the more ugly I found myself to be inside (Ro.7:21). I was corrupt inside, even though I was born again, didn't want to sin, and wanted to serve God. This is the flesh (Greek *sarx*, and not *soma*, the body), in which dwells nothing good (v.18), even though I have the *new man* also in me as a child of God!

I was really puzzled and perplexed by the fact that God called David a man after His own heart *long after* he had committed adultery and murder (Ac.13:22)! All the explanation I could find from scholars was that David acknowledged his sin immediately after God confronted him through Nathan the prophet. I could see that this was certainly an admirable and rare characteristic. But still it didn't completely satisfy my heart or mind on

this issue. Then as I was reading something it just struck my mind that David was special in God's heart because God was the delight of David's heart! It was a love relationship!

Imagine reading the Bible to fulfil our duty, to get some promise for ourselves, to get a word to preach to others, etc., and think of reading it to get to know more of this God we love! Think of giving our money because we want our name in the list or on the plaque announcing what we gave (the modern equivalent of the Pharisee's trumpet -- Mt.6:2), and because we want others to know Him! What if we are working hard serving the Lord because we want to head the institution before long, and not because His burden is heavy on our heart too? And what is so great if we become known as 'great saints' because of our holiness

and we secretly think we are greater than all the others?

It wasn't so with David. The Lord was everything to David. He was the One David used to think of day and night, like a man in love, so much so that songs (psalms) just overflowed. The Lord was his strength, help, fortress into which he would run in trouble, friend with whom he would share his heart and the instructor who would guide his path. David had such close fellowship with Him and the resulting trust enabled him to go against bears, lions and Goliaths without fear. God delighted in David because David delighted in Him! David's heart was so much in tune with God's that God gave him that rare certificate!

About the author

Jacob Ninan (b. 1948), has master's degrees in engineering, and counselling and psychotherapy. He retired in 2008 from the Indian Space Research Organisation as the Programme Director for international cooperation. 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 joined the editorial board of the Christian magazine Light of Life in 2008, and is currently contributing as editor, writer and web master. Jacob Ninan has been married to Susan for 40 years. They stay in Bangalore, and they have five grown up children and six grandchildren.

You may contact the author at jninan@c-n-c.org

-

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, after completing 600 messages through the grace of God, they have been compiled into six 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 at the web site.