



Pointers
along the
way

Devotionals that
make you think

Vol. 5

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Pointers along the way #401

No ask, no get

There are many things God will do for us without asking, which He does even for wicked people. God sends the rain and lets the sun shine on everyone (Mt.5:45). That's because God is good to all, by nature (Ps.145:9). But there are many good things He wants to do for us which He will not do unless we ask Him. We are mistaken if we think that once we have come to Jesus He will take care of all our needs automatically.

We read in Ez.36:22-36 about many things God wanted to do for His people. This included washing them from their sins and idolatry and giving them the new covenant blessing of a new heart. But this was not going to happen automatically, and God was going to wait till they asked Him (v.37).

This is the flip side of the freedom of choice that God has created us with. He will not force anything on us against our will even to bless us! We have to ask for even the things He wants to do for us. He wants us to be responsible for our own lives and choose what we want.

Many times we don't have what we need just because we haven't asked (Jas.4:2). If we ask for things to satisfy our lusts, then it is good God doesn't answer us (v.3). But isn't it tragic if we miss many good things because we assume God will give them to us and fail to ask Him?

God wants us to acknowledge Him in all our ways, and when we do that we allow Him to do things for us (Pr.3:6). One way to acknowledge Him is through prayer, not only by asking for things and thereby acknowledging our dependence on Him, but also thanking

Him for things He has done. A humble man keeps praying all the time (1Th.5:17), requesting God for the things he needs and thanking Him when he gets them. This becomes an attitude (rather than a form of prayers) and a habit which also keep us close to God.

An enemy of prayer is an attitude of self-sufficiency by which we imagine that we can get along well by ourselves. God warns us not to make our own plans without depending on Him or seeking out His will (Jas.4:13-15).

Of course there is no law that we only get what we ask for. God often gives us much more than we ask for, or even imagine (Ep.3:20). He does this out of His love for us. Especially when He sees that our heart is set on seeking His kingdom and righteousness first in our life, He throws in everything else that we need (Mt.6:33). This teaches us

how we should evaluate our prayers to see where our priorities lie--what we seek for most shows where our treasure is (Mt.6:21). Are we earthly minded, caring more for the things of this life than for a godly life (1Jn.2:15)? It's not that we should not ask for our earthly needs. Jesus asks us to pray for our daily bread (representing all our earthly needs). But the question is what is uppermost in our minds. Can we pray, "Oh take the whole world, but give me Jesus"?

It's also our responsibility to pray for others and the work of God's kingdom. How sad for us if things don't get done because we are shirking our duty!

Let us show our love for Jesus in words *and* deeds, if we claim to belong to Him.

Simple faith

We know the story of the woman who had a haemorrhage for twelve years who heard about Jesus and thought that if only she could touch the hem of His garment she would be healed (Mk.5:28). God honoured her faith by healing her. But it would be wrong for us to imagine that this shows there was some supernatural power in Jesus' clothes! The power was in Him, and not in His clothes. But then how did she get healed by touching His clothes?

We read of another incident when handkerchiefs and aprons from Paul were taken around and people got healed (Ac.19:12). Actually the power to heal was neither in the clothes nor in Paul, but in Jesus whom Paul preached!

In cases like these, for those who make

a superficial reading of the Scriptures or who place undue meaning in words, it is easy to get a wrong understanding of spiritual things. We look around and see many Christians keeping a cross or a Bible in their room and expecting to be free from evil spirits, and others making money selling holy water, blessed prayer shawls, etc.

What really happened in the above biblical incidents was that this woman and the people who got healed through Paul were expressing their simple faith in God in the way they knew or assumed. We must also remember that paganism with its magic and magicians was familiar knowledge in those days. The means they used for expressing their faith actually amounted to superstition, because there is really no power in things or people but only in God (Ps.62:11). But God graciously overlooked their ignorance (Ac.17:30)

and acted in response to their simple faith in Him.

Now we see many people getting healed in meetings held by some preachers who have questionable backgrounds in terms of their financial integrity, manipulation of people, playing around with truth regarding their ministry, etc. Can we attribute these miracles of healing to merely psychological manipulations? Not always. Many of them are genuine healings. Is it possible that evil spirits are manifesting works of deception seeking to mislead people away from God's truths? Perhaps, but we can't classify every healing like that. The other possibility is that when people go to God in simple faith, expecting Him to heal them, and not knowing anything about God's opinion about these preachers, God is honouring their personal faith in Him, without

authenticating these preachers!

When we look at God we should know that His heart is bigger and greater than the best of our imagination. He wants to save and to bless everyone. Many times He does things that go beyond our understanding of His ways. He answers the prayers of some people we think He should have known better (Lk.7:39)! Many testimonies we hear may have elements that are difficult to accept, and make us wonder about their truth! A little bit of scepticism is good for our safety. Even when giving glory to God for what He has done, let us be careful about giving doctrinal validation to the practical details.

Pointers along the way #403

The unchanging God

It is one of the strongest anchors of our faith that God is forever unchanging

(Mal.3:6;1Sa.15:29). His love does not cease (Je.31:3), and His mercy endures forever (Ps.118:1). His word will be true and valid for all time (Mt.24:35). His plans will all be accomplished in their time (Je.30:24). Jesus Himself is the same yesterday, today and forever (He.13:8). These are the truths that give us an assurance in the times of testing and give us strength to endure and continue (Ps.119:49,50).

God as a Person and His character never change. At the same time it does not mean that God will not change the way He works, or that He will not do new things in future! There is comfort in knowing that what He has done for others He *can* do for us. It indicates to us His heart. But to expect that He must do for us what He has done for others or in the same way will be unrealistic. We would then be trying to keep God within a familiar box and insist He

stays there! In other words we are defining God as one who has been *fully* described in a small book, the Bible, and who can do only things that have already been done! That is blasphemous because it does not describe God in His infinity. But it is trying to reduce His glory by assuming that He is rigid and unable to come out with new ideas and ways according to the need of the time. Jesus is the same Person, with the same unchanging character, but He does new and wonderful things (Re.21:5).

We make another big mistake when we confuse between what God *can* do and what He *will* do at any time. What He will do depends on His sovereign choice. Once we know God as one who can do anything, it is not difficult to believe that He *can* do what we would like Him to do for us in any situation. But just because we have

faith that He can doesn't mean we have faith that He will. Then when He doesn't, we shouldn't get upset with Him.

It is perfectly alright to ask God for anything we wish because He is our Father. He is also a *good* Father and He delights to give us what we need (Lk.11:13). But it is not right to expect or demand that He should do something just because we asked, unless it is something He has clearly promised in His word or He has spoken to us in our heart through the Holy Spirit (Ro.10:17;Ac.13:2). Otherwise we can only pray and wait in hope.

How God dealt with the people of Israel under the old covenant is not the same way He deals with us now under the new covenant. He is the same God, but He meets with believers in the new covenant in a different way. This is something we must keep in mind

especially as we read the Old Testament, to see how things are applicable now under the new covenant. The forms and the laws relating to external behaviour have given way to an emphasis on our inner life and our personal relationship with God. It is the renewal of our mind and heart and the consequent transformation that are important rather than our external comfort.

The inscrutable God

As we look around at the different religions that are around us we can see the limitations of how much man can reach in his attempt to define God. They describe their gods as those which are merely exaggerated versions of things we know on earth. But once we know God as a Person who created everything and is far above anything we can imagine, we realise there is no way we can get to know Him with our limited minds unless He reveals Himself to us. And that is what He has done through the Bible, in a progressive manner from the beginning to the end. In one sense He has revealed Himself in such a way that anyone can easily understand. At the same time, the more deeply we delve into the whole of the Bible we can understand Him more and more

clearly.

But obviously God has not revealed everything about Himself to us. As limited created beings we will never be able to understand Him fully. There will always be many things we can't understand about Him or His ways. We make a mistake if we imagine that we should be able to understand all that He is doing or planning to do, or that He has to give us an explanation at all times. We must recognise that when we are going through testing times there will always be questions in our mind for which we won't get the answers. If we can't be at rest until we have figured out the answers to all our why's we'd better get ready for some sleepless nights! If we want an explanation for everything He has written in His word and think that something is wrong with His word just because we can't understand, we'd find

ourselves going into unbelief very soon.

We are supposed to walk by faith, and not by sight (2Co.5:6-8). 'Sight' here stands for seeing everything clearly, referring to getting answers and explanations to all our questions and doubts. No, we have to walk in darkness sometimes, being content to just hold on to His hands and walk and not knowing what lies ahead. Our confidence is that *He* knows where He is taking us, and knowing that *that* is sufficient for us. Then when we are content to walk with Him in the darkness without demanding to have light all the time, we come through in triumph (Job.23:10). We know we are safe as long as we are with Him.

One of the strongest needs we have is to know what is going on and where it is going to take us. But the fact is that we aren't going to be able to know

these always. If we insist on asking the why question we will only throw ourselves into confusion and get hurt most of the time. But *by faith* we can put this need aside and go ahead. Don't we admire Abraham who left his father's family and went out with the Lord, *not knowing where He was going to take him* (He.11:8)? When Jesus talked about receiving the kingdom like a little child it is this kind of faith that He meant (Mk.10:15).

The most important thing is to know what He wants us to do, and He will show that once we have a heart that wants to *do* rather than *know* (Jn.7:17).

Pointers along the way #405

Bearing and forgiving

Forgiving someone is to let him go free, without demanding any punishment from our side. We recognise that we have been forgiven freely ourselves (Eph.4:32), and that we have no right to 'hold anyone by his neck' and demand that he pays for what he has done to us (Mt.18:21-35). We leave justice to God who can take an impartial view (Rom.12:19).

But bearing with someone is different. This is to be gracious towards someone who is doing something that irritates, hurts, offends or upsets us. This may be as small as an annoying mannerism or something big like a character flaw that keeps rubbing us the wrong way. We have to bear with that person because we live with him in the same family or neighbourhood, or work with him. If we think that

forgiving someone can be difficult, sometimes bearing with some people can be more difficult, because the provocation is repetitive.

Since none of us is perfect in any sense, we are always going to find things in others that irritate us. While we need to seek for more and more grace to be gracious towards the others, one thing that can help us is to remember that *others have to bear with us also, even in areas we may be unaware of*. We must not also forget the fact that perhaps the key to changing the other person may be with us, when we exhibit more of Christ to him!

A good relationship involves at least two people, and we should not consider ourselves to be entirely responsible for its success. God recognises this limitation and tells us to seek for peace only within the

realistic limitations of our ability (Rom.12:18). Sometimes we can just grin and bear it. But sometimes that is not possible because the irritant level is just too high. As Christians do we have to keep turning the other cheek and bear with everything that others do to us?

No. If we make ourselves doormats and let others walk all over us, we are partly responsible for encouraging their misbehaviour! Jesus tells us to confront people privately first, and then, if necessary, take a couple of others with us to sort out the problem (Mt.18:15,16). The intention is not to pin them down with their fault, but to find a way forward out of the difficulty the relationship is in. If the other person is unwilling to go forward, then we have two options, one of walking out of the relationship, and the other of seeking for more wisdom and grace in

dealing with the situation.

Walking out is possible when that particular relationship is one we can manage without, even though at a cost, as in the case of friendships, or associations at work, church, etc. But it is not an option (except in extreme cases) for family commitments such as marriage. In any case, walking out should not be the first thing we consider because that may very well come from a proud, self-righteous attitude. It should be examined only if nothing else works even after long times of waiting, and the relationship is becoming more and more hurtful in every way.

Pointers along the way #406

Entering through doors

It is not just Abraham whom the Lord has first tested before trusting him with

spiritual responsibilities, but He does it always with His servants. One aspect of this 'test' is that when it comes we don't usually recognise it as such. But the way we make a choice tells God what is in our hearts and which direction we are likely to take.

When God asked Abraham to leave his homeland and his family of origin and proceed to an unknown place, Abraham had no idea what lay ahead (Gen.12:1). Nor did he know what was behind God's strange command to sacrifice his son of promise. But when Abraham obeyed God 'in faith' it made history in a big way, not only for him but for the whole world (Ge.22:16-18). If Abraham had refused to pay the price and continued life according to his own understanding he may not have suffered any punishment from God but certainly he would have missed all that he experienced later.

So it is with us. At certain moments of our life we are asked to open a door and enter in. If we understand that this is what God wants us to do and obey, we enter into a 'new' world of spiritual understanding, experience and responsibility which we could not have imagined as we stood before the door. We have no way of being able to examine the pros and cons of that choice because we don't know where the door leads to! All we know is that it is God who has asked us to enter. If we know Him as our Heavenly Father, and if we have come to trust His wisdom and judgment in all matters of life, it would be 'natural' for us to enter that door by faith just like Abraham and all the others.

Many of us can look back at our lives and see what such decisions have meant for us, how they changed the very course of our lives and led us

closer to the Lord and opened up new domains of understanding and vistas of service. Some of us may also be painfully aware of how we have failed to walk through certain other doors and now we can only humble ourselves and pray for grace to be more alert in future. But it is also possible that we are not even aware of other occasions when we missed God's doors or when we walked through doors which God didn't want us to enter. These are major tragedies for us.

When God tells us something in His word sometimes we may assume that it is not very important for us to obey it because we can't understand its significance. But we must realise that when it is God who tells us to do something it *is* significant. What is being tested is our attitude towards God, whether we reverence Him as God, or we think that we will obey

Him only if we are convinced it is important enough for us. The question is whether we will walk by faith and obey Him, or lean on our own understanding (Pr.3:5). (I am not talking about 'blind faith' but one that is based on knowledge of God and His word.) May God be able to testify of us after each test, "*Now* I know that he/she fears (honours, respects, reverences) Me" (Ge.22:12).

A good start in life

The best starting point in life is when we come to Christ--when we are made children of God, heirs in His kingdom and a whole new world of spiritual realities opens up for us. This, of course, decides our eternal destiny, whether we are going to be with God in heaven or with the devil in hell. But it will also decide the quality of the rest of our life on earth, whether it will be meaningful, fulfilling, useful, productive and joyful, or it will continue to be empty, meaningless, hopeless and valueless even if we have money, pleasures and all that can meet our carnal needs.

People who have made a decision for God must also make sure that they have made a good start in that direction. Different things are possible, such as that we are just imagining and fooling

ourselves that we now belong to God or that even though we have come to God our life is still not what it should be. The reason for these situations may be that we haven't heard the truths correctly or fully, or that we may be relying more on our feelings or our limited experience than on what God has revealed to us in His word.

When God offers to translate those who belong to the devil's kingdom of darkness to His kingdom of light there are a few things He expects from our side. If we don't meet those criteria the most serious thing that can happen is that just as the guest without the wedding dress was thrown out of the king's feast we will finally find ourselves outside God's kingdom (Mt.12:11-13). Another result will be that our Christian life is always going to be substandard, making us wonder what the fuss was all about becoming a

Christian!

The first requirement is that we must recognise and acknowledge that we are sinners in God's eyes who are without hope in ourselves. No amount of being good or doing good can save us. 'Salvation' which God offers through Jesus Christ is for sinners (Mk.2:17)! Those who even secretly think they are not 'sinners' will not receive this free gift of salvation (1Jn.1:8). Possibly a large number of so-called Christians fail on this count.

The second point is that we must know that God's gift of salvation is entirely undeserved for us. God is able to give us this gift freely only because Jesus has paid entirely for our salvation by dying in our place on the cross (Ro.5:6-8). This part of believing in Jesus has to be personal and coming from deep conviction in our heart.

The third point, which is really a test, is that our spontaneous response to this gift is a level of gratitude that compels us to love God and serve Him with everything in us (2Co.5:15:Ro.12:1). If this response is absent, it shows that our so-called conversion hasn't been genuine or deep enough.

God will receive everyone who comes to Him in Jesus' name, in the sense of welcoming him. But He will start working in that man's life to lead him to a genuine experience of conversion. If anyone finds himself short here, this is the time to set it right.

Pointers along the way #408

The great falling away

The Bible says that the second coming of Jesus would not occur till apostasy takes place first (2Th.2:3). Apostasy refers to a falling away from the faith.

In a sense, falling away from God has been there always. But here it is referring to a great, accelerated movement--great falling away (Amp), a definite rejection of God (JBP). We must also be clear that to fall away from God, one must have been *with God* to begin with; in other words we are referring to believing Christians, and not to unbelievers becoming more and more wicked.

All generations of Christians have had reason to believe that this apostasy was taking place in their time. But along with the other signs of Jesus' return taking place around us, it makes us believe that apostasy is greater and more rapid now than ever before.

There can be two major reasons for this falling away from God. One is a disillusionment with God. Perhaps someone finds some apparent contradiction or error in the Bible and

throws away his faith. For another it is because God didn't answer some urgent prayer he made or didn't do something he expected Him to do. Someone else finds the general state of the world to be too unjust or unfair to account for an almighty and loving God. Whatever be the specific provocation, this kind of falling away can be attributed to a lack of understanding of God and His ways, and has really nothing to do with anything wrong with God! All that the man needs to do is to ask the right person or read the right material to clear his doubts.

The second reason could be that the people have been drawn away to some other 'more important' or 'more interesting' stuff! Due to the pressures of life or the craving for more money or status, work may take on top priority. Taking care of the body

becomes very important with exercises and diet control of all types. Overload of stress will call for relaxation and entertainment. Even when these things start as 'legitimate' activities soon one finds that they have somehow managed to crowd out God from one's life. One realises that there is no time for God, for prayer, reading the Bible or going to worship God. Suddenly when we need God, we can't find Him.

Satan knows his time is short, and he is out to get us back to his kingdom (Re.12:12;1Pe.5:8). He has perfected the technique of injecting doubts and questions into our mind and then distracting us with many activities or thoughts so that we don't have time to think properly, pray or get help. If we go along in that direction soon it will not be just being away from God but also falling into sin. He ties knot after knot around us and soon we get

immobilised!

How important it is to keep on the alert, keep a lively contact with the Lord through prayer, Bible and fellowship with other believers! Let us not imagine that *we* can't be caught in the falling away (1Co.10:12). Let us keep checking ourselves to see where we stand and which direction we are heading.

Pointers along the way #409

Impossible for man!

There was a man who went to Jesus imagining that doing a little more good would qualify him for heaven (Mt.19:16). Aren't there *many* people who think like this deep in their hearts, even though they are a part of a church that believes in salvation only through faith and not by works (Ep.2:8,9)? Do *we* think like this sometimes? We can

know this from our inner thoughts when we think about our death. Do we doubt about whether God will finally accept or reject us? If we hesitate with this question in our mind it probably indicates that we may still have some secret idea of qualifying ourselves in the sight of God by our good works.

For a man to get into God's kingdom by his good works is as impossible as a camel passing through the eye of a sewing needle (Mt.19:24-26)! No man can save himself by being good or doing good (Ro.3:20), because all have already sinned and come into the condemnation of God (Ro.3:23), and the perfect God cannot accept anything but perfection. But the good news (gospel) is that God has done what is impossible for us. He atoned for our sins by suffering our punishment Himself (through the death of His Son), and He now offers this salvation as a

free gift for anyone who goes to Him seeking for it *as a free gift*, as something he can never earn for himself.

The problem with some people seems to be that while they can see themselves as sinners (they are conscious of their sins), they haven't given up the hope of becoming good enough for God! Like a drowning man who beats about with all his strength at whatever comes near, they keep attempting to become better, do something more, etc. But if the drowning man gives up his struggle and allows himself to be taken by the lifeguard he can be easily saved!

In order to stop struggling, we must know two things without doubt: 1) There is absolutely no point in my struggling; it can't get me anywhere, and 2) Jesus is very much willing to save me, and He is right there. It is

only then I can place my trust in Him. That is what He is waiting for. If we keep trying to struggle--make ourselves a little better, make some more sacrifices--Jesus has to stand by sadly, waiting for us to come to the place where *we will transfer the responsibility of our salvation from ourselves to Him.*

There is a passage in Isaiah that illustrates this. "For thus the Lord God, ... has said, 'In repentance and rest you will be saved, in quietness and trust is your strength.' But you were not willing, and you said, 'No, for we will flee on horses,' therefore you shall flee! 'And we will ride on swift horses,' therefore those who pursue you shall be swift. ... You will flee at the threat of five, until you are left as a flag on a mountain top and as a signal on a hill. God is gracious and just. Therefore the Lord longs to be

gracious to you, and therefore He waits on high to have compassion on you. For the Lord is a God of justice; How blessed are all those who long for Him" (Is.30:15-18).

Pointers along the way #410

Fighting for the faith

The apostle Jude was planning to write about salvation when the Holy Spirit prompted him to write, rather, about 'the faith' (meaning what we believe in) (Jude.3) because some people were trying to bring in false teachings to the church. In our days false teaching is so rampant that practically everyone has absorbed a little or more of such teachings in their belief system. We all like to think that *our* doctrine is pure and not like some of the others! But the fact is that we all need to check once in a while whether we need to change some of what we believe.

In fact one mark of spiritual growth is that we understand God's ways better. The people of Israel were so carnal that they could only 'see' what God was doing externally, but Moses was able to understand God's ways

(Ps.103:7). A natural part of this growing in understanding is that we see that some of our earlier beliefs were wrong! Then it becomes a test of our integrity whether we are willing to admit that we were wrong and change over to the new understanding. Isn't it less painful to find some justification for our old thinking and stick on with it than to admit that we were wrong? But that is the point at which *we decide* whether we want God to take us further close to Him or we are comfortable where we are. There we will see if God is important to us or what people may think about us. 'Love of the truth' is one of the factors that God evaluates in us to decide how far we would get with Him. If we lack this love for the truth, the dangerous thing is that we start drifting away from God (which is something we didn't bargain for) (Rom.1:18).

In our spiritual development there come several forks in the road where we have to make a choice about which way we will go. We make a mistake if we think that what our Christian forefathers have done or we ourselves have been comfortable with so far is good enough, without checking with what the Bible teaches us. It is not even enough to see what 'our' church teaches about something, but we have to consider that fact that even churches can go wrong in different things. Of course we don't have to leave a church whenever we find some wrong teaching there as long as it is of minor significance. There is no such thing as a perfect church. But sometimes we may even have to leave one church to join another. Some people take the position that since there is no one or no church perfect, we should just lead our lives quietly before the Lord and not get into doctrinal wrangling. While

there is some wisdom there, it depends on how significant any particular teaching is with regards to our practical life.

We all have a responsibility to find the truth, believe it, and to live according to the truth. We won't be looking for the truth unless we recognise the fact that we need to keep learning, and that we need to change our beliefs if we find that some of what we believed was wrong. This is our individual responsibility.

Imitating Christ

Many people, including non-Christians, talk about imitating Christ, or doing what He did. Many others try to follow a practice of asking themselves, "What would Jesus do?" (WWJD) when they come into different situations. This is all right when we are young in Christ. But as we grow up we need to understand that the emphasis in the Bible is about *becoming like Christ* rather than doing what He did.

We must realise that Jesus was also God when He was on earth and that there are things He did that we cannot do, such as dying for our sins. Also there are things He did which were specific to His mission on earth that we cannot imitate--or which we need to understand the spirit of rather than imitate the action. For example when

the time came for Him to die He refrained from escaping death by keeping quiet when He was accused. This doesn't mean that we should do similarly whenever we are accused because our situations may be different.

Many people try to imitate His miracles, casting out of demons, healing, etc., especially thinking that they ought to do more than He did (Jn.14:12). But the important thing is to *become like Christ* and *that* is what gives value to what we do. The attitudes of our mind, and the thoughts and intentions of the heart mean more for God than our works (1Co.4:5).

The apostle Paul exhorts us to imitate him as he imitated Christ (1Co.11:1). If we take this verse alone we will miss the context. If we look at the previous verse we will understand *how* he followed Christ. Paul said that instead

of seeking some advantage for himself he was always trying to see how he could benefit the others, especially that they should get saved (1Cor.10:33). He also said in another place that he did everything he could for the others so that they could be made complete, mature and perfect in Christ (Co.1:28). Contrast this with people who are trying to do things that Jesus did, combined with seeking to build a name or make money for themselves!

Paul also said *why* he served Christ. His goal was that through everything he did the name of God should be glorified (1Co.10:31). If we seek our own glory while seeking to do what Jesus did, is that going to be acceptable to God?

The transformation has to be inside our hearts and minds first, before we are prepared to serve Him. This is also an ongoing process. To the extent that our

mind has been transformed in this way, our service will also be pure and pleasing to God. But if our heart is not right, whatever 'great' things we may do for the Lord, they will all be like wood and hay that will be burned up and destroyed on the last day (1Co.3:12-15). Perhaps in addition to asking ourselves, "What would Jesus do?" we should also ask, "Do I want to bless the others or impress them?" and "Am I seeking for my own advantage or theirs?" The 'great' things that we do may impress others, but only what we do from a good heart will impress God. And they are the things that will remain.

Pointers along the way #412

Pointing at others

Why do we have such a great tendency to focus on the sins and mistakes in others around us? Jesus described this

by using the exaggerated example of trying to take out a speck from another person's eyes while having a beam in our own eyes (Mt.7:3)! How is it that we are unable to see the beam when we think we can see every speck in the other's eyes? Jesus said that if we really wanted to help others by taking out their specks, the first thing we needed to do was to take out the beam from our eyes (v.5)! In other words, we can't see clearly at all as long as the beam is still there.

Don't you think that we keep looking at the other's faults because we don't want to see our own? Looking at our faults is painful, especially after we have come to Christ and started telling others about it. As long as we keep looking at other's faults and seek to 'help' them to deal with those faults we feel 'great' about ourselves! In this process we can even be blind to the

fact that many times we aren't helping them but finding fault with them or accusing them from a superior attitude.

Perhaps a part of the reason is that we haven't come to accept the truth that we are, each one of us, hopeless sinners. Even after we have come to Christ and our sins have been forgiven, we still carry with us our sinful 'flesh' (not body) which has many lusts and desires that tempt us (Ga.5:24; Jas.1:14). We have to resign ourselves to the fact that as long as we are alive on the earth, we shall be carrying this flesh around, and so we are going to do many things wrong, mostly without knowing it, hopefully, and sometimes even knowingly (Ro.7:18,19). When we get light on (discover) the sins we have done unknowingly, they are still sins that we need to confess and get forgiven (Le.4:2,3). So we are going to have to

deal with sin that we keep finding in ourselves.

Ignoring our sins, imagining they didn't happen, justifying ourselves, blaming others, etc., are not going to solve the problem. We need to admit our sins, confess them to God (and to the ones we have sinned against) and receive free forgiveness (1Jn.1:9). We don't have to be scared that if we admit our sins, God is going to be angry with us and reject us, just as parents rejected some of us when we did wrong. If we have had that experience from our parents we can forgive them. But God, our Heavenly Father, has accepted us knowing fully well about our sinfulness (Ro.5:8). He who foresees our future is not shocked when we fall, and His love doesn't come to an end. In fact, He loves it the more frankly and freely we go to Him with our confession and seek for help not to sin

the next time.

The whole process of our sanctification depends on us discovering our sins and sinful tendencies, and receiving forgiveness and help to overcome them. The more we keep away from looking at our own faults and acknowledging them, we ensure that we stagnate and possibly backslide, and never get on to becoming spiritual.

Pointers along the way #413

Do we live out grace?

We understand grace to be *unmerited favour* from God. But how does grace affect our practical life? This practical application of grace determines the real depth of our relationship with God.

There are only two ways in which people try to relate with God. The common approach is to try to find acceptance with God because of how good we are or the good things we have done. In this way people try to *earn* acceptance by strict religious practices, trying to be good more often than bad, to do more good than bad, etc. They expect that somehow the good will outweigh the bad in the end. But they can never be sure if they have succeeded till after they die! This causes a great fear of death because of the uncertainty.

The other way brought by Jesus is to be accepted by God through His grace--unmerited favour--even when we know we are sinners who have no merit. It was because *no one* could ever be accepted on merit (Ro.3:20) that God made this 'gracious way' of salvation. Jesus came down from heaven and went through death in our place, clearing the way for God to forgive and accept us.

Those who earnestly try to earn their acceptance are always trying harder and yet coming short. Those who have been accepted graciously by God now try to be pleasing to God, not because they want to be accepted but because they are so grateful that they are accepted! This is the difference between working *for* our salvation which we are hoping to receive, and working *out* our salvation (Php.2:12) which we have already received

through grace. A mark of those who know they have been accepted purely by grace is that they are not in a struggle or uncertainty (He.4:3).

Even many who have accepted the doctrine of grace still show this struggle or uncertainty, demonstrating that this doctrine has not really touched them deeply enough.

For example, if we have been accepted by grace the first time we came to God through faith in Jesus and still fear that now if we fall we might lose this salvation (because God must be angry with us), then we have switched back to living according to our merit before God! If we hold a goal of reaching a state some time where we will not need grace for God's acceptance we are unrealistic and fooling ourselves! The greatest Christian is still imperfect in God's holy eyes (Php.3:12). And God who accepted us by grace when

we were His enemies will not stop dealing with us on the same basis after we have become His children (Ro.5:8,9).

Do we think that some sins are far too great for God to forgive? Chances are that we are imagining we are generally OK and need grace only to cover our 'small sins'. When God shows us grace He is giving us something we don't deserve at all. We *all* deserve hell, and only grace can save us, and all of us, great or small sinners, are saved on the same basis of unmerited favour.

Do we find it hard to forgive others? Then we have not understood what God had to do to forgive us (Mt.18:27,28).

Pointers along the way #414

Temptation and victory

All of us human beings are born into this world with a sinful nature (Ps.51:5). Even after we are born again by faith in Jesus, we are tempted by the lusts (desires going outside the will of God) in our flesh (Jas.1:14). Temptations draw us towards enjoyment and pleasure which God has declared as being hurtful for us, and if we give in to them they result in works of the flesh as opposed to the fruit of the Spirit (Ga.5:19-23), and ultimately in separating us from fellowship with God (spiritual death - Jas.1:15).

We know that temptation itself is not sinful (Jesus was also tempted though He did not sin - He.4:15). But we sin when we yield to the suggestion that comes in through the temptation. We yield by accepting the suggestion in our mind, and taking action accordingly.

(Sinful action can even be to continue thinking and using our imagination about something or someone in a way that is displeasing to God.) Victory is to reject the suggestion and to behave in a godly way. *Victory is not a state we attain to, from where we cannot fall, but overcoming temptation by temptation.* Each time we give in the temptation becomes stronger, and each time we overcome it becomes weaker.

We can be tempted directly by the desires in our flesh, and they can be strong if we have given in to them in the past. We can also be tempted by the things we see in the world around us and the suggestions of people, which all stir up the lusts in our flesh. Finally Satan and his demons can tempt us by placing suggestions in our mind (*our thoughts are all not our own*) which appeal to us because of our fleshly lusts, and diverting our mind away

from God's word.

Temptations stir up the lusts in our flesh and we detect these desires in the form of feelings, thoughts or bodily sensations. All these forms of input prompt us to take some action. These actions can be for our protection or progress, or in the case of temptations to satisfy our desires. What our physical senses tell us may be to seek for pleasure. We need to keep these desires in control so as to stay within godly limits (1Co.9:27). It is not wise to depend on our feelings for making decisions, but perhaps that may be our usual tendency. We need to train ourselves to recognise when our feelings are leading us in wrong directions and to correct ourselves by comparing with what God's word tells us to do. Our thoughts can themselves mislead us if we don't have enough information, we are in a hurry, or if the

source of these thoughts is satanic or merely human (Mt.16:23). That is why we need to make all thoughts to fall in line with what God tells us through His word and the Holy Spirit (2Cor.10:5).

After we process all the inputs in our thoughts, it is by our will that we decide to act. Victory or sin is decided there. If we have been habitually giving in to temptations, our will would have become very weak, and one reason for delay in victory may be that it takes time to strengthen it.

Pointers along the way #415

Serving by choice

Jesus said emphatically that it would not be possible to serve two masters. We would end up preferring one over the other (Mt.6:24). He illustrated it by using the example of serving God or mammon. If we begin serving mammon it would only be a matter of time before we stop really serving God.

But mammon is just one alternative god we can choose. We may go after wanting to make a name for ourselves or seeking for pleasure in various forms, and then also what would happen is that we lose sight of God and stop thinking of obeying Him. We may still keep God as a part of our life, but just nominally, while our real god becomes the one we serve--money, fame, pleasure, etc. (Ro.6:16).

All these gods can be put under one

category--seeking our own interests rather than God's. If we have such gods it shows that we have not learnt to recognise God as our Lord to whom we owe undivided loyalty and obedience. God deserves that level of respect and exaltation because He has loved us unworthy sinners, and exalted us to become His children. Our reasonable response is to offer ourselves as living sacrifices to God (Ro.12:1), and to live the rest of our life to do His will and to exalt His name (2Co.5:14,15).

The apostle Paul recognised his real position in relation to God and expressed it this way, "God forbid that I should boast about anything or anybody except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, which means that the world is a dead thing to me and I am a dead man to the world. JBP" (Ga.6:14). All that mattered to Paul

now was God, what He thought about him, what He wanted him to do, how His name could be honoured, how His kingdom could be established, etc., and not what people thought about him, what he had to go through in order to accomplish what God wanted him to do, how uncomfortable his life was, etc.

We mustn't understand this in an unrealistic or fanatical way. Certainly as long as Paul was in this world he had earthly needs and it was not that he only 'served God'! He worked to earn his living, and he prayed for God's provisions for his life. But the focus of his heart was not on himself but on God. Serving God was what was uppermost in his heart, even while he did what were necessary for his living. God is not looking for ascetics!

Whatever we do, even eating and drinking, we are to do *for the glory of*

the Lord (1Co.10:31). Whatever we do, we are to do heartily--from the heart, with all our heart into it--because we are ultimately serving the Lord (Col.3:23,24). This obviously eliminates all activities that can dishonour or grieve God. If we carry on with such activities it shows that we ourselves are our god, and that we have dethroned Jesus from the throne of our life, at least for that time. But it is about being spiritually minded about the ordinary things of life.

We need to watch over our heart (Pr.4:23) to ensure that we keep seeking to be always pleasing to the Lord (2Co.5:9), even if we stumble now and then.

Pointers along the way #416

"God spoke to me"

There are Christians who believe that

God doesn't speak directly to people these days except through Bible verses becoming alive, meaningful and relevant to them. Certainly God speaks like this, and all born again Christians experience it. But the question is whether God has stopped speaking to people directly as He did in biblical days. Some Christians think so because they think that once the Bible was written, God's revelation to man has been completed.

But if we look carefully we can see that two different ideas have been mixed up here. One is about God speaking to us personally and the other is about God giving man new revelations that are not there in the Bible. It is unimaginable that God has taken abode in our heart (Jn.14:23) but doesn't speak to us except by quoting from the Bible! He does bring the words of Scripture to our mind now

and then (v.26). He doesn't give us any revelation that contradicts what the Bible tells us, but He does speak to us things that are necessary for us--words of wisdom, knowledge, comfort, encouragement, correction, rebuke, counsel, guidance, etc. When God reveals His will to us concerning something we don't call that 'revelation' in the sense of revealing of new truths. God speaks to us as Father to child (Heb.8:11). His sheep hear His voice (Jn.10:27). God who told Philip to go to the Ethiopian eunuch or Paul to proceed to Macedonia can still guide us through various means. He speaks to us as we commune with Him (Joel.2:28,29).

It is only rarely that God speaks to us in a conversation mode. But He does speak to us in our thoughts, giving us ideas. We can learn to recognise His 'voice' as He talks to us in this way.

But that is also where we can make mistakes.

It is clear that God never contradicts Himself. If He has revealed something in the Bible, He won't tell us something now that will go against that. If something seems to be contradictory we must also see if we have understood things clearly! The Bible becomes the standard against which we check everything else. Of course in order to understand what the Bible, we need to know what the whole Bible says, and not make the mistake of taking just a part of the Bible, or taking words out of context with respect to the passage itself or its position with regards to the whole of revealed truth in the Bible.

When we come to this point it becomes clear that many who claim that God spoke to them something or the other are deceived by taking their own

thoughts or suggestions from evil spirits as coming from God. We must also not forget that Satan can imitate God's voice (2Co.11:14). Deceiving spirits are trying to lead us away from God in some way or other. Hearing God is a very subjective experience, and it is possible for anyone to make a mistake about it. Our safety is to check every word we hear and every experience we have with the standards taught by the Bible and also to consult with others to avoid being deceived.

Pointers along the way #417

Free salvation!

I asked a group of Christian workers, "Why should anyone come to Christ?" The answer was, "To receive blessings!" One of the workers in that group sang a song that thanked God for His love, keeping and protection, and expounded on how we ought to praise God for these. I couldn't help but feeling greatly concerned that the 'good news' they knew and worked all the year long to share could very well be just this. Looking around it seems that many 'Christians' seem to have missed the real, central point of the gospel, but have made for themselves a pseudo-gospel whose focus is on promises for a more comfortable life here on earth.

I was talking to a girl who wanted to get married only to a 'believer'. One boy told her that he was a believer and she was quite content with that! I asked

her, "What kind of believer? Does he just believe that Jesus was a historic figure whom Christians follow as their founder? Or has he known Him as His Saviour and been born again?"

If we ask ourselves this question, "What is it about the 'gospel' that really makes us exclaim that it is such an undeservingly great news?" what would be the answer from our inner being? I suspect that like those stickers on automobiles that state, "Jesus saves" (meaning, from accidents!), many people's answers would pertain to earthly blessings of different types. That is the gospel many have been presented with, "Come to Jesus, He will heal you, solve all your problems, take care of all your needs, and make you prosper in every way." In the words of the apostle Paul, this is a different 'Jesus' than the one whom he preached. The real Jesus suffered and

died so that the punishment for our sins could be paid for. It was to make that happen that Jesus came (Mt.1:21). If we have missed that point altogether we have not repented or put our trust in Jesus as our Saviour and Lord, and we are still not headed for heaven!

After I came to Jesus at first, whenever I learnt some more about what He has done for me I would examine myself to see if it had become real to me (I keep doing that even now). Have we taken our salvation for granted based on what we ourselves consider to be faith or belief, or have we subjected ourselves to tests that can tell us the truth about ourselves (2Co.13:5)? Is this something that we can merely assume for ourselves or something that we need to be sure about? (God can give us that assurance now; we don't have to wait for the final day to find out. 1Jn.5:9).

Preachers have diluted the truth of the gospel in order to get more followers than those God has accepted. Preaching on sin, judgment, hell, repentance, etc., has practically disappeared, and the narrow gate has been made so wide that anyone can just walk in without the slightest inconvenience. They only have to repeat a few words and, presto, they have become children of God. There is no change in their lives at all. Beware lest we ourselves are deceived, or we are deceiving others.

Pointers along the way #418

"Loved the Lord, but..."

It is written about Solomon that he loved the Lord but still worshipped in the high places (1Ki.3:3). Asa's heart was wholly devoted to the Lord but he didn't take away the high places (1Ki.22:43). These 'high places' were where the people of the land had their pagan worship and related activities. Many times Israel joined them in their idolatry, but some people who did not want to be pagan made idols (e.g., golden calves) to represent *the true God of Israel(!)* without realising how God could not be represented in any form and how any form of idolatry was abominable to Him.

God's desire for all of us is that we should love the Lord with *all* our heart, soul, mind and might (Mk.12:30) and live out from that love. It takes honesty to look at ourselves and see how it is

really in our daily life. Our issues may not be about high places as in the Old Testament. But are there things in our life that are displeasing to God?

The most serious thing is if there are such things in our life, we know it, but we aren't doing anything to get rid of them. Then it can't even be said that we love God with all our heart. But there may be things in our life which are displeasing to God but we are ignorant about them. Another thing could be that we know others who are doing things that are grievous to God, we have power to change them, and we choose to tolerate them. Parents in a home come under this category.

We need to be sincere in asking God like the psalmist, "Search me, O God, and know my heart; Try me and know my anxious thoughts; And see if there be any hurtful way in me, And lead me in the everlasting way" (Ps.139:23,24).

It is not essentially about things that would hurt *us*, but mainly about those that would hurt Him. It would only show our ignorance about our human nature if we straightaway conclude that everything is just fine with us. But a spiritual man (and a man who wants to become spiritual) will want his external behaviour and (more so) what goes on inside his heart to be always pleasing to the Lord (Ps.19:14).

The process of sanctification depends very much on our first becoming aware of how unlike we are like God, and then letting Him transform us into His image. This means looking at Him through His word, and letting it judge us.

Some people stay away from this exercise fearing condemnation when they become aware of failures or shortcomings. Trying to remain 'blissfully ignorant' is a sure way to

impede spiritual growth! But once we know that God has accepted us knowing everything about us, not only about our past but also all our life (Ps.139:16), and not because we were acceptable but because of His grace, we can stop being uncertain about God's acceptance. Our focus can then change to pleasing Him more and more out of our love and gratitude towards Him for what He has done for us and what He means to us.

Pointers along the way #419

Are we like grasshoppers?

After Israel left Egypt and came near the Promised Land, Moses sent out twelve spies to visit the land and to bring back a report. They came back and unanimously reported that the land was indeed "flowing with milk and honey" as the Lord had promised. But ten of them said that they themselves appeared to be like grasshoppers in front of the giants who were in the land and that it would be impossible to conquer the land. However Joshua and Caleb, two among the twelve, said that the Lord was able to give them the land (Nu.14:7-9). They added that the Lord had taken away the strength of the enemy and would actually turn them into 'bread' for Israel. Sad to say, the majority opinion won.

This was the land which the Lord had promised to them and to which He had

led them from Egypt through a series of supernatural interventions and provisions. In spite of the promise of God and all their experiences the majority of people chose to trust in their own perception. As a result, all of them perished in the desert without being able to enter the land, except for Joshua and Caleb.

What is our promised land, as Christians? Isn't it eternal life, which is to *know* God through Jesus Christ (Jn.17:3), and to partake of His nature (2Pe.1:4)? ('Eternal life' is not merely to live forever, because even people in hell will do that!) Remember, Israel had to enter the Promised Land area by area by conquering the Canaanites who lived there, giving us a picture of our overcoming our old sinful nature and becoming like Jesus. Many people think of the promised land as heaven. Yes, that is also a part of God's

promise but we must see that becoming like Jesus is the ultimate promise for us who have been slaves to sin.

When we want to enter our promised land we also come across many giants, especially the lusts and desires in our flesh. When we try to overcome them we find that we are only like grasshoppers in front of them!

Those who have not yet discovered that they are like grasshoppers in front of their lusts, hopelessly weak in comparison to the strength of their temptations, have obviously not taken up the battle seriously! Some may not have known any battle at all in this area but have been tamely giving in to the enemy, probably thinking that the blood of Jesus would anyway cover their sins! But people like Paul have tried their best against temptation and discovered that their strength is not sufficient to overcome the enemy

(Ro.7:24). In fact we are really like grasshoppers in front of our lusts.

But many people give up in despair once they come to this recognition. That is because they are only looking at themselves and not *also* at God who has given us the promise (Ro.6:14;8:29). We need to see both--ourselves as grasshoppers and Jesus as our Saviour. That is how Paul overcame his fear, unbelief and hopelessness as he saw himself (Ro.7:25). We need to have no confidence in ourselves and also full confidence in God.

Why are we serving God?

One would think that in the midst of a large percentage of Christians who are merely living for themselves we should be thankful for the comparatively few who are seeking to serve God. But Paul was not naive enough to imagine that everyone who worked along with him was true in their heart (Php.2:20,21). The sad fact is that it is possible for us to look at the external things we are accomplishing 'for God' and assume that we are servants of God. In that way some of us are even 'full time workers'! But God does not merely look at the external things because He knows they can be deceptive. He looks inside our hearts to see *why* we do what we do, and what He sees there is more important to Him than the sum total of all our accomplishments

(1Co.3:12,13).

How can we really serve God? The Bible tells us to do whatever we do *to the glory of God* (1Co.10:31). We are to do everything *in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ* (Co.3:17), heartily *as for God and not for men* (v.23). That is the (only) way to serve God (v.24).

Even if we think we are serving God from our heart as noted above, we can spoil the whole thing in the sight of God if we have an eye looking out for personal glory, fame or gain before people. Temptations will always be there. But if our service is characterised by this kind of self-seeking we need to cleanse ourselves with fear and trembling.

In some Christian circles this self-seeking is so open and blatant that there is no more shame associated with

it. Perhaps we are clever enough to keep our self-seeking hidden. But this is not something that can be kept covered up for long (Ps.44:21). When God's time comes, after waiting patiently for a long time hoping that we would repent, He Himself will make sure that we get exposed (Mt.10:26).

There is nothing hidden from the Lord's eyes which are always searching our thoughts and intentions of our heart (He.4:12,13). Do we imagine that we can fool people here with crafty words and strategies for which we would not have to give an account to God one day (2Co.5:10)? Paul knew this so clearly in his own mind that he did his best to alert the others also (v.11).

Paul gave us the example of living with a clear conscience before God and also seeking to make sure that men who dealt with him knew that about him (2Co.4:2). We know it is easier said

than done not only because our own heart is very deceptive on one side but also because it is easy for others to consider everyone else to be just like them. But if our conscience does not condemn us we will have confidence before God (1Jn.3:21), and that will have to suffice sometimes.

The greatest reward we can receive is to hear the Lord Himself saying, "Well done, good and faithful servant." Let us desist from seeking great things for ourselves (Jer.45:5).

Pointers along the way #421

Children of God!

It is amazing that we who were the children of the devil (1Jn.3:10), in the kingdom of darkness (Co.1:13), have been redeemed by the precious blood of the Lamb of God (1Pe.1:18,19), made children of God (Jn.1:12), have been seated in the heavenly places with Christ Jesus (Ep.2:6), and made joint heirs with Him (Ro.8:17)! The apostle John was overwhelmed by the wonder of it all, all the more since he couldn't imagine what we would be when we would be glorified with Jesus (1Jn.3:1,2).

When this truth hits us, many things can happen. We will no longer imagine that we are forever tied to this world of sin, and its attractions (1Jn.2:15,16) will begin to have less and less pull on us. We will begin to focus more on the 'things above' and our mind will

become more attuned to heavenly values and pleasures (Co.3:1,2). Even though we live on this earth now, we will realise that we are just passing through as pilgrims, and this world is not our home (He.11:13).

We realise we have been given these incredible privileges purely as a gift of grace from God and not because we deserve any of them. We dare not look down on anyone who has not yet come into this grace. We should fear lest we should take this grace for granted, live carelessly and bring grief to the heart of God or dishonour to His name. On the other hand we should present ourselves to God as living sacrifices (Ro.12:1), deny ourselves the lusts in our flesh (1Pe.2:11), and follow Jesus doing His will. That alone will demonstrate that we have indeed received this grace, we have understood it, and we are grateful for

it.

On the contrary we should also recognise that even though we have been made children of God and Jesus Himself is our Elder Brother (He.2:11), there is a great difference between what we are and who Jesus is! Jesus is the Son of God as God Himself. We have been made children of God not in substance but through adoption into God's family (Ro.8:15;Ga.4:5;Ep.1:5). In other words, we are not gods but only created beings. It becomes necessary these days to bring out this truth in view of the teaching by many 'famous' preachers that we have become gods with a small 'g' but gods nevertheless. This is heresy and nonsense. For those who follow this teaching it becomes natural to assume great powers and authority for themselves such as speaking out and making things happen.

The authority and power belong to Jesus (Mt.28:18), and we have been given the right to use that authority, not as if it were our own, but *in the name of Jesus*.

Focus is most important. If we try to major on *doing* and neglect *being* as a result, we distort the whole aspect of being children of God. God wants to transform us into the nature and character of Jesus (Ro.8:29), and this is what we will take with us into eternity. Without manifesting the fruit of the Spirit, won't the use of the gifts be seen as incongruent? Let us glorify *God* for His grace towards us, and not take glory for ourselves.

Pointers along the way #422

To be without convictions

The trend of the times is to try and make everyone 'open-minded', 'non-judgemental', etc., and to avoid being labelled 'narrow-minded', 'fundamentalist', etc. What this amounts to is to make us perpetually sit on the fence about all issues, afraid to hold any convictions and certainly to refrain entirely from *expressing* any of our own opinions unless it falls under the category of 'open-minded'. What a pathetic way to live!

What is being marketed under this open mind umbrella is all kind of muck. Things which everyone instinctively knew to be wrong are now promoted through all forms of media, and nobody dares to speak up against them. Right to speech is freely misused by the wrong side of the moral fence, and those on the right side have had this

right taken away from them. Even Christian leaders have fallen into this trap, and they have also become very conscious of having to be 'politically correct'. They recognise how allegations of narrow-mindedness can affect their popularity. Will we rather be popular than true? Will we bow down to Satan just a little bit in order to win parts of the kingdom he offers? Jesus saw through the temptation straightaway.

One of the secrets behind any real greatness is a set of convictions about what are true, good, valuable, etc. These great men do not flow along with the current but swim against opposition in order to reach worthy goals they see before them.

God has given us His word for us to learn from, regarding Himself, the things He values, the people He admires, the way He works and the

way He wants us to live. These have been tested by multitudes of people through the times and found to be true and reliable. They give us success (in the right sense) in this world and especially in the life to come (Ps.1:3). How foolish of us if we would put them aside in order to woo the approval of people and society!

Under this great onslaught from the prince of this world, we Christians are tempted to focus on 'surviving' and 'succeeding' in this world at the cost of forfeiting greatness in the world to come (He.11:26). Don't we need to think about how Jesus said it was not *possible* to believe as long as we were focused on greatness as the world defines it (Jn.5:44)? Do we not see that there is a snare which we get trapped by when we begin to pay more attention to people's opinion than God's (Ga.1:10;Pr.29:25)?

Reverence for the Lord gives insight (Pr.9:10), and those who have insight will one day shine like stars (Da.12:3). But right now they are ridiculed and ostracised by the majority even though they are really the ones who can impart true understanding to everyone (Da.11:33). The question is what we will live for, the temporary 'acceptance', 'success' and survival in this world, or recognition and rewards from God in the time to come. Wouldn't it be much better to be welcomed with "Well done, good and faithful servant" over there than to forgo it by compromise here?

Pointers along the way #423

Reading into the Bible

The Bible is the most precious book we have on earth, inspired by God to meet our needs for comfort, encouragement, teaching, correction, rebuke, etc. It used to be read only by priests who thought that ordinary people could not interpret it correctly. But with the Bible now available in many languages and translations, it is there for anyone who wants to read it. Even though we don't need to be scholars to be able to read and understand it, we also need to follow certain basic principles when we try to interpret it.

One such principle is that generally the meaning of a passage is what is obvious! In other words, in most cases a passage means just what it says and what any ordinary reader will understand. The exceptions are when it

is *obvious* that there must be another interpretation to it! For example, when Jesus asks us to pluck out our eyes and to cut off our hands if they cause us to sin, everyone knows that there must be some other interpretation for this other than the plain meaning.

Think of Mt.7:1,2 which says, "Do not judge so that you will not be judged. For in the way you judge, you will be judged; and by your standard of measure, it will be measured to you" (NASB), "Judge not, that ye be not judged. For with what judgement ye judge, ye shall be judged: and with what measure ye mete, it shall be measured to you again" (KJV). The obvious meaning is that our judgement will be just as merciful or harsh as we judge others. But imagine an interpretation such as, "If we judge someone for some sin, we shall end up getting judged for the same sin later on.

When we judge someone we are actually sowing a seed which will grow up and cause us to fall into the same sin!"

This kind of interpretation where meanings are added to the text is becoming very common these days, and many people accept it without question when it comes from a famous person. But what prompts a person to interpret a passage in an *extraordinary* manner? Perhaps it is because the ordinary interpretation is not exciting or fancy enough to catch the attention of the listeners? Wanting to 'tickle the ears' with new teachings is a temptation that is especially characteristic of the end times (2Ti.4:3). Perhaps it is because a new teaching or 'revelation' can easily catch the attention and establish the teachers as being 'great'. For this the teachers have to read into the text meanings that

are not there.

A different type of example is, "Death and life are in the power of the tongue, And those who love it will eat its fruit" (Pr.18:21). It is obvious that the literal meaning cannot be right because the tongue or the word has no power to make someone live or die. We need to remember that this is a *proverb* written in a poetic fashion, and so we must be careful not to interpret it literally. But those who believe in 'word faith' take it literally in order to teach their heresy! We should not read meanings into verses to fit our teaching.

The big disconnect

After Lazarus was raised from the dead Mary, his sister, took some very expensive perfume and anointed Jesus' feet. Judas Iscariot immediately commented that the money should not have been wasted like this but given to the poor (Jn.12:4,5). What would you think of this suggestion if you heard it? Commendable, how true, how considerate? But the fact of the matter was that Judas was not at all being considerate to the poor but he had designs on that money (v.6)! What a great disconnect between his outward behaviour and inner thoughts! In modern language we would say Judas had a secret agenda behind what appeared to be a nice philanthropic attitude.

Of course the world, the so-called Christian world too, is full of this. We

have to take care not to be fooled by what people profess on the outside, because they may be acting out of self interests. Paul himself was well aware of this (Php.2:20,21). It is not about being suspicious about everyone but keeping our eyes open. Jesus knew what was in man and would not entrust Himself to anybody easily (Jn.2:24,25). It is only by getting to know the real person behind the appearances that we can attempt to identify their authenticity.

But the more important thing is to make sure that we cleanse ourselves of any such disconnects between our inner life and what we profess outside. Let us start from a point where we assume that there may be such situations in our life which we may or may not be aware of. If we just assume that our conscience is clear and therefore everything is fine with us, we are not

likely to discover the sins that are hidden inside us (Ps.19:12). We must realise that we have tremendous capacities to deceive ourselves (Je.17:9), and we can easily justify to ourselves and to others how we are doing something for God's glory when we are trying to hide the selfish motives behind our actions. A man who is out to make more money can say he is doing it to be able to give more for God's work, and the one who wants to divorce his wife in order to marry someone else can say God told him to do so! We need to make an honest attempt to sit before God and be open to His Holy Spirit who alone can lead us into all the truth about ourselves (Jn.16:13). The process of cleansing has to start from there, by asking God to reveal to us our hidden sins (hidden to ourselves) especially in the area of ulterior motives (Ps.139:23,24).

Even though we are not going to be absolutely perfect this side of eternity, that is the goal towards which we run. The more we love God, the more we want to be like Him and we will cleanse ourselves (1Jn.3:3). We tend to be more careful with sins others can recognise easily as sin, but not so careful with 'hidden' motives and imaginations. But these are what are more important to God (1Co.4:5). The more we try to hide, the more God will take it on Himself to reveal them (Lk.8:17). But if we confess our sins He will forgive and take us further with Him.

Respect for people?

Not all of us are in the habit of checking out for ourselves what we hear or read. Many of us trust the person who speaks or writes because of his fame and receive his words as truth. But blessed is the man who checks for himself if what he has heard is really true and trustworthy (Ac.17:11). Why is it that many don't have this practice? It's less troublesome to just believe. Sometimes the thought also occurs to them, "Who am I to question such famous people with so much education, experience and gifts?"

Among many things to be admired in the apostle Paul is his boldness as a newbie in questioning the well-recognised leader of the twelve apostles, Peter, when he felt that Peter was not acting true to the doctrine

(Ga.2:11,12). What would we have done? Would we have thought, "Question Peter? He is the chief of the apostles and who am I? Wouldn't it be rebellion on my part to disagree with such giants?" If we thought so, we would have joined a group of Jews who were behaving in hypocrisy (v.13)! Fortunately for Christianity, Paul was able to rise above such feelings and proclaim the truth in words and deed.

'Truth' should have such a high regard in our mind that we would not put anyone above that. When Jesus said that we should 'hate' father, mother and every such human relationship when it came to loving and following Him, isn't this principle also illustrated there (Lk.14:26)? But what we usually find is that a misplaced sense of respect for great people and a fear to rebel against authority tempt us to neglect the truth in

order to avoid questioning them or even disagreeing with them. Leaders themselves try to scare us by warning us not to 'touch the Lord's anointed' (a misquoted scripture which actually refers to God's chosen people Israel as the anointed ones and not just their leaders - Ps.105:11-15).

If Martin Luther had feared the authority of the Pope and submitted to whatever he said--without thinking for himself, checking with the Scriptures and deciding to disagree with the system and stand for the truth--where would Christianity be today? But reformation is an ongoing process (even for so-called Protestants), where we have to keep coming out from error to the truth, facing opposition from existing systems and 'authorities', but coming closer to the Lord and His truth in understanding and practice.

Do we love the truth that much?

Sometimes it looks easier to convince ourselves that we should just lead simple lives, not get into complications and let others alone. Even though there is some truth there, that is not the whole truth. Agreed we are not all called to be Luthers, but we still are the salt and light to the people in our circle. If we compromise it is not only that we fail in our witness. We may also end up hindering our own spiritual development by rejecting the truth in some part because it would cost us something to stand for it.

Surely we must respect the great ones, but not at the cost of truth.

Pointers along the way #426

When we are confronted

We acknowledge easily that we are not perfect. But we may not be conscious of the implication that we don't know everything, and that some of the things we think we know may be wrong! Those of us who are seeking to press on to perfection (He.6:1;Php.3:12) may not have thought that this process involves not only learning new things but also 'unlearning' some old things. One of the ways through which we are presented with an opportunity to become 'more perfect' is when we are confronted by other people about our faults. The one who confronts us may point out some problem with our character, behaviour, or doctrines. Like our forefather Adam after his fall, our natural tendency is to defend ourselves from having to admit that we were at fault or in error, and for this we use a

lot of mechanisms. But these come in our way of becoming better people or more like Jesus.

One question that comes up in our mind at such a time is, "Who are you to tell me this?" The implication is that we are more knowledgeable, senior, experienced, qualified, or accomplished, and that the one who has confronted us has no right to question us! One who questions another will do well to ask such questions to himself before he ventures to question another. But it is absolutely irrelevant for the one who is confronted to ask such questions, even if it is only in our mind. The only thing we need to be concern with is, "Is this true what this person is telling me?" Truth is no one's monopoly and if we want to be perfect we will humbly receive all inputs that can lead us in that direction. Peter had no qualms

about receiving correction, and that too publicly, from the 'upstart' Paul (Ga.2:11).

Another thought that occurs to us when we are confronted is, "What will happen to me if I agree to that?" We may think of losing our face, the opinion others will have of us afterwards, the possible loss of position if our superiors hear of it, etc. In other words, the earthly consequences of accepting the truth outweigh the blessing of moving further into the truth. This will prevent us from getting saved from error into godliness because we don't have a love for the truth in our heart (2Th.2:10). In contrast let us look at the apostles who had come to see the truth about Jesus and decided that they would rather obey God than men (Ac.4:19,20).

When we are confronted, whether by a

friend or an enemy, we are faced with a choice. Will we face up to the truth (and be saved), or will we shoot the messenger? King Asa began his reign well following the example of his forefather David, doing things that were pleasing to the Lord. But when he once made a compromise by resorting to human rather than godly wisdom, the Lord sent the prophet Hanani to warn him. But Asa was enraged, and put Hanani in prison (2Ch.16:7-10).

We all make many mistakes (Jas.3:2). Certainly to admit mistakes is humiliating. But that is the way the Lord can give us more heavenly glory (1Pe.5:6).

Joyful surrender

There is a big difference between being commanded to do something and wanting to do it ourselves, isn't there? When it comes to surrendering our lives to God why is there some hesitancy on our part? God tells us to make ourselves 'living sacrifices' before Him--implying a surrender of our wills to Him while we are still alive (Ro.12:1). We are told that if we would commit ourselves to Him He would direct our paths (Pr.16:3). But in spite of all this and more, why do we hesitate to take a definite step of handing over the control of our lives to Him?

It is a matter of trust. We trust in the ability of a bus driver or an airline pilot to take us safely to our destination, but we hesitate to trust our entire life into the hands of our God.

One reason may be that the devil has deceived us into thinking that if we gave our lives over to God He might take away all the fun and make us miserable. Perhaps we have trusted Him in the past and been disappointed by not getting an answer to our prayers or by experiencing some calamity instead of the protection we expected. Maybe we can't make sense of some of the things that have happened around us.

Our trust in God has to be separated from what we expect Him to do for us. Job trusted even if he was going to be killed. Abraham trusted in God even when he was asked to sacrifice Isaac. Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego were prepared to die in the furnace rather than give up their trust in God. They believed in God as a Person--in His nature and character--and considered Him trustworthy, and were

willing to surrender their lives and everything they had into His hands. God is extremely delighted when He comes across a human being who would trust Him like that (Ge.22:12).

When we trust God we are willing to let Him choose what He considers best for us. By this we acknowledge His everlasting love towards us (Je.31:3), the wisdom He employs in planning the best for us (Ps.104:24), and His sovereign power in being able to do whatever He wants (Ps.115:3). We recognise that we can't ever make a better plan than He does, and that even though we cannot understand everything that He orders for us we can still trust Him to carry out the best for us (Je.29:11). Bad things can happen to us, once God determines that they are not beyond our ability (along with His grace) to handle them (1Co.10:13), and then He will turn them around to do

something good for us (Ro.8:28:Ge.50:20). Even if we don't see things level out in this life, we can be sure that God will cause them to work out eternal riches for us (2Co.4:17).

When we know God like this, our surrender to Him will be joyful, and not with hesitancy or fear. We will be glad to do that, and it won't be under the compulsion of a commandment. Once we actually hand over our lives to Him we will find that He not only causes all things to work for our good, but He also will become a close and dear Friend to us, just as He did to many others in history.

Christians without foundation

When we look around at many believing Christians, especially young people, we sadly see a lot of people without much understanding of God. Even when their 'conversion' has been genuine, their foundation is virtually misplaced, on Christian activities rather than knowledge of God. What they know is mostly second hand from the preachers, and they are happy to leave that aspect of their life like that. One result is that they are unable to see through the different teachings that come from a multitude of preachers, and get easily impressed by those who speak authoritatively, as experts, or with some 'special' truths. Instead of turning away from many leading people on the scene when they see their manipulation, unashamed attempts

to impress, and disregard for truth to the extent that they can look straight at the eyes (or camera) and make statements they obviously know to be false, it is amazing when these good people show their admiration and appreciation for them!

I guess the main reason is that these Christians, while their love for the Lord may be real and sincere, do not have enough understanding of God and His ways, because their personal knowledge of the Bible is minimal. To have been a Christian for at least one year and never even come anywhere near reading the Bible seriously is a grave lack. If we have not read what God has given to us to teach us, is it not natural that we don't know Him too well? We know from practical experience that reading the Bible many times over is necessary for us to develop a reasonably good

understanding of God's ways, and it is unrealistic to think that just because we have heard the comparatively few verses the pastor has quoted in the church we have sufficient knowledge, even enough to lead cell groups, youth groups, etc.

The people in the early church who did not have the privilege of having Bibles with them individually or even at home, made efforts to listen earnestly to the apostles' teaching and spend time in prayer (Ac.2:42). Now when we have the Bible in so many forms and versions we are making do with daily Bible verses on the phone! Church Bible studies hold no interest for many people unless they are dealing with future predictions or sensational 'truths'.

On the other side, Satan and his demons are spreading all sorts of heresies and false ways through

mystical religions and Christian preachers who are not listening to God. False teachings have so much infiltrated Christianity that many people are shocked if someone calls them false!

God has provided His word for us so that we can learn, be corrected, trained and be equipped for mature living (2Ti.3:3:16,17). We have no one else to blame if we neglect that great source of blessing and look around for gimmicks and shortcuts that slick operators provide. We certainly can't blame God that He didn't help us in times of need, because what He has provided we didn't care to look at. Let's go to the Bible.

Experience and doctrine

It is a very common mistake, when we go through some experience, to make a teaching of it for everyone. In this way many things are taught by many Christians. Much of it is done with good intentions, but nevertheless wrong teachings will damage lives because our lives are guided by the doctrines we believe.

A world famous Bible teacher wrote about how he cast out a 'spirit of suicide' from a woman, and how her dog jumped off from a truck after that and got killed. He taught from this incident that when evil spirits were cast out they might try to enter a loved one. But the Bible teaches us that either God has to give permission the demons to attack us (see Job) or even to enter into pigs for that matter (Lk.8:32), or we have to give them access

(Ep.4:26,27). To teach that demons can just enter into us from our loved ones is entirely misleading.

Some say that they have witnessed in some families a curse seeming to come down the generations (e.g., every male dies before the age of 40!), and then they start believing the false doctrine of generational curses. But when God has clearly told us that He would not punish children for their father's sins (Ez.18), don't we need to look for some other explanations for the experience?

Jesus has warned us that there would be false signs and wonders in the last days (Mt.24:24). A false sign can be an experience that misleads. We tend to find some explanation for the experience, many times without checking with the Bible. Isn't Satan interested in misleading and confusing people, and can't that be the reason

why he gives us experiences that can mislead us?

Even when we read the Bible we must be careful when we make doctrines out of experiences we see there. We need to check with the Bible's teaching. For example when we see that the early church broke bread every day and then on the first day of the week, which will we follow as a pattern? Actually Paul doesn't give us any rule for the frequency or the day on which we need to break bread, but tells us that *whenever* we do it we need to do it in remembrance of the Lord (1Co.11:25,26). In some countries Christians do it on Fridays!

When we felt convinced in our heart that God was going to do something for us and started confessing it with our mouth and then it finally happened what teaching do we get from here? That whatever we confess we will

receive? No. The fact is that we heard God speaking to us in our heart (Ro.10:17)--even though we didn't realise it--believed Him (had faith), and confessed it; and then it happened. But if we *don't* hear anything from God but confess what *we* want to happen, will it happen? Our words won't make it happen. There are plenty of such experiences! David said that one day he was going to be killed by Saul, but it didn't happen.

So we have to be careful how we make our doctrines. A good doctrine has to be solidly based on the teaching of the Bible. Every experience has to be checked with what the Bible teaches--the whole Bible.

Pointers along the way #430

Waiting to forgive!

God loves us with a love that lasts

forever (Je.31:3). His mercies *endure* forever (Ps.106:1). But sometimes we don't receive that mercy because we don't acknowledge our sins (Je.3:13). He *longs* to be gracious to us (Is.30:18), but sometimes He can't extend His grace to us because we refuse to surrender to Him but continue to run in our own ways (vv.15,16). Perhaps we are so ashamed of our sins that we feel He may not forgive us, or we think that our sins are so big that He cannot forgive them. But all the time He is waiting, like the father for the prodigal son, to forgive us, accept us back, and then to shower His goodness upon us!

There is no sin so great that the blood of Jesus cannot wash it away. The blood of the eternal Son of God who became the sinless Son of Man can wash us from *all* our sins, and it is more than sufficient in value to pay the

ransom for the whole world (1Jn.1:7;2:2). The so-called unforgivable sin or sin against the Holy Spirit is unforgivable because someone chooses to ignore the promptings and conviction of the Spirit and to turn against Him. But if *anyone* goes to Jesus in repentance he can have the assurance that Jesus would *never* turn him away (Jn.6:37).

Manasseh, king of Judah, was one who made the people do more evil than what the heathen nations around them did (2Ch.33:9). Yet he repented when the Lord touched his life, and when he humbled himself before the Lord, the Lord forgave him (vv.12,13). Peter who walked with Jesus for 3 1/2 years denied Him three times at the end, but when he humbled himself he was not only forgiven but used by God to lead the early church! What could God have done with Judas Iscariot if only he had

repented, instead of assuming that there could be no forgiveness for him!

Why did God wait 120 long years for Noah to build the ark and then destroy the world? To give a very long chance for the people to listen to Noah's warnings and repent! Why did it have to take 40 years for the people of Israel to reach the Promised Land after they left Egypt? Of course they could have entered much earlier, because they came very near before God turned them away to wander in the wilderness. God did that because they would not trust in Him to take them in against the opposition from the giants in the land. All of them perished in the wilderness except Joshua and Caleb who believed, and the children of these who died. Imagine what could have happened if any of these people who perished had chosen before they died to repent and turn back to God! God

would have forgiven them too, because He was waiting for them to return to Him for 40 years!

Thankfully our God is a good God, waiting to shower His grace upon us, and not one who will strictly and legalistically hold on to the letter of His words. His justice will always call for punishment for sin, but His mercy will always triumph when a sinner goes to Him in humility and repentance (Ro.2:4;Jas.2:13).

What do we think of ourselves?

"But by the grace of God I am what I am, ... but I labored even more than all of them, yet not I, but the grace of God with me" (1Co.15:10). The apostle Paul was not acting humble as many people do and saying he was a nobody and he hadn't done anything great. I wonder if such talks really fool anyone. Paul knew he was an apostle and also that he was more hardworking than the others. He had no qualms about acknowledging that. But at the same time it was not a boastful posture, but just a recognition of facts. What made Paul truly humble was the deep acknowledgement in his heart that this was all because of the grace of God.

We can't become humble by behaving in certain ways externally; that would

be merely *acting* humble. God looks at our innermost being, our deepest thoughts and attitudes of our heart. These are even deeper than the conscious thoughts we have about ourselves, and it is even possible that we are really not aware of them. Most people only concern themselves with what others would think of them, and so they do everything they can to give a good impression to the others. But God knows the real person in us (1Sa.16:7), and some discerning people also can get glimpses into our inner being. It would require deliberate effort on our part to examine our life to see if it is characterised by the knowledge that we cannot do anything without God's grace.

God wants us to be true in our innermost being (Ps.51:6). Trying to impress God or other people with our greatness is pure folly. But even

imagining great things about ourselves is stupidity. If we will not look at the things that are wrong with us, we will not be able to recognise, acknowledge, repent and turn away from them. Then we shall only remain in the same spiritual condition, if we don't actually get worse!

But we don't look only at the negative things in us; we also have to address the good things the Lord has done in our lives. Here our natural tendency is to take pride in ourselves as if it was we who accomplished them. But it would be wrong to 'act' within our thoughts as if we had no part in them but it was all God who did everything. No. *We* did those things, but apart from God we couldn't have done any of them (Jn.15:4,5). Pretending even to ourselves that we didn't do anything but it was God would not reflect the truth, and God wants us to be really

true.

Paul exhorts us to have a *sober opinion* of ourselves (Ro.12:3). Just because we have accomplished something for God it doesn't mean that we are the greatest! At the same time just because we came short of our own expectations before God does not mean that we are a nobody. We are children of God, and even if we are not the most important part of His Body we are still a part! Isn't it good to recognise just who and what we are in reality?

Frequent thoughts create attitudes, and attitudes define us. The right type of attitude will have a sense both for our inability and God's grace.

**Doctrine must match
experience**

We have to be careful not to make doctrines out of experiences. Every experience must be checked with the Bible to see if it is consistent with the teachings of the Bible. There are many deceptive experiences and even demon-originated doctrines (1Ti.4:1).

At the same time, we must also check our doctrines which we form from studying the Bible to see if they agree with general experience of people. Some people form doctrines from their understanding of certain verses and never check if they relate to real life experiences! If discrepancies with practical experience are pointed out to them they even justify themselves saying that they would believe God's word no matter what people or experiences say (cf. Ro.3:4)! They

point out that God's truth can be beyond human understanding and assume that their stance shows their devotion and respect for God's word.

Take the doctrine about the eternal security of a believer, a.k.a., 'once saved, always saved'. This is based on verses such as Jn.5:24, 10:28,29, etc. However this does not match with practical experiences of many people who have come to faith in Jesus, demonstrated a life consistent with that faith, and then fallen away. These are explained by saying either that they were never really born again in the first place, or that even if they seem to have fallen away they are still secure with God! It is easy to talk like that in the comfort and security of a Bible study but it simply bypasses looking at real life.

Once we notice such an inconsistency of the doctrine what we need to do is

to re-examine our interpretation of the verses which have made us come to such a doctrine. Then we see that these and other similar verses are all talking about how *God* keeps us from His side and how no one else can take us away from Him. But what about the possibility of *our* falling away from God by our choice? It is obvious that this has not been addressed by these verses.

When we look further in the Bible we see that there are other verses which address *our part* in falling away from God (He.3:12;6:4-6;10:26, etc.). There are ever so many warnings given to believers in the New Testament which would all become meaningless if there was no possibility that believers could fall and lose out finally (e.g., 1Co.10:5,6,12). Instead of twisting their simple meaning or saying that they apply to some other group,

wouldn't it be much more natural and straightforward to understand them as they are written?

King Solomon who started off with God on a high note fell away by going after other gods. Judas who was one of the twelve disciples turned out to be a betrayer. Demas who was one of Paul's co-workers fell away because he was drawn away by the world. Don't we have real life examples? Even with examples, people would still argue that they were not really godly or they didn't really get lost. But wouldn't a better doctrine be to say that God would never leave us, but we might leave Him?

Faith and works

One of the common mistakes many Christians make is to take verses from the Bible and interpret those verses by themselves as promises or as doctrines. They don't realise that while these verses may be completely true--all the verses in the Bible are not 'truths' just because they are in the Bible, especially when they quote what some people said--they may not represent the complete truth. If we want to know the truth more completely, we will have to look at the other verses in the Bible too. "It is written" has to be matched by "It is also written" before we can get the balanced truth.

For example we know we are saved by God's grace through our faith in Jesus who died in our place, and not by trying to be good or doing good works

(Ep.2:8,9). This was a truth that generated the Protestant reformation. But some people have emphasised this truth so much unrealistically that even faith on our part is seen as some sort of work that we have to do, and they believe that God will do everything for us. If anyone talks about repentance from sin and turning to God, these people will cry foul and say they are works! But isn't it true that if it was only up to the grace of God *all* the people in the world would get saved (1Ti.2:4), but because it also depends on people to believe and receive the truth, very few actually get saved?

Once we come to God through faith is it like getting a ticket to heaven after which no matter how we live we will finally be in heaven when we die? No. James points out that faith which doesn't result in godly works is a fake--a dead faith (Jas.2:17,26). Many

people are aghast when James says that we are justified by works and not by faith alone (v.24)! What he means is very simple, which can be seen from the whole passage. Where there is a genuine faith, God will begin to do a miraculous work in our heart by which we get a new heart, new desires, new values, etc., (Ez.36:25-27), and as a result of that our external life will begin to show the corresponding changes. What James says is that a so-called faith that does not show these changed works is a dead, useless faith.

Many people who don't understand this use wrong applications in their lives. For example, when there is a problem in their married life or with their children, they pray to God 'in faith', without making any effort to understand what is going on, discussing issues, seeking for counsel, etc. And when the problems don't get resolved they blame

God and even turn away from faith because they think God has failed them! Actually they were 'passing the buck to God' and shirking their own responsibilities, and suffering as a result. A balanced approach would have been to ask God for grace and wisdom and then to deal with the challenges in their lives.

God works in our lives to give us new direction and the strength to proceed, and then *we* need to carry it out (Php.2:12,13). This is to 'work out' our salvation, and not working 'for' our salvation.

Faith and miracles

A woman who had been suffering from haemorrhage heard about Jesus and the miracles and healing He was doing to many people. She thought, "If I just touch His garments, I will get well" (Mk.5:28). She did that, and instantaneously she was healed! How exactly did this happen?

Some people imagine that it was the *process* of touching the garment of the Son of God that caused the healing. Since He is not here any more physically, they try the next best thing, touching handkerchiefs or other paraphernalia that have been 'blessed' by 'great men of God' in the name of Jesus.

Some believe that it was *her faith* that caused the miracle. For this they use Jesus' own words to the woman saying

that her faith had healed her (v.34). As a result of this understanding people try to work up their faith (by repeating promises of God to themselves and rejecting all 'negative' thoughts) to the level that they believe will be sufficient to cause a miracle.

But can we not see, if we just think about it, that it was *Jesus* who healed her, and not her touching *per se* or any 'faith' that she had mustered up? She had faith *in* Jesus, and then she touched His garment, and then He healed her. If people imagine that certain processes or procedures can produce miracles, or that they can develop 'faith' in their minds to the extent that they can demand a miracle in exchange just as we can exchange coupons or points in exchange for prizes, they are totally off from the truth.

God does miracles for us out of His grace, which is something we don't

deserve and which we can't earn. God also does this in His own sovereign way and there is nothing we can demand from Him. We can only request for His mercy (Php.4:6). When He sees our trust in Him (faith) He may respond to us with a miracle if it fits in His plan for us (1Jn.5:14,15). If He sees that we don't trust Him or expect anything from Him He may not do the miracles that He actually wanted to do for us (Mt.13:58).

There is an ordinary trust and confidence in God that we all ought to have, without which we can't have any relationship with Him (He.11:6). This kind of faith is based on our knowledge of God, His character, His ways, etc., and when we come to the place where we have confidence enough in Him to trust our entire life into His hands, then we can say that we have faith in God.

But there is a 'gift of faith' which comes into effect in connection with extraordinary events such as supernatural healing, miracles, etc. (1Co.12:9). In the case of the woman in this story God gave her this faith, and she felt that if she just touched Jesus' garment she would be healed. Obviously, if we don't receive such faith in our heart from God, and we simply imitate what she did, we can't expect any miracle. She was not aware that she had received this 'faith' and we too may not when it happens. But to work it out by ourselves without hearing from God (Ro.10:17) is folly, and that leads to lots of problems.

Pointers along the way #435

Exercising our faith

Let us say we believe in God's promise that He will never leave us or forsake us (He.13:5). One simple

mistake we can make afterwards is to think that from now onwards we will never feel His absence in our life! But we will, and then we mustn't get confused wondering why God has not kept His promise! The problem is not that He has left us; He never will. But we may *feel* and then *think* that He has left us. We look for recognisable signs of His presence in the form of the particular help that we need, and then when they are not there we conclude that He may have left us. As a result of this our faith wavers, we may begin to doubt Him and His word, become fearful about the future, lose hope, etc. We may even assume that God cannot be trusted in future, faith is a notional thing that doesn't work, etc., and decide to give up altogether.

In this case we were wrong to expect that when God said He would never leave us we would be able to 'see' Him

by the way He would act according to our expectations. No, He is a sovereign God and He always acts according to *His* plans (Ps.115:3). Sometimes He hides Himself (Is.45:15), even though He is still with us, to test us. Our challenge is to trust Him even when we cannot see Him (Jn.20:29).

When we cannot see Him He expects us to exercise our faith in Him. In the above example, when we are in a difficult situation and we cannot see or experience His presence we can exercise faith by believing that He is with us and has not left us. Believing this when things are fine (when we can see Him) is easy, but believing this when we cannot see Him (when He hides himself in some difficult situation) is what is challenging to us but what glorifies Him more. When we trust in Him in the midst of our difficult

situation and believe that He is with us even when we cannot see Him, we find that we receive strength to bear it and go through the situation in triumph.

Many times we expect that when we pray God will take us out of the fire. He does that also sometimes. But at other times He stands with us and gives us grace to go through the fire and come out with a triumphant faith and as better people. There are many examples in the Bible as well as in our knowledge of this kind of experience.

As natural persons we all would prefer to escape from all difficulties rather than face them, even though we know in our mind that God has a good plan for us at the end of the difficult times. But sometimes we don't seem to be able to get out of the situation or uncertainties still continue. That is the time we can exercise our faith and believe that our Father is with us, that

He knows every detail of what we are going through, He knows exactly how we feel (He.4:15 KJV), He will not allow us to be tested beyond what we are able to bear along with His help (1Co.10:13), when we get through the situation God will give us the crown of life (not a physical crown) (Jas.1:12), etc. This is how we overcome (1Jn.5:4).

Our God in a free-opinion world

One of the challenges we Christians face now is to be confronted by people who disagree with Biblical teaching and would like to make us feel that we are very dumb to have any other opinion than theirs. The spirit of the times is to keep an open mind about everything, which really amounts to having no firm opinion about anything. What we need to recognise is that behind it is an anti-Christian spirit which particularly targets Christians. Accordingly, Christians shouldn't say anything that might 'offend' non-Christians, because that would be narrow-minded and fundamentalistic, while non-Christians can say anything to Christians even if Christians count it as blasphemy! We can see that this anti-Christian spirit is energising the

media and affecting popular thinking so much that Christians look ridiculous for believing practically everything that counts as essential truths of their faith.

Take homosexuality. Hardly anyone now seems to consider that there is something wrong with this, while serious Christians understand this to be loathsome in God's eyes and on a human level totally degrading and perverted. Time will show that it will be utterly damaging to the people concerned and will cause unlimited chaos in people's lives. Same sex marriages violate nature, and will not work in the long run. But the spirit of the times is such that Christians who say these things will be hunted down and vilified as those who have gone off their heads. They have no freedom of speech to express such views even when they do it out of concern for the

affected ones. That will be immediately classified as gay bashing and made out to be even un-Christian! On the contrary the gay rights movement can bash Christians, exhibit their perversion openly without shame, and through outshouting conscientious people change laws to enforce gay rights.

Many Christians are cowed down by the show of strength and choose to play along. They will never point out that homosexual lifestyle is wrong and bad for the individual and society, and will only show 'love' and acceptance of gay people! In the process they give up God's truth, and also they cease to be the light and salt of the world. God loves gay people and He wants to tell them that they are hurting themselves both in the short term as well as in the long term. If they would respond to His call He is willing to deliver them from

their bondage. But they in turn misinterpret this love as arrogance, self-righteousness, etc.

Do we believe that our God is the only true God, and that what He tells us in His word is the truth and what is good for us? Then we would also understand that anything that goes against God's word, instructions or commandments will only damage people. This damage may not appear immediately especially to those who are involved in such activities, but nevertheless it will come. Those who truly love the others need to warn them and help them to come to true life.

Christian parenting under siege

When a baby is born, he has a great potential for development. This is why, unlike in the case of animals, he needs parental care for many years for leading him in the right direction. It is surely the responsibility of the parents to train him up in the right ways, instead of just giving him the best food, clothes, education and toys they can afford, as many are doing (Pr.22:6). Though all children are born with a rudimentary sense of right and wrong from their conscience, they all have been born with a tendency towards sin (Ps.51:5). For example, they start fighting and telling lies without anyone teaching them, and the first time they tell a lie you can see guilt on their face because they realise they have done wrong.

The spirit of the world has opposed both these truths. Humanistic psychology teaches that people are born 'good' and it is their circumstances that make some of them bad. This has affected many people's thinking, and they assume that the best way of parenting is to leave children alone without interference so that the little ones can develop their own unique personalities. 'Positive' psychology tells us to avoid 'No'. The results are plain to see in the form of spoilt kids. God warns us in the Bible, "The rod and rebuke give wisdom, but a child left to himself brings shame to his mother" (Pr.29:15). Proverbs 22:15 says, "Foolishness is bound up in the heart of a child; the rod of discipline will remove it far from him." Children don't know what is good for them, because they don't have experience, and parents are to pass on the benefit of their knowledge and experience to

them while they still have the children with them.

Perhaps the parents themselves have learnt about God the hard way, having wandered deeply into a life of sin and finding salvation just in time before being swept away to destruction. Do they now leave the children to find their way themselves? The worldly wise man will tell the parents it is wrong to impose their own personal opinions on the children without giving them a chance to choose for themselves. But if we have found that certain ways lead to sure destruction don't we have the responsibility to tell the children strongly to avoid those paths? And if we have discovered the right path should we keep quiet about it hoping that somehow the children would also find it?

'Discipline' becomes abuse only when it becomes excessive, disproportionate

to the situation, and carried out in anger looking out for the convenience of the parents rather than children. If it is done in love (with a history of love on which to build on), with the good of the child in view, in measured ways with good self-control, along with teaching about why it is necessary, it will do much good for the children. The world cries 'Abuse' at discipline, but we don't need to be scared. "Do not hold back discipline from the child, although you strike him with the rod, he will not die" (Pr.23:13).

Pointers along the way #438

If we don't run after God

So many things are against us. Even after we have become children of God we still carry with us the flesh (Gk. sarx. our old sinful nature, the seat of sinful desires). We are tempted day and night to do our own will irrespective of what God wants us to do (Jas.1:14). We are still in this world which draws us with its fame, glory, thrill, excitement, pleasures, wealth, etc. (1Jn.2:15,16). The devil and his demons are after us to make us fall into sin or to draw us away from God (1Pe.5:8). Many people are out there trying to outwit us, use us, harm us or even to finish us off if we get in their way. In spite of all this God has given us a desire to walk with Him and to be pleasing to Him (Ge.17:1). Isn't it a great struggle to just survive? How about if we really want to be counted

as someone useful for God?

The plain fact is that it is not going to happen naturally or automatically. Some of us think that once we have become children of God He will take care of us and we don't have to worry. That's not true. If it was true, wouldn't all Christians be becoming epitomes of virtue rather quickly? On the other hand we find the Bible full of warnings for us to take care, not to allow ourselves to be deceived, and to be alert, sober and vigilant? Doesn't the Bible tell us to *do* many things from our side so that God can accomplish what He has begun in us? Remember Jesus warning us not to just hear His words but also to *act* on them (Mt.7:26)?

The *only* way, I can't emphasise this enough, to remain with God and to survive all the attacks against us is to keep running closer towards God! If

we think we can relax (lower our watchfulness, lower our standards, neglect the things of God--for a while), we *will* begin backsliding. Think of the devil waiting to catch us at just such moments! What a luxurious treat we would be giving to him if we *continue* in this state of spiritual stupor! Don't forget that the devil has become an expert in fooling people with thousands of years of experience, and his demons have been studying us over our lifetime to identify our blind or weak spots. He knows how to lull us to sleep, catch us when we are tired, attack us when we least expect it, etc. Above all, don't ever make the mistake of assuming that we know how to handle him!

Many have become too lazy to spend personal time with God reading and meditating on His word. They want only fast food, in the form of some

preacher dishing out his own ideas. Unfortunately what we hear is usually not from the word of God (even though there would be occasional quotations), but smattered with pop psychology, self help ideas, motivational phrases, feel good messages, false hope and even heretical teaching. We can imagine what would happen to us if fast food is the only food we eat. Others depend on daily readings (ready to eat processed food) which eliminates the need for us to feed directly on the word of God (1Pe.2:2). No. Run, personally, after God.

Pointers along the way #439

The Lazarus context

Lazarus was one Jesus loved, and he was sick. His sisters Martha and Mary sent for Jesus, expecting Him to heal him. But when Jesus heard this, He stayed *two days longer* in the same place, and it was only four days *after* Lazarus had died that He reached their home. Martha said to Jesus that if He had been there her brother would not have died (John 11).

Here was Jesus who was able to heal sicknesses, who loved the family, and who was near enough to come to their rescue. Isn't this situation typical of our own experiences many times? God says He loves us (didn't He give His only Son for us), He is almighty, and He has specially promised us that He would be always with us (Mt.28:20). What we can't understand is why He does not come and heal our situation

then. This was the same thing that perplexed Martha and Mary.

It was certainly not that Jesus was without feelings and didn't bother about what these people were going through. He wept (giving us such a beautiful expression of being God and Man), not because Lazarus had died (He knew he was going to come back alive), but because He could empathise with the sisters and the others who were weeping at that time (He.4:15). That itself is such an encouraging element that dispels any doubt about whether God is bothered about our struggles down here. It tells us that God really cares for us, He knows exactly what we are going through, He is always in full control of situations, and He knows what the best thing is that He needs to do for us.

As we live our earthly lives it is only natural that we experience the reality

of pain and sorrow, and confusion and perplexity, because we can only see things dimly (1Co.13:12). It is only natural that questions will arise in our mind about God, His promises and our situation. Shall we not answer them by recollecting the facts that He loves us, cares for us, feels for us and that He is working out something great for us (Ro.8:28,29)?

Another great difficulty we face in such circumstances is to figure out what 'good' can come out of *such* situations. We have to acknowledge that we don't know the exact answer, and all the glib ideas that well meaning friends toss our way seem to only worsen the pain. The answer Jesus gave to the sisters was to look forward to the resurrection--when there will be no more pain and perhaps we shall also get our answers. (Perhaps we will forget all such questions when we see

Him face to face.)

For Lazarus there was a coming back to life. God may or may not grant us such a resolution of our difficulty. Lazarus' coming back to life not only became an occasion for God to be glorified, but the whole incident has also become an example through which millions of others have been encouraged. Our miraculous answer to prayer or the equally miraculous grace that carries us through the situation will glorify God, apart from the eternal transformation of our lives. Can't we receive that answer and *believe*?

Pointers along the way #440

Our love for God

Nowadays it is very common to express our love for God through songs of praise and worship, especially on Sundays. And I think it would be fair to

say that many of us are quite sincere in our singing. But it is not difficult to see that the kind of love that only remains in words is quite deceptive (1Jn.3:18,19), especially if it is only on Sundays.

There was a woman who was notorious in society as a sinful woman, who expressed her love for Jesus by pouring an expensive perfume on His feet and wiping them with her hair. Jesus said that she loved much because she was forgiven much (Lk.7:47). A careless reading might give the impression that she was forgiven *because* she loved much. But in fact, it was the fact that even though her sins were many Jesus had forgiven her that caused her to love Him so much. Even though in her way of expressing that love she did an unconventional public act that earned religious criticism, Jesus understood the love it came

from.

If our 'love' does not express itself in the way we relate to Jesus, but remains as a doctrine that we believe and some songs we sing, what it shows is that we have not been 'forgiven much'. Some of us actually think we haven't been forgiven much because we haven't been as 'bad' as some of the others! Then we don't realise what Jesus had to pay for each sin. We also don't realise how if we have sinned just once that itself is enough to separate us eternally from the Holy God. For example, if our only sin was telling lies (that's not true!), it is just as bad as if we had committed murder (Jas.2:11). No, we have all been forgiven much.

If we don't 'feel' that we have been forgiven much, the chances are that we have never seen ourselves as sinners in the way God looks at sinners, and then

we have not truly repented, and then we have not been truly born again. Feelings reflect what we believe, and if we have had a genuine experience of being forgiven by God, we will feel the gratitude. It will be something we can never forget in our life. So lack of such feelings may be a true indication that nothing definite has taken place in our life in this way.

But perhaps today is the day when such people can set things right, by recollecting how you have hurt God in the different ways in which you have sinned, asking God for forgiveness and receiving it because Jesus has already taken your punishment. If you do this sincerely before God, you can begin to experience the same love for the Lord that this woman had.

Perhaps others did receive this forgiveness at one time, but have gone distant from the Lord because of

various reasons. Then today may be your opportunity to come back to Him, confess whatever has caused you to stray away, and renew your relationship as a forgiven sinner.

This is so crucial for our life--the present one and the one to come--that we cannot afford to take this carelessly. Our relationship with the Lord must be clear, and it must affect all our life.

Pointers along the way #441

Unmerited favour

"All my life I have fooled around with the wrong things and now my whole life is a mess. I know I don't even deserve to be alive. But will You please take me to heaven?" All 'holy' people would say, "Absolutely not!" But this is essentially what the thief on the cross said to Jesus, and Jesus

actually took him to heaven (Lk.23:40-43). That is called grace, the unmerited favour God shows to people who actually deserve hell for their sins. Even though it appears to be unreasonable to our thinking, it became possible for God because He had first taken our punishment on Himself (Is.53:5).

But even after we have received this undeserved kindness from God, we still find it difficult to extend it towards other people. We want them to receive from us only what they deserve, maybe in a little stronger measure. Unmerited forgiveness towards others appears to be an unreasonable concept to us when it comes to 'passing over' the sins they have done to us, even when we recognise and tell the story of God's Passover. We think, "They don't deserve to be forgiven. They need to

be taught a lesson. They can't be allowed to get away with it. They haven't even apologised to us!"

What does this show us except that we have not understood God's grace towards us? If we haven't, what is the basis on which we think God has accepted us? But grace is the only basis on which we can be saved.

It's not just about undeserved forgiveness. Any blessing or kindness that we receive from God is based on grace, something that we don't deserve. If we have health and ability to earn our salary, that is just another example of God's common grace which He extends to all people, irrespective of whether they are good or wicked (De.8:18;Mt.5:45). There is nothing we can claim as our right from God, but we can only thank Him for His unmerited mercies.

The more we understand this, the more it changes our attitude towards other people, including those who don't know God and those who we think ought to know better. It's not that we let everyone walk all over us or we show them no firmness of right and wrong, but all our attitudes towards others change when we first go through the recognition of God's favour, mercy and kindness towards us. It will affect the hardness of our heart, our unwillingness to make some allowance towards the others or to give them the benefit of doubt, our willingness to hear their side of the story, our acceptance of those who are different from us, our patience with those who are yet to catch up with us, and our awareness of how far we are from the likeness of Christ.

Isn't it very common that we take so much pleasure out of thinking of God's

goodness towards us and spend very little time thinking of our attitude towards others? Yet both these are connected in God's eyes. He says if we think we love Him but do not love our brother we are very sadly mistaken (1Jn.3:10,17;4:20,21). Then we really don't love God as much as we think we do.

Pointers along the way #442

The anointing that teaches

The first letter of the apostle John was the last book of the Bible to be written, and in it he gives some exhortations that are particularly relevant to the 'end times'. He warns us about antichrists among us, which we must understand as Christians who operate in a way contrary to the spirit of Christ (1Jn.2:18). If we only look out for the Antichrist, we may miss identifying the many preachers, writers and other

leaders who are being influenced by the spirit of the Antichrist to a more or less extent. Why are they *antichrists*? Because they oppose the work of the Holy Spirit and the spirit with which Christ works. Since these antichrists are energised to a greater or lesser extent by *deceiving* spirits, they are not going to be opposing Christ openly. But using the name of Christ they deceive people into thinking they are working for Christ. But as Jesus taught us, we can know them by their fruit. When Christian leaders 1) exalt themselves, 2) deceive people in order to increase their popularity, wealth and empire, 3) control people by making them dependent on them, making decisions for them, wanting to know every detail of their lives, keeping them away from all other groups, keeping people busy with activities and responsibilities so that they won't easily leave, threatening calamities if

they left, or using an unhealthy emphasis on church discipline, 4) do not have much to show in terms of the fruit of the Spirit but demand perfect submission from people, etc., don't we have to smell danger?

John says that the 'anointing' will help us to know these antichrists (v.27). When we have the anointing of the Holy Spirit on us, doesn't it give us a warning bell when we come across an antichrist spirit? Even if we don't know much of the Bible, don't we smell something wrong when we come across such people and groups? Even if we feel we are so 'small' compared to these so-called 'giants', don't we know that there is something to be careful about here?

But many of us are too awed by these leaders that we don't trust these warning signals. They seem to have such knowledge, 'power', following

and accomplishments that we dare not question them. But what we must remember is that even though we are not to sit in judgment over them, we need to discern what is going on for our own safety! We should note that this passage is addressed to spiritual children (v.18), and not to the mature ones, showing that we don't need to have much maturity to be able to sense that something is wrong here.

Unfortunately many Christians are not even aware of such dangers, and simply follow their leaders without question. When they are taught new doctrines they assume that these leaders know what they are talking about, without checking for themselves if they are being misled (Ac.17:11). We would not have had to talk about this subject but for the fact that deception is all around, many false doctrines are spreading, and many are

getting deceived. 1Pet.5:8.

Pointers along the way #443

When we love someone

When a boy and girl fall in 'love' with each other, what happens usually is that they are both looking for something from the other to meet their own needs. This is really selfishness disguised under the name of love. Feelings play a big role at such times. When they die down, as they surely will after some time, these people find themselves fighting with each other!

Of course feelings are a part of true love also. But behind those feelings is an attitude or intention to value the other person as 'more important' (Php.2:3 NASB), and to be good to them. If we 'like' some people, we will have good feelings towards them. But if they are our enemies we don't like them, and we won't feel good towards them. But we can still love our enemies by considering them to be

important, and keeping the intention of being good towards them (Lk.6:32-35). Sometimes we may actually be able to 'do' good to them also. This would not be possible if we just went by our feelings or likes and dislikes.

We know this kind of love is not humanly possible. But when we first know God's love for us and recognise how undeserving we are for it, God is able to create His kind of love in our hearts also (1Jn.4:19). One big secret of partaking of God's nature is to humbly acknowledge that we don't deserve it and we can't produce it. In that way we can ask for it and receive it.

We Christians are involved in different forms of love that all look 'filthy' before a true godly love that is interested in the welfare of the other person without any self-interest attached. We may do 'loving deeds'

because we think they will earn us some points with God. We may want others to notice how loving we are, or how much we do for the others (Mt.6:1). Some of us do good deeds in order to compensate (in our mind) for some failure we feel guilty about. How few of us can do good secretly without expecting anything in return (Lk.6:35)!

Godly people will do good to the others looking for the eternal benefit of the others rather than only for meeting their earthly needs. Earthly needs are real and we must do what we can to meet them. But aren't eternal benefits more valuable than the earthly? Meeting earthly needs will usually receive appreciation and admiration. But many times people refrain from talking about eternal truths to the others thinking that they might get 'offended', even though we would not hesitate to provide painful remedies for physical

problems. Is this coming from divine love for the others or just love for our own reputation or social comfort? Of course there is need to say things at the right time and in a loving and appropriate manner, and thoughtless words can actually cause damage rather than blessing. But what we need to see is if our actions are coming out of genuine love for the others or some selfish interest.

We need to keep growing in love because that is the way we can avoid becoming cold. Keep looking at Jesus and His love for us (He.12:2).

Pointers along the way #444

Our temptations

We know how Satan tempted Eve in the garden. He first made her doubt the meaning of what God had said (Ge.3:1), went on to deny God's word

(v.4), and to attribute bad motives to God's actions (v.5). At this point Eve had already moved out of her fortress of protection and stepped into Satan's arena. Then the forbidden fruit looked very attractive to her (v.6) and she yielded to the temptation.

Though these are common ingredients to us Christians also in our temptations, we may also have some additional elements to deal with that make us more vulnerable.

Aren't we tempted with the thought that God would forgive us anyway, even if we sin? We think of God as an embodiment of love and we expect that He would only show love to us by forgiving us our sins. Some of us even think that once we have been made children of God we cannot lose our salvation! But God's word warns us, "Shall we sin because we are not under law but under grace? May it

never be!" (Ro.6:15). Even though God recognises our weaknesses and provides for our repentance and return to Him (1Jn.2:1,2), there is no excuse for deliberately continuing to sin (He.10:26). Many mistakenly explain that just as when we are born naturally we cannot be 'unborn', we cannot cease to be children of God once we have been born again. The truth is that one is a physical birth, but the other is a spiritual relationship which is based on our faith, and will cease if we forsake our faith (Ro.11:20).

Sometimes we think that God understands our situation and our weaknesses and will 'understand' our failure if we choose to sin, quoting Heb.4:15. He certainly understands our weaknesses, and will forgive us if we repent and return to Him, asking Him for grace not to sin again (v.16). But God cannot be mocked by our 'words'

of repentance if in our heart we don't really mean them.

These kinds of behaviour show us that we are actually treating the grace of God as if it is a cheap thing, or even taking it as a licence to sin (Jude.1:4). We forget what it cost God--His own Son--to make it available for us.

A reverential fear of God will turn us away from sinning (Pr.16:6). The more we recognise who God is and who we are before Him, we would fear to sin against Him. This is not about being scared of Him, but an enhanced form of respect towards Him. On the other hand, the more we recognise how much He has loved us in giving Himself for us so that we could be saved, we would draw back from grieving Him in any way by our life. We would also yield ourselves wholly to Him to love Him, to do His will and to glorify His name, which is the opposite of yielding

to sin (Ro.6:13). A life given over to God is the best form of worship we can give Him (Ro.12:1).

The more we focus on loving God and seeking to serve Him by doing His will in every aspect of our life, the more strength we will find in battling with temptations. Then even if we *fall*, we will want to get back to Him quickly in repentance.

Pointers along the way #445

The test of giving

The covenant which God made through Moses with the people of Israel was never meant to last forever, but only to serve as an intermediate step towards the new covenant which God would make through the death of Jesus (Ga.3:22-25). The old covenant gave an indicative outline (shadow) of the relationship and standards that God

really wanted to set up through the new covenant. For example, not doing any work for six days and dedicating the seventh day to God and giving one tenth of one's income to God were meant to indicate the priority that one should give to God. Under the new covenant, when we and all that we have belong entirely to God, the concepts of tithes and sabbaths became obsolete. We can't consider the 90% that is left after giving the tithe to God as ours to spend any way we like, and nor can we live any way we like for six days a week! All our money and all of our time and everything else in our life belong to God to be used according to His will as living sacrifices (Ro.12:1).

But some people take advantage of the new covenant and consider themselves free from any obligation to give any money to the Lord or to have any time

for God! That only shows that they have not entered into the new covenant meaningfully. When someone actually enters the new covenant with God, recognising himself as a lost sinner headed for hell and thankfully receiving forgiveness because Jesus had already suffered for his sin, God causes him to be born again. This man receives a new mind with new desires and attitudes that make him completely different from what he used to be before.

One of the differences is in his attitude towards God. Now God becomes supreme for him because He is the one who truly loves him in spite of knowing everything about him. He falls in love with Him, and wants to spend time with Him, listen to Him, pour out his heart to Him, do what is pleasing to Him and essentially, give his life for Him. If this does not happen, there is a

big question mark about whether he is really born again.

One of the practical results of this change, among others, is his desire to give to God, His work and His people. He no longer needs a rule of tithing or constant reminders or exhortations to give. When he has given himself to God unreservedly, it is no problem for him to give his money (2Co.8:3-5).

Can we examine ourselves on this point? How is our giving? 'How much' is not the question, but the condition of our heart from which our giving comes. Is it out of compulsion that we give, or out of gratitude? Is it in the form of paying a premium expecting great returns from God? Is it out of fear that God might punish us if we didn't give? Is it out of a sense of duty because our local church demands it?

If our heart convicts us on this, don't

just think about giving more! We need to realise that we have not let Jesus enter deeply into our lives, but maybe only superficially or not at all.

Pointers along the way #446

Promise hunters

Admittedly, we all face a lot of difficulties and challenges in this world, some more than others. For us Christians our final resort is our Lord to whom we turn with everything that is troubling us. And many times, it is only His promises that can keep us going, when things on earth seem to be stacked up against us. With this in mind we look up God's promises during times of trial and even stock them up for times to come, as our way of encouraging ourselves (1Sa.30:6;Jude.20,21). We are also happy to receive such words of encouragement from others. Preachers

and writers are also eager to encourage others by presenting to them God's great promises.

But we know that all promises written in the Bible are not meant for us; God gave some of them to someone in specific situations and it would not be right for us to take them for ourselves. For example, when God told Joshua that the people of Israel would possess everywhere they set their foot on (Josh.1:3), it is clear that He was referring to the land which He had already promised to them (v.2). If God did not promise any particular land for us then there is no way we can get it by walking over it and claiming this 'promise'! It is not even right for us to spiritualise it and assume that whatever we attempt for God will succeed. Don't we need to understand that He will only do for us what we ask according to His will (1Jn.5:14)?

Unfortunately many of us don't think like this to examine the proper application of what we read in the Bible. Many are hunting for 'promises' from all over the Bible (even bringing out 'books of promises' or Christian calendars filled with promises). Many preachers and writers also hand out promises rather freely without checking for their applicability. The intention may be to encourage the people, but can false hope ever work for good?

Think of the disillusionment that comes when we don't experience what we believed were promises from God! How many people turn away from God because of this one reason! They imagine that God or His word cannot be trusted, and they have thus lost the only One who can really help them in this life. Those who give out such false hopes to the others are like parents

who promise something to their children which they don't carry out. Mistrust is bound to develop. We can't blame God when it was our wrong assumptions that gave us such false 'hope'. We ought to understand God's word rightly and take only promises that are meant for us.

At the same time we know that sometimes God uses a word from the Bible to speak to us (which may be strictly 'out of context') which is impressed on our heart through the Holy Spirit. Then *we know* in our heart that it is from God, even though we cannot explain to the others every time. But since there can be a lot of error here, we need to check with other parts of the Bible and also with godly people to see if we are making wrong assumptions.

Pointers along the way #447

Automatic fulfilment?

Ex.14:13,14 is a favourite passage for many Christians, where God tells the people of Israel to just watch Him saving them from the Egyptians. But this is many times misunderstood and wrongly applied. First of all we must remember that this is not a promise which is given to all people or even all believers. It was specific to that situation when Israel was placed between Pharaoh and the Red Sea. Here they didn't have to do anything, but to stand and watch the Lord taking action. The Lord did a similar thing for Jehoshaphat when he faced an enemy (2Ch.20:17). God may do this for us also at times. But we can't apply this blindly to mean that we don't have to do anything ourselves when it comes to the challenges of our life but simply wait for God to deal with them! Many

people have been disappointed who took this passive approach, and then they blame God!

The Promised Land for disciples of Jesus is to be *transformed* into His nature (Ro.8:28,29;2Pe.1:4). Since God has created us with a free will He will never force anything upon us. If we are to be transformed, we need to *choose* that process every time we are tempted to act according to our own desires. This is to take up our cross daily, deny ourselves and follow Jesus (Lk.9:23). If we expect this transformation while we are careless about denying ourselves, and irrespective of what we do, aren't we shirking our responsibilities, actually choosing against this transformation, and passing the buck, so to speak, to God?

The Bible is full of words telling us to 'do' many things, warning us of

consequences if we don't, and promising us blessings if we do. Just hearing those words and giving assent to them mentally will not do, as Jesus pointed out powerfully from the example of the one who built on the sand (Mt.7:26). Certainly it is much more pleasant for us to hear 'promises', 'prophecies' and 'comforting words' rather than to deny ourselves or to take pains with doing the will of God. We also like preachers who tell us nice things. But such preachers who soothe us to spiritual sleep without warning us when we go wrong or teaching us to choose the right paths will be responsible for the 'deaths' of their people when ultimately the walls come crashing down in the storms of life (Ez.3:18;13:10).

There are many promises God has given to all of us, and He may also give us specific ones individually.

Sometimes He may even tell us to just stand and watch how He will do a miracle for us. But we can't take promises that are not for us or expect all promises to work automatically. When we place our faith in God He works *in* us giving us desires, inclination and power to do His will, and then it is our responsibility to work them *out* by denying our own desires and doing His will (Php.2:12,13). He will not fulfil most promises automatically without our cooperation. There are conditions He expects us to fulfil. If we understand this we can avoid a lot of disappointments.

Scholar, religious man or disciple?

To become a Bible scholar is good provided we are also disciples of Jesus. Even if we are not Bible scholars we can still be pleasing to God if we are disciples. A disciple of Jesus is so much in love with Him that he makes himself a bonds slave to Jesus and Jesus becomes His Lord (Ex.21:5,6). Now he does all he can to obey Him and to become like Him (Lk.9:23). A scholar knows many things about the Bible including what it says about Jesus. But if we are not disciples also, being scholars may even keep us outside the kingdom of God (1Co.8:1).

The Pharisees were the Bible scholars of the day. They had their 'deep' understanding of the Old Testament scriptures and ordinary people

considered them as authorities on the Bible. They were the ones who could explain the detailed meanings of Bible passages and their applications. But with all this background, they still could not recognise the Son of God when He stood before them, taught with authority and demonstrated His glory through signs and wonders. It was they along with other religious leaders who instigated Pilate to put Jesus to death.

There are many others whom people generally refer to as 'god fearing' or pious people because they spend a lot of time with prayer, Bible studies, and 'Christian' activities. They are held in awe by ordinary people thinking that surely God must be very close to them. But many of them are actually following a way of works, hoping to please God by their good works.

But a disciple is one who has seen

something of great value in the Master and chosen it as his life's goal to follow Him, do what He says, and to become like Him at the end (Mt.13:45,46;Jn.6:67,68). They are the ones who see themselves as sinners, who meet with their Saviour, surrender to Him and follow Him. They realise that without this Saviour they would be lost, and in their gratitude of having been saved from that fate, they give up their own life and follow Jesus (2Co.5:14,15;Ro.12:1).

We may not be always able to distinguish those who are merely scholars or religious people when we look at others (Mt.13:29). But we can know about ourselves where we stand. It is absolutely *crucial* for our destiny that we know this now. If we humbly come before the Saviour, repent from our sins and submit to Him, He will grant us grace to be assured in our own

heart about our salvation (1Jn.5:13;Ro.8:15). One way we can get a clue about the possibility that we have not yet come into salvation is if we are fearful and uncertain about what would happen to us after we die. If it is like that for any of you, do take the time now to make your relationship with Jesus real and personal.

When we truly become children of God, we can see God changing our hearts from inside and our external life following His direction away from a self-centred life to a God-centred and other-centred life (Jas.1:27). This is very different from those who follow the way of works or knowledge hoping to get salvation.

Pointers along the way #449

God's will and control

Is whatever that happens to us God's will for us? When we say God is in full control of everything in the world, is He is the one who makes everything happen to us?

God does not want us, His children, to marry an unbeliever. But if we marry one, can we say that God was the one who gave him/her to us? If we drink too much and die of cirrhosis of the liver, or play loose with sex and die of AIDS, can we say God allowed us to go that way and it is His fault?

When we say something is God's will for us what we mean is that it is what God desires for us. But does what He wills for us happen always? Many times we disobey God and do our own will, don't we? What happens to us then as a consequence of our

disobedience was not what God desired for us, was it? So it was not God's will that happened to us! If we had obeyed what God wanted us to do, then we could say that God's will has been accomplished in our life.

If God is in full control, why do bad things happen to innocent people? Does it show that He is really not in full control?

God is certainly in full control. He does whatever He pleases (Ps.115:3). He can do anything He wants; He is omnipotent. But it has pleased God to create man in His image, and a part of this image is our freedom to choose what we like. This freedom is limited, because we are not omnipotent. Many times we misuse this freedom, and then we suffer the consequences. If someone else misuses his/her freedom we may also suffer as a result. If God were to place absolute control over us

(or others) we wouldn't have any freedom to choose. We wouldn't even be free to choose to love God. But His absolute control exists with a provision for our limited free will.

We have freedom to ask God to do something for us, and when God does that it would not be against our free will! But many times we don't ask (Jas.4:2). Many times we ask for wrong things and then He doesn't give (1Jn.5:14). Sometimes if we pester Him for some wrong thing, He may even give in to us, but we will be the losers (Ps.106:15).

Obviously there is a lot of mystery about this subject. We can't understand everything. But we should understand enough to stop blaming God when we should be taking the blame, and stop expecting that God should do everything good for us even when we are fooling around with Him or taking

Him for granted. Sometimes others are to be blamed for what happens to us, and sometimes no one in particular is to be blamed but the fact that the whole world is suffering from corruption because of the presence of sin (e.g., natural calamities, sicknesses).

Thank God for the freedom to choose to love Him, and for the freedom to choose His will above our own will. Thank God He keeps full control of the world that we are protected from things that are too much for us (1Co.10:13), and causes even bad things that happen to us to bring something eternally good for us (Ro.8:28,29). One day He will answer all our questions.

Pointers along the way #450

Our story

The older I become, and the more I get to know God, myself and others, the more I see how little I really know, and how much more I need to know. I see I need to change even some things I thought I knew. There is still a great gap between what I do know and how I live. I see my very best is still full of many flaws, and my worst is better left without mention. It's certainly not a good picture, but it's what's real.

I could try to make excuses or justify myself in some way, but I can't justify myself before the Lord who can accept nothing but the perfect. I would be totally lost except that Jesus came for me. He saw me in my need and knew that I couldn't save myself. So He took it on Himself to find me justification before the Father. He offered Himself in my place and took the blame for my

sins, and suffered on the cross and died. And because I put my faith in Him and what He has done for me, God has accepted me. He showed me this favour which I don't deserve and can't ever deserve. Because of Jesus I'm forgiven, washed, accepted and named as one of His children. Now the picture is very different. I am still imperfect and unacceptable to God in my own merit. But He has nevertheless accepted me and looks on me as if I've never sinned.

It's Jesus who has made the difference. When He picked me up in my young age out of the crowd I know it wasn't because I was better than any of them. When I look back I see how I blundered along as a disciple. From my point of view it looked many times as if I had disappointed Him and grieved Him. But He has held on to me and never let go of me because He

knew I couldn't manage without Him. That was the same reason why He came after me in the first place, and He wasn't going to give up on me. But by showing grace upon grace He kept pace with me, lifting me up when I fell, encouraging me when I felt like giving up, and challenging me to go on. The attitude of pride that keeps trying to capture me crumbles down the more I see and experience God's grace, His undeserving favour.

When He finally presents me to the Father as one of His prized winnings, all glory would be His.

It's not just for me but for every child of God. Our experiences and circumstances on earth may be somewhat different, but the undeserving favour that we experience from God is just the same--mercy upon mercy and grace upon grace. Our battles are real--against temptation

from within ourselves and attacks from Satan. It's not always victory, but He takes us from victory to victory. We are still imperfect and far from being perfect, but He hasn't finished working on us. He will never leave or forsake us even if we feel as if He would. He has promises to keep and His honour to preserve. He will complete what He has begun with us. These earthen vessels that we are will shine more and more with the glory that belongs entirely to Him. We love Him with all our heart. We want His name to be exalted above all.

How much do we know Jesus?

Most of us know much *about* Jesus. We know the stories about Him, the miracles He did, the parables He used, the lessons He taught, and the big events in His life. Some of us may also be busy 'serving' Him in different ways. Bud sadly all this is possible without having met Him or knowing Him personally. It is like working for many years in a big company without ever meeting with the CEO. In the case of the CEO it may be that he is inaccessible, but not so with Jesus.

We cannot get to know anyone without spending time with him, talking and listening to him, working together with him, discussing things with him, etc. Isn't that how we can get to know Jesus? Why aren't we doing it? Is it because we don't have time?

God told Abraham to walk before Him and to become perfect (Ge.17:1). The implication for us is that to live our entire life with Jesus is the way to become more and more like Him. In other words, whatever we do we talk it over with Him, refer to His word, read what other experienced people tell us, share with Him what is troubling us, tell Him frankly how we feel, ask Him when we can't understand what is going on, discuss with others what we seem to have learnt from Him, etc. We will do this when we realise that He is the most important Person in our life, what He thinks about anything is the final word on that subject, He knows everything that even the cleverest ones on earth are ignorant about, He can guide us in the best possible way, He has got our best interest at heart, He can do whatever He wants, and finally He is the One we are accountable to. Then

we will find time for Him, much more passionately than two people who have fallen in love do with each other.

Instead of doing this, many of us are trying to manage with second hand information which preachers are feeding us. Our entire input for our Christian life comes from Sunday morning messages, or sometimes also from daily Bible verses or 'devotionals'. If Jesus was inaccessible, we would have had to manage with whatever we could get in this way. But every child of God has full access to the Most Holy Place (to use a type) into which we can walk in any time, any day, anywhere, and even live there (He.10:19-22).

A. W. Tozer said, "Every man is as holy as he *really* wants to be." We cannot get away by making excuses about how busy we are, and how we need to do so many things. What we

need to ask ourselves is the question Jesus asked the man waiting for healing at the poolside for 38 years, "Do you wish to get well?" (Jn.5:6).

What a great tragedy if we do so many things, make a lot of money, become so very famous, enjoy the best things that the world can offer, make friends with the elite, and accomplish great things, if we missed the opportunity for getting to know the Lord of our life (Mt.16:26)! And the way to know Him is simple and within the reach of even the youngest Christians. We would be most foolish to let time slip by.

Pointers along the way #452

Honour before people

The people who had seen Jesus around most thought He was just another ordinary man, while people who came across Him doing His mighty acts fell

down and worshipped Him. Jesus noted that this was common for prophets or other servants of God (Mt.13:57). In the case of Jesus the reason why His own relatives and neighbours did not recognise His greatness was because they were blind. He was perfect, and without a single fault, and yet they found fault with Him because they judged Him from their own viewpoints. But when it comes to human leaders they all *do* have many faults, and people who are close to them can see that. Sometimes these 'faults' that they see close at hand make them oblivious to the greatness of God that is shining through these leaders, which other people can see.

Some of us tend to make gods of our leaders, having seen them only from a distance. We are awed by them and swallow whatever they say or do without questioning them or checking

them out with the word of God (Ac.17:10,11). We follow them around in a frenzy of hero worship, not recognising at the same time that however great things they are doing they are still only men! They have their limitations and faults, and not everything they say or do may be even right. If such a leader falls or is exposed suddenly, then even our faith tends to crumble because our faith was not directly in God but mediated through these leaders.

Some of these leaders begin to actually believe what their crazy followers are saying about them, and begin to think of themselves as being somebody special, and beyond the common man's understanding or questions. Sooner or later their castles in the air fall to pieces as God begins to expose their high mindedness. If only they had been willing to recognise their humanness

and listen to those who questioned them!

Godly leaders on the other hand recognise that they are only earthen vessels and that the glory belongs to the Lord (2Co.4:7). They attribute the honour they receive from people to God either openly or in their heart (Ac.3:12,16).

Do we seek to be great? Let's not seek to be great in front of people (Jn.5:44). No one can actually see what goes on inside our heart as God does. True greatness is in the heart. Sometimes *why* we do something makes us great in God's eyes even if what we say or do does not impress anyone or it is misunderstood. If people speak well or ill of us, let's not be too much bothered about it but learn to keep looking at our profile before God--which gets constantly updated. Seek to be great for God; in other words it is called

faithfulness before God. Honour that comes from God is the only true honour. Even if it does not shine here on earth, it will in eternity (Da.12:3).

Pointers along the way #453

When unforgiveness digs in

God wants us to be forgiving towards the others since we ourselves have received forgiveness without deserving it (Ep.4:32). Even when people do wicked things against us we must remember that we have no right to judge them; we have to leave that to God (Ro.12:19). If we imagine that we aren't going to let someone 'get away with it' we must realise that we ourselves would be in danger of losing our forgiveness (Mt.18:35).

God warns us not to be unforgiving towards anyone because that can give an opportunity to Satan to latch on to us (2Co.2:10,11). Making use of that 'access point' Satan is going to bombard us with all kinds of thoughts and imaginations that can finally ruin even our personality.

For example, if we have gone through some unfair, unjust treatment in our developing years, it is possible that we have raged against people in our mind even though we couldn't retaliate against them externally. We may have been upset with God for letting this happen to us. Satan would have made use of this opportunity to poison our mind towards those people or certain classes of people, and this would have shaped our thinking, response patterns, etc., from then onwards. The chances are that these people have passed out of our life and we have practically forgotten about those events, but the distortions that we experienced then in our thinking are still continuing. We may find it difficult now to deal with people in a mature way, we may be very touchy with people, we may find it difficult to face criticism (even the constructive ones), we may be jumping to negative conclusions about people

too quickly, etc. It may be difficult for us to realise that all these difficulties rose from an original root of bitterness against someone, which has not been cleared up so far (He.12:15).

The healing process must start with our forgiving all those who have hurt us, beginning with the ones who come up in our mind immediately. The issue is not whether they deserve to be forgiven, because we also cannot be forgiven on that basis (Mt.6:14,15). We 'let them go' by 'taking off our hands from their necks' to which we have been holding on so far. To be able to forgive them from our heart it is very helpful to remember how much the Lord has forgiven us (Co.3:13). Remember how Jesus forgave those those who had crucified Him, even while hanging on the cross (Lk.23:34).

If we have been upset with God about the problems we went through,

recognise that it was not His fault but those of the people who did this to us and our own response to it. We can ask Him to forgive us for unjustly blaming Him and also for our own sinful reaction when we went through our troubles.

When we set things right in our heart like this we can experience the peace and joy that comes to our life because Satan has lost a major point of access in our life! Now we can allow our mind to be transformed in godly ways with God's word and experience the newness of life.

Pointers along the way #454

Rebuilding walls

Walls protect us, and they also indicate what belongs to us. As children of God who are living in a sin-corrupted world among those who are still

children of the devil (Jn.8:44), we face constant attacks against our spiritual inheritance. Sometimes we get deceived and lower our guard, and sometimes we are caught off guard. Then the attack succeeds and the enemy (sin) makes an entry into our life by breaking down a part of our wall. When we realise what has happened, we repent, confess our sin and our fellowship with God gets restored (1Jn.1:9). Sometimes it is only after a long time that we come to our senses and realise that our wall has been compromised. We have become a bit tolerant towards things that God hates, and we may even have become 'broad minded' about the narrow path that leads to life (Mt.7:13,14). The fact is that our wall has been broken into, and it has become easier for the enemy to enter in and occupy parts of our property.

As long as we are alive, there is still hope, but only if we take quick action. (We shouldn't think we can deal with it afterwards.) If someone had encroached into our earthly property would we sit there quietly? But spiritual invasion is of eternal significance and has to be dealt with thoroughly. We confess our failure to God honestly and without excusing ourselves, and He forgives us. But we need to go further than that. We need to repair the break in the wall, fortify it and take steps to ensure that it does not happen again.

Modern preaching seems to project 'looking inside' as being absolutely dangerous! There is a morose looking inside that is very unhealthy. But a humble, sensible self-examination is the first way to health. By this we can get to know what went wrong, how it happened, and what we could have

done to prevent it. Many times we are unable to do this without bias because we have a natural ability to find excuses for ourselves and to blame others or circumstances. But if we seek the Holy Spirit He can guide us to all the truth concerning ourselves (Jn.16:13).

Rebuilding the wall involves identifying our weak spots (because of which we fell), the circumstances in which these weaknesses became active and the ways in which can avoid falling in future. Becoming aware of our weaknesses will help us to be alert to know when we are facing temptations in those areas. Identifying the circumstances that led to our fall can help us to become extra alert when they come up again, or to avoid them if possible.

We fall because our love for God, our fear of God and the fear of the

consequences are not strong enough. So a major part of rebuilding the wall is to strengthen these areas. We do that through spending time with the Lord with His word, talking to Him frankly and honestly as to our friend, seeking His grace and wisdom for the future, and being with other sincere Christians encouraging them and receiving encouragement. Then the attacks will become less and less effective.

Pointers along the way #455

Impossible commandments?

If someone takes your shirt, give him your coat also. If someone asks you to go with him a mile, go two. If someone strikes you on your right cheek, offer him the other too. Give to everyone who asks. If your eye offends you pluck it out. Etc. These are portions of the Sermon on the Mount. How on earth can we obey such 'commands'? Many people try to bring out contexts and cultural backgrounds to explain how we can obey them. Some wise guy has gone so far as to say that only a left handed person can slap us on our right cheek, and that such occasions are rare! But at the end of it all, we are very confused.

The problem is that we take these words of Jesus too literally. Some of us actually treat *every* statement in the Bible with a scientific precision that is

simply not there. Many times we don't take into consideration the figures of speech and the poetic licence the authors used or the literary genre under which the book or passage falls. For example, can we take verses from the Book of Proverbs (e.g., 22:6) as promises from God when we should know that proverbs are just statements of observations (sometimes mixed with poetic licence, e.g., 18:21), that are generally true but which can have exceptions?

If we look at the above statements from Jesus, do we really think that Jesus expects us to obey them literally? In the case of plucking out our eyes practically no one will imagine so. When we think about it we can also see that no one can really manage to give to *everyone* who asks. If we thought that at least this difficulty would not apply to turning the other

cheek, we would be shocked to see that Jesus Himself didn't do it when He was struck by an official in front of the high priest (Jn.18:22,23)! When we seek to understand the Bible we need to do much more than just look at the words.

If we look at the passage in Mt.5:38-48 we can see that basically Jesus was trying to teach us about our *attitude* to those who mistreat us. It is not a set of commandments to be obeyed literally. Don't we understand that loving our enemies can't mean liking them? It means forgiving them and returning good for all the evil they do to us. If we want to do this, we would have to overlook the many wrong things they have done for us and not ask for an eye for an eye, or in other words, think of demanding justice. So then we would need to be willing to suffer injustice (as all the examples show us), and still

seek to do good to them. Isn't this the message we get from this passage? Instead of this we waste our time figuring out how to obey them!

Using exaggerated statements to bring home a point was a pet approach that Jesus took many times. Think of how difficult it is for a camel to go through a needle's eye as an illustration to show how difficult it is for people who are rich in themselves to enter heaven (Mt.19:24). Why don't we get to the real point instead of trying to find explanations for the needle, Jewish customs, etc.?

Why do we like 'nice' preachers?

We are struggling with one or more of the problems of life and a preacher says, "God is going to change everything for the better. Your marriage is going to take a turn for the better. This new year is not going to be like the previous one, but one full of joy, peace, prosperity and blessings. God is going to make you the head and not the tail. You can command this mountain to be cast into the sea. These enemies whom you see you will see no more. The Lord is a warrior in your midst and He will fight your battles for you. Every promise that you claim will be yours, and no man will be able to stand against you. Etc." Won't we be really pleased?

Yes, we are mightily pleased. But then do these things happen as promised?

Hardly. We command a mountain to move, and it pretends as if it didn't even hear it. We speak life into our marriage and it only becomes worse. Etc. What has gone wrong?

These preachers have been only saying nice things to us and not the things that we *need* to hear. Perhaps we are suffering now as a result of some wrong choices we made, and no one tells us to set those things right. Perhaps we are careless and lavish in our spending but no one teaches us to be frugal and to live within our means. Maybe we don't have skills which we need for our job and we aren't bothered to acquire them, and the preachers tell us we would be promoted anyway. Maybe we haven't made the effort to understand our spouse and learn how we need to treat them, but the preachers are only telling us to speak healing into our marriage.

We are lazy, we love our own ways and couldn't be bothered to deny ourselves in order to do God's will, and so obviously we like to hear all about what God will do for us and not about what we need to do. We lack self-esteem because of the way we have grown up, and instead of finding our security and significance in a living relationship with God we like it when we are told that we are sons and daughters of the King with infinite power at our fingertips (or the tip of our tongue!) and all we need to do is to exercise our dominion over the world!

Preachers who tell us the truth, about what we are doing wrong, how to get things right with God and people, what things are of real value and what all should not be sought after, how we would need to deny ourselves daily if we want to follow Jesus and become like Him--will naturally be very

unpopular, especially when we have a wide choice of preachers of the nice type. True prophets in the Bible were not popular. All the 11 disciples of Jesus except John died as martyrs, and Paul too ended the same way. Isaiah was sawn in two alive. Jeremiah and Ezekiel were so unpopular before people and how they knew it!

If we want life and fellowship with Jesus, look for preachers who will tell us the truth about God and us. Don't look for an easy life in this world but expect opposition, ridicule and hatred. He who endures to the end will be saved.

Forgetful creatures

How quickly we forget where the Lord took us from and how much He had to wash us with His blood so that we would be acceptable to the Father! We even forget how unlike our Lord we are even now! And then we look down on the others, find fault with everyone else and wonder how they could be like that! We are like those Peter mentions in 2Pe.1:9 who have forgotten our purification from our sins, even while we realise that we are not really growing in the virtues of Christ.

Perhaps we have taught ourselves to forget what lies behind, quoting Php.3:13,14, without pressing on towards the life Christ Jesus has purchased for us, as the rest of the verse says! Don't we like to feel nice, thinking only about positive things,

about what the Lord has done, what He has prepared for us in heaven, etc., while, according to Peter, we have even become blind concerning our own spiritual condition?

Paul was not like this. Even when he became the chief of the apostles, had established many churches and written almost half of the New Testament, he never forgot how he had been a blasphemer and persecutor (1Ti.1:13). He was honest enough to acknowledge that sometimes he did not do what he should but did what he should not (Ro.7:19). He did not cover himself with a doctrine by which his sinful nature had been entirely removed. Even while making tremendous strides in spiritual warfare and conquering new spiritual territories he recognised that he was only an earthen vessel which was fragile and unattractive. Luke mentions about Paul losing

control when he was unjustly treated before the high priest (Ac.23:3), and Paul himself mentions about becoming depressed, discouraged, fearful, etc., at times (2Co.1:8;7:6). Paul acknowledged that he was very weak in himself, and that it was when he took that position of weakness that Christ was able to manifest His great power in his life (2Co.12:9).

Victory is not a static state to be attained to and retained, but a possible outcome of each battle we face.

Do we always acknowledge our weakness apart from Christ so that His power can be demonstrated in us? Or have we tried to think positively, put away 'negative' thoughts of weakness and go on declaring that we are strong and rich? Would that be a reason why Christ has not been able to show His power in us?

Here is one of those places where there has to be a balance in our thinking. We need to recognise and acknowledge how weak and hopeless we are without Christ (Jn.15:5), and at the same time that God's grace is sufficient for us (2Co.12:9) and that we can do all things through Christ (Php.4:13). One truth cannot be emphasised at the cost of the other. If we 'forget' our weakness we will also forget to wait on the Lord who alone can give us strength (Is.40:31), and if we do not hope for the grace of God to work in us (1Pe.1:13) we cannot receive what God has truly planned to give us.

How forgetful we are! How easily we move away from the Lord!

Pointers along the way #458

The dynamics of victory

"For sin shall not have dominion over you: for ye are not under the law, but under grace" (Ro.6:14). Now that we are under grace, under the new covenant through the blood of Jesus Christ, sin can no longer rule over us. But like many other promises, this one also does not work automatically. If it did, all people who are born again would immediately become like Christ! As it really is, it is a process called sanctification. There can be ups and downs. We won't come to a steady state condition called victory where we would be safe from falls. Think of life as a battle place where the enemy never stops attacking us, and if we get wounded now and then it should not shock us. We can fall easily when we are caught unawares or if we assume we cannot fall (1Co.10:12). Our

realistic aim is to win the war, and not to escape unscathed.

Before we came to the Lord sin had its way with us, and we were not too concerned about the sinfulness of sin. When grace came our conscience came alive too, and the new desire God put into our heart made us want to stop sinning (Ez.36:25-27). God's 'seed' within us gives us a new nature which cannot continue with sin (1Jn.3:9). We would have quickly stopped sinning except for the fact that we are still going to be tempted, and we have our free will that can decide what we finally do. God won't force us.

Whether it is the Devil or the world that tempts us, it is the sinful desires that abide in our 'flesh' (Ga.5:24) that ultimately entice us to sin (Jas.1:14). God's Holy Spirit within us encourages us to resist sin, but our flesh draws us towards sin (Ga.5:17). The Devil also

watches out for our weak moments when he can mount his attack against us (1Pe.5:8). It is at this point that we have to decide which way we would go. God's grace working in and around us strengthens us to resist sin, but the pull of temptation can be strong, especially in areas where we have yielded much in the past.

It is because of this that sometimes we fail to do what we know we ought to do (Ro.7:19). God does not want us to fall, but He knows that we might fall at times and has made provision for our forgiveness and getting back to Him (1Jn.2:1,2). He has given us His word to strengthen us, fellowship with other disciples to encourage one another, and the Holy Spirit to lead us step by step.

Some people take hold of verses that mention about what God has done for us and assume that He will do everything for us. Others look at verses

that tell us what to do and conclude that it is all about us. But like many other spiritual things, there is a mysterious combination of the divine and the human working to achieve the goal of victory. Because of God there is always reason to expect victory, but because of our humanness there is always a possibility of failure. Therefore we ought to lean on God with all our heart, and also watch out always for possible temptations. And if we fail we must get back to God immediately.

Pointers along the way #459

Forgiveness redefined?

One of the greatest truths revealed through Jesus Christ is that we can receive forgiveness of our sins from God freely because Jesus has died in our place and taken our punishment already (Ep.1:7). This forgiveness is

now available for every human being (1Jn.2:2). But we know that just because Jesus has paid for the sins of the whole world everyone is not forgiven automatically. Those who repent from their sins and believe in what Jesus has done for them receive this forgiveness, and they alone (Lk.24:47).

There are many twists to this teaching coming from different teachers. Some say that since forgiveness is a free gift through God's grace (unmerited favour), it would be wrong to require repentance from people before they can receive it. They think that repentance would amount to a 'work' that has to be done in order to 'earn' forgiveness. That is wrong. Repentance is really the change that takes place in our heart when we realise we are sinners deserving God's judgment. We no longer 'want' to sin.

Of course a true repentance in our heart will show its fruit outside too, as a changed behaviour. The Bible states very clearly that if there is no subsequent change in behaviour no salvation has taken place. Such a 'faith' is dead (Jas.2:17). Without a genuine repentance there is no genuine recognition of the need for salvation, and then such people do not really experience a genuine salvation.

Another wrong teaching is the one which *implies* that once God has forgiven us it doesn't really matter how we live, because all our sins--past, present and future--have already been paid for. It is in fact true that our future sins also have been included in the price Jesus paid. But this does not give us a licence to be careless with sin (Ro.6:1,15). A careless life of sin would indicate that there has been no genuine repentance on our side, and

also that we have not understood what it cost our Saviour to earn this forgiveness for us.

Some teachers say that since the blood of Jesus has been shed once for all for our sins, and they have all been forgiven, including the ones we fall into after we receive God's forgiveness, it would be insulting towards God if we go and confess our sins whenever we become aware of any. What an example of how wrong teachings can have an appearance of wisdom! The Bible tells us clearly to confess our sins in order to receive forgiveness (1Jn.1:9). The Old Testament which gives us many patterns that are later taught in the New Testament with true meaning tells us about how when someone becomes aware of a sin that he had committed unintentionally earlier he ought to present a sin offering to God (Le.4).

These types of wrong teaching illustrate a common mistake that many people make when they make doctrines based on individual verses without placing those verses in the context of the entire Bible. We must remember that the Bible gives us a progressive and distributed revelation of truth.

Pointers along the way #460

Sell all that you have ...

A rich young man came to Jesus one day and wanted to know how to get eternal life. Jesus understood that for this man his money was more important than God Himself, and asked him to sell off all that he had, give to the poor and then follow Him (Mt.19:21). When it came down to it this man chose to cling to his money and lose out on eternal life (v.22).

Jesus said at another time that if we

wanted to get the kingdom of God (which He compared to the pearl of greatest value) we would have to be willing to 'sell off' every other thing we considered to be valuable to us (Mt.13:45,46). To be His disciple we need to renounce all else (Lk.14:33).

In other words, God has to be Number 1 in our life. God is a 'jealous' God (Ex.34:14). Just as a husband is jealous over his wife and wouldn't like his wife to take interest in any other man, God wants our love, loyalty and devotion to be for Him alone. It is actually meaningless and senseless to recognise God as Lord and then treat something else to be more important. Anything that becomes more important to us than God becomes an idol to us, and that is why God warns us to *flee* from idolatry (1Co.10:14). God promises to give us grace to deal with any kind of temptation (v.13), but He

would have to turn away from us in sorrow if He finds us considering other things so much valuable that we are unwilling to give them up for His sake.

God promises to provide everything we need if we seek God's kingdom and His righteousness as *the topmost priority in our life* (Mt.6:33). Isn't it obvious why we don't receive many things we ask for if this equation is not right in our life?

Many people and things can become important to us, for which we give God up in the different situations of life where we are tested. Most of us know it when we are being tempted to do something wrong. Unfortunately we may not even recognise that we are being tested because we don't see 'anything wrong' in many things we do. What can be wrong in loving our family, working hard to earn more money to have a better life, enjoying

some friendship, hobby, pastime, sports or entertainment, wanting to work our way up the ladder to the top, having a 'dream' or ambition for our life, etc.? It is not about the right or wrong of such things. See if any of these things is being allowed to take supremacy over our relationship with God so that God gets neglected or sidelined in our heart and practical life. Is anything occupying our life so much that it is taking time away from God?

God is not asking us to stop taking any interest in anything other than Himself. Certainly there are many things we need for our life and what we need to do in life while we are on earth. But He does ask us to give Him the top position in our heart and mind (Mt.22:37;6:33). Each of us needs to know about our heart--what we really treasure there (Mt.6:21). God deserves

to be that treasure for each of us, if we claim to know Him.

Pointers along the way #461

Obeying from the heart

When we read the story of Balaam in Numbers 22-24 initially it looks as if he wanted to obey God. He actually kept his actions within the letter of what God told him to do. But it becomes clear that he wasn't obeying God from the heart. Right at the beginning it was clear what God wanted in the situation, but his desire for material rewards from the king of Moab kept him hoping that God might change His mind. God played up to Balaam in order to rebuke and teach him a lesson (Ps.18:26). But in the end it appears that Balaam never learnt his lesson (Re.2:14).

What kind of 'obedience' did Balaam

show? He didn't want to disobey God directly, but still wanted in his heart money and honour. Perhaps he thought that if he disobeyed God he would be punished. So he tried to see if God would change His mind. When God made His will very clear to him that he was to bless Israel and not to curse them, he complied! He went on to say many things about Israel in a truly prophetic way. But afterwards, in order to get the rewards from Moab he took advantage of the silence of God and enticed Israel to indulge in sexual immorality with Moab (Nu.25:1). He may have reasoned within himself that since God hadn't told him specifically not to do this he couldn't get punished for it.

Whenever we obey God *why* are we obeying Him? Is our heart in it? Or, are we obeying Him because we want some blessings from Him or because

otherwise we would be punished? We may think that this kind of obedience is fine because externally our actions are right. But God cannot be fooled. He who looks into our heart can see the motives and intentions of our heart (1Sa.16:7;1Co.4:5).

Those who serve their masters only when they are being watched, or those who submit only according to the letter (Co.3:22) may all be thinking that they are doing right. But the question is where our heart is. Is there truth (reality, genuineness) in our innermost being, or is our obedience only outward (Ps.51:6)?

Why would we try to 'cheat' God like this? Don't we know that we really cannot manage to do that? Don't we know that we are only fooling ourselves to think that we are being obedient when we behave this way? Aren't we actually hurting ourselves in

this way? If we do all things out of love for God and because that is what He deserves from us, won't we be happy and fulfilled inside and won't we also bring great delight to His heart? Why would we settle for this substandard, cheap 'obedience' when the genuine thing is within our reach?

My guess is that if we have not come to a place of wanting to obey God with our heart, mind and strength it is because we have not come into a love relationship with Him (Jn.14:21). Our relationship may be an Old Testament type--obeying out of fear of punishment or desire for reward. When we 'accepted' Jesus it may have been merely for earthly benefits rather than out of gratitude for saving us from our sins, even if we said the right words.

The high priest of our confession?

Some people believe that our words have some power (misquoting Pr.18:21) and they confess positive things they want to happen. Some people have gone on to say that Jesus as our High Priest receives what we confess, presents it to the Father and the Father makes it happen, misunderstanding another passage (He.3:1) where some translations depict Jesus as the 'high priest of our confession'. But the simple meaning is 'the high priest whom we confess, profess or acknowledge'. This is an example where people try to read meanings into the Bible (which are really not there) to substantiate their teachings. This is called 'eisegesis' or drawing in one's own ideas into a text, in contrast to exegesis which is to

bring out the real meaning from the text.

This heresy about making things happen by confessing with our lips has pervaded so much of the world that even big leaders take it without question. Some other heresies such as the 'health and wealth gospel', Jesus as an in-style, rich leader who promoted the 'good life', the 'gospel' of Christians dominating and ruling the earth, etc., seem to have this as a common belief. So we see people commanding healing, speaking peace into broken relationships, declaring freedom, and predicting rosy futures. The sad fact is that even when people don't see these things happening as a result of such confessions, they don't question the teaching.

Some people may take offence at my use of the word heresy for such teachings. But I call them heresy

because these teachings create an unrealistic and improper position for man as someone who has power and authority in himself. This is completely contrary to the fact all power and authority rest with God, the Creator (Ps.62:11). Even when we are adopted into His family as His children, we don't become divine but still remain human. But now God is able to work through us earthen vessels using His power and authority (2Co.4:7). When God gives us authority to exercise His power, power still belongs to God and He (and not we) is the one who executes His work through us as His instruments.

A humble, godly man will pray and ask *God* to do mighty things for him and through him. He will not presume to take that authority on himself. He will always seek for *God's will* to be done (Mt.6:10), and not imagine that God

may be commanded to do what he wants! This last one is another heresy that says God wants us to 'command' Him (Is.45:11). When we see this phrase in some translations (KJV,NKJV) don't we need to see 'red' and examine things more? "And you shall commit to Me the work of My hands" (NASB). "will you command me concerning my children and the work of my hands?" (ESV). "How dare you tell me what to do with the work of my own hands!" (NET).

The other problem is that these teachings lead people away from the *true* way of life, of becoming entirely dependent on God (Jn.5:30), taking up our cross, denying ourselves and doing God's will (Lk.9:23).

Pointers along the way #463

Launch out into the unknown

When God called Abram to leave his father's family and follow Him, He just said that He would lead him to the place He had chosen (Ge.12:1). Abram had no idea where this would be, but he trusted enough in God to leave that in His hands and to follow Him still. When we start our spiritual life with God, we too don't know what lies ahead. But if we aren't willing to place our future--our life--into God's hands, we really don't trust Him. We may agree with many things God says, believe in the gospel and accept Jesus as our Saviour--to ensure our place in heaven. But if we aren't willing to hand over our entire life into God's hands, letting Him choose the destination and the paths, we don't really trust Him.

Each of us is to be a living sacrifice for God (Ro.12:1). This means that it is not a one time commitment we make in our life. We certainly need to start

with that commitment, and from then onwards every day we are to be sacrifices for God--where we sacrifice our desires, pleasures, ambitions and plans in order to accomplish God's will for us. It is from this sacrifice that a fragrant aroma will rise up and bless the others around us. Many Christians have got it wrong here. They use the latest techniques to make a plan for serving God, and then they ask God to bless that plan. Instead of finding out God's plan for their life and fulfilling it, they are trying to go in their own human understanding.

Some of you may have never actually handed over your entire life to God for Him to own and lead. It doesn't matter if you are trying to live a good life before God and contributing in cash or kind towards serving God and people. Perhaps you have believed the lie of the Devil and thought that if you

followed God's plan you might lose out on life. Young people fear that God might give them an ugly person in marriage and take them to a remote place to suffer. But God plans are *always* for our very best (Je.29:11), and people who have trusted Him have experienced it. In eternity there won't be any man who can say that he trusted in God and was put to shame (Ps.25:3).

Perhaps you are an older person who has so far led a mediocre Christian life doing all the right things but never experiencing closeness with God. Perhaps what is lacking is that you have never fully trusted God with your life.

Some of you may have made some commitment like this earlier, but the cares of life may have taken you off the path of God. Now you are feeling guilty and ashamed of yourself and

have given up hope of any better life from God. But if the prodigal son had a chance, so do you if you would go back to God in the same way.

Have we made the mistake of thinking that we trust in God to give us what we need, but hesitating to be entirely available to God to be led by Him?

We are not talking necessarily about resigning our job and serving God full time. But all of us can serve Him full time in every place if we are yielded to Him.

Pointers along the way #464

Misled by a spirit?

The Devil once suggested to Jesus that He should jump down from the pinnacle of the temple so that when He came down without getting hurt people would be amazed and recognise who He really was (Mt.4:5,6). Since this

was after the Father had miraculously launched Him into His public ministry, it might have appeared to be an attractive idea. Had Jesus accepted this suggestion it would have been suicidal, because as Jesus Himself recognised, it was trying to test God (v.7). It would have been presuming on God's protection for something God had not asked Him to do. Aren't we also tempted in the same way at times? What we need to ask ourselves is not whether God is capable of doing what we want but whether He has told us to do it. There a big difference between the two, sometimes as much as life and death?

We can be tempted to 'trust' in God for healing and stop taking medicine because we think God will surely heal us because He can. Certainly God can heal any sickness; He can even raise people from the dead. But has He told

us He would heal us this way? Doesn't He heal many times through medicines? If God hasn't told us specifically and we refuse to take medicines, it can be suicidal.

When we get converted our sudden love for the Lord makes us wonder if He would want us to resign from our job and become a full time worker. How many people have followed their feelings here, only to find themselves in dire straits later!

What is missing in situations like these is not a love for God or trust in His ability, but an inability to discern His will in particular situations. Noting our love and zeal for God the Devil may put fantastic ideas into our mind which look attractive to us because of the novelty, excitement, challenge and the thought of the possible impact on God's kingdom. Usually we assume we have 'faith' for this action because of our

belief in God's ability to do great things. But true faith, in such situations, also involves having heard from God what He wants us to do (Ro.10:17).

All our thoughts are not our own. Do we recognise that many of the ideas we get could be from the Deceiver? Even when our heart is right before God, it does not automatically follow that we know what God wants us to do. Especially when we have offered ourselves to God as living sacrifices we will be particularly tempted to attempt fantastic things 'for God'. Sincerity is not enough to protect us because if the Devil tried to make Jesus jump from the temple top, he can try similar things with us. When we look around we can see several who have been deceived like this, and perhaps we ourselves have made such mistakes.

God is almighty. But we cannot assume

that whatever *we* plan God will back us with His power. One of the mottos for Jesus was to only do what the Father told Him to do (Jn.5:19). We need to *wait* on God in prayer to know His will for us, and we also need to think and consult with others to make sure we have heard God right.

Pointers along the way #465

Our anger and the sun

"Be angry and do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and give no opportunity to the devil" (Ep.4:26,27). In wanting to obey this some people get into a frenzy trying to set things right in time if they have got angry with someone just before sunset. Some others who get angry after sunset console themselves thinking that they have time till next sunset to set things right! How silly! These people are going wrong because they take words of the Bible word by word, without bothering to consider context, style, genre, figures of speech, etc. For them every word in the Bible (except for those which are obviously from the Devil or some wicked people) is a word of God to be obeyed. They don't even take into consideration the fact that the Bible was inspired by God but

written through human beings, bringing in a certain human element also into the language.

In the above case it should be clear that Paul is using a figure of speech when he talks about the setting of the sun, intending only to convey the meaning that if we get angry we should control ourselves or settle things *as soon as possible*. If we hold on to our anger (even if we hide it in our heart without expressing it, turning it into resentment, grudge, complaint, bitterness, etc.) we might give the Devil a point of contact to trouble us further with. So it is important that as soon as we become aware of our anger rising up within us, we must recognise it and deal with it in the right way. The wrong way, of course, is to express it without control, damaging others and us in the process.

How many sincere Christians go

wrong in interpreting the Bible because they take an entirely literal approach! Another bloomer is where someone thinks that God's will for everyone is to prosper, be healthy and to prosper in the soul quoting 3Jn.2 (KJV). It is because they believe it is God's word for all, and don't realise that even though it was inspired by God to be included in the Bible, it is just a common greeting and best wishes from one man to another in a private letter! It cannot be taken as a promise at all!

God's word has been given to us not to be taken as a set of rules to be obeyed but in order that through it we can get to know God. It is a means God uses to reveal Himself to us as we read it in reverence and love. But many people read it as if the words have to be examined and taken as we would study a book of law (Jn.5:39,40). Sometimes

the details which one can derive from the words bury the simple meaning behind those words. For example many try to squeeze meaning out of every detail of a parable when all the intention Jesus had was to illustrate a simple point.

The word of God is there for even simple people to believe and understand. But it is not there for people to try out their mental skills to bring out meanings that God never intended (2Pe.1:20). Don't we need to read things in their context and in the context of the rest of the Bible too?

Pointers along the way #466

Money empowers!

Nobody is fool enough to say we don't need money. It's something we can't live without, something that makes our life miserable if we have too little of it and comfortable when we have (more than) enough of it. Jesus asked one young man to sell off everything he had, give to the poor and follow Him (Mt.19:21). This was because Jesus saw that this man's love of money was the one thing that blocked his way to God. But Jesus didn't tell everyone to do this, because we all need money to take care of our needs and also to help others around us in need. Money empowers us in this world. We think if we have enough of it we can do what we want. Many young people have set up as their ambition, "Whatever I do, I must make a lot of money."

But the way to money is laid with many

traps or snares. Paul says, "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). There are temptations to tell lies, hide certain facts, cheat people, workplaces or governments, make false statements, evade tax, 'launder money', gamble, take unreasonable risks, carry out harmful activities, and even to kill to get more money.

A more subtle snare is the one which gives us a sense of independence and omnipotence. When we have money we feel we can manage or handle everything or everyone. Once children begin to earn, they don't need their parents any more, and once wives earn enough on their own they become independent of their husbands. Siblings fight for property, and even churches get divided on money issues. Slowly,

unconsciously, money becomes more important than everything else, including what God wants, people and relationships. Isn't God right in saying that the love of money is the root of all kinds of sin (1Ti.6:10)?

Even though we know that money gives us only a false sense of security, and God is our ultimate security, we still look for the security of money. We know 'rich' and 'poor' are relative terms--we consider those who have more than us as rich, and those who have less than us consider us rich. But we don't consider ourselves rich, and we still seek for becoming more rich!

Many Christians justify themselves in their pursuit of money saying that it is not money that is evil, but the love of money (1Ti.6:10). That is true in itself, but the problem is that it is not easy to distinguish between love of money and looking for more money for our needs,

because we conveniently define love of money as 'a craze after money' and say that we are free from it. But the Bible warns us to *flee* from the love of money, because it is so near to us, and tells us that it is only possible if we redirect our seeking towards righteousness, godliness, love, faith, perseverance and gentleness (v.11). This cannot be a once for all decision, but a constant walk with carefulness and a fear of slipping up. Developing a heart for giving can be a big help to remain alert.

Tying ourselves to the past

Have you come across people who keep telling us how they were treated unjustly by someone in the past or suffered a traumatic event and how they are suffering because of that today? It becomes sadder when they make their past experience an excuse for their substandard life now, and virtually bind themselves to living like that for the rest of their life. What is happening here is that they have found a 'reason' for their present misery and have come to believe that there is nothing they can do to change things because of what they have gone through. Because they have managed to put the blame on someone else, they think it frees them from the responsibility to do something about it. But actually their problem is that they don't realise they *can* deal with the

past, put it aside and move on to a better future. Perhaps you are like this yourself?

If anyone had reasons to justify himself for being bitter and moping around in self pity for the rest of his life, it would be Joseph. He was betrayed by his brothers, sold off as a slave, falsely accused of a crime and jailed, and forgotten and neglected by one who could have helped him. But he had a different attitude and approach towards his past, and we can imagine that it was a continual interaction with God with regards to his life that kept him on the growth track. At the end he was able to tell his brothers that God had turned the evil they intended for him into something good not only for him but even for them (Ge.50:20). No trace of bitterness.

On the other hand Esau is an example who *didn't* have the right attitude like

Joseph. He was bitter towards Jacob for cheating him of his birthright and his father's blessings (Ge.27:41), forgetting his own responsibility for it, and it doesn't appear that he ever gave it up fully.

God is the Author of new beginnings (Re.21:5). However much damage our lives have suffered in the past, He can do a turnaround in unexpected ways, and give us a new future. He challenges us, e.g., that even if our past has been of the worst type we can have the best of the future if we would acknowledge our need and repent (Is.1:18,19). He doesn't promise to keep all evil away from us or to deliver us out of it whenever it comes near us. But He does promise to turn it around and make it work something for our (eternal) good (Ro.8:28,29).

If God is to be able to do this for us, what do we need to do from our side?

Certainly we need to clear hearts of all traces of bitterness towards people who have inflicted harm to our lives (He.12:15,16), and trust in God to turn things around for our good. We need to learn how to 'forget' the things that are behind (break away from the past by stopping the habit of excusing our wrong attitudes and actions using our past) and press on towards the greater good that God has planned for us (Php.3:13,14). This has to be a conscious decision and action on our part. Then we make way for God to take us forward.

Pointers along the way #468

'Surviving' on false hope?

After God gave Abraham the promise for a son he had to wait many years before he finally received a son. Abraham was holding on to hope even though all practical basis for hope was fading away as he and his wife went beyond the age of childbearing (Ro.4:18). God was delighted with this kind of faith, and declared Abraham as 'righteous' (v.22). This was a matter of trusting in God and holding on to His promise even though everything natural appeared to be against that. But one key point here we must not forget is that it was because God had spoken specifically to Abraham that he hoped in this way. Faith comes by hearing the 'rhema' word of God (Ro.10:17), which is a Greek word generally used for a spoken word. Our faith also must be based on what we 'hear' from God

personally. On the other hand if Abraham wanted a son badly and because he knew that nothing was impossible with God he kept hoping he would get a son would there have been any guarantee that he would actually get a son?

Have you seen preachers who keep the expectations of the audience high with loud promises of the coming revival or a visitation of the Holy Spirit with extraordinary healings and miracles? Nothing seems to happen, but 'hope' is being kept up with stories of what happened elsewhere and the phrenetic movements and words of the preacher. People keep waiting for things to happen and finally many go away disappointed. Countless number of people who turned up for healing, especially people from other religions, turn away sadly and some of them even turn away from God. True hope does

not disappoint (Ro.5:5), and so obviously these people were being fed with a false hope.

This is not to say that one should not hope for revival or healing. Obviously we hope for such things because we know God can do such things and also because He is a good God who wants to give us good things. But isn't there a difference between hoping (or desiring) that God will do something for us and hoping like Abraham because God has spoken to us specifically? In the second case we need to 'hope against hope' like Abraham did till we receive the promise. But many times things fall under the first category where we are just wishing that God would do something for us, without having received a 'spoken' promise from God, i.e., receiving a conviction in our heart. In such situations, if we wait a

reasonable amount of time for something we are hoping for and it doesn't happen don't we need to check if we are 'hoping' without any promise from God? In such cases if we get disappointed we can see that it was not because God didn't fulfil His promise but we were just wishing for something from God.

Many people keep hoping that their marriage will improve, their children will change, etc., without doing anything practical to deal with those situations and then get upset with God when it doesn't happen. We mustn't rest on 'baseless' false hopes but ask God to show us what we should do.

How will the truth set us free?

Many people quote Jn.8:32 to say that it is by knowing the truth that we would be set free from sin and bondage. But it should be clear that just knowing is not enough, because after knowing it we would still have the option to ignore what we know or to disobey it. Adam and Eve did just that, and so may we. Knowing the truth gives us the opportunity to follow it and become free as a result! The previous verse makes it very clear that it is those who continue to follow His teaching who will know the truth and get free (v.31).

Knowing has to be followed by doing what we know. Jesus said that those who heard His words and did according to them were the wise ones (Mt.7:24). He pointed out in the same

passage how those who merely heard His words (and came to know the truth) but did not do them were foolish people whose houses collapsed (v.26). In addition, for these people who had come to know the truth and yet did not obey, the judgment would be more severe (Lk.12:47).

We can make a similar mistake if we think that all we need in order to be transformed into the likeness of Jesus is to 'behold' His glory (2Co.3:18). We may imagine that as we discover more and more of the glorious truths concerning Christ in His word, or, as some others would put it, the Holy Spirit opens our eyes and reveals the glory of Jesus to us, that is all we need to become transformed into His image. But these truths may fill our minds, but if we don't walk according to them they will only remain as knowledge in our heads and not produce any

transformation. It is our 'following' Jesus that will cause the transformation.

Jesus said that if we wanted to follow Him, we would have to take up our cross, deny ourselves and follow Him (Lk.9:23). First we need to know His truths so that we can follow them. But in order to follow Him we will have to deny our own will and die to ourselves! Just knowing the truths or seeing His glory will not be sufficient!

In every part of our Christian life there is a mysterious (mysterious because we cannot understand things fully) combination of the divine and the human. Even when God's offer of salvation is entirely due to His grace and not due to any merit on our part, we can receive it only through our faith in Him. We cannot do God's part, but neither can things work without our part. Without taking this aspect of

God's dealings with us into consideration, that the divine and human elements have to work in proper unison, if we take different verses by themselves and try to interpret them as being entirely dependent either on God or on us we could go wrong.

We need to develop the habit of not only checking every teaching or experience that we face with the word of God, but also comparing different portions of God's word with the rest of His word. God's truths have been revealed in the Bible in a distributed manner, and we can avoid a lot of mistakes if we look for truths from the Bible as a whole.

Pointers along the way #470

Scars of victory

Those who have been defeated enjoy their victory. Usually God gives us victory only after we have had our noses rubbed in the muck of defeat, to convince us that it is not of us but because of His grace. In some rare cases, as in the case of an alcoholic for whom God took away his desire instantaneously, victory is quick and lasting. But in most cases, victory comes after a long time of battle with many defeats and occasions when we felt like giving up. And then we have many scars in our life that remind us of our past defeat, and reminding us also that we should beware lest we think we don't have to be careful about this anymore (1Co.10:12). Sometimes these scars are in the form of people we sinned against who remind us by their presence who we used to be.

Sometimes we are suffering from the consequences of our past sins--loss, punishment, bad reputation, etc.--which do not allow us to forget where God has brought us from. *Sometimes these scars remain in the form of a weakness in us that tempts us now and then to sin again.*

We should not think that because we are being tempted to sin we don't have victory. Victory means that God has now given us strength to overcome when we are tempted. Victory does not mean elimination of the desire that tempts us. Of course this sinful desire becomes less and less powerful in our life as we experience more victory. But it is still possible that if we become careless that same desire can overcome us and land us in defeat. We must not forget that the devil is walking around looking for people he can deceive when he can catch them

sleeping (1Pe.5:8). He is not kind or understanding towards us (!) but mean and cruel, and he is always on the look out for our moments of weakness.

A challenging example which God gives us is that of Abraham who 'hoped against hope' to receive the son whom God had promised (Ro.4:18-21). Translating this to our fight for victory it means that even though we experience defeat after defeat in any area of life we continue to hope in God for victory which He has promised us (Ro.6:14). We don't give up after some time saying it doesn't work, like in the story of the fox which jumped at the grapes and finally gave up saying the grapes were sour in any case! Of course it hasn't worked for us (so far), but God will fulfil His promise for us one day if we don't give up in the meantime (He.3:14). Honesty makes us say that we are still defeated, but at the

same time we confess our hope that God will give us victory in the end. It is not honesty to say that it hasn't worked for us and therefore God's promise is not true.

God has created us with the ability to choose--to yield to the temptation or to resist it--and He promises to give us grace to make the right choice. Perhaps we haven't yet become strong enough to resist temptation, or we are doing it the wrong way. If we feel the temptation let's look for victory and not assume that defeat is on its way.

Time for repentance

It has been rightly pointed out by some that until we come to the place where we ask ourselves, "Shall we continue in sin now that we are under grace?" we have not truly understood grace as a favour from God that is entirely independent of our merit. But in turning away from an old covenant based, legalistic, condemning approach to life, some people fantasise grace beyond truth. What they say essentially amounts to a state where we are only to receive everything freely from God, and to do anything from our side is counted as an insult to grace. We cannot do anything to earn grace, but grace will cause us to do certain things. Though there is some truth in what they say, it is not the complete truth.

When we receive this unmerited favour

from God, when we see we have been given such a goodness and mercy from God in spite of what we really deserve because of our sins, there will be a corresponding response from our part. Our gratitude to the Lord for what He has done would immediately cause us to decide to live the rest of our life entirely for Him, not serving our desires but seeking to do His will in everything and at all times. If there is no such response, but life continues more or less as usual except for some external changes, we must know that we have not really seen grace. "For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all people. It trains us to reject godless ways and worldly desires and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age" (Tit.2:11-13). If grace has entered our lives, it will begin to transform our attitudes, understanding, desires, and motives of life, and our external life

will also begin to get changed because of this inward transformation.

For example, some 'grace' teachers tell us that if we sin or backslide after we have come to the Lord we should not allow any trace of condemnation or guilt to come to our mind but we should rejoice in the free acceptance that God has given us. They remind us that our acceptance does not depend on our being acceptable to God by our life, but that Jesus died for us while we were still sinners in order to show God's love for us which is unconditional (Ro.5:8). This latter part is true, isn't it? We don't have to allow guilt or shame to condemn us and make us doubt whether God has given up on us or if He still loves us. He has actually promised us that He would *never* leave or forsake us (He.13:5). But this does not mean that guilt has no purpose.

When we have done wrong, guilt comes to help us to repent (2Co.7:10,11). It helps us to examine what went wrong, why we yielded to temptation, and what the Bible tells us to do in such circumstances, and helps us to seek God for forgiveness and help for the next time. While we should not wallow in despair or doubt after a failure, there needs to be true repentance that can train us for the future. Without this repentance, we will not become stronger to face the next temptation.

Pointers along the way #472

Wives, submit to your husbands

In real marriages there are different scenarios happening around this theme. The increasing trend is for egalitarian roles where there is no question of wives submitting to their husbands since they are both equal! We can see the increasing number of marriage vows which omit the dirty word 'submit'. The emphasis here is on equal sharing of responsibilities between the husband and wife in as many areas as possible. What exists in many tradition driven marriages is that husbands dominate their wives, which the husbands consider as their right, and consequently there is abuse and denial of rights for wives. Some wives meekly give in to their husbands without any dissent. Some wives even dominate their husbands!

None of the above is what God has in mind for families. "Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord" (Ep.5:22), "Wives, submit to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord" (Co.3:18). Certainly there is a sense in which everyone is to submit to one another (Ep.4:21), which is to recognise and value someone else's unique strengths and role and to accede to them. This applies even in the husband-wife relationship. But at the same time we must not forget that God defines a certain role for the wife in relation to her husband and it is that she should recognise he has authority over her (1Pe.3:5,6) and yield to that. God has made such an arrangement for a family in order to maintain order and harmony.

Husbands need to recognise that wives are not inferior persons (Ga.3:28), and respect their role and contribution in

the family. When God gave a wife as a help to her husband (Ge.2:18), one such help is a different opinion which can balance his own many times! A wise husband will realise this, and consider her views also before he makes a decision on important matters in the family. He also takes advantage of his wife's strengths which complement his own. At the same time he does not hand over the authority for making decisions entirely to his wife in the guise of loving her.

Wives who recognise that the authority that God has given husbands is for their good and protection (husbands are given as helps to their wives!) find it easier to submit. The responsibility for making major decisions and *facing the consequences* will be with the husbands! Yet wives have to handle this in a responsible manner, not failing to give their own ideas to their

husbands before allowing them to take the final call.

No healthy marriage can work without disagreements. If either spouse gives in to the other for the sake of avoiding conflicts it will deprive the marriage of their inputs and they will be neglecting their responsibilities. A mature relationship is where differences are recognised and appreciated and the couple knows when to give in amicably.

Husbands who love their wives make it easier for their wives to submit, and wives who subject themselves to their husbands make it easier for their husbands to love them!

Pointers along the way #473

Philanthropy impresses!

Everybody, including unbelievers, likes those who show kindness to

others. Those who make sacrifices to alleviate the burdens of others are highly admired by all. It is not difficult to obtain donations for most charitable works. It makes us feel good to give something or do something in such contexts.

But is it from the goodness of our hearts that we seek to serve others in this way or do we have other motives? Some people obviously do good in order to gain some 'points' with God. They think God will bless them or even overlook some of their sins for their 'sacrifice'. Typically people who commonly resort to many unrighteous practices hope that they can compensate for it by doing some good.

There are others who do good for the sake of the notice and admiration they get from others. They may not be so eager to do good from their own initiative, but if someone asks them,

and especially if their name is going to be mentioned publicly, come up in the list of donors, or engraved on something they donate, they will be happy to give much more than they really like to give. Jesus said that their 'reward' would be just the honour from man, and they would not have any blessing from God (Mt.6:1,2).

How different it would be if we do good *from the heart* and *as unto the Lord* (Col.3:23)! Then it would first of all be genuine, and it would be pleasing to the Lord. When it comes from the heart it does not wait for appeals from people, and when it is done unto the Lord we are not looking for applause to come from people. It gives us tremendous joy to be a part of God's hand reaching out to needy people. And if people's praise comes our way we can quietly attribute it to God who took us unworthy sinners,

washed us with the blood of His Son, accepted us as His children, and enabled us to do that good deed for which He provided an opportunity (Ep.2:10). We can also acknowledge ourselves as 'unworthy servants' who did only what our Master equipped us to do (Lk.17:10).

At the same time we must recognise that it is not far from us to take delight in the admiration of people and take the glory that only belongs to God. It's in our flesh, and the delight comes naturally and spontaneously. The more we recognise the importance of 'grace' over our lives, and how foolish it is to value honour from man as being more important than what God thinks about us, the better we can learn to combat this evil tendency in our flesh. Satan is quick to place thoughts in our minds about how good we are, how much sacrifice we are willing to make for

others, etc. But we need to be *really* convinced in our mind that anything that is good in us is from the Lord (Jas.1:17;Ro.7:18). Modern teachers tell us to think 'good' thoughts about ourselves, and to hide from us how hopeless we were till God redeemed us, and how incapable we are even now without God's help. We are strong in the Lord, but only as long as we abide in the Lord (Jn.15:4,5).

Jesus followers

This is a new term that has cropped up rather recently. Instead of calling themselves believers in Jesus people are saying that they are His followers. A nice way to interpret this is that such people imply that merely believing is not enough and they are seeking to follow Jesus. But another way to look at it is that following Jesus is not always the same as being His disciples!

When Jesus was on earth there were multitudes following Him around. Jesus was not particularly impressed with that and He told them plainly that they were only following Him to get some benefits for themselves (Jn.6:26,27). We can be sure that a large percentage of people who follow Jesus today are really only seeking material benefits. Many want His

blessings and so they are prepared to do certain things to get into His good books, as they think. They will go to church and even get baptised. They may read the Bible and pray dutifully. But this kind of external behaviour is all that has essentially changed in their life. They have not become disciples.

Have we really seen ourselves as those who cannot manage without a Saviour? Have we come to Jesus because we have seen how our sins have separated us from God (Is.59:2), and the gulf between us is so large that no amount of effort on our part can build a bridge across? Much preaching of the 'gospel' these days does not show people as sinners before God who need a Saviour but as a quick fix for all their earthly problems and as an insurance for the life to come. So, many followers of Jesus have actually not entered into His fold through the

gate but climbed over the wall somehow.

Once a man comes to see himself in his hopeless position and comes to Jesus (Mt.11:28) he will find Him as the best thing that has ever happened to him in life. When he realises that Jesus has washed away all his sins with His blood, made him acceptable to God as His child, and opened up the treasures of spiritual blessings to Him freely (Ep.1:3), as a gesture of unmerited favour, he offers himself to God as a living sacrifice (Ro.12:1). From then onwards his desire is to do His will, exalt His name and show everyone around by his entire life how grateful he is to God (Mt.6:9,10). He wants to learn from Jesus, become like Him and follow Him wherever He leads him. He loves Jesus more than all his loved ones on earth (Mt.10:37) and all that he has (Lk.14:33), and follows Him

being willing to do His will rather than his own (Lk.9:23).

The ownership of our life has moved from our hands to Jesus. It is no longer about what we like or what we want, but about Jesus. That is how it is with a disciple of Jesus. This is very different from merely believing and accepting facts about Jesus or following Him externally. The transformation for a disciple is essentially inside, from where it begins to show fruit outside too.

The battle in the life of a disciple is to keep himself always in the position of abiding in Christ (1Pe.1:13).

By grace, not as a result of works

That God gives us salvation not because we have done anything to deserve it but entirely due to unmerited favour He shows us is the foundation of the new covenant which He established through Jesus (Ep.2:8,9). This covenant replaced the earlier covenant made through the Law (which is now called the *old* covenant) under which God rewarded people according to how they obeyed His commandments (De.28:1,15). Under the old covenant one had to *earn* blessings by one's obedience. But God knew all the time that no man could really manage to earn his salvation because of the weakness of the flesh (Ro.3:20), and when He gave the old covenant He was only waiting for people to recognise and acknowledge

their weakness and inability before He offered them the new covenant.

We know what it is to try to please God by trying to be good, doing good things, etc. We realise after some time that it is impossible because we always come short of the requirements of God's law. If we managed to keep the Law in some part, we failed in another. But when we came to that awareness of helplessness, we were glad to be offered the new covenant of grace, that God was willing to accept us in whatever condition we were in, because His Son Jesus had taken the punishment for our sins and met the righteous requirements of the Law on our behalf (Ro.8:3). We understand that we are already pleasing to God because we have believed and accepted what He was offering us through Jesus (cf.Jn.3:18). We now learn to live in a way that is pleasing

to Him (2Co.5:9), not to gain our salvation but out of joy of having been saved.

Some Christians who look at the words of the Bible merely literally and do not look beyond the words to God's heart revealed in those words get into confusion thinking that we are not to do any 'works' at all because our salvation is by grace alone. They interpret 'grace' as something so entirely on God's part that anything man does is considered as works. Some of them even look at repentance and faith as works. That is silly. When God offers us this salvation our faith is just our confidence in Him and our believing in what He has done for us. It is clear that only if we believe in Him we will stretch out our hands and receive what He is offering to us. We could refuse to believe, and so it is our faith that will determine whether we receive this

salvation or not. It is not that we earn our salvation through faith, but it is the means through which we receive this salvation that is offered to us as an unmerited favour (Ep.2:8).

When we hear the Gospel it is our realisation that we are sinners and we need a Saviour that draws our heart to Jesus and His Gospel. Our repentance is a part of our response to this conviction that the Holy Spirit works in our heart when we hear the gospel (Ac.11:18). It then leads us to faith. It should be clear that repentance and faith do not earn our salvation but our response to the offer of salvation.

What if we haven't received the promise

There are many promises from God that are conditional--we need to do certain things in order to receive what is promised. Some others are dependent only on our believing God. But hasn't it happened to every one of us that we feel we have fulfilled the conditions but God hasn't fulfilled His promise? What has been our response then?

Say we have been struggling against a particular temptation, and even though there are many promises that guarantee victory we still haven't actually experienced it. When this happens many people seem to conclude that there isn't going to be any victory for them. Some of them even begin to think that because they haven't experienced victory the victory some others claim

is not real.

How would it reflect on God if what He promises does not actually happen? When we look at this question we will immediately realise that God being who He is it cannot be that He is unable to keep His promises. Then it will occur to us that there must be some other reason why this is happening. Perhaps we haven't understood the promise in the way God meant, we haven't met the requirements, or perhaps the promise is still on its way and we need to wait in hope and patience. But it would be ridiculous to believe that God has promised us something and then conclude that it can't or won't happen. It would be truly tragic if on top of that we go around telling others it can't happen. God is true, He can't lie and He won't even bluff. What He says He will do, He *will* do, if we would only

believe and hold on to the promise without wavering (He.10:36).

What we need to do when we haven't received some promise of God is a lot of introspection, sitting before the Lord and asking Him to teach us how to understand what is happening to us, why it is happening, what He has actually promised and what we need to do from our side to allow it to happen. This needs humility and honesty. We admit that we may have understood things wrongly or only partly, we recognise that He is able to do what He has promised and will do it, and we are willing to wait for Him to do things in His time and in His way.

Many times we don't realise that God has a big picture in mind, since we are only able to see a small part of it at a time. Perhaps He has many things to teach us before we are ready to receive the promise. The training of

our mind when we go through perplexities and then seek God out to get His wisdom is something very precious (2Co.4:17)--which we can miss if God straightaway sent us the promises. How would we learn endurance if there is nothing to endure? Is it not to help us to value God's gifts that He wants us to ask and keep on asking (Mt.7:7)? If we haven't received the promise let's just say *we haven't received it yet* rather than imply that God's promises don't work.

Pointers along the way #477

Are we to judge, or not?

When the spirit of the times agrees with one of the teachings of the Bible, "Do not judge," something is wrong! When the people of the world want their freedom to do whatever they want and they don't want anyone to question them, Jesus' words really become handy (Mt.7:1). If we Christians oblige meekly thinking that we are being loving, they have got us fooled!

God is love. He has compassion on everyone who has fallen. He does not want any to perish. But He is holy too. He hates sin and will not hesitate to judge anyone who would not repent. Why then do we, His children, only want to be loving and nice to everyone? Don't we want to become like our Father in every aspect of His character?

The truth is that we don't want to be rejected by the people around us. They will appreciate all the sacrifices we make to serve them. But they will not tolerate any hint from our side that anything they do is wrong. We dare not use the word 'sin' on them if we want a nice reputation! But then our salt is losing its flavour and our light becoming dim.

If we stand with God and proclaim the truth and then some people's behaviour is discovered to be sin is that judging them? In that case Jesus was very judgmental, so much so that they got mad with Him and killed Him. But He wasn't judgmental at all, in reality, because He had come to save and not to judge (Jn.12:47). It was just that His life, words and action were so holy that it convicted them of their sins (Jn.3:19,20). The mistake we make is that by trying to be non-judgmental and

showing love and mercy instead we have limited God's witness to the world.

In order to avoid offending people we would hesitate to say that Jesus is the *only* way to God (Jn.14:6;Ac.4:12), and talk about 'God' without mentioning the name of Jesus. In this way we omit informing the people that they ought to get in line with Jesus giving up all other gods. We talk about loving and accepting sinners without making them feel guilty (another word the world hates), forgetting that it is guilt that would lead them to repentance and salvation (2Co.7:10). We don't want to tell anyone, do we, that their lifestyle is going to lead them to hell unless they repent, and tell them that Jesus has actually come for them to save them from their sins.

It is not just that our witness suffers, but our own attitude to sin is getting

cooled down in the process. When we see sin around us if we don't allow ourselves to think and speak about its sinfulness but try to excuse the 'poor' sinners and accept them, we wouldn't be able to hate that sin in our own heart. It is another thing altogether to call sin by its name and hate it, but feel sorry for the ones who are caught in it. Then our accepting those people will not include tolerating their sin as something acceptable. But we would want them to be saved.

'Judge not' means not to sit in judgment over others looking down on them. We are alive only because of grace.

Is sanctification optional?

There are people whose main struggle is not being sure of their acceptance with God. Some think that it depends on their being good enough or keeping up practices such as reading the Bible, praying daily, etc. Some others cannot believe God loves them because they are aware of their sins. Imagine their surprise when they hear that God accepts them through a gift of grace (unmerited favour) because Jesus has already paid for every one of their sins. All they need to do is to repent from their sins and accept this salvation. Then God begins to count them as 'justified', washing away their record of sin. This is truly the good news that everyone needs to hear.

But then comes the issue of the failure with sin after this born again experience. Forgiveness of sins doesn't

seem to have dealt with their indwelling sinful nature and the temptations that still come to them. In trying to comfort and encourage such struggling saints, some teachers are over-emphasising acceptance by grace. Since Jesus has not only died for our past sins but also for any sin that we might fall into, there is nothing for us to worry about but to rejoice in our acceptance just as we are, they say. There is an element of truth there, but there is more truth that we need to understand.

"So that you will walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, to please Him in all respects, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God" (Co.1:10). This is just one of many verses that tell us that after we have received the free gift of forgiveness, we should now live in a way that is pleasing to the Lord. If we

are already pleasing to the Lord because He has accepted us, what is this about trying to please Him? We thought, and rightly so, that no one can please God so as to find acceptance before Him!

The difference is that now we don't seek to be pleasing to the Lord in order to find acceptance with Him, but because we have been freely accepted by Him we want to please Him in everything we do. Let us be also clear, there is a difference among us when it comes to our lives being pleasing to Him. Some receive the words, "Well done, good and faithful slave," and others altogether something else! We bear much fruit or less.

If we don't even think in the direction of wanting to be more and more pleasing to God, there is a chance that we really have not even been born again. Paul has left us a challenging

example in that from the time he got to know what grace meant, he laboured to follow that vision and to be always pleasing to the Lord (Ac.26:19;24:16). That is a mark of one who knows he has been forgiven much (Lk.7:47).

If we become slack in this, our loving Father will discipline us (He.12:10), because He really wants us to be become holy in life, and not just in the way He recognises us in Christ. He will tell us if we go wrong, as in the example of the seven churches in Revelation He sent messages to. No, a holy life is not optional.

Pointers along the way #479

Sacrifices

Under the old covenant, the way back to God after doing wrong was to make a sacrifice to the Lord. This is the approach many people take, even in

other religions. Instead of being careful *not to do wrong*, they find that this is a somewhat easy way to settle things with God and to avoid His punishment. God has *no* delight in such sacrifices, because His desire for us is to obey Him in the first place (1Sa.15:22). David found this truth for himself after his great fall (Ps.51:16,17). The old covenant sacrifices could not actually atone for sins but they were only pointers to the sacrifice that would come through Jesus Christ which would be the only one capable of taking away sins (He.10:4).

But when we think about sacrifice, it is not only in terms of making up for sin. There is a sacrifice involved in obedience, that of our own will. Certainly God recognises that. Jesus tells us to take up our cross daily, deny ourselves and then follow Him (Lk.9:23). It is this sacrifice that is

many times more difficult for us to bear than things like giving some extra money to the church, going through a fast, doing some extra good to others, etc.

There is also sacrifice in serving others, when we have to lay aside our own comfort and convenience, and consider the others more important than ourselves (Php.2:3). If we do this publicly where we get applause then it is really not a sacrifice *inside* us (Mt.6:2). But if we do this secretly, before the Lord's face, He will have a great reward waiting for us (v.4). Those who intercede in secret for others are actually sacrificing a part of their lifespan for the others, and they may not get any recognition on earth. But surely they will be treated as 'great' in heaven. Those who travel to distant places preaching the gospel at great personal sacrifice will also have

their great reward.

On the other hand, Christians who revel in their earthly blessings, enjoy the 'good life' sightseeing, tasting new cuisines, trying out the latest fashions, exchanging older phones for new ones, and give to the Lord only out of their surplus, may find themselves extremely poor in eternity! Sacrifice was missing in their life.

The greatest sacrifice ever was that of Jesus. The apostles and many godly men and women have followed Him making self-sacrifices in different ways. The believers in Macedonia first gave themselves to the Lord, and then tried to convince Paul to receive from them more than they were actually able to give (2Co.8:1-4). They did not do this, as many do now, expecting hundredfold returns, but it was from an overflow of their love for others. Paul reminds us that he who sows

abundantly will also reap abundantly (2Co.9:6).

If we put away TV time for prayer, take pains to visit those who are poor or sick, write to those who need encouragement--there are many things we can do--we will fulfil God's plan for our lives. We have been blessed so that we can bless and serve with sacrifice.

Worship of God - in spirit and truth

For many Christians, 'worship' has become synonymous with singing, and churches vie with one another to produce worship experiences that are 'soul-stirring'. They pick the latest songs, get the most expensive instruments and electronics they can afford, raise the volume, choreograph movements along with colourful dresses, and get the congregation to raise and wave their hands, clap, sway from side to side and join with the singing. Many people talk of experiencing the presence of the Lord. The sad thing is if we had a concert experience and felt very nice, but we did not really hear anything from God and it made really no impact in our life. If we met with God our life should not be the same anymore, should it?

(Is.6:5,8).

Perhaps the reason for this is that we were only looking for an emotional high. We enjoyed the music and the choreography just as at any other musical performance, and we felt satisfied with the 'worship service'. Perhaps we were not expecting or even thinking of meeting with God!

But God is looking for true worshippers, in fact, longing to meet them (Jn.4:23). From His side He is hoping to have fellowship with them in the spirit. How exciting it is if that is the desire from our side also! When we sing the songs, we sing them from our heart and not just with our lips, and we are not thinking so much about the melody or the performance of the musicians but about the God we are singing about. We think of what He means to us, what He has done for us, where we have failed Him and how

we want to live the rest of our life for Him, etc. That becomes our fellowship with our God and Saviour through the Holy Spirit.

We come away from the worship having become smaller in our own eyes, more deeply repentant of our failures of the past, with greater determination to be pleasing to the Father and with much more willingness to do anything for Him. The time of worship becomes for us a time of gratitude, a time to tell God about our love for Him, and a time of decisions. It becomes a time to re-dedicate and consecrate ourselves to the Lord as living sacrifices (Rom.12:1), which, the Bible says, is a reasonable service of worship.

It is a time of forgetfulness--when we do not recollect the faults of the people standing around us, do not notice the mistakes of the choir--because it is a

very personal time between us and the Lord. At the same time we forget our self-consciousness in the midst of the crowd and find freedom to express our love for the Lord.

People may find fault with us if we use this time to tell the Lord about our special needs also, because a time of worship, they say, is not for prayer. But the Lord understands us, and He rejoices when He finds us free before Him to be natural and up front!

Let us learn to take advantage of the time available to us to become stronger and closer in our relationship with the Lord, and let us bring great delight to the heart of our Father.

Pointers along the way #481

Second class Christians

Many Christians do not seem to have understood that the priests and

prophets of the old covenant who had a special relationship with God, and from whom the ordinary people had to receive their instructions for life, are no longer there. Under that old arrangement these special class of people were mediators between God and the masses. If we lived at that time you and I could not find out for ourselves what God wanted us to do, and it would have been illegal for us to offer our own sacrifices to God. But now under the *new* covenant we are *all* kings and priests before God (1Pe.2:9). In addition we are *all* brothers and sisters for one another, and the smallest of us--those who have become children of God only today--have the same access to God as the oldest among us (He.8:11). In fact, under this covenant of grace, we can all be *bold* to enter the presence of God as His children (He.10:19) and to talk with Him.

Those who do not understand this privilege which God has freely given to every one of His children consider themselves as being 'unworthy' and hesitate to go before God. They consider 'servants of God', 'men of God', etc., as those who have free access to God, and still try to reach God through such people. They ask such people to pray for them because they are not sure that God will answer their own prayers. They ask them to find out and tell them God's will in different situations, just as people used to go to prophets in the old covenant. Even though they have really been made children of God (1Jn.3:1), they live as if they were some second class citizens. They seem to keep at the back of their mind the old covenant concept of a priestly class and ordinary people, or in modern terms as the clergy (or pastor) and the laity. It is so sad that many Christians do not even know how

to pray, but for every occasion they want the priest or the pastor to be there to take care of all the spiritual (or religious) aspects.

Of course there is a gradation in the depth of our knowledge of God from person to person. But it is not based on our position in the church or our office in an organisation. It is based on our own individual walk with God. So it may be that a person whom no one recognises officially may know God more closely than the pastor or the general secretary. Certainly these people have more authority with God than the recognised officials (Jas.5:16). Officials are very much required to carry out the official duties and handle the administrative responsibilities. But it does not follow automatically that they are the most spiritual among the people or closest to God.

It is not for us to see who is the most spiritual person (Lk.9:46). But it is important for all of us to realise that no one or nothing can prevent us from becoming spiritual people or close to the heart of God. It is something we decide or choose in our individual life. That decides our values and priorities in life, and vice versa.

Facing up to condemnation

Christians who are feeling very insecure in themselves or who have faced high doses of condemnation from a legalistic approach to God in the past tend to be very self-defensive about the idea of condemnation. They try to keep all thoughts of condemnation away from them, quoting to themselves passages such as Rom.8:1. But this approach where one does not face up to condemnation and deal with it is very unbalanced, and it also keeps one away from the *real* freedom from condemnation. In the true freedom that is in Christ we can face condemnation without being scared of it, and have the ability to walk away from it with joy.

There is no saint of God who does not sin in some way or other (1Jn.1:8; Jas.3:2). When we sin we ought to feel guilty about it, which is

what would help us to run to God for forgiveness (2Cor.7:10), and to seek God for help not to sin the next time (He.4:16). In other words, we should feel the weight of God's condemnation for sin and *then* rush to Him for mercy and help. Of course, when we run to God He does not condemn us (Ro.8:1), because our judgment has been taken away by Jesus on our behalf on the cross (1Th.5:9). When we recognise the way God looks at sin and recognise that we have sinned against Him, our forgiveness will be sweet (Ps.32:1,2), and we will have a fresh desire not to grieve our Lord again (2Co.5:14,15).

On the other hand, if we are scared of facing condemnation for our sins and have made a habit of claiming freedom from condemnation as a first response to sin, are we not being superficial about it? It is all right for spiritual babies to do this. But don't we need to

become mature in the way we face reality?

Some of us have received so much input into our mind about the unmerited favour of God that we have forgotten what it took for God to 'gain the right' to show us that grace. His Son had to suffer and die in order to be able to forgive us without overlooking His sense of righteousness. Our sins had to be punished with death (Ro.6:23), but His love made Him to take that death on Himself. We need to understand this when we ask God for forgiveness whenever we fall into sin. Otherwise we tend to treat grace as something cheap, because we don't realise how seriously God looks at sin, and we also don't value forgiveness itself.

A mature Christian is able to keep things in balance. He can boldly face the condemnation that is due to him because of his sins, and hold the

freedom God has granted him from condemnation--at the same time.

While there is so much of legalistic preaching that condemns people, there is also a lot of hyper-grace preaching that takes people into unreality. People who follow the latter face the possibility of not dealing with themselves and their sins in the proper way. Isn't this somewhat like pretending to be healthy by ignoring the symptoms in the body? The right way is to recognise the sickness and then go for healing. Let's not be unrealistic.

Living with consequences

Paul had a 'thorn in the flesh', a messenger from Satan, which reminded him constantly about his frailty and helped him to deal with the pride that might have come up because of the enormity of the revelations God had given him (2Co.12:7). We don't know what exactly this 'thorn' was. But we do know that another thing that reminded Paul about the need for humility was the memory of his old life when he had blasphemed against God and persecuted the church (1Ti.1:13,14). For us, some of the consequences of our past sins may be powerful reminders now of how gracious God has been to us.

God has forgiven us our sins when we repented from sin and put our trust in Jesus and His sacrifice for us. But it is still possible that the consequences of

some of our past sins still prick us like thorns. Perhaps people still associate us with those sins even though we have changed. Perhaps some people whom we sinned against are not willing to forgive us even though we have apologised to them. There could be other consequences such as losing our job, ending up in divorce, being put in jail, our children suffering because of our folly and sin, suffering constantly because of marrying an unbeliever, etc. Are we unhappy with God that He has not taken them away and 'healed' our circumstances even though we have repented?

These are not 'punishments' from God. They are the result of the spiritual law that says we will reap what we sow (Ga.6:7,8). This spiritual law operates even if we were unaware of it or after we have prayed for forgiveness. Now that we have been forgiven and our

punishment has been taken away, God can cause even these unpleasant situations to work for our eternal good (Ro.8:28,29). One thing we can do is to learn from our sins--why we committed them, how we could have avoided them, how to avoid repeating them, etc. Isn't it good that these consequences of sin are there to regularly remind us to be careful with sin?

Another blessing is to be able to help others with our experience. Aren't we in a good position to warn them not to go the way we have gone ourselves, and to tell them how to overcome the temptations in which we failed at first and learnt later in the hard way to resist them? In this way we gain a double victory--our own personal victory and also helping others to gain victory.

Imagine what many do usually. They

blame God for their suffering now (but which they had brought upon themselves), get upset with God for not answering their prayers to take away their suffering, do not seek to overcome their temptations, and pass on the message that victory is not possible.

Now we can understand what good God can bring about even from our past folly (Ps.119:71). The Devil thought he would tempt us to fall, and then afterwards condemn us with guilt forever. But God can turn things around and teach us many precious truths and make us past sinners and blasphemers great witnesses for Him and a blessing for others.

Pointers along the way #484

Truth and our heart

Is the truth we believe in open to

change depending on which group of people we are among? Of course, we don't flaunt our beliefs indiscriminately in every place; we don't throw our pearls before the swine who might trample them under their feet (Mt.7:6); we don't stumble people of growing faith by speaking things that are beyond their present faith (Ro.14:13). But would we be willing to bend our 'faith' to avoid having to contradict those we want to please or those we don't want to offend?

The answer to this question will reveal if the truth that we believe in is just in our head as a notion or it has gripped our heart. If it is just in our head and it doesn't move us in our heart it will be just like one of the many opinions or information we have about many things in the world. It doesn't really shape our life. C. T. Studd the English cricketer who sold off his wealth to become a

missionary for Jesus said, "If Jesus Christ be God and died for me, then no sacrifice can be too great for me to make for Him." Here was a man who was passionate about what he believed.

There are many who will say the same words but who will hardly make any sacrificial move in their life for Jesus. What makes the difference between a 'live' and 'dead' faith (Jas.2:18-20) is a genuine relationship with God that has come about because of a personal encounter with Jesus. Those who have accepted their 'faith' in Jesus just because they were born in a 'Christian' family or who merely opted for a 'conversion' of religion don't have any passion for Christ.

Those who have a passion for Christ are willing to make sacrifices (even of their life) because what they believe is sustained by their real relationship

with Christ. It is not just about how much money they are willing to give for the work of the Lord. Many give out of their surplus without any sacrifice. It can be seen in the focus of our life in giving time and effort in serving God. It is seen in how we deny ourselves in order to do the will of God (Lk.9:23-25). What we are willing to sacrifice in secret is a good indicator of our love for God. We can know in our own heart where we really stand.

There is much too much wrong emphasis from preachers these days about giving. The sometimes open and many times subtle message that comes forth with the preaching is that *giving* is the way to *get* things from God. How much of such giving--even sacrificial giving--is misplaced because the motive is entirely selfish. Do we imagine that God doesn't see

through this ruse?

God is looking for the pure in heart-- whose aim in life is to glorify God and to accomplish His will (Mt.6:9,10)-- who then will be able see God better (Mt.5:8), and who will have increasing fellowship with Him (Jn.14:23). Such people will have more answers to their prayer because their innermost prayer is that God may be glorified through them (v.13). Let us cleanse ourselves from every defilement and live that kind of a life.

Pointers along the way #485

Hollow but impressive

The world does not have any hope for the future, and the people of the world are aware of it only too well. So, many of them try to ignore the realities of life; some do it by escaping through alcohol and drugs; some keep

themselves merrily occupied with entertainment, sports, hobbies, etc. But try as they might, reality hits them on their face now and then, and they find themselves helpless. It's no wonder songs like "Don't worry, be happy" become overnight hits because they give people a nice feeling, and a glimmer of hope that everything will turn out OK.

Some preachers specialise in this. Their talk is focussed on projecting hope for the future--everything will work out fine, after all God will make all things work for our good, won't He? (Rom.8:28). He is able to do things beyond our asking or even thinking, isn't He? (Ep.3:20). Your marriage will be OK. You will get a better job. Your son will come back. God will pay off your debt. He will send you the rent that is due. And such other pleasantries. If we are going

through situations that are out of control, and we don't know what to do or who to turn to, isn't it great to have a preacher reassure us that we don't have to worry and God will take care? "Oh, he's so-o-o encouraging," we would think.

The first thing to notice is that these quotations have been taken out of context and are being misapplied. Many such promises held out by these preachers mean something else, and are not the panacea for our situations. The tragic result of such preaching is that this hope we receive from these preachers doesn't hold out in our practical situation, because *hope that has not been given by God will not lead us to our expectation*. From our side we can hope *and* hope, but we might as well be wishing upon a star!

Jesus said He *is* the Truth. In other words, He came to deal with reality.

He was not playing with words or emotions, and He was not spinning soothing concepts that really don't work. He came to deal with 'sin' and He provided the only thing that works with sin, His own death in our place. Now He tells us to trust Him in our daily situations (Jn.16:33), and to follow Him in the paths He chooses for us (Jn.21:18). He gives us a lot of promises for His unfailing presence with us (Mt.28:20;He.13:5), His ability to keep us (Jude.24), to provide for all that we *need* (Mt.6:33), and to take us finally to a place where there will be no more pain, sorrow or evil (Re.21:4). But He not only gives us hope for our future, but He also tells us how we have to deny ourselves each day, put our sinful desires to death and go along with Him according to His ways (Lk.9:23).

When our mind is set on things above

(Co.3:1,2), we can find strength from the knowledge that God is with us, even when we are walking through difficult and perplexing times in this life.

Fulfilment in life

Looking at what people consider as the things that make their lives significant, we can discover if their belief in a life to come is real or not. Most ambitious people think of amassing as much wealth as they can, becoming powerful and influential, and making a name for themselves and leaving it behind them, as goals to live for. Many others have shorter term goals such as seeing their children well settled before they die. If these are their entire goals, it shows that they don't really believe in an everlasting life that will follow, either with God on the new earth or with the devil in hell.

A sad thing is that we can be those who profess to believe in a life of eternity with God, but still live in all practical ways as if this life on earth is all there is to it. For many Christians this

subject seems to be settled once they have received forgiveness of sins and become heirs to eternity, and then after that they focus on life on earth, just like all the others.

As Jesus said, the whole of the commandments of God can be summarised in loving God and loving the others (Mt.22:37-40). In other words, a life that is circled around these two loves is the ultimate fulfilment. When we love God we seek with all our heart, mind and strength to do only the things that are pleasing to Him and which will bring glory and honour to His name. We also know that God has a special plan for each one of our lives, and we realise that the only thing that can be considered best is to fulfil that plan. When we love 'our neighbour', or in other words everyone we come across in our life (Lk.10:29-37), we think of how we can bless

them--in doing good to them, showing our care for them, sharing their burdens (Ga.6:2), helping them to find the right path, meeting their pressing needs (Ti.3:14), etc.

God's plans for each one of us is different. A few are called to serve Him 'full time', and the others are called to serve Him full time through some work or responsibility that is commonly considered secular (Co.3:23,24). Both these are callings from God and one is not inferior to the other. The challenge is, whatever earthly responsibilities we handle, to do them as unto the Lord and for the benefit of the others. When we do what God wants us to do, none of us is greater or lesser than another because each of us can do no better.

A life lived like that is its own fulfilment. Then we don't have to be concerned about what the world thinks

of our significance (Je.9:23,24). But we can have the greatest satisfaction, to hear our Lord tell us, "Well done, you good and faithful servant." On the contrary, what a waste of life it would be if we got the greatest name or position on earth but were not of any real use to God or man (Lk.9:25).

Doesn't this need a 'conversion' of our heart and mind? Let us get our mind transformed to think and feel in order to fulfil what can be considered as the best of God's plans for our lives (Ro.12:2;Co.3:1,2).

Simple truths about feelings

When we are overwhelmed by negative feelings, many people try to stop feeling like that. But that is very difficult, if not impossible, because we cannot change our feelings directly. Feelings are aroused in our mind depending on what we think about the people, events or circumstances that we are faced with. The way to get to a better feeling is to change our thinking.

This is where the Scriptures become very useful. If we turn in our mind to what God has said about Himself, about what He has promised to do for us in such circumstances, and what He has done for others in similar situations, and then trust in Him, our feelings begin to cool down. If we are feeling fearful not knowing where we can get help, and then we realise that God is always there to help us

(Ps.46:1), our fear will begin to disappear. In a difficult situation if we feel alone and helpless, and conclude that even God has left us, remembering that He will never leave us (He.13:5) can reverse our feelings.

But we find many times that just remembering the promises is not sufficient to soothe our feelings. That shows us the difference between just believing in our head and believing in our heart. If it is just in our head our feelings are able to overpower it and continue to hold sway over us. Many times, right at the time when we are going through negative feelings, we don't find ourselves strong enough to believe and hold on to God's promises. (Some other times, we are able to do this, with God's special help.) What we need to do is to strengthen ourselves in times of peace--off-line, so to speak--by meditating about God,

His word and promises, and receiving that strength into our hearts (Jas.3:18). Then when we are on-line, facing real situations, we have strength to hold on to God.

This off-line processing of negative feelings includes trying to understand what causes them, how else we could respond to those triggers, how to respond on the spot when we realise these feelings are rising up in us, what steps we can take to avoid losing control, etc. One foolish thing we can do is to pray and then expect that these feelings won't come up the next time, without our doing anything to change our thinking or behaviour. God wants to help us, but He wants us to take responsibility for our behaviour.

Feelings are natural, and negative feelings are indicators of something going wrong. There is nothing sinful in negative feelings themselves, but what

we do when we feel like that decides whether we act sinfully or not (Ep.4:26). Feelings rise up in response to situations, controlled by what we assume about those situations. This is why two people respond differently to the same situation. Therefore it is not inevitable that once a situation develops we are forced to feel in a certain way. But by thinking about the situation in the right way, we can direct our feelings in the right direction. It is the knowledge of God that helps us to think right.

Our love for God

To love God is not similar to loving people because God is God. He is our Creator, Owner, Sustainer, Lawgiver, Judge, Master, Father, Friend, one who knows everything about us, who can do anything He wants, who knows exactly the things that are good for us, etc. Loving God is not just about feeling good about Him, like 'loving' chocolates. One mistake many people make about loving God is just here. They feel nice when they think about Him and sing songs of praise and worship in the midst of the church and think that they really love Him. But to love God in the right way involves relating to Him in every aspect of His nature, and if that is not happening, we may be fooling ourselves with just nice feelings about Him.

Love that is based on feelings can

easily get upset when we don't get what we have asked from God. In that case we don't remember that God hasn't stopped loving us (Je.31:3), and that He knows if what we have asked for is really good for us according to His great plan for transforming us into His image (Ro.8:28,29). We think of God as if He was a man (Ps.50:21) and don't recognise that His knowledge, plans and ways are far higher than ours (Is.55:9). This kind of knowledge of God will help us to keep loving Him even when we cannot understand what He seems to be doing or not doing for us.

Sometimes we think of God so much as a gracious, loving Father and fail to remember that He is to be respected (Ro.1:21) and even *feared* (1Pe.1:17). The result is that we become more tolerant towards sin and presume on His forgiveness as our right (and not

something we receive only as a gift of grace).

Jesus said that those who loved Him would obey Him (Jn.14:21). If we try to please the people we love, there is a danger we might make ourselves their slaves. But we can never overdo our obedience to God because He is God. Becoming bondslaves of God--where we want to be pleasing to Him always at the cost of our own desires--is the highest form of our love for God (Ga.2:20). The greater our love for God is, the more willing we will be to deny ourselves and *die* to ourselves in order to do what God wants (Lk.9:23).

Our love for God will be tested many times every day when we have to choose between doing what we want and what we know God wants. The way we respond to these situations is the real indicator of our love for God, and not how fervently we sing His

praises on Sundays.

What we do when God seems to be far away from us is another test of our love for Him. The three friends of Daniel had no idea how they were going to come out from their ordeal with the fiery furnace. But they chose to trust in God even if they were to die (Da.3:17,18). Job could not figure out at all what was happening to him, and his friends were all accusing him. But his love for God and his trust in Him stood firm till the end (Job.13:15).

The more we know God, the more *lovable* He becomes to us, and our love less dependent on feelings.

Pointers along the way #489

God's will

Those who misunderstand the sovereignty of God think that whatever happens is God's will. For one thing, if

it were so, why would Jesus teach us to pray that God's will would be done on earth as it is in heaven? We need to pray that because a lot of what happens on earth is *not* God's will at all. When wicked people do things that hurt others or exploit them, that's not God's will. God's will for us, or in other words His desire for us, is *always* for our good (Je.29:11). But what happens in many cases is *not* for our good, even though God will cause even those to work out something good for us in the end (Ro.8:28,29). Sometimes we suffer because of our own sin, sometimes when others sin against us, and sometimes because of the general consequences of sin in the world in which we live. It is ridiculous to put the blame for all that on God!

Those who believe that whatever actually happens happened because it was God's will confuse His will with

His permission. Because God has created us people with a limited amount of free will, He permits us to make bad choices, and when we do that we suffer the consequences. He doesn't want us to make those choices, and that's why He warns us, tries to instruct us and help us to walk in the right way. But when we make those bad choices we can't blame God! But some do! I have read about a mother who drowned her small children in a state of drunkenness and then blamed God for not stopping her!

If we foolishly believe that everything is God's will, we resign ourselves to all that happens, and don't try to correct or change things, especially what we need to do to get out of those situations or to prevent things like that happening again. What a tragedy that because of this foolish thinking some people passively go through sufferings

that need to be dealt with aggressively and think that they are glorifying God! Wives who are being abused put up with that meekly, couples who face problems in marriage try to accept that situation, parents whose children go astray simply pray for them without dealing with them, etc. Satan has managed to fool us, and at the same time make us think it's all God's will!

Our free will loads us with responsibility. God has also given us abilities, knowledge and wisdom to decide what we need to do from our side when we face problems. How foolish it is to imagine that all problems are God's will for us, and then just go on praying that God should do something about it, while we sit meekly doing nothing from our side! We even misquote the Bible to say that we don't need to do anything but stand still and see the salvation of God

(Ex.14:13,14). This is not a universal instruction for all situations but just for that special occasion. Think of how Israel had to fight with their swords and kill their enemies once they reached the Promised Land!

God works for us, but He also wants us to work with Him, doing what He wants us to do. But we need to act (Php.2:12,13).

Pointers along the way #490

The chicken or egg issue

Which comes first, the chicken which produces the egg, or the egg from which the chicken comes? This is a philosophical debate into which those who have time can look into. But it is imperative for us to look into the issue of what comes first, our faith or God's work of regeneration in us.

Many Christians believe that God's regeneration of the human heart (spirit) comes first. This proceeds from their assumption that if people are 'dead in sin' (Ep.2:1) they don't have the ability to have faith in God, and so they have to be born again as a result of God's work of grace in their lives before they can believe. So, according to this teaching, a man gets born again and only then he believes in the gospel. But this needs twisting several passages in the Bible.

The whole thing pivots around the understanding of 'dead in sin'. God told Adam and Eve that if they ate from the tree of knowledge of good and evil they would die (Ge.2:16,17). That did happen when they ate that fruit. But we don't see them die physically till hundreds of years later. But what we do see is that they died spiritually, got disconnected from God, began to feel guilty and afraid of God (Ge.3:8). The death that sin produced was this alienation from God. As descendants of this couple, we are all born in sin (Ps.51:5), cut off from a relational knowledge of God and fellowship with Him.

But it is not that we are born totally depraved with absolutely no ability to know God. We are born with a conscience that gives us a sense of right and wrong (Ro.2:15). There is a seeking after God that comes up even

among the most pagan tribes (Ro.10:2), even though a lot of people suppress such thoughts in favour of seeking things for themselves. But what we can see is a potential for each man or woman to get to know God if only they could find Him and respond to Him in the right way.

Then comes the presentation of the gospel. We hear about our sinful condition before God and the future consequence of that, and also about the love of God that has prepared salvation on the basis of unmerited favour (grace). As the Holy Spirit hovers over our confused and distorted mind (Ge.1:2), and our eyes behold the truth about ourselves and the love of God, we begin to repent over our sins and to put our trust in God. We receive this offer of salvation by faith, thankfully and joyfully. Immediately God justifies us (declares us righteous

because of our faith), and accepts us as His children. On the other hand, many hear the gospel but choose to reject it.

There is a mysterious working together of God and man in this process; it is not *entirely* of God. It is a free gift of God; man cannot earn it by any means. At the same time, this gift can be received and enjoyed by man only through faith. This faith is man's response to the offer from God, and is not a means to earn the gift. But if a man does not respond in repentance and faith, he cannot receive this offer of salvation.

Pointers along the way #491

Progressive re-birth?

Some people go through a dramatic conversion in a time of crisis. Some others are unable to identify when exactly they were born again because

their conversion was not dramatic but took place over a period of time. It is not that the second type is less genuine than the other, even though such people may have some confusion about it. Any genuine conversion should have repentance and faith--a turning of the mind from sin and the old life, and putting trust and confidence in Jesus as the one who died in one's place for taking the punishment for sin. But when these things do not take place suddenly, in an instant, which is what happens in the case of dramatic conversions, they can be spread over a long time. Let us take an example.

Imagine a man coming to Jesus in prayer because he needs healing for his son. His faith is not concerned with sin or salvation, but only in that Jesus is able to heal miraculously in answer to prayer. Jesus is eager not only to save people from their sins, which is His

primary concern (Mt.1:21), but to help and bless anyone who comes to Him. Assume Jesus heals this son. This man becomes a 'believer' in Jesus, starts attending a church and even takes water baptism. But actually he has not been born again yet. He only has faith in Jesus as God. Perhaps while attending the church he comes to hear about sin, hell and salvation, and he repents and places his faith in Jesus as Saviour. At this point he is instantly born again by the regenerative work of the Holy Spirit in his heart. He gets a new heart, new desires, a hatred for sin, etc. After some time he begins to love God with all his heart and recognises Jesus as the Lord of his life, and begins to live as a disciple of Jesus. Perhaps around this time he hears about the baptism in the Holy Spirit, seeks for it and receives it.

When we read the accounts in the New

Testament we get the impression that all of these things happened almost at the same time. But what we see now in many cases is a process that takes place in spurts. The reason is that preaching is not clear, and does not present the whole picture together. Many times preachers do not emphasise the need to repent from sins before one can receive forgiveness. As a result, the sad thing is that many people assume they are 'believers' just because they have had some experience with God such as an answered prayer or because they have repeated a prayer (without meaning it). Hopefully such people will come to know the full truth over time, but unfortunately it does not happen in many cases.

God wants all men to be saved (1Ti.2:4). He will never cast off anyone who comes to Him (Jn.6:37).

He is delighted whenever someone takes steps towards Him (Mk.12:34). But only those who have been born again can actually enter the kingdom of God (Jn.3:5). That requires repentance and faith in Jesus (Ac.2:38;16:31). How sad it is to assume that one is a Christian and discover it is not so in the end!

Pointers along the way #492

Jesus the Messiah

When the Jews were looking for the Messiah, they expected Him to deliver them from the Roman rule and restore their national independence and comfort. Even though there were prophetic scriptures linking the Messiah to suffering for their sins (Is.53), they failed to see those aspects because they were only thinking of what *they* wanted from the Messiah. When Jesus came and started showing signs of His supernatural powers to heal and to provide for them, they began to wonder if He could be the Messiah. But when He started talking of His real mission to save them from their sins, they were offended with Him and even turned against Him. Isn't this what is happening even now when many Christians look at Jesus?

Many are flocking to Jesus, just as in

the days of His earthly life, for getting healing, blessing, solving earthly problems, etc. Many are willing to make pilgrimages, pledges, offer 'seed' money, etc., if only they can get Jesus to do for them what they want. But among all these people, how few are actually seeking Him in order to have a Saviour who will set them free from their sins! But that was His main task on earth (Mt.1:21).

Jesus was not impressed with the number of people following Him around. He was very clear that they only wanted some earthly blessings from Him (Jn.6:26). He told them to seek instead things that were of eternal value (v.27). In His Sermon on the Mount Jesus emphasised seeking after God's kingdom and His righteousness *first* instead of earthly blessings like unbelievers (Mt.6:31-33). Paul also reminds Christians to set our attention

on things above and *not* on the things on the earth (Co.3:1,2).

Jesus is not impressed even now with the number of people who are flocking around Him. There are many people who have come to Christ seeking for healing, etc., and who imagine they have now become 'believers' in Jesus headed for heaven, even though they have not truly recognised and acknowledged Him as Saviour and Lord. Even though 'Saviour' and 'Lord' are used freely by people, Jesus becomes that only to people who acknowledge their sins and seek Jesus for deliverance from its penalty and power. There are many people in churches who are not bothered seriously about the sin factor and nobody wants to 'judge' anyone. The sad thing that even among preachers and leaders, the emphasis is still on earthly blessings. They know that it is

what can attract and hold people's attention, and so they give out such promises in and out of context. They are allowing large numbers to head on the broad way that leads to destruction, deceiving themselves thinking that they are children of God headed towards heaven.

Many people simply follow their leaders because they are not able to think for themselves and understand what the Bible actually says. So the responsibility of protecting the sheep from error and feeding them with healthy food rests heavily on the shepherds. But many shepherds are only feeding themselves.

Pointers along the way #493

Bearing with others

"Now we who are strong ought to bear the weaknesses of those without strength and not just please ourselves. Each of us is to please his neighbor for his good, to his edification. For even Christ did not please Himself; but as it is written, 'The reproaches of those who reproached You fell on Me'" (Ro.15:1-3). When we deal with those who are 'weaker' than we are, we can please ourselves by boasting in front of them, making fun of them, judging them without mercy, demanding that they should do just as we would (in effect, to perform beyond their strength), etc. Then we forget that we ourselves are weak in comparison with some others, and immeasurably so before God. It is usually only after we have gone through our own struggles and 'our nose has been rubbed in our own muck'

that we can begin to value the weaker ones and view their struggles with respect. (When they struggle, that is in fact much better than giving up!) Then we ourselves know what it means to be weak, how every victory or piece of wisdom we have has been received through grace alone (1Co.4:7), and how we cannot even *stand* without holding on to Him.

Perhaps someone's weakness is that he doesn't know doctrines as well as we do. What an occasion to take pride in ourselves and to look down on him! But haven't we had to change some of our understanding of the Bible as we got to know things better? Is there any guarantee that whatever we know now (or think we know) is 100% correct? Is there any way we can look down on him when we painfully remember how ignorant we were at one time?

Do we see someone struggling with

some temptation that we have left behind long ago? But we are not without any struggle now, are we, in some other areas of life? As long as we are weak when we examine ourselves before the Lord, does it really matter if another man is weaker? In God's sight we are both weak (Jas.2:10,11).

Perhaps he finds himself in unknown territory and is struggling to make the right choice at the crossroads. Perhaps we are safely past those places and it is tempting to laugh at his confusion and wrong choices. But we have some more crossroads ahead of us, don't we? Let's not who are still running the race behave as if the race has been completed already (1Ki.20:11).

If God has accepted him just as he is, it is better for us if we too can learn to accept him at his level (Ro.15:7).

Instead of standing apart from him and criticising him, we can go to him, stand on the same level and *help* him, so that he can grow (v.2), without becoming a stumbling block to him by criticising him unmercifully, making him feel guilty and miserable. If Jesus had sat in heaven, judged us and sent us to hell, He would have been perfectly justified. But because He set aside the judgment, took our reproach on Himself, applied ointment for our wounds, we stand healed now; and there is so much more yet to be healed. As recipients of mercy, let's show mercy to the others.

Creatures of time

God is spirit, and He is eternal in existence, without beginning or end (Jn.4:24;Re.22:13). For Him, the past, present and future are all the same. Time does not make any difference to Him. A thousand years are like a day for Him and a day like thousand years. He created time when He created the universe and us, and we are creatures who live in time.

Even though it took thousands of years in human history after Adam and Eve sinned before Jesus came to die for the sins of the whole world, for God it was something He knew before the foundations of the earth (Ep.1:4,5). God talks about us being seated with Christ in the heavenly places (Ep.2:6), even though we shall experience this only in the future.

The painful fact of living in finite portions of time affects us when we deal with spiritual issues in our daily life. Think of what happens when we are tempted to sin. The temptation comes to us as a thought at a certain point of time, and it takes a finite time for it to stir up our feelings and become real pressure inside us that prompts us to sin. It takes some finite time after this when we think of what God thinks about this temptation, and then we turn away from it. If we finally turn away from the temptation we are victorious, even though a certain time has elapsed from the time the temptation came to us at first. If we expect us to react instantaneously to the temptation and reject it even before it could become really a temptation to us, we forget our presence in time and the time it takes for us to process the temptation. In case of severe temptations, the processing time may

be still longer, with us battling with our thoughts back and forth before we finally choose to reject the temptation. We don't need to think that the time it took for us to reject the temptation was a time of sin.

Think of an instance when we fell into sin. It is a fact that when Jesus died for us even this sin was paid for, and we can receive forgiveness in the next instant itself if we confess our sins (1Jn.1:9). But what happens in practice is that we feel the guilt of sin, repent before God, confess our sin to Him and then receive forgiveness. All this takes a certain period of time, and there are many precious lessons we can learn at each point in that period. We may like to feel forgiven the very moment after we have fallen. But if it could happen, it may turn out that we don't recognise the seriousness of sin or the preciousness of forgiveness.

When we forgive someone, we would like all our feelings of hurt to disappear immediately, and when we ask someone for forgiveness we would like them to treat us immediately as if we had never done wrong. Both these are unrealistic expectations because we are creatures that take time to change.

If we can take this into consideration and judge the state of our heart, it can help us in many practical situations to be saved from unrealistic expectations and consequent disappointments and guilt.

The lust to expand

God has a specific plan for every one of us (Ps.139:16). We would be most fruitful and find maximum fulfilment in doing *just* what He has planned for us and what He has designed us specially for. His grace will be sufficient for us (2Co.12:9) when *and only when* we are in the centre of His will. If we venture outside His plans there is no guarantee that He will help us to do things that He never willed for us, even though He will never leave or forsake us (He.13:5).

There are many people who stay put wherever they are and do not dare to step out into the unknown. It takes faith to go where God calls us to when we don't even know where it would take us (He.11:8). But as long as we are walking *with* God we can be sure that He will take care of every need

(Mt.6:33) and cause us to be more than conquerors (Php.4:19). At such times we can do with some exhortation and encouragement to step out with God.

On the contrary, there are those who are being driven by a desire to accomplish more, who are itching to go out and do more. But such desires may not all be from God. They may be also from our flesh which wants us to seek after fame, glory, recognition, power, influence, wealth, etc. For such people the exhortations from well meaning Christians to dream big, to do great and mighty things for God, etc., can be actually temptations to go outside the will of God (Je.45:5). We need to know where we are with respect to such desires.

If we step out of God's will we will find ourselves lacking His *special* support. We can still do many things with our 'natural' strengths, but we will

find ourselves feeling the strain and that things seem to be going out of control. God may still help us when we cry out to Him, but not with any great delight (Ps.106:15). We may find problems coming up from unexpected sides and even the things we used to do with ease earlier become a struggle. We may get involved with people who can later become like thorns in our flesh.

God warns us not to think too highly of ourselves but to dwell within the limits He has planned for us (Ro.12:3). We must remember that we have lusts in our flesh that cry, "More, more." Otherwise we may misread the calls to dream big and to challenge the impossible with Christ which are really meant to stir up the sluggish to help them expect great things from God. Certainly God can do much more than we can naturally imagine

(Ep.3:20). We should not miss out on what God has planned for us by thinking only within our natural experience or strengths. Abraham is called the father of faith because he believed God and ventured out beyond his natural abilities or knowledge. But at the same time we cannot jump forward thinking that what God did for someone else He will do for us a matter of course. Each of us has a certain part to complete in God's overall plan for mankind and the church. Let us learn to pray, "Lord, help me to be what You want me to be, and do what You want me to do."

Pointers along the way #496

Abusing the Lord's name

One of the Ten Commandments is, "You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain" (Ex.20:7). We usually think of this as referring to people who use the name of God, Jesus or Christ as swear words or exclamation phrases. If we look at it in that way, it is not very difficult to refrain ourselves from doing those. But have we considered how we new covenant Christians can be disobeying the spirit of this commandment?

Jesus said, "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" (Mt.7:21). We Christians are the people who use God's name often. We talk about Him, sing about Him, have His words decorating our rooms, use bumper stickers and T-

shirts to advertise Him, etc. Those who write and preach about Him use His name much more. But the crucial issue is, after having made much of His name, how much we are taking care to *do His will* in the different areas of our life.

If we are only 'talking' about God and not really doing His will, aren't we guilty of taking His name in vain? None of us can boast that we are doing all of His will all the time (Jas.3:2). If we actually dare to boast like that, we are deceiving ourselves (1Jn.1:8). In spite of the best of our intentions we fail because of weakness, ignorance or carelessness. So the deeper question is whether we are wholehearted in our intention to do God's will all the time.

Sad to say, honesty compels us to recognise that even our intention is not right *all the time*. Are we agreeing to tolerate failure if we admit to failure at

this level? No. But admitting this could be the first step towards repentance and more seeking after God's mercy and help. We need help *both to will and to do His good pleasure* (Php.2:13). And whenever we fail we need to get back to God in honesty and repentance.

Let's avoid playing games with words here. Let's not use "there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus," "seated us with Him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus," etc., to turn our eyes away from looking at the reality of our lives in comparison to what He wants us to be and do. It pays to be honest before God, even if it causes us pain to see ourselves in the mirror of God. It is only when we see ourselves that we we cry out to God for mercy and help (He.4:16), and it is only then that He will come running to us with mercy

and help (He.2:18).

When we profess the name of the Lord so much in our life, it is our responsibility to do our best to ensure that what people see when they look at us represents Him. We can't sidestep the issue by saying, "Don't look at me, look at Jesus!" What people see along with the name of Jesus which we proclaim is us. While we will continue to be imperfect in many ways in spite of our strongest desire to be perfect, still let us press on to perfection for the honour of the name of God we profess (He.6:1;Php.3:12).

"By His stripes"

"With his stripes we are healed" (Is.53:5 KJV, "by His scourging" NASB) is a phrase many people quote in order to teach that physical healing is a part of the atonement Jesus made through His suffering and death for us. There are several problems with this interpretation. This is only a *part* of the verse, which reads "But 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. NASB" As we can see, the rest of the verse is talking about Jesus suffering for our sins. So is the rest of the chapter, about how Jesus has dealt with our sins. Is it right to take this phrase alone to refer to physical healing just because the word 'healing' is used? In the context of the chapter, is

it not right to read it as referring to spiritual healing along with the rest of the chapter?

When it comes to spiritual healing, the forgiveness of our sins which Jesus gained through His suffering and death, all we need to do is to receive it by faith. (This 'faith' includes recognition of who Jesus is, repentance, and submitting to Him with our life.) "And it shall be that everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved" (Ac.2:21). Even a criminal hanging on a cross was able to receive this salvation by a simple act of faith (Lk.23:41-43). Yet thousands of people who ask Jesus for physical healing quoting Is.53:5 have not be healed. Even those who have been healed miraculously at some time in their life in answer to prayer finally die of some sickness! Yet those who preach this mistaken interpretation accuse those

who have not received healing of lack of faith, lack of persistence in prayer or the presence of some hidden sin in their lives!

There is no doubt that God does heal people miraculously in answer to prayer even now. The age of miracles is not over. But I also see that there is no promise from God, as in the case of forgiveness of sins, that whoever believes in Him will be healed.

Some individuals claim that ever since they believed in this promise for healing from God they have experienced no sickness. Putting aside the possibility that some of them may redefine sickness so as not to include some of their experiences which others would have called sicknesses, I am willing to accept that God may do that miracle in some lives. But they are rare exceptions and not the rule. Such people cannot form a doctrine based

upon their experience, which does not work for most others. It is right to ask for miraculous healing even though there is no general promise for it because we believe our God is almighty and full of goodness. But if He does not grant that to us after a reasonable amount of time, we would need to accept that for some reason that is unknown to us God has chosen not to do that miracle for us, instead of living in condemnation for the rest of time. Then He will work some eternal glory in us through our suffering (2Co.4:17).

Pointers along the way #498

"Don't sin any more"

Think of the poignant moment when Jesus forgave the woman caught in adultery. This was an amazing demonstration of grace, God showing undeserved mercy. What this woman deserved according to the Law was to be put to death (Le.20:10), and this was what the Pharisees challenged Jesus to do. Jesus countered it by proposing that only those without sin could take up stones against her. When the accusers all left, Jesus told her, "I do not condemn you, either. Go. From now on sin no more" (Jn.8:11).

When it is our turn before God it is very pleasant for us to hear that He is not condemning us. We understand, just like this woman, we also deserve to be put to death for our sins (Ro.6:23), and we see that it is only because of God's special mercy that our judgment has

been passed over. God had to face our judgment Himself, by letting His Son go through the agony of death in our place, because of our sins. But what does God say to us after declaring our forgiveness? Is it not the same directive, "Don't sin any more"?

At this juncture in our lives we are faced with a choice between two attitudes, 1) to meditate on how gracious our Heavenly Father is, how understanding He is towards our weaknesses and failures (Ps.103:13,14), and believe that we can always come to Him boldly for our forgiveness (He.10:19-22), and 2) in addition to (1) determine that we don't want to go on in sin any more now that our sins caused Jesus His death on the cross. This choice makes a huge difference in how we live afterwards. If we follow (1) we may make ourselves happy by reminding

ourselves about God's mercy, but we will not get the increasing peace and joy that comes only with following (2).

As a thinking Christian trying to understand the doctrinal and practical aspects of grace, Paul saw the difference between these two attitudes (Ro.6:1,15). His spontaneous response was that it was totally wrong in every way to live as if sin didn't really matter now that we had come to grace!

We are living in a time when there is a great mixture of doctrines and doctrinal emphases, and it is likely that we may have become contaminated by error in some way. There are those who preach legalistic keeping of commandments with their 'do's and 'don'ts, there are those who preach grace, and there are those who preach 'hyper-grace' without any need for obedience. It is good to ask ourselves which position we are really taking

deep inside our heart, and whether this position is being borne out through our practical life. It is good to check if we have developed the unhealthy habit of keeping 'high' doctrines in our head while being totally oblivious to the fact that our life does not tally with them. In such a case we need to go before God, confess our failure humbly before Him, and start afresh with a proper attitude.

The grace of God, if understood properly with all its implications, should motivate us to a life of being pleasing to the Lord (Ti.2:11-14).

Pointers along the way #499

**Being sure of what we
believe**

There are many things which we have stored up in our mind which we consider to be true. This includes many

things we have been taught from the Bible. Many of these are things that don't have any direct connection with how we live from day to day. But there are other facts we keep in our mind which can bless our life but which we just don't use in practice!

Don't we accept the fact that God forgives us when we confess our sins (1Jn.1:9)? Of course we do. But why is it that sometimes we continue to feel guilty even after we have confessed? We believe Jesus said He would be with us till the end of the age, He would never leave or forsake us (Mt.28:20;He.13:5)? But then don't we sometimes think He is nowhere near?

A simple explanation is that we may never have actually believed in our heart what we hold in our head. In other words, ours may be just an intellectual recognition of facts and figures which doesn't work when it is

tested because it has not gone deep into our heart from our head.

But another possible explanation is that when the time of testing comes, or when adversity strikes us, our feelings are strongly moved, and then we let ourselves be guided by our feelings rather than by our convictions. In other words, when the rational part of our being points out what we believe as being true we allow the emotional part of our being to overrule our conviction. For example, our conviction tells us that if God has promised that He would forgive our sins once we confess them, He has certainly forgiven us because we *have* confessed our sins. But our guilt feeling which lingers on after our act of confession seems to tell us that perhaps we haven't been really forgiven. What we need to do is to insist that God has actually forgiven

because He has promised He would do it, and ignore our feeling which is certainly not in line with the facts.

The devil plays with our feelings in very devious ways. When he went to Eve his first step was to plant a doubt about God's words in her mind. "Indeed, has God said, 'You shall not eat from any tree of the garden'?" (Ge.3:1). Then he followed it up with a daring, "You surely will not die!" (v.4). If only Eve had straightaway refused it by saying, "No, God said we would die if we ate this fruit, and I don't believe you," things would have ended very differently.

How many of our battles are lost when we don't hold on to our convictions at the time of testing by allowing our feelings to move us away from God! What we need to do is to strengthen our convictions in our mind by meditating on them *before* the

temptation comes. The more we think about God's promises and warnings, the deeper they get into our mind, and our convictions become stronger. Then we will find that when the temptation comes our conviction is stronger than the temptation or the feelings that the temptation stirs up. "Your word I have treasured in my heart, that I may not sin against You" (Ps.119:11).

Pointers along the way #500

Waiting for miracles

Anyone who knows God rightly knows that He can do any miracle He wants. Those who find it difficult to believe that God could make a dry path for Israel through the Red Sea or stop the rotation of the earth to give time to Joshua to destroy his enemies don't know God properly. However, just because He *can do anything*, it doesn't mean He will always do the miracles

we want. He can heal sickness without medicines, but usually He expects us to use medical help when it is available. When He is going to do a miracle, usually He will give us faith by telling us (Ro.10:17). It would be foolish of us to imagine that just because God has healed others through miracles He will do it for us too, because He doesn't always do things in the same way. He who allowed James to get killed with the sword sent an angel to rescue Peter from prison.

We may be expecting God to deliver us miraculously from temptations! We couldn't save ourselves from the penalty of sin, and we trusted in the sacrifice Jesus made for us and received forgiveness as a free gift from God. But then we may be expecting that He will freely give us victory over temptation in the same way. We find ourselves powerless against the giants

of lusts in our flesh and conclude that only God can save us from them. That is true. But if we look inside we may see that what we are actually waiting for is for the temptation to cease troubling us in the areas where we have been slaves in the past. In other words, when we pray for victory we want God to do a miracle in us and make us immune to temptation.

We think like this especially because we do see or hear of, e.g., alcoholics or drug addicts coming to faith in the Lord and suddenly becoming free from their slavery. It's a miracle. But what we need to note is that not all experience such miracles. While God is able to do such miracles and He also does them once in a while, that is not the usual way. They are exceptions. In the normal way of life, we have to learn from God's word truths that can set us free, pray earnestly for God's

help and then battle against these fleshly desires (Ro.8:13).

It appears that even though God helps us with grace, He wants *us* to gain the victory (Ti.2:11,12). Even though He works inside our heart and mind to give us new direction and strength, He wants us to take up our cross daily, deny ourselves and follow Jesus (Lk.9:23). Actually He wants us to become more than conquerors, not only gaining victory for ourselves, but also helping others to gain victory (Ro.8:37). What better way to do this than through giving us an education through battles?

Whenever we have sinned, we have added more corruption to our lives (Ga.6:7,8). Our way of thinking, our emotions and our behaviour patterns have all got corrupted. Now when we want a change in our life we would need to overwrite this corruption with

the divine nature. This why we have to consciously deny ourselves and do God's will by His strength.

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

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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.