



Pointers along the way

Devotionals that
make you think

Vol. 6

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Pointers along the way #501

Love one another

Jesus gave this *new* commandment to His disciples (Jn.13:34,35). But even the old covenant had a commandment to love one another (Le.19:18). In what way did Jesus make this *new*? The old covenant spoke of loving others *as ourselves*. Jesus explained what the Law and the Prophets taught, that we should treat others as we want them to treat us (Mt.7:12). But this new commandment is about loving one another *as Jesus loved us*. Think deeply about the difference in level between the two.

Jesus loved us and gave Himself for us (Ep.5:2). He suffered and died in order to give us the blessing of eternal life. It was the thought of being able to bless us that motivated Him to go through the death on the cross (He.12:2). As our sins were laid upon Him He suffered a

separation from His Father that had never happened in all eternity (Mt.27:46;Is.59:2). That is how much He loved us. And now we are asked to love one another just as He loved us.

When we love someone we also feel nice with them. But when we are commanded to love it means we are to be good and do good to the others. That is how we can love even our enemies -- in action. That is how God showed His love to us, in action (Jn.3:16).

How do we usually love one another? In general we love those who love us, and we do good to those who do good to us. Some people do good to others hoping that this will prompt the others to do good to them in return! To love others as we love ourselves is an extension of this kind of love. But the way Jesus has loved us is way above this.

With this Jesus' type of love we can love those who don't love us in return; in fact we can love even those who are out to do harm to us (Mt.5:44,45). We can do good to others not expecting that they will do good to us; they may not even acknowledge the good we do for them. We can make sacrifices of our time, money, energy, comforts and conveniences in order to do good for others. We can do this in an innumerable variety of ways, depending on our own calling from God. Jesus said that it would be this kind of love that would catch the attention of people and cause them to realise that it was Jesus who was behind this.

There are many who are following Jesus, even in the churches, looking for material blessings (Jn.6:26). It is not love for Jesus that draws them to Him, but what they hope to get from Jesus

for themselves. But those who are disciples of Jesus love Him more than their own lives. They serve Him because of their love for Him. And when their love for Jesus floods their heart, it overflows in love for others also. They begin to serve the others and to do them good, even at great sacrifice to themselves. This is what distinguishes them from ordinary people.

We can't start loving like this by trying to love more, but by becoming better disciples of Jesus. We need to get rid of things that hinder us from loving and following Jesus, and then start loving Him more. Love for others will follow.

Pointers along the way #502

It's our heart

When the women with the bleeding touched the hem of Jesus' garment and

was healed, it didn't prove that the helm had magic power (Mt.9:20,21). When people sent out napkins that had touched Paul and some got healed was it because the napkins had an anointing (Ac.19:12)? If people believed that they would get healed if the shadow of Peter fell on them does that make it a fact (Ac.5:15)? Yet some try to teach how the Jews made the helm of their garments in a special way to explain how the woman got healed. So they sell special prayer shawls, anointed handkerchiefs, bottles of holy water, etc., and unsuspecting Christians just lap it all up! Some teach that since there were 12 tribes of Israel and 12 apostles of Jesus, we need to ensure 12 members in every church board or Christian committee to receive God's special blessing. It's astonishing how many Christians follow these 'Christian superstitions' even while deriding those of other religions!

But doesn't it say that God actually did miraculous healings when napkins from Paul were passed around? It does. How can we explain that? In the same way how some people genuinely get healed when they go to a mass meeting with a crooked healer, and some get a genuine touch from the Holy Spirit when they go to a meeting where weird manifestations are taking place. While we denounce manipulations by stage performers and weird manifestations that are advertised as works of the Holy Spirit, we cannot at the same time deny that here and there some genuine things are also taking place. We need to understand how God deals with different people at different levels.

Think of a man longing after the power of the Holy Spirit to be a witness for Jesus Christ in every place (Ac.1:8). He wants to be a witness in his

personal life (the fruit of the Spirit) and in his ministry (the gifts of the Spirit). He hears that in a certain place there is a movement of the Spirit and believes that this would be an opportunity for him to receive his filling. He goes with that faith and meets with the Lord just as the woman with the bleeding. His longing is genuine, and so also his faith. What are absent are deeper knowledge of Scripture and discernment of things that are going on. He meets with the Lord and the Lord touches him because the Lord is delighted with what He sees in the man's heart. The Lord looks at our heart more than what is in our understanding. In the final analysis, it is the pure in heart who will see God and not the scholars of the Bible. When Jesus was here on earth, the Bible scholars of the day could not recognise Him, but ordinary people who were genuine in their heart met with Him and

were blessed.

When we seek God out of love for Him, seeking to love Him more, to serve Him better and to hallow His name above all, He will certainly meet with us. Then if we ask for a fish, He will not give us a snake. Not if we are just seeking for thrills. It's our heart that makes the difference.

Pointers along the way #503

Clever ideas

The Bible is God's word to us. He wants to speak to us as we read it. It is not just to give us information about Himself, His work of creation and the history and future of mankind, but also to tell us what He wants us to do here and now, how we can relate to Him, how we should live, how to receive His blessings, etc. When we read the Bible, that is what we should be looking for primarily, what God is trying to tell us personally in our life, rather than other peripheral issues.

If this sounds too simplistic, let me clarify that studying the Bible to gather all the information that is necessary for us to know God and His dealings with man is no small work. A lot of time and effort are needed in order to continually study God's word in this manner. For some people that is the

task God has given them. But even while doing that, let us not lose sight of the higher goal of hearing God speaking to us in the practical situations of life using His word. Theology is good, but applied theology is far greater.

When we read the Bible are we looking for material for sermons or articles? In that case we stand in danger of making up impressive 'truths' with which to dazzle others, without checking first of all whether what we are saying is really true or how it can bless the others. How much better it is if we listen to God for our own edification first and our outward ministry comes from an overflow of that (1Ti.4:16)!

Many people are bringing out their own clever ideas from the Bible. For example, if someone tells us that in Jesus' days a needle's eye referred to a

narrow wicket gate through which camels could get through with difficulty, it sounds impressive as knowledge. But it detracts from the seriousness with which Jesus was trying to show how difficult it was for rich people (those who placed their confidence in riches) to enter the kingdom of God (Mt.19:24). If the preacher emphasised the practical difficulty rich people faced in this connection, we could have learned not to place our confidence in our natural strengths or wealth. If a preacher tells us about the prayer shawl the Jews used and the significance of its intricate design that may be impressive. But if he asks us to pray with that we (at least the men) would be disregarding God's instruction not to pray with our head covered (1Co.11:4). If someone talks about the significance of the ram's horn (*shofar*) and asks us to play it in order to bring

down God's blessings, we would be going back to the Jewish customs and practices like the Galatians (Ga.4:9). If someone uses computers to search the Bible and discover hidden codes there, why do we allow ourselves to be taken up with them, instead of reading what is plainly written for all to see? Let's not allow ourselves to be impressed with useless ideas however clever or deep they appear to be.

If Satan cannot succeed in leading us to sin, he tries to distract us from the real truth of God. Let's be careful.

Pointers along the way #504

How to become a child of God

There are many people who come to Jesus, not because they love Him, but because they don't want to go to hell, they want to be healed, get His blessings, etc. God in His great love accepts them at that level (Jn.6:37), but there is a lot more to be done in their life before they get born again and receive acceptance as God's children. But many people who come sincerely to Jesus still do not have a proper experience of being born again and becoming a child of God because they were not told the right way by whoever told them about Jesus. The sad thing is that such people are constantly frustrated because they don't experience what God promises His children.

The process of being born again is a work of the Holy Spirit which goes

along with the proper responses from man. When we say salvation is a gift of grace from God and *not of works* (Ep.2:8), what it simply means is that there is nothing we can do to *earn* our acceptance before God. But it does not mean that there is nothing we need to do to *receive* this gift.

The first thing that the Holy Spirit does is to bring us a conviction of our sins. We become aware of our sinfulness, and especially of certain specific sins that trouble our conscience. Then we see the need of salvation. If we do not hear at this time the good news about what Jesus has done to give us this salvation, we may try and try to stop sinning and save ourselves till we come to realise that we just can't manage that. If we hear the gospel that Jesus has taken the punishment in our place we are glad to turn away from our sins and place our faith in Him as

our Saviour. This is repentance along with faith in Jesus. On the other hand, those who become weary of trying to save themselves are glad to hear personally that Jesus has come to give us salvation freely (Mt.11:28). We hate ourselves for our sins, turn away from them in our heart and turn to Jesus as our Saviour.

It is when we have repented from our sins and placed our faith in Jesus for salvation that God forgives us our sins (washes us with the blood of Jesus - Is.1:18;1Pe.1:18,19), and causes us to be born again (1Pe.1:23). He gives us a new nature and a new spirit (Ez.36:26,27). At this point we are born again. But then we need to grow. Those who stay stuck in this stage miss many blessings and plans God has for them.

Getting baptised in water after we are born again is the way we testify openly

about what God has done for us (the death of the old man and the resurrection into the new life - Ro.6:4,6) and our desire to live blamelessly before Him (1Pe.3:21).

Jesus wants to fill us with power and zeal by baptising us in the Holy Spirit (Mt.3:11). This is what helps us to be His witnesses (Ac.1:8), and grants us spiritual gifts to serve God and others with (1Co.12:4,7).

It's not about escaping from hell and going to heaven. It's about getting into a relationship with God as our Father and living a life that glorifies Him.

Pointers along the way #505

Our brother's keeper

God gave Paul great revelations, and it was Paul's task to teach others whatever they needed (Ac.20:26,27). According to the areas of

responsibility God has entrusted to us, it is the same task given to all of us to pass on to others faithfully what God has given us. Preachers, writers and other leaders have one kind of responsibility, parents have a responsibility towards their children, and we all bear responsibility towards those we deal with. Our faithfulness to God is also seen in our faithfulness to these others. God entrusts knowledge, understanding, abilities, skills, etc., to us so that we might be able to 'feed' the others in our care according to what they need and what is available with us to provide (Lk.12:42).

Many of us only think about ourselves, what we want from God and the others. If we are not concerned about the needs of others and the thought doesn't even occur to our mind except when preachers tell us about it, the chances are that our so-called love for God is

not genuine (1Jn.3:14).

Many others think of others only as much as it serves their own purposes. To help when it will bring us honour or so that we can hope for something in return is human. The divine nature is to give expecting nothing in return but only for the good of the others (Lk.6:35). When we love like that, we will not hold back anything God asks us to bless or save the others. Sometimes it could be to give a word of correction or to share a piece of truth that is appropriate for the situation. We are tempted to say only things that will please the others, make us popular with them, increase our reputation, etc., and to avoid saying anything that might 'offend' them. But if we do these, we will not be accomplishing the whole purpose of God or sharing the whole counsel of God (KJV) for the situation.

Sometimes truth spoken in love (Ep.4:15) in contrast to accusations, blaming, fault finding, condemning, etc., can be what God wants us to bless others with.

We cannot have the strength and boldness to do this if we ourselves are not willing to judge ourselves in the sight of God as often as He speaks to us. It is not that we talk to the others because they are not perfect while we are, but because just as we want for ourselves to be saved from all the corruption that is in us we love others enough to want it for them too. It is in that humble attitude that we can take on the role of being our brother's keeper. It is only as we walk before God in truth and humility that we are enabled to fulfil this task (Ge.17:1).

On the other hand, if we shrink back from declaring the whole counsel of God -- whichever part of it God has

given us and the others need -- but choose only those parts that are pleasing to people, we will also end up misrepresenting God to them. For example, if we only talk about the grace of God and avoid talking about obedience to God, we make a caricature of God, and we are going to be held responsible for that.

Pointers along the way #506

What is that to you?

When Jesus told Peter about what he would do in his old age and how he would die (Jn.21:18,19), Peter wondered how it would be for John (v.21). Jesus' reply was a mixture of humour and rebuke, saying that it wasn't Peter's concern how He dealt with John (v.22).

One problem we face is our mental struggle when others seem to do things differently from us, and yet God seems to bless them and use them! The psalmist Asaph had a problem when he saw wicked people prospering (Ps.73). According to the common understanding of God in those days, evil people had to suffer, and good people should be the only ones to prosper. And so what Asaph saw was inexplicable in his own mind. Perhaps if we are going through financial

struggles that may precipitate such questions.

It may be that we have made many sacrifices for God and then we see others who are not like that serving God with His blessings! "That's not fair!" we think. Perhaps we have given up doing certain things because of convictions, and we find others who are doing all those things still enjoying life. Or we have learned through experience how certain things should be done and then we can't accept the fact that God still blesses and uses others who are doing things differently. Perhaps we think God has revealed to us some truths and wonder how He can use those who interpret these same truths differently.

All this shows we need to know God more. In order to understand God, try to look at the world and the people in it from God's point of view. Do we see

the immense diversity He finds among us in terms of personality, family upbringing, experience, intellectual capacity, social and cultural background, etc.? When we come to Him in faith should He neutralise all these differences at once and make us uniform?

He doesn't do that. He knows every detail of our lives, what we are, what we can and can't do, what we know, etc., and plans our education according to these factors. He makes allowance for our lacks. Obviously my training programme will be different from yours. Yet it is the same God who is working in both of us, even though differently at different times. He doesn't force us to fit into some uniform mould, but He is most patient with each of us, taking us further at no greater pace than we can manage.

And so we find ourselves looking at

others and wondering how they can be like that or do things like this! What we need to do is to be sensitive to what God is doing in our own lives -- customised according to our special needs -- and leave the others to God to do with them according to His plan for them and at their own pace. We may be more or less mature than others. They and we may be in different classes in life's school. Even when God asks us to give inputs to some others, we need to recognise that it is not certain they look at those things in the same way as we; their response may be different.

Humility is what can help us when we think about other people.

True victory

Once we realise that sin was the original cause of all our problems, we can see that salvation is deliverance from sin. Jesus was sent from heaven exactly for this purpose (Mt.1:21). Many people miss seeing this. They think mainly of getting healed from sickness, getting rid of different problems and having a comfortable time in this life. Some others think of escaping from hell and going to heaven. But we miss the point of Jesus' mission if our focus is turned away from salvation from sin.

This salvation actually takes place in three steps. Forgiveness for our sins is first. When we go to God repenting over our sins and put our trust in Jesus as the One who has taken our punishment, He forgives us our sins. He reckons us as justified before Him,

or as righteous in His eyes, just as if we'd never sinned. Along with this comes the experience of being born again when we are made alive in our spirit through a work of the Holy Spirit, and we are given new desires, new understanding and new power to do the will of God. This is followed by sanctification, in which we are increasingly set free from the power of sin in our life and we are transformed more and more to the character of Jesus. This is a slow and lifelong process. Finally, when we are taken off from this earth to be forever with God, we will be delivered from this body of sin and given a glorified body in which there will be no sin.

Many people make the mistake of assuming that justification is all there is to salvation. They think that since there is forgiveness for sins, all we need to do is to get forgiveness

whenever we sin. Many of them live a life similar to what they used to have before they came to the Lord (except for going to church, reading the Bible, etc.), and assume they are doing quite well. But they are missing out on sanctification.

But some others who want sanctification make the mistake of assuming it's the same as glorification - when they will no longer have sin in them. These people get constantly frustrated because reality is something else.

Even after we are justified by God, we carry with us a 'flesh' with lusts and desires (1Pe.2:11) through which we are tempted daily to sin (Jas.1:14). We are to 'crucify' the flesh and 'put to death' the lusts in the flesh in order to live according to the way of God (Ga.5:24;Ro.8:13). We make a mistake if we wait for the temptations to

disappear or stop coming, because that will only happen in glorification. Now we are in the phase of sanctification, where victory means to be tempted and to overcome.

If we faithfully resist the temptation and overcome, we will become stronger and stronger to deal with that temptation. But we would be wrong if we think that any temptation will no longer trouble us (1Co.10:12). It is possible that the same temptation can come when we least expect it, and we can fall. But if we can humbly learn to endure, with watchfulness and prayer, we can experience victory continually.

Pointers along the way #508

In the name of Jesus

For many people, the 'name of Jesus' is like a magic phrase that Jesus has given. They use it to try and get whatever they want from God. They ask for healing, whatever material things they want, promotion, triumphing over their enemies, solving problems, etc., using the name of Jesus. Many people think that 'in the name of Jesus' is the way to end prayers and the cue to say, "Amen." Did you know that 'the Lord's prayer' doesn't end with this phrase?

When Jesus was getting ready to leave this world, He told His disciples that they could now start praying to the Father *in Jesus' name* (Jn.14:13,14), something that they were not doing till then (Jn.16:24). So far they could not have any direct access to the Father (the priests had to mediate between

them). But now that Jesus was opening a way into the Most Holy Place (the part of the Old Testament tabernacle representing the very presence of God), they could walk right in, with boldness and confidence (Heb.10:19-22). This is the authority given to all who believe in Jesus and are born again. That authority is what is represented by the phrase 'in the name of Jesus'.

When a traffic policeman stands at an intersection, he represents the authority of the government. All people have to submit to him, even though physically speaking he may not have the power to stop a motorbike, let alone huge multi-wheel trucks. The authority of the name of Jesus is given to us so that in that name we may be able to stand before the Father, ask Him for things we want (anything according to the will of God - 1Jn.5:14,15), command demons to

flee, bless people, etc.

What we need to know is that even though Jesus has given us the privilege to use His authority, it is still *He* who decides what to do for us, and does them. We don't have the power in ourselves. We may imagine that when Peter asked the lame man to walk in the name of Jesus (Ac.3:6) he was exercising some power that was in him. But Peter himself was very clear in his mind that it was not he but Jesus who had done the miracle (vv.12,16). God is very jealous of His name, and He will not tolerate anyone who tries to steal from His glory (Is.42:8).

We would be wrong if we think that Jesus has given us a blank cheque to write *anything* in His name (Jn.14:14). That would be totally foolish for Almighty God to give us such a free choice because the results would be disastrous. We need to only remember

how Adam and Eve messed up the one choice they had to make! So, God holds the final authority to decide what is good for us. It is safe for us that way! 'In the name of Jesus' also implies that what we ask should be in line with His character.

When we truly trust Him, we must be willing to leave the final decisions to Him, even though we are free to express to Him whatever we want. It is this freedom to 'ask Him anything' that Jesus offers us. But we mustn't imagine from there that we can get anything we ask by using Jesus' name.

The voice of the Spirit

The God of the Bible has not changed. He speaks to people, answers prayers, and does miracles for us, as He has been doing from the beginning. Unfortunately some Christians believe that God doesn't speak directly to us in our heart but only through the reading of the Bible. Such people miss out on the comfort, encouragement, guidance and correction that come through fellowship with God through the Holy Spirit. God has sent the Holy Spirit into this world for this very purpose. We only have to see the Book of Acts to know the different ways the Spirit moves in the lives of God's people.

On the other hand, those who look forward to moving with the Spirit need to be careful that they hear clearly. Deceiving spirits can also speak to us, imitating the voice of the Holy Spirit

or Jesus. That is one of the tactics of Satan (2Co.11:13,14). If we are open to hearing from the Spirit, and if we have decided that we would trust and obey Him in everything He tells us, these counterfeit spirits can be very dangerous. This is essentially what Satan tried to do with Jesus when he came quoting the scriptures (Mt.4:6). If Jesus wasn't aware that Satan could talk to Him and try to deceive Him, He could have been fooled when the scriptures came into His mind. He could have assumed that it must be the Father who was reminding Him about the scriptures.

How many wrong doctrines have come up through people who started with sincerity and godliness, and who made themselves wholeheartedly willing to do anything for God! It's because they believed that the voice they heard was from the Holy Spirit that they received

it immediately and failed to check it out first.

It may also be that when we hear a quotation from the Bible we take it without question as God's word for us. But the Devil can quote words out of context or in part in order to mislead us. When he talked to Jesus, he said, "He will command His angels concerning You"; and "On their hands they will bear You up, So that You will not strike Your foot against a stone" (Mt.4:6). The original word he was quoting to said in fact, "He will give His angels charge concerning you, To guard you in all your ways. They will bear you up in their hands, That you do not strike your foot against a stone" (Ps.91:11,12). The substance and context of this verse were about God's protection in general, and the mention of foot striking against a stone was to be taken as a figure of speech used in a

song rather than to be meant literally.

It was the personal knowledge of the Father and His nature, the knowledge of God's word and the awareness of the dangers of temptation that preserved Jesus from the attacks of Satan. It is the same for us too. In these last days, Satan and his demons have stepped up their efforts to attack us, and more so to deceive us. The nearness of God is our strength and refuge (Ps.73:28). The more we know Him and His word, the better we are prepared to overcome Satan's wiles.

Pointers along the way #510

Are we listening to *God*?

Unfortunately, many Christians do not expect to hear God speaking to them in their heart; they only read and try to obey what the Bible says. But God does speak to us, always in line with what He has already said in His word, according to need of the time. The God who spoke to the apostles (and 'ordinary' people like Ananias who baptised Paul and Cornelius the Roman centurion) speaks even now in our hearts (and sometimes through dreams and visions), to comfort, encourage, exhort, correct and guide.

But those who are expecting to hear from God directly are in for a shock because He is not the only one who wants to speak to us in this way. Satan (or usually one of his demons or deceiving spirits) also will speak to us, pretending to be coming from God

(2Co.11:13,14), or quoting from the Bible as he did to Jesus (Mt.4:6). But he twists truths, omits parts of them, suggests falsehood and tries to lead us off on a tangent.

I want to use the example of what happened to Kenneth E. Hagin, sometimes called the father of the heresy called 'word of faith' which has now spread all over the world. According to Hagin, one day he had read the whole of the Gospel of Mark and was finally meditating on Mark 16 when his mind went blank. (He had been practising this going blank from his teenage years, believing it helped him to hear the Holy Spirit speaking.) This 'blinking of the mind' which is a part of yoga and TM is very dangerous because those who do that abdicate the control of their mind making it open for evil spirits. Hagin then heard a voice telling him to take note of the fact that

Mark 11:23 mentioned three times about 'saying' and only once about 'believing', and that he should preach thrice as many times about saying as about believing. Hagin was gripped with this, and it started him off on what we see now as heresy.

If we heard anything like this, or it came to our mind, we should be thinking, "What! Certainly the Bible emphasises believing more than saying. Our salvation is by faith and not by saying. If we don't have faith, what use is there in saying? How can we interpret this verse like this? Etc." But possibly Hagin didn't think like this because He was under the assumption that it was the Holy Spirit who was speaking to him.

So, take it to heart, what we hear from preachers or as we read the Bible is not necessarily from God. Even if someone quotes from the Bible don't

just accept it but question it honestly in the light of what the whole Bible teaches. Even godly Christians, including preachers, can be deceived. Even preachers who are not themselves deceivers (unfortunately there are many of them around) but who are sincerely seeking to believe and obey God can be deceived. Sincerity is not enough protection in the presence of ignorance. God warns us about this very specifically as we approach the end of days (1Ti.4:1). Yes, we must seek to listen to God, but recognise the possibility of deception.

Pointers along the way #511

Family to be saved

Can our faith save our family members? Many people think it will. They quote Paul telling the Philippian jailor, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household" (Ac.16:30,31), to prove their claim. Some people refer to Jesus healing the paralytic seeing the faith of his friends who brought him (Mt.9:2). Some who overemphasize election and predestination assume that if they are elected, their children also will be. The chances are that they will take the salvation of their children for granted, and not take much pains to pray for them, instruct them in the right way or correct them if they go astray. What if this happens in a church? It is a serious mistake.

Ezekiel 18 makes it absolutely clear that neither will a child be punished

for his parents' sins nor will he be saved just because of his parents' faith. I suggest that you go through that portion of scripture to dispel all doubts in the areas of salvation of children, generational curses, punishment for the parents' sins, etc. God is a righteous God. He will count every man or woman responsible for their own life (v.20). Each of us will have to give an account of *ourselves* to God (Ro.14:12). When God asked Adam for his account he tried to divert God's attention to Eve's account, and so on. But this doesn't work. We can't blame anyone else or our circumstances for the life we lead. Nor can we assume that if our family has been 'Christian' for many generations, our parents were godly people, or we go to the 'best church in the world' that it would add any virtue to us in God's consideration. On the contrary, these may make us more responsible to God because he

who has been given much, from him much will be required (Lk.12:48).

What then did Paul mean when he told the jailer that his family would be saved? To understand this we must recognise the fact that when the Bible quotes words from people those words may not always convey the full doctrinal declaration of the speaker, but only what they said in a certain context. In such cases it is wrong to attribute divine authority for every word they spoke. Check with the other words in the Bible. In this case, what I understand Paul is saying is that the way to be saved is to believe in (to put our trust in, rely on) the Lord Jesus, and it is the same for us as well as our family. Especially in view of Ez.18, we cannot interpret this verse to mean that if we believe, our family also will be saved automatically.

When Jesus saw faith in the case of the

paralytic, we can't be sure from the context if 'they' included the paralytic also or only those who carried him. But if we bring in Ez.18, we can see immediately that for the paralytic's sins to be forgiven, he himself had to believe. We cannot be saved by someone else's faith nor punished for another's sins.

Pointers along the way #512

Missing the spirit

It is the Holy Spirit who gives us true understanding of the truth. That is why, when we have been born again by the Spirit (Jn.3:3), our eyes get opened to see the truth of the Bible in a way that we were not able to see earlier. But being born again is not enough when we want to understand the things of God, because we can still look at words in the Bible with their literal interpretation without seeing the *real* truth. If we do that we can misunderstand the truth because the 'letter' kills and only the Spirit can show us the truth (2Co.3:6).

The Pharisees are typical examples of those who knew the Bible in the letter but missed the spirit. (Here I am using the word 'spirit' to refer to the actual intended meaning of the words, and not the Holy Spirit.) For example, they

heard Jesus mention in one context that if He alone was testifying of Himself, it wouldn't be true (Jn.5:31). Later on when Jesus said that He was the light of the world they pounced on that and said that it couldn't be true because He was saying so Himself (Jn.8:12,13). It is this kind of legalistic approach to understanding the Bible that has misled many people even now.

Look at the passages in 1Pet.3:3,4 and 1Ti.2:9,10. Some people take this extra-literally and assume that God is commanding women not to use gold jewellery, special hairstyles or special clothes. But what is the *spirit* of these passages? It's that godly women are those whose focus is on the inner life rather than on what they wear, etc. When people misinterpret these passages they insist on meticulously avoiding ornaments (especially gold!), etc., but may end up with no difference

in their inner life compared to the other women around them. What a tragedy!

Some people quote Jesus saying it is not what goes into a man that defiles him, in order to justify smoking or drinking (Mt.15:11)! That is again a legalistic approach. But what Jesus was referring to was the defilement of our heart or spirit (vv.17-20) which is ultimately what God is looking at (1Sa.16:7), and He was not saying that we can eat or drink anything we like.

We can see many people of different religions including Christianity paying great attention to the dress they wear, the way they pray, the details of keeping festivals or rituals, etc. They get very agitated when one of their external practices gets broken. But they miss the whole point that true faith is about the heart and our relationship with God on that level. What is the use if our external life fits with the norms

but inside we are sinners like everyone else? Jesus compared this to beautiful tombs, inside of which were rotting flesh and bones (Mt.23:27).

When we 'shine' externally, people are impressed. But God looks at our heart and may see something very different there. What we need to do is to connect with God in our heart through the blood of Christ, and then walk before Him all the time, accountable to Him and open to His corrections (Ge.17:1).

Pointers along the way #513

Doctrines and life

Some Christians take the view that their goal is to live a simple, sincere life before God and that they would not like to enter into discussions on doctrines. There is some truth in this, because they have realised that living a life before God is far more important

than learning doctrines. There are many examples of godly men and women who became very Christ-like in their lives but who did not know enough doctrines to be able to argue with people. What is the use if we become Bible scholars if our practical lives do not reflect Christ?

On the other hand, knowledge of God's teachings (doctrines) will be of great help in our pursuit of becoming like Jesus, avoiding ways of deception and helping us to instruct other people about the way they should walk.

It is as we understand doctrines from the Bible that we can learn about our sinfulness, God's salvation, how to deal with temptations, how to deal with other people, etc., and much more. God has provided His word for us just for this purpose (2Ti.3:16,17). It is when we allow His teachings to remain in our heart and mind that we

will know to face the different challenges of life (Ps.18:28,29). For example, when we know the differences between justification, sanctification and glorification and how each of them works, it becomes easier for us to know to deal with our situations at each point in our lives.

If we are not thorough with the *right* doctrines, it is easily possible that we may get fooled by false doctrines that are going around us (2Pe.2:1). It is an extremely sad thing to look around and see how false teachings have crept into many churches in different forms and how these doctrines have distorted the understanding of many people and made them ignorant of the truth. It is the responsibility of pastors to protect their sheep from this onslaught, but unfortunately many of them are also influenced by false doctrines.

When new people come to the Lord

and are born again through their repentance and faith in Jesus, it is not automatic that their understanding will fall into the right place. Far from it. They come from a background of wrong teachings and practices which they may carry over for a long time into their lives. And because they do not have enough of right teaching to start with, they may also get locked into one or more of the wrong teachings that are going around.

"My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge," says God (Ho.4:6). But we don't have to. God has given sufficient teaching in His word from which we can learn and derive strength. He has also given warnings for us to watch out for and to expose false teachings. God has also raised up many teachers who are themselves godly and able to instruct others. If earning money, getting an education

and doing a job are necessary to survive in this world, isn't godliness more important, for this life and the one to come (1Ti.4:8)? The reward of godly understanding is closeness to God Himself.

Pointers along the way #514

Giving freely from the heart

If we are children of God, one of the biggest reasons for thanking God is for His love for us, and giving His Son to shed His blood and die for us in order to offer forgiveness of sins freely to us. We didn't deserve it at all, and we would never have had any way of asking for it until He offered it to us out of His own goodness towards us. Even if any of us had committed just one sin in our life, we would still have deserved to be put to death for it and sent to hell because that is what sin attracts as punishment (Ro.6:23). The

holiness, righteousness and justice of God could not have had it any other way. The fact is that even though all of us deserved to be punished in hell for all that we have done in our lives, God has blotted out our sinful record with the blood of Jesus and made it white like snow (Is.1:18). It is mind boggling when we sit and think about how God has been gracious towards us.

Then we come up face to face with the question of what we should do with the sins others have done to us. For some of us this is a big issue because we have suffered horribly at the hands of some people, and some of us are still struggling with the consequences of things others have done to us. It is not easy to just forget about it.

Jesus warns us about how the Father will not forgive us our sins if we will not forgive others who have sinned against us (Mt.6:15;18:34,35). This is

a great help for us to understand the serious consequences of not forgiving others. But isn't it possible that if we forgive others because of this then it will be based on fear and not because we really *want* to forgive them?

Jesus wants us to forgive others *from our heart* (Mt.18:35). In other words forgiveness should flow from our heart rather than be forced out of us because of fear. The best form of forgiveness towards others is not what we do in obedience to some commandment but what comes from our heart. We cannot make that come from our heart by fearing the consequences of not forgiving others. The only way it can work is by understanding how freely and undeservedly we ourselves have been forgiven.

The problem with the servant in the parable who was forgiven much by the king was that he did not value the

enormity of what the king had done for him (Mt.18:27,28). He received forgiveness as a matter of fact and as he was going away from the king found it difficult to forgive another servant who owed him a measly amount compared with how much he himself had been forgiven.

If we find it difficult to forgive anyone, ask ourselves how much God has forgiven us, and ask the Holy Spirit to show what it cost God to obtain forgiveness for us. If we have forgotten it, realise that what we have forgotten is one of the most precious gifts our Heavenly Father has given to us, without which none of the other gifts would have been available to us. When our heart is filled with gratitude to God, it will overflow with forgiveness for others.

Pointers along the way #515

What is God's will for us?

In a broad sense, God's will for us is that we should be saved from our sins (Jn.3:16;Mt.1:21;1Ti.2:4), and we should be transformed into the character of Jesus (Ro.8:29). But as we can see plainly, comparatively few are being saved and the majority are going into eternal judgment. In other words, God's will is not being carried out in this context! Now we can understand why Jesus asks us to pray that the Father's will should be done on earth as it is in heaven (Mt.6:10). A part of God's will is being done, but all of it needs to get done.

What is hindering God's entire will from being done is our free will which is able to oppose God. It is with a good purpose that God has created us with a free will, because only then can we choose to love Him (more than

everyone and everything else). God has also taken a risk in doing this because He knew that we might disobey Him. It was because He knew that we might mess things up that He made a plan (before even the world was created) to take our punishment on Himself and make a way for us to get back to Him.

There are two sides to this. God's will does not get done automatically, and not everything that happens is the will of God. Sad to say, we can make a mistake in understanding both these sides, and then end up not doing the things He wants *us* to do, or blaming God for things He didn't do.

When we have a problem, say in our marriage, we may expect God to sort it out and the maximum we may do is to pray. Yes, we need to cast our burdens upon Him and depend on Him to help us, but we shouldn't neglect doing the

things we ought to do, such as talking things over, going for counselling, apologising, trying to understand the spouse's point of view, learning where we would have gone wrong, etc. But instead, we get upset with God for not answering our prayers!

On the other hand, when some calamities happen to us we mistakenly assume that God has done them to us. We marry the wrong person and wonder why God gave us that spouse! Someone crashes into our car and we think God is punishing us for some past sins. A storm or flood comes our way and we are upset that God didn't protect us as His children.

If we married the wrong person it is we who made that mistake and not God. If someone crashes into our car it could be his fault and not ours or God's. If a natural calamity causes us to suffer it is because we are living on

the earth that is suffering from the consequences of sin.

There are times when God protects us supernaturally and other times when He *allows* certain things to happen to us to test us or train us for greater things (1Pe.4:12). He causes even bad things that happen to us to work together to give us something good (Ro.8:28). So why don't we stop blaming God for things that happen and start asking Him about what we should do *now* in our present situation? Then He can give us some meaning for different situations and show us how we should respond.

Pointers along the way #516

When life doesn't make sense

However knowledgeable we are, there may be times in our life when something doesn't make any sense to us. In his days Job was the most godly man on earth, and God certified about him to Satan (Job.1:8). But when God permitted Satan to test Job with destruction of his children and property all of a sudden, Job was confounded. The general understanding of those days was that only bad people suffered calamities and good people always enjoyed blessings. Obviously Job's experience didn't fit into that explanation. His friends concluded that there must be some secret sin in Job's life because of which God was punishing him, but Job was flabbergasted because he knew he was blameless before God.

Hardly any of us has had experiences of the same magnitude as Job. But we too may come across situations when we can't make out just what is going on. Why are we suffering from some sickness even though we know God is able to heal us? Why is God not intervening in our situation even though we have asked Him umpteen times? Why does God allow some wicked man to cause us suffering even though we haven't done anything wrong to him? Our mental struggle is all the more when we see some others getting answers to their prayers, and experiencing miraculous healing and supernatural protection from suffering. Think of what James' family would have gone through after he was killed by Herod, especially after they heard that God had sent an angel to set Peter free (Acts.12:2,11).

However much knowledge we may

obtain, there will still be situations like these where we can't get the answers. The wise thing is to expect that we won't ever get all the answers we will need while we are still on the earth, and to stop hitting our heads against a wall which is not going to move. 'Why?' is a question that God chooses not to answer most of the time, possibly because He wants us to learn to walk by faith and not by sight (2Co.5:7). A better question, and for which we can expect an answer, is, "What now, Lord?" He can tell us what to do *now*, and how to walk by faith here.

In this case we can see that walking by faith means to have faith in God as One who is Almighty and able to do anything He wants, and who loves us with an unconditional love, and then to leave God to His wisdom to decide what will be most glorious for His

name and eternally the best for us. Isn't this what is implied when we pray that His name should be hallowed and His will should be done and *then* ask for things we need (Mt.6:9-11)? 'Faith' is *not* mustering up enough positive thoughts to believe that God is going to answer our prayers.

In choosing to live by faith we recognise our limitations in wisdom and knowledge but attribute to God infinite wisdom and knowledge that are tuned towards us because of His great love for us. Those who come out of suffering in this manner obtain a much greater reward in heaven than others who got their problems resolved while on earth!

Pointers along the way #517

"Ev'rything's gonna be OK!"

How nice to hear things like this when we are going through tough situations! Especially when a preacher quotes promises from the Bible to support such statements! It brings us great relief, comforts us in our mind and gives us hope for the future. But just think back about the number of such occasions in the past when things *didn't* actually turn out to be OK. What went wrong?

1. It didn't show us our responsibility in the situation. Perhaps some part of our mess is from our own making, and unless we own up and take charge, things can't change, can they? Perhaps one of the things we need to do is to acknowledge our sin (Je.3:13), repent (turn completely around), and set things right with God and man. Maybe our response could be different. But

what happens if we ignore all these steps and just wish that things will turn out OK?

2. We aren't doing what we ought to *do*. Perhaps we have made ourselves believe that God will somehow take care of everything and we don't have to do anything.

3. We are leaving the responsibility on God. We expect that He should come and clean up the mess we have made, change the minds of other people towards us, and make things out as if nothing ever went wrong at all. We'd like to come out unscathed.

When we were babies we couldn't do much, and naturally it was our parents who took care of all messy details like changing our diapers. When we call ourselves children of God and take the same attitude towards God what does it say about ourselves? That we are

still *babies* spiritually speaking. I don't think anyone would want to remain like like once we understand this is what is happening.

But the sad fact is that many of God's children continue to remain babies, and many preachers are there catering to them. Paul warned the people in the Corinthian church that they ought not to remain as infants (1Co.3:1-3)! The writer to the Hebrews lamented the fact that even though people had enough time and opportunity to have become teachers, they were actually remaining retarded and needed to be fed with baby food (He.5:12).

God wants us to grow up to a mature stature (1Co.14:20;Ep.4:13). This is possible only if we exercise our spiritual muscles (He.5:14). In simple words, this means that when we are faced with temptations we must learn to deny ourselves and follow Jesus

(Lk.9:23). The Holy Spirit is there to stand with us and help us. We shouldn't be running to someone else to pray for us so that the situation may change and we won't have any difficulty. It is sometimes easier to fast and pray than to deny ourselves in the time of temptation! But when we take up our cross and deny ourselves in order to do God's will in every situation, that's how become increasingly mature. As we grow more mature, we become able to handle situations better that used to bring us down in the past. We can also become strong enough to stand with others and encourage them to handle their challenges better.

Pointers along the way #518

The pull of the world

If we have been born again, one of the many things that happen to us is that our heart gets more interested in the things of God than in the things of this world. If we have found Jesus to be the pearl of greatest value, automatically other things will lose their value in comparison. Where our heart is shows where our treasure is (Mt.6:21).

However, it is not automatic that our heart is constantly kept on the things of God, because the things of this world and the lusts of our flesh keep drawing us away from God. The people of Israel who heartily promised God that they would keep all that He told them (Ex.24:7) fell into idolatry almost immediately afterwards (Ex.32:1). That is why we are exhorted much to set our heart on the things of God (Co.3:1-3), and not to love the world

or the things in the world (1Jn.2:15-17). *We* have to consciously remind ourselves to let our life centre around God, and keep checking ourselves to see if we are straying away.

One of the first things Satan tries to do to us is to tempt us to sin, offering us some immediate pleasure, some easy wealth, some earthly advantage, etc. It is the word of God that can be a lamp unto our feet (Ps.119:105), show us the narrow way that leads to life (Mt.7:14), and warn us about deviations that can lead us away from God. The word of God is also called our spiritual food (1Pe.2:2) without which we cannot get our nourishment and become strong in the Lord (Ep.6:10). If we are not strong spiritually the devil can easily trip us up because he is a deceiver who looks for our weak moments.

But another way the devil trips us up is

to keep our interests in the world. If he can keep us occupied with innocent looking things, he can manage to keep us away from God without our realising it! There is nothing wrong in doing our work and earning a living, is there? But if our whole life revolves around it and the prospects of our advancement there, how much time will we have for God? Perhaps it is our interest in visiting new places and taking photographs that forms a major part of our free time. It could be sampling different restaurants and dishes, trying out dresses or hair styles, keeping up with the latest technology and gadgets, acquiring bigger houses and cars, etc., that take up a huge chunk of our life. Perhaps we feel the pressure of life so much that we find ways to relax through watching TV, and then it becomes a major part of our life. Or we have become conscious about keeping up our health and our

thoughts and activities are about our diet and exercises.

We can always tell ourselves that there is nothing sinful in what we are doing. But don't we see that these things can rob us of the time we could have spent before God getting to know Him and learning His ways? Perhaps God wanted to use us to serve other people as His salt and light in this world and we missed it!

Let's make God the focus and treasure of our life, and be moderate in everything else.

Pointers along the way #519

What are we in essence?

When we meet people we see their body, colour, shape, size, the way they talk and behave, etc. Then we get to know about what they do in their profession, their title, qualifications,

abilities, accomplishments, etc. This type of information gives us a certain picture of who they are, and our respect or lack of it gets fixed in our mind based on these things that we know about them.

But all these things are merely temporary. All these people will one day leave their bodies, titles, wealth, accomplishments, etc., behind in this world as they get ready to meet their God and Creator. These things which made them special on this earth in the eyes of the people around them will have no value in His sight. His question for them is whether they knew His Son as their Saviour and what *He* has been able to accomplish in them. What a shock it will be for many people who gloried in themselves on earth and in their honour before man, when they realised that none of those things received any recognition in

eternity!

Paul realised this even when he was living on earth (Php.3:8). He was a blessed man. Once he recognised the relative value of things on earth and in heaven, he set his mind to pursuing after the things that really mattered in heaven (vv.9-11).

Sad to say, it appears that a large majority of Christians have not received this understanding. We see churches honouring film stars, politicians, sports stars, award winners, etc., as if they were great people, even greater than their pastors! We 'bow down' to celebrities, and swallow their statements on theological points as if these people have instantly become theological experts when they said something loosely related to a recognition of Jesus.

Paul came to see that he could recognise 'no man after the flesh' (2Co.5:16), meaning he would not be impressed by what people were recognised for in the world. He wanted to see people as God looked at them (1Sa.16:7).

Of course, when we have to deal with people in this world, we do need to show respect wherever it is due - for their abilities, achievements, position, authority, etc. (Ro.13:7). But we need to avoid confusing between spiritual and earthly values.

There is something we need to do to ensure that what we 'build' while on earth will remain for eternity. The first thing is to recognise that only what Jesus is able to do in us and through us will remain (1Co.3:11-15). The more we get to know Him, the better we will be able to submit to Him. We will have to choose many times every day and all

through our life what we would like to have, things for glory on earth or in eternity. Jesus warned us lovingly *not* to labour for the things that would perish with our bodies one day, but to seek after things that would last (Jn.6:27). How foolish it would be if we know this, but spend all our efforts to become great in this world! On the contrary, seek to allow Jesus to change us deep inside and make us fruitful for Him.

Pointers along the way #520

Keep on asking

Why is it that even though there are many promises from God many of our prayers don't get answered quickly? The answer is not simple, because it has to take many different factors into consideration. But one thing we can look at is that God has a higher purpose for our lives than our

immediate satisfaction. As people going through different types of difficulties on earth we feel that the removal of our present difficulty is of the highest priority. From God's point of view, His ultimate plan for us is to deliver us from our sinful nature and transform us into the nature of His Son (Ro.8:28,29). In order to accomplish this He knows that many times we may need to go through difficulties (Ac.14:22). It is through the trials in life that we learn to make the choices that matter in eternity, and it is then that we gain much more than merely the resolution of our earthly problems (2Co.4:17). We may not feel like agreeing with this, especially when we are in the midst of trouble, but once we understand things in the right way we will also see that it is good for us that sometimes we go through difficulties (Ps.119:71).

When we ask God in the midst of trouble what is happening to us and why, the answer is not always forthcoming. But this delay gives us an opportunity to examine our lives and see if there is something we need to correct (Ps.139:23,24). Most probably we would never have done this had there not been anything troubling us! But when trouble comes and we ask searching questions we get to see things about us and God which we hadn't seen before. We begin to search God's word for more answers and we get more insight. Our attitudes change, and so does our behaviour.

Have you wondered why God asks us to *keep on* asking, seeking and knocking? Scholars say that that is how the original Greek text reads (Mt.7:7). If we got our answers just when we ask, we would miss many other things God wants to give us through that

situation. I remember many times when I have had to wait on God about some particular issues before I could begin to see things clearly.

God also tests our heart to see our real priorities with respect to godly values versus earthly comforts, by delaying His answers. How many times people turn away from God because they didn't get an answer to their prayers, without seeking to understand Him and His ways! Many times our problem can be that we are willing to forgo eternal values and perspectives in pursuit of earthly gains. Jesus tells us to seek (actually *keep on seeking*) God's kingdom and His righteousness *first* in our lives (Mt.6:33). We may not realise it, but the fact is that God is always watching our heart to see where its treasures are (Pr.4:23;Mt.6:21). That is where His eyes are focussed, rather than on the

external things (1Sa.16:7). How we tend to miss this point and focus on our immediate circumstances!

The choices we make in our heart--between God's values and earthly gain--make us what we become.

Pointers along the way #521

Words without the cross

"The word of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God" (1Co.1:18). People are either perishing or being saved. To save those who are perishing, God came with the message of the cross, that they don't have to die for their sins if they would humble themselves, acknowledge and repent from their sins, and receive forgiveness freely because Jesus has been punished in their place already.

Many who hear this message mock at it, because they don't like to hear about themselves as sinners, they think they don't need any salvation, or because they think it's not logical that someone else's death can save them. What they don't realise is that they can't save themselves and that this offer from God

is the only way for them.

But the cross isn't just about forgiveness of sins. It's also the way for those who have been forgiven to come to experience the fruit of their salvation in practical life -- sanctification. This is a process by which we are being set apart for God, made more and more holy in life, and become more and more like Jesus in our character. What we need to do for this is to take up our *cross* daily, deny ourselves and follow Jesus (Mt.10:38,39). If we don't deny ourselves when we are tempted by our desires (Jas.1:14,15) and follow the way Jesus went, we cannot make any progress in salvation or grow up into the likeness of Christ.

Many believers mock at the preaching of *this* cross. They would rather hear about blessings that are coming their way, the promises God is going to

fulfil for them, how God will fight on their behalf (so that they don't have to carry their cross!), etc. They call the preaching of the cross 'legalism' and 'the opposite of grace'.

Salvation is by grace through faith, and not by any works from our side (Ep.2:8,9). We cannot *earn* our salvation by anything we do. But if we have to 'work out' in our daily life the salvation God has granted to us, don't we have to choose God and His ways instead of the works our flesh would tempt us to do (Php.2:12,13)? We shouldn't think that by pointing out what God wants us to do in order to enjoy what He has prepared for us, we would be going back to works that are trying to earn our salvation!

Sad to say, lots of 'believers' these days don't seem to like hearing anything about what *they need to do*, whether it is repentance or self-denial,

but they like hearing about promises, prophecies of rosy days ahead, etc. Many preachers have caught on to 'what will sell' and adapted their messages accordingly! They studiously avoid the mention of sin, hell, judgment, cross, temptation, self-denial, etc. Instead they fill their messages with stories, jokes, psychology, impressive one-liners, etc. When people who hear perish because of lack of vision or insight (Pr.29:18), their 'blood' will be on the preachers and authors who compromised on their message and chose to be popular rather than helpful.

Pointers along the way #522

First God

"Seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be added to you" (Mt.6:33). So what do some people do? They make sure that as soon as they get their salary they set aside a part for God's work. The first day of the week they spend time in the church. They pray before they start out on a journey or eat their meal. But the sad fact may still be that what their heart is really after are "all these things" that they want God to give to them, earthly blessings, protection, comforts, etc. In other words, even behind what we do for God may be a wish that if we do these things God will take care of us in our earthly life. What we do for God or give Him may be just like an insurance policy for our protection.

That is not what God means by seeking

first His kingdom and His righteousness. Jesus said that where our heart was indicated what our treasure was (Mt.6:21). It is not just that in whatever we do we think of God first, which is a good thing in itself (Pr.3:6), but that the priority for our heart is God's kingdom, His righteousness, His name to be glorified and His will to be done (Mt.6:9,10). Of course He promises us that He will take care of all our needs. But we want to glorify God and do His will as the topmost priority in our life, and not as a means to getting God to do things for us.

When we do anything on earth, the topmost priority in our heart and mind needs to be on how that will affect His kingdom, how that will manifest His righteousness, and how that will execute His will. When we choose a job or take up a business, a place to

stay, someone to marry, a school or college to put the children in -- what are the thoughts and aims that guide our decision? If we look over the way we make decisions and go on doing the various things of this life, we can see for ourselves whether we are actually seeking God first or not.

It's a fact that we are living on this earth, and we do have a lot of earthly needs and earthly tasks to be accomplished. God is very much aware of these, and He is committed to providing these things for us (Mt.6:31,32). But we are prone to forgetting about God in the midst of the whole process and end up seeking our own earthly goals first. Jesus warns us that we cannot serve two masters (v.24). That is why we need to consciously set up God as our priority in life, and check up on ourselves now and then to see whether we have

reverted to seeking earthly things first in our lives.

When we do set our heart on God and the things above (Co.3:2,3), we will be amazed to see how God begins to take care of us in many different ways. He will even turn the bad things that happen to us to do something good for us (Ro.8:28,29). The more we experience this, the more we lean away from the earth towards Him in our heart and in practical life. On the contrary, if we are trying to use God to help us while we are pursuing after earthly things, we will find ourselves with more doubts and confusion.

Pointers along the way #523

Ignoring reality

Psychologists have identified that one of the tricks our mind plays with us in order to protect us from pain is a defence mechanism called denial. We tend to deny the reality of facts that stare at our face by questioning their validity, proposing the possibility of errors or playing with alternative scenarios, if only we can show that these facts are not facts! When we hear the shocking news about the death of a loved one, don't we try to dodge it by saying it can't be true because we spoke to him only the other day? This kind of reaction actually lasts only for a short term until we can no longer deny the facts. But the sad thing is when we use this approach when we come face to face with spiritual realities that cause us distress. The resulting damage could be long lasting.

Think of how people try to hold on to the teaching that when we were born again we were made completely new (2Co.5:17). What this really means, when we read it along with all other statements on this subject, is that God has started something new in us to make us like Jesus and that our life will become more and more new as a result. It's not as if our old life has suddenly disappeared and got replaced with the life of Christ. But there is a process involved here, it will take time, and we have to cooperate with God by putting off the old self (Ep.4:22), denying ourselves and following Jesus (Lk.9:23). If we try to pretend or try to make ourselves believe that the old life is totally gone, we deceive ourselves. We deny reality in that way, and the result will be confusion and frustration.

It is a reality in life that we are

tempted and sometimes attacked by Satan or his demons who try to deceive us and take hold over parts of our life (Ep.4:26,27). We are warned many times to take care that we do not fall for their schemes (1Pe.5:8,9;Ep.6:11). But if we imagine that Jesus has conquered them on the cross of Calvary and since we are in Him we don't have to worry about Satan at all, we deceive ourselves. Then we won't be prepared when the attack comes, and we may not even recognise that a problem is from Satan.

All Scripture is the inspired word of God (2Ti.3:16,17). If we don't believe this we will have no solid foundation for our faith, our hope and our doctrines. But if we don't acknowledge the practical limitations that God took on Himself when He used ordinary imperfect people to write down His words, the different literary styles He

allowed the authors to use, etc., we may tend to read things into the words that God never meant them to mean.

God wants us to be honest. Any pretence we take up, even if it is done with a (misguided) goal of honouring God, is abominable in His sight. Of course we would believe God rather than man (Ro.3:4), but let us not make ourselves believe things which are contrary to reality. When we find contradictions let's check to see if we have understood things rightly and also what other parts of the Bible say.

Pointers along the way #524

Becoming all new

As we grow up from childhood, all the experiences we go through have a large part to play in how we think and feel, and what we are inside of us. When we were children and didn't have the knowledge or maturity to respond to adverse situations in a mature way, we may have reacted in wrong ways, and this may have distorted our ideas about people, situations and our interactions with life in general. These are some of the sad consequences of growing up in a sin corrupted world with less than perfect parents, and other people around us. None of us would have escaped untarnished through this process.

When we come to Christ, He wants to re-make us, just as He did at the time of creation when He made order to come out of chaos (Ge.1:2) and finally

reached the point when everything was very good (v.31). He wants to make 'all things new' (2Co.5:17;Re.21:5). He begins by replacing our stony heart with one of flesh, writing His laws upon our heart, putting a new spirit in us, causing us to walk in His ways (Ez.36:25-27), and promising to be merciful to us not holding our sins against us (He.8:12). God begins this work in us the instant we are born again.

Even though we might wish that this should be done instantly, God works in such a way that He wants us to *want* to change and *ask* Him to change us (Ez.36:37). Since He wants us to *choose* His life to come into us by taking up our cross, denying ourselves and following Jesus every time in the situations of daily life (Mt.10:38,39), it takes time for us to experience this transformation in real life.

A starting point for us is to recognise and then acknowledge to God that there is 'sin' in us (Ps.51:5). We also recognise the fact that there is a law of sin working in our flesh even when we want to follow the law of the Spirit of Christ (Ro.7:23). We have to consciously and deliberately seek for the Holy Spirit to renew (rewrite) our mind -- our way of thinking, reacting, looking at people and things -- based on the word of God (Ro.12:1,2).

When we begin to look at the roots of bondage in our thoughts that we have wrongly nurtured over time, let us not shrink back because of fear of pain. Bringing up old memories we have suppressed can be very painful, but enduring that pain is required if we want thorough healing. It is just like cleaning up a physical wound. Inner healing can take time and cause temporary suffering, but when it is

done we will realise we would have been foolish to avoid it.

If we avoid looking at our hurts and cleaning them up with Jesus, we would not only be retaining the warps in our thinking, but because we continue to behave wrongly as a result of such thinking we will keep adding to the problems we will have in our life.

Jesus has come not only to forgive our sins and take us to heaven, but also to give us an abundant life beginning from now (Jn.10:10). Shall we not cooperate with Him and His servants as He tries to accomplish this work in us?

Pointers along the way #525

Marks of a true conversion

Not everyone has a crisis conversion to point to, with a dramatic change from an old way of life to the new. In

many cases the transition is slow, and the people themselves may not be able to remember the day or occasion when they chose to follow Jesus. On the other hand, those who come to church regularly and are active in Christian work may give an appearance of being Christians but it is possible that they do not have a genuine relationship with Jesus in their heart. Let me try to present to you what the essential characteristics are that distinguish a true Christian from one who merely has a name of being a Christian. You can read a more detailed look at this in my article called "Are you born of God?"

No one can be a genuine Christian unless he has been born again (Jn.3:5). This is what happens when a person repents from his sins and places his trust in Jesus to forgive his sins (Mk.1:15). Then God saves him from

the kingdom of darkness into His light (Co.1:13) and from death to life (1Jn.3:14), gives us the seed of His nature (1Jn.3:9) and adopts us as His children (Ep.1:5). This salvation is an unmerited favour and an undeserved gift from God which we receive through faith (Ep.2:8,9).

If we have been saved by this grace of God the very least thing that distinguishes us from others is our inner recognition or acknowledgement that God has shown us tremendous mercy in forgiving us our sins. We are extremely thankful for this and we know that we really do not deserve this. This will drive us to love God, and this will be seen in our lives by the increasing importance we give to God in every area of our life (2Co.5:14,15).

There is a spiritual growth and development that starts in our life when we are born again. But if what I

have mentioned above--a recognition of God forgiving us in spite of our not deserving it at all--is missing in our life, it is unlikely that we are born again at all. Reading the Bible, prayer, 'Christian' activities in the church or outside, etc., can all be carried out in our own human strength and may get us a name before people. But God cannot recognise such people as His children if His seed has not been born in their heart.

Obviously we need to check our own status in this connection, and we must also do our best in helping other people to come to a genuine relationship with God through Jesus. If we take it for granted that we or others belong to God's kingdom when in fact it is not true, that would be the most fatal deception anybody can be in.

There is so much need for the gospel to be shared with clarity while preaching

or writing so that no one will be left in uncertainty about what they should do to be saved. In reality many are deceived about their salvation. Truth has to be spoken in love even if some hearers may get offended, because we should not become responsible for misleading people and letting them get deceived about the most significant issue in their life.

Pointers along the way #526

Turning failures into assets

If we fall into sin or make a mistake in our life, is it enough to confess it and get forgiveness (1Jn.1:9)? Of course, this is a minimum response from our side to get back to God and people. But if we leave it at that, we would be missing some treasures that could be unearthed by looking at clues we can find more clearly after a failure than at normal times.

If we can learn from our mistakes, it is not only that we can learn to avoid similar mistakes in the future and prevent consequences that will hit us badly, but we also can learn a lot about why we think and behave the way we do. We can also have a better understanding of the constraints under which other people behave. On the whole it can make us better people, and we can also lessen the negative impacts of our foolish behaviour on ourselves and others.

But the spirit of the times, which has also infiltrated the church to a large extent, dissuades us from looking at our faults or failures saying that it will only produce hindrances for our happiness and future. We are 'encouraged' to look only at the 'positive' things. But the fact is that we have negative things because we were born in sin (Ps.51:5), as a result of

which our thinking, feelings and will have all become distorted. Jesus has come to set us free from all sin and bondage and lead us to an abundant life (Jn.10:10). This transformation does not take place automatically when we put our trust in Him, but only as we take up our cross daily, deny ourselves and follow Him (Lk.9:23). The first step we need to take is to look squarely at our failures, acknowledge them, ask God for forgiveness and for help not to make the same mistake again.

Some people look at how to avoid their foolish behaviour in the future, e.g., by taking a deep breath when we are getting angry with someone. But that does not deal with the cause of our anger, or any other behaviour we are concerned with. Without dealing with the root of our problem, we will not be able to prevent the same behaviour

from happening again. But when we ask God to show us why we behave in a particular way, and then think about it along with what the Bible tells us about it, we may get an understanding about ourselves. We may see a wrong attitude, a wrong opinion about others, a wrong goal, or other things like that, which can then be corrected.

We will then begin to understand how others behave, from the point of their ignorance, bad experiences of the past, wrong goals, etc., (just like we also do), and become more merciful and less demanding towards them.

When these two things happen, the consequences of our behaviour and our interactions with others will also begin to change. If we are feeding on the word of God all the time along with learning from our mistakes, we will be becoming more like Jesus also. Isn't that what every Christian really wants?

And of course, that is what the Lord wants for us. Let's look at our sins, and get right.

Paradoxes

Different people come to place their trust in God for different reasons. The usual way is to recognise our sinfulness and believe in the love of God as something we don't deserve. Perhaps we didn't start that way but it was the fear of hell that drove us to repentance. Or something else. But the chances are that however we came to the Lord, that impressed us as the most important factor in relation to God. It can also be the special emphasis which we heard from our leaders at that time, e.g., on evangelism or healing, that has directed our path. However it would happen as we get to know God better from His word that we realise there are aspects of God other than what we have known. A mark of growing in maturity is that we understand more of the different sides of God and their

relationship with one another.

But we may major on that one aspect of God which impressed us, even to the extent of minimising the other sides of God. It may be we are not growing in maturity. But it may also be that we are not able to accept these aspects of God because they appear to be contrary to what we already know about God. We get caught in a paradox, and choose to stay with the side with which we are most comfortable with.

The fact is that there are many sides to God, and some aspects of His character are indeed on the opposite side of some other aspects. For example, there is the love of God for sinners and His hatred for sin. It is not easy for us to exercise both attitudes at the same time in our mind. As a result, some people make a choice of one against the other. Some accept the love of God for people and rule out the

concepts of eternal judgment and hell. Some others cannot accept this kind of (apparent) contradiction and reject the concept of God altogether.

Another apparent contradiction is that of God's foreknowledge and man's free will. Some cannot reconcile the fact of a loving God who has the ability to do anything He wants with the fact that there is so much suffering in this world. It is difficult to understand why God answers some prayers and not some others. Another thing is how the Bible says in one place that salvation is by grace through faith, and then in another place how there must be works that accompany true faith.

As we get to know God better, through the study of His word and an exercise of obedience, we get to understand more about such different factors and their relationship with one another. We also recognise the limitations of our

knowledge but learn to trust in God all the same. The secret of being able to stand without giving up our faith in the face of difficult issues such as the ones above is to know and trust in God. *When we have known something of God as being real and true in our life, we can also trust in His word about things we don't understand yet.* If we are willing to accept all aspects of God even when they appear to be contradictory that can keep us balanced in life without going off on a tangent.

Pointers along the way #528

The logs in our eye

Though we have all been worthy of being cursed by God for our sins (De.28), He has washed us with the blood of Jesus Christ, and cleansed us from all our sins (1Jn.1:7). Now, instead of curses, God has given us the same blessing that He gave to Abraham, that we should become a blessing to everyone around us (Ge.12:3;Ga.3:13,14). One of the ways in which we can bless the others is to help them to deal with the problems they are facing. Even though God calls only some people to specialise in counselling, all of us come across opportunities to help others whom we meet in life with the wisdom God has given us through the different circumstances of our own life (2Cor.1:3,4). But we cannot do it properly if our own eyes are blocked

by 'logs' in them while we are trying to clean up specks from the eyes of others (Mt.7:4).

One big log that blocks our vision is self-centredness. If we are being driven by what *we want* we are in no position to see what *they need*. One common mistake is to tell others to do what we have done in some situation, without finding out whether their situation needs a different solution. Another log is our prejudice or bias about people which makes us look at the others through coloured glasses. Then we assume we know what is to be done even without bothering to find out from them. If we jump to conclusion based on our previous experiences or our assumptions without even listening to the others, we show ourselves to be foolish counsellors (Pr.18:13). One of the biggest logs in our eyes can be a lack

of understanding of what the others are going through looking at it from their eyes instead of ours. If we have logs in our eyes it is natural that we become judgmental or condescending towards them, and then we cannot be a blessing to them.

On the other hand, if we love the others, if we are truly concerned about their welfare, if we feel compassion towards what they are going through, and if we can step into their shoes and empathise with how they feel, we can begin to minister to them according to the wisdom of God and our ability. Many people are wandering about, hoping that that they can find at least one person whom they can open up to. They are not sure if others would understand them or care enough for them to listen to them, and if they can trust the others to keep matters confidential. Half the pressure in their

mind will go away if they find one trustworthy person to share with.

As someone said, even if we can't help someone, let's not end up harming them. Along with a goodness of heart, it would also need relevant knowledge to be able to help others with their problems (Rom.15:14). It is also important to pick up skills to listen to them, make them feel respected and understood, and to guide them towards a solution. There is great joy when God uses us to bless others and lead them out of their difficulties (Jas.5:19,20). The effect of this blessing may even go on to their future generations.

How personal is your God?

When we say we know someone personally, we mean we have met and interacted with him for some time, and we have enough knowledge about him through our contact that helps us to have an opinion about how much we can trust him. How much we trust God also depends on how well we know Him through our interactions with Him. It is obvious that if we have only heard about Him from others but haven't met Him personally it is unlikely that we trust Him much. Our ability or difficulty in trusting God is certainly not because of any fault on His side. If we know Him, we can't but trust Him.

It is well known that a large number of people who assume they are 'Christians' or children of God think so based on false assumptions--they were born in a 'Christian' family, they attend

church, take part in some church activities, read Bible, pray, or they have left their earlier religion and joined a church, got baptised, etc. Their lack of knowledge of God is seen at the time of trials when they find themselves unable to get any comfort, encouragement or help in their heart by holding on to God (Ps.46:1). (Isn't it good that trials come and show us where exactly we stand?).

Some 'Christians' even find it difficult to believe God is almighty, who created the whole world out of nothing and who can do whatever He wants (Ps.115:3;135:6). They don't think the stories of miracles in the Bible actually happened. In this case it is easy to see how they find it difficult to even expect that God will do something for them in their situation, and naturally they don't even seek God for help.

Of course, it is not that all who are truly born of God automatically find it easy to face trials. The difference is that they trust in their Father and turn to Him instinctively when they are in trouble. On the other hand, what we see is that some 'Christians' are not able to receive any comfort or encouragement even when someone shares God's promises with them or prays for them. It is that their heart hasn't been regenerated yet, and they can't even 'see' the things of the kingdom of God (Jn.3:3).

There is so much need to preach the true gospel of God, urging people to turn from their sins and the wrath of God, and to throw themselves at the mercy of God so that they can receive the forgiveness of sins freely as a gift. God *longs* to be gracious to everyone, but people have not really heard how they can receive that grace

(Is.30:15,18). Most have received a cheap grace where all they need to do is to 'accept' Jesus, without any reference to their sin or what it cost God to give them forgiveness freely. Many such people think that God is a very tolerant person who will show grace to everyone.

Anyone can learn to sing songs, clap hands, 'worship' God and be active in church. But if we have a true relationship with God, it will be seen in the way we relate to Him in times of trouble. We can see where we stand by the fruit that comes out in our own life (Mt.7:20).

Pointers along the way #530

The Bible in our life

Throughout Christian history, people have longed to be able to read the Bible for themselves, and many have

gone through much trouble to get hold of one. But now most people can get the Bible in their own language and usually in several versions. It's freely available on the internet, and even on smart phones. However, many people, including born again Christians, aren't actually doing much of reading it, studying it and meditating on it! Many factors seem to be contributing to this. Parts of the Bible, especially some books of the Old Testament, are not easy to understand without a proper background. Some people don't seem to understand the relevance of many parts of the Bible to modern life. There are truths hidden in the Bible that can be found only if we dig deep. But the modern man doesn't seem to have the time or inclination to do that. And, of course, those who are not born again aren't really able to make much sense of what they read (Jn.3:3).

But here is a treasure God has placed in our hands, which is able to reveal God, His nature, His ways, the sordid history of man and what God has done to redeem us, instructions for our daily life, and which provides us a means to communicate with God Himself (2Ti.3:16,17).

The modern man is impatient, partly because he has very little time in his hands in which he is expected to accomplish a variety of tasks and fulfil many responsibilities. So he usually listens to himself for ideas, or accepts ideas that are thrown at him through the media. He swallows those ideas especially when he knows they have come from celebrities or 'great' persons, because he doesn't have the time to check if they are correct. If he is a church going man, he thinks whatever the pastor says is enough for him.

But the spirit of the times is such that there is great pressure on people from all around to turn away from God, and one of the things it causes people to do is to neglect the Bible. If they accept this, perhaps without knowing what is happening to them, they have got cut off from a fountain of life. When they find themselves in difficult situations, they find they have no strength to stand, because they haven't been feeding on the milk of God's word (1Pe.2:2).

Godly Christians through the centuries have spent much time with the word of God, meditating on it and having fellowship with God who inspired it. They have chosen to trust in what the Bible says even when 'great' people of the world opposed them. They have held the Bible as their ultimate authority for life, and rejected ideas and philosophies that went against it. Then they grew from faith to faith,

received grace upon grace, and became godly with every day.

Let's not fool ourselves to think that we can now manage with just snippets each day or second hand devotions. Let's submit ourselves to the authority of the word of God, respect it and honour it. Let's draw on the strength God has prepared for us in our times of need.

Pointers along the way #531

Springs of living water

"Whoever drinks of the water that I will give him shall never thirst; but the water that I will give him will become in him a well of water springing up to eternal life" (Jn.4:14). Jesus said similar things in Jn.6:35 and 7:38. When we have yielded our life to Jesus trusting in Him and the Holy Spirit dwells in our heart, this living water will meet our spiritual need in different situations of life. In other words, the Holy Spirit will bring to our mind words of truth that can comfort, encourage, guide, teach and correct us according to our particular need (Jn.14:26). Not everyone can receive this help except those who have been born again (Jn.3:3). All of us were born in sin (Ps.51:5;Ep.2:1) and our spirit was dead (disconnected) towards God. But when we

acknowledged our sins, confessed them to God and received forgiveness by trusting in the death of Jesus in our place God regenerated our spirit. Then we got connected with God and were made His children. Now we can receive all the help that He has provided in His word through His Spirit working in us.

Does it happen that someone shares God's word with us and we don't find any help there? Perhaps it was not the right word for us at that time. But perhaps it is true that we are unable to hear the living words that God is speaking to us because we have no connection with God! There may be comfort and encouragement in the word but for us it is meaningless because our eyes and ears have not yet been opened to God.

It may also be that we could hear God at one time in our life but have lost

touch with God over time. We may have taken Him for granted or we may have strayed away from Him slowly (Mt.13:22). We may have neglected nourishing ourselves daily with spiritual milk and meat and got into the habit of praying only in time of need (1Pe.2:2;He.5:14). We may never have developed the ability to receive strength from God through His word or we may have lost it through lack of use. In this case it wouldn't be fair to turn to God and complain about Him not being around when we need or not answering our prayers.

God has provided all things we need for our life through His word, the Holy Spirit, the church and fellowship with other believers. But one mistake we human beings make is to blame everyone else, everything else and even God for all our problems, and never thinking of looking to see what

we may have done wrong or failed to do. Instead of working with what God has given us, we sit passively and expect everything to go smoothly without problems or we look for solutions that will simply take away our problems. What we don't see is that God is in the process of transforming our nature through the Holy Spirit using God's word, and this can happen only if we respond to Him in the trials of life, seek after Him, and receive and use the help that He provides. Instead of going after things that won't last, why don't we drink from the fountain of living waters (Je.2:13)?

Pointers along the way #532

What does worship do to us?

'Worship' has become a major part of the 'service' in many charismatic/pentecostal/independent churches, and this is especially the main attraction for many young people who migrate to these churches from formal churches which they consider 'dead'. Here they can feel the energy ('the power') in listening to loud, pulsating music coming through sophisticated musical instruments and music systems and moving with it with clapping, raising hands, swaying, etc. It is very near in experience to the world they have left behind except that this is 'clean', there is mention of Jesus, and their parents are ok with it. At the end of this time of 'praise and worship' they have had their high, and they long to come back to it again next week. They are all the more interested in a

church where there is a vibrant youth programme where they can jam with their friends, strike up 'relationships' with guys and gals without too much supervision from the elders and have a blast with drinks and snacks.

But what is worship supposed to be for us, from God's point of view? It is our adoration of God when we 'see' Him in His glory and power, and we take our place before Him in humility. The words used for 'worship' in both Hebrew and Greek imply prostrating oneself before God. It is not the 'how' of this that is important--whether it is when we sing songs or we are sitting quietly alone before Him, or whether we kneel down, raise hands, etc. What needs to happen is a humbling of ourselves before God in our heart as we recognise and acknowledge Him, as created ones before the Creator, as feeble ones before the Almighty, as

essentially unclean ones before the Holy One, as ignorant ones before His wisdom, as selfish and self-centred ones before His love, etc.

As Isaiah recognised his own uncleanness when he saw a vision of God (Is.6:5) and the apostle John fell down as if dead when he saw an appearance of Jesus (Re.1:17), when we worship God we will lose our own sense of self-righteousness and self-importance, and stand in awe of God. When this happens we will be so full of reverence and respect for God that we will offer ourselves to Him without any reservation to do whatever He wants. God says this is to be our reasonable response when we worship Him (Ro.12:1).

We would be fooling ourselves if we come away from the worship service feeling all excited and thrilled with the experience but there is no change in

our understanding of God and attitude towards Him. *When we meet with God in truth, there must be always a movement away from sin towards Him in our life.*

There is too much importance given to stirring up of the emotions, and there is very little emphasis, even in the message that follows, on following Jesus as His disciples and receiving the truth which alone can set us free (Jn.14:26). What is the point impressing everyone with organisational skills, oratory and showmanship but people continue to remain essentially the same as before?

Pointers along the way #533

Our love for others

When young men and women 'fall in love', they have strong feelings for the other. But most of them are looking for getting something from the other person, perhaps some pleasure or affection. This kind of love is almost like loving ice-cream or chocolate. If we get them we can enjoy eating them. But this is not godly love, far from it.

When God loved us we were sinners and there was nothing lovable in us. But in order to save us from death and to give us an eternal relationship with Him He sent His Son to go through the suffering of death (Jn.3:16). He suffered so that we could be blessed. He looked for our eternal welfare and He expressed His love for us by suffering in order to bless us. The mark of our true love for others is how much we are willing to deny ourselves in

order to bless the others.

When we want to bless others, it is not by giving in to their wishes. What they wish for may be bad for them, and it would not be love on our part to give them something that will hurt them. The way many parents give in to their children thinking that they are making them happy they end up spoiling them and hurting them in the long term. If we love the others sometimes we may have to do things that may appear to hurt them in the short term. A typical case is when parents have to discipline the children. This kind of love may face ridicule and opposition from ignorant people, but we can face them because we really care for the welfare of the people we love more than we care for the opinion of people.

There is much we can learn here from the example of Jesus. Think of how He once refused to meet people who were

waiting for His healing because there were others who had to hear the gospel (Mk.1:37,38)! Once He walked quite a long distance and back just to heal the daughter of a Canaanite woman (Mt.15:21,29). Many times He found no time to eat because of the large numbers He had to deal with, even when His relatives felt He had gone out of His mind (Mk.3:21). He was willing to be interrupted in the midst of His busy schedule but He was also willing to go away from the crowd in order to recoup physically and spiritually--all for the sake of being useful for the others.

God's love is connected strongly to His intention to bless us, and so it is to be with our intention towards others. Our love is not to be wishy washy or going up or down with our feelings. Jesus described true love by saying that there was no greater love than for a man to

lay down his life for the others (Jn.15:13). What this tells us is not just about physically laying down our life, but denying ourselves comfort, pleasure, personal gain, etc., in order to do good to the others. This is the kind of love that has driven missionaries of old to leave their countries in order to take the gospel to those who had never heard. And this is the kind of love that seems to be fading away from the general population of Christians these days, just as Jesus expected (Mt.24:12).

Pointers along the way #534

The imperfect church

Jesus once used the example of children playing happy and sad songs and feeling bad that the others did not join them (Lk.7:31,32). He also said that people found fault with John the Baptist who hardly ate anything, and with Him who ate everything freely (v.33-35)! Don't we sit around and find fault with different churches we see around us with their labels, doctrines and practice? If one church points out a mistake in another church, is the first church without fault? Some who take pride in their form are grossly wrong in their attitude and some who take pride in their attitude neglect form. Actually nobody gets it fully right, either in form or spirit.

When God mentions the church as the Body of Christ (Ep.4:12;Co.1:24), which one did He mean, the local or

the universal one? Those who focus primarily on the local church never seem to get it functioning as the full Body of Christ--something is always lacking; there are some gifts missing in operation, they haven't got all their doctrines in balance (even if they imagine so), and it would be presumptuous for them to consider that they are the Body of Christ in whole. If they do that they practically exclude all other parts of the Body blocking out what God wants to give them through those others. On the other hand, if some hold the view that the universal church is the Body of Christ but neglect the work of the local one it remains just a nice theory without any practical benefit.

Local churches are themselves different members of the Body of Christ. It is in the working of the local churches *and* in their relationship with

other members of the Body that the world will see Christ in action (Jn.13:34,35). Those who hold on to a grandiose delusion that they alone are *the* Body of Christ manage to put off many unbelievers from coming to Christ in the first place who are justified in commenting, "Christ I like, it's Christians I can't bear with." Can they imagine that because they are the 'eye' (for example), they don't need the 'hand' (1Co.12:21)?

Let's also be realistic. We aren't going to be able to bring all the churches together in agreement to manifest the one body in Christ. It is by accepting the different members of the Body in our heart, learning to respect the contribution of others where we lack and working together with them (to an increasing level as more agreement and refinement result from an initial breaking of the ice) that will show

something to the world. This has to begin with the leaders.

It takes humility to admit that 'our church' lacks certain things and be willing to receive them from the others. It's usually the insecurity of leaders that prevents this. 'Receiving' cannot be done without discernment or carelessly because errors need to be sifted out. But once an openness develops in the heart, the mind can be broadened through careful exposure to resources coming from the 'others'. Think of how much delight this will bring to the heart of the Lord!

Pointers along the way #535

Paul's ministry, a challenge

The apostle Paul was an unusual man, who went from being an enemy of the gospel to the most prominent apostle of his days (1Ti.1:13;1Co.15:10). God

chose him to bring the gospel to a large part of the world, and to write a great portion of the New Testament. But it was not a charismatic personality, oratorical skills or organisational abilities that made this man accomplish all that (2Co.10:10;1Co.2:1). There are many now who impress millions with their natural abilities, but how few have what Paul had!

1Th.2:1-12 is very illuminating on the subject of becoming a spiritual 'father'. "Our exhortation does not come from error or impurity or by way of deceit" (v.3). He did not talk whatever came to his mind or what he thought would impress people. He sorted out error from the teaching or practice he saw around and took care to present a sound and wholesome gospel. He didn't use tricks to work up emotions, exaggerate facts to convince people, play down reality in order to give a

rosier picture for people to hold, avoid painful subjects so as not to lose any in the audience, etc. He was true to God, and he chose to be true to people in every way, believing that truth will stand, and also that he would have to give an account to God one day.

"Just as we have been approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel, so we speak, not as pleasing men, but God who examines our hearts" (v.4). Isn't this an area where we can easily fail, and not even realise we have failed God? It is God who has made us stewards of the gospel, and instead of being faithful to Him and to the calling He has given us (1Co.4:2), do we seek to keep everyone happy? It is not just our works that God examines (Ro.2:6), but mostly the motives and intentions of our heart (1Co.4:5).

"We never came with flattering speech, as you know, nor with a pretext for

greed--God is witness" (v.5). Flattery involves exaggerating things or telling 'white lies' to please people in order to get some favour from them. Even when we need to honour someone, we don't have to stray from the truth. But sadly many consider this as what everybody does or what everybody is expected to do. 'Pretext for greed' is so rampant among preachers that it is pathetic. Paul stands out. Even when he had to take some offerings from one church to another he made sure that everything was impeccable in the sight of God *and* man (2Co.8:21).

"Nor did we seek glory from men" (v.6). If we seek honour from man, that will be all that we get, and no glory from God (Mt.6:1). But how much more focus, time and effort people give to impress people than to what God thinks about them! There is a strong urge within us to appear great before

people, and this can be overcome only by focussing on God.

Paul worked night and day giving himself to those he served and doing everything he could to bless them. He desired their benefit rather than his own gain and did everything for their sake. Challenging!

Pointers along the way #536

What is that to you?

When Jesus appeared to Peter after His resurrection and talked to him about taking care of His sheep, Peter was curious to know what would happen to John (Jn.21:20,22). Jesus' answer was to the effect, "Why are you worried about him, you just follow Me yourself" (v.23). Our tendency to get occupied with what is really none of our business is many times used by Satan to mislead us.

For example, what is our thought when we hear about a Christian leader who has fallen? Do we think, "If such a person has fallen, is there any hope for someone like me? Was this man cheating us when he claimed all kinds of experiences? Is there any truth at all in all that such preachers tell us? Have I been 'believing' in vain? I don't want to be fooled any more. It's better I take

care of myself instead of depending on this God"? The Enemy is at work.

Even if everyone around us going to compromise, is that reason for us to compromise? Even if many people are only pretending to know God and trying to fool everyone, does it really mean that what we believe is also false? Even if many preachers are doing all their 'ministry' only to make money or their own empires, can we not do it differently for the glory of God?

The closer we are to the person who has fallen (maybe it is a close relative or someone we associated with for a long time!), the greater is the shock for us. But that does not mean that all that we have believed in and experienced are all only our imagination. The apostle John could say boldly with complete confidence, "We are from God" (1Jn.4:6). He had no doubt about

that. So can we know for sure, any one of us who knows God personally and know that we are His children. This is what gives us boldness to stand for Him in all kinds of situations, even if we are threatened with death. We have a great number of Christians in history who have given their life for Christ because of their firm faith in Him. If our faith wavers in the face of challenges, what it shows us is that our faith is not real or it is weak (Pr.24:10), and not that the God we believe in is not real. If other people whom we looked up to fall, what it shows is that *they* have made a mistake. We mustn't allow their mistake to cause us to make a mistake of our own.

When temptations grow strong and survival becomes precarious, many people's love for God will faint (Mt.24:12,13). They will choose the

tangible things of this earth in exchange for the invisible things of the life to come. But does that mean that we ourselves should give up our faith? For those who believe, what is not seen is also real (2Co.5:7).

Actually, if we lose out we are the ones who will suffer the consequences. We can't justify ourselves before God saying it was because someone else betrayed our trust. Salvation is a personal relationship, and we have to preserve our salvation no matter what others do. We cannot blame husband, wife, parents, pastor or church for our condition.

Our blind spots

When we drive a car, even when we look through the rear view mirrors, there are angles we can't see, and sometimes we are shocked when other cars appear by our side which we hadn't seen coming. These 'blind spots' are there because parts of the car's body and the view in the mirrors leave some areas uncovered. Another serious challenge we face is that we all have blind spots in our mind, areas where we aren't able to see some faults other people see in our lives. These exist because we naturally don't like to see anything wrong with us and our sin-corrupted mind automatically helps us to avoid the pain we will get if we look at our faults.

When someone tells us our fault, whether in love or anger, it's a good opportunity for us to clear up a part of

these blind spots. But what do we do instead? We tell them it's not true. We aren't being dishonest, but because this is our blind spot we are simply unable to see that we have such a fault. The same thing happens even if a thought comes into our mind that suggests something could be wrong with us. Our response happens automatically, without our thinking, because this is a part of our sinful nature. Another thing we do is to think about what we heard about us, and justify ourselves by finding out reasons why we had to behave in that way or by telling ourselves how other people misunderstand us. Sometimes we go beyond this and attack the other person for 'accusing' us, blaming us, finding fault with us in an area where (we think) we are innocent! God says, "The way of a fool is right in his own eyes, but a wise man is he who listens to counsel" (Pr.12:15).

If we don't recognise this and take deliberate steps to overcome our natural (sin tainted) tendencies to protect ourselves, our blind spots will remain and become more hardened.

Have we thought about how our bad behaviour can hurt others? They may get hurt as a direct result of our sinful behaviour. But some may also get put off from God because we claim to be His representatives and we not only refuse to accept our faults but we also shoot the messenger. There are instances where God sent 'prophets' to warn people who are going astray, and these prophets are punished for their audacity (2Ch.16:9,10). Isn't it true that many times we don't recognise the 'prophets' God sends to warn us?

When we say we want to become like Jesus don't we first have to recognise and acknowledge areas where we are unlike Jesus? God shows that to us

sometimes as we read His word or listen to a message. But sometimes it comes to us from other people who are hurt because of us or who observe our failures. Some may want to help us, and others may want to find fault with us. But if we really want to become like Jesus don't we need to receive this 'feedback'? Our self-protective nature will start acting if we don't focus deliberately on getting feedback.

When we do things in ignorance, God is merciful to us (Ro.5:13). But let's remember there are consequences to every wrong thing we do.

Pointers along the way #538

Christian writings

We have now with us, in addition to the Bible, writings by many Christian leaders which help us to get a clearer view of what the Bible says. We have the writings of 'apostolic fathers' like Ignatius and Polycarp who lived close to the time of Jesus' apostles. Then we have people like Athanasius (known for his 'creed') and Augustine who were theologians who tried to deal with heresies that were coming out in their times and wrote down their understanding of Biblical doctrines. Later came Martin Luther and John Calvin who spearheaded the protestant revolution and their writings are also classics. Coming to the present day we have the advantage of reading and studying all these and many more writings of earlier and present day theologians and thinkers.

One thing we must keep in mind as we read any Christian writing is that these are but *interpretations* of what the Bible says in the author's opinion. Much as we may respect any of these writers, their writings are not scripture and they do not hold the same validity as the Bible itself. When we read the writings of godly people it is but natural that we hold them with respect and try to learn from them. At the same time we should recognise that they are not perfect, and that they may contain errors in the light of the understanding we now have of the scriptures.

Earlier writers did not have the advantage of the breadth of understanding of the Bible that is possible these days because their sources were limited. If we look at Luther or Calvin it is easy to see how the theology they came from coloured their thinking, and how it leaves much

to be desired. Modern writers are also affected by their own background and experience. Even those who quote directly from the Bible and say that they are only saying what the Bible says may be picking verses out of their context and their teaching may not have the balance that would have come from the verses they are *not* quoting (it is also written)!

It is not wise for us to base our theology entirely on what any great Christian leader has said or what some church holds. My personal conviction is that there is no one (including me) who is completely right in what he understands and teaches. We all see things imperfectly (1Co.13:12), and we may even have blind spots that prevent us from seeing some part of the truth. It will do all of us good to keep our mind open for correction and new learning. Even if what we learn in one

grade of our spiritual school seems to be sufficient for us at the moment, let us recognise the fact that there are many grades ahead of us. The more we learn, the better our own lives can be changed, and the better we can help others to come to the knowledge of the truth and grow in it.

It is also prudent to keep away from speakers and writers who bring out heresies or say things that cannot really edify us (2Jn.9,10). This will preserve our own soul, and also save a lot of time and effort for us.

Pointers along the way #539

The anointing of God

The other day I was watching a video of a preacher speaking 'powerfully'--with loud voice and excitement--about how God was going to anoint some of those who were listening, quoting He.1:9. But even though he read the full verse, he was only talking about how God was going to anoint the people, without mentioning how this particular anointing mentioned in this verse was given to Jesus *because He loved righteousness and hated lawlessness*. He did not also mention that this anointing was to give Jesus a higher level of gladness than everyone else. What the listeners may have understood from this message, because of a lot of exposure to similar use of the term 'anointing' by many other preachers, could be to refer to an

experience of the power of God coming upon their lives. But what we see when we read this verse carefully is that this anointing that made Jesus more glad in His heart than everyone else was actually a mark of God's pleasure over Him when He saw how Jesus loved righteousness and hated lawlessness.

Anointing with oil is used in the Old Testament for different purposes such as ordaining people for God's service or setting apart inanimate things such as vessels for use in God's service. In the New Testament the elders of the church are instructed to anoint sick people with oil and pray for them so that they may be healed (Jas.5:14). But in this use of the word anointing in He.1:9, the anointing came from God upon Jesus because He was pleasing to the Father. This anointing was not for

Jesus to do any ministry to the others, but for Him to enjoy the Father's pleasure over His life. The Father announced publicly at the time of Jesus' baptism that He was well pleased with Him (Mt.3:17). This anointing was given to Jesus in His personal life, a mark of God's pleasure, irrespective of whether others were blessed by it or not.

Shall we seek for such an anointing over us? In one sense, what else shall we look for more earnestly than anything else than to receive approval from God? For many godly people who have lived on this earth, there was nothing more important than God's approval and being welcomed by Jesus on their arrival in heaven with, "Well done, good and faithful servant" (Mt.25:21). If we can receive this commendation from Jesus then we will

recognise that every hardship we went through here on this earth was worth it. But what He.1:9 indicates is that we can have this sign of approval from God even while we are still on earth.

To know that we are pleasing to the Lord is its own reward, especially when we go through difficult times on earth or when some people are against us. Nothing pleases God as much as our faithfulness with the abilities, things and opportunities we have been given and our obedience to Him in the face of opposition from our own desires and people. People may be impressed with great achievements. But God greatly values faithfulness in secret (Mt.6:6) and in little things (Lk.16:10).

Pointers along the way #540

A mark of godly love

Many people move into 'faith' thinking that Jesus will be there to take care of everything for them. All their prayers are for what they want, and they feel 'blessed' when life prospers and doubtful about God when things don't go the way they expect. Many of them actually don't know Christ or belong to Him because they don't have the *spirit* of Christ (Ro.8:9). This verse has to be understood as meaning both having the Holy Spirit (through whom we are born again and who dwells afterwards in our heart) and having the same attitude that Jesus had (Php.2:5-7). Jesus said He had come to serve and not to be served (Mt.20:25-28). He said that the people of this world (those who have not yet been born again) looked for greatness in the sight of others and tried to lord it over the

others, but His people found greatness in serving others. This change of heart and attitude is something that begins to happen when we are born again. The love of God (His kind of love) is poured into our heart by the Holy Spirit (Ro.5:5).

When we love people like this, we desire to bless them in whatever way we can, instead of expecting them to serve us, or worse still, demanding that they serve us. We are willing to make sacrifices of time, money and effort to do good to the others. Christians are known all over the world for sacrificial service of various forms. The sacrifice is in being willing to say no to our own comfort, convenience and pleasure in order to do good to the others.

Of course, there is a development and growth in this willingness to sacrifice and wisdom to do things better each

time. Also, what each of us will do in response to this desire to bless others will vary depending on our particular calling and task within the Body of Christ. But what we need to examine is whether we do have this spirit of sacrifice or whether we are still looking out for our own interests. If we are looking out essentially for our own interests we need to look at the possibility that we are not really born again. It is pertinent to note that even many people who were active in 'Christian work' along with the apostle Paul were only seeking their own rather than the interests of the others (Php.2:20,21). Is it not possible that some of us are active in Christian work not because we are really driven by a desire to bless the others but with the idea of making it big in the organisation? Sad to say, it is also a fact that many have chosen Christian work only because they could not land

any other job!

Only the love of Christ can 'drive' us to make sacrifices for others (2Co.5:14,15). God's Spirit working in us will first begin to make us aware of certain needs around us, and then we feel a great concern for them and then a burden to do something about them. If we start doing what we can and recognise our limitations, our burden will drive us to ask God for greater abilities and skills to serve. God will equip us if we have the right motive (Lk.11:5-13).

Pointers along the way #541

How shall we share the word?

We will all agree that the purpose of sharing God's word, whether it is in a sermon or an article, is to bless the others. When we do it in the right way, we become a channel through which God can speak to the others. It is God's word, and it is He who wants to speak to the others, and we do well as channels when we allow the Holy Spirit to work through us as He wishes. It should be obvious that the cleaner the channel is, the purer the message will be that goes through it (2Ti.2:21). More important than homiletics is the state of our heart, including our motives and desires.

We are all aware of people's opinions about us. But the more we allow that to influence our message, the more defiled God's message will become.

We may hold back what God wants us to say, soften what we would consider as a 'blow', and add elements that would impress rather than bless. The result would a greater impression on people but a sad heart for God. What He wanted to say didn't get through.

Our ambition has to change from impressing people to be totally pleasing to God. Then we can become a pleasing aroma to all who are in tune with God (2Co.2:15,16). The more we become pleasing to God the more we will be hated by people who hate God. But that wouldn't matter much to us because we are enraptured by the grace that overflows to us from God through Christ Jesus. Selfish ambition--for fame, power, influence, wealth--will be like dirt that defiles everything we touch (Jas.3:14-16).

Jealousy can be another wrong motivator. We are then trying to outdo

someone else or draw people from others to us, or feeling bitter because we aren't getting as much attention as the others. This green monster hides itself deeply within us and poisons even our best 'messages'. Even when no one can detect anything in what we say, the flow of the Holy Spirit is hindered in our channel.

It is God who can touch people's lives, even when we are the ones who are speaking the message. It is a sobering truth to realise that the best words we can use will have no lasting result in the lives of people unless God works in their hearts through the Holy Spirit. It's all about Him, even though He uses us as channels. So if we want to be effective in our ministry to people, we must make ourselves available to Him as clean vessels which He can use. It doesn't really matter if we as channels get forgotten by the people, as long as

God has been able to do His work in them.

The apostle Paul was very aware of this. He made deliberate efforts to avoid projecting 'himself', in order to make it possible for the power of God to work through him perfectly (1Co.2:4,5). For this he chose his words, the concepts he shared, and the way he spoke, so that the wisdom and the power of God would not be contaminated with human ideas and wisdom (vv.1-3). Now we can understand how God could use this man even to write scripture.

It's not about us, but all about God, His word and His work.

Pointers along the way #542

Little compromises

Sometimes when things are going well we forget that we are all in a spiritual

battle. The intensity and the subtlety of the battle depends on how close we have come to the Lord, the closer the stronger. Our enemy, the Devil, is just waiting for opportunities to trip us up when we least expect it, or to catch hold of one of our weaknesses to pull us down (1Pe.5:8). Thank God He is there to protect us and to make sure that we are not tried beyond our ability and also to provide us help in the times of testing (1Co.10:13).. But it is not automatic that just because God is our protector we won't get tempted or that we will have a cakewalk.

God wants us to treat this battle very seriously because He knows how weak we are. He tells us several times in His word to be sober minded, to be vigilant and alert, and to watch out for the attacks. He also tells us to protect ourselves with armour so that we will be able to stand without getting hurt

and also to overcome (Ep.6:10-13). When we find ourselves doing well, we tend to think that things are safe and to relax on the putting on of this armour. The Devil is watching to see which part of our armour is open and swoops in to attack. Therefore God tells us not to take our safety for granted (1Co.10:12).

What opens up our armour is usually little compromises. We tend to think seriously about 'serious' sins and assume that little compromises are tolerable. After all, we think, it is such a small thing! "Everyone does it, we can't be perfect, we have to live in this world, etc." What we don't realise is that we are opening up a small part of our armour and the Devil will be quick to use that access to push in with more serious and subtle attacks.

When we are born again, God gives us a growing hatred for sin (1Jn.3:8,9).

But then we have to maintain this attitude of hatred towards sin, and we are exhorted to 'consider ourselves to be dead to sin' (Ro.6:11), 'put off the old self' and 'put on the new self' (Ep.4:22,23). What happens when we make compromises is that we allow the old attitudes to take root and grow again.

Looking at it another way, imagine temptation is like a door to be opened, with posters announcing the offers inside. The first door appears to be rather innocuous, but once we open that door and enter inside we find that there are other doors beckoning us with greater offers. If we hadn't entered the first door we would not have faced the next door at all; now that we have entered through the first door we find ourselves already weakened and less able to resist the further doors.

Every temptation starts in our thoughts,

and it is when we compromise here that we find ourselves in temptations that appear to be too strong for us. Let's not fool ourselves thinking, "It's only a thought, I am not really doing anything!" By allowing thoughts of temptation to dwell in our mind, we are developing a wrong attitude towards sin. Let's not offer ourselves as sitting ducks to the Devil.

Pointers along the way #543

Sin in disguise

The reason temptations deceive us is simple. They do not come announcing themselves as temptations, which would have put us on the alert, but as with great and captivating offers that should not be ignored. It is because what they offer is attractive to us that we even consider taking them up. There are already desires (lusts) in our flesh (our sinful nature), which we have inherited from our ancestors Adam and Eve after they sinned, which have an inclination to give in to these offers of temptation. When these desires are stirred up by the temptation that comes upon us, that is when we are 'really' tempted (Jas.1:14,15). Temptations are always out there, but it is only when our sinful desires are fired up that we feel the temptation.

We can say, in general, that temptations

offer us one or two things--pleasure or an undue advantage. That was how Eve was tempted in Eden. She imagined the pleasure she would receive from eating that attractive and delicious looking fruit. She thought that by eating it she could become wise like God. Satan also threw in an offer of impunity telling her that she would be ok even after eating the forbidden fruit (Ge.3:1-6). If we look at our own experiences can we not identify these elements in them too?

We know that Eve was deceived. There are certainly serious consequences to sin (Ga.6:7,8), now and in eternity. There is pleasure if we yield to sin, and there can be advantages on earth. But the pleasure is transient and the consequences last for a long time. The so-called advantages we imagine will always bite back. And there is no impunity for

children of God 'under grace' either (Ro.8:13).

We who were slaves to sin were purchased with the ransom of the blood of Jesus. Now God wants us to overcome temptations and not live as before. He knows that even after becoming children of God we carry with us the flesh with its sinful desires. He wants us to keep the flesh crucified (Ga.5:24), not yield to temptation (Ro.6:13), and to put the deeds of our body to death by the Holy Spirit (Ro.8:13). So He tells us not to allow ourselves to be deceived by the appearances temptations put up (He.3:12,13).

We need to become wise or acquire wisdom concerning salvation (2Ti.3:15). If we can understand what attracts us to the offer from the particular temptations we face in our life and look at the whole sequence

from the point of view of the word of God, we can learn how to prepare ourselves and overcome such temptations in future and also to cry out to the Lord for more specific help. It would be most foolish of us to take cover under 'grace' or to excuse our failures as our 'weaknesses'.

God is very realistic. He knows we *might* fall and He has provided for our cleansing if we fall (1Jn.2:1,2;1:9). But certainly He does not *want* us to fall but to become overcomers.

Let not the failures in our past keep us down in hopelessness or despair, but teach us how to overcome temptations in the future.

Pointers along the way #544

Measure our love for God

It is very easy when we sing songs of worship to God to voice superlatives

about God and say how we love Him, and then to believe that we really love Him much. We may be quite sincere at that point, and we may really desire to be true to that. But this type of occasion is different from real life situations, and the love for God we show in our daily life may be very different. When we are singing God's praise our emotions may be high. But our love for God cannot be measured in terms of emotions (even though if we never experience emotional highs at all as we think about God we should conclude that our 'love' is only a notional love). If we are truly in love with God, it will show in every aspect of the way we live our daily life.

Just as someone who loves another person thinks often about the other, so will we if we love God. Even when we are busy with our work, our thoughts will often return to God. We

will be conversing with Him, asking Him for help in different situations, thanking Him for His love and mercies, praying for His mercy on others we meet, remembering His word which we have learnt, learning more and more as He gives insight, etc. This describes our praying without ceasing (1Th.5:17), giving thanks in everything (v.18), finding mercy and help in times of need (He.4:16), etc. The more we do this, the better we get to know Him, and the less we do this we should realise how little we know Him.

But the real measure of our love for God is in how much we value Him in comparison to our own desires. Jesus said, "He who has My commandments and keeps them is the one who loves Me" (Jn.14:21). How we choose to keep His commandments when our own desires point in some other direction is a true indication of our

love for God. Job was tested to see if his so-called love for God was because of all the benefits he had received from God or if he would value God even if all was taken away from him (Job.1:9-11). Abraham was tested in a similar way when he was asked to sacrifice his only son (Ge.22:12).

Of course, there is forgiveness from God if we fail; but we are not to presume on that forgiveness and take it as an excuse for indulging our desires. In fact, every failure we go through should drive us to love God in a more real way in future. A genuine love for God will compel us to constantly seek to deny ourselves in order to do what is pleasing to Him (2Co.5:14,15).

Satan tries to lull our conscience to sleep by reminding us about how fervent we felt when we were worshipping God, and to make us

believe that everything is fine between us and God, when actually we may be giving in to our desires thinking that it is only a minor failure! Eve lost her relationship with God by giving in to her desires, and now after accepting us by His grace God is trying to make us people who will constantly choose Him even in the midst of strong desires.

This inner battle is a mark of true children of God as we go towards maturity.

Pointers along the way #545

Applying faith

We need to *have* faith in God (Mk.11:22). This means that we believe in who He is, what He is like, what He has done for us, etc., and place our confidence in Him rather than in ourselves. When we believe

there is nothing we can do to make ourselves acceptable to God and receive *by faith* the forgiveness for our sins which God offers to us because of His grace, that is our faith, or trust and confidence, in God *in action*. We need to understand that it is not enough to *have faith* in God, but we need to apply this faith in our daily life and appropriate all that God has promised for His children. If we say we have faith, but do not apply that faith in practical situations, God will tell us that that kind of 'faith' is dead (Jas.2:26).

One mistake we can make is to have faith in God and then expect that everything will become easy--no more temptations, trouble or problems. But we do face trouble in different ways, and then we may wonder what use our faith really was! We read in Hebrews 11 about how different people *did*

different things *by faith!* In the same way, when we face difficulties in life, we also have to overcome them by applying our faith.

We cannot have just a single approach for applying faith. Sometimes God wants us to overcome our fear by looking to God and expecting Him to do something for us (Ex.14:13). If God has given us a specific promise to us in a certain situation that we don't have to do anything, as in the case of the Israelites before the Red Sea, we can believe it and just wait expectantly for God to act.

But remember that God didn't tell the Israelites to take this approach every single time. When they came to Jericho, they had to march around the city seven times and then the walls fell down. Another time the priests who were carrying the Ark had to step into the water first and then the River

Jordan stopped flowing and opened a dry path for them to walk on. We also need to hear from God.

Most of our problems trouble our mind. We may wish that because we have placed our trust in God, we should be free automatically from worries, fears, lusts, jealousy, greed, etc. But the fact of life is that whenever we are troubled by anything, we need to overcome it by applying faith to that particular situation. For example, when we are fearful about the future and worry about how we can cope we can comfort ourselves by reminding our heart about God's promise to be always with us (Mt.28:20), and that if He is with us we don't have to fear anyone else (Ro.8:31). We can hold on to the promise that He will not allow us to be tempted beyond our ability but will always provide a way out for us (1Co.10:13).

These are works resulting from faith. If we don't learn to *work out* our faith (Php.2:12), but assume that just because we *have faith* everything should be fine, we make a terrible practical mistake. Salvation is by grace, but we need to appropriate it for ourselves by acting according to our faith (Jas.2:24).

Pointers along the way #546

Jesus sleeping in the boat

Many use the story of how Jesus was sleeping in the boat in the midst of the storm as a mark of His ability to be unperturbed in the face of challenges. But the fact is that even you and I would also have been unperturbed if we had been *asleep* at that time! We would have been unaware of what was going on, and we wouldn't have been disturbed! But what is impressive is that even when Jesus was woken up

and suddenly He found Himself in the midst of the storm He was not shaken. He had authority to chide His disciples for their unbelief (Mt.8:26).

Some people object to this explanation saying that even while Jesus was asleep He knew everything that was going on since He was God. Of course, Jesus was the Son of God. But did He really know at all times all that was going on? What about the time when He had to go to a fig tree to see if it had fruit (Mt.21:19), and the other time when He said He didn't know the time of the end of the world (Mt.24:36)? How could He not know such things if He was the omniscient God?

He was indeed one of the three Persons in the Trinity. But at this point when He had come to the earth He had taken the role of a man and was behaving like one. For this period of time He had 'emptied' Himself from the

position of equality with God the Father (Php.2:6,7). He did not cease being God, but He chose to live here to face the same challenges that we face here on earth. In such a way He could be a forerunner for us (Lk.1:17) and an example to us (1Pe.2:21).

If Jesus was living here as God, He couldn't have been tempted in all the ways in which we are tempted (He.4:15,16). He became like us in order to identify with us and give us an example to follow.

Whenever we read about how Jesus behaved in relation to people and things in His life on earth, let us remember they are examples for us to follow. If we relegate them to an unreachable realm thinking that Jesus was God and we are only people, we will miss many things that Jesus was trying to teach us. Of course, there were things that Jesus did as the Lamb

of God who was given as a sacrifice for our sins that we cannot follow because that is not our role.

Let us also understand that what we need to learn from Jesus (or for that matter from any people we admire), is not so much to imitate their action as to their spirit, attitude and character (He.13:7). What Jesus *did* in different situations may not be what we need to do because our situations may not be exactly the same. But what we need to learn is from *why* He did certain things, His attitude in different situations, the priorities in His heart and the general condition of His heart and mind. Jesus came to this earth not only to provide us with a remedy for our sins but also to give us a benchmark with which we can measure ourselves. We will miss a whole lot of His instructions for us if we only think of Jesus as God on earth and not also

as the Son of Man who walked this way before us.

Pointers along the way #547

Our final resort

For many people, morality is relative; what seems wrong for one seems ok for another. Values that have been respected from the beginning of man are now changing. Laws are being rewritten, and anyone who stands by the ancient truths (Pr.22:28) is mocked as being narrow-minded or 'fundamentalistic' (with a negative connotation). The sad thing is that many Christians also are being swayed by this social current and compromising godly values in order to be seen as progressive, broad-minded and tolerant.

In the midst of all this attack against Christian values, Christ and God

Himself (it is actually against Him), praise God that many Christians are still holding on. They draw their strength from the word of God and their fellowship with Him. One of the reasons why many others are failing is that they have compromised their concept of the word of God.

The Bible has been under attack for centuries. Many have tried to remove it from the face of the earth, and others have burned it, banned it, ridiculed it and belittled it. But God's word still continues to survive and to inspire, guide, teach and build millions of people (2Ti.3:16,17). Those who accept the Bible as inspired by God and given to man thrive in their spiritual life and stand boldly in the face of attack. They recognise the truths in the Bible as those revealed by God to man even when 'experts' in the world try to disprove its claims or

mock its standards.

Some Christians are trying to find a middle path between the teachings of the Bible and the opinion of experts. Some are willing to compromise the teachings of the Bible in order to find favour with the world's opinions. We must not forget that over the centuries greater scientific and archaeological discoveries have actually served to validate the claims of the Bible, even though before such discoveries were made it was felt that the Bible couldn't be right in view of certain 'facts'.

When we read the Bible we must reckon with the fact that it was written by people, and we have to take into consideration various aspects such as the context, the background culture, the particular people each passage originally addressed, the literary style used (sometimes the words are to be understood figuratively), etc. How

many times has it been seen that what appeared to be an 'error' in the Bible has been clarified later when more details were brought in to the process of interpretation!

At the same time, even when we make allowance for the fact that we are not always in a position to interpret the meaning of some passages exactly, with absolute certainty, we must be clear that it is still *God's word* which He has inspired the human authors to write. It is His authority that gets questioned when people question the Bible or refute its teachings. On the contrary, the Bible is our reliable standard and last resort when it comes to God's truths and values. Our safety is to stay with the Bible even when 'experts' disagree.

Pointers along the way #548

The sinner's prayer

Sometimes we may wish that the Bible was written in a text book form, systematically presenting each truth in sequence, so that we might know them unambiguously. But that is not the way God chose to give us His word. He chose different authors to bring out His truths, a little here and a little there. If we want to know the truth we need to look all over the Bible, and not just at a few pet verses. Many people don't read the Bible like that, and so many bits of truths are taken from different places and doctrines are formed without looking at their place in the whole Bible.

Take a look at some verses dealing with salvation. "And it shall be that everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved" (Acts.2:21). Can we conclude that all that we need to do

is to say, "Jesus, come into my heart," "Jesus, I give my life to You," and then we will be saved? "If you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved" (Ro.10:9). This seems to make things very simple: confess something with our mouth and accept some fact in our heart!

If we understand what salvation is all about, we will immediately know that none of these above statements is an adequate description of the way to be saved. Adam and Eve *chose* their own pleasure and advantage over being faithful to God. They lost their relationship with God ('died'), and everything in their life became warped and distorted. We who have come from them have the same distortion from the time we are born into this world, and we all have pleased ourselves and

sinned against God in many ways and many times. God cannot accept us back as long as our sins have not been dealt with, and instead of condemning us to death for what we deserve, He took the punishment on Himself (through the death of Jesus). Now He expects us to a) acknowledge our sins, and b) receive forgiveness from God as a free gift, believing that Jesus has taken our punishment in our place. This is what is needed to receive forgiveness of sins (the first phase of salvation).

Repentance and faith are the two essential steps to salvation. Repentance includes forsaking sin and choosing God, which is the opposite of what Adam and Eve did. Without this there is no returning to God. If there is only 'accepting' Jesus as your religious choice or coming to Him for the benefits you can receive, there is no real salvation there. It is only when a

sinner *repents* that there is joy in heaven (Lk.15:10). In other cases, at best there is a coming nearer to God, but repentance and faith have to necessarily take place before one gets salvation.

Acts.2:21 or Ro.10:9 are not complete in themselves, but have to be understood along with other parts of the Bible. They are not meant to be understood as statements of the steps to salvation. 'Saved' as used there has a broad meaning and does not assume to stand for salvation from sin. Repent and believe (Mk.1:15).

Pointers along the way #549

How to stop our growth

All of us who want earnestly to grow spiritually know what all challenges we face. Temptation after temptation follows us around wherever we go, people oppose us or mock us, troubles come along which seem beyond our ability, God's ways seem to be inexplicable and sometimes disappointing, etc. We find it's very easy to backslide and difficult to make progress. Certainly our spiritual development comes only through a battle--where we hold on to faith, seek God for help and make every attempt to get closer to God.

In such a context, the only thing we have to do to get stunted in our growth is to stop paying attention to growth. Growth does not take place automatically, as many people seem to assume. They assume that once we

have come to God He will do everything that is needed and we will grow. Yes, God wants to complete what He has started to do in us (Php.1:6), but He cannot do it unless we cooperate with Him (He.3:6). Some people think that we have to only keep reading God's word, and that as we do that and see the glory of God revealed there we will automatically be changed to become like that (2Co.3:18). But no transformation will happen if we are only hearers of the word and not doers (Jas.1:22). Some others think that all we need is to be baptised in the Holy Spirit and then He will transform us into the likeness of Christ. But even the Spirit cannot do that for us if we will not receive His power and resist carrying out evil deeds (Ro.8:13).

In simple words, the way to stop growing is to be passive, and to keep

on hoping that things will change, and God will do a miracle. This kind of hope is foolish because it is unrealistic. It does not recognise all the exhortations in the Bible *to do* what God tells us, nor does it consider what salvation means. There are rare occasions when God may intervene in our life with a miracle, especially if we are beginners in our Christian life. This was what God did for the people of Israel by opening the Red Sea. He may do similar things for an alcoholic by taking away his desire entirely, or clearing up someone's debt in an unexpected way. But we can't ask for miracles and sit passively doing nothing from our side.

Transformation of life begins to happen when we have heard the truth and respond to it by repenting from our old, sinful ways and seeking to do the right things, asking for God's help. This

involves denying ourselves, giving up our old pleasures, and following Jesus (Lk.9:23). God wants us to do the right things till they become our nature.

If God were to magically change our hearts and make us do the right things, He would be making us into robots. But it is when we feel the temptation to do wrong but choose to deny that and do God's will that our transformation happens. This is not salvation by works, but these are works that follow salvation. If we are unwilling, it shows we are not seriously interested in salvation, even if we say and imagine otherwise.

Pointers along the way #550

Are we God?

One day the king of Aram sent a letter to the king of Israel asking him to cure Naaman, the captain of his army, of his leprosy. The king of Israel felt very intimidated by this and exclaimed, "Am I God, to kill and make alive?" (2Ki.5:7). He had that much sense to know that there were limits to his power as king and as a human being. When Joseph's brothers feared that after their father was dead Joseph would turn against them, he said, "Do not be afraid, for am I in God's place?" (Ge.50:19). He knew that it was only the Lawgiver who could judge or take vengeance (Jas.4:12;Ro.12:19).

One temptation that Satan gave to Eve was to want to become like God (Ge.3:5). That was the desire that made Lucifer lose his place of eminence among the angels and

become Satan (Is.14:14), and he is trying to infiltrate the minds of people, especially Christians, with that same spirit. Many people seem to be confused between the concept of becoming like Jesus in terms of character by bearing the fruit of the Spirit, and thinking in terms of having the power and authority of God.

Jesus has given us authority to heal the sick, cast out demons and do miracles *in His name*. This authority is different from having the power to do these same things by ourselves. Just as the traffic policeman can command the traffic using the authority of the government but who has no strength in himself to stop vehicles, it is for us only to exercise God's power as long as we are doing it under His authority and direction.

Using the 'name of Jesus' implies, of course, that we are under subjection to

Him, and are doing things according to His will and direction. It is not a *mantra* or magic formula which we can use at will. If we 'speak to the mountain' to be cast into the sea, it will happen only if God tells us to do it, and we do it believing He can do it. If we don't understand this, we may begin to use "In Jesus' name" right and left, and nothing happens!

A more serious thing is to wrongly assume that God has given us a blanket permission to act on His behalf. Some people are going around 'declaring' things that they want to happen, 'pronouncing a blessing', 'commanding' things to happen, etc., *as if they were God!* Many of them don't even use the term "In the name of Jesus" because they assume that God has given *them* the power.

They think that just because God said, "Let there be light" and there was light,

they too, as children of God, can command the same power. That's crazy! We are not God. Even as children of God born of the Holy Spirit or from God's seed, we are not God in our essential being. We are only created beings with all kinds of limitations who have been *adopted* as children of God (Ga.4:5).

Power belongs to God (Ps.62:11). He is the Creator who brought into existence everything from nothing. He created us out of dust and gave us breath. He has blessed us tremendously, but let's not forget that we are still subject to Him and not independent.

Pointers along the way #551

So near yet so far

When Jesus was on earth there were multitudes who followed Him around. He did heal their sick, cast out demons and do miracles for them. These were 'signs' for them to realise that He was the Son of God who had come to be their Saviour (Jn.2:11). But just 'following' Jesus like that did not make them part of the kingdom of God. For that Jesus preached the Gospel to them, saying that they should repent from their sins and believe in the Gospel (Mk.1:15). Of course, the Gospel reached its completion when Jesus died and rose from the dead.

Jesus was not impressed with people who followed Him around merely to receive benefits from Him or to witness miracles (Jn.6:26), and He impressed upon them to receive the Good News (v.27). We can believe

that this continues to be one of Jesus' burdens even now. Crowds are still after Him for food, healing and miracles. But comparatively very few are actually seeking Him as their Saviour.

Why is it that in spite of so much preaching about Jesus people aren't going to Him to find salvation? How can they unless someone tells them? Preachers these days are very sensitive not to offend the hearers, and so they don't talk about sin or hell. They talk about the love of God which is acceptable to all people. Who doesn't like to receive this love of God especially when it is being offered for free? So one has to only 'accept' this love from this Jesus and then one will be fixed up for eternity! Deception!

People aren't looking for a Saviour because they don't see any need for one. God loves them, doesn't He, and

what else do they need? This loving God will never send them to hell. Hell is, after all, something made up by old time preachers who wanted to scare people. We know better, don't we? So they think, and deceive themselves. These 'nice' preachers are the ones who deceive them!

Imagine people flocking around Jesus and yet being so far away from Him! The righteousness of God will demand us to give an account for every deed (Mt.16:27) and every careless word (12:36), and He will look into every hidden thought and intention of our heart (He.4:12). None of us can get through this examination because we have all sinned in many ways and come far short of His standards (Ro.3:23). We are *sinner*s. Hell is the place prepared for Satan and his demons and sinners (Re.20:15).

But the love of God has provided a

Saviour for us. If we acknowledge our sins and repent from them, He will forgive us, make us His children and take us to be with Him.

How can people believe in the Saviour without knowing that without Him they would be headed for hell? How can we appreciate the gift of forgiveness unless we know what we really deserve? How can we seek God for victory over sin until we begin to loathe sin that caused us to be judged by God in the first place?

Let's wake up, preachers, writers and all who work to pass on the Gospel. Make sure it's the truth.

Pointers along the way #552

The littleness of our faith

The twelve disciples of Jesus were given authority to heal the sick and cast out demons as they went from place to

place preaching the Gospel (Mt.10:1). They must have been amazed when demons obeyed them when they commanded them in the name of Jesus. But there came a time when they could not cast out a demon from a young man, and they were perplexed about it (Mt.17:19). Jesus' explanation was that it was because of the littleness of their faith (v.20).

Many people think of their 'small' faith in contrast to the 'great' faith some others have. They think that somehow the others have 'more' faith, in terms of quantity, than they. So they try to increase their faith by 'positive confessions', repeating God's promises, etc. But to explain what He meant by 'littleness of faith', Jesus made a very curious statement. He said if we had faith even the size of a mustard seed, we could move mountains. This is quite contrary to the

common thinking that greater faith meant more faith or bigger faith.

It looks as if the disciples had begun to be used to their ability to cast out demons to the extent they forgot it was God's power. So possibly when they saw a violent manifestation from a demon they felt they couldn't handle it. But they didn't realise that for God no demon was a match, and if they looked at God instead of themselves, even a mustard seed faith would have sufficed.

Can we understand that if we want to move a mountain and we muster up all our 'faith' and gather up many friends to pray for us, the mountain will still not move unless God wanted it to move? The kind of big faith that people like to build up has no power in itself to move anything. Only God has the power to move anything. When we place our faith in Him, it is not the size of our

faith that matters, but *in whom* we have faith. Many people try to manipulate God by gathering up 'faith' and 'claiming' things from God as their right in exchange for their faith! Some people wrongly teach that faith is the currency of heaven, and that we can get whatever we want from God if we have enough of it.

It is God who has power, and He will exercise it on our behalf when we ask Him, if it is according to His will (1Jn.5:14). Since it is His will always to do what is best for us (Je.29:11), many times He will not give what we ask for! That's a good thing! Of course, if we don't have faith in God, there is no guarantee He will give us anything (Jas.1:6,7). We cannot insist that because we have faith God *has to* give us what we ask for.

A mature, godly man trusts God enough to willingly submit to His will,

knowing that His will for him is the best that can be. He does not depend on his faith, but rather on God's goodness (Jn.2:11). He trusts God rather than look at how much faith he has. Even though he knows God can do anything, he is happy to pray 'in Jesus' name' bowing to His authority and His will, and not demand that God has to give whatever he asks for.

Pointers along the way #553

Grace and willingness

When the old covenant was declared to the people of Israel, they promised God that they would keep all that He asked them to do (Ex.19:8). They were *willing* to obey God in everything, but did not know that they didn't have the ability in themselves to do it. God allowed them to try for thousands of years and discover that no one was able to keep the whole Law. God knew this already (Ps.14:3), but He waited till they saw it themselves. Then God came with the new covenant where the criterion for acceptance with God is no longer keeping the Law but faith through grace (Ep.2:8,9).

When someone repents from his sins and turns to God in faith, trusting in God's provision for his forgiveness and acceptance because Jesus has paid his ransom, God washes away all his

sins with the blood of Jesus. He justifies him, just as if he had never sinned, by counting the righteousness of Jesus into his account. He adopts him as a child of God. He begins to work in him, transforming him little by little into the character of Jesus.

Will God do this for us people even if we are not interested in it? That is not in His nature to force anything on unwilling people. The picture of Jesus standing outside an uninterested church and knocking on its door (Re.3:20) is typical of His ways. The point is, how can we become more like Jesus if we are not interested in it? How can it happen if what we are really interested in is only our earthly prosperity, more comfort, promotions, sightseeing, better gadgets, etc.? Do we presume that part of grace (unmerited favour) means that God will transform us even if we are not interested in it?

God said through His prophets about the new covenant He was going to bring to His people (Je.31:33,34 Ez.36:27-29). The essence of this covenant is that He would transform our lives from the inside. But He qualified the offer by saying that He would do it only if we asked for it (Ez.36:37). This means that He wants us to long for it, ask for it and pursue after it. Now we can understand why among all the people who come to God, our fruit varies from 30 to 100 fold. Some do not even bear any fruit at all and Jesus warns us that such people are going to be thrown out (Re.3:15,16 Jn.15:2,6).

Perhaps some people are not interested in it because no one told them that this is the biggest thing God has prepared for them. Perhaps what they have heard from the so-called leaders is about how they they can multiply their

income by a hundred fold by giving God a tenth of their present income, or that whatever problem they face can be solved by sending a certain amount of money to some organisation! No wonder people are starved of the truth, and they are suffering from the lack of the only thing that can set them free (Jn.8:32). Ultimately they all get disappointed.

Darkness is increasing over the earth, and confusion is reigning. Let us be the light of this world (Mt.5:14) till Jesus comes, even if our voice is small.

Pointers along the way #554

Which is better?

Think of two believers. One man has a lot of knowledge of the word of God and tries to live his life according to it. The other man tries to listen to the voice of the Holy Spirit to lead him in

everything he does. Which is better?

It would be foolish to choose one path exclusively without the other. Just think that the man who studies on the Bible referring to concordances, commentaries and Hebrew and Greek meanings may still have only an intellectual knowledge of the Bible without a revelation from the Holy Spirit! The Holy Spirit who inspired the authors to write the books of the Bible is the only one who knows exactly what He meant and how He wants to apply those words to our present life. How dry, legalistic and far from God's plans we can be even with a scholarly knowledge of the Bible! This man can be so confident of his knowledge of the Bible that he takes decisions based on his knowledge but fails to wait on the Holy Spirit to know His particular will in different situations.

On the other hand, the second man revels in thinking that because he has a direct link to the heart of God he does not need any other knowledge or information. He is so confident that God is leading him that he does not even consider the possibility that he could be mistaken in assuming that he is hearing God. He could be hearing his own mind or even a deceiving spirit putting ideas into his mind. He may end up doing weird things which everyone else can see through, but which he believes are from God. If only he could understand that God has given His word as a lamp for our feet and a light to our path so that we can avoid such pitfalls (Ps.119:105)!

The word of God is His revelation to us, showing us His character, His ways, His plan for our lives and a mirror for our own life. This provides us the foundation for our life and also

the map for us to follow. But it is not like other books that can be studied and followed using just our mind. It is the Holy Spirit who makes the word come alive to us as we read it and makes it different from other books. If we don't recognise the role of the Spirit and submit to Him in daily life, we will miss out on what God has for us and may even end up far outside His will. We may live our life in the realm of knowledge and doctrines, even losing touch with the real situations of life. Knowledge puffs up (1Co.8:1).

Those who pay attention to emotional and supernatural experiences tend to think that if they have experienced it, it must be real and true. What is supernatural does not come from God alone, and we also have a tremendous capability to deceive ourselves (Je.17:9). Evil spirits are around, trying to mislead us. The word of God

is the one that gives us understanding and discernment, and it is easy to go astray without it.

It is quite silly to sit in one camp and accuse the other, without looking honestly at what the other camp is saying. Let's merge these camps and get the benefit of both.

Pointers along the way #555

The task of the church

For many, sad to say, the church is the place to get married in and buried by. For some others, it is where one can celebrate Christmas, Good Friday and Easter. For the rest of the time, they will 'go to church' if they feel like it, as long as the choir sings well, the pastor doesn't preach too long, and nobody gets too personal.

But the church is supposed to be the Body of Christ, where each member

supplies something for the growth of everyone and everyone grows up in maturity to the stature of Christ (Ro.12:5;Ep.4:13). For this to take place, there must be recognition of our place in the Body, and our responsibility towards Christ and the others. Instead of craving for prominent roles in the church and recognition by others, what we can do is what God has strengthened each of us for, beginning with the smallest acts of service.

The majority of the members of the Body need leaders to teach, guide and lead them according to the plans of Christ, the Head (Ep.4:11,12). But many times these leaders are only interested in their name and gain rather than the growth of the members. As a result, many of the members never grow spiritually, and many even fall back into sin. Some members were

never even born again when they came to the church, and they remain like that but assuming that everything is all right since they are 'in the church'! Many come to church looking for help with their lives, but they fall away slowly because all they get are platitudes and social pleasantries. God will surely ask such shepherds about the health of the sheep under their care (Ez.34:8).

The apostle Paul not only planted churches, but he also took pains to nurture them. He didn't assume that everyone in the church knew God or would grow automatically. He knew that they had to be fed and nourished by what he gave them. He didn't hesitate to correct them if anyone was going astray (Ac.20:31). Night or day didn't make a difference for him as he strove to build them up in their spiritual life. He gave words of encouragement or sharp rebuke,

whichever they needed, bent on telling them the whole wisdom of God (Ac.20:26,27). He was tender with them as a mother (1Th.2:7), but fear of offending them didn't prevent him from correcting them.

Why isn't this happening in the churches of today? Many churches have become entertainment centres with a Christian touch. Many are engaged in programmes that would involve many people and give them a feeling that they are serving God. Many consider that the gospel is to be proclaimed to the 'others' while they themselves are all fine. Problems in the church are ignored or dealt with in a patronising way. Many churches are really serving only the purpose of conducting weddings and funerals.

Who should be waking up? All of God's people. Instead of pointing fingers elsewhere, let us ask God to

strengthen us to do what He wants each one of us to do. Don't wait for the big revival. Kindle the small fires.

Pointers along the way #556

How much shall we give?

People give different answers to this, but is there a definite answer to this from God? Some are very simplistic when they say 10%, because even though that is a measure God gave to the people of Israel under the Old Covenant, it was not that it was all He asked from them. They had to give tithes for different purposes at different times. On the other hand, under the New Covenant the guideline is to give as each one has purposed in his heart, cheerfully (2Co.9:7), according as one prospers (1Co.16:2), richly, readily and generously (1Ti.6:18), etc. This brings us into a logical dilemma--how much is enough?

One stream of logic tells us that since there are so many other people suffering from much want, it would be unrighteous for us to live in any way

that may be called as luxury in comparison. There is much truth here. Wanton spending in lavish ways is unjustified as a matter of principle. But who is to decide what is lavish or luxurious? If we look around we can always find people who do not have as much as we have, and then where do we draw the line where we can decide we have sacrificed enough? Forget now about the condemnation and guilt some people try to heap upon us by saying we are not giving enough. As we stand honestly before God, how much does He really want us to give?

There was one rich young man whom Jesus asked to sell all that he had and give to the poor (Lk.18:22). But the purpose Jesus had in this was not to set a standard for everyone, but to encourage this particular man to love God more than his money. On another occasion Jesus commended a poor

widow for giving all she had (Lk.21:1-4). Again this was not to teach that everyone should give all that he has, because such an instruction would be very impractical as a general rule. What Jesus was trying to do was to challenge people who gave from their abundance without feeling any pinch and thought mighty good about themselves.

So how much shall we give? Let us not judge one another, compare ourselves with ourselves, compare others with ourselves, and try to impose some rule on others which we ourselves find comfortable with. Let us learn to leave this matter to God to decide and tell each one of us according to His plan for us.

"If you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the Law" (Ga.5:18). This is such a glorious truth that liberates us from the letter of the law that will only

kill us in the end (2Co.3:6). Since God has not made us all equal and He has put us in different circumstances of life, He has specifically different plans for each of us. We have a tendency to want to be like others, and also another tendency to want everyone else to be like us. But the right/best thing is to be led by His Spirit. Then we don't have to make a rule about how much to give, but give as He leads us every moment.

But there is a great challenge in being led by the Spirit. We need to be humble, honest and sincere, because we should not fool ourselves.

Pointers along the way #557

What was 'finished'?

There are some Christians whose main theme now is Jn.19:30 where Jesus said, "It is finished." They point out that Jesus made this declaration on the

cross to denote that everything pertaining to salvation was complete. Placing this along with the fact that our salvation is entirely by grace and not by anything we *can* do from our side (Ep.2:8,9), they come to the conclusion that there is nothing we *need* to do, now that we have been saved. Some of them teach that it would be wrong to confess our sins if we fall into them now, because our sins have already been paid for and it would be an insult to God to ask Him to forgive our current sins as if they were not forgiven already! Some of them say, even though mostly through implication rather than directly, that how we live now does not really matter because His grace is sufficient for us.

Here the whole point revolves around what exactly was finished on Calvary. In simple words, everything Jesus had to accomplish through His life and

death was finished. He paid the price for the sins of the whole world (1Jn.2:2) so that the way into the Most Holy Place where God dwelt was now made open for people (Mt.27:51). In His life on earth Jesus had fulfilled all the Law (Mt.5:17) as our forerunner and given us an example to follow (Jn.13:15;1Pe.2:21). Jesus stripped Satan and his demons of their power (Co.2:15;1Jn.3:8) and gave us authority over them (Lk.10:18,19). Etc.

But even though Jesus died for the whole world, actually only a few are going to be saved (Mt.7:13,14), because only a few are going to humble themselves, acknowledge they are sinners, repent from their sins and turn to Jesus as their Saviour (Mk.1:15;Ac.2:38:3:19). This shows us that *even though Jesus had finished His part in salvation, He had not finished 'our part'*. Our part is

something we have to do in order to participate in and to receive the benefit of what He had done. Therefore it is totally misleading to preach "It is finished" as if it means there is no part for us to do.

Of course, there is nothing we can do in order to *earn* our salvation. But to receive it as a gift there has to be an appropriate response from our side.

Even God has not stopped doing things from His part. When we go to Him in Jesus' name repenting from our sins and confessing them He forgives us and wipes our record clean. When we receive Jesus as our Saviour He causes us to be born again to become His children (Jn.1:12;1Pe.1:3). God continues to work in us giving us grace (help He.4:16) to do His will (Php.2:13). And then we are expected to work out (or live by) this salvation we have received (v.12). By the power

of the Holy Spirit who now dwells in us, we are to put to death the deeds of our body so that we can do God's will (Ro.8:13). Whenever we fail, we confess it to Him and get forgiveness (1Jn.1:9).

Instead of dwelling in a doctrinal cloud that obliterates reality, let us respond to God's salvation in a realistic way.

Pointers along the way #558

Lacking in the knowledge of God

When Paul wrote to the Corinthians he said that some had no knowledge of God (1Co.15:34). The context was people questioning the resurrection with doubts like how people were going to be raised and the kind of body they would have (v.35). There is nothing wrong in wanting to know such

things, but if we are overly occupied with such issues it may indicate that we do not have a working knowledge of God. If we know Him personally we would be taken up with Him, and lesser issues will not be in the focus of our mind.

But what do we see among Christians today, even so-called leaders? A very unhealthy fascination with fringe issues. We know that God has absolute power in Himself to do what He wants (Ps.115:3;62:11). But when some people read that God spoke and things got done, they move their focus from God to His words, and they assume that God's power is in His words (and not in Himself)! They now begin to teach that when we speak, our words also have power to make things happen!

We know of the woman who believed that if only she would touch even the

helm of Jesus' garment she would be healed (Mt.9:20,21). Some people jump to the conclusion that it was the helm that healed her! Then they write and teach about how the Jewish leaders had tassels on their garments and prayer shawls and begin to sell such shawls so that people can touch them and be healed!

Some people took handkerchiefs that had touched Paul and carried them to sick people to heal them (Ac.19:12). Don't we have people now who sell handkerchiefs that had been 'prayed over'?

Some people say they need to have a picture in their mind when they pray to God. We can list many things like this, like walking around a place like the children of Israel did around Jericho and expecting 'walls' to fall down, blowing a ram's horn (shofar) from the city hills to bring down favour from

God, selling 'holy water' to anoint the sick, 'sprinkling the blood of Jesus' around the rooms or houses, sleeping with a Bible under the pillow to ward off bad dreams, etc., which are all indications of people missing the point. They are trusting in things and practices rather than directly in God. If they had a true, mature relationship with God, would they need to follow such schemes?

We know that anything that we 'worship' in the place of God in our life becomes an idol for us. The examples we have given here are not such idols. If we are engaged in these practices we believe we are doing them according to the will of God. But the fact is that in following these practices we are putting our focus on them rather than on God. Our dependence is transferred from God to these practices. For example, instead

of asking God to do things for us, we think if we speak the right words we can get things done. This is one of Satan's tactics to mislead us.

If we know God directly and we have regular transactions with Him, would we need symbols and rituals to relate to Him?

Pointers along the way #559

Walking with understanding

When Satan began his attack on Eve, he questioned her whether God had actually forbidden eating from any tree in the garden. He knew God had only forbidden the fruit from the tree of knowledge of good and evil, but he put it as 'any tree' in order to confuse Eve. Eve's reply was that God had only forbidden eating from the tree which was in the middle of the garden (Ge.3:3). Why would Eve say 'the tree

which is in the middle of the garden' and not 'the tree of knowledge of good and evil'? We do not know it exactly. But perhaps if Eve had thought earlier about the implications of the term 'tree of knowledge of good and evil' instead of thinking of the tree as just some tree in the middle of the garden, she would have been better equipped to deal with this temptation. As it was, she may have considered God's commandment as an arbitrary commandment without any meaning, and not seen the importance of obeying Him here.

What do we think of God's commandments to us today? Perhaps we think of Jesus' instruction for believers to get baptised as just one of those rituals which do not have much relevance. Perhaps we put the 'holy communion' in the same category. Or that is the vague way we think about being a member of the church. What

about not getting married to unbelievers? Are the commandments and instructions which God has given to us in the Bible vague like some 'tree in the middle of the garden'?

If we have not taken time to think about, ask questions and understand what God wants us to do, the chances are that what God says does not mean much to us. In that case it would not be difficult for us to think in times of temptation that something else is more relevant or expedient.

After God gave the Law to the people of Israel, they told Moses, "Go near and hear all that the Lord our God says; then speak to us all that the Lord our God speaks to you, and we will hear and do it" (De.5:27). God's response was, "Oh that they had such a heart in them, that they would fear Me and keep all My commandments always, that it may be well with them

and with their sons forever!" (v.29). God's desire is that His people would respect His word and keep it all their life. As we do that, His blessings will increase over our lives.

In the Old Testament, people could not go directly to God to hear Him speaking. They needed someone like Moses to do that and then pass on the message to them. Even now, under the New Testament where the least of us can know God directly as our Father (He.8:11) and be in His presence all the time, some of us still do not make the effort to listen to God directly but depend on pastors to tell us what God wants. Is it any wonder if we remain without real understanding of what is in God's heart and the commandment looks like 'not to eat from the tree in the middle of the garden'?

Shall we meditate on God's word and get understanding on it? Let's get to

know not only what God wants but also *why* He wants it.

Pointers along the way #560

The treasure in our heart

What our mind runs to most of the time is what is very special to our heart. A man may be at work for many hours a day and his mind busy most of that time with his work. But during that time and afterwards his mind keeps running to something that is precious him the most. We all have legitimate things that occupy our mind for the moment or for a certain period of time because of their importance or urgency for us. But when we look at ourselves over a longer period of time we can identify things that are of long term interest to us and which form a priority for our life. Jesus called it the treasure in our heart (Mt.6:21). A godly man treasures God's word in his heart (Ps.119:11),

meditates on it, and is concerned about how his practical life aligns with God's ways, whatever he does. For a worldly man, his mind values above all how he might get pleasure, acquire more wealth or fame, etc. His treasure is in this world. The treasures of this world will pass away one day (1Jn.2:15-17). Jesus tells us to seek for the treasure that will remain in eternity (Jn.6:27).

We may call ourselves Christians or believers in Christ. But when we honestly check out the treasure in our heart and mind, as we have understood above, if we don't find Christ there, we would be fooling ourselves. If our attention is on something else, if the thing that actually gives us delight in practical life is some pleasure of this world and not Christ, if what we want to enjoy when we have some free time is something God is not happy with or

is not connected with Christ, if we think of Christ as a burden that has to be borne with for the sake of getting to heaven -- are we true to call ourselves children of God?

We may have fooled ourselves, or some preacher may have fooled us into thinking that God's grace is so great that all we need to do to enter in to receive it is to 'accept Jesus'. If the grace we know is the genuine one, it will surely cause changes in our lifestyle (Ti.2:11,12). The plain-spoken apostle James said that a living faith would produce works (Jas.2:17,18). When Jesus said we could judge false teachers from their fruit, doesn't the same standard apply to us too (Mt.7:15,16)? What a shock there will be if we believed a lie about our salvation and finally found ourselves in hell! We have to make sure *now* that what we have believed

and experienced is the genuine salvation that Jesus came with. There isn't going to be a 'second chance' to choose the right way (He.9:27).

It is not some wicked person out there in the world about whom we are speaking. It will happen to many people who call themselves followers of Jesus. Satan has succeeded in distorting people's ideas about salvation so that they think they are saved when they are far from it! We need to enter through the Door and not try to climb over some other way. *Repent* and believe in Jesus for the forgiveness of sins. Make sure we have fruit to show from our repentance (Mt.3:8).

Pointers along the way #561

Check out new teachings

What can we do when we hear a new teaching? It may sound right, it may be coming from a famous preacher, many people may have accepted it, or there are examples of the teaching working in practice. We may think that since God has given us an anointing that helps us know the truth (1Jn.2:27), we would know immediately when we hear something whether it has a ring of truth. This is generally true, but we may still make a mistake because our knowledge is not full. Well known preachers may also be wrong, because the Devil slips in wrong teachings into the minds of even godly people, just as he injects thoughts of temptation, in a moment of self confidence or carelessness. If many people have accepted it, that does not prove it is right, because it is very common where

large numbers are following wrong teachings. We would think that if a doctrine works in practice it should be right because that would be judging it by its fruit (Mt.7:15,16). What has happened may have other explanations, or it is even possible that Satan does false miracles to propagate false teachings.

Then how can we be sure that any new teaching is right? Check with the word of God. God will never tell us anything now, through prophets or our own heart that does not fit in with what He has already told us in His word.

But the problem is more complicated by the fact that the people who preach false doctrines are also quoting from Scripture to prove their point. We know that we cannot accept something just because someone uses Bible verses. When Satan quoted the Bible to Jesus, He knew how to quote back

other verses from the Bible to counter the wrong way in which Satan had quoted other verses. It is not enough to see that 'it is written', we also need to know 'it is also written'.

One of the things we can do is to check out for ourselves to see what all the Bible says about the subject of the new teaching, using concordances, digital searches, etc. But not everyone can do this properly unless they are very knowledgeable about the entire teaching of the Bible.

One thing I do is to go to the internet and see what different people have to say about the teaching, keeping in mind that everything on the internet is not reliable--anybody can write things there. But one thing that has helped me is to read what the supporters of the new doctrine as well as the opponents of the doctrine have to say about it. Since both these groups usually quote

different parts of the Bible, we get to see a larger coverage of the subject from different angles than what we could have done by ourselves in a short time.

It is possible to be enamoured by a new teaching when we hear it first. But it is when we listen to the opponents that we are able to see things which we had not seen before. Pr.18:17 says, "The first to plead his case seems right, until another comes and examines him." So, let us learn not to allow ourselves to jump to conclusions with limited knowledge.

Pointers along the way #562

Salvation by family?

Calvinists generally believe that if the parents are 'elect' of God, their children will also come under that category automatically. Is it possible

that this, in practice, reduces the responsibility of the parents to share the Gospel with the children and pray for their salvation? A similar thing can happen when non-Calvinists believe that when a man comes to experience salvation by repenting from sin and putting their trust in Jesus for the forgiveness of sins, his family members also will get saved. This is a false belief based on a misunderstanding of Ac.16:31.

To understand this properly, it is important to see what salvation really is. When Adam and Eve sinned, they 'died' instantly in their relationship with God (Ge.2:16,17). Sinful people cannot obviously have any connection with a holy God. Jesus paid the price for our sins when He died in our place on the cross, and opened the way for people to get back to God. But though Jesus died for the sins of the whole

world (1Jn.2:2), we come to experience this salvation or restoration of relationship with God only by 'receiving' it (Jn.1:12). How can we receive this if we don't see a need for it? If we see a need for it, won't we ask for it? We see our need for salvation when we see ourselves as sinners in God's eyes, and we ask when we believe that Jesus has taken our punishment so that God can righteously and justly forgive our sins. In other words, we receive this salvation through repentance and faith.

When someone receives this salvation, how can others in the family be saved automatically? Doesn't each one have to repent and believe personally?

In the light of this understanding of salvation we can see that Ac.16:31 cannot be taken to mean what it appears to mean from a mere look at the words. (This reiterates the fact that

we need to understand the Bible as a whole and cannot take words out from here and there). What Paul means, obviously, is that the way of salvation is the same for everyone, through Jesus, for us as well as our family members.

A misunderstanding on this may make parents think that their children will 'somehow' come to salvation because they themselves believe. Especially when troubled with the behaviour of some child, parents may take this as a promise from God that He will take care of the children. So they stop worrying, and also begin to neglect the nurture of their children through teaching God's ways, disciplining them, praying for them, etc. When some of the children grow up and show no interest in God, they get upset with God!

Young parents, when your children are

still teachable, do all you can to lead them to the Lord and to protect them from going astray into the world. Older parents, even if your child has gone astray, don't lose hope. Ask God to forgive you for neglecting your child's spiritual development, and keep praying for God's mercy to triumph in the child's life. Our God does miracles too, especially when we pray.

Pointers along the way #563

Missing our mission

God sent King Saul on a mission to destroy all the Amalekites and everything they had (1Sa.15:3). God's plan was the extermination of Amalek because of their wickedness (Ps.83:4,7). But Saul didn't see it that way. He may have thought of it as just another battle to fight. So he may have thought it wouldn't be seriously wrong to spare Agag, the king of Amalek, and

the best of all that he saw (1Sa.15:9). He missed God's real mission for him, because he didn't understand it in the first place.

When we think about God's plan for our lives, many think only about major decisions like marriage, job, etc. They think they are just ordinary people and that their lives don't count much for God. It is as if God has value only for 'spiritual' 'five-fold' ministries namely the work of apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors or teachers (Ep.4:11,12). As a result, many miss out on their 'mission' in life, even as they live their lives on earth.

It is a wrong teaching that there are only five major ministries in the church. As we can see from other places in the NT (Ro.12:6-8; 1Co.12:8-10), there are many different gifts and callings that God gives to people for serving His purpose.

Another misunderstanding is that only work related to spiritual aspects can be called serving God -- falsely dividing between 'spiritual' and 'secular' work. Whenever we do what God wants us to do at that time, we are serving God (Co.3:23,24). A man selling grocery or a mother bathing her baby is serving God at that point as well as a pastor preaching a sermon, because each one is doing what God wants them to do. Selling grocery in a way that bears witness to the Lord is his mission, and so on. Wherever God has placed us and whatever He has asked us to do, to be a witness for Him there in that way is our mission. This is what gives dignity and responsibility for our life.

What God seeks to do is to 1) save (regenerate) and bring people into His universal church (not buildings but the spiritual body of Christ that consists of

all who have been regenerated everywhere), 2) work in each one of His people to transform them into the character of His Son, and 3) exhibit them as witnesses to the world and use them to draw more people into this church. We see in Ep.4:11,12 that God uses the leaders in the church to train and equip the others so that all of us can serve Him in His work. What we need to also see is that what these so-called 'ordinary people' do is also necessary in return to support the leaders as they lead the church. Everyone has a role that supports the others (v.16). One group cannot exist without the other.

When we recognise the special mission God has given us and learn to be faithful to that, comparison and competition cease. Our reward from the Lord is not based on who did the most, but on who did most efficiently

with what he was given (Lk.19:17).
The men with 5 and 2 talents got the
same commendation, because they
were equally faithful.

Personality clash with God

The prophet Jonah seems to have been the type of person who had a strong sense of justice, along with a tendency to be strict with people who did wrong. He probably felt that it was a weakness to show any leniency to people who deserved to be punished. If so, then we can understand why he didn't want to go to Nineveh and preach God's warning to them (Jon.1:2,3). He thought that after he preached and they repented, God would withdraw His punishment from them (4:2), and he would look like a fool for preaching judgment! Jonah didn't approve of God letting His mercy triumph over His judgment (Jas.2:13).

A man with a different personality, who wanted to be nice to everyone and didn't like to be strict or firm with the

others, would have looked at God's mercy with great delight.

Do we like one aspect of God more than another because of our particular personality? There are those who like to follow laws strictly and find it difficult to bear with those who are careless with the law. There are those who major on grace and not judging. Each group feels right about their own stance and is always trying to correct the other group, calling each other legalists and those following hyper grace.

God has a most balanced personality. He is righteous, just and impartial and also loving, merciful, patient and compassionate. The thing is that He always acts according to what particular virtue is required at any time. Jesus knew when to show compassion to the people, and when to leave them and go off for prayer, when

to heal the sick and when to preach, when to sleep and when to work overtime, when to comfort and when to rebuke. The mistake we make is to get polarised into one side, and act in one particular way whatever the situation is. If we are gracious we don't know how to be firm, and if we are strict we don't know how to be gracious or patient. Another problem is that we can justify ourselves by saying that our behaviour is godly – the only thing is we are manifesting the wrong aspect of godliness for the situation. When we need to be firm we show grace, and when we need to be gracious we show strictness.

Someone has pointed out that Satan also makes good use of this weakness. If we are the strict type of person, he reminds us of Bible verses that exhort us to be strict, and we don't realise that we are being pushed to an extreme

position. If we are the soft type of person he reminds us about how forgiving and gracious we ought to be, etc. We may get fooled by these Bible verses into thinking that we are on the right track!

It is the Holy Spirit who can lead us into all truth. He can whisper in our ears and tell us when we are erring to the right side or the left (Is.30:21). We shouldn't walk blindly with "It's written," but we ought to listen to the "It's also written." God wants to make us mature people, well rounded in our development, and not have a warped development with some virtues growing more than others.

Pointers along the way #565

The wineskin or the wine?

The disciples of John asked Jesus why His disciples were not fasting like

them or the Pharisees (Mt.9:14). In reply Jesus said that new wine needed new wineskins and could not be put into old wineskins. Obviously, the meaning was that Jesus was bringing some new things which could not fit in with the old religious forms. To put in other words, the old covenant had its laws, rituals and forms, but the new covenant was something entirely new. The old covenant focussed on external arrangements and behaviour, while the new one turned the focus to the inner man or man's spirit. This was what God wanted all along (1Sa.16:7), but He had to begin at an introductory level with the people of Israel at the time of their leaving Egypt because they did not have sufficient maturity in their knowledge of God (Ga.4:3-5).

But the sad thing is that even under the new covenant, many Christians are focussing more on the wineskin than on

the wine itself. Granted, some of them are looking at *new* wineskins. They study and try to implement the new testament pattern of the church (organisation, order of service), for example, or discuss about what dress or hair style Christians should have, how often we should have communion or how exactly it should be done, how we should adapt our Christianity to the culture around us, what all we are allowed to do and not, etc. It is not that we don't need to look at these things at all; after all, we can't have wine around without a wineskin to hold it. But the point is, are we *more* interested in keeping the wine's quality or in designing a good wineskin?

One day, when our time on this earth is over and we have been translated into eternity with our glorified 'bodies', how much would it matter what kind of forms and rules we followed here?

They would matter only to the extent that they helped in preserving the wine.

The wine represents our inner life, the life of our spirit. God has redeemed us from death and from Satan's hands by paying with the blood of Jesus Christ, and now He is in the business of transforming us into the nature of Christ. That is what will last through eternity. Whether we wore white clothes or we broke bread every Sunday are not going to be so important then. What did all these things we were fighting for with other Christians contribute to making us like Jesus? (Or did they turn out to the contrary?)

"Where there is no vision, the people are unrestrained" (Pr.29:18). A prophetic insight is needed to put first things first, *not neglecting the others* (cf.Mat.23:23). If we don't understand God's priorities, it would be easy for

us to take off on a tangent with whatever looks interesting to us at the moment. Momentary interests may come and go, but we must never lose sight of our most important goal. The question is not merely if what we are doing is 'right' or not, but if it is the one thing needed (Lk.10:42). What Martha was doing was good, but it was not 'the one thing'.

Pointers along the way #566

Forgive others. Not fair!

After all that someone has done to us, after all the suffering and pain we have gone through, isn't it unfair for anyone to suggest that we should forgive that man? The immediate response that comes to our mind may be, "You don't know what he has done to me," or "Forgive him? That's too much!" In one sense these are valid responses. Someone else's evil actions have affected us so badly, and our sense of justice cries out to say he should be punished. That's only fair! How can anyone even suggest that we should let him free?

This would be right if justice was all that we had to consider. If we take this person to the court, that is the view the court would take, and probably he will get punished for his crime. But the fact is that justice is not the only thing we

have to consider. The more important question we need to face in this context is whether we are qualified or eligible to 'judge' this person. We know what happened when some people brought a woman to Jesus, asking Him for His opinion about whether she should be stoned to death for adultery as the Law of Moses said (Jn.8:2-5). Jesus answered saying those who had never sinned could throw the first stone, and everyone just slunk away (vv.7-9)! All those religious men who brought her realised in their hearts that they were sinners too!

When we come to this realisation about ourselves, all our bravado disappears, and what we imagined was our 'righteous indignation' withers away. As sinners we stand before God with the same status as these others we would like to judge. The difference in the degree of offence would hardly

make any difference to the fact that we all face judgment from God.

Then comes grace. Some of us have acknowledged our sins and our sinfulness before God, and also our inability to save ourselves, and gladly received from Him the free gift of His grace, with forgiveness of our sins, regeneration of our spirit and joint heirship with Jesus the Son of God. God has exalted us far above all the other sinners in this world. But our status is as sinners who have been forgiven by grace, something we don't deserve in the least. With this status how can we lift our head and look down on anyone else, let alone judge them?

The story of the 'unforgiven' servant who could not forgive a fellow servant after being forgiven himself (Mt.18:21-35) tells us that God expects us who have been forgiven freely and

graciously to show the same attitude towards others. This servant lost his forgiveness when he would not forgive another. Jesus warns us that our Heavenly Father will not forgive us if we are unwilling to forgive others (Mt.6:15).

Forgiveness starts in our heart (Mt.18:35), and when we decide to forgive others just as God has forgiven us (Ep.4:32), our emotions will begin to fall in place. God understands our struggles and supports us. But He looks for our heart to make a decision to forgive. Once we make that decision, a great release will follow.

Pointers along the way #567

Dead people feel no need

When a baby is born, everyone waits for him to cry. The baby's first cry indicates his need for air to breathe. Afterwards the baby cries whenever he feels hunger, thirst or pain. Everyone knows that if a baby does not cry for these things there is something seriously wrong with the baby's physical health.

It is the same way when a person is born again. What happens when a person is born again is that his spirit becomes alive and he gets a living connection with God. Then he begins to cry for God. A desire to know God better, to walk closely with Him, to become more pleasing to Him, to become like Him in thinking, attitude and behaviour, to love others, to stop sinning in so many ways, etc., becomes stronger and stronger. He begins to

read God's word, pray more, talk about God more, ask more questions about the godly life, etc. Something has happened. He was dead in sin (Eph.2:1;Ps.51:5), and now he has become alive to God (Ro.6:11). He has changed inside, and he wants the change to happen outside also. A battle develops between the new man that has been born and the sinful nature that is still in him. The psalmist describes this seeking after God as a deer panting for water (Ps.42:1).

Is this the picture you see when you look around at the large numbers of Christians around you? Is this *your* picture? The picture that is most commonly seen is that there is some external compliance with Christian norms, but the heart only longs (cries) for earthly pleasures. What seems to interest a large number of so-called Christians is really no different from

what non-Christians desire -- the wealth, fame and pleasures of this earth. What it shows is that these Christians are in fact no different inside them from their non-Christian friends, if we put aside the external differences of rituals, practices and beliefs! If such spiritual cries as mentioned above are not coming up, what does it indicate except that the baby is not spiritually alive? He is not born again, even though he assumes that he is, and other people also think that because of his regularity in the church. What a depth of self-deception! People are dead in sin even now, but they imagine that they are on their way to heaven!

This is the single root cause of the myriads of problems we see among Christians and churches. The reason for the rottenness of the root is that the Devil has managed to change the

preaching of the Gospel by taking away even the mention of the problem of sin, Christ's answer for it and our repentance. Now it is all about getting blessings from God for our *earthly* life! As a result people are not saved at all, they have no knowledge of God (1Co.15:34), but they still imagine that everything is fine. Such ones even become preachers to tell others this 'good news' -- now you can enjoy this life! But that is a false gospel!

The time is really short. Every one of us needs to make sure about where we stand with God. Are we alive or dead?

Pointers along the way #568

Missing factors

If we come to some conclusions thinking that what we have seen with our own eyes or heard with our own ears must be true, the inherent assumption here, even though we are not aware of it, is that we have all the factors we require concerning the matter for making that judgment. We are so confident that we are doing the right thing. But in reality, we may be totally unaware of many different factors involved there. It's like a high school student thinking he knows everything about mathematics when a PhD is aware of many things he does not know!

The more factors we become aware of, the wiser we become. This kind of wisdom comes from learning, from personal experience and from observing the others and the world

around us. The Bible is a source of great wisdom if we meditate on it with reverence for God (Pr.9:10). It protects us from worldly wisdom and our own human desires (He.4:12), and shows us the perfect will of God (Ro.12:2). But even studying the Bible does not necessarily give us wisdom unless we seek to put into our daily life what we learn (He.5:13,14). Our daily life is a great teacher. Many times we learn from our own mistakes, if we are honest before God and with ourselves. The Holy Spirit opens our understanding to new things (Jn.14:26) as we live our lives before God (Ge.17:1), corrects us when we go wrong (Is.30:20,21) and shows us the way we should go (Ps.32:8).

We need heavenly wisdom in this world where other voices are loudly proclaiming their views to us. The wisdom of this world is about taking

care of oneself and enjoying life. There is also a 'wisdom' that comes from demons (Jas.3:14,15) whose goal is to destroy us, by leading us into sin or *leading us away from God.*

There is something that makes a big difference for us Christians in our practical life. It is the importance we give to the word of God. Sad to say, many Christians who believe in the Bible actually use their human understanding coloured by the opinions of experts in the world for interpreting the Bible. Of course this will affect our practical life. God has given us His word as the ultimate authority and standard against which we are supposed to judge the opinions of the world.

Another mistake we may make is to judge new factors that come to our notice based on what we already have in our mind. This is like a participant

in a debate competition rebutting whatever the opposite side is saying, even if it is true! So we may actually end up rejecting the additions to our wisdom that God is offering us! But if we can humbly acknowledge in our mind that some of what we believe to be right just now may need to be corrected with the new knowledge that comes in, then we can grow in wisdom.

There is generally wisdom in listening to many counsellors. But we must know that some of them may be just giving their opinion, and accept only what is in line with what God is saying. Honesty before God about the possibility of mistakes can be our protection.

Pointers along the way #569

Whatever we ask?

Haven't you heard preachers speaking emphatically on asking God for whatever we want, and telling us to persevere in prayer till we get it? They usually quote "All things you ask in prayer, believing, you will receive" (Mt.21:22). If we are honest we have to say that we don't get all that we ask for. But it's actually good that our Heavenly Father doesn't give us everything we ask for, because sometimes that would be disastrous for us! He has got more sense. We understand even as earthly parents how foolish it would be to give our children whatever they ask for!

The verse quoted above talks about asking, 'believing'. We can't say that all that we ask, we ask believing. We also don't always know what to ask for. Believing is not just about knowing He *is able to* do what we ask for, but also an assurance that it is His *will* to do it.

It's also written, "Whatever you ask in My name, that will I do, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son" (Jn.14:13). Do all things we ask for qualify for glorifying the Father? If we ask for things that will only please us, or they are going to hurt us in the long run or make us miss His best for us, isn't it good that He doesn't give them to us? If we are adamant in our prayer, He may finally give in to us to teach us a lesson, and we aren't going to like it (Ps.106:15).

"If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you" (Jn.15:7). This makes it a little clearer. We can see that if we are abiding in Him we will be in tune with Him, and we are likely to ask for things that are on His heart for us. Then we will be asking believing and, of course, He will be glad to give us what we ask for.

"You did not choose Me but I chose you, and appointed you that you would go and bear fruit, and that your fruit would remain, so that whatever you ask of the Father in My name He may give to you" (v.6). It will be clearer now to see what kind of things He wants us to ask, and how He is interested in giving them to us. He is not talking at all about things we might fancy, but things concerning what He has chosen us to accomplish through us.

"This is the confidence which we have before Him, that, if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us" (1Jn.5:14). In other words, it is only when we ask for things according to His will that we can have confidence that we will receive them.

When we don't understand this, we get disappointed when we ask and don't receive. And then some preachers

blame us for lack of faith or sin. But some make a mistake about faith as if it is something we have to manufacture and then get into a bargaining position with God!

God wants us to be honest (and to read the Bible carefully). He also wants us to be those with mature understanding (1Co.14:20). Why don't we ask Him for whatever we want, with the understanding that we know only imperfectly and are willing to be content with whatever He decides?

Pointers along the way #570

The essence of sin

When we try to find a definition for sin from the Bible we usually think of it a 'transgression of the law' (1Jn.3:4 KJV) or as 'lawlessness' or being without law (NASB). Another way to define it is as coming short of the glory

of God (Rom.3:23). And we know that the punishment for sin is death (Rom.6:23). This is a big problem for many to understand, how 'small' sins like telling a lie or shouting at someone in anger can deserve to be punished with death! This is a problem especially for those who have been brought up in decent families and never committed any of the gross forms of sin that people detest naturally. They cannot understand how a loving God can send them to hell for their 'small' sins, and as a result they find the gospel message somewhat unrealistic.

The normal explanation given to such people is that God being an infinitely holy God, even the smallest of sins (according to how man would view them) is seen to be totally intolerable. A common example we use to make this point is how a person who has a great penchant for cleanliness is

bothered even about some specks of dust on the floor which ordinary people do not worry about. But we can understand more about sin when we look at Genesis 3.

The forbidden fruit was from the tree of knowledge of good and evil. The main thrust of the temptation from Satan was that the fruit would give one this knowledge and in that way make one 'like God' (v.5). Once we have this knowledge within us, we are capable of making our own choices -- apart from God. Even when God tells us something, we can think about it and say, "I don't agree with it!" We feel we are the masters of our own life and destiny. We are independent of God!

Haven't all of us lived like that from the time we were born for different periods of time till we came to know God? When we come face to face with God we realise He is the infinite God

and we are only small created beings. Then we come to realise that all our life, till then, we were living as we liked, doing 'our own thing', not bothered much about what God thought about anything. We did not hold ourselves accountable to God, and lived an independent life. This is the essence of sin, and the punishment is that we will be made to be eternally away from God, in hell.

There are some who were trained from early times to do right and to obey God. They turn out to be 'better than others' with an air of self-righteousness about them. They don't consider themselves to be 'independent of God', but their problem is that they depend on their own righteousness to find acceptance from God. And even the best of them cannot say that they have always lived in dependence on God.

Looking at it this way, the essence of

sin is a life independent of God. Everyone is guilty of that. Even those who have 'accepted Christ' but live independently of God even afterwards are still continuing in sin, aren't they? True coming to Christ involves submitting to Him too.

Pointers along the way #571

The ostrich strategy

It is said that the ostrich will bury its head under the sand when it feels any threat, and the assumption is that it thinks denial is safety. We humans also seem to use this strategy very often! It was Sigmund Freud who brought out the concept of psychological 'defence mechanisms' which we use instantly when we hear of things that can cause us mental pain or discomfort. One such mechanism is 'denial' where we reject painful facts hoping that they are not true, or that they will go away if we ignore them! A typical example is when we hear of someone's death and react immediately by saying it can't be true because we saw him just the other day. When we think of it we can see it is totally illogical to think that just because we saw someone alive the other day he has to be alive today. But

this is a defence mechanism.

Among some Christians this strategy comes in the form of "Hear no evil!" They quote the verse that tells us to dwell on good things (Php.4:8). What this verse intends to tell us is that we should not *brood* over negative thoughts that would take away our joy, make us fearful, gloomy, depressed, etc. This does not mean that we should *never* think of negative things. The reality of life includes many unpleasant situations, evil people, injustice, cruelty, etc., and we can't live if we won't look at these things, think about them and form our responses. We can't make them disappear by ignoring them or pretending they are not there. That would be a most unrealistic thing to do.

Some people say, "Time will heal," and use that as an excuse not to take any action. Some others pray and leave

everything into God's hands thinking that this would absolve them of any responsibility they have to do something. Some fanatically resist even hearing or reading anything that is unpleasant to them thinking that they are keeping their minds clean. None of these strategies works. They can't work because by one way or another they are keeping us away from taking up responsibility for what they should do.

Parents don't correct their children. Husbands and wives don't discuss their problems. People who are in debt don't cut down their expenses in order to pay back. Leaders keep away from problems their people have. Organisations bother about their image more than the internal problems.

We live in a real world with real problems. When we have problems we are the ones who need to do something to deal with them. These problems

have a way of becoming worse the more we ignore them! Yes, we can ask others and God also to help us. But it is ultimately not the responsibility of others or even God to sort out our problems, but ours. Others are there to share our burdens and to help us carry them. but it is our need and responsibility to deal with our own burdens (Ga.6:2-5). Unlike the ostrich, we need to look squarely at our problems and ask God and others what we can do about them. That is to face reality and to live real lives.

Chastening from God

When we go through special times of difficulties, they could be of different causes. It could simply mean that we are living in this sin-corrupted world and we are just experiencing the natural problems that others also face (1Co.10:13). In some special cases they could be tests which our Father has permitted to come to us so that we can see where our faith actually stands. This is what God did for Peter (Lk.22:31,32). It could also mean that God is disciplining us, trying to catch our attention to look at something in our life which we have been neglecting. This is more than the conviction and guilt of sin which we feel after we have fallen. This happens when we have been ignoring God's warnings about some area in our life for some time and going about

brazenly. He is still our Father, and He loves us too much to just let us go.

It may be that when everything is going well and people like us our heart becomes proud, *slowly*, so slowly that we don't realise it is happening. Some signs of this happening are that we look less to God for help, have more confidence in ourselves, begin to be impatient with people and situations, etc. But then some 'calamity' or failure hits us. It could be that something we normally do well gets messed up, we get into sudden sickness or accident, some problem begins to so occupy our mind that we get irritated with God, someone rises up against us as our 'enemy', etc. It may be that Satan seems to get some access to our life causing us unexpected problems.

Let us not imagine that every such problem is because of chastening from God. No. We have looked at this

earlier here. But when we go to God to find out why something is happening to us, He may just point out to us that this is something He is doing to catch our attention.

Let's also not imagine that God must be angry with us. No. He has put away His anger towards us forever by expressing it towards Jesus when He was on the cross (1Th.5:9). Now He treats us as His beloved children (He.12:6,7). There is no more curse on us, nor does He deal with us like someone who is out to find our faults. He has promised us that He will not recollect our past sins any more (He.8:12).

What we need to do is to face God in humility and repentance, acknowledging our sins (Je.3:13) and turning away from them with our whole heart. We need to take to heart the precious lessons that He wants us to

learn through these difficulties that we missed earlier. Let us not begin to complain and grumble about the pain of the chastening, but recognise that we ought to come out at the end as better persons (He.12:10,11).

At the same time, let us remember that if we are careful to examine our life and listen to the voice of the Holy Spirit in the daily situations of life, we need not come to the point where we need to be disciplined by God. Let us be humble if the discipline comes, but let us learn from there to be more careful and sensitive in the future.

Test the spirits

"Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world" (1Jn.4:1). We should note that this warning is given in the context of false prophets (we can add false teachers and miracle workers too). Even when Christians with knowledge of the Bible are preaching, we must be aware of the possibility that some of them may be *false* workers, or at least that some parts of what they say may be false. This is for our protection. The example John gives here of testing the spirits is about checking if these people can confess that Jesus came in the flesh (vv.2,3). But is that all we need to see?

These are the last days, and according to Jesus there will be a proliferation of false teachers, prophets, miracle

workers, etc. We can't believe everyone we hear just because they are using the Bible, or they are known to be gifted people. Some of them could be influenced by deceiving spirits who inject their influence on them. That is why we have to test these spirits to see if they are from God. In other words, we need to check if what we see, hear and experience is from God.

The first thing we need to check is whether what they preach is in agreement with what God says in His word, the Bible (Ac.17:11). But since we know that sometimes Satan himself quotes from the Bible, we should look beyond the words into the spirit behind. That is what this warning is about.

Just take an example. There are many preachers now whose trademark is that they touch people on their head and people fall down, supposedly 'slain in

the Spirit'. Shall we just examine the fruit of this experience? Did the people who fell down become more pure in their life through the operation of the Holy Spirit in their lives using the word of God? Have they started loving God more, not just emotionally but by giving up things that were displeasing to God in their lives? Or did they just get up and feel mighty thrilled by their experience? This is how we judge false teachers 'by their fruit' (Mt.7:15,16). Those who went to a 'revival' meeting, heard 'soul stirring' music and moving sermons, said many hallelujahs and returned home excited, but they had no change in their lives inside them--would we call that good fruit or deceitful fruit?

A sadder thing is when some of these preachers are deceiving people knowingly and deliberately.

It is high time we started thinking about

such nuances, asking such questions and refusing to be tranquilised by popular opinions. It is for our safety and the safety of those who are under our care.

The *spirit* of the Antichrist is already at work (2Jn.1:7), even though who he is has not yet been revealed. This development will only become stronger and wider till he gets revealed. Is it not necessary for us to keep ourselves close to the Lord, rely on His word and keep away from everyone who operates with a deceiving spirit?

Some snares of Satan

When we come to Jesus in repentance and faith, God forgives our sins and makes us His children. What also takes place at this time is that we move from the dominion of Satan into the kingdom of God. This is something Satan doesn't like, and he is going to try all kinds of things to get us back. Therefore, apart from getting to know God better and better, we also need to watch out against the schemes of Satan (2Co.2:11).

If we fall into any sin after coming to Christ, God has made a way back for us (1Jn.2:1,2). If we confess our sin, He will forgive us and restore our fellowship (1Jn.1:9). But if we would not repent or confess our sins, we would be continuing out of fellowship with God. This would enable Satan to get a foothold (access) in our life. The

Bible uses two examples of continuing in an unforgiving attitude (2Co.2:10,11) and in anger (Ep.4:26,27) to illustrate this point.

Behind every idol people worship as god, there is a demonic spirit impersonating deity (1Co.10:20). If we are paying homage to any idol now (even 'Christian' idols) we would be actually worshipping demons! People who have become believers in Christ from such backgrounds must make sure that they have repented from such sins and that they have completely renounced them now.

Occult practices dealing with spirits such as ouija board, tarot cards, seances, divinations, etc., are becoming fashionable these days for thrill seekers. But we must have nothing to do with such things, knowing that they connect people to demons.

Of course, Satan will keep tempting us to sin or to move away from God by putting ideas into our mind. We remember how he first made Eve doubt God's word and then denied it point blank. Not every suggestion he makes will be openly wrong, and some may appear to be good, as when he told Eve that she could become like God if she ate the forbidden fruit. We need to develop the habit of checking new ideas, whether they come directly to our mind or through preachers or authors, to see if they agree with what the Bible teaches.

Another way Satan deceives us is through pride. That was the reason for his fall, and he knows we are also vulnerable when we become proud. If we compare ourselves with other people and think how bigger, better or more able we are, we are in a position to slip. The remedy is to stand before

God and see how small we are.

If we think we are someone special with a revelation or task other godly people can't understand, we are in a very dangerous place. It is unlikely that we discover some truth now that the apostles or saints down through the ages had no idea about or thought not important enough to emphasise.

Satan is too clever for us. Our safety is in humility.

Pointers along the way #575

Titles and entitlement

The kingdom of God is unlike the kingdoms of this world. In it the one who is most valued by the King is the one who serves everyone the best (Mk.9:35). So it will happen that when we get to heaven we will see that many who were unknown and unappreciated here will have greater prominence there, and many who we thought were 'great men of God' are not even there! Jesus told His disciples that the people of this world clamoured for important seats, titles and recognition (Mt.23:6,7) while those in His kingdom had no desire for such but only to serve Him and His people.

Without understanding this spirit of Jesus, many Christians now aspire for fame and recognition. They promote themselves (not Jesus), love it when people honour them (Jesus tried to hide

or move away), and hold on to imposing titles (Most Reverend, Reverend, Pastor, Evangelist, Prophet, Apostle, Deacon, Father, His Holiness). Most of them are highly offended if they are not addressed by these titles, offered seats of honour in public places, or allocated some part in special functions. They feel entitled to special recognition and treatment.

It is true that God gives each one of His children specific tasks in the Body of Christ (1Co.12:6,7). Some are also given special responsibilities in the church to train, empower and equip the others to serve the Lord (Ep.4:11,12). If God has entrusted us with such responsibilities in the church we are not to think we are more important or above the others. It is a work we have to do to *serve* the others, and it is not a title we have to put on ourselves as they do in the kingdoms of this world.

Can we revere any man on earth, or is it something reserved only for God? We have examples of the apostles Peter and Paul becoming aghast when people tried to bow down to them, and saying they were only mere men like the others. They didn't call one another apostle (2Pet.3:15). Is that what we see among some leaders now? They seem to enjoy receiving all the adulation and flattery that come their way and are not even averse to someone kissing their hands! They are eager to be invited to public platforms, receive garlands and other forms of felicitations, praised high to the sky and get an envelope as they leave!

Friends, is this what it means to become more like Jesus? Is this the spirit He came with? Is this what will be appreciated in heaven when we receive our rewards?

Let us be careful not to admire leaders

who are seeking to exalt themselves. But more than that, let us be careful not to drink of that spirit, desiring to receive such attention ourselves, feeling sad if we don't have it or becoming envious of others. Let us learn to serve God and His people in all humility, being grateful for the grace He has shown to us sinners and being eager to bring honour and glory to God (Mt.6:9,10). And if some honour gets thrown our way from people, let us quickly acknowledge to God that it belongs entirely to Him.

Pointers along the way #576

Our fear of man

There is a comment John makes in his gospel that should make us examine ourselves. "Nevertheless many even of the rulers believed in Him, but because of the Pharisees they were not confessing Him, for fear that they would be put out of the synagogue;" (Jn.12:42). Many rulers kept themselves from believing in Jesus by telling themselves that He was a sinner or a blasphemer. But we are looking now at those who actually *believed* but who were not willing to acknowledge Him publicly or to follow Him. What hindered them was their fear of man: the opposition that might come up, the ridicule they might have to face, a possible loss of position or status in the synagogue and society, etc.

Let us think of some practical examples that we face nowadays. Let's

say we are convinced that the water baptism Jesus meant for us to obey Him in is one as a believer who has experienced salvation already in his life. But if we get baptised like that we can imagine the situation in our church, family and friend circles. Or perhaps we have been baptised in the Holy Spirit and we experience some gifts of the Spirit but we dare not mention them openly because our church doctrine says all this stopped with the time of the apostles. Or we are in a church where different manipulations or excessive practices are going on in the name of the Holy Spirit but we go along with them because we don't like to lose our position or role. Are we so obsessed with the fear of man that we choose to avoid standing up with Jesus or speaking out for Him?

This is all the more serious if we are 'rulers' or leaders who are influencing

many others who look up to us. Perhaps God has placed us in such positions of responsibility where He wants us to be 'lights' for the people around us (Mt.5:14-16). But then are we choosing to hide that light under the bushel so that we can protect ourselves?

The few who dare to throw off this fear and step out usually get ridiculed and penalised by the compromising majority. That may strengthen our resolve to keep ourselves hidden. We may even convince ourselves that by keeping some knowledge of the truth to ourselves we may actually get some opportunity to be useful to many people. Perhaps. But if we act out only up to the level of the truths that everyone around us accepts, when we have more to give, wouldn't we be giving up the opportunity to bless the others in a greater way?

We do recognise, at the same time, that sometimes we have to be as shrewd as 'serpents' (Mt.10:16). We should not throw our pearls before swine who will just trample them under foot (Mt.7:6). Sometimes we have to run away from situations that might seriously harm us if we made our faith public (Mt.10:23). But let us also be honest to admit to ourselves if our motive is honourable in the sight of God or we are just unwilling to stand up for God. If everyone tries to be non-denominational that would be 'politically correct', but is that being faithful before God?

Pointers along the way #577

Becoming like Jesus?

When the scribes and Pharisees brought a woman to Jesus saying she had been caught in adultery, He told them that the one who had no sin could throw the first stone at her (Jn.8:7). Then they all left the scene, one by one, starting with the older ones! Whenever we take delight in finding fault with others, that is the opinion we have about ourselves, that we don't have any fault!

Actually, most of us will never claim that we are without sin. We are quick to admit we are imperfect. Except when it comes to a specific sin. Then we try to claim we never did it, and if that won't work, we will say we had a very good reason for doing it, especially since it was someone else who started it. Then we turn the full focus on this other person, and start

throwing stones at him. We even forget in the process that we did anything wrong.

If no one buys this argument from us, we may admit we did wrong, but not from the heart but only because we have been caught. Now our goal is to minimise the punishment!

This is our automatic self-protection mechanism and its sequence. And yet we are convinced that we want to become like Jesus!

How can we become like Jesus if we won't even acknowledge where we are *unlike* Jesus? Becoming like Jesus is not about increasing in knowledge about Jesus or how much we feel moved when we sing His praises. Such knowledge has the ability to make us feel we've got it (1Co.8:1), especially if we have knowledge many others don't have! To become like Jesus is to

have His attitude towards people (Php.2:5-8), to be able to think like Jesus and behave like Jesus in the different circumstances of our life. To get to this involves *denying ourselves* when we are unlike Jesus and choosing to behave like Jesus through the help of the Holy Spirit (Ro.8:13). Certainly we can never do this if we are doing our best always to turn away from looking at our faults, and throwing stones at others.

What kind of people are we now? Are we the type who find delight in discussing other people's faults? Then we are not like Jesus but like the hypocritical Pharisees who thought they were always right and looked down on others (Lk.18:9). Do we notice other people's faults but we never tell them about it but only share this observation with others? Jesus came to save us, but we seem to be

involved with backbiting instead! When we have to discuss someone's fault with another person as a part of our responsibility is our attitude one of concern and empathy? Then we are beginning to become like Jesus!

Our challenge becomes greater when someone has done us harm, we are suffering from it, and we have to discuss about it. Is all our talk then only about his fault and there is no mention about what we have done wrong? Keeping quiet about his fault and talking about our faults is being super spiritual, but to hold both sides together in balance is to become mature like Christ (Jn.18:23). Let's get real about becoming like Jesus.

Pointers along the way #578

Believing lies?

Some Christians seem to take

individual verses from the Bible and interpret them as universally applicable, without looking at the local context and especially at what other verses in other parts of the Bible have to say on the same subject. One result of this process is that some of them take unrealistic doctrinal positions which are not related to practical experience of life. They make way for ignoring reality when they say they would rather believe (their idea of) God's word even if it is against reason or practical experience, misquoting Ro.3:4!

"There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (Ro.8:1). Does this mean that we should never feel any guilt in real life even when we sin? If we fall into sin shouldn't we feel guilt so that it would lead us to repentance (2Co.7:9)? Don't we need to confess our sins if we fall

into any (1Jn.1:9;2:1)? Some people behave as if nothing negative about self should be looked at in life! "The law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death" (Ro.8:2). Don't we see ever see in practice the law of sin working in us (Ro.7:23)? Should we just pretend it doesn't exist? Are we doing anything to make sure that the law of the Spirit of life is actually working in our daily situations, without just asserting that it is so? Things like these are provisions which God has made for us, which we have to experience not only by believing them but also working them out so that we can actually have them working in us (Php.2:12).

What do we do when we see things in our life that are unlike Christ? Should we simply assert to ourselves that we are 'in Christ', God sees us in Christ and ignore the reality in our life that

needs to be dealt with and overcome? When we truly love Jesus and want to become like Him, and then find sin in our life, should we just ignore it? Wouldn't it be natural and actually good for a believer to be broken-hearted because he is still unlike Jesus and then mourn over it (Mt.5:4)? Do we just claim we are free from the law even when it is not yet true in life? Do we claim we are seated in the heavenly places while our life shows our mind is still after earthly things? The list can go on.

One part of honesty is to accept reality. Would God want us to pretend to be something we are not or believe lies (unreal things) about us? Shouldn't we see many things that God has provided for us in Christ and hope for becoming like that, while being honest enough to say that we are not yet like that in reality? If we don't face up to and

accept the reality of our lives, how can we want to change to become like Jesus, ask Him for help and do what we need to appropriate the promises?

If we look at the word and keep it in our head but don't see ourselves as in a mirror, that's the way to fool ourselves. If we want real changes in our lives let's start with honesty about our condition. Let our doctrines match with practical life.

Healing of the heart

When someone comes to Christ, he repents of his sins and his sinful life and receives forgiveness of sins by believing Jesus has taken his punishment on Himself. Then the process of transformation begins, where he is going to be made like Jesus a little by little. Sad to say many believe that the first part is all there is, or that it covers everything needed in life. As a result their lives continue to be practically the same as before they came to Christ, except that they now believe all they do is forgiven. In order for the transformation to take place, we must know two things, what God has prepared for us and also where we stand now in reality in relation to that. Again here, some people make the mistake of thinking of only what God has prepared, hoping that God will do

all that for them, and some others make the mistake of thinking that they have to somehow make themselves like Jesus.

Where do we stand now in reality? Because of the Fall, we are all born with tendencies towards irrational and illogical thinking, setting wrong goals for ourselves and feeling lots of negative thoughts. On top of that, some of the experiences we have gone through from childhood have imposed on us certain wrong patterns of thinking, feeling and behaving. So there is really a lot of baggage from our fallen nature and experiences that need to be corrected and then to be replaced with the life and character of Jesus.

Thankfully, God has promised to carry out this transformation for everyone who becomes His child (Ro.8:29). He has also promised to do this by writing His laws upon our heart, giving us a new spirit and causing us to walk in

His ways (Ez.36:26,27). But this is not going to happen automatically just because we have been born again, because we have to 'want' to be changed into His image, and we have to 'ask' Him to do it in us (v.37). This wanting and asking are also not one time events where we dedicate our lives to Him. But it is an ongoing process where God does what He has promised and we keep acknowledging our need and asking Him for this transformation. God works in us to do will and do His pleasure, and we then receive that strength and actually will and do His pleasure (Php.2:12,13).

Now we can see that we can make mistakes in so many different ways and then put the blame on God saying He has not done what He has promised. Some of us say all we need is faith. They think that anything we do is 'works' and not acceptable to God. But

faith without works won't work (Jas.2:17)! If we say we have faith but do not do the things our faith tells us, we won't get the result.

It is never God's mistake. If we have held wrong understanding of God's ways, we can see that it has not produced what we thought would happen. What we need to do is not to complain, but to ask Him to show us where we are going wrong, give us strength to do what we ought to do, and then help us to do things rightly. God's promises are always true.

Pointers along the way #580

Misunderstanding the Bible

The Bible is one of the greatest gifts God has given to people by which we can get to know God and His ways. Most Christians accept the fact, which the Bible itself tells us, that it was written under the inspiration of God (2Ti.3:16,17). But it was not *dictated* to the human authors by God but written by the authors using their own vocabulary, grammar and style. Therefore, in order to understand what God is communicating to us through the Bible we need to look beyond the written words, to understand what the Holy Spirit is saying. This is one place where many Christians make a mistake; wrongly assuming that every word is a direct quotation from God, they try to interpret verses literally as if they are scientific or legal statements. There are many things in the Bible that can be

understood literally, but when we deal with spiritual truths, they cannot be understood by human analysis but only by spiritual revelation (1Co.2:14).

Take, for example, "If you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved" (Ro.10:9). Can we take this verse by itself and interpret it as the way to salvation? No. The context of this verse is to show a contrast between the people of Israel who were trying to find salvation by keeping the Law and Christians who receive it by faith. But this is not a statement that is complete in itself. Where is the mention of repentance from sins when one hears of Jesus having to die for one's sins? Does it mention how one would be lost from God and in hell if one continues in hell and is not saved? So what happens if one takes this verse by itself

and repeats with his mouth that Jesus is Lord? Even if he believes that God raised Jesus from the dead? He would deceive himself if he thinks he is saved. But the fact is that many people who think they have become children of God are basing their salvation on such flimsy assumptions!

If we want to understand salvation, for example, we need to understand the nature of God, how Adam and Eve sinned, what God has done to bring people back to Him, and what sin does to us and to our relationship to God and others. Then we will repent and turn to God, and find salvation by receiving forgiveness that God offers freely to us based on the sacrifice of Jesus. Where do we get this understanding? From the whole Bible. Of course, people do get saved by understanding verses like Jn.3:16 which is a very condensed version of

the truth we have been talking about. But if they need to grow and become mature in Christ, they have to feed on the word of God more and more (1Pe.2:2).

In matters as important as our salvation, and even on other subjects, we can't afford to take partial truths which we get from some verses here and there. We need to understand the heart of God. That is possible only as we study the Bible more. Let's learn to study the Bible properly, in the right way, and not misunderstand it.

Making the way broad

When man disobeyed God and lost his access to God, God paid the price through suffering and death to make the way for man to come back to God. Since God is the One who made this way, and He has declared that there is no other way to get to Him (Jn.14:6;Ac.4:12), there is no place for us to define additions or modifications. If we want to go to God we need to know the way God has declared and go that way, and if we want others to come with us we must show them also the same way as exactly as we can. But then we come across this disturbing fact that not many are interested in walking in this way, and that most people are only interested in having a good time on earth even though ultimately they are going to miss God (Mt.7:13). Then we are tempted to

wish things were not as 'difficult' as they are in fact, and then try and make them a little bit easier for people. So many times what the people hear is not the way that God has made, but some man's revised version. But are people going to be able to enter into God's kingdom through such bypass roads?

Being born again is a supernatural, spiritual work God does in a human being. This is not a mechanical process that happens automatically when we do certain religious things. But when God actually does this work in a person, everyone can begin to see the changes in that person's life like fruit coming out of a tree. Some fruit may be seen in a short time, but some over a longer period of time. What is important to note is that if these changes are not seen even after a period of time, we have to recognise that no real rebirth has taken place in that life. If we are

the ones who have shown him the way, we will be guilty of having misled him, with eternal implications.

Preachers are only human beings, and they are tempted to expect great results from their work, and they may be also looking for fame, recognition, respect, honour, position and even wealth to come from their preaching. Or they may not want to make their 'way' look hard or narrow. So they modify their message to make it more pleasant to the hearers. They omit mentioning the coming judgment for sin, an eternity in hell, and the finality of a man's choice on earth without any remedy after death. They make things simpler by just asking people to raise their hands, come forward, sign a slip, repeat a prayer or get baptised, and then assure all who have followed such instructions that they have now become children of God! How tragic!

Many leaders preach this because they themselves have not known anything better.

But the day of judgment is certainly coming when the books will be opened, and those whose names are not found in the book of life will be thrown into the lake of fire where they will be forever (Re.20:15). Of course, many are going to scream and resist at that time with no avail. But what do we think will happen to others who misguided these ones with broad and easy ways assuring them with promises?

Pointers along the way #582

Grace without responsibility

"For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all men, instructing us to deny ungodliness and worldly desires and to live sensibly, righteously and godly in the present age, looking for the blessed hope and the appearing of the glory of our great God and Saviour, Christ Jesus, who gave Himself for us to redeem us from every lawless deed, and to purify for Himself a people for His own possession, zealous for good deeds" (Ti.2:11-14). This is what true grace does. God's goal is to purify us from everything displeasing to Him and make us into people who do His will with great zeal and earnestness. Grace brings us God's salvation, and then enables us to live out saved lives. After entering into this salvation, first we deny everything that is ungodly in

us. Then we live a godly life.

In this way, both aspects of grace are involved. It brings us God's favour to us in accepting us, which we don't deserve (Rom.5:8), and it also helps us in our time of need--when we are tempted or when we face trouble--to overcome (He.4:16).

But false grace nulls out what we have to do. It highlights what God has done for us, and then makes one believe that God will do the rest of it also. In other words, our responsibility is only to have faith in Him. It looks as if this glorifies God the most, because we will have nothing to boast about. But this is a misunderstanding of salvation.

The first sin of Adam and Eve was to disobey God and eat the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil. What actually happened when they did that was to choose their own pleasure

and independence and reject God in the process. True salvation is when we become people who voluntarily choose God above ourselves and our pleasure. What God wants to do is to make us such people and show us to the Devil who engineered the first sin.

This is not just about God accepting us. This is not also about God supernaturally transforming us to His nature where we automatically show all the fruit of the Spirit (Ga.5:22,23). This is about the miracle of people who overcome all the odds against them--the lusts in their flesh, the attractions of the world and the schemes of the Devil--and choose to love God and do His will. How can we manage to do that? With the grace (help) that God gives as we trust in Him and not in ourselves. With this grace we take up the battle against our own desires and against the Devil and

overcome. Finally the grace of God will be seen to have helped poor, weak people with the baggage of their past and all the troubles of the present to choose God above it all.

False grace takes away our responsibility. It looks very attractive to us because it avoids our struggle and offers us a cakewalk. But it is our choice for God in the midst of our struggles that honours God. It is our willingness to suffer for the sake of pleasing God that magnifies Him. He wants to make us such people, in contrast to Adam who chose independence.

Pointers along the way #583

Our freedom in Christ

If we know just a little bit of the Bible we will still recognise that God has promised us freedom when we come to

Him through Christ (Ga.5:1,13). But what exactly is this freedom Jesus has come with? Jesus has said that He came to proclaim liberty to the captives and to set the oppressed free (Lk.4:18,19). It is possible for us to misunderstand what this freedom means, in practical terms, and go in wrong directions. So, let's try to understand what Jesus meant.

We know that the basic problem of man was the presence of sin: we can easily see the sins of people around us especially when they affect us, and when we learn to be honest we can also see our own sins and sinful tendencies that cause problems to ourselves and others. When we sin we go outside of God's will for us, then we get into bondage because sin is a bondage (Ro.6:16;Jn.8:13). This bondage makes us sin more, and then we get away from God's plans for us

much more. We know that God has many plans for us for our welfare (Je.29:11), but if we go on sinning we don't get to experience all the blessings He has prepared for us (1Co.2:9). It is from this bondage that Jesus has come to set us free. That is why His name itself is Jesus, meaning 'Jehovah saves', because He came to save His people from their sins (Mt.1:21). When we get freed from the guilt of our sins when the blood of Jesus washes us (Jn.1:7), and we learn to walk according to the Spirit (Ro.8:4), we begin to experience the 'glorious freedom' of the sons of God.

This does not mean we now have freedom to do 'our own thing'. Our real freedom is to be able to do God's will. That is where all our blessings are. If we do what we like, we can't expect God to bless us as much as He wants to, even though He may grant us

'common grace' that He gives to all people (Mt.5:45). Of course, we don't have freedom to sin just because God has shown us grace (Ro.6:15), because Jesus came to take us to exactly the opposite place where we stop sinning (1Jn.2:1).

Jesus wants us to enjoy being free from bondage to the opinions of people around us (Pr.29:25;Ga.1:10). When we want to do the will of God there will be a lot of opposition from men, and to live in fear of what man may say is a great bondage. God wants us to walk before Him without this fear. At the same time, it is not a 'freedom' where we walk in our own ways ignoring what others tell us. People who are in 'Christian' cults or following heresy have a tendency to ignore people who warn them, thinking that it is their way that is right and it is they who are truly serving Christ.

Many young people become 'anti-establishment' and seek for a (false) freedom from the opinion of people. This (wrong) attitude towards 'freedom' has led to many weird things in the name of the Holy Spirit. No, there is safety in listening to counsel and correction (Pr.11:14).

True freedom is to do the will of God, denying self, and then there is His grace with increasing peace and joy.

Practical security in Christ

What are some of the signs of insecurity? At the spiritual level, to be afraid of God, not being sure of His love, not being sure if we have been forgiven or where we will be after we die, etc. In our behaviour, we may be withdrawing from people and situations because of a lack of self confidence, protecting ourselves from mistakes by not taking risks or by avoiding the limelight, projecting ourselves aggressively in order to get attention, not able to look at own faults but deflecting criticism to others, constantly finding fault with others, bullying others, etc. This insecurity will also affect every part of our life including relationships and work.

Even though psychologists try to help by directing people to look positively at themselves, that is not enough to

help them at the root level. Insecurity is one of the things that Adam and Eve experienced when they got disconnected from God, and we are born with it. This may also have got aggravated due to experiences of rejection especially during the growing years. The solution is to experience the largeness of God's love for us.

Receiving forgiveness of sins is a big step of healing when we come to Jesus. But in order to let the healing reach down into the deepest parts of our mind which has been conditioned to insecurity for years, we need the Holy Spirit to minister the word of God to us.

We need to be convinced of the fact that God loves us, unconditionally and forever (Je.31:3). This is not because we somehow deserve it or because our good deeds are more than the bad. God loves us because He is love. Grace

means that God's love is something that He extends to us purely out of the goodness of His heart and not at all based on our deserving it. He created us, and He knows all about our past, our present struggles and failures, and also that as long as we live here we will continue to be imperfect (Ro.5:8). He has promised to never leave or forsake us (He.13:5). Knowing this should drive away our fear and uncertainty about God and help us to find security because we are His children.

Another thing that helps us to be secure is the knowledge that God has created us as unique persons who cannot be compared with anyone else. The package of abilities and talents we have been given and the circumstances and experiences we have faced in our life make us unlike anyone else in this world! Since we know that God is the

one who decided the details of our birth and who was in overall control of everything we have gone through (Ro.8:28), we can be sure there is something unique which He wants us to do for Him and others. We can stop comparing ourselves with others and feeling bad.

When we find ourselves secure in God's goodness and love towards us, one thing we should do is to forgive and let go of everyone who has hurt us (Co.3:13). This will liberate our minds from so much of bitterness and tension, and allow the Holy Spirit to have more freedom with us.

Pointers along the way #585

When things are upside down

When the apostle Paul went to Ephesus and preached the Gospel, many

received the word of God and were born again. Many of them had been sorcerers earlier, and when they realised that they had been wrong earlier, they came out in large numbers and destroyed all their magic equipment and books (Ac.19:19). Just imagine what would have happened if Paul had started on a campaign to expose sorcery and conducted publicity campaigns against them instead of preaching the Gospel first? People would have turned against him as their enemy. When John Wesley preached the gospel in England and people were converted, they gave up their drinking and bars had to be closed down. Would it have worked if Wesley's campaign was to close down bars?

God understood the root cause of man's problem as sin in the heart, and He declared that unless that was set right,

man could not even understand ('see') anything concerning the kingdom of God (Jn.3:3). First, man had to be born again, his heart set right, and only then could he have any real, lasting changes in his behaviour. When people repent from their sins and receive forgiveness from God because of what Jesus has done for them, God gives them a new spirit and writes His laws upon their hearts (Ez.36:25-27). Only such people will have a place in the kingdom of God (Jn.3:5). What God wants those who have already come into this kingdom to do is to preach the Gospel so that others too can come in (Mk.16:15).

Even entering into God's kingdom in this way is not all there is to it. Those who have just entered are spiritual babies, and they have to be fed first with milk (1Pe.2:2), and then with meat as they grow up (He.5:13,14)

before they can be useful for God. This is another task for the church to help believers to grow up and become mature (Mt.28:19,20).

In the body of Christ, where different members have different functions (1Co.12:7), the evangelists bring the sheep into the fold by preaching the Gospel, and the prophets, teachers and pastors (shepherds) nourish them to grow into maturity and become useful to God in turn (Ep.4:11,12). God's kingdom is not a worldly one on the earth (Jn.18:36), but it is a spiritual kingdom with Jesus as King and those who are born again as its citizens. Because these citizens have a different nature compared to the one people outside this kingdom have, they can shine as lights in the midst of the darkness of this world (Mt.5:13,14). Hopefully, as people show their lives as testimonies for God and preach the

Gospel, others also will get attracted to this kingdom. Humanitarian services carried out by the people of this kingdom because their hearts have been changed by the King also will serve as beacons of light drawing others to Jesus.

On the other hand, when we see many things upside down in this world, can we hope to put them right merely with good examples or teaching? Wouldn't it be like washing the pigs who will only return to the mud later?

Pointers along the way #586

Giving no place to the Devil

Our adversary, the Devil, is on the lookout for those he can attack (1Pe.5:8). He comes to steal and destroy (Jn.10:10), and he does this through deception (2Th.2:9,10). All his fury against God for exposing him and throwing him out of heaven is now directed at us, God's people (Re.12:17). Though Jesus has overcome the Devil and all demons publicly on the cross (Co.2:15), and He is able to keep us from falling (Jude.24), *our* victory over the Devil is not automatic or to be taken for granted. It is possible for us to give access to the Devil in our lives by our carelessness with sin.

Ep.4:26,27 warns us not to give an opportunity to the Devil by continuing in anger without settling it. 'Not letting the sun go down on our anger' is not

giving us a time limit but it is just a way of telling us to overcome our anger quickly. If we continue with our anger, the Devil will be able to stir it up further by pumping in ideas to our mind, and if we keep yielding to such suggestions without a fight, he may even get control of our mind in that area.

Another example the Bible gives is a warning about continuing in an unforgiving attitude towards someone who has done something against us because this can also be taken advantage of by the Devil to strengthen his attack against us (2Co.2:10,11).

We mustn't think that these are the only two areas we have to be careful about in our defence against the Devil. What these examples teach us is that we shouldn't be continuing in *any* sin because that would expose us to the Devil's attack. We shouldn't imagine

that we can continue in whatever 'weaknesses' we may have, and still face no consequence! Jesus is able to keep us from falling, but we shouldn't take that for granted.

Continued indulgences in sin create strongholds of the Devil in our lives. By continued yielding to temptations our defences in those areas become weak, and it becomes easy for the Devil to make us fall any time he wants.

By the authority of the name of Jesus which He has given to His disciples (Lk.10:19), we can command the Devil to move out of our lives. But that doesn't rebuild our defences automatically. If the walls of our fortress have been broken down in some places, they have to be built up again, stone by stone. In the places where we have yielded carelessly to temptations in the past, now we have to

learn to resist and overcome them. God doesn't make it easy for us by building these walls for us, or by helping us to build them up fast (De.7:22). He trains our hands to war (Ps.18:34), but He wants us to strengthen our spiritual muscles by actually using them (He.5:14). We have to learn to lean on God who alone can give us strength for the battle, and we also need to learn how to fight against the Devil by resisting him when he comes against us with his temptations (Jas.4:7). It is not a cakewalk. But even if we have fallen much, He won't forsake us (He.13:5). And so, we must take up the battle!

The forgotten act of worship

It's sad that nowadays worship has become synonymous with singing, accompanied with music with a pulsating beat, electronic and smoke effects, waving of hands and high energy movements on stage. The power of the amplifiers and the finesse of mixing sounds decide the output, and large sized video displays make it possible for people in every part of the auditorium to taste the excitement. Training in leading worship has become common, and a certificate from a famous group is sufficient to catapult youngsters to become worship leaders overnight. 'Soul stirring' performances get applauses and wild responses as if people were attending a concert by the rock stars currently in vogue.

Many in the audience have just come to

be there at the concert. Music aficionados evaluate the blending of the sounds and the harmony of the singers with the instruments down to the beat. They give marks to the singers and the musicians individually and as a team. Many others in the audience are watching the gyrations of the music team on the stage rather than the lyrics that are flashed on the screen.

Some songs make no mention of God or Jesus, and they could very well have been love songs people sing to one another. Many of the singers and musicians themselves do not have any relationship with God, but they are into this because of their love of music. What anointing can they bring to the listeners? They are not thinking of honouring God but only in performing well for the sake of their own satisfaction or impressing others.

Because of the occasion and the place

where it is taking place, it is possible for those who want, to think of God. But many in the audience are not joining in the songs from their side even as they enjoy the performance from the stage. Whatever happened to praise and worship in this 'time of praise and worship'?

Worship may be defined as a profound sense of love and admiration towards someone, in this case, God. As the music team leads, this is what everyone is supposed to express. As we worship God with songs and words from the heart, it is an opportunity to express our gratitude and love for Him who has given Himself for us. That will result in recommitting ourselves to Him (Ro.12:1). It is not in the perfection of the music performance that our worship lies, but what God sees in our heart (Jn.4:23,24). God is not interested in receiving our worship

for His own sake, but because it strengthens our relationship and re-establishes our relative positions. He can minister to us as we worship Him (Ac.13:2), revealing to us traits of His nature which we have not known till then (Jn.17:24;14:21).

Satan has managed to counterfeit worship towards God as he has done in various other aspects of life. But let's see through his schemes and get back to the worship which God deserves, in truth and spirit. Let's use the time of worship to get closer to Him, giving ourselves to Him and hearing what He has to say.

Pointers along the way #588

The goodness of the Lord

God is so loving that He is even called love (1Jn.4:16). If He wasn't, none of us would be even alive, because His

righteousness and justice would have destroyed us because of our sins. His mercy triumphed over His judgment (Jas.2:13). It is not that He neglected the part of His nature that requires us to be judged. But His judgment was placed on His Son, because of which we have escaped it. And now He is able to show us love and mercy. His character of holiness and righteousness that requires us to be judged hasn't been suppressed. But God found a way to show His wrath over sin at the same time as He shows His mercy!

If we have fallen into sin, Satan is quick to come as an accuser (Re.12:10), and tell us that God is surely angry with us now. Satan is mixing up things in our mind. When we think of God's holiness and His anger towards sin, we are tempted to think that God must be angry with us. By pressing this idea into our mind, Satan

tries to keep us from remembering that God's wrath towards our sins (past, present and future) has been put on Jesus when He hung on the cross. What God shows towards us now is His love and mercy without measure (Ro.5:8).

'False grace' directs us to think only about the love and mercy of God and tells us to avoid looking at our sins. Legalism tells us to think only about the righteousness of God while reminding us that we don't deserve any mercy from Him. But we ought to be aware of the righteousness of God as well as His mercy towards us, and how God has resolved the paradox through Jesus on the cross.

The man who has a tendency to take the grace of God for granted needs to get balanced with the knowledge of the righteous anger of God towards sin. The sensitive Christian who trembles

before God and wonders how God could actually love a sinner such as he is needs to get soaked in the knowledge of God's undeserved mercy towards sinners who repent and put their trust in Jesus.

Someone has said that Satan has a way of preaching the very part of the truth that a man doesn't need to hear at the moment, while hiding the part of the truth he needs to hear. He preaches grace to one who takes it for granted, and the righteousness of God to one who is trembling with fear because he has fallen into sin.

It is possible that we, as individuals, may swing from one side of the truth to the other at different times in our life. We may take sin lightly or we may feel like giving up when we fall. But God's desire is that we learn to hold both sides of the truth together, in their balance, and not look at either of them

while neglecting the other. If we fall into sin, we need to admit and confess it, and repent from it. But we also need to be grateful for the undeserved gift of forgiveness so that we don't lose courage. We can rejoice in the knowledge that God has forgiven us, while we should not forget the fact that we are still sinful, imperfect people who need the grace of God badly.

Why do You stand afar off, Lord?

The Psalmist expresses the cry that comes up sometimes from our heart, when we are in trouble and we can't see God doing anything about it (Ps.10:1). We pray, perhaps with fasting or with many others joining us, but we see no change in the situation, and then it is but *natural* for us to wonder about God. We believe He loves us and hears our prayers, He knows every detail of what is happening to us, and He is almighty and wise to do whatever He wants. But why is He not helping us out at such times?

It confuses us because we know He is always with us (Mt.28:20), and will *never* leave or forsake us (He.13:5), but He is nowhere to be seen! We think, like the Psalmist, that He is

hiding Himself when we are in trouble (Ps.10:1).

It is obvious to our mind, when we pause to think about it, that God must be there with us still, because He cannot go back on His promises and He is not one to bluff. But still we can't see any answer to our prayers.

But perhaps one problem may be that we are looking for answers in the wrong direction. He is there with us, and He is helping us, but we have been looking elsewhere. This could be because we have wrong expectations from Him.

When we are in some serious difficulty, what we would like to happen is that God changes the situation or changes other people so that our difficulty is taken away. But that is not His goal! His goal for us is that we should be transformed from our

old sinful nature and be transformed into the nature of His Son (Ro.8:28,29). In order to accomplish this, He is not going to do some magic and change our nature. But He wants us to *choose* His nature in the different situations of life after denying our old nature which comes to us naturally (Lk.9:23). So, He is standing there with us giving us a desire to do His will and also strength to do it (Php.2:13). We will experience this grace coming to us from God if we too are looking for the same goal to be fulfilled in our life.

Then, instead of waiting for God to miraculously change the situation or people around us, we would be asking Him for wisdom and strength for us to handle the situation. We will ask for help in overcoming the desires coming up from our old nature and also for directions on what He wants us to do.

Then we will discover that He is with us! He hasn't left us, and He isn't hiding Himself!

Sometimes God *will* hide Himself from us and wait to see what we will choose to do by ourselves (2Chr.32:31). This doesn't mean that He moves away from us, breaking His promise to be with us always. No. He is there with us, but He is keeping Himself 'invisible' to us for testing us. He is ready to get right into the situation if we are in danger. But this is a periodic test to see how all that He has taught us so far has helped us.

Let us not walk according to our senses or feelings, but believe that God is always with us, always guiding us towards His goal of making us like Him.

Pointers along the way #590

Go back to the Bible

The church, as a whole, is becoming more like the world than ever before. People who want to build the church are resorting to human ideas to do it, and the churches that are coming up are farther and farther away from what Jesus had in His mind when He said He would build His church. Satan has been very successful in sowing tares among the wheat (Mt.13:24-26). As a result, a large percentage of people sitting in churches and imagining they are headed for heaven are in for a shock when they find themselves in the fire of hell (v.30). The phrase Jesus used while describing this parable is very telling, "while his men were sleeping" (v.25). That is what is happening. The leaders are spiritually asleep, dreaming about prosperity and fame, and the enemy has crept into the

church.

What are some of the *wrong* things churches are focussing on these days?

Entertainment. When people come who are stressed up because of all that they have been through during the week, the church is there to entertain them with appealing music, enjoyable programmes, impressive, short sermons, etc.! What is missing is the word of God that can bring conviction to sinful lives, heal wounds, and provide hope, encouragement and wisdom for the future.

Not offending anyone. Not wanting anyone to leave, the messages and interaction are always welcoming, overlooking faults (even when people continue in sin), giving hope without repentance, prophesying prosperity and resolution of all problems, etc., and the church becomes very unreal.

More numbers. Church growth is measured in numbers and not in terms of lives being transformed into godliness. When the leaders' goal itself is wrong, how can churches be pleasing to God?

Seeker friendly churches. If the focus of the church is to make it comfortable for unbelievers, it can't at the same time cater to the growth of believers. The church is where His people are to be edified (Ep.4:16). Others can be added to it only by being born again (Jn.3:5).

Social work. *Everybody* appreciates philanthropy. If the church is involved in helping needy people, it is certainly going to be admired. People may be attracted to the Gospel of Christ through these good deeds. But transformation of society cannot convert it into the kingdom of God, because only individuals who are born

again by responding to the Gospel can enter that kingdom.

While Satan is at the back of this confusion as a master strategist, it is people who lean on their own understanding instead of listening to God who play into his hands.

If we believe that the Bible is God's word given to us, let's follow it as our guideline for every work connected with His kingdom. Let's not imagine that the 'Ishmaels' we produce with unholy alliances with the world can also be heirs to the kingdom. On the contrary, Ishmaels can only cause confusion and destruction to the work of God, which was why God told Abraham to send him and his mother away.

Pointers along the way #591

Private interpretation

From the time Adam and Eve chose to have their own knowledge base of good and evil apart from God (Ge.2:17), we have the danger of leaning on our own understanding instead of God (Pr.3:5,6). This tendency does not stop even after we are born again, or filled with the Holy Spirit, because it depends on our free will. None of us can claim that we lean on God every moment, because if that were so, we would not make any mistake at all. But the fact is, we all make mistakes, as the apostle James was honest enough to admit (Jas.3:2). Our safety is to humbly recognise the possibility that some of our ideas may be wrong, and become willing to learn, receive correction and change.

The Bible was written when God inspired human authors to write down

His truths (2Pe.1:21), and to interpret it we need to let the Holy Spirit bring out the truths from the written word to our hearts and minds (v.20). This process of bringing out the truths from the written word is referred to as biblical exegesis. God's word is not open to private interpretation. Some Bible study groups discuss the meanings of different passages by asking different members what each one thinks about them. It is all right to discuss different opinions as long as we recognise that there is finally only one possible meaning and that is the one which the Spirit inspired the authors to write down.

Many wrong teachings develop when people have bright ideas in their mind which they believe are from God and they find verses to place these ideas into. This wrong process of reading ideas into verses is called eisegesis.

Unfortunately, this is very common. This is one of those things we have to check when we are listening to modern day preachers or reading their writings. We tend to assume that what they say must be true because they are quoting Bible verses to make their points. What we need to do is to see if they are quoting accurately, according to the context of the verse, the chapter, the book and the whole Bible. If Jesus had not done it, He would have been fooled when the devil quoted from the Scriptures (Mt.4:6).

Every believer has the right to know God and to hear personally from Him as he reads His words (He.8:11). But we must also recognise that not everyone is qualified to teach God's word because He calls only a comparatively smaller number of people to do so (Ep.4:11,12). When those who are anointed to do this

ministry fail to be careful or others attempt it, false teachings flourish. Those who don't have the gift of teaching must submit to those who have it (Ep.5:21), if such teachers have been tested and found to be true and reliable (cf.1Ti.3:10), while checking with the scriptures to the extent they can do it personally (Ac.17:11).

In these days there is a great increase in all kinds of false teachings coming out. One way of safety to read more of the writings of men of old who have a demonstrated record of godliness and understanding (Je.6:16).

Pointers along the way #592

The root of all problems

Some people will quote 1Ti.6:10 to say that the love of money is the root of all problems. But if we look at that in a broader sense we can understand that while the love of money is indeed the root of many problems, it is not the root of *all* problems. The NASB says that it is "*a* root of all sorts of evil," and that is probably a more accurate translation of the phrase than the KJV which says, "the root of all evil."

When man lives according to his own way, pleasing himself and wanting to have his own way, he is acting according to his sinful nature which he was born with (Ps.51:5). He got this nature from Adam and Eve when they chose to have their own knowledge of good and evil instead of being entirely dependent on God. With this they made themselves independent from God, not

realising that they lost their dependency on God too. No amount of training, imposition of laws, change of circumstances, etc., can stop man from being selfish and self-centred. Well-meaning but secular thinkers have imagined for centuries that what the people of this world need is more education, better living standards, better facilities, better health, etc., and done what they could to change society in this way. Even though some of them have made great impacts on the way society thinks about certain issues or brought about reforms on what society permits, man, in general, has remained selfish and self-centred. Sin is at the root of all the problems of this world, and nothing short of salvation can change man from being what he is.

That is why God sent His Son Jesus into the world, not to give people more commandments or instructions, but to

die in our place so that we can get a new nature. It is only by acknowledging our sinful condition, repenting from the sins we have committed and believing in Jesus to save us from our sins (Mt.1:21) that we get to being born again (Jn.3:5). That is the only way we can get a new nature. There is no other way we can be saved (Jn.14:6;Ac.4:12).

Many missionaries have come to India from the West and started schools, colleges, hospitals, orphanages, etc., out of their concern for the people in need that came out of their love for Christ. They hoped that this would kindle a desire in people's hearts to become like the missionaries in their lives, and that this would lead many to Christ. The missionaries were shining like lights in the darkness of the world (Mt.5:16), hoping that their small lamps of light will show people the

way to the Light of the world (Jn.8:12). While evangelists preached the Gospel directly to people, those who were involved in being 'lights' were trying to lead people to the Gospel. That is what gave their work eternal value. If the people they served came to Christ, that is what will count in eternity.

Making the world a better place to live in is good. But those who contribute towards the salvation of people touch the root of the matter and bring about a greater result.

Pointers along the way #593

To love God with all our heart

Jesus said that the first and the most important commandment was to love God with all our heart, all our soul, and all our mind (Mt.22:37). If we look at this as a sentimental idea, it looks to be so easy! This seems to be the way many people think about love for God, especially when they feel good after listening to worship songs, reading 'cute' statements or videos on social media, or experiencing something specially good. On the contrary, if we look at this as a commandment to be obeyed in practical life, it immediately looks impossible! How can anyone obey this? Does this mean we have to be thinking about God all the time? How can imperfect people like us ever keep a perfect standard like this? However

seriously we try, we invariably come short.

What exactly did Jesus mean when He gave us this commandment? Was He just giving us some nice concepts which He never expected us to keep? No.

When we think about it we can understand that this is not a commandment that we can obey perfectly from the start of our spiritual life, when we are born again. We need to look for a practical growth in our love for God in our life. We need to be able to love God more and more as we grow spiritually, as we get to know Him better and understand ourselves better.

At the same time we need to know how to 'measure' or assess our love for God in a practical way so that we can be sure that we are indeed making

progress. This measure should not be based on our feelings of love for God which may fluctuate because of various reasons, even for the most spiritual people.

We can measure our love for God by the way we choose Him whenever we have an alternative to choose. Do we love God more than we love anyone else or anything else? Jesus is the one who has given us this test (Mt.10:37). He said that if we loved anyone more than Him, we would not be worthy of Him. He went to the extent of saying that when we were faced with a choice between pleasing God or any of our loved ones, we should, in effect, 'hate' our loved ones (Lk.14:26).

If we love anything else more than God, we make that an idol for us in our mind which we worship. If we are willing to overlook God when it comes to pleasing ourselves or pleasing

people then we can't say we love God with all our heart. If we have time for many things but not for God, how do we say we love God? If we have money to spend on ourselves but not to give to God, aren't we fooling ourselves?

Then God asks us, "Do you love Me more than these?" (Jn.21:15).

It should be obvious to us that we can only grow in our love for God to the extent that we notice how we love other things and *then* choose to place God first in those situations. We can grow from failure to success in different areas of our life as we become more and more aware of what is going on there. Let us learn in this way to love God with all of our heart and mind. Then we will also find that He is more worthy than all else!

Pointers along the way #594

When we can't understand

Irrespective of how intelligent we are, there are things about life we can't understand. Whether it is in our relationship with God or other people, we can't figure out everything. There is so much we don't know. We are limited by what we have come to know thus far through our experience and learning. Our problem is that even though we are constrained by all our limitations we think what we think must be right. We also tend to think that if we can't understand something it can't be right. We know what this does to interpersonal relationships. Think of what it can do to our relationship with God!

God has revealed Himself to us through His word. First of all, He hasn't done this in a systematic way in a text book fashion. We have to glean

our knowledge of Him, a little here and a little there, as we read through the whole Bible. There are also a whole lot of things He hasn't told us about Himself, and so, we have many questions that are not answered. Why does He do different things for people, that too differently at different times? He allowed James to get killed but saved Peter through an angel (Ac.12:1,2,7). Why does He heal *some* people and even raise some people from the dead while *many* others die from their sickness? Why does He sometimes give miraculous answers to some people's prayers while many prayers go unanswered?

When it comes to understanding the Bible, many things are not clear at all, and different people argue with different points of view. Many things seem to be so clear to us but we can't convince some others about them.

Many times the arguments coming from opposite sides look equally valid!

If we are the kind of people who would like to have everything under control this situation is very disturbing. Many people give up altogether at this point saying they can't understand the Bible or God, and therefore God and the Bible are not trustworthy. But what can we expect? Did we imagine that we should be able to understand everything about God? Then we would have been greater than God Himself! But as it is, we are only created beings with many limitations. There will always be things we can't understand. Even though God has revealed Himself through the Bible, it is still only a limited revelation because the infinite God can't be explained through a finite book.

Once we have come to know God personally in our life and know the

reality of His presence, the proof of His existence becomes irrelevant. The more we get to know Him through His word and in our experience, we become better able to trust Him. Once we trust Him, we can even trust Him for things we don't understand. We can believe that He has wisdom to know what we need to know at this time. He has actually provided us with all things we need for life at this time in terms of His word, the teaching of the Holy Spirit and the fellowship of other children of God (2Pe.1:3). By faith we must be able to leave the rest to Him (De.29:29).

Pointers along the way #595

Speaking the truth in love

Rare is the person who is able to take a straight word of correction. People usually tend to deny any fault or to justify themselves when they are confronted. As a result, very few people are willing to point out to others their faults for fear of offending them. Most people think they are keeping quiet out of love for the others! There is misunderstanding here on both sides.

We all know we have many faults, and that is why we need to be saved from them in order to become more like Jesus. But it pains us to hear about our faults from someone else. One reason is that we are very insecure in ourselves and our self-image will get broken if we are made to acknowledge some fault. The way out of this is to recognise that Jesus has made us

acceptable to God by making an atonement for all our flaws. God has now accepted us as we are, with all our faults and lacks, because of His great love for us. Now He is working in us to transform us into His image. This process involves our acknowledging our flaws whenever we notice them, confessing them to God and turning to Him for replacing them with His nature. Any attempt we make to preserve our self-esteem by denying our faults is only going to hinder this transformation.

On the other hand, sometimes God may want to use us to help others whom we meet in our lives. It is somewhat easy if other people recognise we are more spiritual than they are (Ga.6:1). Even here, unless we do this very tactfully, the chances are that they will get hurt. Then, instead of benefitting from that correction, they may turn against us,

and even harden their heart against the truth God was trying to tell them.

We can do this only if we truly love them. Love here means to desire their very best, and being willing to do anything to bless them. If we love them like this, we could tell them things that will help them to set certain things right so that it will go better with them. What commonly happens is that people tell others their faults only to belittle them or to accuse them, and then it will only hurt the relationship between them. God expects everyone of us, His children, to grow like this, receiving and giving correction, encouragement, comfort and instruction from and to one another (Ep.4:15,16).

Helping people by pointing out errors to avoid as well as to get rid of involves bits of prophecy, teaching and shepherding. This is not a popular ministry. People may judge us as if we

were conceited, judgmental, and holier-than-all. The question is if we do this out of love for God and others. Timothy, young as he was, was given the task, apart from other tasks, to point out the errors that had crept into the church through deceiving spirits (1Ti.4:6). That wouldn't have made him popular. People want to hear nice words that make them feel good (2Ti.4:3), and that is how one must preach to become popular. But imagine if a doctor would give only health foods and didn't bother to deal with infections!

Pointers along the way #596

Two serious deceptions

The Bible warns us about being deceived and deceiving ourselves. We get deceived because our understanding is limited. When someone presents us with certain arguments in an authoritative or impressive way we tend to agree with him either because we are not aware that there are other sides to the issue, or we have not really looked at the issue in an overall sense. There are two common deceptions that affect our spiritual life.

A large number of people who imagine they are children of God are not. The only way for all of us who have been born naturally into this world with a sinful nature (Ps.51:5) to become a child of God is to be born again (Jn.3:5). The way to be born again is only through faith in Jesus, when we go

to Him admitting our sins, turning away from a life of sin and being adopted By God as His children. The deception is to imagine that one is a child of God after bypassing this process by merely asking Jesus to come into one's heart. The way to test if we have really become God's children is to see if God has begun to make some drastic changes in our heart. Our heart which was earlier inclined towards sinful desires now directs us away from sin (1Jn.3:8,9), towards doing things right (2:29), and towards loving one another (4:20). If God hasn't made this change in our life, we shouldn't assume we belong to God.

The second deception is connected with this. That is to assume that once someone has become a child of God, he continues to be so irrespective of how he lives. The argument is that once a person is born again, he can't be

unborn! In other words, once saved, always saved! But our new birth is not like our physical birth. Our physical relationship as a child of our parents is irrevocable. But our spiritual birth is based on our relationship with God through faith (Ro.11:20). If we give up that faith, we will also lose salvation. But people think only about the promises from God's side for eternal salvation without looking at the *many* places that warn us not to take salvation for granted but to see it through. We need to reckon with our human free will which makes us responsible to God. We are able to accept or reject the offer of salvation. By this same free will, we are able to give up our salvation even after we have received it. Two common reasons why people reject salvation are when they don't want to give up the pleasures of some sin, or they get disillusioned with God because they didn't get some

answer to their prayers.

1Co.10 warns us to be careful how we live after we become children of God, using what Israel did after they were brought out of Egypt. Paul points out that most of them perished, *after* figuratively experiencing salvation from sin, baptisms in water and the Spirit and being led by the Spirit. He tells us that these things are written for our warning (v.11). We can't take our salvation for granted, not bothering about idolatry, immorality, going after pleasure, etc.

Pointers along the way #597

All that glitters is not gold

This saying is not just about gold and its counterfeits, but it warns us that we can't just believe something just because it *appears* to be good or true. Let's think especially about Christian teaching. Aren't there *many* people nowadays who bring out so-called words from God whom God hasn't sent (Je.14:15)? People seem to want to feel important by passing on words and being respected as 'prophets'! But we should know how to discern everything self-appointed prophets tell us because it would be dangerous for us to swallow man-made (as well as demonic) ideas (1Th.5:20,21). Jesus has warned us that people may even speak or do supernatural things in His name and yet He neither knew them nor sent them (Mt.7:22,23). The benchmark or the standard that God has given us is

the Bible so that we can test with it everything we see or hear.

It is sad to see that many new teachings are coming out in the Christian world which appear to be attractive and good, till we test them against the truths revealed in the Bible. Then many of them fail the test by proving to be contrary to direct Biblical teaching or subtly different from the general tenor of the Bible. Even well-known Bible teachers go astray on different points, and it is in the interest of our safety and the people we influence to be able to remove the chaff from the wheat. Is it any guarantee that just because someone has a name for a godly life or a gift of teaching that he can't make a mistake here or there? Isn't it possible for *any* of us to go wrong when a deceiving spirit slips an idea into our mind even as we are meditating on the truths of the word of God (1Ti.4:1)?

This can happen. We must remember that every thought we have is not our own, and check if we are being deceived.

Some people claim to hear directly from God messages to pass on. One very famous example for this is the book 'God calling' by 'Two listeners' which is being sold from Christian book shops. This was written by a process called automatic writing where the writer sits with paper and pencil, lets the mind go blank and waits for God to speak. The 'Two listeners' were following this method taught by A. J. Russell in a book called 'For sinners only'. If we let our mind go blank, it could open a way for deceitful spirits to access our minds and put ideas there. 'God calling' has parts in the book which don't agree with the Bible, even though it has the appearance of having come from God.

When mediums pass on messages from dead people we are quick to understand the error, but when people claim to speak messages from God we get fooled. We must not forget that one of the ways of Satan is to come pretending to be from God, as an angel of light (2Co.11:14) and then deceive us.

If we want to hear from God why don't we simply turn to the Bible instead of looking for short cuts or exciting means? If we look for special knowledge / revelation or thrilling experiences it may take us away from God.

One swallow doesn't make a summer

This proverb refers to the migratory bird swallow appearing as summer starts. What it says is that if we saw just one swallow, that is not enough to say summer has arrived. Technically speaking, one data point does not indicate a trend!

If someone is talking about being kind to the poor and I mention how I gave some money to a poor man years ago, that doesn't prove I am a kind man. If I am a kind man, that will be seen as a characteristic of my life and not some rare thing that happens once in a while.

But this is one way we try to justify ourselves and paint ourselves in a good way by quoting examples of how we have done some good thing. One of the biggest hindrances to our

sanctification is this habit of justifying ourselves. Whenever the Holy Spirit tries to show us something of our lack or failure, we immediately point to some incident where we behaved in a good way. What we are trying to say is that if we have done such a thing we can't be really bad! But where does it take us? Nowhere in the direction of becoming more like Jesus, but only digging deeper with our foundation of self-righteousness.

Jesus came to save sinners (Lk.5:32), and if we recognise we are sinners who need a Saviour we can go to Him and receive salvation (Mt.11:28). But if we smugly say we are righteous we will remain in our sins (Jn.9:41).

The spirit of the times tells people to keep a good self-esteem. We are supposed to keep positive thoughts about ourselves and shoo away every negative thought that comes! But in

spite of all our efforts our self-esteem is so brittle that we get into despair and depression often. So we try all the more to tell ourselves how good we are, how great we are, etc., and get angry with people who point out anything wrong with us. We choose preachers who will make us feel good with soothing and comforting promises and always hold a bright future for us no matter how we live (2Ti.4:3). Even though we get such booster shots every Sunday, our immunity doesn't even last till we reach home after church!

God wants to heal our wounds and strengthen our muscles. He doesn't just wave a wand over us (even through 'anointed' people who make us swoon before them), and the realities of life keep bursting our bubbles of imaginary grace. He wants to forgive us only when we confess our sins (1Jn.1:9), and He wants to give us victory only

when we deny ourselves, take up our cross and follow Him (Lk.9:23;Ro.8:13). How can even God help us if we keep telling ourselves, "I am good!"?

Our fight is not against people (Ep.6:12), but evil, deceitful spirits who are trying to manipulate the thoughts and values of the whole world so as to turn us away from God. 'Clever' ideas are coming out through the media and from so-called experts, with the ultimate goal of making us feel self-sufficient with no need for God. Thinking 'positively' and rejecting all 'negative' ideas is one subtle attack they use in this war.

Pointers along the way #599

Seek earnestly for spiritual gifts

There are three chapters in the Bible

devoted to spiritual gifts. 1Co.12 explains spiritual gifts, 13 describes love with which they are to be exercised, and 14 talks about avoiding misuse. 14:1 exhorts us to seek earnestly after spiritual gifts. Yet some people teach that gifts have all ceased! If they argue that ch.12,14 were only meant for dealing with some problems in the Corinthian church and not meant to be applied to us, then why don't we throw out 13 too?

One thing we must realise is that spiritual work cannot be done with our natural strengths, skills or abilities but only with the anointing of the Holy Spirit. The 'natural man' cannot even understand the things of God (1Co.2:14). This truth is ignored in practice by a majority of Christians who exalt naturally gifted people who sing, speak or manage the stage. But such work will not last the test of

eternity and will one day get burned up (1Co.3:11-15). The gifted ones are the heroes and not the godly ones!

God has a work for every one in the body of Christ, and for that He gives each one gifts that are needed for those tasks. God sovereignly gives each one different gifts (1Co.12:11), and so, even if we are tempted to ask for prominent gifts that will fetch us a great name before others, we must humbly submit to His specific choice for us. If we truly understand the purpose of these gifts, which is to serve and bless others (v.7), we can specifically ask for those gifts that can enhance the effectiveness of the ministry He has entrusted to us. Let's not seek for gifts for our own sake. Usually God will indicate to us the ministry He has for us by giving us a particular burden that comes from seeing a need in some area. It is when

we start seeking for God to do something about those needs that He tells us to do something from our side to meet those needs (Mt.14:15,16). Then when we seek for grace and wisdom to do those things He anoints us with spiritual gifts that equip us to do those ministries.

For centuries after the days of the early church, the mainline churches had become worldly and lost their relationship with God and the burden for His work. It was only natural that spiritual gifts ceased in their midst! But the word of God still remains for all who will believe. The reformation that started with Martin Luther is not finished but it is continuing even now in spurts here and there. These days when spiritual issues have become very complicated in the world and even among the churches, how much more we need the anointing of the Holy

Spirit and His gifts to serve one another! Let each of us earnestly seek for spiritual gifts so that we can serve the body of Christ better. Let us not limit God to only those gifts that are mentioned in 1Cor.12, because there are varieties of gifts (v.6) that God wants to spread around among His people. We don't even need to wait for recognition or designations from people to do what God tells us to do.

Pointers along the way #600

Sitting on the fence?

Once I was taking a class on spiritual matters, and a young man who was just out of Bible college was not very happy. At the end of the session he took me aside and corrected me saying I shouldn't have been emphatic on interpreting things in what he called as 'my way'. I should have just said certain scholars thought this way and others that way. Should I have just asked the audience what they thought about different things and left things there without telling them what I thought? I thought that even if it was OK to do this in an academic setting, it would be wrong to leave things hanging in the air. We need to pass on our understanding and convictions to others to take them forward (2Ti.2:2). If we are not convinced ourselves of the things we speak of, how can the

hearers or readers catch the enthusiasm?

If we are not convinced about the things we say we believe in, how can they help us in the time of trial? Then it will be seen that what we had been imagining we believed were just ideas in our head we were not sure of. Mere ideas like that can't give strength for us to face situations of life. Elijah asked the people of Israel how long they were going to waver between God and Baal (1Ki.18:21). They preferred to sit on the fence, unwilling to take a stand. There are some Hindus who are willing to consider Jesus as yet another God to be worshipped but who are unwilling to take His word that He is the *only* One (Jn.14:6). There are many Christians who know what their church practises is not Biblical, but will go along with it, and there are other Christians who obey God (e.g., in

water baptism) in secret and remain in churches which oppose that. Assuming that God has accepted their 'secret obedience', we can see that they are unable to be a witness for Christ for what He has taught them or done in their lives.

Paul was not like this at all! After opposing Christians to the extent of putting them to death for what he believed was blasphemy against God, the moment he saw his mistake and understood Jesus was the Messiah and the Son of God, he immediately started preaching about Jesus (Ac.9:20). No wonder he became such a great apostle and a writer of Scriptures! When the young Phinehas obeyed God by killing a couple who who had joined with Baal (Nu.25:7,8), God honoured him by giving him spiritual responsibilities (vv.11,12).

Let us not sit on the fence anymore, and

let us also not follow leaders blindly, accepting what they say or do. The young convert that Paul was at one time, he was bold enough to question the recognised leader of that time, Peter, when he was wrong (Ga.2:11). When it comes to God's truth, it is truth that is more important than the stature of the person who is going wrong. Insecure leaders try to avoid people questioning them by threatening them of dire consequences if they touched the anointed or left their church! But God will honour those who honour Him (1Sa.2:30).

About the author

Jacob Ninan (b. 1948), has master's degrees in engineering, and counselling and psychotherapy. He retired in 2008 from the Indian Space Research Organisation as the Programme Director for international cooperation. He met with Jesus while studying in Bangalore in 1972, and from then onwards has been an ardent student of the Bible, reading hundreds of Christian books, listening to hundreds of messages, and being very active in the church in speaking, counselling, writing, editing, etc. He runs the 'Comfort & Counsel' web site (www.c-n-c.org) where he has published a large number of articles on practical Christian life and counsel. With advanced training in Christian counselling, he has been counselling individuals and couples, and also

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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.