



Pointers along the way

Devotionals that
make you think

Vol. 4

Jacob Ninan

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Author: Jacob Ninan

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Pointers along the way #301

To the rich!

Let us define the rich as those who have more than they need, and the poor as those who lack what they need. This places all who are reading this in the category of the rich. Then let us see what God would have us to do.

God recognises that there would always be poor and needy people in this world (Mt.26:11). So He tells us to do something about it. He tells the rich essentially not to place our trust in our wealth but in God, and to be generous towards the poor (1Ti.6:17-19). The principle behind sharing is that those who have can supply the needs of those who don't have, working towards equality (2Co.8:13,14).

But we know that this is easy to state, but there are philosophical and

practical dilemmas in carrying it out. We recognise immediately that none of us can remove all the needs in this world, and we may even give up trying. This is when a story can help.

One man went to the beach one morning and found thousands of starfish that had been washed ashore at night. They would all die on the beach. He thought about his helplessness and went on to muse about all the problems of the world. Then he saw a boy picking up the fish one by one and throwing them into the sea. He asked, "What difference will it make, you silly boy?" The boy threw another starfish and said, "It made a difference to that one, didn't it?"

We think of the big problems of the world that we can't handle, and don't even do the small things we can. We hide behind excuses and entirely shirk the responsibility God places on us.

Thus we fail to be the light and salt of this world God wants us to be, and we fail to draw attention to God and what He has done in us (Mt.5:16).

God may ask just a few to 'sell all that they have and give to the poor' (Mt.19:21). Disciples who recognise that all that they have belongs to the Lord will be willing to do this. But God asks everyone to be compassionate towards the needy and to give cheerfully from what they have (2Co.9:7). Each of us needs to decide how much we want to give (2Co.8:1,2) and who to give to, keeping in mind that we would also receive blessings proportionately (2Co.9:6).

If we aren't able to give directly to those in need, we can identify reliable agencies that are helping out in areas we are concerned about. I would also like to make a practical suggestion to think about and follow. Even those

who hesitate to make big sacrifices in giving can find ways of doing what they can! For example, suppose we are planning to spend X for something we need, and instead we manage to find a cheaper option and spend only Y which will still meet our need. We can set aside $X-Y$ for the needy. If we think of the many needs in the world, we may even decide not to spend for certain things as we would have, and then keep away X itself for the needy. What we need is just a sense of responsibility.

When we love

When people say they love someone, in most cases it means that they like something in the other person that makes them happy. Perhaps the other person's looks and behaviour are pleasing to them, or the other person does something for them. In other words, the others meet their needs. Don't we realise that this kind of 'love' is essentially selfish and self-centred? Yet even among many 'Christians' this is the only kind of love that is going around.

This love has its problems. When the other person doesn't do what we expect, love grows cold. When the other person does something that hurts us, this love turns into hatred!

Then we look at another kind of love that God has for us and which God

wants us to have towards the others. Isn't that totally opposite to the love we usually think of? His love loves the 'unlovely' and the 'unlovable.' He loves sinners and even His enemies. He shows mercy and goodness to those who deserve the very opposite. He forgives the worst of sins and accepts people as if they were saints. He puts behind past sins without gloating over them again and again. He gives good things both to the wicked and the righteous. He is patient even when a sinner slips up for the umpteenth time and is always on the lookout to run to someone who turns to Him.

Unbelievable love! If God simply asked us to have this love towards the others it would have been ridiculous because it would be impossible for us to love like that. But God first showed us that love Himself, and then He puts that love in our heart (Ro.5:5). Then

we are empowered to love others like He does.

Many of us make the mistake of trying to love others like God does without having gone at first to the source of that love. And we cannot just walk in and ask Him for that love, until we are willing to acknowledge our selfishness and lack of love (repent, in other words) and worship Him (fall at His feet and surrender to Him) in love and thankfulness (Is.30:15). Then He takes away the old heart of stone and gives us a heart of flesh (Ez.36:26). That is when we begin to be able to love others in this new way.

Once we taste this love, the old love becomes something to be spat out. We wonder how we could have imagined that we loved others when all we had was selfishness in disguise. Actually we were looking for this new kind of love from the others, while we

ourselves were giving them the old kind of love!

When we love with this new love others will know we are His disciples (Jn.13:35), because only such can love like this. What the world needs are people who have this love.

Let us put away the old love whenever it comes up in us, and replace it with love that comes from God (Ep.4:21-24). Then we will be happy ourselves and we can also make others happy.

Pointers along the way #303

Serving in style

Most people live for themselves, but a few do serve the others. But to serve is not enough, but we are to serve as Jesus did. Some people serve expecting to get appreciation and applause, some look for service in return when they need it and some seek for blessings from God as a reward. But when we want to serve like Jesus did, it is not enough to ask, "What would Jesus do?" but also "How would Jesus do?" *Being* like Jesus has to come before *doing* like Jesus.

Even though Jesus was Teacher and Lord, He took the initiative to wash His disciples' feet (Jn.13:12-15). He needn't even have *demand*ed it but He could have just *suggest*ed it and He could have got one of the disciples to do it. Sure, He did it this time to make an example of it, but this was just His

style, always serving His people, us. He came down from heaven to serve us, and His life was spent serving (Jn.4:34).

Why do we hesitate to serve? Do we think it is beneath our status? Somebody *else* should do it? If we do it, people will expect us to do it the next time also? People will lose their respect for us and sit on our head? Isn't it someone else's job? The problem is not with all these questions, but that we just don't have Jesus' mind and style.

Jesus never thought that serving was something lowly or demeaning. In His kingdom, the one who serves most is the greatest (Mk.9:35). Those who wait to be served are unfit there. That is why His style is different from that of this world. Another thing is that in His kingdom, even those this world would consider as 'the least' would be just as valuable as Jesus Himself. If

we serve any of them, it would be just the same as serving Him (Mt.25:40). When we consider someone else as lowly because of his social or financial status, colour, community, race, etc., it shows we are far away from Jesus' mind and style.

Jesus considered serving as being greater and more valuable than His own comfort or pleasure. That is why He came down to us. When we consider it 'a great sacrifice' to deny ourselves and serve the others and do not see it as something greatly valuable we again demonstrate that we don't have the mind of Christ (Php.2:5-7).

Serving is the lifestyle in Jesus' kingdom. The more we learn it the more we make ourselves comfortable in the kingdom.

Jesus never allowed anyone to bully Him or 'sit on His head.' He was

always in control. He knew where to draw the line and how to do it. *He served because He wanted to do good to the others.* He did it differently at different times, sometimes in the form of a servant and sometimes acting with authority. But it was always with the good of the others as His goal. That is where we have to be basically transformed, from seeking our own good to seeking others' good. It is a change of mind that we need, and not just a change of action. The more we are able to consider the others as more important than ourselves (Php.2:3 NASB), the more our actions will also fall in line.

Pointers along the way #304

What is on our mind?

We know that we are not what we do or speak, because these are specially tuned by our circumstances. But we are

what we think. That is, what we think in our mind, hidden from others, is a picture of what we really are. The desires we cherish, the goals we work towards, the motives behind our words and actions, the reasons for our choices -- all these define who we really are. Our final judgment is going to be based on not just what we have done or said (2Co.5:10;Mt.12:36), but essentially on our motives and intentions (1Co.4:5). If we know that God keeps a record of all that we have ever done or said in this life, we can be sure that He knows also our reasons behind those deeds and words (Ps.139:1-4). This comforts us on one side when we think of the times we have been misunderstood by people and we know how God understand us. On the other hand it tells us that we cannot hide behind 'good' deeds and words when our heart hasn't been right.

What is the special characteristic, in this context, of a disciple of Jesus? That he is occupied in his mind with His Master. He wants to know more and more what His Master likes and wants him to do, and he is waiting to hear His call. His attitude is, "Speak, Lord. Your servant is listening" (1Sa.3:10). Jesus contrasted the way the people of this world set their mind on earthly things and how His disciples would seek God's kingdom and His righteousness *first* (Mt.6:32,33). In other words, God and His interests are uppermost in a disciple's mind.

We make a terrible mistake if we imagine that seeking God *first* is a good thing but really only for special godly people. What are *we* supposed to be? His special people, chosen from among the people of the world to be His kings and priests with the task of

proclaiming His excellences (1Pe.2:9)! If we think this is nice doctrine but hardly to be practised, we deceive ourselves. Something is lacking in our relationship with God.

I am not trying to imply that everything we do or say will be perfect if we are disciples of Jesus. Remember, we are *disciples*, still learning. But what I am saying is that our motives and intentions should be in the right direction. We may fall at times, but good intentions and motives should be the general characteristic of our life as disciples of Jesus.

What does this imply in practical terms? That we are constantly seeking to know what God wants from us, what He thinks about us, how we can do things better, etc. These are the things that occupy our mind and heart. This is what it means to love God with all our heart, mind and strength.

We are still on this earth, and there are lots of things we need to do down here. This needs lots of thinking, planning, doing, etc., on our part, which all take a lot of our time. This is unavoidable, and there is nothing wrong in it. Be we can have all these things as sub-agendas in our main agenda of serving God, can't we?

Let us all be *true* disciples of Jesus, and not just in doctrine.

Pointers along the way #305

Is it OK to disagree?

No one likes others to disagree with them. Some people think that to disagree with someone is a mark of disrespect or pride. To question someone in authority would be unthinkable? Is it better to bury our disagreement than to risk displeasure?

The fact is, nobody agrees 100% with anyone else. None of us knows everything or does everything right. Sometimes we are right and sometimes the others are right. One secret of maturity is to recognise this, accept this, and be willing to change our opinions as soon as we find we were wrong. There is nothing demeaning in thinking we were wrong, because whether we like it or not, we *are* wrong many times. Even the apostle James acknowledged that he often made mistakes (Jas.3:2). To

acknowledge that we make mistakes and to admit them when we make them is to be real and upright. Our mistakes do not make us less than human, because all of us make mistakes. They only demonstrate the fact that we are not perfect, but far from it. When we make a mistake it doesn't mean that we should give up. If we relate our self-worth to a mistake-free life, we are binding our lives to despair. We haven't understood how much God has valued us, when we were hopeless sinners, and gave His life to redeem us (Ro.5:8).

When we disagree with another person what we are doing is to recognise that he also is not perfect. It is a sad life if we just swallow *everything* that some preacher tells us, because then we are making a god of him in our mind. But when we disagree, we can start thinking about who is right. If we see

that we were wrong, we can change, can't we? But if we imagine that to question someone is pride and give up using our mind, we will be slaves to others, and we will never grow. If we don't question things around us, we will be confining ourselves to lifelong mediocrity.

On the other hand if we disagree because we are stubborn, and we don't want to let anyone show that we are wrong, *that* would be pride. Then we assume *we* are gods. If we go on arguing even when we are wrong (and know it), we may be stubborn, or we may even be insecure regarding our self-worth. We are unable to accept the fact that we could be wrong.

Many cults form because people are unwilling to question things, and the leaders give the impression that to disagree with them is pride. It is a wrong understanding of leadership,

authority and humility. Mature leaders recognise that they can be also be wrong, and are always willing to listen to others and make changes.

God has made all of us in such a way that we need to learn from the others all the time. It is not just that they may know things we don't know. Even when we think we are right, someone else can give us a different perspective that can enhance our understanding. How we impoverish our lives when we stop listening to others!

Pointers along the way #306

The power of the tongue

"Death and life are in the power of the tongue" (Pr.18:21). What kind of power does the tongue have? Our tongue which is just a small part of our body can change the course of our life like the rudder on a ship, and we can use it like a bridle on a horse to choose our direction (Jas.3:3-5). All these passages speak about the *responsibility* we have, to be careful with what we speak. We can speak in such a way as to encourage and build up others so that they can get to experience godly life. On the other hand, if we let out hurting or demeaning words the consequences can be very bad. In such cases, the damage can last long even if we apologise or 'take back' those words. Actually, we can't take back words once we have spoken. They can remain

in someone's memory and trouble them as long as they live. Words spoken in a fit of anger can divide families or even nations.

We have to learn to be more and more careful not to speak damaging words. The way to do this is not just by being careful and asking God to help us (Ps.141:3), but also by seeking to say words that will be gracious and serve to bless the others (Ep.4:29). Since words come out of the abundance of the heart (Mt.12:34), we have to watch over the intentions of the heart. When provocation comes, we feel like letting someone 'have it.' But when we realise that such words can hurt and possibly damage relationships permanently, we will learn to be more careful. When we love the others we will also seek to bless them through all that we say.

The control of the tongue is so important that if we are not even trying

to keep it in control we may be fooling ourselves in our understanding of spirituality (Jas.1:26).

Unfortunately a modern teaching has also come about that implies as if our tongue has some power in itself. It follows that the words we speak have the power to make things happen. This seems to come from a literal rather than contextual interpretation of words like Pr.18:21 and Jas.3:3-5. The truth is that our words have *consequences* to the hearers, just as our actions also. We can initiate reactions in our hearers, and in turn to us, that can lead to 'life or death.' But we cannot extrapolate and assume that we have a power to make things happen through our words.

Power belongs to God (Ps.62:11). Jesus as Son of God is God. But even as children of God we are just created beings. We have no supernatural

powers. Even when God gives gifts through which we can exercise supernatural power, the power itself is of God. What we say does not necessarily happen. David said once that he would die by the hand of Saul (1Sa.27:1), just to give one example. We don't have to be scared if we inadvertently say such things. Neither should we imagine that by speaking what we want to happen we make it happen. Confessing with our mouth what God says is different, because it is an expression of our faith in God (Ro.10:9,10), and a recognition that it is God who exercises power.

When we look back

Many people are scared of looking back at their lives because that would bring up painful memories of failures or hurtful treatment by others. They unconsciously use different mental tricks to prevent these memories from coming up. What they don't realise is that such memories work deeply in our mind and distort our attitudes, thinking and behaviour. Then we can't become the successful persons that we are capable of becoming. We also suffer from problems that have not only mental but also physical and spiritual implications. For example, those who have faced severe insults in their childhood may keep themselves aloof from people, hoping to avoid further insults. Those who were harassed by their parents about their performance may live in fear of coming short of

perfection. Those who have been abused sexually may have a twisted view of life and people.

But we Christians have the unique advantage of being in a position to deal with the past squarely, get rid of its chains, and go forward enjoying life and liberty. When Jesus came down to Earth, He proclaimed liberty to the captives (Lk.4:18,19). This liberty is not just from the guilt of sin but also from the power of sin (our sin or sin that is in the world) (Ro.6:14).

Usually the process involves 1) acknowledging exactly what has happened to us, 2) asking God for forgiveness of our own sin, 3) forgiving those who have harmed us, 4) giving up bitter attitudes against God for 'allowing' us to go through such experiences, and 5) receiving the total and unconditional acceptance God gives us. As we surrender ourselves to

God, the Holy Spirit can minister to our deepest parts.

It takes honesty, sincerity and courage to look at our past hurts just as they happened. We need to understand how they happened, what roles we and other people played in them and, if possible, how they have affected us now. We may need to stop blaming ourselves for what others have done to us, and at the same time admit what all we have done wrong. We can then receive forgiveness for ourselves and also forgive the others.

Many people blame God for what has happened, thinking that He could have prevented it. But when evil people choose to misuse the freedom of choice He has given them, they are at fault and not He. If we have had such complaints against God we can repent now and get a new attitude towards Him.

The Gospel is that God accepts us just as we are when we go to Him in our need (Mt.11:28). Messed up ones, oppressed and downtrodden ones and slaves to sin are all welcome to receive a complete salvation from Him (1Co.6:9-11). He is an expert at turning things around, making something good come out of the worst things that have happened to us (Ro.8:28). He gives us fresh starts in life (Re.21:5). If He could turn a Mary Magdalene with 7 demons into a saint, there is nothing impossible with Him (Lk.1:37). When we receive this free cleansing and acceptance from God, we can lift up our heads, live boldly, and fulfil His plans for our lives (Je.29:11).

Pointers along the way #308

Every blessing a test

It's great to be blessed of the Lord, and a greater blessing to bless the others in turn (Ac.20:35;Ge.12:2). It's good to long for more blessings, and much better to desire to become a blessing to the others. We know that it is the blessing of the Lord that makes us truly 'rich' (Pr.10:22) and fulfil our life. Unless He blesses us, anything we do or have will be hollow and worthless (Ps.127:1).

We are living here on the earth, and material blessings are necessary for us, and it is 'super-spiritual' to imagine that thinking of and asking for earthly needs is unspiritual. At the same time, spiritual blessings are more important for us because they are useful for the life to come as well as this life (1Ti.4:8). We will find ourselves poor in eternity if we seek to accumulate

material blessings and neglect spiritual growth. It is also wise to choose spiritual blessings in place of material blessings when it comes to a direct choice between the two on any occasion.

But whatever blessing we receive also exposes us to a test about how we will use that blessing. Health and strength are great blessings, but we can use them for ourselves or also to serve God. Natural abilities we are born with are also in the same category. Spiritual gifts, ministry and authority are also things that we are accountable to God for. We see from the Bible and from history how different people who were faithful with their blessings continued to be blessed, and those who took blessings for granted and failed in the tests lost out (Mt.13:12). King Solomon was faithful to God and His people when He asked God for

wisdom to lead the people. But he apparently did not realise that God's subsequent blessings of wealth and fame were also to be used for His people. Instead he spent them on himself, giving in to his desires in various directions. Finally he lost out in every way. But the apostle Paul realised the significance of God's trust in him and worked more than all the others for God's kingdom (1Co.15:10). He recognised that it was the grace of God that had given him the blessings and he also knew that the blessings demanded greater accountability from him.

One mistake we make is to assume that the blessings are for us to enjoy, and fail to see that they are added responsibilities too. The more we receive from God, the more we are accountable, because He has enabled us to become more useful to His

kingdom. He blessed us because we found favour in His eyes and He felt we could be trusted with greater spheres of responsibility and larger scope for blessing others (1Ti.1:12).

Let us not forget ever that whether we live or die, we do that for the Lord and not for ourselves (Ro.14:8). We are to present our bodies as living sacrifices to Him to do His perfect will at all times (Ro.12:1,2). Let us remember to place every blessing that we receive also on the altar to be used for Him according to His will and for His glory. A blessing placed at His disposal can become a greater blessing.

Insecure in Christ!

You are a Christian. But do you wonder now and then if God could be upset with you, that He may not love you anymore? Do you worry about what would happen if you died suddenly in an accident without having the time to pray and set things right with God? Do you rack your brains to find out if you have confessed every single sin to God? Do you worry because you aren't quite sure if you would make it to heaven finally? Do you give money to the church or for needy people and think surely God will count it to your account? Do you look down on some Christians and wonder how they would ever make it to heaven?

All such things indicate that even though you claim to be a Christian you are very insecure. There are only two

possibilities. You may be a true born-again Christian but you don't know your doctrines rightly. The second is that you are not even born again. But the fact is that there are a lot of insecure people who think they are Christians.

Those who are not born again but imagine they are Christians are usually trying to somehow make it heaven by being or doing good. But because of the very nature of the thing they can never be sure that they will make it. Some days they feel OK, and other days down. This is because their basic assumption itself is wrong. *No one* can ever qualify for heaven by being good enough (Ro.3:20;Ga.2:16). It is a performance based acceptance that they are seeking from God, and no one can do well enough that way.

The only way is to admit that we just don't have it in us to make it, we have

messed up till now, and we can't help messing up even in future. *Then* God tells us, never mind, He will accept us because His Son Jesus can wash us up with His blood and make us acceptable if we believe (Is.1:18;Ro.5:8). That's the only way anyone can ever reach God (Jn.14:6). Once we find our acceptance this way, all our insecurity vanishes!

Unfortunately even many people who are truly born again in their heart, after coming to Jesus in repentance from sin and trusting in Him for their salvation, don't have it right in their head concerning this doctrine of free grace (Ep.2:8,9). They also feel insecure. Those who grew up with an experience of receiving love and affection from their parents only based on their performance have a great struggle to believe this doctrine even when it is explained to them, because it appears

to be too good to believe!

But that is the truth, and the only true doctrine concerning salvation. When we know this truth it delivers us from insecurity. When we know that God has accepted us once for all through Jesus because He loves us and not on the basis of our acceptability, it liberates us from the bondage of insecurity. He has loved us with an unending love (Je.31:3). If we now fall into sin it would only break our fellowship (which can be restored through confession--1Jn.1:9) and not His acceptance of us as His children. He may discipline us at times but never forsake us (He.12:6;13:5).

Pointers along the way #310

Rom.8:28 -- What does it say?

Some people think it says only good things happen to us Christians. Some others think that whatever happens to us is good because it comes from God. Both are NOT right! Many bad things also happen to us, and it is not God who makes everything to happen to us.

What do we mean when we say, "God is in control"? Is it correct to think that God plans and executes every single thing that happens to us. If it were so we could ask Him, e.g., "Why did You do 9/11?" But God doesn't do everything that happens. We are living in a sin corrupted world. Evil people do many evil things, and Satan and his demons also are at work, directly and through people. Our gadgets go wrong just as they do for others. We do many foolish things for which we suffer consequences. This is because God has

created people with a freedom of choice. God told Adam and Eve what to do, but He also gave the right to do what they chose. Then where is God in control? He can and does whatever *He* wants (Ps.115:3). He also puts limits on what can happen to us (Ge.3:22,23;1Co.10:13). Satan could not do to Job more than what God permitted him (Job.1:12;2:6).

What God does say is that whatever happens to us--irrespective of what it is and where it comes from--He will make that to work for our good.

- "And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose. NASB"
- "And we know that all things work together for

good to them that love God,
to them who are the called
according to his purpose.
KJV"

- "And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. NIV"
- "And we know that God causes everything to work together for the good of those who love God and are called according to his purpose for them. NLT"
- "That's why we can be so sure that every detail in our lives of love for God is worked into something good. The Message"

This goes beyond what Joseph said,

"As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good" (Ge.50:20). God causes everything that happens to us to do something good to us. This depends on us too. We can miss them if we react to things in a bad way, or we are not looking for the good God wants to give us through our experiences. What God essentially wants to do for us is to make us more like Jesus (Ro.8:29). That is why Ro.8:28 is valid only to those *who love God* and are *called according to His purpose*.

When Joseph was taken into slavery wrongly he sought for freedom (Ge.40:14,15). So did Paul (Acts.25:11). They did not thank God for their misfortune and remain there! Learning to give thanks in everything is fine, but don't we also need to overcome every hindrance and fulfil God's plan? Paul sang praises to God even in prison because God was in

control, but he made his defence whenever he had opportunity.

Let us want most what God wants to give us, and let us cooperate with Him as He works in and around us.

Pointers along the way #311

From head to heart

If we aren't born again, we can't really understand spiritual truths. We may study the Bible, and form our opinions about various things. But we would be really far away from the truth, because spiritual truths can only be understood spiritually (1Co.2:14), and only by being born again can we begin to 'see' the things that are of the kingdom of God (Jn.3:3).

But even after we are born again and begin to understand the things of God, we see that it is easier to understand things 'in our head' than to experience them in our practical life. For example we can quickly learn about faith in God and how we can trust Him in times of trouble, but still find it difficult to overcome anxiety when trouble comes. When this happens we may doubt if we have any faith at all.

We had expected that we had faith, and that we would be able to overcome when temptations came.

What is really happening in such cases? Can we say we don't have any real faith? No, we have faith--believing in God, His promises, and expecting that it would be according to His word. What we don't realise at that time is that faith has to be tested, and that only after testing we get the ability to endure (Jas.1:3).

When people try to help us in trouble by quoting some scriptures do we feel like saying, "I know all that. But still I am not able to handle this problem"? What we are demonstrating is that we know the truth and believe in it; but the truth has not come down from our head level to our heart level where it controls our emotions too. When our emotions are contrary, it becomes difficult for us to choose to do obey the

truth. We know we ought to obey the truth, but we feel driven in other directions.

This is a crucial point in the temptation. If we give in to our feelings, we will find it even harder the next time to obey the truth. But if we overrule our emotions at this time and do what we know we ought to do, our faith will come out triumphant. Then the next time we will find the pressure from our emotions to be weaker, and when we go on in this way a time will come when our emotions also support us in following that truth.

It is not that overruling our emotions at one time will resolve such issues for all time. Certainly we are strengthened in our spirit by this to do the same thing in other areas of our life too. But when we face new issues in different areas we need to follow the same path there too.

'Understanding' of truth tends to boost our confidence, sometimes to the point of pride, and it is difficult to recognise in the time of trouble that just understanding is not enough. It can be painful, if we had been thinking that we have strong faith, and especially if we have also been preaching to others about it! But then we must remember that the validity of our faith is being tested, and that after it is tested it will become a part of our life itself (Jas.1:12). The key is to *persevere* in the truth, by obeying the truth even when our feelings lead us against it.

Pointers along the way #312

The snare of riches

Money itself is not sinful; it is the *love* of money that causes all kinds of evil (1Ti.6:10). But the question that comes up is, "What *is* the love of money? Is it wrong to want more money?" It is an

unrealistic position some people take to say that any desire to get more money is sinful. We need money to live in this world, and people who are struggling to make both ends meet desire to get more money. Even those who are not 'struggling' feel that if they had some more money they could turn their focus to other more important things. This prompts them to work harder, plan better forms of savings and investments, etc. If God wants us to learn from the ants a lesson on wealth management (Pr.6:6-8), it shows us what love of money is not.

This warning against the love of money comes in the context of godliness and its blessings (1Ti.6:6-11). Godliness has blessings for this life and the world to come (1Ti.4:8). That is to be one of our prime concerns, to partake of godly nature (Ti.2:11-13). The problem is that we tend to forget this,

and get occupied with getting more of this world--money, fame, power, influence, etc. When our focus shifts from God to this world--slowly and over a period of time--and we begin to aim for greater heights here, we get caught in a trap.

Money rules this world. And behind the world of money there is the prince of this world, Satan, who manipulates everything in his way so that people would turn away from God. He offers attractive looking rewards that money can bring, hiding the fact that it is a bait for his trap. "But those who want to get rich fall into temptation and a snare and many foolish and harmful desires which plunge men into ruin and destruction" (1Ti.6:9).

Think of the some parts of the snare. It takes greater risks to make more money, and falling markets, crashing financial giants, changing governments

and revised rules can totally derail our investments. Think of the tensions, worries, fears and sleepless nights we have to go through. Imagine suddenly finding ourselves in a place where only bribes, false statements or black money can get us out. Personal relationships can break down through money transactions. Our struggle for a 'better life' seems to be unending because the expensive things we buy become outdated soon--our houses, cars, phones, dresses, all become 'old,' and we are under pressure to get newer things. We find it difficult to stand the pressure when 'everybody else' seems to have better stuff!

The only way to keep out of this snare is to have our priorities set on 'godliness' and keep everything in our life under its subjection. The solution is not asceticism. That is just another unrealistic extreme. Don't we need to

learn the attitude of being content (1Ti.6:8)? In practical terms this would mean drawing the lines in our lives according to what God has given and enabled us, where we decide that enough is enough, and desist the temptation to keep up with the Joneses?

Pointers along the way #313

Planning on miracles

When God does a miracle we see that as an extraordinary act of intervention on the natural processes that run our lives. If miracles take place every day, they will no longer be considered as miracles but as normal events. Anyone who knows the God of the Bible and believes in Him knows that God can do miracles easily--raising a stinking four day old corpse back to life is nothing for Him. But does anyone expect all corpses to be raised up, all sicknesses to be healed through prayer alone, all financial crises to be dissolved through fasting and prayer, all marital problems to be sorted out by a prophet's blessing, etc.?

The problem we have here is this. We believe in a God who can and does miracles. Shall we wait and look for miracles--foregoing all kinds of natural

reasoning and planning--or we should plan ahead based on what God has taught us?

We see two types of miracles in the Bible--those which God initiated on His own, and those which He did in response to prayers. The first kind of miracles are totally unexpected, and we won't know when they will come. But based on what we know about God and His love, compassion and power, we ask God many times to do miracles for us. He obliges us sometimes, but unless He tells us specifically that He would do something special for us, we cannot presume on that. This is because God works with us in different ways to teach us new things and according to our ability to learn. If we don't take this into consideration, we might expect miracles to happen every time and not realise that this time God may want us to learn new things.

Sometimes this can also be disastrous.

When the Egyptians came against Israel at the Red Sea, God wanted Israel to stand by and watch the salvation of God (Ex.14:13,14). Can we make this a rule for our lives for all time? This same God told Israel the next time to fight with the enemies, with different strategies each time. Since Moses and Joshua were in touch with God they were able to hear what God wanted them to do each time. What would have happened if every time they chose to 'believe' and just stood by waiting for God's salvation!

We like it, don't we, if we have to just stand by and watch, without having to get into any fight with the enemies? But we would never grow that way. Our spiritual muscles are to be strengthened through exercise (He.5:13,14). Every truth that God teaches us and every experience that

we go through, equips us to deal with life's situations. Finally God wants us to stand strong in His grace so that we can *take action* (2Ti.2:1). He doesn't want us to be like dumb animals to be directed in every step, but He wants us to learn from Him, 'think' based on that, and go forward (Ps.32:8,9). We use our mind under the leading of the Spirit and expect God to do miracles (Ep.3:20).

Pointers along the way #314

I am special, watch out!

It gives us great rest to recognise that we are all so unique in the way we are. Our temperament, family upbringing, experiences, abilities, knowledge, culture, etc., combine to make each of us such unique persons that there is no one just like us in the whole world. The rest comes by giving up comparing ourselves with others and also trying to become like someone else. God has made us and accepted us just the way we are.

But suppose we think, "I am like this. Others better make way for me!" It can cause a lot of wounds and unpleasantness. This is because we are living in a world full of people who are different from us! This is not *our* world. It belongs to all of us. If we don't understand this and go ahead pushing our way we can create a lot of

havoc instead of being the special blessing God intends us to be.

We all have blind spots. We can't see the beams sticking out of our own eyes even when we can clearly see the specks in others' eyes! We really can't see those beams, because if we could we would have done something about them. When someone tells us about them we aren't too happy to hear that! But they do exist (Mt.7:5). When we are out on a spree to take off the specks from other eyes, let's not forget about these beams. We need to identify them and take them off as quickly as we see them.

We all have our rough edges too. We may have full justifications worked out to show that those rough edges have unique values to bless the others! But the question is whether the others are getting blessed or wounded. It is truly great to say the right word at the right

time in the right way (Pr.25:11). Even good words need to be spoken at the appropriate time (Ecc.3:1), and in a way that the others can receive well. We all may be speaking and listening at somewhat different frequencies, and sometimes when we are not tuned to the other's frequency our words and actions can be distorted and jarring to the ears!

In a sense none of us can help blundering along in this way. We do find occasions where we feel like biting our lips for saying the wrong thing. Sometimes our good intentions are not backed up by wisdom. But we can learn something when that happens. We can recognise some more about our jagged edges and also about the other's tender areas. If we don't want to hurt others but only to bless them, we'd better learn how to do things differently in the future.

God wants to teach and train us in this area (Is.50:4). We won't reach perfection in a day or two, for sure. But we *can* make progress if we are willing to learn and make changes.

Our tendency is to want to change the others so that we can go on without obstacles! But that is to be ruled out. The more we try that the more upset the other person is going to be, and we are going to become more frustrated. What we need to do is to get a better understanding about ourselves and also the others we deal with, and make changes in our own attitude and approach. This is what is going to work.

Pointers along the way #315

Why was Jesus silent?

When Jesus was accused, insulted and abused He said not a word, much to the surprise and annoyance of His tormentors. The Bible challenges us to learn from this to endure unjust and unfair treatment from the others with patience (1Pe.2:20-23). This has great reward from God. This world is very unfair many times, and we find ourselves in situations where we simmer with inward rage at the unfairness of it all. Then the Holy Spirit reminds us that One has gone before us who suffered the greatest injustice of all times, and who refrained from reacting, speaking or behaving in ways which would have appeared to be justified on such occasions. This helps us to give up our rage and commit ourselves to God who is bigger than the situation. Then we

find peace and rest in our mind and heart.

But we make a mistake if we think that this is the way we should respond *at all times*. Are we to take things lying down? Are we to allow others to ride over us as they wish without any defence? Are we forbidden to take any measures to claim or regain what is taken away from us? The mistake is in assuming that whatever Jesus did or spoke is for us to do--irrespective of the context or situation.

Why did Jesus keep quiet? In a sense, because He had come down all the way from heaven for that moment, to die. The Father's will was clear, and the Father was asking Him to drink that cup which Jesus had asked whether there was any way to avoid. This cup meant a total neglect, reversal and obliteration of justice, and it was not for Jesus to contest that through

arguments, presenting evidence, calling for witnesses or supporters, etc. He had to bear that injustice to the point of death. So, of course, He kept quiet.

But our situations may not be like that always. Many times we suffer because we are not bold enough to question somebody. Sometimes we give up the battle before taking it up. Sometimes others type us as being soft and take advantage over us. And then we comfort ourselves by saying that we, like Jesus, are keeping quiet!

Was Jesus a soft person who allowed Himself to be bullied around? Far from it. He was always in command, never afraid to disagree with anyone or to stand against sin. He would only do what He really wanted to do. He wouldn't cow down before anyone. He told Pilate to his face (not with insolence or pride) that he would have no authority over Him except what His

Father gave (Jn.19:11).

We can't blindly apply one lesson we have learned from the Bible to all situations. It depends on the situation and what God wants us to do each time. We can't also take lessons from Jesus without trying to understand why He did what He did at different times. A blind application of "What would Jesus do?" can also be dangerous! As someone said, there are times when we need courage to change the situation, and at other times we need grace to accept things that can't be changed. We need wisdom to know the difference. We need this wisdom even in studying the Bible.

Pointers along the way #316

Unbelief that destroys

What about a person who has asked God to heal him but is not sure if he

would be healed? Is this unbelief? Is he going to be thrown into the lake of fire on the judgment day (Re.21:8)? People may not go to the extent of allotting him a place in hell, but certainly there are many who will condemn him for his unbelief and lack of faith. They may ask him, "Don't you believe that God can do anything? When you have asked God to heal you and you doubt if He will do it, isn't it unbelief?"

He believes that God can heal. That was why he asked God to heal him, in the first place! Where then is his unbelief? Isn't he only wondering if God will answer his prayer in the way he expects?

For a person who claims to have 'faith' the above argument is not sufficient. He claims that Jesus has promised to give whatever we ask for (Jn.14:13). But isn't it also written that if we abide

in Jesus, and His words abide in us, *then* He will do whatever we want (Jn.15:7)? Hasn't it also been clarified that *if we ask anything according to God's will* He will grant it to us (1Jn.5:14,15)? When we ask for something that we wish for, but are not sure if it is according to God's will, is it unbelief?

If we find ourselves in a situation when our future or the safety of our family is at risk, thoughts of anxiety rise up in our heart. We know that God is in control, but we also know that many times God allows His children to go through suffering in this world, and we aren't sure which way we are heading. Anxiety is a part of the temptation, and till we overcome it case by case through placing our trust in God, it would trouble us. The more experienced and mature we are, our anxiety levels will be lower, and we

will overcome it quicker. But will we consider ourselves as unbelievers if we are tempted with anxiety?

Faith is a choice that we make. We choose at first to accept what God tells us about our sins, and then we place our trust in Jesus as our Saviour and Lord. Then when we are tempted at different times in many ways we learn to overcome them by trusting in God and believing and doing what His word says. Unbelief is also a choice, where one refuses to believe what God says. It is more than an inability to believe. Young Christians may be excused if they are unable to trust God for great things. God didn't rebuke Mary when she asked how she could conceive (Lk.1:34). But what God cannot tolerate is if someone chooses to go against Him, especially if he chooses to go against what he knows inside his heart is right. *That* is the

unbelief that the Bible talks about. The Bible mentions those who knew God refusing to honour Him as God (Ro.1:21). It is a deliberate choice they make against God.

After coming to Christ too we may have chosen at times to do what we knew to be wrong. That is disobedience coming from unbelief. The Bible warns us that if we don't take care of unbelief and disobedience we too may ultimately lose out on what God has promised us (He.3:18,19).

Pointers along the way #317

Pursuing peace and sanctification

God exhorts us through His word to pursue after peace with all men and sanctification (or holiness, as in some translations), without which we will not be able to see God (He.12:14).

Jesus gives us His peace, which is unlike the peace of the world (Jn.14:27). The world has peace only when there are no problems, but the peace that Jesus gives us can exist in the midst of problems. We can have peace with other people even when they are not at peace with us! It shows in our heart when we forgive them, hold no desire for vengeance and wish them well even when they may be planning to do us harm (Lk.6:27,28,35). We forgive them not because they deserve it or after they have come and apologised to us, but because we have been forgiven freely by God (Co.3:13), and also because they really don't know the sinfulness or consequences of what they are doing (Lk.23:34).

It is not easy at times to forgive and be at peace towards those who have hurt us. Sometimes we may be suffering

from some irreparable damage they have caused, and they themselves seem to be going around freely and without care! The injustice of it all haunts us day and night. The secret of forgiving them is to know that God has forgiven us freely as a gift when we went to Him in repentance without asking us to 'clean up' first. When we ourselves have experienced such an unmerited favour from God, how can we not show mercy to these 'poor' people? Jesus forgave those who crucified Him even without waiting for them to admit their sin, and that is how we can also forgive others. Even if it is a struggle to forgive, shouldn't we be pursuing after it, seeking God for more help?

Living at peace with the others does not demand that others should also be at peace with us. Can we change the others? We can pray for them, bless them and do good to them, but at the

end of it all some of them may be still at war with us! God is realistic. He tells us only to be at peace from *our* side (Ro.12:18).

We are never 'without sin' while we are on earth. To pursue holiness means being 'set apart for God.' Sanctification is the process of becoming more and more holy. After our sins are forgiven through repentance and faith in Jesus, we are 'justified' before God. Then the Holy Spirit begins His work of sanctification in us, drawing us away from fleshly and worldly desires to God who is the source of all joy and pleasure (Ps.16:11). Finally when we stand with God in eternity we will also be glorified and given a new, sinless body. We are to pursue after sanctification by cooperating with the Holy Spirit to be weaned from earthly values to heavenly values (Col.3:1,2).

The question we have to keep asking

ourselves is, "Am I eagerly and sincerely seeking to live at peace with all people, and is my heart constantly seeking for a closer walk with God?" What do we do when the Holy Spirit points out things in us that are taking us in the opposite direction? Don't we want to see God better and walk with Him?

Pointers along the way #318

Outside our well

The proverbial frog in the well who thinks his well is the world represents many Christians who stay within the confines of their doctrines and denominations. It is comforting to enjoy the stability of familiarity, and frightening to take risks and venture outside. But our well is *not* the world. There is big wide world out there with millions of other Christians who are all part of the Body of Christ and who have something to give us and receive from us (Ep.4:15,16). But there are doctrinal walls that divide our wells and form us into groups that are even opposed to one another. Unfortunately the majority of Christians simply believe what their own pastor or group has told them and have not even looked at the possibility that they could be wrong.

But if we pick up courage and start looking at *what exactly* some of the opposing groups believe differently from us, and *why* they differ from us, we can perhaps begin to see things differently, a bit more broadly or *somewhat more strongly*. That would be our growth. Of course it would be uncomfortable to recognise that we were wrong, after all. That could mean having to admit it before people, the necessity to make changes to our lifestyle and affiliations, risk losing some of our old friends, etc. Therefore we can draw up a whole lot of justifications why where we are is good! But such justifications won't stand before God, and, if we are honest with ourselves, they would diminish our self-respect too. This explains why it would appear to be safer not to look outside our well in the first place.

When we learn to love one another it is

not because we agree with them. We can disagree and yet love them because that is the way God loves us too! How much we disagree with one another is not as great as how much God disagrees with many of the things we believe and do! That's true, if we know how imperfect we are. So it is not that if we look at what others believe we may stop loving them. But we can grow in our understanding and make changes in our own attitudes and behaviour.

When doctrines divide us we must consider the possibility that *our* doctrine may be the wrong one. If we believe one way and some believe in an entirely different way both of us can't be right! Tolerating someone with a different view is different from living with our own wrong doctrine. If we are wrong, it is better to lose face and admit we were wrong than to stick to

our position and lose out with God. See what Saul did when he discovered he had been wrong all along about Jesus (Ac.26:19). Following his example may be what will lead us to greater revelation and ministry.

Even though we all have to study the Bible for ourselves for our own growth, it is also true that we can't do it on our own. We also need to take in the truths others have unearthed over the centuries. We need to examine what different viewpoints there are about doctrines before we come to conclusions. And we must keep fine tuning things.

Those who want to be mature have to go this way, even if others find it too uncomfortable.

Disillusionment with God

We are exhilarated by the spontaneous worship that rises in our heart when we get a fresh glimpse of our Lord's loveliness, whether of His power, wisdom, love, mercy, patience or understanding. But we also know times when inexplicable situations hit us on our face and we feel let down by the same Lord. "Where were You, Lord, when I needed You the most? Why are You silent when all I can do is cry out to You? Can't You at least tell me what is happening?" These are some of the thoughts that pound our mind relentlessly. We feel God has disappointed us, even though we dare not say it aloud.

We are not in the same class as Job, and our experiences are also much lighter than his. But for us small people, these are heavy enough that we

feel like Job! David felt at times that God had forsaken him (Ps.22:1). Jeremiah thought God had deceived him (Je.4:10). Paul was almost in despair sometimes because of his troubles (2Co.1:8). Job's troubles were much worse, but like these people, he too didn't give up (Job.13:15). On God's side He never scolded any of these people for feeling like this. In fact He knew what they were going through and empathised with them. So we too mustn't feel scared to face up to what we are really feeling and share it with the Lord. We don't have to 'act' positive and utter pious words in prayer. God loves it when we are honest with Him.

If Jesus prayed for Peter that his faith shouldn't fail when Satan sifted him like wheat (Lk.22:31,32), we can be sure that He will do it for us too. He has no favourites (Ac.10:34,35). What

will delight His heart is when we look beyond our troubles at Him, and acknowledge that He is trustworthy.

There is some background work we can do so that we can *continue* to trust in the Lord when troubles come upon us (assuming that we have already come to know the Lord personally and placed our life in His hands). We must settle certain truths in our mind. 1. In this life we are going to see a lot of trouble (Jn.16:33;2Ti.3:1). By having Jesus as our Saviour and Lord we are not going to be immune. 2. We cannot ever understand God and His ways fully. He is too big for us. 3. God is not going to always answer our 'why' questions. Remember God didn't answer all those questions Job asked! 4. God will *never* leave or forsake us (He.13:5). 5. God will ensure that nothing will go beyond what God and we can handle together (1Co.10:13). 6.

God will always be by our side with some way of escape.

The secret of perseverance is to believe that He is with us, He knows what is happening, and He is in control, and to trust Him even when we can't understand what is going on and where it is heading. The 'way of escape' He brings may be sometimes to snatch us out of the trouble, or at other times to sustain us through it all. But in both cases He has something for us to learn and to be trained in (Jas.1:2-4). He makes or allows things to happen so that He can work out something good for us (Ro.8:28,29).

Pointers along the way #320

Learning with balance

Think of a high school debating competition where one team has to prove that abortion is good for society and the other team that abortion is bad for the society. These youngsters want the prize, and sometimes they have to put aside their conscience and their better sense and insist that their wrong ideas are right! Lawyers are trained to push aside all ideas of what they can easily perceive to be right and wrong, and argue for their client. Some scientists will go to any length to push or hold on to their theories even when evidence comes up to the contrary. What do *we* do when we argue with someone?

We know we don't know everything. This implies that we are wrong partially or fully in many of our current ideas. It will invariably happen as we

discuss with others that some of our wrong ideas will get exposed. We can then continue to defend our views with what we know in our heart as being really incorrect, or we can accept the correction and go forward. If we keep defending ourselves we make it more difficult for our ego to climb down at the end. But if we allow ourselves to take small corrections during the discussions instead of stonewalling our discussion we will get a chance to go deeper into the subject.

What is important for us, our integrity or our ego? Job was being tormented by his so-called comforters who emphasised their point that God was apparently punishing Job for his sins and that he was not admitting his sins. Job's integrity did not allow him to 'agree' with them even though he could have at least avoided their accusations (Job.27:4,5). At the same time he did

not keep rebutting them at each point they raised as if they were in a contest. He accepted them when they spoke truths about God (Job.9:2). He was certainly trying to argue his own case. But he was also willing to listen to them and learn.

Some of us don't question others, especially those whom we recognise as being more knowledgeable or experienced than we. We seem to assume that just because they are greater than we, they are right. No, even the greatest of men make mistakes. None of them knows everything right. If we don't question things for ourselves we cannot get to know things in the right way.

Some of us don't know when to quit arguing and give in. We don't stop when we see that we are going wrong and the others know better. We blunder along till the others get fed up with us

and quit, thus blocking the way we could have learned something more.

God has created us as social beings who are dependent on one another, in order to provide a way for all of us to learn and move forward, and also to give us a balance. Men and women complement and balance each other. Different personality types give different perspectives on life that can together provide a more complete picture than what any of us can put together. Shall we not learn to listen more to the others, and judge everything according to God's word, so that we can become mature?

Pointers along the way #321

Respect for the devil!

Our enemy, the devil, is a crafty old liar and deceiver. When he was an angel he was more intelligent and wise than all other creatures. Now he has had thousands of years of experience observing people and learning how to fool us one way or another. He has supernatural abilities (think of all that he did to Job, and how he raised a storm against Jesus). Even though he cannot be in every place at the same time, he has innumerable demons at his command to send after us. He cannot see inside our mind, but can make a very good guess by observing our actions and expressions. Even when he comes as an 'angel of light' (2Co.11:14) promising us great and wonderful things, his aim is only our ruin and misery (Jn.10:10). We make ourselves easy prey for him if we

aren't prepared for him.

The devil is prowling around, looking for those he can capture. If he wants to attack us, first he has to get permission from God (Job.1:10;Lk.22:31). Jesus has given us authority over the devil and his armies (Mt.10:1). But the devil can take advantage of us as much as we allow him. The Bible tells us to be sober, alert and aware of his ways (1Pe.5:8;2Co.2:11). God warns us that if we wish to survive the attacks of the devil we need to put on the *full* armour of God (Ep.6:11). This tells us that God knows about the powers of the devil, and also our weakness!

Some of us are scared of the devil, not realising that he has been defeated already and that his final place will be in the lake of fire. Some others are over-conscious of the devil, 'seeing' him in everything that happens! But many others tend to underestimate his

cleverness and power.

If we harbour wrong attitudes in our heart, we give the devil a foothold in our lives. If we hold anger, bitterness, resentment or unforgiving attitudes towards others the devil finds it easier to influence us by suggesting further judgmental thoughts and actions of revenge, spite or malice (Eph.4:26,27;2Co.2:10,11). Letting our imaginations run about on what pleasure or advantage we will gain by sin is another way to attract his attacks. Playing in our mind with the first thought suggested by the devil is like answering the doorbell when he rings it. Very soon he will be inside the house taking charge of everything!

The problem is that when he rings the doorbell--when the first suggestion pops into our mind--we don't realise how serious the ultimate consequences are going to be. We feel we can handle

this at the thought level, not realising that the more we think about it, the devil finds it easy to slip in more ideas and suggestions, and our will becomes weaker to resist him. We may imagine that our ideas are logical conclusions we arrive at, and be totally unaware that the devil is playing with us.

The devil tells lies and evil suggestions, and also deceives us by making us think they are true and appropriate. Our safety is to recognise him when he comes with the first suggestion itself and run to Jesus for help.

Pointers along the way #322

A lesson from Nicodemus

Nicodemus was the man who met Jesus secretly at night to talk about things of God. He was a Pharisee and a ruler among the Jews (Jn.3:1). We can say he was very religious, with a good knowledge of the Old Testament scriptures, and we may not be wrong if we guess that he might have been a sincere and upright man. But the first thing that Jesus told him was about being 'born again,' first of all to be able to 'see' (or have a true revelation) of the kingdom of God and also to enter it (Jn.3:3,5).

To be born again is a new covenant experience. This is when God takes away our old, sinful heart and replaces it with a new heart of flesh (pliable and mouldable) (Eze.36:26), writes His laws on it (Jer.31:33), causes us to walk according to them (Eze.36:27),

washes away all our sins and promises not to remember them again (Jer.31:34). Under the old covenant which God gave through Moses, there were blessings or curses depending on whether people obeyed the commandments or not (De.28). In the new covenant God gives us forgiveness, acceptance and eternal life as a gift of grace. God does this supernatural work of new birth through His Holy Spirit when we go to Him in repentance from our sins and place our trust in Jesus who died in our place for our sins.

Jesus was speaking to Nicodemus about this new covenant experience. Actually the new covenant would come only when Jesus died, and Jesus was talking ahead of time. We don't know why Jesus said this only to Nicodemus and not to the others who asked Him about eternal life, to whom He said,

"Keep the commandments,' according to the old covenant. Perhaps it was because the others were testing Him, and Nicodemus was sincere.

Anyway, the fact is that even such a religious, knowledgeable, sincere man such as Nicodemus needed to be born again! People born in Christian families make a mistake when they think that they are already children of God because of their natural birth or because their parents 'baptised' them. Being born again is a thing of the Spirit, and not related to fleshly birth or religious rituals (Jn.3:6). This happens when each man comes to Jesus personally, acknowledging his sin and placing his trust in Him. We all are individually responsible and accountable to God (Ro.14:12), and our parents or others can't stand proxy for us.

A new birth is required, because when

we are naturally born, we are born in sin (Ps.51:5), and our old heart is deceitful (Je.17:9). It is only when God gives us a new heart and writes His laws upon it that we receive a new nature and new desires (1Pe.1:3,23).

A 'natural' Christian cannot just make a 'commitment' to Jesus to live a good life or to turn over a new leaf. He needs to be born again. That happens only when he confesses his sins, repents from them and receives Jesus' substitutionary sacrifice for him. That is how he acknowledges that he can never earn his salvation but only receive it as a gift of mercy (Ep.2:8). That is when he is born again.

Pointers along the way #323

Children of God

Even though we are born into this world in sin (Ps.51:5) as children of

the devil (Jn.8:44), when we repent from our sins and place our trust in Jesus as our Saviour we are born again (Jn.3:5,6) and become children of God (1Jn.3:1). This new birth is carried out by the Holy Spirit placing the 'seed of God' into our spirit (Jn.3:6;1Jn.3:9). Now Jesus the Son of God calls us His brothers and sisters (He.2:12), and all the other children of God become our brothers and sisters. We become inheritors of God's riches and glory with Christ (Ro.8:17).

At the same time we need to keep in mind that we can never become a 'child of God' in the same way that Jesus is the Son of God! He is the Son of God as being God Himself as a part of the Trinity. We are created beings who are children of God. In other words this acceptance by God as His children does not make us gods.

The Bible says that God has *adopted*

us as His children (Ep.1:5). We have been made children of God by His grace and we enjoy all privileges as His children. There are more glorious things God has planned for us in eternity (1Jn.3:2). At the same time we have to recognise that we are still only created beings who have been given the privilege of being children of God. Even though we can partake of God's character (nature), we are not partakers of His being as God.

Why is this important to keep in mind? This is because the New Age philosophies which are influencing the world have crept into many parts of the Christian world view, confusing people's understanding concerning these things. The New Age philosophies come from Eastern religions such as Hinduism, where the assumption is that man is a part of god and is essentially god in his being.

Man's *moksha* (salvation) is to come to realise this and ultimately merge with god losing his own identity in the way a drop of water merges into an ocean. These people believe that man has in himself all powers that he needs, and strive to locate and release these powers into action. It is blasphemy for a Christian to claim he is God, because the Christian's God is his Creator and distinctly far above and beyond him. The Christian's salvation is to acknowledge God's lordship over him and to submit to His authority in every way. This is extremely contrary to the New Age approach.

God has given Christians authority in the name of Christ over sickness, evil spirits, etc. (Lk.9:1). We don't have this authority in ourselves, but only in the name of Jesus. It means that it is Jesus who exercises His authority even when He does that through us as His

channels. It is sacrilege for us to take that authority on ourselves (mis)using the name of Jesus and acting out of our own initiative. Many Christians seem to be getting into this posture, albeit unknowingly. It is good to remember that even Jesus as the Son of Man never did anything out of His own initiative (Jn.8:28).

Serving tables

There was an incident in the early church when the Greek widows felt neglected during the community meals (Ac.6:1). When the apostles heard it they said that someone should be chosen to oversee this matter of serving food and the apostles should be left free to focus on the ministry of the word (v.2). Does this look like high minded behaviour, especially these days when there is much preaching on 'servant leadership'? Can one ask, "Did the apostles think serving tables was below them in any way? Shouldn't they have stepped in to fill the gap when there was need?"

One problem is in imagining that serving tables is a lower ministry than preaching, for example. The issue is about what the Lord has called each of us to do. If one is called to serve tables

and he attempts to preach, everyone will recognise that the results can be disastrous. But what many people may not have thought about is that if the person who is called to preach serves tables instead, the result in this case also could be disastrous, because the preaching will get neglected or become less than the best possible. So when the apostles said that they could not neglect the ministry of the word they were not at all being high minded but being responsible to their own calling. It was neither that they could not serve tables because of a lack of ability, nor that they felt it would be below their dignity. They wanted to be faithful to the charge that the Lord had given them.

Many people act out of a sense of perceived need. They think that if the Lord has shown them a need and they have the ability to meet that need, it is

required of them to meet that need. But in doing so they may hasten their own burn out by taking on themselves more than they can handle because they are already into many other activities to meet different needs, become less efficient in what the Lord has in fact given them to do, or deprive the opportunity for others to take up what the Lord wants them to do! Many are driven to take up such additional responsibility because they are unable to say "No" when someone asks them.

The advantage the apostles had was that they were clear what the Lord wanted them to do. Even though there were pressures from others about what they should do, they limited themselves to their own calling and responsibility. If we follow the life of Jesus during the days of His public ministry we find there also that He just stuck to what the Father wanted Him to do, and He did

not allow Himself to be controlled by other people even when they were well meaning. He never burned out, and He finished all that the Father wanted Him to do.

This is not to comfort people who are unwilling to work hard! There is no excuse for laziness, and many times it is our unwillingness to come out from our comfort zone that prevents us from fulfilling God's calling for our lives. Then we miss many blessings also. But at the same time there is also need to be faithful to His particular calling for us.

Our God is lovely!

Our God is great. As the Creator of the whole universe He is bigger than anything we can imagine. He has made us and everything we know. He has designed every physical, chemical, biological, psychological and spiritual law, and also how they all interact. He sustains the universe and makes all inanimate things (such as stars and planets) to work precisely and in a predictable manner. While He has given the freedom of choice to angels and human beings, He keeps the final control so that nothing happens beyond what He permits. He is everywhere at the same time, He can do whatever He wants, He knows everything about the past, the present and the future, He knows what is the best to be done in every situation, and He decides and executes His plans instantaneously. It

is natural for us to fall prostrate before Him and *worship* Him when we get to know Him like this.

But what touches us most and causes us to bow down in adoration is how He deals with each of us personally. His love, unconditional acceptance, mercy, kindness, patience and 'lo...ngsuffering' towards us who actually deserve the complete opposite--if we see these, we cannot but fall before Him in worship. "Who is there like our God?" comes up spontaneously from our heart! Has any civilisation been able to configure such a God in all their mythological writings? No, they all would have thought that this kind of god would be beyond belief! The fact is that our God, the true and living God, is such an unbelievably good God that unless He had revealed it to us through His Son Jesus Christ no one would have

believed it.

The overwhelmingly valid proof of the truth about this God is how He meets with millions of us personally, changes our lives, and continues to be a 'tangible' reality in our lives (1Jn.1:1-3). He actually forgives the worst of us, transforms weak, hopeless lives and makes us into significant and valuable people who are seen now and who will reign with Him through eternity. The scorner may not agree with our doctrines, and scoffers may despise our arguments for God, but none of them can answer the living proof of changed lives.

It is only natural that when we get to know this lovely God we want to tell the others about Him too, just as a patient who found a cure wants to tell his fellow sufferers. They may think we want to 'convert' them into our religion, but actually we only want to

offer them freely what we ourselves have received! Is it unreasonable that some of us who have found the pearl of greatest value want to 'sell off' everything else and follow Him? Is it not understandable when some of us who have experienced this undeserved love of God personally want to do anything we can to demonstrate this love to others in various ways?

When our 'eyes' are opened to behold His loveliness, nothing else seems to matter any more. Wealth, fame, pleasure--everything loses its priority in our lives (Php.3:8). Everything in our lives turns to become centred in Him.

Creating our destiny

Slick preachers and self-help *gurus* promise us that we can be the masters of our destiny. Is this true? Many times truth gets distorted through taking only a part of it, extrapolating it beyond its validity, or mixing it with error or some other unconnected truth. This is what seems to have happened in this case. That is because, instead of standing firmly on the foundation of the Scriptures, people have allowed other ideas to get mixed with the truth.

In the larger sense, our destiny is entirely in the hands of God, who created us, caused us to be born to parents of His choice in some place of His choice and at a time of His choice. He overruled on all the situations we have faced in our life and watched over our training and preparation. And even before we were created, He

foreknew the master plan for our life which He recorded in His book (Ps.139:16).

Yet God has created us with a certain level of free will, so that we have the ability to make choices about what we would do. Therefore He holds us accountable to Him for our life (Ro.14:12). Many of us have misused this freedom and messed up our lives to greater or lesser degree. The point to consider is what we would do now with the rest of our life.

Many preachers and teachers, aided by 'pop' psychology and New Age philosophies, are emphasising man's role in the shaping of his destiny, and 'God' practically becomes a tool in man's hands to be used for this purpose. People want wealth, fame, pleasure and 'happiness' which is defined as absence of problems. These teachers tell us to define our goals, and

devise ways in which we can attain to these goals. Those who believe in God are encouraged to use God's power and promises to make their dreams come true.

Some of the tools include 'claiming' God's promises that relate to prosperity, 'releasing' our faith through our lips, denying every 'negative' thought or word, and setting things into motion so that God now has to act according to our desires.

Now, what about seeking God to find out what He would have us to become and do, and then choosing to go in that direction in His strength?

The difference between the two approaches is who is calling the shots and who submits. If we give Jesus the duty of 'saving' us and tell Him what we want, isn't that different from coming under His lordship and

submitting to His plans?

When we read about life and death being in the power of the tongue (Pr.18:21;Jas.3:5), we understand that what we say can have good or bad consequences. For example we can build friendship or cause enmity by using our tongue. But if we misinterpret it to mean that we have the power to make happen what we want by speaking with our tongue, we are making ourselves 'gods.' On the other hand, when we submit to God and speak and do according to His ways we allow Him to accomplish His purposes.

Some may think this is splitting hair. But you will see the point if you think about it. The two ways glorify either God or man.

Blasphemy against the Holy Spirit

Jesus once cast out a demon from a man who was also dumb and blind (Mt.12:22). This made the people who were watching to wonder if Jesus was not indeed the Son of David they were waiting for (v.23). But the Pharisees said that Jesus was casting out demons by Beelzebub, the prince of devils (v.24). Jesus clarified that He had in fact done this through the Holy Spirit (v.28). Then Jesus made the famous statement that blasphemy against the Holy Spirit could never be forgiven (v.31).

This is the so-called unpardonable sin. Many sincere Christians sometimes get into great distress thinking that they have accidentally or unknowingly fallen into this sin, and that now they are lost without any further remedy.

Some others who understand this incident to mean that the sin of the Pharisees was in attributing to Satan what the Holy Spirit had done become terrified of exposing counterfeits of Satan, thinking that unknowingly they might blaspheme against the Holy Spirit.

Nicodemus, who was a Pharisee, recognised that Jesus was from God, because he said that otherwise no one could do the things that Jesus did (Jn.3:2). This tells us that the other Pharisees also had enough evidence to recognise that Jesus was doing many things in the power of God. So when they commented that He was casting out demons through Beelzebub they were not acting in ignorance but deliberately trying to malign Jesus with what they knew in their heart to be a blatant lie. *That* was what made it a blasphemy against the Holy Spirit, the

deliberate attributing to the devil *what they knew* the Spirit of God had done.

When someone exposes some deceitful work of the devil, such as people slithering on the floor like snakes or running around barking like mad dogs supposedly under the anointing of the Holy Spirit, that is not blasphemy! We can say this boldly because these are against the character and nature of God and not at all in line with the fruit of the Spirit. This is the basis on which we are to determine false prophets, teachers and miracle workers (Mt.7:15,16). It is also not a sin of blasphemy if somebody hesitatingly expresses doubts on something as being possibly from the devil, because his doubt is genuine and he is not knowingly contradicting the truth as the Pharisees did.

If someone feels that he has committed an unpardonable sin, the question to

ask himself is how then he is experiencing the conviction of the Holy Spirit regarding that sin, and how he has a desire to repent. Satan may accuse, and we also may feel remorse or regret about what we have done. But it is God who gives us a conviction in our heart that we have done wrong, along with a desire and willingness to repent (Acts.11:18). If we have actually committed an unpardonable sin the implication will be that we will be lost forever, and then God would not be helping us to repent.

As long as we can truly repent we can go to Jesus, and He will never cast us out when we do that (Jn.6:37).

The Spirit and our reason

Like many other areas of practical Christian life, this is one that needs great balance on our part. The majority of Christians use their own reason to finally decide what they want to do, even when they consult the written word of God, the Bible. In contrast, some put their reason aside and do what they think the Holy Spirit is telling them to do. They say that when they have the Holy Spirit as their Teacher they would need no one else to tell them anything (1Jn.2:27). Both groups go astray in their understanding, because balance is missing.

However clever we are, none of us is clever enough or knows everything. Our particular temperament and the experiences we have had tend to colour our thinking and give us bias and prejudices too. It would be stupid

for us to depend on our own reasoning or understanding to decide what to do in all circumstances (Pr.16:25). It is God who knows us and our circumstances completely, and depending on Him is our wisdom (Pr.3:5,6). When Jesus came down to earth as a Man, He Himself depended on the Father, only doing what the Father wanted Him to do (Jn.8:28).

But seeing this truth some people go to the other extreme, of listening only to the Holy Spirit for guidance. They don't realise that even while they seek to know the will of the Holy Spirit they can be deceived by the voice of Satan or their own voice (1Jn.4:1;2Co.11:14)! It is also not enough just to be reminded of some verse from the Bible, because even Satan quotes the Bible to deceive us (Mt.4:6). While the Holy Spirit is a great Teacher, we are not always good

learners! We need to know that our safety is to check every idea with the values, principles and commands given in the whole of the Bible and not just from any verse here or there. It is here that the anointing helps us to distinguish error from the truth (1Jn.2:26,27).

God is the One who has created us with the ability to learn, question, analyse, understand and remember things. In this He has made us superior to the animals (Ps.32:8,9). A horse has to be directed specifically to make every move. But God wants us to grow in wisdom, and we do that as we learn more from Him through His Word, and put them into practice (He.5:13,14). In practical terms, this implies that as we become more and more mature we know what to do in more and more situations without having to hear directly from God each time. At the same time we

place ourselves in subjection to the Holy Spirit to lead us differently if we have to move out in a different direction from what we would have taken normally (Is.30:21).

God also directs us through other people many times who can give us different points of view, and we again check these with the Bible. If we are unwilling to submit ourselves to others in this way (Ep.5:21) and imagine that we can hear the Spirit infallibly we again go astray (3Jn.1:9). Wisdom teaches us to know which counsel to take or reject, because there is no lack of advisers with their own interests.

Submitting to one another

Not many people look at one way we can express submission within the Body of Christ as we work together. In simple terms this is to submit to others who have spiritual gifts and calling from God which are different from ours. This is not a case of Person A submitting to Person B in all things, but as much as Person B operates his gifts and ministry. Before Paul gave God's instructions for wives to submit to their husbands, children to their parents and servants to their masters he gave this common instruction to submit to one another (Ep.5:21).

The church (the universal collection of born again Christians) is characterised by various spiritual gifts that the Lord has given to different ones (Ep.4:11,12). The number of such gifts is only indicative and certainly much

more than what is given in that verse (See 1Co.12:8-10; Ro.12:6-8). What we need is to submit to the operation of a gift when we recognise one. Though some have several gifts, no one has all, and so everyone has to recognise his own limitations and submit to others who have other gifts.

This is not very common to see; what we usually see is people all acting as if they do not need the others. An evangelist teaches, a teacher administers, an administrator prophesies, a prophet shepherds, a shepherd serves tables, etc.! It's a calamity, because each ministry requires a special gifting from God which may include associated natural abilities, and those without such a calling may make a mess of things by going outside their boundary. Think of one common example.

A Bible teacher is usually one who

along with his special calling and burden from the Lord is also endowed with the ability to analyse things systematically, discern subtle differences in doctrinal interpretations, and explain things in simple terms using appropriate examples. When we see how the Lord chose Paul with a brilliant mind to bring out doctrinal explanations, and compare his writings with those of others we can notice the difference. It is not that the other writers did not teach at all, but they were able to recognise the special anointing the Lord had given Paul in this connection and submit to him (2Pe.3:15,16).

Imagine what happens when an evangelist comes up with new doctrines instead of using well-analysed material from teachers! If the evangelist recognises the teacher's gift and submit to him, while the teacher

recognises the evangelist's gift for reaching out to the lost and supports him with appropriate teaching, there would be harmony. Both of them will submit to the administrator who plans and executes practical things in the church. Both of them learning from others with similar gifts is also a part of submission.

No local church has all gifts within, and submission will extend to other churches also as we recognise their gifts! We can invite others to minister to our local church in areas where they have something to give us. In this way each member will be able to give to the others and receive from them what the Lord has given for the growth of the Body (Ep.4:16).

The outward call

It's natural that when we are called to be His children we are taken up with ourselves, beaming about how He has forgiven sinners like us, exalted us from the pit of sin and shame to seat us along with Jesus in heaven on the throne as His children, blessed us in many different ways, etc. But when God called Abraham, He had more than just Abraham in mind. In his case God had the whole world in His mind. God was going to bless Abraham and then through him every family on earth (Ge.12:3). In this case this essentially meant that one day all the people of the world have the opportunity to receive God's blessings through Jesus, a descendent of Abraham.

This Abraham was the first one who 'believed' in God in a way that God counted as 'faith'. When he and his

wife Sarah were too old to have children, Abraham believed in the promise of God that He would give them a son, and this faith was counted as righteousness to Abraham (Ro.4:3). That was how he became the 'father of faith' to us who believed that we sinners would be justified and accepted by God as his children because Jesus took the punishment of sin in our place (Ro.4:16). Now God wants us to be a blessing to the world, i.e., have the same blessing as Abraham (Ga.3:14). We now have the opportunity to bless the world in Jesus' name, just as Abraham blessed the world through Jesus.

We can bless the world not only by proclaiming Jesus to the world directly, or indirectly by supporting those who do, which is evangelism, but also by serving people around us in the place of Jesus (Mt.5:16). What exactly

we do and how we do it will depend on the particular ministry that God gives to us. But every one of us has this calling to be a blessing to the people around us (1Co.12:7).

Many Christians don't even know about this. They assume that once they came to faith in Jesus they are headed for heaven, and live their self-centred lives virtually as before. Some are so taken up with their own personal relationship with Jesus that they are practically of no earthly use to anyone else! Many others think that they are not capable or qualified enough to do anything for others. But God wants us to be just ourselves, not trying to imitate someone else we admire, and to use the talent(s) He has given each one of us. If God has given us only one talent, He doesn't expect us to produce as much output as some who has been given more. But He certainly expects

output in proportion to what He has given us.

There is no greater blessing than to become a blessing to others in Jesus' name. Our own experience of God becomes greater as we seek to respond not just to our own need but also to that of people we deal with, and this makes us stronger, wiser, and able to bear more fruit for God's glory in His kingdom. If we think the reward of seeing lives blessed before our eyes is great, just think of finally hearing from God, "Well done, you faithful servant!"

Isn't this a good time to place ourselves into His hands to bless others?

Pointers along the way #331

When we don't like someone
We human beings are fickle creatures (marked by erratic changeableness),

however clever or capable we may be otherwise. God has created us with the ability to think, analyse things rationally, differentiate between feelings and reason, foresee possible consequences of our actions and make wise choices. Yet Adam and Eve's fall has distorted the way we actually think, reason and behave. As natural people we tend to be guided by selfish interests, and our hearts are deceptive in giving us justifications for whatever we *want* to do (Je.17:9). What God is trying to do now is to restore us to His image. He begins by taking away our heart of stone (selfishness) and giving us a new heart (Eze.36:26). However this process is a lifelong sanctification, and at every stage we feel the pull of our old nature which we need to resist, and place ourselves in line with the new nature (Ep.4:22-24).

One major example of this is what

happens when someone has displeased us in any way. If this has been a drastic event or a series of small events, we find our hearts changing towards that person however dear he may have been to us before. From this point onwards we begin to think of him with negative attitudes. Everything he says or does appears to be 'bad.' Slowly we begin to attribute bad intentions in that person's dealings with us, and misunderstand even the good thing he does. Our eyes have put on coloured glasses which we consistently use to look at him.

We know, in theory, that we ought not to be like this, but that we should forgive him, bear with him, etc. We also recognise that we might be misinterpreting him in many ways, but we don't seem to be able to see things any differently. We seem to be only getting more convinced about his bad

behaviour towards us.

What is happening is that we have started listening to the Devil who saw the opening in our life and put his foot inside. His ideas and suggestions are so convincing and persuasive that we think we have reasoned out and reached the conclusions ourselves! The Bible warns us about this and tells us to be careful. We are instructed to get rid of our anger at the earliest so that the Devil does not get a foothold (Ep.4:26,27). It is not wrong to feel angry when others provoke us, but it would be wrong to retaliate in anger or hold on to resentment in our heart because then we would give the Devil grounds to work on.

Another way we can allow the Devil access is by neglecting to forgive others from our heart (2Co.2:10,11). By forgiving others we protect ourselves from attack! We need to

forgive as an act of our will, even if we don't *feel* like doing it. God helps us by reminding us how He has forgiven us freely without our deserving it (Ep.4:32). Jesus forgave His murderers without even waiting for them to repent (Lk.23:34).

When we find ourselves wearing these coloured glasses, it is time to seriously seek for grace from God because otherwise we may get into worse and worse scenarios.

Pointers along the way #332

Sometimes we just need to be tough

Sometimes it happens that whatever we may do in order to get right with other people, they are unwilling to take any steps towards us. We apologise, but they don't accept it. We forgive, but they continue to trouble us. We return

good for evil, but we get nothing but evil from them. We plead with them, but they only seem to get worse. We get other people to mediate, but that makes them more upset. Finally we grow so weary that we feel like giving up and retaliating with evil ourselves! What we need may be some toughness.

Don't we see that Satan is getting to us through some other people while we are watching out for his direct attacks? He is trying to wear us out by focussing on changing other people, which is rather difficult and almost impossible. By putting a lot of our energy in a direction where we are unlikely to succeed, we are only allowing ourselves to become worn out and finally give up!

We can try to be helpful, discuss, or do good in any other way, but if the other person is not willing to respond there is hardly anything we can do. We will

spend our time and energy better if we put him out of our focus and concentrate on more useful activities. God says we are to pursue peace with others only as much as it lies within our powers (Ro.12:18) because He knows we can't control what others decide to do. But we don't recognise this limitation and get quite frustrated because we think we are unable to have peace with some others. On top of that we may also blame ourselves for what is really somebody else's fault.

When we wish to bless the others and have peace with them, we need to be 'tough' when we have to stand and watch them going wrong. We really can't do anything else, and it is good to recognise this quickly. We shouldn't let their evil ruin our peace. We know they are going to hurt themselves, but we are unable to help them because they

don't want our help. It is not that we stop loving them. We keep ourselves ever ready to help if and when they want our help. In the meantime we keep praying that God would give them good sense. After that we need to stop feeling guilty or frustrated at our helplessness, and turn our attention to other things God wants us to do.

Think of how God watches people going in wrong directions. He longs to tell them how much He loves them and bless them with salvation. But He doesn't want to take away their freedom of choice, and so He bears His pain and sorrow as He 'helplessly' watches the ones He has created going away towards destruction. But He is perfectly at peace with Himself, because He knows He cannot do anything else for them and it is they who are making their choice.

Sometimes it is this tough love that

will finally draw such people to us. They slowly recognise that we were 'for them' all along, and our goodness may lead them to repentance (Ro.2:4). On the other hand our 'running after them' may put them on the defensive and actually delay their repentance.

Pointers along the way #333

Doing the will of God

It is very easy for us to fall into the habit of *saying*, "Lord, Lord," and *not doing* the will of God (Mt.7:21). This happens when we become familiar with 'churchy,' 'spiritual' things. Our 'life' consists of words--even right, good, Biblical words--as we talk, sing, listen to and write on Twitter or Facebook. We don't even notice when our words lose their meaning for us and things become mechanical. This seems to be inevitable when words don't come from life, and there is no life because there is no 'doing' the will of God (Jas.1:22-24).

This is probably because of deeper issues, even of wrong understanding of salvation and our life with God. At the lowest level, if our 'salvation' consisted of merely repeating the words, "Lord Jesus, come into my

heart," without any heart-felt recognition of our sin, turning away from it sincerely and committing ourselves to Jesus as our Lord, our salvation is just make-believe! At the next level, even if there has been a genuine meeting with Jesus and placing our trust in Him, if our understanding of life is that now we have a guaranteed place in heaven and that there is nothing more to do, of course there will not be any serious attempt to 'do the will of God.' Then there are those who have been taught to resist any teaching that asks us to 'do' anything, calling that 'getting back under the law,' and that also leads to inaction.

We need to be clear that there is no requirement for us to do anything to earn any merit with God, because we are saved and we live only because of His grace (Ep.2:8). But if we have

truly come under grace, this grace will begin to change our lives. There will be some 'works' that we and other people can notice. These are works that come out of a heart of faith, love, gratitude, etc., seeking to keep God's ways and thereby to honour and exalt Him. If these are missing or lacking, it indicates that our so-called 'faith' is useless and 'dead' (Jas.2:17). Then all our "Lord, Lord" will be useless, since Jesus will say He doesn't know us (Mt.7:22,23).

Let us ask ourselves if there is really any focus on doing the will of God in our daily life. Let's not count in this context major issues where we seek the will of God. How about wanting to know how God would want us to spend our free time, when we have it? What about asking God to tell us how He would want us to spend money? Do we seriously spend time reading His

word to get to know His will better? Do we often have questions about His will? How often do we recognise that our behaviour has grieved Him (1Jn.1:8)? Do we examine ourselves to see how we could have said something differently?

In other words, is there a conscious effort going on towards doing God's will better and better in daily aspects of life? Otherwise there is a strong chance that we are deceived or deceiving ourselves when we think we are 'saved.' If God shows that to us, it is not to condemn us but because of His love that wants us to be truly saved.

Pointers along the way #334

Are we the 'sensitive' type?

People get upset easily. Someone just says or does something we didn't expect, and we get hurt! We start worrying about what they meant, and why they are like that with us. We imagine all sorts of things and soon our attitude towards them is not the same any more! Our 'mood' is gone, and we feel terribly unhappy about life itself! We may tell ourselves that we are just sensitive, but actually we are being absolutely silly about the whole thing.

We've got it all wrong. What is happening is that we are letting other people determine our moods! We have handed over the control of our mind to others. We are going to have a miserable life because the world is full of people who are inconsiderate, self-centred, unkind, callous, sadistic, malicious, etc. Others who aren't like

this also do many things that can prick our sensitive skin because they unconsciously do and say things that hurt us. Since we can't change the world, the only practical thing for us is to determine that we aren't going to allow ourselves to get hurt by what others do!

Our salvation begins by recognising that we are not going to be able to come to a happy life if we are going to depend on other people to make us happy. The good news is that God has given us the ability and the means to choose to be joyful at all times. The secret is to rejoice *in the Lord* always (Php.4:4). The fact that God wants us to rejoice always tells us that it is *possible* to do that. This also tells us that it is possible only *in the Lord*. No matter what happens on earth or how other people treat us, God's love for us will never cease (Ro.8:31-35). If God

is for us, how does it matter how other people are towards us?

The world thinks that they can be happy only when everything is going fine. But nothing goes well all the time, and even the best people rub us the wrong way at times. But when our joy is linked to what the Lord thinks about us and His presence with us, our whole life makes a paradigm shift.

This is a matter of walking by faith (2Co.5:7). When we believe this truth in our mind and heart, we can apply it when we face the next challenge to our faith. The next time someone hurts or ignores us, we can remind ourselves that God's love for us hasn't become any less. When God's love is there for us, which is infinitely great, how does it matter if one human being seems to be against us? We can also remind ourselves that in many cases people don't know they are hurting us, and in

any case they are unaware of its seriousness. Then we can, like Jesus, forgive them freely (Lk.23:34). Then we can put them aside and go ahead with rejoicing in the Lord.

As we practise this more and more, it becomes easier to turn aside from people and look at the Lord. It becomes habitual to think more and more about the Lord, talk to Him and listen to Him. We will see how we have been making ourselves miserable all the time when we could have easily turned to Jesus and found true meaning in life.

Tests of faith

God tests our faith, our trust in Him, to show us what is in our heart. Without that we might fool ourselves thinking we are some giants of faith. Many times when we are tested we get to see that we don't have so much faith as we imagined. But that is not for us to give up. But we can have a more sober estimate of ourselves and go on to place more trust in our Father.

Abraham, who is called the father of faith, did not get that name without tests. First he was asked to leave his father's family and leave for an unknown place which God called the Promised Land. It may be difficult for some of us to leave our comfort zone for any place even when we know where it is. Abraham was not told where, and he had to follow God's guidance step by step. He believed

God's promise of a son even when he and his wife were too old, humanly speaking, to have children. He was willing to let his wife Hagar and son Ishmael go, without any hope of seeing them again. He was willing to kill his son of promise, Isaac, as a sacrifice to obey God. Compared to such tests, most of us have had only kindergarten tests.

Joseph had to face 13 long years of 'unfair' deals in life, through no fault of his own, and hold on to the dreams God had given him as a teenager. At the end God's rewards and blessings came through, not only in a material sense, but also in the height of spiritual maturity he attained to (Ge.50:19,20).

Our trials may be different. Sometimes the trial is short but intense, and sometimes the power of the trial is in its apparently unending nature. Sometimes we have others around us

who understand what we are going through but unable to help us. Sometimes no one seems to even understand our real struggles. Sometimes trials are unexpected in terms of timing, and sometimes they hit us unexpectedly from people from whom we had expected better. Sometimes the 'why' question haunts us, and sometimes we cry, "When will this end, Lord?" People around us may offer us platitudes, but we are struggling with what God wants from us.

These tests can harden us, and turn us away from God, or they can drive us closer to God. God's desire for us is to get nearer to Him, learn from Him and become a little more transformed into His character (1Pe.1:7;Re.2:10). What helps us to endure is to see by faith what lies at the end of the trial. God stands with us through the trial, with

the thermostat in His hands, and encourages us through His word to keep running and not give up (He.10:36). At the finish line of the race there are trophies waiting, and above all, the joy of being rewarded personally by our Saviour (Ac.7:56;Re.11:18).

In the race we are in, statistics show that except for Jesus no one has finished without many trip ups along the way. Failures are unavoidable, considering our weaknesses. But we shouldn't let them cause us to give up. We can get up and run again. The prize here is not for coming first but enduring till the end (Mt.24:13).

Pointers along the way #336

Feeding the flesh?

Jesus died a painful death on the cross for us, not just to pay the penalty for

our sins (Col.1:20), but also that we might become *dead to sin* (Ro.6:6;Ga.6:14). When we were sinners without Christ we had no real qualms about sin, except that others shouldn't catch us! A few of us who were troubled by our conscience or taught by some others would have made attempts to overcome sin, but without much avail. But when God gave us a new heart (Ez.36:26), one thing was that we began to want to stop sinning altogether. (If this has not happened, the chances are that we aren't born again yet. 1Jn.3:9). But even then we find that stopping from sin is not easy. This is because our flesh is still there through which we feel sinful desires (Ga.5:17). Satan and his demons are out there working against us, trying to fool us into sin (1Pe.5:8). The world around us attracts us with enticing offers (1Jn.2:16). Caught in the middle we

are overcome many times, even though we wish we weren't.

Sometimes we wonder why we aren't really victorious over sin even though God is with us, we are His children and His power is available to us. Of course God's provision of grace is meant to ensure that sin is not able to rule over us (Ro.6:14). It is certainly not due to any fault on His side if we haven't yet come to enjoy this blessing of His grace which He has prepared for us through Jesus' death. There could be several reasons on our side why victory eludes us.

1. We may have neglected this possibility with regards to our salvation. We may have assumed that because 'we are human' we are going to fall, not believing that Jesus wants to give us victory and that He is able to keep us from falling (Jude.24). As a result we may not have sought for it

seriously.

2. We may have tried for victory in our own strength, failed, and then given up. Instead of seeking God for grace to help (He.4:15,16), we may have struggled and found our strength or resolve to be insufficient.

3. We may not have sought to understand why we were failing and how God wants to help us. Some of us have assumed if we 'just believed' it would be all right, and others have thought that prayer was the key, and not realised that there was more than one aspect to victory.

4. We may not have realised that falling is a part of the learning process, and that we should not give up till we reach the goal.

5. We may have been 'feeding our flesh' now and then! The reason for denying ourselves and taking up our

cross daily (Lk.9:23) is to put our flesh to death and put off the old self (Ro.8:13;Ep.4:22). Our flesh is to die of starvation, when we prevent it from carrying out its desires. But it gets revived if we indulge ourselves once in a while, think that we mustn't be so hard on ourselves and give in. Satan tells us that a little 'picnic' into his territory won't do us any harm but will give us great fun and relief from pressure.

We will get victory little by little. But let us not neglect or miss it.

Extreme preaching

There are all kinds of preachers--those who threaten with fire and brimstone, those who soothe with "Everything's gonna be alright," those who tantalise with health and prosperity, those who teach ultra-radical discipleship, those who challenge with 'perishing millions', those who excite with end time prophecies, those who impress with Hebrew and Greek, and others who veer off from the track with special interpretations, hidden knowledge, sensational discoveries, etc. If we are not properly grounded in the Word of God, things can be quite confusing. If we aren't clear in our understanding and thinking, preachers quoting Bible verses can appear to be convincing.

Many believing Christians are not able to face this confusion because their

knowledge of the Bible is limited to what they hear in their churches. In many churches, the focus of their particular ministry limits the preachers to select portions of Scripture. What the people hear are different versions of the same message, and they are really only familiar with certain verses. As a result they are not in a position to do a fair assessment of what they hear and read from others.

Any form of preaching, whether it is hard hitting or soothing, can be extreme if it addresses only that side of the big picture. We may think that preachers who speak of damnation and judgment without mentioning grace are extreme. But even those who only speak about 'grace' without mentioning God's strict hatred for sin and our need to repent are going to another extreme. Our first line of defence is from the Holy Spirit who can indicate to us that there is

something that doesn't sound quite right when we come across error (1Jn.2:26,27). But then we may not feel competent to question teachers whom we respect! But it is necessary for our own safety and for ensuring our proper growth that we, like the Berean church who examined Paul's teachings (Ac.17:11), check things out before accepting them as truth.

The use of 'proof' texts is notorious, where selected verses are taken to prove one's point of view at the cost of other parts of Scripture that would provide a balance. When we listen to such an exposition it must immediately strike us in our mind that there are other verses that the preacher seems to be ignoring. At the same time we must keep in mind that it is not always possible to reach complete balance within individual sermons because they may be targeting only some

particular issues. But we can assess a speaker over a period of time to see if he is presenting the full counsel of God, as Paul did (Ac.20:27).

It is true that not all are teachers and gifted to 'divide the Word accurately' (2Ti.2:15). But we can still take questionable teachings to the Lord and ask Him to reveal His ways to us. God can then bring other parts of Scripture to mind directly or use other people to bring us to a balance. What is needed on our side is a willingness to keep on learning and to change whenever we see a need for balance.

Pointers along the way #338

Finished with the law?

In the early church some thought that apart from faith one needed to be circumcised also. Now some preach that baptism is also necessary for salvation. Others insist on keeping the Sabbath on Saturday. Some teach that Christians ought to keep the Ten Commandments. Still some others advocate throwing out the Law now that we are under grace!

God has revealed Himself progressively to man in time and through the Bible. The old covenant which was given through the Ten Commandments was not God's ultimate plan for man, but just a step before God set up the new covenant through the death of Jesus. It was like a steward of the house tutoring a young son till he became mature enough to take over the household (Ga.4:1-5), or

like a shadow pointing to the full reality which was to come (Co.2:16,17). So its standards were kept at a level which the people of Israel could reach, if they wanted to, with their limited knowledge of God after all the years in Egypt. (Paul kept the Law without blame - Php.3:6). Israel demonstrated through their repeated failures that man needed a Saviour more than commandments, as many of us also have learned. The new covenant came with grace, undeserved favour from God--a major paradigm shift from obeying commandments to God working in us and accepting us freely.

When God gave the old commandments, He had in view much greater expectations in the future. Jesus said that if murder was a sin, so was hating someone in our heart, and looking at a woman with desire just as

bad as committing adultery. He shifted the focus from external sins to those inside our hearts. God always wanted this, but He was unable to ask till we had a Saviour and the Holy Spirit enabling us to rise to that standard. He supersedes all the old covenant Law in His law of love--loving God with everything we have and loving others as ourselves (Mt.22:37-40).

What God wants from the Christian is an allegiance to Him that captures all our life (Mt.10:37;Lk.14:33). How can we give Him one day in seven or one tenth of our income and live as we like for the rest? How can someone who 'just lives by the Ten Commandments' enjoy fellowship with God at this level? Is our relationship with others limited to honouring parents and not committing murder, adultery, stealing, false witness and coveting?

When we love God with all our heart,

prompted by His grace towards us, that love will compel us to run towards a 'perfect' relationship with God and man, won't we (2Co.5:14,15)? Then we will be able to see the proper place of the Ten Commandments, all the ritual practices that pointed towards Jesus as the Lamb of God, and God's dealings with people through the Old Testament in the light of God's new covenant of grace. When we see the severity with God dealt with sin in the old covenant, we will appreciate the value of grace and free acceptance that God has given us in the new covenant. Then we will also learn how to keep His commandments in our heart (Jn.14:23).

Pointers along the way #339

Walking with Jesus

A mistake many Christians make is to assume that walking with God is a

privilege that only a few 'great' men and women of God have, not realising that these people have become great *because* they walked with God! We learn to walk with God somewhat in the same way that we learn to walk physically, with attempts to get up and stand, take a few steps, and get up again when we fall. Physical walking comes instinctively, but our spiritual walk comes by choice!

Jesus tells us about a gate and a way, indicating that we need to first decide to walk with Him, and then to actually walk with Him daily along the way of life. We need to make this a deliberate choice and practice because the easier thing is to walk like everyone else around us, who are actually on the broad way to destruction (Mt.7:13,14). By their standards Jesus' way is narrow, because when we choose Jesus we simultaneously choose

against things that are displeasing to Him.

The life of Joseph in the Old Testament gives us a challenging example of this walk. When his father Jacob gave him a multi-coloured robe his brothers began to hate him because of their envy. Then when he told them about the dreams he had at night where he saw them bowing down to him they became furious. But later on when Jacob asked Joseph to carry some food and refreshments to his brothers who were away pasturing sheep Joseph had no hesitation to do that! He was not harbouring any ill feelings towards his brothers.

When the brothers saw Joseph they wanted to kill him, but later sold him off as a slave. As a slave in Egypt in Potiphar's house, Joseph conducted himself so well that Potiphar entrusted the entire responsibility of the

household to him. What does this indicate but that Joseph was not nursing bitterness, grudges or hatred in his heart towards his brothers or God? When Potiphar's wife tried to entice him, he replied, "How can I do such wickedness against God?" (Ge.39:9). This woman falsely accused Joseph and he ended up in prison. In the prison his attitude and behaviour encouraged the jailer to give Joseph the responsibility over his fellow prisoners!

Joseph requested one of the prisoners who was going to be released to inform Pharaoh about his unjust imprisonment. But that man forgot all about it for two years. When Pharaoh had a dream that needed interpretation, this man suddenly remembered Joseph. Joseph interpreted Pharaoh's dream, and was awarded with the highest position in Egypt. Years later when

Joseph met his brothers he told them that God had worked everything for good (Ge.50:19,20;Ro.8:28).

What we see here is that Joseph was walking consistently with God, seeking to please Him and denying himself from day to day in order to do that. Isn't this what Jesus asks us also to do (Lk.9:23)? Isn't that how we can walk with Jesus in a practical sense? The knowledge of God from His Word, the leading of the Holy Spirit and the fellowship with other disciples help us as we walk this way.

Pointers along the way #340

Two groups of people

People can be grouped in different ways. One that pertains to how we live our lives is to note that some people live by their principles and others by how they relate to other people. In other words, one group values principles more than people and they would not mind if others got offended with them because of their stand, and the other group values people and would rather choose to avoid offending people than be, what they would call, too legalistic. Our personality may have something to do with this, with the left brain dominated people choosing to do 'right' about everything they do, and the right brain dominated people giving more value to their relationship with people.

God has given a set of principles and values for us to strictly adhere to

(De.6:2;Ps.119:10)). Even though the Ten Commandments were part of the old covenant and we are now under the new covenant, the values they represent still hold for us. Jesus in fact took pains to point out in the Sermon on the Mount that God's requirements run deeper than the commandments relating to external action as given under the Law. God also warns us that if pleasing people became more important to us than obeying God, we would get into a dangerous trap (Pr.29:25;Ga.1:10;Ac.4:19)).

One of the works of the Holy Spirit in the believer is to write these laws of God on the heart (Je.31:33;Jn.16:13)). When this work goes deep, it even changes our personality, and we begin to give more attention to what God thinks than about others. We then value acceptance from God so much that we are no longer fearful about being

rejected by people.

'People of principles' who did not care so much about how it impacted other people also come under the work of the Holy Spirit. They do not begin to neglect principles in order to please people. But they begin to become more sensitive to other people's feelings in the sense that they take pains to express their views and decisions to others without *unnecessarily* hurting them. They become empathetic towards the weaknesses and struggles others are going through when they are faced with the choice between God's values and the relationship with their friends.

Choosing to please people rather than God can easily be seen as 'compromise'. But bulldozing over people with 'principles' is callousness if not cruelty. Pharisaic Christians who think they are doing this for the Lord's sake do not realise the damage they are

doing to the name of Christ; they manage to turn away people from the gospel by their legalistic attitudes instead of drawing them with their sacrificial love.

Whichever group we start from, there are changes that are required in our attitudes and behaviour. Nobody has a natural advantage. The first group may appear as if they are 'real' Christians compared to the other group! But 'religious' attitudes like that of the Pharisees was more detestable to Jesus than the 'ordinary' sins of other people.

Pointers along the way #341

Why aren't they like me?

Practically everyone will be quick to admit they are not perfect. In saying this we want others to be considerate towards our imperfections. But paradoxically, we aren't so eager to bear with the imperfections we see in others! When we wonder how others can be like this, or why they can't be different, we seem to imply that if they were like us it would have been fine! We'd be aghast if someone told us we seem to think we were the standard, but isn't that what our behaviour indicates to an observer from outside?

This becomes worse if we are Christians thinking of other Christians. When we look at their faults we wonder how they could be like that, adding, "And they call themselves Christians!" Momentarily we forget this is what the world is saying about

us, and perhaps for very good reasons too!

This is a part of our fallen nature. We just can't seem to be able to get rid of it. It's not as if we don't know the story of how Adam and Eve blamed each other and God (Ge.3:12,13), or how Jesus told us to first take out the plank from our eyes before trying to remove specks in others' eyes (Mt.7:4,5). The fact is that our eyes are drawn like magnets to the others' faults without having to make any effort at all. But it takes us a lot of effort to turn our attention to our own faults. And that is why most of us practically never learn to find any fault with ourselves even if we look. We may have heard about how couples going for marital counselling find it easy to list their spouse's faults but most often can't proceed beyond one or two points when it comes to their own faults.

Isn't the solution obvious from the above paragraph? What we need to do is to train ourselves to look inside more often. When we think about an incident with another person, our normal practice may have been to go over the other person's faults from what he said or did. These get magnified by repeated thinking so much that we become convinced that it was certainly his fault. And then we stop. But what we should learn to do is to think about the incident with an assumption that there could be things there that we did wrong or could have done better. Don't give up on this after a cursory glance and get back to looking at the other person's fault!

This doesn't come easily, nor does it become a habit till we practise it deliberately for some time. However, when we have begun to discover our own wrong words, deeds and attitudes,

it becomes easier the next time to go along this path.

Of course when we see our faults it does not imply that the others don't have any. It is also not as if we are 'failures' just because we have failed here or there. What we are learning to recognise is that we are *really* not as perfect that we thought! Except for some people with serious psychological issues, this shouldn't be unmanageable. Once we 'manage' this, we are on our way to having 'sober' estimates of ourselves (Ro.12:3) and becoming truly humble!

Pointers along the way #342

Entering the kingdom as a child

It is one of those categorical statements Jesus made that unless we become like little children we shall not enter His

kingdom (Mt.18:3). This is also linked to His statement that it would be more difficult for a camel to go through a needle's eye than for a rich man to enter His kingdom (Mt.19:24). It would not be right to think that this means we need to be unthinking or gullible like children or poor in terms of wealth to enter God's kingdom.

A rich man can be in God's kingdom if he would place his trust in God rather than in his wealth or in himself (1Ti.6:17). The issue is about where he places his confidence, whether in God or in his 'riches'. We see how we tend to forget God or revel in self-confidence when we have money at our service or abilities, good health, influence or friends in high places (De.8:11,12). It is when these things fail, or become unreliable that people are usually cast upon to the Lord. What Jesus wants us to understand is that

even when He blesses us with abundance our heart is to rest entirely on Him (1Pe.1:13).

A childlike characteristic that is linked to our relationship with God is trust. It is impossible to please God without it. A child trusts what his parents tell him and is willing to act accordingly. This is because he has not yet experienced disappointments with them or known their limitations or imperfections. The more we 'learn' and experience the more we tend to live according to our own understanding rather than according to what God says. God wants us to trust Him implicitly and do what He tells us (Pr.3:5-8).

Grown up people who feel capable in themselves look at different parts of God's words and say, "I don't agree with that!" What audacity! They have not come to recognise God for who He is. Even when they have been born

again, their own concept of God seems to remain as if He is just some superman type with some extra-normal powers. But if we take time to sit and look at Him, and meditate on His creation and what He has been doing since then, we will learn to respect Him as God (Pr.2:1-5). Why do people find it difficult to believe that God stopped the Sun (or the Earth to be precise) for Joshua or parted the Red Sea for Israel except that they have not understood that He was the one who created the Earth, the Sun or the Red Sea in the first place and that He can even now do whatever He pleases (Ps.115:3)?

A childlike faith trusts in such a God, and has no problems in receiving His Word even if our understanding (or the lack of it!) seems to tell us otherwise. Without such faith how can we enter or walk in His kingdom when economic

recessions, political chaos or sicknesses rage around us? Shall we not recognise that our 'great scientific knowledge' is just a tiny glimpse into His vastness and that too wrong and imperfect in many ways because science hasn't really 'arrived' yet? Shall we see ourselves as small children standing before our awesome Father?

Pointers along the way #343

To love God's way

When two people fall in love with each other and get married, why does God have to exhort husbands to love their wives (Ep.5:25) and older women to *train* younger women to love their husbands (Ti.2:3,4)? Married people know that the euphoric feeling of 'love' cools off after the 'honeymoon phase', and in reality it is sometimes difficult to love one's spouse. There were many things that you liked about each other before you got married which seem to have disappeared. Now you are now struggling to just bear with your spouse and you wonder whether you like him/her anymore now!

Jesus went a step further when He asked us to love our enemies (Mt.5:44). How can we ever love those we cannot even like? God

wouldn't be so unrealistic as to expect us to like them. Then how can He ask us to love them? Does He like *us* when we sin, holy and perfect God that He is? But He loves us!

The mistake we make in this kind of thinking is that of assuming that to love is a higher form of liking. Isn't that why we say, "I love chocolates," or "I love that music"? But love is quite different from liking someone or something. That is why instead of telling us to like our enemies, our husband or wife, He asks us to love them.

When God tells us to love our enemies, what He also tells us, by way of explanation, is to bless those who curse us and pray for those who abuse us (Lk.6:28), to do good to the to the ungrateful, the evil (v.35) and the unjust (Mt.5:45), and doing to them what we wish they would do to us (Lk.6:31). In other words, our

intention is to be good to everyone irrespective of whether they are good or evil to us, and we are to actually *do* good to them instead of returning evil for evil, or treating them according to their behaviour. That is divine love. When we were God's enemies, and doing things He hated, He wanted to bless us and do us good, and therefore gave His Son to die for us so that we could be saved. That is the love He wants us to have, and not nice feelings of 'like'.

Suddenly this kind of love becomes attainable. Instead of struggling to make ourselves like and thereafter 'love' others, we can intend good (and only good) for others, and do good (and never evil) towards them. Now we can understand why husbands and wives need to be exhorted to love like this. When they cannot like certain things they notice in each other, they

can still choose to desire good for the other and continue to do good.

Why do we need training in this? It's because when we have to continue to be good, we have to put to death our fleshly desires for vengeance, forgive and continue to be good. At the same time we don't have to twist our minds to force ourselves to 'like' the others or ignore their faults. We can honestly reckon with the fact that there are certain things wrong with the others (as also with us) and still continue to be good to them. Let us ask God to pour out this kind of love into our heart and mind.

Pointers along the way #344

Full time Christians

"Once I was blind, but now I see!"

"Once I was lost, but now am found!"

These are expressions people use to describe what God has done in their lives when they came to God as sinners, and God gave them a Saviour, Jesus Christ. The Bible also uses other phrases such as coming into life from death, into light from darkness, etc., to describe the same experience. Even if this transition happens in some people's lives over a period of time without being dramatic as in other lives, nevertheless it is still a life changing milestone for everyone. What is a man's normal response when he recognises what God has done for him in this way? He worships God, with humility, gratitude and love bursting out from his heart. He cries out, "What can I do for all that You have done for

me? I'll love You and serve You with all that is within me!" God's word says that this is the only reasonable response under such circumstances (Ro.12:1).

Such a man recognises that he doesn't belong to himself any more, but that God has *bought* him with a price, the blood of Jesus Christ (1Co.6:19,20). His body is the temple of the Holy Spirit. Even though God has adopted him as a *son of God*, he considers himself as a *bond slave* of God. His time, energy, money, and everything else that God has given him belong to God. Whether he works in a factory or serves as an evangelist, he does all things according to God's will and in order to glorify God (1Co.10:31). He is a Christian, full time.

On the other hand we may be divided in our heart between God and this world. Then we decide that certain

things such as going to church, reading the Bible and praying are spiritual things, and working in a job, getting married, buying things for the home, enjoying a hobby, watching TV, etc., are secular things. We talk about spiritual things in a church, and other things outside. We give some of our money for 'spiritual things' and spend the rest any way we like. We use 'spiritual' language when we talk about 'spiritual' subjects and common (worldly) business practices in our daily dealings. In such a case we are, at best, part time Christians.

Many of us have acknowledged that Jesus is the Lord of our lives, but even while seeking to love and serve God as full time Christians we are aware of discrepancies between our profession and practice. So there is nothing in us that can boast, or look down on part time Christians. At the same time we

can imagine that somehow such people's eyes have not yet 'seen' the incredible magnitude of God's grace reaching down to us sinners and the largeness of God's heart towards us.

Don't we too need to examine our own lives periodically to see how we can show God our gratitude in a better way, and what He would have us to do for Him, not just in terms of 'ministry' but in our everyday life? Don't our thoughts, words and deeds need to be pleasing to God full time?

Pointers along the way #345

Faith works, or does it?

"Seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be added to you" (Mt.6:33). There could be three different ways Christians respond to this. 1. They don't believe it will work out, and so they pursue all these 'other' things. 2. They 'believe' it, but still they pursue after the other things. 3. They believe it, and so they seek God's kingdom and His righteousness *first* in every part of their lives. Group 2 thinks they believe, but their deeds are the same as the unbelieving Group 1. They think that they too have faith but keep wondering why God is not keeping His promises! Only Group 3 has genuine faith, because they behave according to what they believe. Their faith works, and God rewards them by taking care of all their needs.

Faith that does not result in works of faith is a counterfeit (Jas.2:17). Genuine faith is not some abstract concept that is only fit for sermons; it works. If it doesn't work, it is false. If we believe that our God shall supply all our needs according to His riches in glory (Php.4:19) and still continue in anxiety, the truth is that we don't believe. Then the best thing to do is to acknowledge that we have been fooling ourselves about our faith, and seek to genuinely believe what we profess.

Certainly it is not that, for example, we hear a promise from God and all anxiety disappears. There is a battle involved where we choose to believe God and refuse the misgivings of our mind. But as we win that battle, we enter God's rest also progressively.

What is the reason we don't actually believe what we read as God's

promises in His word? Perhaps we did not understand His words correctly and tried to apply certain words from the Bible in a wrong way, got no result and concluded it wouldn't work. We may have taken promises that do not apply to us, or we did not fulfil the conditions associated with those promises. It can never be that the eternal God gives a promise and does not keep it.

But when we receive a promise that is meant for us, but we still won't believe it and act accordingly, it shows that we don't really trust in God who gave us the promise. It is stupid for us not to believe God, and we are also insulting God by making Him out as being untrustworthy! Is it any wonder God is angry with those who will not believe (He.4:3)?

Actually genuine faith is more about who we believe than what we believe

for. It is the immature Christian who only applies faith to what he wants to get from God. But when we become more mature, we learn to trust our Father even when we do not know what is going to happen, because we *know* He knows, and He is in control. When we ask Him for something, we are happy to leave the decision to Him who knows whether it is good for us. This was the faith that the three friends of Daniel (Da.3:17,18) and Job (Job.13:15) demonstrated. This kind of faith works by giving us 'rest' irrespective of the earthly outcome (Is.26:3).

Responding to God

God takes the initiative with us, and we need to respond. Since He will not force Himself on us, we will miss what He wants to do for us if we sit passively waiting for it. When we recognise His grace and mercy towards us, we respond by receiving Him as our Saviour and Lord. It is then that we receive the blessing of becoming His children (Jn.1:12). When we experience His overflowing love towards us we respond by loving Him and seeking to serve Him (1Jn.4:19). It is then that we begin to enjoy the blessing of His fellowship (Jn.14:23).

The taste of His kindness leads us to repentance (Ro.2:4). Sometimes, like the prodigal son, it is the bitter fruits of our folly that cause us to repent (Je.4:18). For some the fear of God's

coming wrath makes them repent, and that is why God has given many warnings in His word. But when we repent, that leads us to our salvation (2Cor.7:10). What happens if we experience such touches from God but do not repent or believe?

God manifests Himself in marvellous ways through His creation. Scientists who recognise His brilliance behind the design fall down and worship Him. God demonstrated His immeasurable love towards us, even though we were sinners, by sending His Son Jesus to die in our place, taking our punishment upon Himself (Ro.5:8). When we hear about Jesus--His life, the fulfilment of prophecies, His impeccable character, the love that reached out to miserable sinners, miracles, death and resurrection--we place our trust in Him and believe His words. That faith causes us to experience His grace--

unmerited favour and acceptance (Ep.2:8).

Many people perish, even in Christian families, because they are waiting for God to do things for them while they take no steps towards God which they are capable of taking. Even many believers want God to bless them and cause them to bear fruit without actively seeking after God, waiting on Him, learning from His word, seeking help from others, etc. Then they complain against God, saying that He is not doing this or that for them. That's not true, because God is all the time waiting to be gracious towards us, and we are the ones who go on our own without seeking Him (Is.30:15-18).

God is working *inside* us giving us understanding, desire and ability to do His will (Php.2:13). He is also working outside of us arranging things for our welfare (Je.29:11). But we

have to respond by *working out* what He is working *in* us (Php.2:12).

Satan deceives many people into thinking that they must avoid 'works' at all costs if they have to be under grace! Certainly no work of ours can *earn* salvation or any other blessing from God. But certainly God *cannot* bless us if we don't respond to Him when He offers us His blessings! Our response may take different forms, such as trusting and obeying Him, repenting and turning away from folly or sin, seeking Him more earnestly, consecrating ourselves entirely to Him, etc. 'Faith' without such works can only be dead (Jas.2:26).

Pointers along the way #347

Sacrifice vs. obedience

Sacrifices, rituals and festivals were instituted in the old covenant to teach

people certain lessons and also to point prophetically to the coming of the Saviour (Messiah) who would take their ultimate meaning. The sin offerings pointed out that sin needed atonement through the shedding of blood. Burnt offerings helped people to recognise God and submit to Him in their lives. Different rituals concerning temple worship and sacrifices taught people to give attention to every part of life to be pleasing and acceptable to God. Festivals were reminders of great things God had done for them in the past. But when the Saviour came and made the *new* covenant between God and man through His death and resurrection, He fulfilled all these requirements of the old covenant, and opened up *a new and living way* for us to walk in. But it is a sad thing if we have not learned the meaning and purpose of sacrifices and rituals, and give more attention to them than to be

obedient and pleasing to God *from our heart*.

Sacrifices were not meant to be a *substitute* for obedience. For example, if there was disobedience a sin offering became necessary. But the people of Israel misunderstood this, and thought that however they lived, whether they lived for themselves or worshipped idols, they could always go to the Temple, offer their sacrifices and be blessed by God. At one time when they got defeated by the Philistines because God was not with them, they thought that if they took the tabernacle into the battle place they would get the victory! (But the Philistines captured the tabernacle!) As time went on they continued to give sacrifices while they continued in idolatry. God had to tell them that no amount of sacrifices could compensate for their disobedience (Is.1:11-15).

When God asked King Saul to destroy everything of the Amalekites he saved some sheep and cattle, ostensibly for making sacrifices to God! God was appalled that Saul could think that sacrifices could make up for disobedience (1Sa.15:22).

Do we think that by offering sacrifices we are obeying God and thus pleasing Him. But what is the use of *external* sacrifices if our hearts are disobeying God? Will God value 'ministry' without a godly life? Is God fooled by outward actions of sacrifices, rituals and festivals when He primarily looks at our heart and wants sacrifices and offerings in the heart (1Sa.16:7)? Even when living with cheating, lying, unforgiving attitudes, bitterness and complaints, and lacking love, mercy, kindness or compassion, people make much of paying their tithes, keeping Lent, Good Friday, Easter and

Christmas, taking part in communion, etc.

It's not that festivals or sacrifices should be stopped. There is freedom to have them as long as we do things as unto the Lord (Ro.14:5,6). But how much more important and essential it is to have an inner life of obedience and sacrifice than such external compliance to forms and practices (Mt.23:23)!

Pointers along the way #348

Praying in faith

There is so much confusion among Christians about praying in faith. Many people think that if they could somehow get their mind to reject all doubts and have only thoughts about getting what they pray for, then they will receive it. This is a silly interpretation of Mk.11:24 and also aiming for an impossible state of mind.

They try to repeat 'positive' words to themselves and even get angry with others who might raise some 'negative' ideas. With true faith there is an inner assurance (He.11:1). All this struggle to maintain faith shows that what they have is not genuine. They are actually taking a position that faith is up to them to create and maintain and that once they reach a 'critical mass' God will automatically kick in!

How can we have this assurance that we will receive what we are praying for? *When God gives it to us!* When God tells us through His word or directly to our heart what He is going to do for us, then we receive faith, and we have the assurance (Ro.10:17). This is the assurance of faith.

But the fact is that we get this kind of assurance comparatively rarely and not every time we pray. Many times we ask, not knowing if our Father is going

to give it to us or not, immediately or later, or in the way we expect. This doesn't necessarily mean that we don't have faith. We have faith in the goodness, love, wisdom and power of God, and that is why we ask. This personal trust in God is absolutely necessary for us to be pleasing to God (He.11:6). If this is also coupled with an acceptance of God's will as being the best for us (not my will but Yours, O Lord) we will also experience rest.

Sometimes it also happens that our mind is so confused or pained by our circumstances that we only know how to cry out for help to God. There are many such prayers in the Bible, especially in the Psalms, and we see how God answered such prayers also (Ps.34:6). Our 'faith' may appear to be very small or almost absent at such times, but the fact that we cry out to God indicates our trust in Him.

God's heart is so gracious and large that He does good to even wicked people (including sometimes hearing and answering the cries) (Mt.5:45). When the Bible says that God does not hear the prayers of those who harbour sin in their heart (Ps.66:18), it refers to those who are playing a double game with God. But God does hear the cries of those who seek Him in desperation (Ps.86:5;50:15).

So God tells us to pray at all times and not to give up (Lk.18:1). When He tells us to pray without ceasing (1Th.5:17) it means we shouldn't stop praying, especially if we didn't get an answer immediately.

Prayer to God expresses two things, that we are not sufficient in ourselves and we need Him and that we trust that God is able to help us. It pleases God greatly when we pray. It is our pride or unbelief that stops our praying. But

how good to know that we can go to our Heavenly Father like children and ask what all there is in our heart (Jn.15:7)! He truly cares for us.

Pointers along the way #349

The promised land

The land that Israel was promised when they left Egypt was a physical *land*. After leaving Egypt they soon came near the land of promise, and Moses sent 12 men to spy out the land in front of them. Even though all the spies agreed unanimously that the land was just as the Lord had promised them, flowing with milk and honey, ten of them felt that they were like grasshoppers before some giants in the land, and discouraged the people from going forward. But Joshua and Caleb pointed out that God who had promised them the land would make those giants their prey (Nu.14:8,9).

The people were swayed by unbelief, and so God took them for a journey of forty long years in the desert during which all the grown up people among them perished except Joshua and Caleb. Joshua was finally able to lead them across the River Jordan into the promised land where they settled down after conquering the Canaanites who were living there.

This Old Testament incident has a significance for us under the new covenant for whom also there is a 'promised land' but of a different nature. What God promises us now is 'eternal life' (1Jn.2:25). There is more to eternal life than living forever with Jesus after we die and rise again, which Jesus referred to as eternal life in the age to come (Mk.10:30). We should remember that those who perish without Jesus will have to endure the eternal *fire* (Mt.18:8). There is also an

eternal life we can enjoy *now* (Jn.6:47;1Jn.5:13). That is the life of Christ, or the divine nature, that we can partake of (Jn.17:3;2Pe.1:4).

The crossing of the River Jordan to enter into the promised land signifies two things to us now. One is that we shall die physically and enter into the heavenly abode. But the other meaning is that we might die to ourselves, put our fleshly desires to death, and partake of God's character (Ro.8:13). The first part is what God will grant to us when we die because we trust in Jesus as our righteousness, but for the second part, there is something more expected of us. That is to take up our cross daily and to follow Jesus. Many focus much on the first part, and neglect the second.

Just like the people of Israel taking their stance at the borders of the promised land, we can also take the

position that the giants in our flesh are too strong for us and accept the position of defeat. We say that, after all, we are but human. But in that we make the same mistake that Israel made that day, of forgetting that God is able to fulfil His promises. Another mistake we can make, just like Israel, is to make compromise with the flesh in some areas instead of wiping it out completely.

Just as Israel had to fight the occupants of the land and overcome them one by one even as the Lord was fighting for them, so it is for us in partaking of the divine nature. As God works inside us to give us a new mind, we must deny the desires of the flesh and do His will (Php.2:12,13). That is how we shall possess the promised land.

Experience and the Word

Some people reject every experience that is not taught in the Word. Some others take experience as a demonstration of truth. Where do we stand?

Rejecting experiences simply because they are not mentioned in the Word is simplistic, and assumes that the Word gives an exhaustive coverage of every possible situation. Certainly the Bible is God's revelation of Himself and His ways to men, and in it we have truths, values, principles and help for our life (2Ti.3:16,17). When we find ourselves in situations that are not explicitly addressed in the Bible, we still take the revealed principles and values from it to decide. For this we have to go beyond looking for particular verses that apply to our situations, and seek to understand God's direction for

us by judiciously extrapolating from what is already revealed in the Bible.

The other group considers their experiences as 'reality' and hence truth. In this way, they go from experience directly to doctrine. The danger here is that experiences can be deceptive. Also our interpretation of our experience can be wrong. Our experience itself can be wrong, coming from deceiving spirits (1Ti.4:1). None of us can claim immunity from deception, based on holiness of life or knowledge of Scriptures (Mt.24:24). Everything supernatural is not from God, and Satan and his demons also have much powers (even though limited compared to God).

We can see that many types of teachings are being brought forth these days. It is sometimes difficult to distinguish between good and false teachings because 1) there are

references to the Bible, 2) preachers or writers are teaching them confidently, 3) they promise to give us exciting experiences, superior knowledge, or join us to an exclusive group of specially favoured people, and 4) there are many testimonies of people who have followed them.

Some of us decide to obey the leading of God through the promptings of the Holy Spirit in our life, and then when we get into unfamiliar territory we either withdraw out of fear of going wrong, or plunge into the situation 'in faith' putting aside caution or restraint. Yes, we can go wrong, can't we, in recognising the voice of the Spirit and mistake our own thoughts or demonic suggestions as coming from God? Even when we have learned through experience to recognise the Spirit's voice, do we forget that Satan can impersonate that 'voice' (2Co.11:14)?

God has given us His Word to be the lamp for our feet (Ps.119:105). *It is our safety manual.* If a teaching is clearly contrary to the Word, we can reject it straightaway. If it is not clear, we need to examine if it is in line with the whole of Scripture. Here it is necessary not to look at a few verses alone, but the general spirit and direction of the whole Word. We must not allow ourselves to overlook some discrepancy with the Word just because it is coming from some well known person or supported by many testimonies. The final judge is to be the Word (Ro.3:4).

Our lines of responsibility

In the final analysis we can't blame our circumstances or other people for what we make of the one life God has given to us (Ro.14:12). God will surely take into account any handicaps we grew up with. He doesn't expect a man with one talent to produce the same output as one with ten. But He expects us to seek Him for all that we need, and to make the best of what we have been given. We have the option of hiding behind excuses, or trusting Him and seeking to bear much fruit as we cling to Him (Jn.15:5). What greater thing can we accomplish than fulfilling the tasks God entrusted us with (Ps.139:16)? Stories of people who rewrote their 'destiny' are there in plenty to encourage us.

If we are married we have the responsibility towards each other to

love, to be faithful (Mal.2:15), to live in an understanding manner (1Pe.3:7), and to build up companionship (Mal.2:14) so as to become more and more one (Ge.2:24). Will this happen automatically, or do we need to work on it diligently?

If we are parents we have the major responsibility of bringing up 'godly children' (Mal.2:15). Surely we cannot take this for granted assuming that as they grow up in a Christian home it would happen automatically, or relegate it to the church or school teachers. God tells us to *train* our children in the way they should walk (Pr.22:6), and this involves spending time and energy with them with clear objectives.

If we are members of the Body of Christ, every one of us has been given one or more gifts of the Holy Spirit to be used for blessing the others

(1Co.12:7). Don't we have to give an account to our Lord for what we have done with those gifts according to whether we have used them to make ourselves great or to bless the others in His name?

If we have spiritual leadership of any kind aren't we also responsible for the kind of examples we give by our life and conduct (1Pe.5:1-3), and also for the 'food' we need to pass on according to the need of the flock (Mt.24:45)? Those who lord it over the others or use their sheep for their selfish gain will not only lose rewards but also have to face wrath from God (Je.25:34).

We are also placed as salt and light of the earth (Mt.5:13-15). We are responsible for the faithfulness and Christ-likeness we exhibit in our workplace, our relationships, and our conduct in the world.

As we stand before the Lord today it may be that we find ourselves coming short in different areas of our responsibilities. But this is not a message of condemnation. There is grace with our Lord to receive us just as we are, as we acknowledge our failures and seek to learn to be faithful from now onwards (Is.30:15). Our old nature shirks any type of responsibility, and looks only for pleasing ourselves. But God has given us a new nature. When we are truly repentant we will have a willingness to make amends, change and learn new ways (2Co.7:10,11). We can't change our past, but we can learn from it in order to have a better future.

Pointers along the way #352

Religion cannot save!

All religious activities are aimed at impressing God with good works so as

to get into His good books. Even Christian religion! Many think that activities such as going to church, attending Bible studies and prayer meetings, giving money to church and Christian work, and volunteering to do different things for God and people will please God and get Him to take them into heaven one day. Some even get baptised! Involvement in such 'religious' activities in contrast with many 'immoral' and 'worldly' activities which other people are doing gives them a feeling that they are truly Christians. People around them also certify that these are 'good' or even 'God fearing' people with whom God must be definitely pleased. But the shocking truth is that this is not the way people become acceptable to God.

At the back of this kind of assumption is a (mostly unspoken) thought that they have something to offer which God *has*

to reward. Wasn't this what some people were thinking when they went to God saying that they had prophesied and cast out demons in Jesus' name? But Jesus said He didn't even know them (Mt.7:22,23). Wasn't this what the Pharisee also thought when he reminded God about how much he had fasted and given (Lk.18:11,12)? Jesus said he went away without being justified. This approach where we imagine that we can impress God and win our way into heaven is totally abominable to Him.

One symptom that gives such people away is that they are never sure whether they would make it to heaven, and are very scared at the thought of death.

When God was making plans for our salvation, if He could have found any other way than letting His Son die on the cross, He would have chosen it,

because that is how much He loves His Son. But our sins could not be paid for in any other way than by God Himself taking the punishment -- death -- on Himself. Now salvation is offered to us as a free gift that none of us deserves (Ep.2:8,9). What we need to do to receive this gift is to first acknowledge that this is a gift which we don't deserve, and then to believe that it was the death of Jesus in our place that made this salvation available to us. Out go all our own righteousness and our boasts about all the good things we have done, because they are filthy in God's eyes (Is.64:6).

But then we start doing good works, not in order to earn our place with God but because of our gratitude and love to God for this gracious gift of mercy to us wretched sinners. Now that we have been fully and eternally accepted by God, we want to honour God, tell

others about Him, be pleasing to Him in all that we do, etc. The difference between the two types of good works is as life and death.

Jesus said it was very difficult for a 'rich' man to enter His kingdom (Mt.19:24). If we feel 'rich' about all our good works and think God is obliged to recognise them, we are in for a shock. But when we consider ourselves as unworthy sinners and place our trust in Jesus, He receives us!

Pointers along the way #353

A two way transfer

Jesus died in our place, taking the punishment for our sins. Our sin was laid upon Him as He hung on the cross (Is.53:4,5). He who knew no sin was made sin for us (2Co.5:21), so that we who were sinners could be justified,

accepted and set free from bondage to sin (Ro.6:17,18). He did this purely out of His love for us, and not because we deserved it.

This transfer of our sin to Jesus and our consequent freedom and blessing are the subject of many sermons, and rightly so. But great and glorious as this truth is, it is incomplete in itself. There is another truth that makes up the other side of the coin. They are inseparable, and neither of them can stand up without the other.

The 'other' truth is that when Jesus paid the price for our sins, He also bought us to be His own. He redeemed us from the ownership of Satan and transferred us from the kingdom of darkness to His light. This truth shouts out to us, "You are not your own. You have been bought with a price" (1Co.6:19,20). The price was nothing less than the blood of the Lamb

(1Pe.1:18,19).

The implication is that if we don't belong to ourselves any more, and Jesus is our Owner and Master, we don't have freedom any more to do whatever we like. Satan makes it look as if it is a bondage for us to come under the ownership of Christ. But the truth is that since we were born in sin and the lusts of the flesh ruled over our flesh before we came to Jesus, what happened when we did 'our own will' was that we got more and more into bondage to sin (Ro.6:16). This was actually making us more and more miserable. Now that we have come under the lordship of Christ we have the privilege of doing His will, and that is really the best that can happen to us (Je.29:11). So contrary to the lie of the devil, becoming a slave of Christ is far better, blessed and glorious for us than to be free to do our own will!

Unfortunately, if we have fallen for the lies of the devil, even after we come to experience forgiveness of our sins as a gift of grace, we hesitate to accept our place as a bond servant of Jesus Christ. We are scared that if we gave in too much to Jesus He might take away our freedom and happiness and tie us down to a miserable life of only fasting and prayer and Bible study! Young people are scared that Jesus might tell them to get married to some creep! But these are gross lies from the devil.

If we believe these lies, and hold back from committing our lives entirely to Jesus and surrendering our ambitions and plans to Him, we miss the blessings of doing His will and receiving all the good things He has prepared for us (1Co.2:9). Then we complain why God is not fulfilling His glorious promises to us!

A mark of true faith in Jesus is that we are willing to place our entire life into His hands without reservation. He wants to do great things for us and through us. But He will not force us. He stands at the door and knocks. If any one opens the door to Him, he will be blessed beyond imagination.

Second hand Christians

We can recognise a second hand sermon preached from someone else's outline even when the preacher uses all the tricks of homiletics, because there is no passion in it. Isn't it the same with most second generation Christians? The theology may be right as also the jargon and the routine. But *when there is no passion, there is no zeal or earnestness about what they believe.* As a result, even though they may participate in religious activities, there may be very little depth in their spiritual service. One reason for this is that they received 'faith' from their parents without having to fight their way into it or having to pay any cost for it. They take their faith for granted and do not value it much.

This happens so commonly that it is almost to be expected. Even in

Christian ministries and organisations in the second generation the spiritual vision gets lost and things become routine. Perhaps second generation Christians cannot be blamed for having believing parents! The problem is that in most cases they are not aware that anything is missing.

It is the contrast between our past and the present--"I was blind, now I see. I was lost, now I am found. I was a slave to sin, but Jesus set me free."--that usually causes us to appreciate what God has done for us. In the case of many second hand Christians this element is missing, being very familiar with the gospel and also not having committed any gross sins in their lives. What one would consider as advantages have actually become hindrances! Of course the solution is not, as some people carelessly suggest, to get a taste of the world and then get

properly converted. Isn't it better instead to recognise that their faith lacks something, and that they cannot be effective Christians till they have a wake up experience?

If we examine our life and find that we are really just lukewarm and not on fire for Jesus, doesn't it show that we are in a desperate situation (Re.3:15,16)? When we consider ourselves to be disciples of Jesus but do not find increasingly rich fruit from our life and ministry may that not indicate that something is lacking (Jn.15:5,6; 2Pe.1:8,9)? Perhaps when we turned to Jesus we had not seen ourselves as being desperately sinful and needing a Saviour? Perhaps we find it difficult to forgive others because we have thought of ourselves as those who *deserve* some favour from God (Lk.18:11,12)?

This is not meant to judge or condemn

anyone, but to encourage everyone to make sure that we don't miss out on the full salvation because we made some wrong assumptions about ourselves. Our goal is not to convince other people about our salvation but to make sure that we have the genuine experience. The best way to do this is to go to God directly and place such issues before Him. We can bare our souls before Him and ask Him to clarify doubts, make things clear to us and to give us what we lack. God will answer everyone who seeks Him sincerely (Is.49:23).

The wicked and the righteous

God declares that there is *none* righteous, and *all* have gone astray (Ro.3:10-12). The only ones who can be called righteous are sinners to whom God has *imputed* His righteousness because of their faith in Jesus (Ro.4:3). Such ones acknowledge that they are sinners in God's eyes but they have received forgiveness from Him because Jesus has taken their place on a cross. Even those God called righteous in the Old Testament were those who had faith in God and so were treated as beneficiaries of the sacrifice Jesus was going to make for them later. But *those who consider themselves as righteous in their own eyes are still considered wicked by God, even if people around them think they are such good people*

(Lk.18:11-14)!

God is gracious, and does good to both the wicked and the righteous (Mt.5:44,45). When God says He sends the sun and rain on everyone He is referring to meeting the earthly needs of both wicked and righteous people. Wicked people also get jobs, food to eat, clothes to wear, house to stay in, family life, healing for their sicknesses, etc., just as those who place their trust in the Lord, so much so that many godly people wonder what advantage they have for being so faithful to God (Ps.73:1-3)! But the psalmist saw that the wicked perish when they die (v.27), and that his blessings were in the nearness of God (v.28).

Some people are confused in thinking that God loves everybody the same. It is true that God has no partiality, and He loves everyone equally whom He

has created in the sense that He wants *all* to be saved and He will provide for their needs. But there is a difference in the way people experience God's love--all of us do not experience His love to the same degree. Jesus said the Father and He would come *to dwell with* those who loved Him and kept His word (Jn.14:23). The more importance we give to getting to know God, keeping His word, and doing whatever He asks us to do, the closer we get to Him and the more intimate our relationship becomes with Him. There are dimensions to this relationship that are known to His godly ones that the casual ones have no clue about. The transformation of our life into His nature is another grace. The difference is also seen in the anointing and the effectiveness of our service for Him. The danger that we all face is that when we stand face to face with Him

on the final day we may realise that He wanted to give us more of this intimacy than we actually tasted.

There are also going to be differences among God's people in heaven. Some are going to have better rewards and greater responsibilities (Lk.19:17; Re.2:26;3:21).

One great mistake we may make is to think that earthly blessings are indications of God's pleasure over us. But we only need to look at some of the wicked people to see that they have much more of that kind of abundance. No. The mark of God's pleasure over our life is His intimacy with us. That is what we can carry with us into eternity.

Pointers along the way #356

It's not in us

It is quite natural when we do something special--preaching a sermon or writing something that blesses the others, healing the sick, casting out a demon, helping someone out of a problem, etc.--that people begin to admire us. They unwittingly place an aura over us as if *we* were someone special. But it would be quite silly if we begin to believe that! We should know within us that we have not done any of this "by our own power or piety" (Ac.3:12). In fact, it wasn't we who actually did it but God working through us. We know we are just created people and we can do nothing unless God gives us the ability and the anointing to do it. Even if we were born with 'natural' abilities that we can use to accomplish many great things, we know it was God who created us

with those abilities (De.8:18). We may have also experienced the sobering truth that even when we exercise our abilities the maximum we can accomplish is to impress some people. We can't really 'bless' anyone in their lives without God's anointing working through us. In every sense we are entirely dependent on God for our life and our work.

It is very common for us to make the mistake of receiving the glory and admiration that come from others as if they are ours to enjoy. But God is very jealous about His glory to make sure that no one steals it (Is.48:11). If we try to usurp that glory we will be the losers because He will chastise us specially for it. If we blunder along callously we will suffer eternal loss and perhaps even shame before the very people who praised us once. Even if we only flirt with this glory to

enjoy it momentarily we will lose out on all that God wanted to give to us and do through us.

God gives us spiritual gifts to bless others with (1Co.12:7), and not for our own enjoyment. Our satisfaction is in seeing others getting blessed and God being glorified through it. That is the heart of all who have truly recognised that they were wretched, hopeless sinners who deserved hell, and who have been redeemed through the undeserved grace of God and made children and servants of God (1Ti.1:12-14). We who have been forgiven much love much (Lk.7:47), and we are clear that it is God who deserves the glory and not us. The question we have to settle in our heart is, "Do I want to bless, or to impress?"

God asked Abraham to *walk before Him* and be perfect (Ge.17:1). What happens when things go well and

everybody's praises are in our ears is that we take God for granted. God's voice of warning and correction becomes faint. And then when we live before people, seeking their recognition and applause we begin to think that we are someone special to be able to bless them.

All of us are broken vessels to some degree or another, whom the Potter is reusing instead of throwing away. The least we can do is to keep the vessel clean for the Master's use--clean from self-glory, self-congratulation and pride. Otherwise God will find someone else, and we will be the losers (Es.4:14).

What happened to Moses?

We know the incident where God asked Moses to speak to the rock in order to get water for the people (Nu.20:8), instead of striking it with his rod as he had been told to do earlier. Moses still struck the rock with the rod. A 'type' of Christ was involved here as our Rock who would be stricken once for all for bringing life and healing to us (He.9:26). After we have received 'salvation' there is no need for Christ to be stricken again for our sin--we need only to ask Him (1Jn.1:9). But Moses who had become the meekest (gentlest) man on earth (Nu.12:3) and obeyed the Lord exactly in all that the Lord commanded him disobeyed Him at this point. God reproved him and told him that he would not be able to lead the people into the promised land.

Possibly Moses did not even realise that he was disobeying Him. He was 'mad' with the people who were rebellious and obstinate. When they complained to him yet once again he lost control. He shouted at them, "You rebels! Must we now bring you water from this rock?" The meekest man had become 'exalted'. He looked down on the people from his heart. Wasn't there an attitude that despised them, rebels though they were? The leader who had meekly led those millions from Egypt up to the borders of the promised land began to 'lord it over them' instead of continuing to be their servant. God could no longer recognise him as a leader, and the leadership was passed on to Joshua.

Jesus and the apostles described the godly concept of servant leadership (Mt.23:11). Jesus Himself humbled Himself to become the servant of all

men, and that was why God recognised Him as the greatest of all (Php.2:6-9). Even in the Old Testament, David who was after God's own heart was a servant leader who knew his own boundaries (1Sa.24:6) and who would not treat his people as if they were worthless (2Sa.23:15-17). God always looks for such people to be His leaders for the people. Those who exalt themselves will be humbled, sooner than later.

Even though self-exaltation can be noticed by other people in the course of time, it can begin in our heart much earlier. When fame and recognition come from people around us we forget how God once picked us up from the dirt, washed our wounds, and clothed us in a righteousness that was not our own, and we begin to look down on others. Finally we may say, "You rebels! You compromisers! You

ignorant ones! You foolish ones!" We forget that God gives us responsibility and authority not because we are inherently better than others but because of His own sovereign choice (Ro.9:13). If we have been 'faithful' it is only because He gave us grace (1Co.15:10). Who are we to think and behave as if our own efforts have made us 'great' and start looking down on others? It seems Moses didn't realise his real sin (De.4:21), and repent like David. Let us fear lest it should happen to us too. Let us be diligent to keep our heart humble (Pr.4:23).

Pointers along the way #358

Building ourselves up

The disciples asked Jesus at one time, "Lord, increase our faith" (Lk.17:5). They made the common mistake of assuming that while we continue in our weaknesses, failings, doubts, unbelief, etc., it is up to God to take care of us. Instead of judging themselves for not having proper faith in Jesus, repenting, and setting things right by deciding to trust Him in future, they felt in effect that God should do all the hard work for them! There is a place for acknowledging our helplessness before the Lord and asking Him to do what is impossible for us. But prayer is not an excuse for inaction.

God tells *us* to build ourselves up in the most holy faith (Jude.20). This is in direct opposition to just praying for

faith. If God has opened our eyes and revealed Himself to us as a trustworthy person, then it is up to us to trust in Him. We can't trust God and at the same time doubt if He will keep His word; or wonder if what He says in His word actually happened; or debate in our mind if He will ditch us when the going gets tough. We are *tempted* by such thoughts now and then. At such times we keep our faith by reaffirming what He has said.

We cannot trust God and yet question what He has said. If we have doubts about the authenticity of the Bible or its inspiration, we will be left with nothing reliable enough to hold on to in life. If we think of the Bible as merely a good book with lots of good things in it, and not as God's own word given to us, we will not have any faith that will sustain us in dark times. So it goes without saying that if we would like to

have stronger faith, we must have God's word as a solid anchor in our life which will hold us from getting tossed to and fro, and as a fortress to which we can run for safety at any time (Ro.10:17).

Once we have laid this foundation stone, we can build further up in faith. When we read in the Bible how God took care of those who trusted Him, did miracles to meet their needs and kept His promises to them, our own faith begins to become stronger. When we read and listen to testimonies of present day people who have experienced the reality of God in different ways, we begin to expect that if God did such things for others, He can do them for us too. Finally we begin to experience God's touch in our own life, meeting our needs, keeping His promises and even working through us to meet with others around

us. In this way we build up our faith by taking steps that will increase our faith.

On the contrary what will happen to those who just keep waiting passively for things to go better? They miss the things they could have experienced if only they had trusted in God, but they did nothing to build up their faith. Finally they conclude that God's promises don't really work!

There is a clear promise of God to those who wait on Him that they will never be put to shame (Is.49:23). But it is those who trust in Him who will wait for Him, and it is those who seek Him with *all their heart* who will find Him (Je.29:13).

God's control over everything

It's deeply comforting to know that our Father in heaven is in total control of not only everything that happens to us, His children, but also everything else that goes on in the entire universe. Nothing catches Him by surprise or escape His notice (Mt.10:29;Lk.12:7). Even the decisions the heads of states make are subject to God's sovereignty (Pr.21:1). Satan himself has to obtain God's permission before he can touch us, God's children (Job.1:9-12). We can place all our cares, fears, anxieties and doubts into God's hands and know that He cares (1Pe.5:6,7).

The question that comes up then is why bad things still happen to us. This does not prove that God is not in control. (Some preachers say that nothing bad really happens to them, because God

does everything for their good. But that is to deny the reality of bad things that happen and the suffering we all go through. Rom.8:28 (NASB) says only that God causes all things to work for our good--sometimes by positively making good things to happen, and sometimes also by causing bad things to result in our ultimate good.) When God created man with a free will, man chose to sin and the consequences of sin continue to be present even now. Sometimes we suffer due to our own sin or folly, sometimes from other people's sins, and sometimes because we live in a sin-defiled world with calamities, sickness, pain, etc. How is God still in control?

When the disciples asked Jesus whether a man born blind was that way because of his or his parents' sin, Jesus replied that it was not due to their sin but that the works of God may be seen

through him (Jn.9:2,3). Some people misinterpret this as if it was God who made this man blind to start with, with the intention that one day Jesus would heal him! Such a concept would imply that sometimes God would do evil in order to achieve a good end! But this is unthinkable once we know the heart of God. Isn't it right to understand this in this way that God *permitted* Satan or natural causes (we don't know which it really was) to make this man blind knowing that one day He would heal him through Jesus? Some people misread Amos.3:6 to place the blame on God for every calamity that happens, not realising that when there is an obvious misfit between what a verse seems to say and God's character, we need to interpret that verse wisely? (When Jesus tells us to cut off our hand and pluck out our eyes--Mt.5:29,30, we understand differently, don't we?)

Within the scope of His supreme sovereignty and control, God has permitted a certain limited scope for people and Satan to do what they like. But He has His control on everything so meticulously that whenever something tends to cross His set limits He will intervene. For example, He will allow us to make mistakes, but will intervene if we are about to make any terrible mistake (Ps.37:23,24). If Satan tries to tempt us beyond a point, God will not allow him (1Cor.10:13). So God is still very much in control!

The highest form of prayer

A debate is going on about whether we should plead for something from God or command things to be done. But the more important issue is *what our heart is praying for* rather than the method we adopt. The 'prayer of our heart' indicates what our treasure is (Mt.6:21). When we take delight in the Lord, He promises to give us the *desires of our heart* (Ps.37:4). We do need to ask God for many things for our earthly life. God recognises that we need them (Mt.6:31,32). But what is uppermost in our innermost being? That will show how much we are actually in love with God.

When Jesus was here on earth, He had only one goal in life, looking at it in one way. That was to do the will of His Father (He.10:7). In fact He derived His fulfilment as a man in

doing the Father's will (Jn.4:34). That was what gave Him maximum delight (Ps.40:8). In the biggest test of His life He demonstrated His conscious choice to do His Father's will rather than save Himself (Lk.22:42). When Jesus was contemplating the suffering and death that He would have to face soon, His high priority prayer was, "Father, glorify Your name" (Jn.12:27,28).

Aren't these the same things He emphasises in the prayer that He taught us? "Hallowed be Your name. Your kingdom come, Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven" (Mt.6:9,10). He held up these values before our eyes, and then demonstrated them through His own life in the costliest possible way.

Perhaps we also say the same words at the time of prayer or through worship songs. But God is looking for *true* worshippers who will worship Him in

spirit and in truth (Jn.4:23). He wants to see if what we say with our lips is coming from our hearts, because if it is, it will also be seen in our deeds. That gets tested many times a day when we have to choose between our will and our glory and God's will and His glory. That is when we have actual opportunities to pray, "Hallowed be Your name. Your will be done."

The height of this prayer comes when our heart prays, "Father, Your will be done, and Your name be glorified *at any cost to me.*" This is the prayer great men of God have prayed through the centuries, that has come from hearts that have recognised through experience that God's will is the best that can be done at all times and in all kinds of situations, and that God deserves all the glory at all times. This is the prayer we aim for and must hold on to, especially when we have talked

like Peter (Mt.26:35), and then acted like him, and realise that *again* we have gone and done our will at the cost of God's will.

The will of God and the glory of God has to become integral with the beat of our hearts, and not relegated to special occasions such as getting married, finding a job, etc. Pray that God will help us to speak, behave and think in all situations according to God's ways so that those who observe us (including the angels and demons who watch us even where no man can) may give glory to God (Mt.5:16).

Pointers along the way #361

Through many troubles

Many preachers give a wrong impression to people when they promise a trouble free life to those who come to Jesus, in spite of the fact that Jesus said that we would have much trouble in this world (Jn.16:33). As a result many are confused when trouble hits them. Then the preachers chip in to tell them that there must be some sin in their life or that they don't have enough faith! To add insult to the injury! Some believers falsely believe that if they claim the blood of Jesus and anoint the doors and windows of their house with oil then no demon would enter there. Some even believe that if they kept a Bible under their pillow they would not have any bad dreams. If things were so simple!

Trouble is a part of this life. We live in a sin corrupted world which produces

its sicknesses and calamities. The majority of people in the world are still serving their father, the devil (1Jn.3:10), and we suffer from their evil deeds. Even though we are born again, we still have a flesh with its lusts and desires because of which many times we think, say and do stupid and sinful things, unknowingly and sometimes even knowingly, and we suffer the consequences. Satan and his demons are always on the look out to harass, deceive and turn us away from God (1Pe.5:8). We just can't avoid trouble, one way or another.

God has allowed the devil to be alive and this kind of trouble to exist so that through it all we can grow up into the stature of Christ (2Cor.4:17). Our helplessness in the face of difficulty draws us closer to God, and teaches us not to place any confidence in ourselves but to cling on to Him. Our

search for wisdom to handle difficulties leads us to understand God and His ways better. We get to know 'what is in man' and get better equipped to deal with our own issues and have better inter-personal skills. In the whole process our character is being slowly moulded to become like that of Jesus.

At the same time we are not looking for trouble or eagerly waiting for it. Nevertheless when it comes our way we know who to turn to. We don't ask God why out of bitterness or complaint, but we ask Him, "What are You trying to teach me, Lord? What do you want me to do now, Lord?"

Whatever be our trouble, we have God's promise that He will be with us always without leaving our side (Mt.28:20;He.13:5). We are also comforted to know that Jesus is interceding for us just then

(He.7:25;1Jn.2:1). Sometimes He will take us out of the trouble, and sometimes He will walk with us through the trouble. We can trust Him to know when to do what. That kind of trust will be our strength as we wait to see what He will do. It is natural that we would want all troubles to be removed. But by faith we will leave the decision to Him because we know He loves us and will always do what is best for us. Jesus had His natural desires in Gethsemane, but He left the choice to the Father (Lk.22:42). This is what the three young men also did before the fiery furnace (Da.3:17,18).

Pointers along the way #362

We are weak *and* strong

This is one of many such pairs of truths in spiritual life that appear to contradict each other. One mistake many make is to take just one truth of a pair that they prefer and neglect the other. But the fact is that both are truths, like two sides of the same coin, and we cannot afford to cut off one side without losing value for the other.

Jesus said that without Him we could do *nothing* (Jn.15:5). As a starter we can see that since we are born in sin and carry around a 'flesh' (Gk. 'sarx' not 'soma' body) with nothing good in it except lusts and desires (Ro.7:18; Ga.5:24), the Devil is out there trying to deceive and trip us up (1Pe.5:8), and the world allures us with so many attractions (1Jn.2:16), we cannot live without sinning, unless God helps us. We are so weak that

even when our spirit is willing, we may still fail (Mt.26:41). Many times we do not know the right thing to do, and even when we do, we do not have the power or boldness to do it! After we have proclaimed in our zeal like Peter that even if everyone else may fail the Lord we won't, the hard reality of our nature crushes us and finally brings us to the place where we acknowledge, "Lord, without You I am only a failure!"

That was with regards to overcoming sin. But we also learn, to our chagrin, that even something we are quite good at because of our natural abilities or the expertise we have developed sometimes 'fails' us, showing us that we can't even exist or do small things without God's grace upon us. When we become truly 'broken' in our self-confidence, we learn to cling to God with everything that is in us! God had

to break Moses in the desert for 40 years before he learned this lesson.

But then we also come to learn the other side of the truth that we *can* do all things through Christ who strengthens us (Php.4:13). The more we learn to depend on God, the more we become confident--yet not in ourselves but in God who is with us. We become bold, but without an accompanying arrogance or boastfulness about it. Isn't this the example we see in Jesus? He confessed freely that He could do nothing apart from His Father (Jn.5:19;8:28). But then look at the majestic dignity with which He conducted Himself before Pilate who had the authority to put Him to death!

We make a terrible mistake when we only talk about how strong and rich we are in Christ, without inwardly acknowledging at the same time that

without Him we are nothing! It's the modern trend to avoid talking about weaknesses or needs and to act as if we were *only* strong. Yes, those who are insecure or fragile in their relationship with Christ need to know their rights and privileges *in Christ*. In Christ we are fully accepted, even though we are unworthy in ourselves (Ro.4:5), and all His authority is given to us in His name (Mt.28:18-20). But others who are oozing with self-confidence have never learned to recognise their utter poverty *without* Christ. There are two sides to this truth.

Pointers along the way #363

Sanity amidst confusion

The philosophies and ideologies of this world are always in a flux, and many new ideas that come up give way to other new ideas. Women's lib caught the headlines years ago, but finally people knew that it was better to be a female woman and a male man instead of obliterating the differences (Ge.1:27). Now we are witnessing the chaos among the children of those who believed that it was better to let a child develop its own personality instead of being guided and moulded by the parents (Pr.22:6). The current prominence given to same sex marriages (Le.18:22) and live in relationships (1Co.7:2) will also get exposed, once the effects of such concepts are seen openly. The problem is that these people don't have any foundational principles that they can

build on. Any idea promoted by someone who pushes hard for it and hyped up by the media is taken up, at least as being good enough to experiment with. What happens in the bargain is that thousands of individuals and families get disfigured, and the consequences follow for generations to come.

What we have with us from the Bible is truth which God Himself has revealed to us, regarding Himself, the way He has designed us and what He expects from us. It is worth repeating what has now almost become a cliché that the Bible is an operating manual given by the Creator. Experience of thousands of years have demonstrated that those who placed their trust in these truths have been able to stand steady in the midst of changing ideas and practices.

The challenge is that it takes firm

conviction and strength of character to stand against the currents of society. This is not easy because we are being pressurised from every direction, including from within the church. We need to have a personal relationship with God, His anointing that tells us when we come across something fishy, and our own personal understanding of Biblical truth. We may be lacking in any or all of these things, and then we allow ourselves to be moved by preachers who speak and write with apparent confidence.

We must not forget that Satan is still the ruler of this world (Ep.6:12), and that he is behind movements and media that promote immoral and ungodly trends. There is even no guarantee that a Spirit-filled person cannot go wrong on some points (Mt.24:24). The nearer we get to the second coming of the Lord, these things are only going to get

worse.

Honesty demands an acknowledgement that we need something that is more reliable than our own or other people's opinions. That is why God has given us His word (2Ti.3:16,17). Our safety depends on our drawing closer to God, learning to listen to the voice of the Holy Spirit coming in our hearts through God's word and through godly people, and also making the effort to pass on the same seriousness and understanding to our children. God's word is the major way through which He reveals Himself to us, and trusting in it is a major part of trusting in Him. Then we can stay sane in the midst of all the confusion in the world.

Pointers along the way #364

Saints and sinners

One miracle of grace is that Jesus

presents sinners before God as saints. When we come to God acknowledging ourselves as sinners and accept His mercy on the basis of Jesus' death on our behalf, our status before God undergoes a change. God wipes our heart clean with the blood of Jesus Christ, redeems us from the ownership of Satan, causes us to be born again, adopts us to be His children, and imputes to us the righteousness of Christ (Php.3:9). Now we are called saints (set apart for God, or morally blameless).

Some Christians insist that now that God calls us saints, we should not call ourselves sinners anymore. They then proceed to focus only on verses that reflect our position in Christ and ignore other verses that relate to our overcoming sin in our lives. It becomes a 'denial' of reality under an apparent but mislaid zeal to hold up the

truth of one part of God's word.

Some other Christians cannot relate at all to being called saints. They are bemoaning the sin that they find daily in their lives and even wondering occasionally if they are really Christians at all. They think God must be angry with them, and they have no confidence to ask anything from Him.

Actually, when God looks at us clothed in the righteousness of Christ, He has not turned blind to the sin we are fighting against in our lives! These are two different aspects of His relationship with us. When it concerns our acceptance with Him as His children it is on the basis of imputed righteousness (Ga.2:16). Since this is based only on Jesus' death, our relationship with God is not a variable that depends on our current performance. So we can have boldness to walk into His presence at all times

by the blood of Jesus (He.10:19). His favour towards us does not waver.

But when God wants to sanctify us and re-make us into the image of His Son, He keeps watching over every detail of what is going on with us. He confronts the faults and failures He finds with His compassion (Lk.15:20). Even when He sometimes discipline us, it is always only in love (He.12:6). The conviction that the Holy Spirit gives is only intended to save us from our sins and not to condemn us.

We see a beautiful balance in the life of Paul. The apostle who has taught us the doctrine of justification and shown us our placement as saints seated with Christ in the heavenly place was also one who acknowledged His own battles with sin in his flesh (Rom.7). He saw himself progressively as being unworthy to be an apostle (1Co.15:9), less than the least of the saints

(Ep.3:8), and finally as the chief of sinners (1Ti.1:15). Yet at the same time he was experiencing more of the practical reality of becoming a 'saint' and walking closer with God!

We are saints *and* sinners at the same time, according to what perspective we use. And we need to have both perspectives! Our acceptance depends only on God's grace which we receive by faith, and our daily sanctification necessitates our being aware of our sinfulness.

Pointers along the way #365

The new covenant and surrender

The new covenant between God and man, which Jesus ratified with His blood (Lk.22:20), is far superior to the old covenant which God had brought earlier to Israel (He.8:6). In fact, the

old covenant has become obsolete since it has now been replaced with the new (He.8:13). The old covenant was based on God's commandments which man was to keep, and it failed because nobody *could* manage to get right with God that way (Ro.3:20), because of the weakness of our flesh (Ro.8:3). The new covenant was in God's heart from eternity (Ep.1:4,5), and He announced its coming when Israel had failed the old covenant miserably (Je.31:31).

The new covenant replaces the 'You shall' of the old covenant concerning man with 'I will' from God's side. When we come to God as helpless sinners and place our trust in Jesus as God's sacrifice in our place, we receive forgiveness from God freely--as an unmerited gift of grace from God. He accepts us as His children and makes us heirs of every blessing that is

available (Ep.1:3).

The Bible describes the new covenant as a fulfillment of the full implication the old covenant (Ro.8:4). In other words, if the old covenant was a shadow, the new covenant is the body that cast that shadow (Co.2:17). The law of the old covenant was like a guardian who was to prepare his ward until he became mature enough to take on full responsibility (Ga.3:24). But now that Christ has come with the new, perfect covenant, we are no longer under that guardian (v.25), and we have a direct relationship with God as His sons.

The old covenant laws were only indicators of the full requirements that were in the heart of God. For example, Jesus explained that commandments against physical murder and adultery actually pointed to the time when even unholy anger and lustful looks were

recognised as being practically the same as those (Mt.5:21,22,27,28). Offering animal sacrifices became unnecessary when Jesus made the supreme and all-sufficient sacrifice of Himself for us (He.9:12). Symbolic requirements such as keeping one day in seven as being holy to God and giving a tenth of the income to God get fulfilled when we realise that every day of our life is to be kept holy to God (Co.2:16,17), and we are to be stewards of all our wealth before God (Lk.16:11,12). Holy places and clean foods gave way to an inwardly holy life.

The new covenant works on the basis of grace from God's side and faith (trust) on our side. *The only way we can experience more of His grace is by trusting God more.* The mark of our trust in God is in believing His word and obeying Him in everything--

surrender to God. We hand over the ownership of our lives and all that we have to God and His will. Then we don't just give Him a part of our life (as in the old covenant) and live our own lives otherwise. It is when people are unwilling to make this wholehearted surrender to God that they prefer to live under the old covenant even now. But then they will also miss out on the full blessings of the new covenant.

Pointers along the way #366

Just passing through

One of the wars that go on in a believer's mind concerns the opposing pulls from God and the world. The battles concern daily choices we have to make. But the war itself is about where our heart lies. "If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him" (1Jn.2:15).

We may not be even aware of this ongoing war if we have compartmentalised God and this world separately. We may think we can give to God what belongs to Him, and to the world what we need to do as long as we are in the world. But the reality is that while we are in this world, Satan, the prince of this world, and his demons are constantly trying to draw us away from God by presenting many tantalising offers of glory, wealth and pleasure. Even if they don't manage to make us worship Satan (Lk.4:5-7), or sin (by yielding to him) in order to gain these advantages, they would be happy just to keep our attention away from God. As a result, our God compartment will ultimately get neglected as we get more and more engrossed with the world.

We may begin our Christian life with great zeal to seek God and His

kingdom as our topmost priority (Mt.6:33). But then as time goes on and the pressures of 'real life' engage us we may begin to give in little by little, and then more and more.

But a spiritual war is going on! The lust of the flesh (craving for sensual gratification) and the lust of the eyes (greedy longings of the mind) and the pride of life (assurance in one's own resources or in the stability of earthly things) are really strong, and many times subtle, and we are constantly in danger of moving away from God (1Jn.2:16 Amp).

If we seek to have the best of both sides, our conflicts will be stronger, and the chances are that because of the sinful tendencies of our flesh we are likely to fall frequently. When we fall we also make the conflict worse, having also to deal with our guilt, shame, and loss of self respect, and to

find our way back to God.

In the ultimate analysis we need to remember that we are only passing through this world, and our real citizenship is in heaven (Php.3:20). If what we treasure in our heart is earthly, we will be poor in eternity (Mt.6:19,20). But because *earthly gains are tangible and their demands seem more immediate*--we need to go up in our career, make more money, take care of our family, make life more comfortable, have vacations and entertainment--we are in danger of making our focus on the earth and neglecting our heavenly calling (He.3:1). Symptoms can be seen in less time for personal times with God, skipping church meetings for all kinds of excuses, resorting to human help first instead of God, planning more for earthly life than for God's calling or service, etc.

On the other hand, if we keep our mind fixed on God and strengthen ourselves regularly with His word and fellowship with other serious believers, our options will be clear whenever we are faced with a choice, and we will also have the ability to make the right choice.

Living works

One day Jesus shouted aloud saying that whoever believed in Him, out of his innermost being rivers of living water would flow out (Jn.7:37-39). John clarifies that Jesus was referring to the Holy Spirit who would be given after Jesus was glorified. Jesus told the Samaritan woman also that the water He gave would become springs of living water coming from the innermost being (Jn.4:14). What we do in the strength and anointing of the Holy Spirit would be living, and 'life' giving. 'Rivers' (plural) indicates that what we do could be different types of activities--mighty or small, prominent or hidden, addressed to individuals or crowds--but the Holy Spirit would give them 'life' beyond the natural. A cup of cold water (Mt.10:42) given to someone in the leading of the Spirit

could meet not only physical thirst but also give encouragement and strength to stand without giving up. A public message given with anointing will 'speak' to unknown people and meet even unknown needs, as compared to a sermon presented with style by a preacher with charisma that does nothing more than impress the audience.

How we need to be aware of our need and go to Him to drink regularly, whatever service we do! Certainly we need knowledge, expertise and skills in our different fields. But the best of what we can do with all these will still be lifeless if the Spirit's anointing is lacking.

We are all broken vessels which the Master Potter is reshaping and rebuilding. While being eternally thankful that He hasn't dumped us because we got broken, the least we

can do is to keep our vessel clean for Him to use (2Ti.2:20,21). One way to keep check on ourselves is to examine 'our innermost being' out of which spiritual works are to proceed (Pr.4:23). In the midst of our busy schedules and multi-tasking it is very easy to lose this focus and concentrate on how our external works present themselves before others or on how 'successful' our projects are.

The best and the most challenging example for us is, of course, Jesus. His sceptre was uprightness, and His heart *loved* righteousness while *hating* wickedness (He.1:8,9). If our tasks, schedules, milestones, and our appraisal by our superiors, clients, family or the public become so powerful in our mind that we lose our focus on the Holy Spirit, our uprightness will naturally get relegated downwards in our priority list. Then

all that we do will no longer be done in love (1Co.16:14), but with selfish motives, envy, jealousy and striving (Php.2:3). The danger here is that we can go a long time without uprightness of heart before it becomes obvious to others. But most of us can know in our heart even the first time we put uprightness to the side.

But what an opportunity we have to show our love and gratitude to Jesus by giving 'pleasing Him' the top priority in our lives in daily, practical ways? Is it worth compromising with God to whom we need to give an account, in order to gain earthy glory (Lk.9:25)?

Pointers along the way #368

Promise seekers

The promises of God in His word are an anchor for us in the storms of life, giving us hope and strength. But many times like a drowning man clutching a straw, we try to hang on to verses that are not applicable to us, without fulfilling the conditions attached to some of them and even converting verses into promises that were never meant to be treated like that!

"Train up a child in the way he should go, Even when he is old he will not depart from it" (Pr.22:6). We have problems if we treat this as a promise! Which parent can claim that he has trained up his children *entirely* in the right way? When we haven't, where is the question of claiming the result? Is this really a promise from God, or just a proverb that emphasises the great responsibility parents have in bringing

up children? We see parents who have taken the entire blame on themselves when one child has gone astray, not remembering that the will of their child was not entirely in their hands and also that there were other influences on the child on which the parents didn't have complete control.

The Philippian jailer came to Paul and Silas and asked, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" They said, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household" (Ac.16:30,31). Did Paul say that if one person came to believe in Jesus his entire family would be saved? That would certainly go against God's way of saving us as individuals who must put our trust in Him. None of us can save another person by our faith. So the question is, can a believer claim this as a promise from God for the salvation of his family members?

Unfortunately no. We would have to ignore the context of the verse and the truths we learn from other parts of the Bible in order to take it that way. What this actually says is that both we and our family can be saved by believing in Jesus.

"Beloved, I pray that in all respects you may prosper and be in good health, just as your soul prospers" (3Jn.2). This was just John's greetings to Gaius to whom he was writing this letter! To convert this into a promise for all of us or even for Gaius would be totally in neglect of the context.

Promise seekers are scouring the Bible to locate promises. What about the damage to faith when others claim all kinds of verses as promises and get disappointed? Can we then put the blame on God?

We don't have to go that way. There are

many promises in the Bible which are clearly given to us. Some may have conditions that we can then seek to meet. We must not also forget that apart from promises God has also given commandments and instructions for us to follow.

(We must recognise, however, that God may sometimes speak to us individually in our time of need using words from the Bible even out of context, in order to communicate His *special* promise to us for that time. We know it when we receive such a promise. But we can't take that verse as universally applicable to everyone at all times or preach it like that!)

Pointers along the way #369

A question of semantics

It often happens that people understand different things from the same words.

There are many things that affect our understanding, and we are sometimes not even aware that what we intend to convey is not what some other people understand, and vice versa!

One example comes in the area of our salvation. Some people who understand that salvation is a gift of grace from God which we don't deserve find it difficult to accept that we need to have faith in order to receive it (Ep.2:8,9)! For them 'faith' is not associated with placing our trust in God but in mustering up enough 'faith' in order to meet God's criteria for granting some request. So they associate 'faith' with works (!), and that is blatantly contrary with their understanding of the doctrine of unmerited favour from God. They argue, "If you have to have faith in order to receive salvation from God, it is not longer a free gift!"

Another example is also in the area of salvation. When someone preaches that 'mere faith' that Jesus died for us and confessing our sins are not enough to receive salvation, but we need to repent first from our sin, some people get worked up! For them 'repent' means to change their sinful behaviour, which, they point out, comes as a result of salvation and not as a condition of salvation! But Biblical repentance is actually just a change of the heart's attitude towards sin--from being OK with sin to wanting to be saved from it--which causes us to recognise our need for a Saviour.

I read someone's comments on a certain preacher who used Mt.7:21, "Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven will enter," to say that it was not enough to

give lip service to faith, but that a genuine faith would be seen by the transformation of our life into doing God's will in practical ways. But his opponents took up Jn.6:29 to prove that the work of God that Jesus meant was only 'believing'! This preacher was only trying to clarify what a genuine 'believing' will do in a man's life, and saying that if our faith didn't result in genuine 'works' we would be deceiving ourselves (Jas.2:17).

We must recognise that we all make many mistakes (Jas.3:2). Who among us can claim to use all our words with exactness all the time? Some may be better at it than others, but no one does it perfectly. Why don't we make some efforts to understand what another is *trying to say* before we reply? Why are we so eager to come up with a fit reply that we aren't even listening to the others while they are speaking but

preparing our rebuttal? Why don't we also try to make our meanings as clear as possible to the others?

Understanding others doesn't come easily. (They are also finding it difficult with us!) But don't we need to work on it consciously, learning from our mistakes and also from what we observe in others? Be quick to hear, slow to speak (Jas.1:19).

Pointers along the way #370

Follow me!

There are preachers who tell us *not* to follow them but only Jesus. Some of them are very frank about their personal failures. Surely there is a comfort in knowing that we are not the only ones who are struggling with sin and that even men we would respect greatly otherwise have their challenges to face. At the same time, we would like to have as examples those who are making progress upwards rather than who are stuck in the same rut. Sometimes this pointing to Jesus as an example and away from ourselves can be a cover up or an excuse for failure, especially if we end it by saying, "After all we are only human!" Then we forget that Christ can strengthen us and help us to do things we otherwise can't (Php.4:13).

The apostle Paul was unique. He was

bold in proclaiming the highest standards of God for Christians, and at the same time honest about his own struggles (Ro.7:7-25) and imperfection (Php.3:12). He would not water down God's standards just because he himself had failed at times. He was not taken by the argument that we have no right to speak about the things we have not attained to. He knew that he was in a learning process himself and that as a prophet and teacher he had to proclaim the highest standards of God even if he himself had failed, because otherwise his hearers would be prevented from hearing them. At the same time he would not talk in a way that gave an impression that he was on top and had no struggles himself. He was not trying to impress them but to bless them (1Co.9:22 MSG).

Paul was bold in asking people to follow his example

(1Co.11:1;Php:3:17;2Th.3:9). What are some of the lessons that we can learn from him?

1. He had his goals set high. His personal goal was on becoming like Jesus (Php.3:14), and his ministry goal was to prepare every person so as to present them before God as mature people (Col.1:28). He would not settle for anything less.

2. When he failed, he got up and continued. Some of Paul's mistakes are mentioned in Acts. He himself tells us in his writings about his struggles with discouragement, despair etc. But he would not allow these to stop him from moving forward (Php.3:13).

3. He would not give up. The kind of opposition Paul faced in his ministry, and the adverse experiences he went through would make us ashamed of the complaints we have. But the challenge

we receive from him is that nothing would make him give up his goal (2Co.6:4-9).

4. He lived to bless. He was so convinced of how God had lifted him up from being a blasphemer and persecutor and given him the privilege of serving His people, that he sought to find ways to bless the others in some way or another. He has given us an example of not seeking his own gain but giving himself up for our gain (1Co.9:19).

Paul was not asking us to follow him as a perfect man, but as an imperfect man pressing on with clear focus on the goal, fighting against odds, not giving up, and enduring till the end (1Co.11:1). Aren't these practical and realistic examples for us too?

Give up on God?

It's true many people make false promises, "Come to Jesus, and all your problems will go away!" Then it's no wonder that people who come like this get disappointed. No, the Christian life is not a bed of roses. We live in the same world as the others, and we also have special challenges when we take our stand for Christ in the world. But some Christians also 'try out' God for some time and then give up, thinking that He hasn't met their expectations. This is quite contrary to the promise of the Bible that those who put their trust in God would never be put to shame (e.g., Joel.2:27). Why does this happen?

There will be times when answers to prayer are not immediate, or when they don't come in the way we want. Things might happen to us which we thought

never happened to Christians! When we face injustice or suffer because of someone else's sin we may question where God has gone instead of protecting us. In situations like these people give up on God because they think He has failed them.

When unexpected things happen to us, what can help us to hold on to God is our personal confidence in Him. When we know Him as one who can be trusted and as one who only does only good things for us, we will not question *Him*. But then we will question our own understanding of His ways. Instead of finding fault with Him, we consider the possibility that perhaps we haven't understood Him right. We can ask God why things happened *this* way when we thought they would have happened *that* way, and we begin to search His word to find the answers. Then we will get to

know more of His ways, and that will build up our trust in Him more. We won't have to give up on Him!

This trust takes time to develop. It requires us to get to know Him through different experiences during which we talk to God, tell Him what is bothering or confusing us, and seek for answers from His word. If we are too busy with our life and don't have enough time for God, the result will be that we won't get to know Him well. Then in the times of trouble He seems to be far away or like a stranger. Then it will be easy to think that is all *His* fault, and give up on Him.

Many people these days are in a great hurry. They want quick answers and solutions for their problems. They aren't willing to make the effort to read the Bible or articles that talk about their problems, but they want the answer in one short sentence! They

want someone else to pray for them and move their problem away!

If we don't have time for God, we won't be able to find Him when we need Him; we aren't familiar with the approach road! God does not run a desk for handing out solutions; He wants to be our friend. Our God *longs* to show favour to us, and *all who long for Him* are truly blessed (Is.30:18). "You shall know [with an acquaintance and understanding based on and grounded in personal experience] that I am the Lord; for they shall not be put to shame who wait for, look for, hope for, and expect Me" (Is.49:23 AMP).

Pointers along the way #372

Covering our sins

When Adam and Eve had sinned, what they did was to hide from God (Ge.3:8). When God confronted them

about their sin they tried to pass the blame to someone else (vv.12,13). These two who had been created 'innocent' did not know how to handle the sense of guilt that had suddenly come upon them. It was a very painful feeling they had to face, and they did everything they could to avoid feeling the pain.

What do we do when we have sinned, or made a mistake? Do we also try to cover it up hoping that no one would notice, avoid thinking about it in order to avoid the pain, pass on the blame to someone else so that we can feel safe, or justify it in our mind saying that we wouldn't have done it except for the fact that someone or something else 'made' us do it? Then it shows us that we don't really know God the way He really is.

Think of what David did when the prophet Nathan confronted him about

adultery and murder, sins that could have required him to be put to death for! Here it was much more than the mental agony of owning up to the guilt of his sins; there was also the possibility of losing his life. But David said, "I have sinned against the Lord" (2Sa.12:13). What did the Lord do to him? He was forgiven *immediately*. Of course he suffered many consequences because of his sin, but he was totally forgiven by God, and God continued to call him 'a man after God's own heart' (Ac.13:22). What would have happened to him if he had tried instead to cover up his sins?

David knew God, and His heart. He was one of the few who had entered into a love relationship with God above the level of the Old Testament which operated on the basis of blessings and curses depending on obedience to God's commandments

(De.28). He knew God's mercy and lovingkindness (Ps.51:1). He knew God had no pleasure in punishing the sinner but in saving the sinner from his sins (Ps.32:1,2). He knew that if he acknowledged and confessed his sin to God there would be forgiveness and not judgment (Ps.32:5).

"He who conceals his transgressions will not prosper, But he who confesses and forsakes them will find compassion" (Pr.28:13). It is far better to acknowledge our sin to God (Je.3:13), and receive forgiveness than to cover it up, pass the blame or find justification for it, and then suffer misery, lack of joy, fear of getting exposed, etc. When we really see the heart of God we find that He longs to be gracious to us (Is.30:18), rather than waiting to catch us in our sins. He wants us to enjoy the blessing of sins forgiven (Ps.32:1).

Perhaps those who have grown up in strict families where any mistake would receive a rebuke and where grace (undeserved favour) was rare find it hard to think of our Heavenly Father as being loving, merciful and compassionate. That will begin to change when we take the first step of going to Him, and honestly admit our sins to Him. Then gratitude, love, and admiration will replace any fear, guilt or anxiety we may have had before Him.

Pointers along the way #373

Unlikely disciples

Look at the early part of the lives of Esau and Jacob, and we would imagine that Esau was such a nice boy, industrious, willing to face dangers, able to provide for his family, etc., compared to Jacob spending time at home as his mother's pet, and crooked

and cunning in his manipulations. We may not consider Jacob either as a man of talents or as one of dependable character. But in the foreknowledge of God Jacob was the one He loved, and Esau was hated. Later on, when Esau manifested his indifference to God or long term blessings, and when Jacob broke down and humbled himself before God, we understand what God knew earlier.

Would we have imagined that Jesus would not be impressed with all the things Martha did for Him but He would be happier with Mary who sat and listened to Him? Would any office have employed impulsive Peter with a foot in his mouth to lead their projects? But he was the one the Lord could depend on to lead the first movement of His church, after he was broken. We all would agree that in the early days of Saul he would never have come to

our mind as a potential candidate to be the greatest apostle of his time.

There are many reasons for this. One is that God looks at the heart and not the outward appearance (1Sa.16:7). Many times someone's outward behaviour impresses us and we don't even bother to look inside, and then we are surprised when someone who is not so impressive comes out with greater accomplishments (from the point of view of eternity). Another thing is that God can see the end from the beginning, and we can only see the present, and we mostly look at someone's past to assess his potential. We are unable to think of people as they would be after God has worked with them. Another point is that we tend to think in terms of someone's natural abilities, and write off some as being incapable of doing anything great. We are then surprised to see

what the Spirit of God is able to do through such 'small' people through His anointing which the clever and capable people could not achieve. Many times we also assess someone's worth in terms of what he has 'accomplished' before our eyes, not realising that there are spiritual victories someone wins in his personal life as well as his ministry for others that are not so obvious outside. We also have the problem of ignoring the prophet we are familiar with, while making much of someone else whom we have only heard but not known personally (Mt.13:57). What a lot of surprises we are going to have when we stand before God in heaven and the books are read out. Many who have been first here would be last, and many who have been ignored or sidelined here would receive great honour.

There are two obvious lessons we can

learn from this. Don't be so quick to make an assessment of others based on their outward performance (1Co.4:5). Try to see their hearts. More importantly, make sure that all that we do for God is of eternal value and not just something that will impress others here.

Pointers along the way #374

To make more money?

One of the things we are strongly tempted with in this world is to want to have more money, more things, more comfort and more pleasure for ourselves. Luxury, glamour, prestige and honour entice us, and we want more money for them. But God tells us plainly that if we run after these things we will be ultimately destroying ourselves--spiritually (1Ti.6:9,10). It is sad that many preachers, instead of warning people about such snares and trying to pull back those who are going in that direction (Jude.23), push them forward--to their destruction. There is nothing wrong with money itself, which is only a means for buying and selling things, but *the love of money* can cause all kinds of problems. It is necessary to work hard to earn enough money for our needs and to be able to

help others, and to be faithful in spending it the way God wants. Money is really His and He has entrusted it to us as stewards. But it is quite another thing to crave for more money and run after it. God actually tests our hearts regarding our attitude to money and the way we use it, before He decides to entrust us with spiritual riches (Lk.16:10-12).

Some people quote from 2Cor.8:9 to say that Jesus became poor so that we could become rich and from 9:6 to say how we can become rich--by giving abundantly! It is as if these chapters are there to tell us how to give in order to get back more and get rich! On the contrary, both those chapters were actually written to teach us how to *give* more to others, and to help us to become more considerate of others' needs and gracious and sacrificial in our giving! We can read them

ourselves and see!

Some other preachers hold up threats before people to make them give, usually for the preachers' own benefit. When people respond to these threats by giving, or they give because they want to receive more in return, they fail God's test. They are giving not because they want to give, from their heart, but merely as an insurance against calamity or for making a great business deal.

God *loves* a cheerful giver--one who gives because he *wants* to give, and because he loves and wants to bless the one he gives to (2Co.9:7). These are the ones who will receive a blessing in return, and not those who try to bargain with God, or think that they can make an investment that gives hundredfold returns.

One day we are all going to leave all

our money and wealth behind, and take with us only things that have value in eternity. That is why Jesus tells us not to labour for things that will perish but for eternal things (Jn.6:27). What would happen to us if we focused so much on acquiring more wealth, comfort, pleasure, fame, applause, etc., and missed eternal riches (Mk.8:36)? There is no virtue in poverty or wealth, but there is great value in the sight of God in being content. Paul was good at learning that, whether he had little or much (Php.4:11,12).

Pointers along the way #375

Don't we need to think?

Some Christians insist that we only need to 'believe', and any attempt to 'think' is seen as being against faith. It's a wrong understanding of faith itself. Faith is based on facts which God reveals to us (Ro.10:17), and we can't understand facts without thinking. It is especially dangerous these days when wrong teachings abound, to believe what someone tells us, even if he has a great name, without questioning its validity with respect to what the Bible says. Even teachings quoting the Bible cannot be taken simply as they are presented, without comparing them with foundational truths revealed from the whole Bible. This involves some amount of thinking on our part.

Unfortunately not everyone who teaches has thought things through before making claims of 'truths' they

have discovered. There was a famous preacher, e.g., who taught from He.11:1 using the archaic language of the King James version that faith is a 'substance', contributing to the belief that it can be accumulated with exercise of mind and words, and then used to claim things in return from God, in the same way as we exchange 'points' we earn to get some gifts! This is not just because of the KJV language, but because he did not bother to think of what faith means in the context of the rest of the Bible. Instead he just took one verse 'literally' and made a doctrine of it.

What do we do when we hear some new teaching? Do we just accept it because it is a 'big name' who teaches it, or do we go to the Bible and check it out? There is a big name teaching that we don't need to confess any sins now because they have already been

forgiven when Jesus died on the cross. Another teaches that every sin, from birth to the present, must be confessed in order to receive salvation! Yet another one teaches that when we die if there is any sin that we have failed to confess we will not be admitted to heaven! These have an appearance of being 'radical' and different from common Christian understanding and get accepted just because of that, without checking with the Bible.

We understand that the old covenant has been replaced by the new (He.8:13), and that the old covenant taught things that were only symbolic of what was to come in the new covenant (Col.2:16,17). Don't we need to think about various teachings that people bring up from the Old Testament, and see if they are applicable at all to us under the new covenant, and what their real meaning

is in the new covenant as different from the symbolism they had in the old covenant? 'Holy' places and things, 'clean' foods, special dresses, special days, etc., have given way to matters of the heart and attitude (Mt.27:51;Mk.7:19). People who bless handkerchiefs or water, or 'place the blood of Jesus' on doors or walls have not understood the passing away of such old covenant symbols.

Let us stop swallowing every teaching that comes down to us or practice of rituals, and develop the habit of thinking things through using the word of God.

The intoxication of ministry

'Ministry' is what we *do* to *serve* Christ and His people; we serve with the spiritual gifts God gives us (1Co.12:7). That is not who we *are*. What we are is the result of the fruit of the Spirit. When we have these fruit, namely, love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control, and the like (Ga.5:22,23), they make us what we are. There is also 'fruit' in our ministry, but here we are talking about the fruit of the Spirit that make up our character. Perhaps we get a name for ourselves from our ministry because others can see it and are blessed by it. But many times these same people are forced to *bear with* our lack of spiritual fruit. Sometimes they may speak about this, but most often they try to overlook it because they are impressed by our

ministry!

Spiritual gifts are just given to us according to God's choice (1Co.12:11). But fruit have to be grown! And that is where the problem can be. We can be so intoxicated by the success of our ministry and the admiration of the people that we may ignore the lack of character in our lives. If we lack love, joy, patience, self-control, integrity, etc., we can call them our 'weaknesses' and mentally excuse them in the light of our successful ministry. But we fail to realise that the lack of these fruit is what produces the deeds of the flesh (Ga.5:19-21) which are characteristic of the kingdom of darkness.

Imagine if we carry out our ministry while simultaneously manifesting the deeds of the flesh; in the extreme case it may even take us to the position where the Lord has to disown us

(Mt.7:22,23). This is a terrifying thought.

"If you are living according to the flesh, you must die; but if by the Spirit you are putting to death the deeds of the body, you will live" (Ro.8:13). If we have to partake of the fruit of the Spirit we must put to death the deeds of the flesh by cooperating with the Holy Spirit. If we are to become patient, we have to put our impatience to death, by depending on the strength that the Holy Spirit will give us, because the Holy Spirit in us is always fighting against the flesh (Ga.5:17). If we yield to the Spirit in this fight, we won't be yielding to our flesh also, and then we can 'live' (Ga.6:8).

How possible it is to neglect this battle against our flesh when we are engrossed in our 'ministry', especially when 'the Lord grants us success'! We may imagine that this success is a sign

of God's approval over our lives, when actually He may be very displeased with us because of the deeds of our flesh which are causing His name to be dishonoured in the sight of unbelievers (Ro.2:24). Even unbelievers expect Christians to live at a much higher level of life in terms of love, kindness, sacrifice, etc.

If our ministry is successful, praise God because He deserves the honour. But let us examine ourselves regularly to see how it is going in our personal life.

The choice that Lot made

There is a very practical lesson that we can take from Lot's example. He was Abraham's nephew who went along with Abraham, as God was leading Abraham to the Promised Land. As Abraham and Lot both increased in wealth, the place was not big enough for both to stay together. Abraham made a magnanimous offer to Lot that he could choose where he wanted to be, and then Abraham would go another way. Now Lot looked around and chose some fertile land in the Jordan valley. We read this story in Ge.13.

The reason why he chose that land was obviously the potential for rich harvests and great growth in wealth and comfort (v.10). However this choice also brought him close to Sodom which was notorious for its

wickedness (v.13). Perhaps the prospect of prosperity shadowed in his mind the risks of immoral influence and decay. Maybe he convinced himself that he could handle the Sodom factor without difficulty (1Co.10:12). Did he imagine he was going to be *the* witness who was going to bring the Sodomites to the Lord? He might have thought that the money he made there would enable him to contribute much for needy people or God's work! Perhaps he thought he would stay there just long enough to make some money and then he would move out.

Unfortunately it didn't work out as he planned. He wasn't much of a witness there, and when it came down to it his prospective sons-in-law didn't take him seriously (Ge.19:14). He had to run away from the place finally and lost everything he had come for. He lost his wife, and his two daughters

fell into immorality. The Bible calls Lot 'righteous' (2Pe.2:7). Perhaps he was saved himself, but lost out virtually on every other front (1Co.3:15).

We are in the same world as Lot was (Lk.17:28). And so God tells us to seek His kingdom and righteousness *first* as we think of the things we need for life on earth (Mt.6:25,33). Unless this is the underlying priority in all the choices we make, we will be walking on dangerous grounds all the time. It is in this context that Jesus tells us that we cannot serve two masters (v.24). Our heart is very deceitful (Je.17:9). It can give us all kinds of justification or excuse to seek other things first. God's promise is that if we have Him as the first priority in our life, He will provide us everything else that we need. Neglecting to seek Him while we are in pursuit of other things will never

work for our good. Seeking Him along with seeking other things will also not work. He has to be first.

The pressures that work on us to make us to seek after money, comfort, pleasure, fame, glory, etc., are extremely strong. Coming from the schemes of Satan they are also subtle. It is unrealistic for us to expect a once for all victory based on one act of surrender or prayer. We need a process of constant inner cleansing, where our attitudes, ambitions, goals and priorities are continually under examination (2Co.7:1). Then we can humbly seek God for help to keep our focus on Him at all times.

Pointers along the way #378

From error to growth

It shouldn't shock us to realise that there are many errors in what we all believe. (I am not necessarily talking about major errors that may be called heresy, but those that are not perfectly right in the way we understand things, or do or think.) We have picked up a lot of errors from our parents and other people around us, from our teachers and classmates, from society, the media, etc. Even the things we have learned from the Bible may be in error -- I am not saying there is error in the Bible, but we may have misunderstood or have not understood many things we have read. There may also be errors in what our church teaches us or practises -- no church is perfect. This is all because none of us is perfect or knows everything perfectly.

Jesus was truth personified (Jn.14:6),

and He came to teach us the truth, to set us free from error (Jn.8:32), and to give us an abundant life (Jn.10:10). He does it now in our life through the Holy Spirit who shows us the error in our life and leads us to all the truth (Jn.16:13). But He doesn't do this automatically but with our cooperation as we acknowledge our error and accept the truth.

A lot of our understanding is based on our past experiences, and they have moulded our way of thinking and responses to situations and new ideas. Our respect for our parents may sometimes hinder us from recognising that not all that they have taught us is true. In the same way, we may so value the teachings that we have received from spiritual leaders that we don't even think of questioning if they are all fully true. Because of such reasons we may not even realise that some of the

beliefs we hold on to now or the approach we take now may be wrong. But how we defend our position and beliefs!

The fact is, our progress and growth are dependent on not only getting to know new truths but also in giving up erroneous ways and changing over to true ways. The way to inhibit our growth is to stick to our position and refuse to examine our belief systems. That is the easiest thing to do -- not questioning what we believe and rejecting outright any idea that is contrary to what we believe. But remember this, *every significant step of growth is based on revelation of 'new' truths and responding to them.*

One ability God has given to everyone is to think rationally, subject to the Holy Spirit, and to make choices. This is so much necessary if we are to grow spiritually and not to remain stagnant

where we are. However farther we have come since we were born again, there is much we need to grow up to, and this can only come if we are willing to constantly question ourselves, reject error and learn new things. Those who say, "This is the way we have always done, and that is how it will be," are signing away further growth. Even churches and organisations can grow only through reformation -- rejecting wrong ways and changing over to right or better ways. May the Lord give all of us the honesty and humility that we need to move forward.

Preacher bashing?

What would we do when we come across a preacher teaching heresy? Do we say, "Well, it's none of my business. The Bible says not to judge"? Then we would be putting ourselves and perhaps others in jeopardy. When Jesus said, "Judge not," He did not mean that we should not have any opinion about people or their teaching. We are not to judge someone else in a way that condemns or despises him, because we have no right to do that since we ourselves are standing only because of God's mercy (Jas.4:12;Ro.11:22). On the contrary, we need to assess what is happening around us, what kind of people others are, what they are teaching or doing, etc., in order to decide whether we can agree with them, go along with them, or not. We *ought to* make judgments

like that for our own safety (1Pe.4:7). If God has given us responsibility over others then we ought to warn them too. We can't afford to ignore what is going on and carry on as if it is none of our business. If we do that it will become our business soon in that we will get affected by it.

At the same time we make a distinction between errors that can actually harm people or hinder them in their spiritual growth, and others which are only a matter of academic interest or which have only a minor impact. This is only for the sake of avoiding having to go around bashing every person who makes an error. (Don't forget that none of us has got everything right.) We may have come across web sites that find fault with practically every Christian leader and bash them up (including some who are well known for godliness) without making this kind of

a distinction.

However it is clear that erroneous doctrines and practices are on the increase, as expected in the last days (Mt.24:11;2Pe.2:1). We can recognise some outright frauds when we see that they are out to fleece us using various gimmicks rather than being interested in feeding us for our growth. When we see some preachers trying to impress us with 'hidden' truths, new revelations, etc., rather than helping us to love Jesus and His people more, a red flag should go up in our mind. If someone's aim is to entertain us rather than build us up, why should we waste our time with him? If a preacher always makes us feel good and never tells us things that convict us and make us want to change, he is not speaking on behalf of God. If someone wants us to think how great he is and try to make us dependent on him, watch out! If a

leader threatens us with calamities if we disagree with him or leave his group, it's time to run. It becomes our responsibility to keep away from such and also to warn others we care for. False ideas of loyalty or the awe of their fame should not cause us to stay and get hurt.

Some of the 'famous' preachers of these days are teaching false doctrines, adopting devious ways, and making themselves wealthy and great at the cost of their followers. Every one of us should become more alert and discerning concerning these things.

Pointers along the way #380

Little sins, big sins?

One of the sad features of modern Christianity is that the average 'born again' Christian is badly lacking in integrity. Satan is very much behind

this. There was a time when Christians who knew God shouted out to the people that it was not good enough to be born in a Christian family but that anyone who wanted to become a real Christian had to be born again (Jn.3:3). However the enemy saw a fine way to oppose this message subtly and at the same time appear to be loving and broadminded. He convinced the preachers not to be too narrow minded about the message and encouraged them to broaden the 'narrow way' (Mt.7:13,14), so that they could get more people to respond to their ministry. With a master stroke he made it very 'easy' to be born again, just by repeating a formula, signing a card, raising a hand, etc., and suddenly thousands began to be 'born again' or, to be precise, to imagine that they have been born again!

We can't find a shortcut that bypasses

recognising one's sinfulness and the awful punishment waiting for sin, repenting and turning away from sin, and receiving salvation as a free unmerited gift from the Saviour. These are things that happen inside us, and it is only those who genuinely experience them who can come to enjoy the supernatural step of being born again by the Spirit of God. Unfortunately many seem to have taken shortcuts, and now while they consider themselves born again they are suffering from serious lacks in their Christian experience.

One 'litmus test' we can take for ourselves is with regards to our inner attitude towards sin. If we feel quite comfortable with 'little sins' such as lying, unrighteousness with money, pilfering, etc., we fail this test. Either we were never born again in the first place, or have backslidden so much

that it is just as if no such thing ever happened to us. The apostle John had a burden to make the distinction between children of God and the devil very clear. He said, "No one who is born of God practices sin, because His seed abides in him; and he cannot sin, because he is born of God. By this the children of God and the children of the devil are obvious: anyone who does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor the one who does not love his brother" (1Jn.3:9,10). The one who *practises* sin has not had a change of heart (He.8:10); he has no qualms about it; he is still a child of the devil.

It is not that the children of God never sin. But isn't there a difference between falling into sin against one's own wishes and carelessly going about sinning? Isn't there also a difference between sins of action such as lying which we can avoid if we really want

to and other sins of the emotions?

This kind of careless approach to sins that can be avoided shows that such people have never really experienced the new birth from God's Spirit. Nothing supernatural has happened in their lives when they repeated some words or whatever. But even now it is not too late.

Pointers along the way #381

To remain humble

When do we usually humble ourselves? Is it only after we have fallen or made a blunder, and seen how limited and fragile we are? Then we remember how we need to depend on the Lord more for grace to sustain us. Then we recognise that we had been becoming self-sufficient again. Most of us associate humility with a recognition of sin. But that was not how it was with Jesus who never sinned! He realised He could do *nothing* without the Father (Jn.5:30). That was what kept Him humble, always leaning on the Father.

Jesus the sinless Son of God grew in wisdom (Lk.2:52). It is difficult to imagine how He could have *grown* in wisdom if we think He had all wisdom as God anyway. But we know that even though He was the Son of God He

lived here as the Son of Man, refusing to act as God while He was in the form of man (Php.2:6,7). He wanted to be an example for us. He did not learn wisdom *after* He had done something wrong, as we are prone to do, but He sought for wisdom from the Father whenever a new situation presented itself. When He faced the crowd with the adulterous woman, wasn't He waiting on the Father to hear wisdom? That's how He grew in wisdom.

We stray away from humility when things are going well, things are successful, and we think we *know* how to handle things. We don't realise how we are letting go of the hand of the Father and thinking we know this road only too well. Then another blunder comes along to wake us up from our spiritual sleep.

It may seem as if there is an inevitable cycle about this whole process. We

have fallen, we humble ourselves, we seek to keep close to the Lord, we experience His grace, we take things for granted, and then we fall again! Obviously Jesus didn't go through this cycle. One secret of His was that He spent time seeking the Father's face *before* crises and *after* success. He humbled Himself and sought for wisdom and grace before facing tough situations, and after He went through success He deliberately acknowledged His Father's hand in carrying Him through. In other words, by attributing His success to the Father He protected Himself from becoming euphoric about it and taking the next success for granted.

Nothing good is in our flesh (Ro.7:18), and every good thing we have has come from the Father (Jas.1:17). Any tendency to think as if we have done or achieved something great is dangerous

(1Co.4:7). But that is where we can get deceived.

The Bible warns us not to think we are able to stand lest we should fall (1Co.10:12). In other words one of the reasons why we fall is that we were thinking we would not fall. We know in our head that we *can* fall, because we have fallen far too many times already. Yet success seems to have an intoxicating influence on our thinking. Do we imagine that *this time* we have become strong or wise? No, our enemy is far too clever for us, and he has the advantage of thousands of years of experience deceiving people. May we learn to be humble, and also to remain humble.

Why don't we just trust and obey?

One of the tragic trends among Christians now is that many are leaving the simple life of trusting the Lord, obeying Him, and walking in His ways, to more 'interesting' and 'exciting' things. The Bible warns us (2Co.11:3,4). In this process people are being led to another Jesus, a different gospel and a different spirit. See how this is happening--not just in some distant places but right among the people we know.

What is the simple gospel of Jesus Christ? It is that He came to save us from our sins (Mt.1:21) and to transform us into His character (Ro.8:28,29). Perhaps we haven't seen ourselves as sinners who really need salvation, who would have gone to hell if Jesus hadn't come. Perhaps for us the

'gospel' has been about coming out of our problems. Perhaps it is about becoming prosperous and enjoying life. If so, our attention has been drawn away from the Saviour and His gospel.

These days even sincere believers are being drawn away by wrong teachings, and even many otherwise good preachers and teachers are taking on new teachings and practices that are floated by others, without checking them against the Bible. It looks as if someone has to only say, "God told me," or to bring out a testimony of how something worked out, and then many people just accept it as coming from God. Many preachers are also quoting from God's word to add authenticity to their new teaching, and many people don't bother to check if it has been quoted rightly, in context, and if it is applicable to the situation at hand.

Weird things are happening. Many

distort their teaching to mean what they want. For example, some quote Pr.18:21 to teach that our words have power to make things happen, when actually it is just warning us to be careful how we use our tongue because it can hurt and damage others. Many start weird practices. For example, they say God told them to celebrate the feast of the tabernacles in the church or to blow a ram's horn from the top of a city in order to receive His blessings (at a time when God has moved over from the old covenant to the new and now we receive blessings not through rituals or practices but by trusting Jesus). Many 'prophets' are telling us about 'what God told them' about the future and 'God' reveals some hidden codes and mysteries to some others. Many people are reporting trips to heaven or hell and some of them teach others how to have such experiences. Gullible people are drawn to such

'truths' or experiences like to magnets, and they don't realise they are losing their focus on the Saviour and His simple gospel.

Don't we need to be *really* cautious and vigilant because Satan and his demons are on the prowl (1Pe.5:8)? Not everything supernatural is from God. Not everything done or said 'in the name of Jesus' is from Jesus. Not every interpretation of God's word is from God.

Jesus told us to judge by the fruit (Mt.7:16). The good fruit is the life of Jesus in us, and we get them by trusting and obeying Him.

Pointers along the way #383

Oh to be poor in spirit!

Jesus said that His kingdom belonged to the poor in spirit (Mt.5:3). The more we become poor in spirit the more we

can fit into His kingdom. But unfortunately this attitude is being removed out of many Christians' minds by the modern trend of confessing we are strong! Admission of need or weakness is considered to be a sign of lack of faith. People are taught to proclaim they are strong and in need of nothing whenever they sense some need in their lives. The apostle Paul who knew both weakness and strength was able to distinctly understand that while *he* was weak in himself he was at the same time able to draw on Christ's strength (2Co.12:10). He was honest enough to recognise and admit that he had many weaknesses, and then he was able to receive strength from Christ, unlike many now who profess strength in Christ without acknowledging their own weaknesses. He knew within himself that it was only through Christ that he was able to do all things (Php.4:13), and that

without Christ he was nothing.

When we are poor in spirit we know that we know only a little and then we are willing to learn. We know we are making many mistakes every day (Jas.3:2), and we are therefore willing to learn and change. We are willing to listen to others who may teach us many things. We recognise the possibility that some things we believe and practise need to be changed. We cannot look down on anyone because what we are and how we exist are only by the grace of God.

It is one of the paradoxes of Christian life that when we recognise we are weak we experience the strength of Christ. This means that we are not grovelling in the dust bemoaning the fact that we are weak and nothing, but we are walking about boldly and confidently doing the will of God. We don't attack or retaliate, but we are not

going to be doormats letting others walk over us. If some Christians are taking one extreme position of 'denying' all weaknesses and acting as if they are only strong, some other Christians are passively taking things as they come and letting others do whatever they like to them.

When Jesus told us to 'turn the other cheek', He was trying to teach us that sometimes in the process of loving our enemies we might have to face evil and suffer from it unjustly (Mt.5:39,44). But He did not mean this to be taken as a commandment to be obeyed literally, because He Himself did not turn the other cheek when He was slapped (Jn.18:22,23). He conducted Himself before His enemies with such dignity and confidence that they were afraid of Him!

But having said this I think that the current trend among Christians is more

towards 'positive' thinking--putting away all negative thoughts (such as admitting our needs or weaknesses!), telling ourselves we are strong (not so much about 'in Christ!'), and making us believe that we are indeed strong!. This kind of 'self-esteem' in the absence of poverty of spirit takes us away from the kingdom of God! Oh to be truly poor in spirit!

Fulfilling the Law

Jesus said that even the minutest parts of the Law would be fulfilled. He came to *fulfil* the Law, and not to break it as some who observed Him thought (Mt.5:17,18). The Pharisees, and other such people who only understood the letter of the Law and missed its spirit, felt that Jesus had no regard for the Law because He refused to abide by their literal and extra-literal interpretation of the Law. But Jesus kept pointing out that they had missed the intent and spirit of the Law.

We realise that the Law was given to a people who had been slaves in Egypt for 430 years, who hardly knew God. They were more familiar with the gods and practices of Egypt. So the Law and the 'old covenant' which was given with the Law were only an introductory level course for Israel.

The Law focused on external behaviour, rituals, ceremonies, festivals, etc., at this stage, God knowing that a final fulfilment would come later when Jesus brought in the new covenant. The Law was merely *symbolic* of the ultimate reality that would be unveiled with the new covenant.

Immediately after mentioning that He had come to fulfil the Law, Jesus explained how this was to be done. The law against murder, e.g., would be truly fulfilled in a person who would stop even hating his brother (Mt.5:21,22), and the one against adultery when a person would not even commit adultery in his mind (vv.27,28). What is happening here is that what was given under the Law in a primitive form was getting the full meaning now. In the same way, all the rituals, sacrifices, offerings, festivals

etc., would find fulfilment in what Jesus came to do in the new covenant (Co.2:16,17).

So now when we read things in the Old Testament we have the privilege of looking not only at how things were taught in those days to Israel, but also how they find their ultimate meaning in the new covenant. It is sad to see Christians reading the Old Testament without this understanding and getting confused about what they should and should not do.

Unfortunately there seems to be a resurgence of OT ideas among Christians, with some of them taking up Old Testament practices, imagining that by repeating them with special regard to shapes, colours, procedure, etc., they can bring down God's blessings. You see how people are promoting the use of prayer shawls, seven sprouted lamp stands, ram's horns, feast of the

tabernacles, etc. What they have missed to remember is that now that Jesus has come and established the new covenant, the old covenant has been made obsolete (He.8:13). Now that the veil protecting the Most Holy Place has been removed, we all can have direct, individual access to God all the time through the blood of Jesus (He.10:19,20). Our relationship is now spiritual based on faith and not on forms or procedure.

There are many practical implications to this in the way we Christians conduct ourselves. May God open our eyes to see them clearly, and teach us to walk in the fullness of liberty.

Pointers along the way #385

Bringing honour to God

There must be a time in our life when we decide that instead of seeking

honour for ourselves, henceforth we want to seek to honour God. He is the only one who deserves honour, anyway. The more we get to know ourselves, the more we have to acknowledge that what *we* deserve is quite the opposite, actually dishonour and shame. If God hadn't shown us mercy we wouldn't even be here, but where we deserve to be, in the lowest parts of hell. But God deserves honour, not only for the gracious way in which He has dealt with us, but mainly for the great God He is, whatever aspect of His nature or works we choose to consider. And it is only right that we do all we can to bring honour to Him.

When we think of this, probably the easiest thing we can do is to honour Him with our lips, as we do especially on Sundays when we sing His praises and show our worship to Him. The question we need to ask ourselves is

whether *that is the only way we honour Him*. Something God had against Israel was that while they honoured Him with their lips, their hearts were actually far from Him (Is.29:13). We may be able to sing our worship songs from memory and feel a great thrill from singing them. But God may not be not honoured through our hearts. It is not that the songs don't come from our hearts when we sing them; at that point we may be sincere and mean what we sing. But if this is not the general character of our lives God is not really honoured.

Do we dishonour God by having priorities other than Him during the week in the way we make choices and decisions? Are their things in the way we conduct our business, deal with other people including our family, etc., that we know to be ungodly? Do we keep God and our earthly life in two

separate compartments not allowing Him to 'interfere' with the way we do things? When we are in difficult situations do we ignore God's voice and choose the easier, more comfortable and the more advantageous paths? How can we then say we worship and honour God? All our Sunday morning activities don't mean anything to God if this is how things are with us at other times.

When Joseph was faced with a situation that was very tempting he ran out of the place saying, "I can't do this to my God" (Ge.39:9)! When Abraham was torn between the God he worshipped and his only son he loved, he chose God, and that is what registered in God's mind (Ge.22:12).

Now we are not great heroes, and so our tests are also small, according to our size! But when we fail even in our small tests what it shows is that we are

not serious about honouring God in our lives. That is why we need to make a commitment to God that things will be different in future. It's not that we won't ever fall again or slip up, but when our intention is clear in our heart and mind, we are going to become better and stronger at actually living to honour God. We can pick ourselves up and run more carefully if we fail. Then we begin to show our real worship to God (Ro.12:1).

Action without vision

Imagine an 'evangelist' leading a sinner through some steps which he has been trained with, and then declaring that the sinner has now become a child of God. Has he? Really?

The truth of the matter is that if this evangelist has gone through his steps mechanically without understanding the spirit behind them, and if he has not tried to convey the same spirit to the sinner, the chances are that this man's 'conversion' is not genuine but just another addition to the statistics. What has happened is that this evangelist was just following a method without understanding or having been gripped himself with its vision.

We see this happening many times in Christian work. A leader starts a movement with a great vision inspired

by God, and his people 'multiply' his activities and projects without catching his vision. They follow the externals and complete many projects, which makes everyone believe that great things have been accomplished for God, and that these men are great leaders and achievers themselves. If these projects were IT projects, for example, things would have been fine, but when it comes to spiritual work, just following the externals kills the whole purpose (2Co.3:6).

Jesus said that the harvest was plenty, but the labourers were few (Lk.10:2). And labourers with vision, fewer! What shall we do? In the absence of labourers without vision shall we try to do the best with others? We cannot assume that they will automatically catch the vision, but we need to make efforts to impart the vision to them from the beginning itself.

Many preachers imitate 'great' preachers, following their style and even gestures. But what is it we need to do? Isn't it imparting spirit and life to those who hear us rather than impressing them with our charisma, our knowledge, our 'profound' statements, etc., (Ep.4:29;1Ti.4:16)?

This comes up even in parenting. If we assume that our children will automatically catch our faith and vision just because they are growing up in our home and we are taking them to church, we are making a serious mistake. Don't we need to work with them from childhood, prayerfully passing on our values, hopes, faith and vision to them? Just telling them what to do is not enough, but 'why' they have to do it becomes important especially as they grow into their teenage years.

The fruit we expect from spiritual work is not to be in numbers, but the

spirit we have helped others to catch on. Why are we so eager to replicate what someone else has done and to multiply his works? Isn't it better to make one true disciple who loves the Lord and follows Jesus than one thousand who only pay lip service to Him? Is it any wonder that we end up with a lot of problems when we follow the latter approach? Jesus worked with just 12 men and worked with them deeply. What would have happened if He had only been preaching to the multitudes, travelling from place to place? His 'movement' would have died a natural death after He was no longer there.

Pointers along the way #387

Experiencing the new life

Can we take for granted that those who are brought into God's kingdom will grow up spiritually? When some

radical conversions take place where people sincerely repent from their sins, God does a deep and mighty transformation of their desires, and they experience a mighty impact of the new life in Christ. But many people come to Christ without truly giving up their old life and choosing to live for Christ. Certainly God will be at work in them through the Holy Spirit. But they also need to be *taught* many things about God's nature and His ways before they can stabilise in their spiritual life (He.5:12). Jesus told His disciples not only to preach the gospel but also to *teach people to obey all that He had taught them* (Mt.28:19,20).

This is specially relevant when people come to Jesus from *anti-Christian* backgrounds. A new believer in the Corinthian church continued to live with his father's wife (1Co.5:1). Simon

who, after listening to the preaching of Philip, had believed and got baptised (Ac.8:13), was still in the bond of iniquity (v.23). Peter told him to repent of his wickedness because his heart was not right with God. It is a simplistic explanation to say that people like this have really had no proper conversion in the first place. Of course there are cases like that. But it is also true that in many cases their experience with the Lord is only partial, a first small step, and there is much to be set right. There is also need to build up a good Christian foundation in their lives. Their old worldview needs to be changed and brought into alignment with God's ways.

There are also many people who have yielded parts of their life to demonic influences, either by indulging their fleshly desires without restraint or by entering into occult practices where

Satan rules. Even when such people come to Jesus in the sincerity of their heart it may be that they have not repented from such things or renounced such practices. Even born again, spirit baptised believers who enter into such indulgences find that Satan and his demons get a hold over those parts of their lives. Certainly the ownership of these people is with God because they have yielded to Jesus. But at the same time they have yielded a part of their lives to demonic oppression. Paul warns believers to be careful not to give the devil any foothold in their lives

(2Co.2:10,11;Ep.4:26,27).

People need to be taught to recognise what has happened and to give up all such connections through repentance and yielding such areas deliberately to God.

These changes do not happen automatically just because someone

comes to Christ. That is why there is much need for pastors, teachers and counsellors to work with new people to provide the right foundation. Without this type of care it is easy to see why many of them are continuing to suffer from various types of bondages, and on the top of it all wondering why things are like this even though they believe in Jesus.

When we face uncertainty

Faith is not the same as hope. Many time we pray in hope that God will answer our prayers in the way we expect. But if God has not given us a specific promise concerning our request, either through a direct promise in His word or an assurance in our heart (Ro.10:17), we really don't know how God will answer us. If we are honest and real about life, we have to admit that this is the case many times. After we have prayed we wait in hope, but uncertain about the outcome. What is certain for us is that our Father has heard our prayer, He is almighty, all knowing, all wise and full of love for us, and that He will answer us in the way that is really the best for us. *That* is our faith in our Father.

To believe that God can do anything, or that He *can* do what He has done for

others, is faith in God's ability and power. But that in itself is not the same as believing that God *will* actually do what we have asked for. Has *He* told us He will do it, or are we just hoping that He will do it? If He has told us in our heart then we can have faith that it will happen just as He has said (Mt.8:13).

We shouldn't be confused between hope and faith. When we have an assurance in our heart that what we hope for will come true, that is faith (He.11:1). This assurance is given to us by God specifically in different situations. We know it when we have it. But this is different from us trying to make ourselves come to that assurance--by repeating words from the Bible or 'positive' words and avoiding 'negative' words. That will be like us making things happen (which we can't do; we are not gods), and not

God answering our prayer through His grace.

When we have prayed in hope, and when we are uncertain about how things would turn out, that is when our faith in our Father will be our strength. "We don't know the future, but we know the One who holds the future." Just as a young child derives his confidence and strength from his father's finger which he holds on to, we too can stand firm, without wavering, knowing that our future is safe in our Father's hands. Then we would be glad if our Father answers our prayer in the way we want or the way *He* wants. We know He knows best, and that knowledge helps us to have the attitude, "Not my will, Father, but Yours."

Those who wait on God will not be disappointed (Is.49:23). We may be disappointed when we don't get what

we asked for, but we will not be disappointed in the ultimate sense because our Father always plans for our welfare and not for calamity (Je.29:11), and He causes even the disappointing things that come to us to work for our eternal good (Ro.8:28,29).

This kind of faith in our Father helps us not to be moved by things that happen to us. People who have been taught to 'believe' that they will always get whatever they ask for get disappointed many times, and some of them even fall away from God. The fault is not with God, but an unrealistic understanding of faith that they had.

Overtaking our past

A sizeable part of who we are now is the result of what we experienced in the early years of childhood. Our personality has been partly moulded by what we observed from our parents and other caregivers in those days when we were not able to analyse what they did and said. We stored it all in our memory without differentiating right from wrong, and now, years later, our behaviour is strongly influenced by those (hidden) memories. Our self-image also depends to a great extent on what we *felt* they thought about us.

Even well-meaning parents are imperfect, just like we ourselves are now! If they haven't told us we were useless, they may have compared us unfavourably with our siblings or someone else. They may have shown us love only if we were good. They

may have tried to motivate us towards better performance but ended up making us feel that we were never good enough. Some of us may have had major experiences of neglect or abuse. Now we may be withdrawn, having buried our talents in the ground (Mt.25:25), or we may be always trying to prove to ourselves that we *are* really someone to be reckoned with. We may be seeking to get from our marriage partners the acceptance and appreciation we missed in childhood, which drives us to dissatisfaction and unfulfilled expectations. We may be upset with God for making us like we are, and not like someone else we admire, and for allowing us to go through traumatic experiences. Such unhealed wounds from the past hinder us from being what we *can* be, and spoil our relationships now with other people and God Himself.

But the truth that sets us free is that in God's eyes we have no comparison and we face no competition for His favour from anyone else (Is.49:14-16). He created us as unique individuals with our own set of strengths and talents. If He wanted us to be like someone else He could have easily made us that way, but *He wanted someone exactly like us in every way!* He has also watched over us as we went through hurtful events in our life, with compassion in His heart and confidence that He will one day turn them around to work for our good (Ro.8:28,29). Many times the pain we have gone through and the subsequent comfort we have received equip us to comfort others (2Co.1:3,4).

It is the increasing knowledge of God as who He *really* is, and our relationship and fellowship with Him which is becoming stronger as He

touches us through His word and Spirit, that can heal the wounds of the past and equip us *to be what God wants us to be and to accomplish what He wants us to*. The confidence that we belong to Him and that He valued us so much as to give up His life for us gives a true sense of self-worth. This will naturally transform our relationship with other people also. We can blossom to become the kind of people God had planned for us to be before we were even conceived (Je.29:11). We can begin to *enjoy* life and also bear fruit that can bless the others and glorify God (Jn.15:8).

Pointers along the way #390

The master we serve

We know what Jesus said about not being able to serve two masters at the same time (Mt.6:24). Apart from God, another master can be money, as Jesus pointed out, or many other things such as pleasure, comfort, fashion, entertainment, physical fitness, ambition for honour and fame, career, hobby, friendships, etc. If at times we choose any such thing *above* God, by choosing to disobey God in our pursuit of those things, it is clear which master we are serving. But even when we 'are not doing anything wrong' while pursuing any such thing, it can still be that we are serving them as our master.

The next verse tells us *for this reason* not to be worried about our life regarding food, clothes, etc., (v.25). Why 'for this reason'? Because when we worry about such things there is a

strong possibility that they might end up becoming a master for us. I am sure Jesus wasn't referring to occasional concerns we may have regarding such matters, because we will face such situations as we live in this world and then we would need to think and plan for them. Our Father knows we have need of them (v.32). But Jesus is talking about the kind of worry that occupies our mind most of the time.

Jesus says that what occupies our heart is what we really treasure (v.21). If we consider that God is our real treasure, but if most of the time our mind is occupied with any of these 'other things', the truth is that this other thing is what we really treasure. This is a very revealing test which doesn't give false results. If we test positive for other masters it is then up to us to acknowledge the truth and set things right in our life, or to justify ourselves

and lose out on God.

It may be very difficult for us to leave some of these other masters, depending on how long and how closely we have served them. Our mind will work overtime to provide us with excuses, and Satan will be only too happy to help us in that direction. But finally we have to decide for God--there is no question about that. That will be the wisest thing we can do and truly the best for us ultimately even though it may be difficult at the moment.

Every person who has made a choice for God over other things that clung close to him has received a great blessing from God. Beginning with Abraham who was willing to give up Isaac, the Bible has many such examples. We have many examples from the Christian era, and some of us have personal experiences too.

It is by faith that we choose God above other things. To do this we must believe that God is real and that He will keep His promises (He.11:6), that He is more precious than everything else (Mt.13:45,46), that eternal life with Him is better than temporary pleasures here on earth (Ps.16:11), and that it is better to give up some of the pleasures here on earth and suffer than to lose the pleasures of being with Him (2Co.4:17;Lk.9:25).

When we choose God above all else, we will not lose. He will give all we need (Mt.6:33).

Pointers along the way #391

Balancing priorities

We may be messed up in our priorities--with no priorities, wrong priorities, or even mixed up priorities. When we turn to God and desire to set our life in

order, one of the things we need to re-work is our priorities. According to God who knows what is best for us, the top priority is to seek God's kingdom and His righteousness--*first*-- , and then His promise is that He will supply us with everything we need for this life on earth (Mt.6:33). The word *first* is a key here, implying that He does not mean *only*. There are other things also we need to seek, each in its own order.

Jesus once told the Pharisees, "For you tithe mint and dill and cummin, and have neglected the weightier provisions of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness; but these are the things you should have done without neglecting the others." (Mt.23:23). In our context here the point is that while seeking after weighty matters less important things should not get neglected.

Some Christians pursue after a holy life, and withdraw themselves from the world, and they are unable to become salt and light to the world (Mt.5:13,14). Some focus so much on reading the Bible and Christian books that they classify everything else as worldly wisdom, and deprive themselves of knowledge that God has given to all people. They also don't know how to witness to people in the right way because they can't understand these people's values or thoughts. Some place 'spirituality' so much above everything else that they neglect their studies, work, family responsibilities, keeping things neatly and in order, etc. Some Christians in their zeal to 'burn out' for Jesus Christ end up shortening their lives or breaking down. If we would not take care of ourselves how will we be able to serve others?

Why do we do this? It may be because of a misplaced zeal for God coupled with ignorance. The Pharisees were originally God fearing people who were seeking out ways to be pleasing to God to the maximum level, but who went off on a tangent with a focus on external religion and missing out on inward attitudes and values (Mt.23:25). If we neglect the ordinary responsibilities of life under the assumption that we are seeking God supremely, we ought to hear Jesus' words, "these things you should have done, *without neglecting* the others."

It should be also noted that after reading this some of us may swing to the other extreme of seeking 'other' things first and neglecting the weightier matters! When we become aware of a tendency to be legalistic and focussing on 'touch not, handle not' etc., we may throw off all rules as a reaction! E.g.,

in order to 'take care of ourselves' we may take to too much of entertainment or relaxation! Or to avoid praying as a rule at different times, we may slowly stop praying also! No, our priorities should be balanced and constantly under evaluation.

The challenge to be an example

We know we Christians ought to be examples to the others in every part of our life. But honesty compels us to acknowledge many mistakes, failures and sins which we are ashamed about. But should that stop us from going forward? The devil points out our failures and warns us that we have no right to tell others what to do. Many people are also quick to point out our faults and try to shut us up. But the example we want to show others is not about our perfection but how we run towards perfection.

The perfect example that Jesus gave is not intimidating because that is what we expect from Him anyway. The fact that He did not sin even once even though He was tempted in everything just as we are tempted now (He.4:15)

(and we can be sure that Satan would have tried his worst to trip up Jesus) helps us to persevere with hope even when we have failed (He.12:3,4). We are encouraged to go to Him after we have failed because we know He understands our struggles, weakness and feelings (He.4:15,16) and He Himself went through struggles against temptations and overcame (He.5:7,8).

But the example of Paul encourages us in a different way which is perhaps closer to our lives. Here was a man who experienced real failures just like we have but who didn't give up. He knew he hadn't become perfect (Php.3:12), but he pressed on towards perfection. He did not forget that he used to be a blasphemer and a persecutor (1Ti.1:12,13), and considering his failures in spite of the grace and gifts God had given him he sincerely felt that he was the chief of

sinners (1Ti.1:15). This recognition protected and preserved him so that God could use him as the mightiest of all apostles.

Paul's secret was his honest assessment of himself (Ro.12:3). He didn't live in a world of theological abstractions but he recognised his existence in this 'real' world with a flesh in which dwelt no good thing (Ro.7:18). He called sins, mistakes and failures by those same names. And yet--this is my point--he had the audacity to tell others to follow his example!

Paul didn't call us to follow his example of success after success! He called us to follow Jesus as he himself followed Him (1Co.11:1). It was not an example of an unbroken chain of success. But he wouldn't give up even when he had been knocked down but he continued to fight till he achieved

great things for the Lord. Paul is exhorting us to follow Christ in the same way.

When we confess our sins to God He forgives us, wipes our record clean as if there was never any blot there (1Jn.1:9). We don't carry a sense of guilt into our future but we go forward with a greater desire and mindset not to fail again.

Pointers along the way #393

Waiting is not a waste!

We know that it is one of the most difficult things for us as human beings to wait for God's answer. Our intellectual problem is that we know He *can*, and can't understand why He *doesn't*! Our emotional problem is that we so much want what we have asked for that it is almost unbearable to live without it. Our spiritual problem is that the devil questions how we can trust God when He doesn't answer our prayers. But why does He delay?

Instant gratification is what we would like. But that's what 'spoils' kids. Even world history teaches us that those who become great in any area of life are always those who have learned to curb this impatience and learn to wait for the right time.

There are several examples in the

Bible of those who had to wait. We know Abraham who had to wait 25 years before he received the son *whom God had promised*. Moses had to wait 40 years in the desert before God called him to lead His people, for which Moses had thought he was ready 40 years earlier. After David was anointed as king of Israel he not only had to wait to actually become king, but in the meantime he had to run for his life from place to place. After Joseph received two dreams that suggested honour and respect, he seemed to go further down with each step during the next 13 years.

God is no sadist, as the devil would have us think. He takes no thrill in watching our anguish. When He does something for us, we can be sure that He has a clear and good purpose for us (Je.29:11). He sits in heaven and does whatever He chooses, and no one can

stop Him (Ps.115:3;Da.4:35). He is well able to do, then and there, what we ask for, but He believes He can give us something far better than what we have asked for (Ep.3:20). If we instantly got what we wanted, that would be all we would get. But when He deals with us during our time of waiting He changes and transforms us, our way of thinking, our understanding of Him and life, etc., and finally He gives us what we want or something even better.

Waiting tests our faith in God. It causes us to examine our priorities about what is important to us. We get to know God better through direct interaction with Him rather than through second hand information. It makes us tougher and less easily moved. It leaves us with more maturity to handle the thing we asked for than we would have had otherwise. It causes us to understand

what others go through in similar situations, and perhaps that initiates our ministry towards them (2Co.1:4).

When we wait for some of the promises of God to be fulfilled in our life, perhaps what we need is endurance (He.10:36). How foolish it would be to get impatient and give up after some time, when the answer is already on its way! Those who place their trust in the Lord will *not* be put to shame ultimately (Ps.9:10), as we shall see with hindsight. Even if we face challenges on the way to the promises, let's not forget that only our impatience can divert us.

Pointers along the way #394

Our theology and our life

We shouldn't assume that theology is only for the Bible colleges and those who train to 'serve' God, because our

theology is simply our understanding of God, and that determines how we live. To take an extreme example, those who believe in the evolution of life from inorganic substances do not have to consider God as someone they have to give an account to. Somebody has pointed out that from the 1960s when evolution began to be taught in schools, morality has taken a nosedive.

It's not that Christians who believe in the Bible revelation of God are exempt from such aberrations. Many of us know how we have imagined God as a hard taskmaster waiting to pounce upon us whenever we fell, and considered any calamity as an expression of His wrath. We have actually taken this view *from parts of the Bible!*

On the other hand we may have thought of God as an indulgent grandfather who smiles faintly at His naughty kids (even

when we kids have tried to 'cheat' Him!). This imagination has helped us to take sin lightly, take forgiveness for granted and stray far away from God's paths. By this we also forfeit the ability to assess or say that certain things others do are wrong!

The mistake is to consider only *one* side of God's character to the neglect of others. If we think that God is a consuming fire (De.4:24) and does not take into account His compassion and longsuffering (Ex.34:6) we go wrong. If we think of God only as love (1Jn.4:16) but not as light (in which there is no darkness) (1Jn.1:5) we get lopsided. We need to understand Him as kind (to an immeasurable degree) and severe (in the right proportion) in the same Person (Ro.11:22). God is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in lovingkindness and truth who keeps lovingkindness for

thousands, who forgives iniquity, transgression and sin but He will not let the guilty go unpunished (Ex.34:6,7). (Under the new covenant we need to understand that while our punishment has already been taken away because Jesus took that on Himself, we will be subject to God's loving discipline as His children - He.12:6-8).

Whenever we go wrong in our practical life or the choices we make, behind it is a wrong theology. Therefore Bible studies are not only for those who have a lot of time to spare(!), but for all of us who need changes in our thoughts, attitudes, words and behaviour. When we *really* know our God better, our life will change.

Let us also consider the possibility that we are quite capable of keeping our theology and our life in separate

compartments. Then we are like those who 'heard the word' but did not act on them (Mt.7:26). But that actually shows that we have only come to know *about* Him from others but we don't know Him personally ourselves. When we want to be wise we will *act upon* what we come to know about God (Mt.7:24). This will be a lifelong process of getting to know God and being transformed into His image. Let us make that our way of life.

Pointers along the way #395

Shall we continue to sin?

'Sin' is not a word many people use these days, because it sounds so archaic or fundamentalistic! Yet the whole focus of God in sending Jesus down to us was our sin (Mt.1:21;1Ti.1:15). It was to deal with sin and to deliver us from its power that God's Son had to die. Yet even

among 'evangelical' Christians there is very little mention of wanting to overcome temptations and to live in the way God wants.

One major reason is a misunderstanding of grace. Even in the time of Paul when the concept of grace was still being discovered some people thought that grace was such a blanket cover for sin that it didn't really matter how one lived in daily life. There was always forgiveness available, wasn't there? But Paul took pains to explain that grace didn't mean a licence with sin (Ro.6:15,16). If we yield ourselves to sin, we become slaves again. But temptations are all around, all the time, and it is easier to yield than to fight, isn't it?

Actually 'grace' has two parts to it, mercy for the sins that we have fallen into, and help to fight it when we are tempted (He.4:16). We may have

thought that to obey God's commandments and thus to fight against sin was a 'work' and that we have been made 'free' under grace! That's a lie. God has given us grace so that now we will have strength to deny ourselves when we are tempted to do wrong and to live godly (God-like) lives here on earth (Ti.2:11,12). We make a terrible mistake when we use grace only for forgiveness and then live (more or less) as we like.

What do we do when we face a *strong* temptation? Certainly we need *extra* strength to overcome this. The Bible talks about 'shedding blood' in the battle against sin (He.12:4). Isn't it much easier to give up the fight and give in to the temptation, *especially when we think that we can get forgiveness afterwards?* But that will weaken our stand against sin, and the next time even a less strong temptation

will be enough to make us fall.

The problem is that deep in our mind we feel that it is OK to sin (occasionally) now that we are under grace. Suppose we were under the Law and every disobedience was to be punished severely, would we have sinned so carelessly? If our eternal judgment depended on our obedience, would we have been so light hearted about it? But because we believe that salvation is by grace through faith, and not of works (Ep.2:8), we don't make much effort to stop sinning. *We seem to have become worse off in practical life by coming into grace!*

As those who have been given undeserved favour from God, we are supposed to show Him love and gratitude by the way we live (Ro.12:1,2). When we don't do this we show ourselves unworthy of His grace (Ep.4:1). That kind of attitude is

dangerous, amounting to insulting His spirit of grace (He.10:29). God is patient and longsuffering towards us. He waits and longs to be gracious to us (Is.30:18). But let us consider it as an opportunity to repent rather than misuse it.

Pointers along the way #396

Innocent of His blood?

When Jesus stood before Pilate he knew Jesus was innocent of the charges against Him. But a riot was likely to start, and it would have personal and political implications for Pilate. So he chose a political game to protect himself at the cost of condemning the innocent. He washed his hands with water publicly and declared, "I am innocent of this Man's blood" (Mt.27:24). But was he? Certainly Pilate was guilty of causing innocent blood to be shed (that of the

Son of God in human form, no less) which couldn't be wished away by political statements!

Many people point out that it wasn't really Pilate, or the Roman soldiers subsequently, who put Jesus to death. It was the Jews, instigated by their rulers who were really the masterminds behind the move, who forced Pilate to do it. The people even said without thinking, "His blood shall be on us and on our children!" (v.25).

But really, who was guilty of His blood? "He was pierced through for our transgressions, He was crushed for our iniquities; The chastening for our wellbeing fell upon Him, And by His scourging we are healed" (Is.53:5). It was for bearing the just punishment for our sins that He had to suffer and die such an ignominious, unjust, excruciating and cruel death that has been recognised as the greatest

mockery of justice in the world ever. If we weren't sinners, He needn't even have come down or gone through this at all.

So *we* are the ones guilty of His death. It was *our* sins that actually cried out, "Crucify Him, crucify Him!" Every scourge, every spit, every insult, every pulling of His beard, every nail that went in, every thorn that pierced Him, every agonising breath He had to take-- every part of His suffering and death was to get us forgiveness for our sins.

Many times we totally forget this when we ask God to forgive some sin we have fallen into. We tend to take forgiveness even as some right! We think God will *of course* forgive! But every sin cries out, "Crucify Him!"

Thank God for forgiveness, because it is a gift of God's mercy which we don't deserve at all. We are really *blessed* to

be given this grace of forgiveness (Ps.32:1). But let's not presume on it and go ahead and sin carelessly. He who taught us to forgive others as much as seventy times seven (Mt.18:21,22) will do it even more. But let us not forget what it meant to Him to earn our forgiveness. We *cannot* earn our forgiveness, but He had to earn ours. Now He gives it to us freely, but it wasn't free for Him, far from it.

When we get into some problem don't ask, "Lord, what have I done to deserve this?" Don't talk of what we really deserve! (I am not saying that whatever happens to us is what we deserve!)

On the other hand some of us wonder how God can ever forgive this particular sin we have fallen into. When the sinless Son of God died on the cross, that is sufficient to pay for the sins of the whole world (1Jn.2:2).

Now we can be forgiven if we confess our sins (1Jn.1:9).

Pointers along the way #397

Satanic whispers

Almost every day one can read about people who have committed suicide. To an outsider a large number of them appear to have been rather impulsive or for trivial reasons. Are such people responding to a sudden thought that comes to their mind telling them, "What's the use? Just end it all!"?

Not all thoughts that occur in our mind are our own! Various thoughts come up in our mind giving us suggestions and many times pushing us to take a wrong course of action. Perhaps it is to misunderstand what someone has said or done. Perhaps it is to let ourselves go in a violent manner to retaliate. Perhaps it is to throw up our hands and

give up. Perhaps it is to walk out of a marriage. Whatever the suggestion is, it is couched in such a manner that we think it is our own thought, but if we just go along with it, it gets us into trouble. Such thoughts are not necessarily ours. They may be from one of Satan's demons (Satan is too big to bother with small people like us) who has studied us for years, got to know how we respond to different situations and understood how to slip in a thought into our mind now and then in a deceptive manner.

If we think that it cannot happen to Christians just think of how Jesus was tempted to jump off from the top of the temple (Mt.4:5,6). When it happens to us the first thing we need to do is to recognise that it is not from God. How we can do this is first by learning to recognise God's voice (Jn.10:27). But this voice can be imitated (2Co.11:14),

and so we need to get to know God's ways better and better from His word and from our experience as we follow Him. It was because Jesus knew the Father and His ways well that He could immediately recognise that the voice that quoted a verse from Scripture and told Him to jump from the temple was not from God.

One helpful tip for recognising this type of demonic whispers is the pressure behind it that tells us to act quickly (without taking time to think) and not giving us a reasonable opportunity to make our choice. Whenever we feel this pressure it is wise to pause from speaking out or taking action on the suggestion, and to take it to the Lord in prayer. This can protect us from a lot of folly.

Have we noticed how we get some critical opinions about other people when we are dealing with them? These

thoughts are dressed up in such a manner that we may think we have ourselves cleverly arrived at that conclusion! We may be so convinced about their validity that we don't even question them. But they are poisonous and malignant impressions about others that may not be true at all!

We need to be on the alert against all such fiery darts that the devil sends in our direction in the form of ideas, suggestions, insinuations, etc. The whole armour of God is needed to protect ourselves from such attacks (Ep.6:11). Remember we are no match for Satan by ourselves; but Jesus has given us such authority in His name over *all* the power of the enemy (Lk.10:19).

Pointers along the way #398

Living before God

At one time the brothers of Jesus told Him that He should show Himself before others if He wanted to become known (Jn.7:4). They thought in the usual way: if you want to do something great and want people to recognise you, better take care to impress them. Jesus knew this was what people usually did, because He said another time how the Pharisees were doing everything 'to be seen of men' (Mt.23:5). He told His unbelieving brothers at this time (because they were not in a position to understand anything better) that His time was not yet come. But His life was not before people. Yes, He worked with people, He was seen and noticed by people, but His heart was focussed not on what they thought about Him but on pleasing the Father (Jn.6:38).

Jesus was probably exaggerating when He talked about people who blew a

trumpet before they gave alms (Mt.6:2). But we are familiar with people who insist on engraving their names on the things they donate or having their names published in the donor's list. Jesus said that they got their full reward already from the people who saw them, meaning that there was no further reward waiting for them in heaven. What a tragedy if we even sit down privately and gloat over our achievements and how other people have appreciated them (Da.4:30)!

Jesus went to the extent of saying that those who valued the honour of men didn't even have a genuine faith because for them the honour that came from God was not very important (Jn.5:44). Faith is all about our trust and confidence in God and the subsequent relationship with Him. By giving priority to men's honour don't

we show that we don't really know God too well and that's why we don't value Him?

How much of our life is lived before God in such a way that others don't even know about it? Decisions we make in secret to deny ourselves in order to honour God, personal sacrifices we make in order to bless the others, prayers we send up for other people that nobody knows about, money we give without the left hand knowing what the right hand is doing, etc.--these are the things that prove whether we are content with pleasing God, or we want admiration and honour from people.

Jesus mentioned specifically about faithfulness with money, saying that this was one factor that decided whether God could consider us worthy to be entrusted with spiritual riches (Lk.16:10-13). Avoiding

unrighteousness in the use of money is one thing, but isn't avoiding unnecessary or luxurious expenditure in order to make money available for God something He won't miss?

Not retaliating when attacked, not trying to vindicate our name before people when maligned, blessing in return when cursed, praying for those who hurt us, etc.--of course these are not to be followed blindly without wisdom--indicate to us if we are content with the honour that comes from God or if we very badly want everyone to appreciate us.

May we learn *to walk before God* and become perfect (Ge.17:1).

Pointers along the way #399

Will Jesus be with us always?

Jesus said that the Father never left Him alone *because* He was always doing what pleased the Father (Jn.8:29). But what about Jesus being with us always? (If we are honest, and looking at our practical life instead of at an imaginary world made up of doctrines, we have to admit we aren't always doing what pleases Him.) Jesus *has* said that He would be with us till the end (Mt.28:20), and that He would *never* leave or forsake us (He.13:5ff). But what happens if we fall into sin? Won't that separate us from God (Is.59:2)?

When we think about it we can see that Jesus was really the only one whose presence with the Father could be based on being pleasing to the Father always. But that is not the way it is with us now. No one of us can be

accepted that way (Ga.2:16). At any given time, in the eyes of God who is so holy that He cannot look at sin (Hab.1:13), all of us would be practically ungodly people because nothing we do is ever perfect according to God's standards. But God has shown us mercy because we trust in Jesus as our Sin-bearer and He has justified us *ungodly people* (Ro.4:5;5:8). According to this new arrangement where God's righteousness and mercy meet together, which we call the new covenant, Jesus now promises us that He will never ever leave us. (We can leave, if we want.)

But what happens if we fall? Jesus doesn't leave us, especially at that point, because as our Friend He cannot leave us to ourselves at a time of great need for us. But don't we *feel* as if He has left us after we have fallen? What

has happened is that our fellowship with Him has been affected by our sin (Is.59:2). We need to restore that fellowship by confessing our sin to Him as honestly and immediately as possible and then believe that He has kept His part of the promise (1Jn.1:9).

If we fall into sin, alright, it has happened. Now the best thing to do is to make sure that we get back into fellowship as quickly as we can. It is foolish to lie around, bemoan our condition, wonder how we can ever become perfect, and think that if we feel perfectly humiliated and repentant *then perhaps* God might take us back! God has said He would take us back, and He would be thoroughly unfaithful to us (which He can't be) if He didn't after we have confessed our sin. What we need to do is to confess our sins, and then believe that God has forgiven and cleansed us.

The devil is not likely to let go so easily. Once he has succeeded in leading us to sin, he starts his second goal of accusing us. We cannot deny that we have fallen, but it is still true that once we have confessed our sin, God can be relied on to forgive us. The best response to the devil's accusation is to ignore him and to go on to thank God for His love and mercy in forgiving us. It will not be a good idea at all to stand there and try to convince the devil that God has forgiven us, because he will keep pointing out that we don't *feel* forgiven! But feeling or not, we are!

Pointers along the way #400

It's not about us

It's true that when we first come to God it is because there is a need in our life. We may need help in some practical area of our life and so come to God. But, of course, the greatest need in our life is in connection with our sins. We need forgiveness, and we need deliverance. Then we are so happy to hear the good news that Jesus has come from heaven for this very purpose, to save us from our sins (Mt.1:21;18:11). We are happy that God helps us in various other ways in our daily life also, protecting us, guiding us, teaching us, healing us, providing us miraculous help in different situations, etc.

But as our relationship gets secure with the Lord, a major change also takes place in our priorities. We get concerned with what the Lord wants us to do for Him, rather than what we

want Him to do for us. It's not that we don't want Him to do anything for us any more (we actually become more and more aware of our dependence on Him), but that it becomes more important for us to accomplish His will, fulfil His purposes, tell others about Him, and generally to bring greater honour and glory to His name.

Many verses make it clear that for the apostle Paul serving God and doing His will had become the passion of his life

(Ro.12:1;1Co.6:19,20;1Co.10:33;2Co.4:12). This is the same way the apostle Peter also saw things (1Pe.4:2). These verses also make it clear that such a life is not just for apostles or so-called full-time workers but for all who believe in Jesus and become His disciples. In other words, if we have not tasted this passion at all in our life we would need to check if we have got

stuck somewhere in the baby stage of our spiritual life. The Bible says that if by the time we ought to be serving the others we ourselves need to be taken care of all the time it shows that we have not grown up spiritually (He.5:12). Or in the worst case we may never have had a true experience of Christ in our life.

If we have truly experienced repenting from our sins, putting our trust in Jesus alone for the forgiveness of our sins and being born again, then we ought to check why we have not been growing up. Have we not taken the trouble to feed on the word of God (1Pe.2:2) through which He gives us spiritual food--knowledge of Him and His ways, comfort, encouragement, guidance and correction for our life (2Ti.3:16,17)? Have we neglected going to the Lord in prayer at all our times of spiritual and practical need

(He.4:16)? Have we missed out on gathering with other disciples to worship the Lord together, listen to His word and to encourage one another through fellowship (He.10:24,25)? Have we been overruling the voice of the Holy Spirit in our heart who has been warning us when we strayed away from God's paths (He.3:7,8)? Have we allowed ourselves to be drawn away to the things of this life so that God has been crowded out of our mind (1Jn.2:15,16)?

Let us show our love for Jesus in words *and* deeds, if we claim to belong to Him.

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

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About the book

Pointers along the way are brief messages on the practical Christian life, originally sent out weekly through email to those who asked for them. Now, 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.