



Pointers
along the
way

Devotionals that
make you think

Vol. 7

Jacob Ninan

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Author: Jacob Ninan

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Pointers along the way #601

Turning away from God?

A young woman was 'in a relationship' with a man, and it broke off. Now she is upset with God, asking Him why He did this to her. How can we blame God for everything that happens to us, as if He is the one who makes them happen to us? Don't we have any responsibility towards the choices we make and how we respond to people and situations? But God seems to be an easy target to attack.

Somebody prayed earnestly for something and when it didn't happen he turned away from 'a God who didn't bother' about him. A young man thought that he would enjoy life and later on, when he was old and about to die, make time for God. When problems came up in his life and he tried to pray he found God very distant from him (actually he was so far away from God that he didn't know where to find God). He blamed God for not being true to His promises. Another man blamed God for the family he was born into. He didn't want this God who made him go through 'hell' and ruined his life. Many people have turned away from God saying that a God who allowed so much of evil and injustice in this world wasn't really powerful or loving.

Such people (and some of us can understand them from our own experiences) have not understood God. When we get to know Him personally we find that He is the most adorable and praiseworthy Person we can ever know. Everything about Him is right, good and perfect. There are many questions we may have in our mind because we are limited people trying to understand an infinite God, but the more we get to know Him, the more lovable we find Him.

In the process of staying away from God because of misunderstanding, we are also keeping ourselves aloof from the One who can really help us. God wants to be with us as we go through the challenges of this life (Ps.46:1), and He wants to give us grace and wisdom to help us to get through those situations successfully (He.4:15,16). But what many people do is that, instead of seeking God and coming closer to Him through all those problems, they turn to their own limited knowledge and abilities or to other people for help. Then they sit around and complain about God.

We *need* God (1Co.8:6). We also need a Saviour who can deliver us from our

sinful ways (Mt.1:21). We need wisdom to deal with people and situations in a godly way that goes beyond human understanding or powers (Ja.1:5). The fact is that God has made Himself available to us, and His Son Jesus has come down to our level in order to save us. If we understand the greatness, the goodness, the wisdom and the love of God, we will run to Him in humility, and open up ourselves to God in honesty (He.2:18). In His holy presence we will see our sinfulness and we will ask for forgiveness and deliverance. Then we will see that He becomes everything for us. How really foolish to think we are wiser than God and turn away from Him! How silly to ignore the only one who can truly help us and turn to weak and mistaken sources of help (Je.2:13)!

Pointers along the way #602

Nuts and bolts

Instead of getting fascinated by exciting doctrines about the end times or stories of visits to heaven, what we need most is to know how to live our daily lives in a way that pleases and honours God. If we are unclear about this or if we are following fanciful theories, there is even a chance that we are on the wrong road altogether! Let's look at how things work, at the level of nuts and bolts.

At the beginning of our Christian life should be a time when we turned from our sins to the Saviour, Jesus Christ. When we become convicted in our hearts about our sinful condition, that is when we realise our need for a Saviour. We go to Him asking Him for forgiveness and help to change us so that we can stop sinning. If this has not happened in our life, it is very unlikely that we have become children of God. Our church attendance, baptism, Christian activities, etc., cannot substitute for this event called 'conversion'.

If this has truly happened to us we will notice certain changes in our life. We will see a great new desire that has come that makes us want to stop sinning and to do whatever God tells us. Sinful things we used to enjoy appear to become bad in our eyes and we try to avoid them. We will find a great interest in reading God's word, the Bible, and we find that it begins to make more and more sense to us. We find that God is even 'talking to us' as we read it. We learn to talk to Him in prayer, thanking Him for His love and mercy to us and asking Him to help us to obey Him better. Now there is a great interest in us to hear about God more. So we read Christian books, listen to preaching, discuss with others about questions about God and our life with Him.

We will also notice that there is now a strong battle going on in our mind. One part of us draws us towards God and godly living. But another part of us pulls us back to our old life. Some of our old friends and even relatives turn against us because we no longer like to do what they do. We try to explain to them how we have found the Saviour, but they only mock us. Sometimes we fail under pressure and then we feel so bad about it. We go to God, confess our failure, and He forgives us. But we feel sad that we failed Him who gave Himself to us in love. We begin to ask God more earnestly for help to

overcome when we are tempted again. God answers by encouraging us, and helping us to become more careful and teaching us how to handle different temptations. We grow spiritually as we learn to overcome more and more, but being aware all the time that we can fall any time we are careless.

We also find that we are faced with false teachings that try to take us away from the true path, saying that we don't need to do anything because God has done everything and He will do everything for us, we shouldn't think of overcoming sin but only praise God always, we need not confess our sins because we have already been forgiven, etc. We need to learn to endure till the end.

Pointers along the way #603

Forms, places and reality

"Our fathers worshiped in this mountain, and you people say that in Jerusalem is the place where men ought to worship," the Samaritan woman said to Jesus (Jn.4:20). For many believing Christians, it is still all about holy places, festivals, communion, dutifully keeping a 'quiet time', dress code, positions in the church, singing, etc. Such are the things that give them a feeling of being 'spiritual'. For many, their access to God is still through the priest or pastor, who prays for them and blesses their house or car! This was understandable in the case of Samaritans, but how can we, in these days of the Bible, continue at such primitive levels?

God, the Creator of the universe, has adopted us as His children (Ro.8:15), and do we now come to our Father, taking off our shoes, offering Him sacrifices, greeting Him with words of praise to in order to appease His wrath, talking to Him with 'Thou's and 'Thee's, and making our prayers to Him formally? What kind of a relationship would that be? Why would we want our pastor to intercede for us as if He was someone else's Father?

Jesus told the woman that worship was not about places but about the heart (Jn.4:23,24). In our days, let's remember worship is not about listening to the choir singing praise and worship songs! When we have a relationship with God as our Father and we get to know Him, worship will automatically rise from our heart. Recognition of His holiness, majesty, perfection, compassion, love, mercy, patience, etc., will overwhelm us, and we will worship Him from our heart, whether we sing, tell Him how much we love Him or break into tongues for want of words.

But, instead of this, if our 'spirituality' is all about external forms, places and people, we must recognise that we are missing what God has prepared for us. If what we debate about in our mind is whether we should wear white clothes or grow a beard, if we give special attention to taking off our shoes when we go into the church hall or when we pray, if we argue about breaking bread every day or every week, if we follow superstitions such as letting the milk boil over when we move into a new house (!), keeping a Bible under our pillow to ward off bad dreams, hanging a crucifix in the house to drive away evil spirits, if we ask the pastor to pray for us whenever we face a problem, etc., we must remember we have a Heavenly Father and we are His beloved

children! Let's not live in insecurity like orphans!

Of course, there is the danger of becoming too familiar with God and talking to Him as if He was our buddy without the reverence we ought to have for Him. But should we continue to live a low level of life now as if God was only there in theory? Shouldn't we spend more time with Him reading His word and talking to Him in order to get to know Him better? Shouldn't we keep a conversation going with Him all through the day (1Th.5:17)? Should we miss the privilege of really having Him as our Father?

Pointers along the way #604

Lie for God's honour?

"Sin shall not be master over you, for you are not under law but under grace" (Ro.6:14). If we know that God has placed us under His grace but we see that some sins are getting the victory over us, what would be our reaction? Can we say, "God's word is true even if my experience seems to be different. Let God be true and every man a liar (Ro.3:4). So I am going to confess that I have victory!" Or even, I have victory in Christ! Wouldn't this be a lie, a falsehood, a contradiction of reality to say sin is not ruling over us when, in fact, it is? But this is how many people are treating God's word. They seem to think that they would be willing to tell lies if that was the way to honour God and His word. And they seem to think that by confessing this kind of statement one day they will also experience the reality. What deception!

Suppose we have asked God for the healing from some sickness. If our sickness persists even after we have prayed, should we now confess that we believe in God and therefore we are healed? Then we refuse to take medicines because we think by this we are giving an occasion for God to be glorified!

Children of the devil lie, because that is the nature of their father (Jn.8:44). But can we, who have been brought from darkness to light (1Pe.2:9), and made children of God in whom there is no darkness at all (1Jn.1:5), imagine that speaking falsehood will honour this Father?

On the other hand, when we see a contradiction between God's word and our experience, can't we try to see if we have understood the word clearly? We can ask God to reveal the truth to us more clearly. We can talk to more mature, godly people and ask them for help. We can look at Bible commentaries. In this way we can begin to get more insight into God's truths which we have not had earlier.

We can also examine the possibility that while God's word is true perhaps we haven't been following His ways properly. We may get to see that most of God's promises have certain conditions that we need to meet in order for them to get fulfilled in our life. We can now ask God to show us more clearly how to keep ourselves before His face, and strength and wisdom to do what He wants us to do (Php.2:12,13). Then we see that His word is beginning to

get fulfilled more and more in our life.

In the case of the prayer for healing, can't we go to God and ask Him why we haven't been healed? Perhaps He wants to heal us through doctors, and we had been presuming that He would do things the way we wanted. But do we have any right to claim what is essentially untrue and unreal thinking that we would be honouring God that way?

We will find this tension between God's word and our experience all through life. If we face that honestly, go to God and learn from the situation, we will be able to make spiritual progress. We are only likely to get confused and mislead others if we refuse to face reality. Let's remember there's no lie at all in God our Father!

Pointers along the way #605

Can a godly man be deceived?

We just have to look around to see the way spiritual deception is growing around us. What everyone knew as sin is now being seen as acceptable. Jesus came with the *only* way of salvation but even Christians are beginning to think God is the same as other gods. Christian teachings, apparently based on the Bible, are turning the focus to earthly wellbeing rather than to freedom from sin and eternal welfare, grace is being exaggerated to give the impression of an unrealistic freedom, people are taught that they can now exercise power just like God, etc., just as Jesus predicted (Mt.24:24,25).

But many believers seem to think that since they have the Holy Spirit in them they will not be deceived. Think of how Jesus was tempted by Satan to move away from God's ways. Of course, Jesus saw through the deception and defeated Satan's attempt. But if Jesus could be tempted in this way, there is no guarantee that we will not be. So we can't take our victory or protection for granted. Peter fell to Satan's suggestion and told Jesus to avoid suffering on the cross (Mt.16:22,23). Peter could later see through Ananias and Sapphira (Ac.5:3), but Philip was fooled by Simon the sorcerer (8:9,13). The Holy Spirit may warn us (Is.30:21), but we may not recognise His voice, or we may neglect to pay attention to it. So we can't just assume that since we have the Holy Spirit we will be automatically protected from error.

Peter and Philip were godly men. Just because they made this mistake it didn't mean we should reject them as ungodly people. In the same way, even godly people who preach and teach nowadays may make mistakes here or there. We can't accept whatever they say just because they are godly people. Have you noticed that as we study the Bible some new ideas come to our mind? Can we accept those ideas just because we were prayerfully studying the Bible at that time and we think the Holy Spirit has revealed those 'truths' to us? No. Isn't it possible that some of those ideas came to us from deceiving spirits (1Ti.4:1)? Don't we need to check every new idea with the word of God before we can accept them?

If Satan is able to get a great Bible teacher to accept 'one' false teaching in the midst of his great and edifying teachings, isn't he (Satan) going to be able to deceive a lot of people through this one teacher? Even though we can't deny the fact that this teacher is an anointed man who has helped us greatly in our

spiritual life, don't we need to recognise that this particular teaching was wrong?

As we individually try to listen to God, don't we need to remember that every thought we have is not necessarily from God? Shouldn't we be more careful in future to check with the Bible before passing on ideas to others as "God spoke to me," or "The Bible says"? A lot of 'prophecies' these days seem to be coming merely from human ideas and some also from evil spirits. Let us ask God for more discernment and a sober mind.

Pointers along the way #606

Jesus heals!

Of course! As the One who created the whole universe (Jn.1:3), Jesus can not only heal all diseases, but He can also cast out demons and raise people from the dead. He has done that during His 3 1/2 years of public ministry on earth. People experienced that one word from Him or a touch from Him was enough to heal them. Naturally, multitudes who wanted to be healed crowded to Him. He healed every single person who came to Him for healing or deliverance. He announced that He had come here to bring freedom and deliverance and to proclaim that the favour of God had come (Lk.4:18,19).

But the primary purpose with which Jesus came was not to bring healing from sickness and deliverance from oppression. He had come to deal with the root of all such problems. The angel told Mary that she should call His name 'Jesus' (meaning 'Jehovah saved') because He would save people from their sins (Mt.1:21). It was the presence of sin in the world and the curse that was on the earth that caused sickness and every other problem (Ge.3:17-19). While healing would be a blessing in this life, freedom from sin would be a blessing that would benefit us for all eternity!

The apostle John called healing and the other miracles of Jesus as 'signs' announcing Him as the Son of God (Jn.2:11). Even though Jesus healed people out of compassion for them, He hoped that they would come to Him to receive the greater blessing of salvation. But He knew that most of the people were coming to Him only because they wanted earthly blessings (Jn.6:26,27). In fact, when the crowd gathered around and He began to speak about the gospel of salvation, many got offended and left Him (v.66).

We people are the same even now, aren't we? When a preacher announces healing, the attendance is great, but when there is talk of repentance and leaving sin behind, not many stick around! When there is talk about sin, people generally want to find safety under 'grace' and not deal with it!

If we have come *near to Jesus* through an experience of healing or a miraculous answer to prayer, we can now come nearer to Him and ask Him to forgive our sins and set us free from its power. The one who gets healed from sickness can become sick again, and the one who is raised from the dead will die again. But we can get our sins forgiven and live with Him forever if we

go to Jesus with repentance for our sins and seeking for forgiveness, because He has already taken the punishment for our sins in our place (1Jn.2:1,2).

On the other hand, if we imagine we belong to God just because He has touched our practical life in some way, we would be deceiving ourselves. That touch has brought us near to Him and now we must surrender to Him in faith. This is called entering through the narrow gate, and then there is a narrow way we walk in afterwards in obedience to Him (Mt.7:13,14). By faith we enter, and then we walk by faith. Our need draws us to Him, and our love for Him helps us to obey Him (Jn.14:15).

Pointers along the way #607

Favourite quotations!

People have a habit of quoting certain verses from the Bible while neglecting to note certain other verses which don't appeal to them. For example, it is nice to look at the promises from God and ignore His commandments. This kind of approach will lead us to an imbalanced life, because spiritual truths are to be balanced by other spiritual truths in order to give us a full picture. Let us look at some examples.

The Bible tells us that when we come to God through faith we become 'dead to sin' (Ro.6:4,5). We read that if we are dead to sin we are freed from sin (v.7). If we quote only from here we may conclude that we don't have to worry about sin anymore because now we are dead to sin and alive in Christ. But if we keep reading, we see God telling us not to let sin reign in our life and not to present our bodies to sin (vv.12,13). Now, if we don't take care of this, can we expect that sin will actually stop ruling our life as given in v.14? Actually, when we became dead to sin, what happened was that our earlier willingness and desire to sin were taken away. Now the new man which God has created in us makes us want to stop sinning and to live in a way that is pleasing to God. We won't understand this unless we read all these verses (and many other verses in the Bible) together.

Another example is where we see that we have been given 'eternal' life (1Jn.5:13) and no one can take us away from the Father's hands (Jn.10:29). There are several verses that tell us about the eternal security of the believer. But several other verses like Re.3:5 (telling us about the possibility of one's name being erased from the Book of Life after being there), and 1Co.10:1-12 (warning us not to perish after coming to the Lord) say that we can't take our salvation for granted. If we study all these verses together we can learn that God does not intend to lose us after we have come to Him, but that, because of our free will, we can choose to neglect this salvation (He.2:3) and go back to a life of sin. This is the balanced view.

A major wrong concept that gains hold of many believers is that once God has accepted us and made us His children we shouldn't have to do anything except to receive everything from His hands 'by faith'. Anything someone says we need to 'do' is considered as 'works' and hated more than sin! This is

because we don't understand that even though justification (God declaring us righteous) is purely by God's unmerited favour, sanctification (God actually making us righteous in practical life) requires our cooperation.

But our fleshly nature prefers to listen to and take ideas that comfort us, soothe us and make us feel nice and secure. But this is a false sense of security. Once we understand this and look at the New Testament with an open mind, we can see a whole lot of passages that tell us what we need to do from our side and how we ought to be careful to obey God now that He has accepted us with an undeserved favour.

Pointers along the way #608

A blue moon arising

Are you someone given over to frequent bad moods? I am not talking about mood disorders that are serious enough to require medication. But common bad moods are several minutes or hours of negative feelings (in contrast to fleeting feelings) that come to all of us. But we don't have to think they are inevitable. A bad mood slips in unnoticed, and soon it takes over, spoiling the rest of the day for people. It all usually starts with one negative event or something that is wrongly interpreted as a negative event, and then that triggers off a series of negative thoughts. Then one comes to a conclusion that *all* people are like that, all men/women are like that, life is like that, or even that God is like that! This is actually over-generalising one event. The actual fact is that some people are sometimes like that, one or two people are usually like that, sometimes life is tough, and sometimes it is difficult to understand God. But if we get locked into a bad mood, it usually reduces our ability to think coherently.

It can even be that people who are in a bad mood get upset with others who try to encourage them by clarifying their thoughts. What such people are looking for is not clarity but only support for their way of looking at things!

But clarity of thoughts is what we need to overcome bad moods. Once we recognise we are in a bad mood (which takes some learning for some folks), we can ask the Holy Spirit to help us out of it. He usually brings some word of God to our mind which we should grab hold of and not let go. If we now start meditating on that word, whether it is a promise of God or some fact that corrects our present thinking, we will find that the mood begins to lift.

One of the promptings that we constantly get from the spirit that is in the world is to look outwards or into the future and to avoid looking inside at all costs. But actually, unless we learn how to look inside our mind, we can't notice the things that are going wrong, and then we won't be seeking correction. Another thing that we need to learn is to look at ourselves objectively, without taking our own side by justifying ourselves, blaming others, denying the reality, etc.

Our salvation starts with right thinking. When we realise we are sinners who

deserve punishment, it is then we look for a Saviour. After we have been made a child of God, the way we become more like Christ is also by acknowledging where we are unlike Him and then seeking help from the Holy Spirit to transform us. This is why we are exhorted to *renew* our way of thinking (Rom.12:2), from the old way where we tried to 'save our own life' to the new way where we seek to receive the life of Christ in us (Mt.16:25).

On the contrary, if we allow ourselves to be led by our feelings, e.g. anger, bitterness, jealousy, discouragement, etc., we will ultimately ruin our life. When we are in a bad mood, and we allow ourselves to continue there, it can be very dangerous indeed.

Pointers along the way #609

The father of lies

Which of these have you believed at any time? "I am no good. I am never going to succeed in anything. I am a failure. I can never be as good as my brother/sister. Nobody likes me. Nobody cares about me. Even God can't forgive me. I'll never be able to change. Nobody will marry me." If we believe such things in our life, especially in our childhood, the chances are that our life will be, in general, a miserable experience. Did you realise that thoughts like these are put into our mind by the Devil or one of his demons at the appropriate moments of our life? Satan is out to destroy us (Jn.10:10), and he waits to catch us when we are most vulnerable, when we have just experienced a painful situation because of what someone said or did or something that happened. Especially when we are children and unable to think much, analyse things or understand, he puts ideas such as these into our mind which can derail the rest of our life.

Think of occasions when we have misunderstood other people or misinterpreted their intentions. Our parents disciplined us in order to teach us good behaviour, but we may have imagined that they hated us. They struggled in order to provide for us, but we may have thought they didn't have any time for us. Someone tried to help us by pointing out where we were going wrong, but we may have concluded that they were out to find fault with us.

God may not have given us something we asked for because He felt that it would not be good for us, and we may have judged Him as one who didn't care for us or as one who didn't keep his promises. He may have spoken to us through a preacher that we were going on a wrong path, but we may have decided that this church was too judgemental and condemning.

Etc.

How many lies like this have we believed and imagined that they were true! How such beliefs have spoilt our moods and broken down relationships! Satan has been at it for thousands of years and he is an expert at it. We poor, foolish, ignorant people have fallen for his lies again and again. We didn't even realise these thoughts were coming from him, but thought that they were

the conclusions that our clever minds had reached!

Can we wake up from this and learn to question our own thoughts before we accept them? It is only when we accept the truth as truth and decide to act on it that we are going to enjoy God's abundant life (Jn.8:31,32).

A sad fact is that if we have built up wrong thought patterns in our childhood it is going to be difficult to change them. But they can be changed, with God's grace. It will be helpful if we can identify how they started and recognise that we were believing what were really lies. Then we can reject them, and replace them with what the Bible tells us (Ro.12:2). Sometimes it is helpful to meet a Christian counsellor who can take us through this process.

Jesus has come to set us free. He does this many times by telling us the truth about ourselves, others and God.

Pointers along the way #610

Lest we fall!

The greatest of saints is but a short step away from a fall. Apart from Jesus, the world has not yet seen anyone who hasn't fallen after he reached some particular stage in life! The mighty apostle Paul, almost towards the end of his life, lost his cool when the high priest asked someone to slap him (Ac.23:2,3). But unlike many others who pretend such things never happen to them, Paul was very realistic about himself (Ro.7:18,19). He is the one who has warned us to be careful how we 'stand' because we can fall very easily (1Co.10:12).

Some people seem to think only of gross sins as sins, and call common sins of words, behaviour and attitudes as human weaknesses. But God will want us to give an account for every word we speak (Mt.12:36) and our motives and intentions too (He.4:12,13). Some people call their sins as mistakes and imagine those are not serious. Some take comfort in the fact that they are active in church, not realising that God looks at the heart more (Re.2:2-4), and some are even 'dead' in God's eyes while they take pride in their name before people (Re.3:1). Some people even claim they are in Christ and God looks only at Christ and not at them, making this an excuse for their lives!

How different things would be if we are always honest with ourselves and with the Lord, recognising at each stage where we actually stand! Then every time we make a mistake, the Lord would alert us (Is.30:21), and we can confess our sins (1Jn.1:9), learn from our failure and do better next time. The Lord knows we might fall, and He has already made provision for us to go back to Him (1Jn.2:1,2). It is if we imagine we are not going to fall (Mt.26:35), that we will taste bitter failures again and again.

We need not give up even if we have fallen, even if we *feel* there is no hope for people like us. The enemy of our soul will be there to try and make us give up, but the secret of our victory is to hold on in faith to our Saviour who has given Himself to us, who will not lose us at the end (Re.12:10,11). It pays to be honest before Him, not trying to cover up our failures, or to pass the blame to someone else, but to accept our responsibility for being proud, not being careful and not asking Him for help (He.4:15,16).

When we fall, and receive forgiveness, it is not as if we can go on as if nothing happened. We suffer corruption every time we sow to the flesh (Ga.6:7,8), and we will have to deal with that for a long time. But we can also learn some humility and fear of God from our failures which can help us to be more careful in the future. We can also understand how frail and fragile we are, and show more compassion and tenderness with the other people we have to deal with. So God brings out something good even from our failures (Ro.8:28).

Pointers along the way #611

How do we love?

One of the marks of true Christians is that others can see how we love (Jn.13:34,35). We are the ones God has chosen to demonstrate His love by loving even our enemies (Mt.5:44,45). Then people get to see something of the love of God to them.

Our first challenge is that it is difficult to love some people! If everyone was lovable, we wouldn't face this difficulty so much. Especially if people are causing us problems, we wonder how on earth we can love them. If we pose this question to God, we will get to understand that love is not a matter of how we feel, but more in terms of our intentions. An intention to do good, even when people are our enemies, is the essence of *agape* love. God will also teach us that He didn't love us because we were lovable! We were dead in our sins and enemies to God when He picked us up to show His love (Ro.5:10). The more we recognise how God's love to us is totally out of His grace, something we don't deserve, the more we are inclined to show love to everyone around us.

A second challenge is that even when we show our love to others, even sacrificially, many people don't recognise it. Some of them even accuse us that we don't have any love for them although we call ourselves Christians! This can make us discouraged, until we realise how God doesn't give up on us even though many times we are sure that our behaviour has not been the best, to put it mildly!

God loves everyone in the world with the best kind of love all the time without fail (Jn.3:16). He has demonstrated it powerfully by giving His only Son for everyone's sins (1Jn.2:2). This is *agape* love which has no match. Yet we know that very few among all these people recognise this love or accept it. Can we see that people even reject the highest and purest form of love there is? It is no wonder some of them reject our imperfect love.

Sometimes the reason why people reject our love is because they are insecure in themselves. They expect a kind of love that will make them feel good -- if we keep doing whatever they want, saying nice things to them, even flattery, never disagreeing with them, never pointing out their errors, etc. When they

don't get this kind of love, they get upset and then they can turn abusive towards us. There are also those who try to take advantage of our Christian name to make us do what they want.

But that kind of love is not godly. For those who have been transplanted from the darkness of living for ourselves and for the pleasures of this world to an eternal world of righteousness, peace and joy, blessing people for their eternal good is more important than making them feel happy. Of course, we ought to show our love to needier people we come across (Ga.6:1,2), not to please them but to help them with eternity in view. This includes meeting their earthly needs according to our ability, but we cannot end up displeasing God trying to make them happy.

Let's ask God for strength to continue to love (2Th.3:13).

Pointers along the way #612

It wasn't me!

When someone accuses us or points out our fault what is our natural response? "I didn't do it," "It wasn't me," "I am not like that," or is it "What about you?" The story of Adam and Eve and how they turned the question away from them to someone else teaches us what one of the effects of the Fall was (Ge.3:12). We don't like to take the blame, and we will do everything in our power to deflect the focus from us. We may even point out a rare occasion in which we were different from what we are now being accused about, to try and prove that we are quite the opposite of what we are being accused of. For example, if someone is telling us how stingy we are, we like to point out how once we gave someone 100 bucks, without telling them or acknowledging to ourselves how 99 other times we were reluctant to give even one buck!

If we look at ourselves honestly we may come to see that actually we are very painfully aware of our flaws, shortcomings and failures, and that this attempt to cover up is one way we are trying to avoid experiencing more pain. But really, this is a most stupid thing for us to do because it would only increase our potential for pain. Using the example above, down in our heart we know our tendency to be stingy and the recognition of our stinginess is going to haunt us and give us more pain in the future!

What we fail to bring into the picture is that our Lord knew everything about our failures, shortcomings and weaknesses when He took us to Himself. He has washed away the guilt of our sins with His blood and promised never to bring up the subject again (He.8:12), and He is currently trying to make us whole in every area where we lack (Ro.8:28,29). So, when we admit another one of our lacks or failures now, it is not shocking for Him, and He doesn't think any less of us because of that. On the contrary, when we admit our failure or lack, it allows Him to do more of His work of salvation in us in those areas in our life.

As we can see for ourselves, this is something which is easier for us to understand and accept in our mind than to put into practice. That is our challenge, to change from this hurtful habit of covering ourselves up all the time to being honest with ourselves, others and God Himself. But He helps

us. Also, after we take the step to admit our fault the first time, it becomes easier for us the next time. We can also learn with time to look at our faults even before others point them out to us!

It is never too late to start. Whatever feeble steps we take towards honesty, let us remember they take us closer to God. He will teach us to get rid of the pain of recognising our failures and to find instead the joy of being right with Him, hating sin and loving righteousness (He.1:9). Our self esteem goes up when we know what the Lord thinks about us, and our dealings with others become more merciful. Let us allow God to reverse in us the effects of the Fall and take us closer to what He wants us to be.

Pointers along the way #613

Stonewalling the truth

Every time we choose to obey God even when we have to deny ourselves in order to do it, it brings us closer to God. At the same time, every time we choose to follow our own ways even when we know it is displeasing to God, we harden our hearts. It is likely we have all hardened our hearts sometimes, even though we were not aware that this was what we were doing. It is even possible that we have lost out on some great plan that God had for us personally through our foolish choices, which we will realise when we stand before Him on the final day.

God tests the ones He chooses. We usually don't recognise we are being tested until it is over, and then it is too late to change if we have already chosen foolishly. When Abraham was asked to sacrifice his beloved son, he didn't know what hinged on his choice (Ge.22:16-18). Did Daniel know all the implications for the future when he decided not to defile himself with the king's food (Da.1:8,9)? Unlikely. So it may be that when we come to some crossroads in our life and make a choice we may not realise what all depend on it.

Have you had a time when you realised that a doctrine you believed in was wrong? You may have defined yourself with this doctrine and you may have even preached it, and now you realise you were mistaken. You immediately start to think of all the repercussions if you were to admit that you were wrong, and you choose to stick on to the old doctrine even though you know it is wrong! You know the doctrine is wrong, but you realise it is not practical or convenient for you to admit your mistake!

Imagine Saul went to Damascus after he received a revelation of Jesus and he was thinking of the new revelation of the truth that was completely opposed to everything he had believed until then. He would have thought of how he would face his teachers and the Council that had given him authority to persecute the Christians. He could have escaped all the confusion and opposition from the Jews if he had pretended nothing had happened on the road to Damascus. But then he would not have become the great apostle Paul that we know of now.

When God gives us the grace by revealing the truth to us, He expects us to respond to it honestly and sincerely. In that sense we really don't even have any option but to follow Him with the new truth we have understood. But history, perhaps including our own history, is full of Christians who choose to please themselves or people instead of God (Php.2:21). In this way we show that we don't really love the truth but only ourselves. If so we miss all the good things God had planned for us and stand exposed to the possibility of deception (2Th.2:10-12). Then we find many people creating arguments against the truth and even writing books about it.

Stand before God and see if conscience brings up incidents from our life where we have compromised on truth. Now is the time to repent and look for a second chance like Jonah before it's late.

Pointers along the way #614

From disobedience to obedience

How did the world which was very good in God's eyes (Ge.1:31) get to being what it is today, with degeneration written into every aspect of creation? When Adam and Eve sinned. How did they sin? By disobeying a simple command that God had given them. Every human being who has been born since then has been born with corruption written into his body, soul and spirit (Ps.51:5), and has disobeyed God's commandments and done things to please themselves. As such, all of us are worthy to be cursed by God and punished in hell for eternity. What is the great plan of salvation that God had prepared before He had even created the world (Eph.1:4) to deal with this contingency? Many people think that the aim of His plan was to prevent us from having to go to hell, but to ensure our going to heaven instead! In other words, many believe that Jesus was sent here to die for the sins of mankind so that we can escape the judgment that is due to us and He can take us to heaven.

But God is not One who does things superficially. And superficial would be that salvation which only changes the destination of people from hell to heaven while they still remain the disobedient and self-loving people they have been before! No. God's intention is to bring us back to be the kind of people we were intended to be, obedient to God and loving Him more than everything else (Mt.10:37,38). This is the salvation He wants to give to us, and it is for this that He sent His Son to take our place and go through the death that we deserve as our punishment.

"For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all men, instructing us to deny ungodliness and worldly desires and to live sensibly, righteously and godly in the present age" (Ti.2:11,12). God begins this work of grace in our lives by forgiving our sins by grace, as an act of unmerited undeserving favour towards us (Ep.2:8,9). And then He begins to teach us to obey Him rather than our own lusts (desires). This is what a disciple of Jesus learns, to deny himself, put his own desires to death on the cross and then follow Jesus (Lk.9:23).

Let's not satisfy ourselves with just forgiveness. Let's learn to obey God in everything because of His love towards us and what He has done for us. Let's

not give up even if we have failed many times when trying to obey God. With God's plan in front of our eyes and trusting in His enabling grace (He.4:15,16), let's pursue after perfection (He.6:1).

Let's not make the mistake of thinking that obedience has only to do with the Law. Under the Law, obedience was the means to find acceptance with God and to receive His blessings. But under the new covenant, obedience is the mark of a man who has received grace. This is how we show our love for God and our gratitude to Him (Jn.14:21). This is how we become transformed little by little into the character and life of Jesus. That is the ultimate goal of God in providing us this salvation (Ro.8:28,29).

Pointers along the way #615

Judging ourselves?

When I counsel married couples, it is common to see both people trying hard to convince me that the fault is with the other person. There are exaggerations of the other's faults and blanking of one's own faults, but at the end it is usually clear that there are faults on both sides. But the challenge is to help people to understand where they themselves need to change. Our fallen nature has inherited this expertise from Adam and Eve to deflect the attention from ourselves and to focus on the others.

God wants us to judge ourselves (1Co.11:31). This is in the context of preparing to take part in the 'breaking of bread' or 'communion' when we need to approach God with a clear conscience towards Him and other people (vv.27,28). This occasion gives us an opportunity to examine our life and set things right with God and, at least, to decide to set things right with man.

But do we have to live from communion to communion, or can we have a real-time walk before God, allowing Him to examine us all the time and tell us if we go off from His paths (Is.30:21)? When God tells us to deal with our anger before sunset (Ep.4:26,27), is He giving a deadline or is what He means not to delay matters but to set things right as quickly as possible?

When we examine ourselves shall we start from the position that there are many things wrong with us which we don't even know? Shall we also recognise that sometimes other people can see things about us that we ourselves can't see? When we start from here, we are in a position to turn our attention from the others and focus on changing our own thinking, attitudes, assumptions, prejudices, biases, etc.

From my personal experience I have seen that this is easier said than done. It takes time, attention, effort and honesty to be able to see our own faults. I remember once how I kept asking God to show me what I might have done wrong in a relationship, and it took me more than a month to get an understanding. I think the Lord was testing me at this point and I am not saying that we have to wait so long.

Self-awareness is something that is very much lacking among common people. Some people have spent so much time thinking about what the others

have done to them that they could write books about them. But, for example in counselling, if we ask someone to name three wrong things they have done, most people are dumbstruck!

Worldly wisdom advises us not to look inwards because it is painful, but to tell ourselves how good and great we are! Most of us can remember some good things we have done, and we tend to make ourselves believe that that is who we are, while ignoring the many things that are wrong with us. If we want healing for a wound, the first thing we have to do before applying the ointment or bandage is to clean it up. Cleaning the wound causes pain. But we have to go through that pain first if we want to have a perfect healing later.

Judging ourselves is a habit we have to pick up.

Pointers along the way #616

Genuineness of heart

What does the Lord want of us? Does He want us to do many things for Him in the short time that we have here on earth? The fact is that even though He has great plans for each of His children, it is not always in terms of the quantity of output that He expects from us. Even when God had trained someone like Moses to accomplish something great for Him, He was willing to put him aside when he didn't behave the way He wanted (Nu.20:12). On the other hand, what was it that made God consider David as a man after His own heart even after he had fallen into adultery and murder (Ac.13:22)?

This is something that doesn't occur to Christians who come into positions of leadership. Many a time, their mind is turned towards achieving great things that are very much linked to their name and fame that will live on after them. In their path towards this goal, they take moral shortcuts, ignore warnings of the Holy Spirit and well wishers, tread down people who stand in their way, and go on just as they would have done if they were earthly kings expanding their kingdom or political leaders increasing their influence.

But God looks at the heart (1Sa.16:7), always and every time. He would rather have in us a genuine love for Him, more than we have for everyone and everything else (Mt.10:37,38), than someone who towers above others as a great achiever whom even unbelievers will recognise. Our honesty and sincerity before Him are tested every day, sometimes in the big moments of life, but mostly in the small choices that we make.

We are tempted to take shelter under the spiritual gifts which God has given us, which other people appreciate and admire, while ignoring the pricks of our conscience which are warnings God gives us in love. God's patience waits for long, hoping that we would come to our senses (Lk.15:17) and repent (2Pe.3:9). But it can also happen that we take God's grace for granted once too many times and find ourselves without being able to repent (He.10:26,27).

David's heart was right before God at the time when He chose him to be the king of Israel (1Sa.13:14). But like many others in similar position he became careless and fell terribly into sin, and then he tried his best to cover it up. But when the prophet Nathan confronted him about his sin, he acknowledged it

immediately, showing that he knew all along in his heart about his failure. What this teaches us is not that whatever sin we fall into all we need to do is to acknowledge it, but that even in our struggle with sin we need to keep an honest heart before God. That was why God referred to David as a man after His own heart even after he had fallen.

Let us ask God to give us such a tender heart towards Him, which will be sensitive to His warnings and corrections. That's something He values (1Pe.3:4). Whatever mistakes we make or whatever sins we fall into, let us remember to be open towards God. Trying to justify ourselves will only serve to harden our hearts.

Pointers along the way #617

Experience

Life has 'n' dimensions to it, and n is not a small number! A part of wisdom is to gain understanding of more of these dimensions. Wisdom is not mere knowledge. We may have much knowledge but hardly any wisdom. God tells us that true wisdom comes only from the 'fear of God' (Pr.15:33) which is to respect and revere Him. When we respect God like that, it shows us in comparison who we are, that we are nothing and nobodies except what He has given us and made of us. That is the basis of true wisdom.

When we are young and we are full of knowledge about different things including theology it is possible for us to imagine that we are somebody. But knowledge of the n dimensions does not come from mere study, but usually through years of experience including lots of failures. We could even say that someone who sincerely wanted to live in the fear of God but made a lot of mistakes in the process has actually gained more true knowledge than others who have many theological degrees. Such a person has learned the right and the best thing to do in different circumstances, perhaps after getting burnt with many mistakes. But such a man has also become willing to acknowledge his ignorance and learn from anyone else including younger ones (Pr.9:9).

The gray hair does not always imply wisdom, because we get wisdom depending on how we have sought after it (Pr.4:7;2:4,5). Who seeks for wisdom but one who recognises that he lacks it and needs it? When we are young and zealous we may imagine that we know it all! Then we don't need anyone to teach us or correct us, because our excitement about what we have learnt makes us think we can't be wrong! We are eager to proclaim our knowledge and correct others, and we are hardly thinking of learning anything ourselves! But then we fall, and our balloon of self-esteem bursts. If we don't give up there but acknowledge that we were wrong (at least we didn't know about some of the n dimensions), that will take us on the path to wisdom.

There are things we can learn by gathering up knowledge, even from the Bible, and we can imagine they are so clear to us! But the fact of life is that there are things we can only learn from experience. For example, from a course of theology we can learn about temptations and sin. But it is only by going through actual temptations in life that we learn how to actually face

them. Then we find that there are things we learn through experience that are not written there in the Bible! We may try to argue with an experienced man by quoting verses from the Bible, but we may not realise that there are truths that God reveals to His people beyond the written word, e.g., about more of the n dimensions and their linkages which are not contrary to scripture but which are not specifically spelt out in the Bible.

However experienced we are, we need to realise that we really know so little compared to what is to be learnt. Let us be willing to learn and even receive correction.

Pointers along the way #618

Following shepherds or wolves?

Even in the days of the early church, with the apostle Paul still around, most Christian workers were seeking their own (Php.2:21)! Things have only become much worse now. Many are blatantly after our money, with different tactics for persuading us to give them our money. Some harp on the tithe, some ask for donations for large projects (with most of the money making them rich), some promise us prosperity if we make sacrificial 'seed' investments in their schemes, and some even plead with us to get them out of their huge debts! Some are not directly after our money but after our support that will increase their numbers and boost their image, power and influence. But how many of them are genuinely interested in *our* welfare (Php.2:20)? How many of them care for us so much that they work hard to provide a blessing for us, even at their own expense? Why are these people who promise us prosperity unable to be prosperous themselves that they don't need to ask us for money? Why are these healers taking their relatives to the doctors while they ask us to hold on to faith? How many are keen on being a blessing to us even if we give nothing in return and don't even acknowledge them?

Such false workers are ravenous wolves whose goal is to make a meal of (or gain something from) the sheep (Mt.7:15). They are clearly seen as being different from true shepherds by their spirit which is so totally opposite to that of Jesus. Jesus came to serve and to give His life for us (Mt.20:28), while these people are making merchandise of poor gullible people.

Why don't we see for ourselves what kind of shepherds we are following? For our own safety? Are we finding comfort in being a follower of some famous person while we are being fed with adulterated food and taken for a ride? Don't we care where this will take us and our children in the future?

Things have come to such a pass that trustworthy servants of God have become very rare. There is hardly a church where everything is good and edifying. I am not advocating that therefore you leave everybody else and sit alone at home. But don't we need to grow in discernment and choose what kind of spiritual food goes into our heart and what needs to be thrown aside? In order to become that much discerning, don't we need to feed ourselves personally with the word of God and become faithful in our own lives?

Pointing out the error that is going on around us does not automatically make us good or acceptable to God. We need to take care of ourselves and also those who are in our family. Ultimately we are not responsible for the condition of others (unless God has anointed us as His watchmen on the wall, Ez.3:17), but we have to give an account to God for our own lives and also about the responsibility He has given us over others (Ro.14:12). We may try to blame our leaders for not feeding us properly or misleading us, but what is the use if we have allowed ourselves to be made fools of?

Pointers along the way #619

Unrealistic doctrines

There are some factors that must be looked at before we can accept a doctrine. Apart from the obvious things such as being true to the Bible, something we need to examine is whether it agrees with practical experience. Some go wrong on this, forming unrealistic, imaginary doctrines that no one relates to. For example, if someone claims that after he was born again or filled with the Holy Spirit there is no more sin in him, he is deceiving himself (1Jn.1:8). This kind of wrong doctrine comes up when people do not differentiate between figures of speech and plain words, or between God's ultimate goal for His people and how they need to go through a process before getting there. When we read, "if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creature; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come" (2Co.5:17), don't we need to realise that this is what God has prepared for us and that we are being made new progressively (Ro.12:2)?

Let's look at a typical situation. In Ro.7, Paul talks about a struggle between two laws working in him (vv.21-23). He follows it up by exclaiming that the solution is the Lord Jesus Christ (vv.24,25). Then he says the law of the spirit of life in Christ Jesus *has set him free* from the law of sin and death (8:2). Some people come to a doctrine that Ro.7 is talking about life under the Law and in Ro.8 we have the life in the Spirit. Accordingly, if anyone experiences this struggle mentioned in Ro.7, he is still under the Law. Also, if a man has come under grace, the Spirit will enable him to walk through life and never face any struggle! But actually, Ro.8:2 is talking about the provision that God has made, which will be increasingly experienced by those who walk according to the Spirit (v.4).

In real life, have you come across any godly Christian who does not acknowledge in truth about the struggles he faces? Those who hold on to the above wrong doctrine will insist on their doctrine and deny the truth of practical life, just to stand with their doctrine. Many of them play with words, e.g., talking of 'mistakes' when they try to cover up their 'sins', using 'concern' when what they should actually say is 'worry', etc. Some of them include only gross sins like murder, adultery, robbery, etc., as sins, while they classify anxiety, unforgiving attitudes, jealousy, bitterness, shame, unbelief, etc., as human weaknesses! But don't we need to be honest?

The fact of the matter is that as long as we are on this earth, we are on a spiritual journey with many dangers, and if we are not watchful we may fall (1Co.10:12). Our enemy, the Devil, is eagerly waiting to catch us in a weak moment to trip us up (1Pe.5:8). Even the great apostle Paul fell (Ac.23:3), and if we are honest, we will admit that we too fall here and there (Jas.3:2). Of course, our Lord knows this might happen, and has already made provision for our restoration (1Jn.2:1,2).

Let's not live in a make-believe world of doctrines.

Pointers along the way #620

Where is the true church?

'Mainline churches' take pride in their ancestry and look down on 'free churches' that are sprouting all around them. Some churches do split based on personality clashes and remain minor variations of the old. But many churches come up because of the desire of people to plant churches after getting theological qualifications or spiritual experiences. Many churches claim to be the true churches of Jesus Christ on the basis of emphasising some particular aspect of doctrine. For example, some teach strongly on the body of Christ and then claim that they are *the* body of Christ on earth. Some point out that in the early church there was only one church in any locality and then claim that they are *the local church* in their locality. Some try to follow the new testament pattern of a church and say they are the true church. Some major on signs and wonders and claim they are the ones in which Jesus is truly working. Some cults have come into existence as a result of revelations that the leader claims to have received.

If we just think of it we can see how silly it is to claim to be true church based merely on some doctrines. Of course we need right doctrines because they guide our practice, but the sad fact is that doctrines can be very lofty while people in such churches can be just like everyone else. In such a case, things are actually pretty bad in the church while the people in the church are under a delusion to imagine they are the true church. People there can see things that are not right, but they stay on because they don't want to leave the true church!

Jesus said that it was love among the people of the church for one another that would distinguish them from others as belonging to Jesus (Jn.13:35). This love is not the same as the usual loyalty people show to others in their group. Jesus was talking of an *agape* love as Paul further described in 1Co.13. This is actually the fruit of the Spirit (Ga.5:22,23) into which we have to grow. This growth takes place when the teachings in the church provide the direction but also as the people learn to depend on the work of the Holy Spirit in their lives rather than mere doctrines.

When a church begins to take pride in their doctrines without leaning practically on the Spirit, they become dead, and when another church

depends supposedly on the Spirit without being guided by right doctrines they go off into tangents.

Is it right for any local church to claim that they are the true church in that place? Isn't it necessary for churches, even if they consider that their doctrines and practices are right, to recognise that they are only a small part of a worldwide entity called the church which is the collection of all the people who are born again and have become a part of the kingdom of God? As such, doesn't every 'church' need to be connected to other churches in order to receive and to give what is missing in that church? Not ecumenism but a recognition of interdependence?

Pointers along the way #621

Own up or lose it

"For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may be recompensed for his deeds in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad" (2Co.5:10)! Did we read that right? Does it actually say Christ's judgment of us will be according to what we have *done*? Weren't we always taught that it would be according to our faith? We understood that nothing we did could ever make us acceptable to God (Ro.3:20), and we were immensely relieved to hear that God the Father had accepted us through His unmerited favour (grace) towards us when we put our faith in Jesus (Ti.3:5). We can understand how *unbelievers* would be judged depending on what they have done (Re.20:12,13). Now why am I saying *our* judgment depends on our deeds?

One reason why we find it difficult to accept this is because a great delusion has come upon many Christians which makes them think that now that they are 'under the blood', nothing more is required. They think now God doesn't see them individually, but when He looks at them He sees Jesus! The fact is that God not only wants to accept people, but He also wants to conform us into the character of Jesus (Ro.8:28,29). The first part was done by cancelling out the punishment due to us by letting Jesus take it. The second part can only be done as we take up our cross daily, deny our own desires and follow the example of Jesus (Lk.9:23). That's how a disciple becomes like the Master. If we satisfy ourselves only with the first part, the second wouldn't get done!

Many Christians seem happy knowing that they can get forgiveness from God when they fall. They are not even *aiming* at overcoming temptations and *not* sinning. But true grace includes not only unmerited favour, but also help in our time of need (He.4:16), i.e., when we are being tempted to sin. God gives us that grace through the Holy Spirit who dwells in us. We are responsible for how much we desire to overcome, how much we seek help from God and how we seek to learn from God's word about how to be pleasing to Him and serve Him. We are going to be rewarded at the judgment seat of Christ based on our deeds.

One of the lies that have come to us through the Fall is that it's somebody else or the circumstance that makes us do wrong (Ge.3:12). Some people claim

the devil made them do something. Others think that because they feel a certain way they have no choice but to follow on. Granted many things outside of us and even inside our flesh *prompt* us to do wrong. But we are the ones who do it finally! We are responsible for what we do, and that is why we are accountable to God for our actions (Ro.14:12). Until we take ownership of our behaviour and actions we cannot be set free.

The fact is that with God's help we can choose to do what He wants. Even an ungodly person finds it possible to give up his addiction when the doctor gives him an ultimatum. Let's stop making excuses and make up our mind to stop sinning.

Pointers along the way #622

Manipulate God?

It's sad to see how people who claim to be Christians have such a poor knowledge of God. They seem to think God can be manipulated to do whatever they want if they follow certain schemes. They are essentially trying to put God in a fix where He has to do what they want, because they have met certain conditions. Once they think they have met His conditions He has no other option but to give them what they ask!

Some 'claim' things by 'faith'. According to their understanding, faith is something they produce within their mind by forcefully believing He will do something, after trying to push away doubts and questions from their mind. They think that now that they have acquired this 'faith' God has to oblige them!

Some add fasting to this, and think that because they have made such a sacrifice God will be under pressure to give in to them. Some walk around a place, some use holy water, handkerchiefs or prayer shawls that have been prayed over by 'men of God', some keep a Jewish lamp-stand, some blow a ram's horn, some follow a certain pattern of prayer by imitating 'the Lord's prayer', some go on a pilgrimage, some give huge donations, etc. They think that doing this kind of things will make them specially entitled to favours from God.

It doesn't occur to them that in simple terms a prayer is a *request* to God (Php.4:6). He is *God*, and we are not at all in a position to make any demand of Him. Jesus has given us the privilege to go to God and ask Him for anything we want (Jn.16:23), provided we know that only if our prayer is according to His will there is a guarantee that He will give it to us (1Jn.5:14,15). How dare we go to Him and demand that He should do something for us because we have followed some methods or done something special!

This is not a mere lack of understanding. This is utter ignorance of who God is! When we go to God like this, we insult Him. We treat Him as if He is our servant or some clerk who has to give us something after we have filled up some forms!

How many preachers and authors are telling people about some new technique to get things from God! What kind of God are they presenting to people? Where is the respect and awe that we should have when we come before the Almighty God, the Creator of the universe? Where is the fear and trembling that should grip us when we stand before this holy God in whom there is no darkness at all?

Jesus has opened a way for us to enter God's presence by giving the price of His blood for that. Shall we just walk in casually, call Him Daddy, and give Him a list of things He has to get ready for us? And when He doesn't oblige, do we have the right to call Him names or express our displeasure over the so-called injustice? What do we know about God and who do we think we are?

God has been very gracious to us. He has not given us what we deserve and has given us what we don't deserve. Let's not think we can do things that will make us deserve what we ask for!

Pointers along the way #623

Throwing stones

I am someone who has made many mistakes in life. I am also used to sitting before the Lord and examining myself to see where I have gone wrong and how I went wrong (Ge.17:1). So I am painfully aware of much of my failures. Sometimes this knowledge tends to crush me, but it also helps me to throw myself helplessly into the Lord's keeping. In one way this disqualifies me entirely from throwing stones at anyone else (Jn.8:7), and I try to avoid going there. On the other hand it looks like the Lord has given me a task of pointing out different things to His people, such as errors, the right paths and corrections. These pointers sometimes look like stones being thrown, and sometimes I hesitate much before sending them out.

The question that comes to me is, "Don't people need to have some things pointed out to them, and if I have something that will help others in some way don't I need to tell them?" The next question that comes to my mind is, "There are things to be pointed out, but who am I to do that?"

The answer that comes to me is that this ministry is not about me. I am an earthen vessel which is also broken in several places. But if the Lord decides to put some treasure in this vessel to pass on to the others, who am I to stop Him (2Co.4:7)?

Granted there are people all around us who are throwing stones at us. The thing is, pointing out errors is not the same as casting stones at others. People who are insecure in themselves are generally unable to face their own faults, and they see anyone pointing out faults as judging them. But that does not mean that no one should tell them their faults. How will they hear unless someone tells them (Ro.10:14)? God tells us His children our faults because He loves us (He.12:6), and wants us to change (v.10). If we parents really love our children we will correct them even to the extent of punishing them if necessary. We know that children don't like correction, but it is necessary for them. We too need correction from the Lord, and many times He does that through His servants; He even uses unlikely people or things to correct us at times!

"Judge not" is a favourite quotation for many people because they don't like to be corrected. The spirit of the world also tells people not to give any place

to negative (painful) thoughts but only to think positively! But there cannot be any healing without first recognising the sickness, and then there may be some uncomfortable tests and painful procedures before we are healed. What many people are doing seems to be to pretend as if there is no sickness and hoping it will go away with time.

'Everyone' likes to receive promises from God and prophecies that tell them about a bright future. But don't you think there should be more people telling us what is wrong with us and helping us to get well? When we read God's word, don't we think we ought to look for things that can correct us, rather than for things that would give us a false comfort?

Pointers along the way #624

Kinder than God

When the almighty God has revealed Himself to us in the Bible and told us how things ought to be, dare we disagree and say we have come to know things differently? Even evangelical Christians are beginning to accept the ideas that perhaps sexuality other than male and female is OK, religions that differ with Christ in theory and practice may also be acceptable, cultural and social practices that signify heathen beliefs are fun to join in, our preaching needs to be sanitised to avoid offending anyone's sentiments, etc.

We think we should just love and serve everyone without pointing out that what they are doing is wrong and they are going to end up in calamity. We no longer mention the words sin or repentance even in our churches because that wouldn't be love but judging. We preach messages that everything is going to be all right and that Jesus will do every miracle that people want. Of course we must focus on what Jesus has done and will do for us and avoid taking people back to the Law by telling them about things God wants them to do! Now everybody will be happy and we can gather around every Sunday and have our fun, swaying to contemporary music and enjoying raising hands and clapping, and biscuits and tea later. As long as we drop our tithes into the bag, no one should have any problem with us or ask us about our personal life with Christ.

Terrorism, racist and religious divides and political skullduggery are the order of the day, and what is expected of us Christians is not to talk about such things but take care of orphans and widows and run hospitals, schools and colleges. As long as we go along with the others around us they won't give us any trouble.

Have we lost our conviction that Jesus is the only way anyone can come to God (Jn.14:6)? Have we forgotten the fact that people all around us are on their way to eternal damnation? Are we just being friendly towards them, letting them continue in their ignorance because we don't want to offend anyone? Do we realise that once God has accepted us on the basis of faith in Jesus we are to be the light and salt of this world (Mt.5:13,14)? Do we think Jesus was being dramatic or exaggerating when He said if we belonged to Him (and walked with Him) the world would hate us (Jn.15:19)?

Our desire to be accepted by society, our fear of being persecuted and our mistaken concept of being nice to everyone have misled us, and we are no longer what God wants us to be or doing what He wants. Perhaps what we need is to hear what the Lord said to the church in Sardis, "I know your deeds, that you have a name that you are alive, but you are dead. Wake up, and strengthen the things that remain, which were about to die; for I have not found your deeds completed in the sight of My God. So remember what you have received and heard; and keep it, and repent. Therefore if you do not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what hour I will come to you" (Re.3:1-3).

Pointers along the way #625

We need one another

When we look at the apostle Paul we see someone who was gifted in many ways--great intelligence, knowledge, wisdom, discernment and many spiritual gifts. But there were things he lacked, in terms of mental make-up, experience, resources and opportunities to do things for the churches that needed to be done. He was humble enough to recognise this and to receive help from other members of the body of Christ. See how he was glad to receive prayers for his safety from a church which was not known for their godliness (2Co.1:10,11).

The church in Philippi was known for their love for the people of God even in distant places, and they were willing to serve others with enthusiasm and concern. They first *gave themselves to the Lord* and then also to His people (2Co.8:1-5). But at the same time, Paul noticed that along with their love they needed to grow in knowledge and discernment (Php.1:9). What we see here that there was something they needed to hear from Paul, while Paul was also dependent on them to meet some of his needs (4:15,16). This is an illustration of how we all need one another in the body of Christ.

We may be willing to receive practical help from others and some may even be willing to ask for it. But what about receiving spiritual help from others in the form of teaching, correction, comfort and encouragement? Or do we think we will take help only from recognised pastors, leaders or those who are known for their godliness? That would be a most foolish approach to take. Much of the feedback about our behaviour and attitudes come from people we deal with in daily life, who may not be even Christians or known for any spirituality. If we ignore their opinions about us, we may live in an imaginary world of our own, feeding our mind with our own thoughts and what we selectively take from 'spiritual' people. Have you heard it said that many times our 'enemies' tell us more truth about ourselves than our 'friends' who want our favour?

Many people think about the donkey God used in connection with the prophet Balaam and say that if God could use a donkey He could also use someone like them. But God used that donkey to correct a prophet. Will we be willing to receive correction from a donkey if God chooses to send us

one?

We were born 'wrong', in sin (Ps.51:5), and since then we have done and picked up many more wrong ways of thinking, speaking and behaving. One common way we get to see if we were wrong in our behaviour is to see how other people respond to it. Some people are even 'kind' enough to tell us what they think about us! If we reject all such feedback asking in our mind who these people think of themselves to talk to us like that, or what they can teach us, we are ignoring the hand of God in the process, the 'donkey' He sent for us!

But if we really recognise that there is so much in us to be saved from, we will be actually eager to get feedback. This is different from being slaves to the opinion of man.

Pointers along the way #626

Finding fault with leaders?

Many who are in Christian leadership positions use Ps.105:15 to tell others, "Do not touch My anointed ones," meaning no one should question them or talk about their faults. Some go to the extent of threatening calamity to those who dare to oppose them.

What is happening at ground level can be of two types. Some people oppose the authority which God has given to the leaders because of their own rebellious attitudes. But some others don't dare to raise any issues or question misuse of authority because of fear of God's judgment. We need to see these as two different dangers.

Those who oppose or resist the authority which God has placed on the leaders face severe judgment from God (Ro.13:1,2). Miriam and Aaron questioned the authority of Moses because they thought they also deserved some of that authority, probably because they were his older siblings (Nu.12:1,2). A cousin of Moses, Korah, gathered about 250 people against Moses saying that he was exalting himself over them (Nu.16:3). In both these cases Moses had done nothing wrong, and this could also be seen by the way he responded to these accusations. God judged Miriam with leprosy and He opened the earth miraculously and buried Korah and his group alive for their affront. These are warnings to us not to resist or rebel against authority, especially thinking too much of ourselves or seeking something for ourselves.

But there are also many cases where people in positions of authority misuse it and lord it over others, fleece or even abuse them. Are we supposed to ignore such things, not to talk about them with others and to take things as if coming from the authority of God? It is because many are afraid to even question such things that these so-called leaders 'flourish' without opposition and damage many lives and dishonour God. Does God want us to silently let that happen?

"Do not receive an accusation against an elder except on the basis of two or three witnesses. Those who continue in sin, rebuke in the presence of all, so that the rest also will be fearful of sinning" (1Ti.5:19,20). For this to happen, some people should have been talking about it! They discussed matters

among themselves discretely and finally took some action. Obviously they were not being rebellious or scheming against the leaders! But they were concerned for the leaders and for God's name. This needed humility, discernment and discretion. But that wouldn't have happened if they were cowed down by a 'simplistic' understanding about resisting authority.

What God looks at first of all is the motive of our heart whatever we do (1Co.4:5). A 'junior apostle' Paul had the 'audacity' to question the senior apostle Peter (Ga.2:11), and Peter took it well. Jesus allowed Peter to rebuke Him (Mt.16:22), even though He corrected Peter afterwards. But leaders who feel insecure and threatened warn people with Ps.105:15 (where, actually, 'the anointed' refers to the people and not leaders)!

Pointers along the way #627

Will we perish?

One of the big mysteries in life is why 'innocent' people suffer as a result of disasters including terrorist action. Even with the story of Job, many Christians believe that godly people will not get anything like cancer or face accidents, and whenever something like that happens, they begin to accuse victims that they must have some unconfessed sin in their lives, just as Job's friends thought! Job was the godliest man on earth at that time, and yet God allowed him to lose all his children and wealth on the same day, and immediately afterwards he came down with a terrible sickness! In his case the reason was that God was testing him, and he actually came out of the experience as a much humbler, purer person. In other cases it may be just that we are living on this earth which was cursed when our forefather Adam disobeyed God.

One mistake many Christians make is to think only of a comfortable life on earth and not so much of the eternal life that is to follow which will have no sorrow, sickness, pain or evil (Re.21:4). Because of this, they also attribute every evil that happens to us as related to some past sin. Even though God has forgiven our sins and accepted us as His children by grace through our faith (Ep.2:8,9), some people still think in terms of law and punishment. Sometimes they feel condemned when some calamity hits them thinking that God must be punishing them, and at other times they feel indignant against God for letting some evil come to them 'even though they have been such good people'!

When some people asked Jesus about why something evil had happened to some people in Lk.13:1-5 what He told them can be quite confusing if we don't have a proper perspective about our life on earth and the life to come afterwards. He said that those people who had 'perished' in those incidents were not greater sinners than the others. But then He warned the disciples that they would 'perish' if they did not repent. The first 'perish' referred to what happens on earth, but the second 'perish' referred to what would happen in eternity. For God, it is clear that eternal perishing is far more serious than what happens on earth.

Because of the presence of sin here on earth, many unpleasant, unrighteous,

unfair, painful and ugly things happen here. Even though God is aware of what we are going through here (He.4:15), and He knows how frail we are (Ps.103:13,14), and even though He will step in whenever things tend to go beyond what He has permitted (1Co.10:13), His plan is not to eliminate all the difficulties and pain on the earth. Jesus said that in this world we would have much trouble (Jn.16:33). But as we have seen earlier, His plan is to provide us with an eternity full of pleasure (Ps.16:11).

When we have this perspective, it gives us meaning when we go through painful times here. When we go through trouble ourselves or see innocent people suffer, what comforts us is that there is an eternity coming (1Th.4:17,18).

Pointers along the way #628

Growing in wisdom

Imagine a situation when you spoke to someone with the best of intentions but it turned into a misunderstanding. Now you can justify yourself thinking that your intentions were good and conclude that the misunderstanding was due to some problem with your friend. But it may have been that you had not taken into consideration some sensitivity on your friend's part which you knew earlier. When this comes into your mind now as you think about the incident, you can still avoid a sense of guilt by thinking that it was your friend's fault and that he shouldn't be so sensitive. What has happened here is that in effect you have chosen to stay where you are in spiritual development and make no progress.

Justifying ourselves and passing the blame to other people is one of the first results of the Fall (Ge.3:12,13). When we justify ourselves we may not be even telling ourselves lies because we may be 'truthful' depending on certain particular facts we look at. But the problem is that there may be other facts which we are conveniently forgetting or putting aside from our consideration.

The reason why this happens may be that we are very insecure about God's love towards us. Even though we know in theory that God's love comes to us from His unmerited favour towards us, in practice we may be still thinking that whenever we fall or make a mistake His displeasure will kick in! Another reason may be that our self-image is so poor that we don't want to let it get further dented.

The joy of the Lord is our strength (Ne.8:10). When we are *feeling* joyful, this is fine. But when the circumstances of life are making us feel all confused or lost, we would need to *draw* our strength from Him by consciously going to Him, recognising His love and acceptance, and allowing our joy to be restored. When He is for us, why do we worry about those who are against us (Ro.8:31)? Why should we worry about what might come to us in future when we have One who holds the future in His hands (Ro.8:28)?

When we draw our strength from the Lord, we can afford to look at our failures and shortcomings without losing courage. We *know* we are far from being perfect and that God is at work in us to make us more and more like His Son (Ro.8:29). The way this transformation takes place is when we

acknowledge our lacks honestly, go to Him and draw strength from Him to do things better next time.

Sometimes, when we are sensitive to the voice of the Holy Spirit, we may be able to know that something we are thinking of doing is wrong and avoid doing it. But more often what happens is that *after* we do wrong we come to know of it. It is only the next time we can avoid that mistake. This means that we should be able to look back and acknowledge that what we did was not perfect, recognise the mistake, learn from it and do better the next time. To be able to do this, we should accept as a rule the possibility that we could be wrong any time and be willing to take feedback.

Pointers along the way #629

Disinterested?

What we see in many 'Christian book shops' nowadays is that the focus of the display is on 'Christian' articles such as pictures with verses, key chains, etc., or music CDs or DVDs, rather than books! The sales people tell us that these are the things that sell more than books. If we look around at our Christian friends what we see is that for many of them the 'Christian' activity they enjoy is listening to Christian music, and not Bible study or prayer.

It is a fact that since the arrival of multi media in easily available forms, less people read anything at all compared to what they watch on their phones, computers or TV. This has affected Christians also in how much they read their Bible or Christian books. A survey has shown that less than 20% of Christians have read through the full Bible even once. When we remember that the Bible is God's gift to us with which we can grow spiritually (1Pe.2:2), we can understand why many are not growing in their relationship with God or in their understanding of His ways. Compared to those who actually read the Bible, the number of those who read Christian books is even much less.

For many Christians, all their knowledge of God is from their pastor or favourite TV personality. To say the least, this is all second-hand. Their spiritual food is coming to them pre-cooked, and people just have to swallow what they get. Doesn't this explain at least one reason why false teachings flourish when they are put across by impressive speakers? The hearers or readers now do not have to exercise their spiritual senses at all either to discern if what they hear is true or to learn how to apply it in their practical lives (He.5:14). They become blind followers of blind teachers (Mt.15:14).

When Christians have to be fed always with 'milk', pampered with entertainment, kept from getting offended, etc., one reason could be that they have never been born again properly, because just as physical babies start crying for physical food, those who are truly born again will have a deep hunger for the word of God which alone can nourish them (1Pe.2:2). What they need to hear is the bad news that they are sinners in the sight of God headed for hell and the good news that Jesus has come to save them from sin.

Because of watered down preaching that avoids offence, many are really not born again, but they are given the impression that they are safely on the way to heaven. Then everybody has to keep them entertained lest they leave.

When people want *only* promises, words of comfort and encouragement, etc., and cannot bear any word of exhortation or correction, then there is a strong chance that they have not experienced salvation or that their spiritual growth is stunted. They are really disinterested in spiritual things, and they want to be attracted with cake or games! What they need is not encouragement but to wake up from their spiritual deception. Where are the preachers who will lovingly tell them that?

Pointers along the way #630

Justified? Sanctified?

Many Christians seem to think that salvation means (only) getting our sins forgiven and going to heaven. The Bible points out that there are three parts to salvation -- justification, sanctification and glorification. When we come to God repenting from our sins and receive forgiveness for our sins because of Jesus' death in our place, God justifies us. In simple terms, He accepts us as righteous in His sight. But then starts the lifelong process of sanctification, which involves transforming us from our old sinful ways to the character of Jesus. The third part of salvation is glorification, which means God giving us a new sinless body when we go to be with Him in eternity.

Justification gives us a confidence before God that there is no more any condemnation for us from God (Ro.8:1), God's wrath has been taken away (1Th.5:9), we can constantly be in the presence of God without fear (He.10:19-22), etc. These things give us boldness before God, especially when doubts and fears trouble us. When we know that we are God's children and He is with us and for us, we even have boldness to face trouble from people and situations on this earth (Ro.8:31). We need this kind of assurance and boldness if we are to survive our journey through this world.

To be sanctified means to be set apart for God. In one sense God has sanctified us (set us apart) for Himself (1Co.1:2), but on the other hand we are to sanctify ourselves *to* God (1Pe.3:15; Jn.17:19). It is when we deny ourselves our sinful desires and present ourselves as holy towards God that we get sanctified (Ro.6:19). Many people feel some kind of a contradiction when they have to recognise and deal with big and small sins in their lives, because that makes them feel as if they are coming away from justification! Some people say that when God has promised not to remember our sins any more (He.8:12), we should not be thinking about sin ourselves. Some other people feel very insecure when they look at the actual presence of sin in their lives because they fear they are denying God's grace over their lives. As a result, many people keep away from any mention of cleansing themselves (2Co.7:1), and then they do not experience sanctification.

The fact is that we have to learn to hold both justification and sanctification together in our lives. On one side we need to be without doubt that our sins

have been completely forgiven and that God has accepted us without condition. Without letting go of this assurance, we must know that God wants to set us free from actual sinning in our practical lives too (1Jn.2:1,2). God knows we might fall into sin again after we have been justified, and therefore He has made the provision of confessing our sins and receiving forgiveness (1Jn.1:9). Justification is about God accepting us unconditionally, and sanctification is something we need to cooperate in by dealing with sin, without losing the sense of acceptance by God because of awareness of sin.

Pointers along the way #631

Learning from experience

A famous Bible teacher once cast out an evil spirit from a woman, and immediately after that her dog jumped off from a truck and died. He assumed that the woman had 'a spirit of suicide' and that it had entered into the dog from her. This 'taught' him that henceforth whenever he cast out a demon he should pray for the protection of the relatives of the person from that demon entering them.

We may have come across a few or more cases where a family has a series of calamities happening to them, and then someone tells them that this is due to witchcraft or black magic which someone has done against them.

We are expected to learn from our experiences as a means of growing in knowledge and wisdom. We can learn from our own experiences and from watching others. But if we 'learn' as in the above cases, we go entirely wrong. We may not only assume many things in error but we may also pass on such things to others. In that way we may become instruments in the hands of the Deceiver.

What we need to do is to interpret experiences in the light of God's word. It is very clear from the Bible that evil spirits cannot touch God's people because they need permission from God to do so (Job.1:10). Evil spirits need permission even to enter pigs (Lk.8:32). Why should we live in fear that some evil spirit will proceed from some relative and jump on us? We too should be careful against evil spirits getting access to our life avoiding continuing in sin (e.g., Ep.4:26,27), indulging in occult Satanic activities, or worshipping idols (behind whom are demons 1Co.10:20).

Don't we know that God is now our Father and that it is His responsibility to protect us? The Bible says that witchcraft or black magic will not work against us because we are His children (Nu.23:23) and not even curses will have power over us because we are under the blessing of God (Nu.22:12; Ga.3:13,14). Why do we live in fear of evil spirits or calamities? Is it not because we do not believe what the word of God tells us?

So we see that whenever we try to understand some experience, we must go to the word of God to see what God has to say about such things. When God

says something, let us hold on to it, even if we are unable at the moment to explain what we have seen or experienced. If we stay with God and His word, He may give us an explanation sooner or later when we have become mature enough to understand His ways.

We must remember that we cannot explain a college level subject to a primary school student. We have to wait till he gets to college. So depending on our level of understanding we may be able to understand certain things of God. But we can believe God even when we cannot understand things. Even if our experiences seem to point to some conclusion which is contrary to the word of God, it is right for us to stay with what God has said.

We may never fully understand certain things of this life, but we can always trust in our Father and His word.

Pointers along the way #632

Our standing with God

Jesus said, in effect, that some people were going to get the shock of their lives when they stood before Him on the final day. They had taken for granted that they would be welcomed into heaven with great fanfare because they had prophesied, cast out demons and done many miracles *in Jesus' name* (Mt.7:22)! They thought that Jesus would not only be very thankful to them for what they had done but also excited to use them as examples before other people in heaven! But they were shocked to the core when He publicly disowned them, saying that He never knew them (v.23).

How could they have done such supernatural things without power from God? How could Jesus have given them power if He was not pleased with them? One explanation could be that their power came from deceiving spirits pretending to be coming from God (2Co.11:13,14). Did you know that a lot of miracles are being performed these days in the power of Satan and not God (Mt.24:24)? We can see that if we look carefully at the fruit (Mt.7:15,16). Another explanation could be that God used these people just as He used heathen people like Nebuchadnezzar to accomplish His will, but such people never had any relationship with Him. It is obvious that they didn't have such a relationship because their claim to the kingdom was their good works and not faith. Such people cannot be accepted by God (Ro.9:32).

Many foolishly assume God is pleased with them because they were born in a Christian family, they have done many things for God or His people, they have not been as bad as some others, etc. What would be our shock if we have such assumptions but we are not acceptable to God?

God has not made the condition of acceptance too high for any of us. We are not asked to live up to a certain standard or accomplish certain things for Him. There is also forgiveness for our past, however bad. What He requires from us is to be honest about our innate sinful nature, admit and confess our actual sins and to go to Him asking for forgiveness and acceptance because He is a gracious God. We go to Him in this faith because He has demonstrated His willingness to accept us by putting His Son, Jesus, to death for our sins (Ro.5:8). It is this faith that comes along with sincere repentance that guarantees His acceptance. This is open to everyone who wants (Re.21:6).

With this kind of open invitation from God, none of us needs to make any false assumptions or to live in uncertainty. When God accepts us we can know in our heart that He has made us His children (Ro.8:15). We will experience the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives glorifying Jesus and changing us into His image (v.16). We will receive an assurance of eternal life (1Jn.5:11,12). When we stand before God we shall not boast about what all we have done for Him or how great we are, but we will rejoice to confess that it was the rich grace of our God and our Saviour that took us out from a life of sin and made us children of God.

Pointers along the way #633

Things we can't understand

One mark of godly people, in contrast to those who project themselves as being great, is that they readily admit they don't know many things, not only about earthly things, but also the knowledge of God. Of course, those who have been faithful before Him for many years know much more than those who are young in the life of grace. But even the most experienced Christians will admit that they don't know many things. It is because God has not revealed many things to us (De.29:29). God being who He is, it is natural that there are things we can't grasp about Him. But it is also true that God has not chosen to reveal many things even in His word. Blessed is a humble man who will be honest about it instead of thinking that he ought to explain everything in the Bible and then trying to make up natural explanations.

Jesus has said very clearly that no one knows the day of His coming (Mt.24:36). But just see how many people have foolishly and arrogantly tried to pin point the exact date! Even though He has given a revelation about the things to come (Re.1:1) just to give us hope and a general understanding of how things will end, many Christians try to be very exact in their interpretations! It seems obvious that God has deliberately chosen to be vague and ambiguous about many details. Instead of humbly recognising our smallness we seem to be bent on twisting meanings in many places in order to put everything into neat explanations! How many Christians have made fools of themselves by presenting ideas about prophecies in a cocksure manner!

In God's description of creation, He has again chosen to be very vague about how exactly He created things. What we *can* understand is that it was He who created everything and not some chance occurrences, and also that He has created us human beings in His image (Ge.1:27) unlike all other living creatures.

The reason why we have this problem with God and His word seems to be that we tend to have a poor image of God and a grandiose image about ourselves. We just can't seem to accept the fact God is almighty, all knowing and all wise, and that we are unable to explain everything. Ever since Adam and Eve ate the fruit of the tree of knowledge we all seem to have an air

about us as if we know everything and that our opinions are correct (Ge.3:5). We don't realise that in this way we make ourselves independent of God instead of enjoying the rest that comes from being entirely dependent on Him.

There is nothing wrong with knowledge itself. But there is a right way of knowing things (1Co.8:1,2). That is to make ourselves and our ideas always subject to God, recognising our total dependence on God for everything including our existence, and never imagining that we know better than what God says. We may have our *opinions* about things which are not clearly revealed in God's word, but can't we at least be a little tentative about what we think? God surely looks at our attitudes (1Sa.16:7)!

Pointers along the way #634

Technology transfer!

When we look at some of the sons of mega church pastors who are apparently being groomed to take over from their fathers, it is only natural that we notice their imitating some of the mannerisms and use of words and phrases from the fathers. But the sad thing is when we see that it is techniques and forms that the sons are picking up rather than values. And then the sons make these techniques more current with the use of technology and they seem to think that they are going to be greater successes than their fathers! Can technology by itself make us or our churches spiritual? When values that God considers to be more important than numbers in the church (members or collection) are set aside, these are turning into entertainment centres rather than churches! We don't know how long it will be before Jesus returns, but it pains to think of the condition of people in such churches if things progress in this direction.

What is getting transferred to our minds and hearts when we listen to preachers or read their books? Are they godly values based on the Bible or their clever ideas based on pop psychology? Christian 'shibboleths' (Judg.12:5,6) can be easily picked up and make us acceptable to the particular church we are in. But is our aim to be accepted by the people or by God? Pep talks seem to be more popular among church goers compared to heart-felt exhortations. "We look for comfort and encouragement when we come to the church and not more judgment," some say. This is not a modern situation. Even in the days of the OT prophets those who merely applied whitewash over cracks in the wall were more acceptable (!) than those who wanted to help rebuild them (Ez.13:10). But what do we really *need* to hear? How to be set free from our blind spots, the oppression and deception of the evil one, the bondages to sinful thought patterns and behaviour, etc.! Jesus has come as our Saviour for this very purpose (Lk.4:18,19). Instead we learn how to raise our hands or clap, sing and dance 'in the spirit', send seed money, attend all night prayers, take prayer walks, etc.!

What do we try to pass over to our children? It is good, of course, to teach them to memorise Psa.23, sing songs, pray, etc. But do we show them the way of salvation, teach them values such as speaking the truth always, apologising when they go wrong, showing respect to older ones and those in

authority, controlling their temper and desires, thinking of the others also and not just themselves, etc.? Or do we buy them good toys, give them good food, send them to good schools and then expect that the church will automatically make them Christians?

In these days when much darkness has crept into the world including churches, it is the responsibility of the few who truly know the Lord to shine more brightly without hiding their light (Da.12:3). They will shine by living lives before God, sharing the truth with those who are willing to hear and standing against darkness.

Pointers along the way #635

Altruistic love

To love altruistically means to love others without wanting any returns for it. This is very uncommon in this world where those who love others expect them to love them back, to be grateful to them for their love, and to return their favours appropriately when they need them. Jesus said that even sinners loved those who loved them in return (Mt.5:46)! But God's love is altruistic. He loves the good as well as the wicked people and blesses both groups with rain, sun, etc. (v.45). Certainly, the wicked aren't going to do Him any good but only give trouble! He hopes that His goodness may cause the wicked to repent, but that is for *their* good and not for any gain for Him!

God is able to love everyone irrespective of their response to Him because His nature is to love (1Jn.4:8). And if *we* have to become able to love like that, first of all we need to be born again and become children of God, and then we need to grow into this love. Ordinary people cannot love in this way even if they decide to love like this because that is not their nature. When we are born into this world we are born with a sinful nature (Ps.51:5). But when we come to Jesus repenting of our sins, we get born again when His nature is born in our spirit (1Pe.1:23), and this nature begins to grow develop.

The world cannot even believe that any man can love without some secret, selfish agenda behind it, because that is the way they know love. But there are *many* Christians over the centuries who have given themselves to the others in selfless service even to the extent of losing their lives (1Jn.3:16). They were willing to spend and to be spent if only they could bless the others (2Co.12:15). This is how we follow the ultimate example Jesus left us with when He gave Himself for us even when we were His enemies (Ro.5:8).

But it also a fact that even many who are publicly known as 'servants of God' are secretly seeking for their own gain, usually in terms of money, position or fame. Among all those who worked along with him, Paul could find only one, Timothy, who was genuine in his love; all the others had selfish motives of their own (Php.2:19-21). What a pathetic situation!

What is God telling us, as we read this? Do we want to be men and women after His heart, or do we want to travel with our feet in two boats, 'serving God' in front of the people while our heart seeks after our own gain?

What face will we have when we get to look at the face of our Lord? Will we have to put our head down in shame even if we are given the privilege of being with Him, or will we lose that privilege altogether and be cast off as those He does not know (Mt.7:22,23)? If we really love the Lord will we not offer ourselves up to Him as living sacrifices (without seeking any returns) (Ro.12:1)? If we really believe that He has given us every blessing graciously even though what we deserve is hell, how can we have any other response than a wholehearted and joyful service to Him?

Pointers along the way #636

The anointing that teaches

Once someone invited me to attend a public meeting he had arranged, and later he asked me what I thought of it. In this meeting that lasted several hours, there was band after band that came from different places and sang many songs accompanied by electric guitars and drums, there was someone who came on stage exhorting people to give generously for the expenses of the meeting, and there was someone who spoke for a few minutes about how God wanted to bless people. Between the bands the MC spoke excitedly about the anointing that was present there. I told my friend that it was a time of entertainment for the people but that hardly anyone was likely to have been 'blessed'! He was shocked and asked me what I thought was wrong. I told him that it was only *truth* that would set people free, and it was by preaching the truth from the Bible that we could bless people (Jn.8:31,32;1Co.1:23,24).

Does God give His anointing so that we can experience excitement? Some find excitement in rhythmic singing, clapping hands, 'dancing in the Spirit', etc. Some find it exciting to fall backwards on the stage, some in blabbering senseless sounds, and some in narrating about exciting things they have seen!

When the Holy Spirit genuinely touches us there will be excitement too. He may also enable some people to speak in unknown tongues. But is excitement the mark of the Spirit?

When Jesus came with the anointing of the Spirit, it was to bring freedom to people in various types of bondage (Lk.4:18,19). When we preach the word of God now under the anointing of the Spirit, there is conviction of sin (not judgment) in people's hearts (Jn.16:8), and it causes them to repent (Ac.11:18) and to be set free from bondage (Jn.8:36). That is the mark of the true anointing. It may happen silently or with emotions, but lives get changed. It is so different from the 'anointing' that is distributed nowadays by the entertainment experts!

The apostle John spoke about the anointing in connection with discerning the spirit of the Antichrist. This deceitful spirit was working in those days, and much more in these days. John points out that this true anointing is

characterised by truth, in contrast to lies which is one of the marks of the Antichrist (1Jn.2:20-22). If we have this anointing, we would be able to sense when some preacher is bringing a false teaching, that something is wrong, even if we can't figure out immediately what exactly is wrong (vv.23,24). Even in those days there were many 'antichrists' (v.18), who were apparently bringing heresies into the churches.

In these last days there are many Bible teachers who are bringing false teachings and many more teachers who are influenced by such teachings. The most common false teachings are the 'health and wealth gospel', the 'word of faith' teaching and 'hyper grace'. Let us seek an anointing from God, not for getting excited, but so that we can know the truth and be set free more and more.

Pointers along the way #637

A servant of God

If we want to serve God, the first thing we ought to do is *not* to rush to a Bible college or to look for an appointment. To serve God does not mean becoming a pastor, evangelist, etc., or giving up all 'secular' work to become a full-time worker. It is not to 'live by faith' (so-called) as in not having a regular salary. Anyone doing any work which God has given him to do can serve God if he does it *as unto the Lord* (Co.3:23,24). It is the condition of our heart that helps us to do everything 'as unto the Lord' which really qualifies us to be servants of God.

To serve God is simply to do what God wants us to do; it is not a position or a title. What God wants is supreme, and our privilege is to have a part in doing it. A servant does not choose what he should do, but simply does what the master asks him to (1Co.4:2). If God has called someone to be an apostle and another to be a housewife, each one will get a reward according to how faithfully they have carried out their task. It's not automatic that an apostle will get a greater reward, as commonly thought. Perhaps, if the housewife has faithfully given herself to taking care of her husband and bringing up her children to love God, isn't possible that her reward may be greater than for an apostle who wasn't really faithful in his heart before the Lord?

How can we become a servant of God with whom the Lord will be pleased? Is it by setting up 'mega' churches, having a worldwide ministry, or becoming a TV personality or best selling author? It is by cleaning our heart from everything that defiles us or distracts us from doing the will of God. "If anyone cleanses himself from these things, he will be a vessel for honor, sanctified, useful to the Master, prepared for every good work" (2Ti.2:21). An obvious problem with many so-called servants of God is that they are actually pursuing a personal agenda of their own while seemingly serving God (Php.2:19-21).

Shall we stop doing things with the motive of making ourselves great, impressing people, making money, living in luxury, etc. (Php.2:3)? Shall we stop being concerned about people recognising us or our service, and be focused on doing the will of God as exactly as possible whether people understand us or not? Can we be content to do the will of God even if nobody

knows about it (Mt.6:3,4)? Shall we stop worrying about people misunderstanding us as long as we know that God knows our heart (1Co.4:2-4)? Can we make it our sole ambition to be pleasing to the Lord (2Co.5:9)? Is keeping faith and a good conscience more important to us than how 'successful' we are before people (1Ti.1:5)? If there is selfish ambition or conceit in our heart, let's not imagine we are serving God (Jas.3:14)!

Are all the so-called great servants of God really serving God in truth? Do we love God enough to want to serve Him irrespective of what we get out of it? If so, let's learn to cleanse ourselves in our heart as we walk before the Lord.

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 #638

Consequences

I overheard a talk going on among four teenage girls about boys, marriage, etc., at a table near mine in a restaurant. As they were drinking beer and smoking cigarettes, one of them said that she wouldn't like to get married to someone before living with him for some time to get to know him. The others just accepted that without even a comment! We know this is not uncommon these days, but it made me think about it, about the parents of these girls who had given them this kind of 'freedom' without much instruction, and about the way many people make decisions without giving them much thought.

Young people don't have much experience in life, but still many behave as if they know everything and can handle it all! Anyone who tries to warn them gets the reply, "Nothing will happen!" But it is not just young people who have this problem. We older ones can also do things without thinking of the possible consequences and imagine that everything will be ok, nobody will know, God will overlook it all in mercy, etc. This was one of the lies the Devil told Eve (Ge.3:4), and this is one of his most successful ways to mislead us even now.

God's word warns us categorically, "Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for *whatever a man sows, this he will also reap*" (Ga.6:7,8). In other words, everything we do will have consequences. We have the ability to choose what we would do, but we don't have the ability to define the consequences. When we do wrong we have the possibility of confessing it to God (1Jn.1:9). He will take away the punishment we deserve. But even then we cannot avoid the eternal loss we would suffer (loss of what we could have gained spiritually), a greater difficulty in overcoming that sin later, shame, impact on our children, etc. Knowing this, we should be those who would prepare in advance through prayer, watchfulness, etc., to avoid going wrong. But it may be that we learn about the seriousness of some wrong thing only after we have fallen or seen someone else fall and seen the consequences. At least this should bring in us a godly sorrow, deep repentance and a determination not to fall into it again (2Co.7:10,11).

Instead, what we can foolishly do is to blame God for the consequences! We accuse Him of a lack of love, hardness of heart, unjust judgment, etc.! In this

way we make sure that we become more established in our sinful behaviour without learning anything from our failure!

'Hyper grace' teachings serve to take away the healthy fear that we should have about falling in sin, by making us think that grace covers anything we do without any consequences. By exaggerating the mercy of God and hiding His severity towards sin (Ro.11:22), that heresy actually serves to support the work of the Devil. Reading the Bible, believing its warnings and teachings, and noting the examples of different people there, good and bad, can give us a very good understanding of the consequences of our actions, in this life and in eternity.

Pointers along the way #639

Bypassing God!

There was a time when Israel got defeated before the Philistines (1Sa.4:2). Instead of humbling themselves before God, acknowledging their sin because of which God had handed them over to the Philistines (Judg.13:1), and turning back to God, Israel thought of gaining victory by taking the ark of the Lord into the battle (1Sa.4:3). They thought that since the ark represented the presence of God, if they took it, it would be the same as having God with them! But they were not only defeated, but the Philistines took the ark away with them (vv.10,11)!

We are now Christians, having been born again by the Spirit of God and with God living within us. What do we do when we need God to act on our behalf? We wave a cross or the Bible to scare demons away, place the Bible under our pillows to avoid bad dreams, wear a chain with a cross around our neck or has a cross on the wall of our house to get God's protection over our lives, place stickers on our car that say, "Jesus saves!" to ensure accident free driving, etc.! And they don't work, just as in the case of Israel with the ark!

If the almighty God is our Father, why is it that we don't draw near to Him straightaway in times of trouble? Why don't we ask Him for protection or whatever else we need? Why is it that we look to things, methods and techniques to get things from God rather than approach our Father openly?

In the case of Israel, it is clear that they did not have a proper relationship with God at this time, and it may be that they were imitating the practices they had seen in the nations around them. Is the reason why we are not so bold or confident to run to our Father that our relationship is not secure? Are there things in our life that are not right with Him because of which we hesitate to go near Him? The moment after Adam and Eve disobeyed God they became afraid of Him and wanted to hide from Him.

But we are now in a different relationship with God compared to Adam or Israel. God's relationship with us has been opened through His grace, and not on the basis of our righteousness (Ep.2:8,9). Our record has been wiped clean by the blood of Jesus, and there is also provision for us to confess our sins immediately when we fall (1Jn.1:9;2:1), so that we can have an all-time

access to our Father (He.10:19-22). We don't have to be scared of Him, and we don't have to wonder if He would accept us. It is our privilege now to run to Him whenever we are in trouble, like a little child to the father. Why do we have to resort to forms and methods to get God to work for us? Just ask ourselves why hesitate before God, and see if it is because we actually want a life where we can do what we want and we are unwilling to walk according to His ways.

We cannot have a real and meaningful Christian life without an ongoing, continual fellowship with the Father through Jesus. Such a life is not possible unless we are willing to give up our own life and do what He tells us (Lk.9:23).

Pointers along the way #640

How do we face adversity?

When God chose Saul to be the king of Israel, Saul did not think he was qualified for it (1Sa.9:21). He had such a poor self-esteem that he hid himself when people were wanting to crown him (1Sa.10:21,22). From our understanding of human nature we can assume that he may have had a bad experience growing up, without much acceptance or affection coming from his parents, and maybe even facing some abuse. This showed up later in his marriage too, when he referred to his wife as a 'perverse and rebellious woman' (1Sa.20:30). His wrong attitude towards his son also shows up in the same verse.

On the other hand, we find another man, David, who was side-lined by his father who favoured his other children more (1Sa.16:10,11). But while David was forced to spend lots of lonely time with the sheep, he learned to draw near to God and worship Him. Joseph suffered a lot during thirteen years after his brothers sold him as a slave, but during that time he learned to trust in God and learn about His ways (Ge.50:19,20).

Adversities come to all of us, some getting more of them than others. When we face them we have the choice between sulking about them, getting angry with God and turning away from Him, and seeking God especially at that time and learning from Him. God takes no delight at all seeing His children or even wicked people suffer (Ez.18:23). God's ultimate purpose in allowing us to face adversities is to mould us a little more into the likeness of His Son (Ro.8:28,29). In other words, it is through facing difficult situations in the right way that we get opportunities to become more like Jesus.

It is when we are in situations that defy our faith in God and we still hold on to our confidence in Him that our faith becomes stronger. It is when we have to deal with 'impossible' people that we can acquire patience! We don't find it difficult to love those who are good to us. But when we learn to be good even to people who hurt us, that is how we grow in love and become more like God (Lk.6:35,36).

On the contrary, if we choose to sulk, question God's love, become bitter, complain to everyone around us, etc., how can God fulfil His promise of

working out things for our good? It is certainly not God's fault, but we are the ones who choose to remain in bondage to sin and end up being more ungodly than before.

It is wrong and irresponsible for us to think that irrespective of what we choose, what we do, or what we think, God will still make us like Jesus! If this were so, then it would be God who fails when some people go to hell or some others never come to enjoy the abundant life that Jesus promises (Jn.10:10)! Then God would have no right to punish anyone, but He should face judgment Himself! How ridiculous!

Let's make the right choices in responding to life's situations, according to God's instructions in His word. Let's resist this tendency to wriggle out of our responsibilities and pass them to someone else, even God.

Pointers along the way #641

Walking with Jesus

Under the covenant which God made with Israel through Moses, there was a system of sacrifices which people had to make in order to deal with their failures to obey God. These sacrifices could not really take away their sins (He.10:4). Their sins would be kept covered (Ps.32:1) till Jesus would come and offer the only sinless and sufficient sacrifice that could take sins away (Jn.1:29). God also knew that no one would be able to keep all the commandments (Ro.3:20). Then why did God make this covenant?

God had to let the people try to keep the commandments and come to realise that it was impossible! But when He saw that this was done, He came out with the new covenant through Jesus.

One big mistake many people make about this new covenant is to assume that since Jesus has made a once-for-all sacrifice (He.7:27) for sins, all they have to do is to confess their sins every time they fall (1Jn.1:9), and continue as before. Yes, it is true that Jesus has made a once-for-all sacrifice, and that we can be forgiven when we confess our sins. But the mistake is to assume that we can continue to live as before.

Many Christians think of salvation *only* as forgiveness of sins which God has graciously given them. Once they have forgiveness for sins, their focus turns to getting a comfortable life on earth! That is really no abundant life (Jn.10:10). The truth is that God does not want to leave us in perpetual failure in sins, with Him just picking us up and washing us clean whenever we fall. Jesus has come to 'take away' sin, and to set us free from the bondage to sin (Jn.8:34).

God has no pleasure in receiving sacrifices from us, but He wants us to actually do His will in our bodies (He.10:5-7). Jesus did the Father's will entirely in His body while He was on earth, and He wants us to follow Him on this way. That is what it really means to follow Jesus (1Jn.2:6).

God has made the new covenant in such a way that now He not only tells us to do His will, but He also enables us to do it. When we are born again through our faith in Jesus, the Holy Spirit regenerates us. He writes God's laws upon our heart and mind and causes us (enables us) to walk in them

(Ez.36:25-27). In this way Jesus breaks the bondage we were in to the power of sin, and makes us free to choose the will of God (Lk.4:18,19).

It is not that we will not sin once we come into this new covenant, but that now we are free to choose *not to sin*. If we fall, which we may all do because of our ignorance or weakness, God has made provision for our forgiveness (1Jn.2:1,2). But He wants us *not to sin* (v.1). As long as we are on this earth, carrying our sinful flesh, we will not become sinless or perfect. But God wants us to press on perfection at every point (He.6:1).

If we are truly born of God, we too will want to stop sinning and to press on to perfection. The Bible says that this is one way the children of God are to be distinguished from others (1Jn.3:8-10).

Pointers along the way #642

A wrong way to love

Many people think that when they love, their duty is to make the other person happy. People who are 'in love' try to do this, sacrificing their own interests, but they realise, especially after they are married, that this is not practical! People who are married expect that it is the duty of their spouse to love them like this, and get disappointed. Some foolishly love their spouses like this, and make themselves slaves to their spouses. Parents think they love their children when they do whatever the children ask, not wanting them to cry, and end up spoiling them. Love is not about happiness, of the others or ours, but it all about being good to the others. If we think of it, we can also understand that we can't really be good to the others without being 'right' too! We can't be doing anything unrighteous or wrong, and expect anything really good, especially anything eternally good, to come to the others.

When we love someone like this, sometimes we may not be able to avoid 'sparks' or 'heat' coming up with our interaction. When iron sharpens iron (Pr.27:17), as two people who are different from each other in many ways interact, there are bound to be differences of opinion, arguments, misunderstandings and times of impasse! That is when both can get their rough edges smoothed out, become better people individually, and also (truly) become more close to each other.

Take a look at marriages. Many people think that a marriage should be without arguments or quarrels, and therefore they compromise on truth and what is right in order to maintain 'peace'! But the challenge is to learn to 'fight fair' without attacking each other, and trying to learn from each other. Remember, sometimes 'peace' cannot be achieved without a war! If we have a wrong idea that all 'war' is 'wrong', we will be giving in all the time to the others in order to keep peace. Then we will neither be able to *be* who we ought to be and *do* what we ought to do, nor be able to bless the other by filling up what they lack.

Love is not a virtue standing all by itself. It has to be 'righteous' and also 'wise'. "And this I pray, that your love may abound still more and more in real knowledge and all discernment, so that you may approve the things that are excellent, in order to be sincere and blameless until the day of Christ"

(Php.1:9,10). We are not to remain in 'baby love', and not even at the level of love where our goal is to avoid conflict and to keep the other happy. We may think that we are 'denying ourselves and following Jesus' when we come to this latter stage, but we must realise that Jesus has given us a much greater example. When He rebuked His beloved disciple Peter strongly (Mt.16:22,23), openly criticised the Pharisees many times, or drove out the money changers from the Temple, did He come out of love? No. He loved them so much that He wanted them to come out of their error. He was willing to take the risk of being misunderstood (Mt.19:21,22).

Pointers along the way #643

The way God provides

One church says, "We don't need medicines. We have faith." Another says, "We don't need psychology. We have the Bible." "We don't need counsellors. We have prayer." I have yet to hear someone say, "We don't need bridges. We can walk on water!" These people choose some area of life where they think God is sufficient for them, without thinking about thousands of other areas where they are using the spiritual and the earthly things God has provided for us. The list goes on. "We don't need to read the Bible. We have the Holy Spirit!" "We don't need any church. We have Jesus."

For people who take this attitude, one common factor is a sense of superiority in comparison to 'ordinary' people, even if they won't say it. Because of this pride, they are unable to see their error or *to receive all that God has prepared for them.*

Before God created man, He created everything that man needed for life, everything in the heavens and the earth. Each part of God's creation has something to contribute to our life on earth. Even now, with the advancement of technology and knowledge, it is still God who meets all our needs from day to day (Mt.6:33;Php.4:19). For example, it is still God who heals even when we take medicines. It is wise to recognise that many times God meets our needs through other people. It is He who has given scientists intelligence and insight to understand more about what He has done in His creation and to bring out new ideas that can help man. On one side we can see His increasing provisions for meeting our material needs. But we can also see His provisions for our social, psychological and spiritual aspects in the way He gives different people insight into such aspects. When Satan is trying to cause more damage in every direction, God is also providing help in different ways to meet our needs.

Some people go astray when they give attention only to the spiritual aspect of life thinking that other things will be automatically be taken care of, misunderstanding Mt.6:33. Do we take from this verse that we don't need to do any work, for example? No. As we set our heart on knowing God more and doing His will, one way He helps us is by guiding us to do our earthly job better! He sends doctors to treat us when our body becomes ill,

psychologists to tell us how to deal with our mental issues and to have better inter-personal relationships, psychiatrists to help us if medicines are needed to deal with problems affecting our mind, counsellors to help us to understand what is going wrong with the way we live and to guide us about what we need to do, etc. How foolish it is to ignore all such help that God is providing for us, under a foolish assumption that we need only God!

When everything is going well, people seem to get away with sitting around with such wrong concepts about God's sufficiency. But when calamity strikes, as when someone falls critically ill, it would be tragic to neglect what God has already provided for us!

Pointers along the way #644

All these declarations!

Some 'man of God' comes and declares that no scheme of the enemy is going to work, and everything is going to be just nice and glowing! Of course, 'in the name of Jesus'. How wonderful if this was true, and all we had to do was to rebuke the devil and declare blessings and everything would be fine! No more sickness, no more poverty, no more broken relationships, no more struggles! Heaven will be on earth right now!

Don't these men of God pause to wonder what difference their declarations have actually made to the lives of people they were talking to? Did all these wonderful things happen? Why is it that these people are still coming to you asking for prayer?

Don't the followers of these 'great' men ever ask why these things have not happened just as they promised? They go on foolishly hoping that one day these things will happen. In the meantime, they promote these servants of God on Facebook and expect many people to 'like' and 'react' to these promotional postings. You are asked to type 'Amen' and share it if you want money and other blessings to come to you the same day or within the week!

These 'great' men have found a nice alibi. "If these things didn't happen to you, it must be because you didn't have enough faith, or there must be some hidden sin in your life!" They happily ignore the fact that Jesus healed *every* person who came to Him. Do you think all those thousands of people had 'faith without doubting' and lived without sin? Of course, in some cases where He wanted to give them more than just healing, He also talked about faith, etc.

Jesus said in this life we would have trouble (Jn.16:33). No declaration is going to be able to erase that! Sometimes Jesus is going to give the Devil chances to test His people (Lk.22:31). We can't just rebuke the Devil and keep him away permanently. This world is never going to be peaceful and prosperous, and we are to look for a trouble free life only in heaven!

But if anyone preaches this truth, he is not going to be popular or recognised as 'a man of God'. A 'man of God' has to paint a rosy picture, freedom from all forms of trouble, etc., and learn the trick of keeping the people's hopes

alive even if actually things are only becoming worse in their practical life. On the contrary, anyone who teaches people to deny themselves, take up their cross and follow the example of Jesus every day (Lk.9:23) will be named 'Legalist', 'No love or grace', etc. Yet such people have the true words of life (Jn.6:67,68).

Don't we know that no man has the power to make things happen just by making declarations, even if he uses the *mantra*, 'in the name of Jesus'? Power belongs only to God (Ps.62:11). His children have to do His will, in His way, when He wants. Only His will, not their wishes! If we try to act as if we were God (even though He has adopted us as His children) and declare things, we will see it doesn't work. Be real! Let's be sober-minded and discerning.

Pointers along the way #645

Misreading the Bible

"Whoever believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God" (1Jn.5:1). This seems to make things extremely easy for someone to be born again; all he needs to do is to believe in the identity of Jesus. Another verse says, "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). "Whoever will call on the name of the Lord will be saved" (v.13). Again, very simple! Sad to say, many people take verses like these and assure themselves and others that everything is fine, they are children of God. What is going wrong here?

Doesn't Satan also believe that Jesus is the Christ or that God raised Him from the dead? But has he been born again? Isn't it easy to 'believe' and 'confess' many facts like this, without that actually affecting one's heart and mind? Just accepting facts as being true does not change a person. These facts must take hold of the person in such a way that he repents from his old sinful ways, sees Jesus as the only One who can save him from his sins, and puts his life entirely into the hands of Jesus with a determination to obey Him. This has not happened to Satan, and to many thousands of people who are deceiving themselves thinking that they are children of God. The sad thing is that they are basing their assumptions on verses like the ones quoted above.

Aren't these verses in the Bible, and isn't the Bible inspired of God? Yes. But God inspired certain *people* to write the words of the Bible, and so there is also a human element in the text of the Bible. Different authors have used different sets of vocabulary, grammar, styles of narration, idioms, colloquial phrases, etc. When we interpret the Bible, we need to take such factors also into consideration if we are to understand properly.

The above verses cannot be taken as standalone truths but only as parts of the truth that is coming out from all over the Bible. Those who are born again will believe that Jesus is the Christ and that God raised Him from the dead. These are true aspects of born again people. But just believing these facts does not cause someone to be born again.

3 John was a letter from John to Gaius. In v.2 we find a greeting at the

beginning of the letter. It is wrong for people to take this as a promise from God of health and prosperity! In Pr.18:21, in the figurative language of proverbs, we find a warning to be careful about how we speak. But some people mistakenly assume that God's word is defining a fact about the supernatural power of a tongue! There are many examples like these where mistakes come because of a wrong assumption that since the Bible is the word of God, every word in it is accurate and precise just as in scientific or legal statements. No. God has allowed the human authors to express things in their own ways, while at the same time getting His truths across. We must keep this in mind as we read and meditate on the words of the Bible.

Pointers along the way #646

Our potential for evil

David was not planning to commit adultery. In fact, he was so upright he wouldn't even think of it. We know that even when he appreciated Abigail, the wife of Nabal, he kept away until her husband died (1Sa.25:39). But he just got excited one day when he unexpectedly saw Bathsheba bathing, called for her and slept with her (2Sa.11:2-4). He sent her home after this, possibly thinking that this was the end of the matter. But she sent word saying she had become pregnant. So he called for Uriah, her husband, and tried his best to make it look as if Uriah was responsible for the baby. But when that man didn't play along, David arranged to have him killed. He thought that no one other than Joab his army chief would know. But God was watching.

We know David was earlier such an upright man that even when opportunity came up twice to finish off King Saul who was out to kill him, he refrained (1Sa.24:6;26:9). Hardly any man would have criticised him had he killed Saul then, because God had already anointed him as king and Saul was troubling him even though he was only trying to serve him. But he was caught unprepared in the case of Bathsheba, and he thought he was 'forced' to kill Uriah in order to preserve his kingdom and his reputation as a man after God's own heart!

We see how King Herod who was scared to kill John the Baptist because he was a prophet and actually liked to listen to him (Mk.6:20) suddenly found himself in a situation where he had to order to kill him! He wanted to avoid becoming embarrassed in front of his guests (v.26)!

Can we assume, "I'll never do anything like that!"? Can we afford to look down on others who fall? "Therefore let him who thinks he stands take heed that he does not fall" (1Co.10:12). Godly people look at the 'worst' examples of sinners and say to themselves, "But for the grace of God, there go I." God preserves the humble. But let us walk with trembling because God will certainly oppose us if we begin to be proud (Jas.4:6). If He removes the protection of grace over us, the best of us can fall down to the deepest depths.

Another lesson that we need to learn is that major falls into sin do not happen just like that, suddenly, out of the blue. It is the little falls here and there

beginning in our attitude and thoughts that slowly prepare us for the major falls. We can be sure that our enemy, the Devil, is watching us all the time, and biding the time to catch us off guard (1Pe.5:8). We can't think we are safe by arguing that we aren't really doing anything seriously wrong, because the Devil knows our weak spots and is always waiting for the right moment.

God wants us to work out our salvation *with fear and trembling* (Php.2:12). Of course, God is watching over us to protect us. But when pride comes, it comes along with the companion called carelessness. That is why we need to work on maintaining an attitude of humility, a sense of dependence on God, and then be sober and vigilant.

Pointers along the way #647

Sensitivity to sin

One discovery we make in life is that we keep recognising now and then that we didn't know we were doing something wrong till later, after we have done wrong. Maybe we came to know it because those acts caused problems to us or others, someone told us, or our own conscience pricked us. In other words, when we were about to do those wrong things, we didn't even realise they were wrong. This can happen all our life.

Several responses can take place. We can justify ourselves or blame others and suppress our conscience. Then we harden ourselves little by little and it may happen that we become callous about sin. Some people take shelter under false grace and refuse to receive the conviction of the Holy Spirit, imagining that it is an accusation of the Devil. A few people may feel condemned, thinking that they are never going to be pleasing to the Lord. A few may seek forgiveness from God and people, try to learn how to avoid those mistakes in the future, and get back to life. Sometimes we remain blind to some faults in our life!

A mark of growing in maturity is becoming more and more aware of sin in our life, learning to overcome in more and more areas in life, and developing the habit of responding quickly to the awareness of sin. If we are in the habit of languishing in our sin for a long period till we run out of steam (!), it shows we have not learnt to respond in the right way. For example, think of what happens when we become angry, bitter or lustful in our mind, to take some typical situations. Do we let the imaginations run in our mind, chew over the memories again and again, and find new angles to interpret events? Then we are actually allowing sin to rule over us, instead of us ruling over sin.

Imagine, instead, if we become aware more or less immediately that we have become angry, bitter or lustful, and then we start our battle to get over these thoughts and feelings! We cry out to God for help because we realise that we have fallen in the past and that we don't have the ability in ourselves to deal with such temptations. We remember what God's word tells us about situations like ours, and we start taking action in different ways to think according to God's ways rather than in human or fleshly ways. Then we find

that we are better prepared for the same temptations the next time, and we are *slowly* becoming more like Jesus in real life!

This spiritual battle is going on in our mind (2Co.11:3), and it is in our mind - in the way we think and react -- that we fail, or overcome and get transformed to the image of Christ (Ro.12:2). It is not going to happen merely by 'believing', 'confessing', 'praising', 'praying', etc. These are all bypass roads that the Devil has put up, trying to deprive believers from the victory that Jesus has purchased for us. Yes, we do believe, etc. But then 'by faith' we need to take action, starting in our mind, like we see in many examples from the heroes of faith in Heb.11.

Pointers along the way #648

What does it mean to be lukewarm?

This is a warning Jesus had to give to the leader of a church, "I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot; I wish that you were cold or hot. So because you are lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of My mouth" (Re.3:15,16). The human way of looking at things is that to be lukewarm is better than being cold. But Jesus thinks that if anyone claims to follow Him and yet takes things lightly, he hasn't really come to know Him. We can understand it when one is cold towards Jesus. But we need to realise that if we don't see Jesus as the pearl of greatest value and therefore become willing to give up everything else for Him (Mt.13:45,46), we haven't really seen Him at all.

How can we see if we have become lukewarm towards Jesus? That is when we take Him for granted and our relationship with Him for granted. Maybe we look back to a certain date when we believed Him. But now we just assume we are following Him and that He is there for us. We go to Him only when we are in need. We may be reading the Bible and going to the church out of a sense of duty rather than with any longing or eagerness on our part. When we have read the Bible we feel good about it, and we go to church because we don't want anyone to think we have backslidden. But otherwise, we hardly think about Jesus or share our life with Him, and generally carry on just like anyone who does not know God.

On the contrary, what would a man do who is 'hot' for Jesus? His life centres around Jesus! He is always talking to Him, asking Him for wisdom and strength, confessing his failures, thanking Him when things go well, always wanting to know Him better, to be pleasing to Him and to fulfil His plans for his life, and to tell others about Him. He is eternally grateful to the Lord that He has had mercy on him, and he wants to live a life that always expresses his gratitude.

Such a person who is hotly in love with Jesus can indeed backslide when things go well for him and he doesn't feel any urgent need to seek His help. This is in our human nature. God warned the people of Israel this could happen to them when He blessed them (De.8:11-14). The danger is that when it happens we may not recognise it. We may be looking back to the date of

our coming to the Lord, all the blessings He has given, how we do the usual 'religious' things connected to our faith, etc. We may not even recognise it if we become 'dead' in our heart towards the Lord as we pat ourselves over the 'ministry' we are doing for the Lord (Re.3:1).

What the Lord wants is for us to be able to see our true condition (v.18). Only then we can know if we have backslidden from a first love for Jesus (Re.2:4), or if we have never known Him at all in a real sense but we have been assuming we were Christians. If we want to be truly pleasing to the Lord, let us make sure that we are on fire for Him. Every part of our life should show the effect of this relationship with Him.

Pointers along the way #649

The gift and the anointing

God entrusts every member of the body of Christ with abilities for a specific function (1Co.12:4-6). Since these functions differ, each one's abilities also differ. All are not able to do everything, even if we wish to. We become dependent on others to perform the functions we are unable to do. Then it becomes necessary for all of us to submit to one another (Ep.5:21) when the other person is the expert in his own work.

But fallen people that we are, we tend to try for independence. When man sinned he got the knowledge of good and evil in himself apart from God and he thinks he can act like God, independently (Ge.3:5). But actually, we *think* we know it all, even though we know only in part! So in many ways we try to live as if each of us is the entire body of Christ. Instead of submitting to the others as they do their functions we try to handle everything by ourselves.

Each function (ministry) has its own concerns and burdens. An evangelist is concerned about people who have not heard the gospel, a teacher about the wrong doctrines people are following, a pastor about the issues people are facing in their lives, a prophet about people going away from the path of God, an administrator about getting all systems to function properly, the social worker about the injustice and inequalities people are facing, the helper about the different needs people are suffering from, etc. We can see that we don't share all of these concerns in the same measure, and it is mostly those connected with our function that occupy our mind.

Each function is also associated with a special sense of discernment concerning the situation in their areas of ministry. This helps each one to quickly see what is lacking so that they can take appropriate action. All of us don't have this sense for all areas of life. But in our own area, we become more and more sensitised as we grow. Each of us will also develop strategies for dealing with our function and to take steps in that direction.

A common problem is not understanding these differences in ministry and not keeping any boundaries for ourselves. As a result, we expect all the others to be able to understand and share our concerns and join with our efforts. Another mistake is to judge the others when they can't 'see' things in our way

in areas where we have insight. Thirdly, we don't realise that we are unable to see some things connected with another's ministry about which they are sensitive and so we wonder why they do some things. Fourthly, we don't realise we are all making mistakes in many things because we don't have insights related to those.

While we recognise the inevitable diversity among people and the way we minister, we all need to follow the ways of God given in the Bible whatever we do. Here is God giving all of us instructions to do everything we do in the right way. We can do this better as we learn to submit to others who are anointed in their own areas of ministry.

Pointers along the way #650

Did Jesus come for you?

When Jesus died on the cross He was paying the price for redeeming the whole of mankind from the consequences and the power of sin (1Jn.2:1,2). But not everyone gets to enjoy this blessing except the ones who go to Him acknowledging their sins, repent from their sinful ways and put their trust in Jesus as their Saviour and Lord. Those who are unwilling to humble themselves in this way and receive this salvation as an unmerited gift may put up various excuses. But their loss is eternal, and the only reason is their own unwillingness to be honest with themselves.

But on the other hand, there seem to be a lot of people who assume they have been accepted by God for different reasons. They assume they are not as bad as those who deserve punishment, their good deeds outweigh their 'little mistakes', God is love and He will not punish them for their human weaknesses, they have done the best they could, God cannot ignore the sacrifices they have made for the church or poor people, they have been 'Christians' all their life, etc. The underlying assumption here is that they are 'good' and so God cannot reject them.

What is the deception that has caught all these people? That God can just wink His eyes over all the wrong things people have done if He finds them comparatively better than others. But that is something God is *unable* to do. He cannot gloss over sins; His righteousness demands that sin must be punished. That is why Jesus, the sinless Lamb of God had to die -- for our sins. But now that He has paid for sins, the offer is open for everyone.

But if we want to receive this free gift of salvation we must agree with the terms and conditions. We must agree that we deserve to be put to death for our sins and that we don't want to sin anymore. Then this offer of God will become available for us, but only then.

If we think in our heart that we are really good people, and that God ought to be delighted to have us with Him, we are seriously deceived. Jesus said, "It is not those who are healthy who need a physician, but those who are sick. I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners" (Mt.9:12,13). In other words, those who think they are good people cannot find acceptance from Jesus, but

only those who sincerely recognise and acknowledge that they are sinners who deserve death.

Some are willing to say, "We are all sinners," "OK, I am the biggest sinner," loosely, without any conviction. They too won't enter the kingdom of God. Salvation is available on a personal basis, to all who go to God with true conviction of their sinfulness and who rejoice in the offer through the death of Jesus Christ. In principle this is very simple, but in practice very few are willing to take this humble position, and so very few finally get saved (Mt.7:14). If we don't want people to miss the true experience of salvation, we mustn't widen the narrow gate by watering down the doctrine of repentance or exaggerating that of grace.

Pointers along the way #651

How do we take correction?

It is true for all people that we don't naturally like correction. But when corrections come our way people react differently. Some ignore them, some push them away, some get disheartened, some feel condemned, some get angry with the one correcting them. It was probably because Nathan knew about these human weaknesses (and also the fact that he was dealing with the king!) that he chose to take the indirect route of a story when he went to David to talk about his sin (2Sa.12:1). Others were not as lucky. King Asa put Hanani in jail for daring to point out his sins (2Chr.16:10).

Why don't we like to hear about our faults, failures, folly, mistakes or sins? It causes us pain because it shows us there is something lacking or wrong with us. Especially if our parents were very critical towards us in childhood, meticulous in pointing out mistakes or comparing us with our siblings, it is natural that we would have tried to build a shield in our mind against criticisms. (We may be angry with our parents and have not forgiven them, not realising that many of them were actually only intending to spur us on to better behaviour!) We try to cultivate a self-image that gives us some self-esteem and we don't like anyone to mar this image by pointing out faults. If anyone does, see if our first response is not one of self-protection using one of many defence mechanisms!

Why don't we admit to ourselves that we, like everyone else, are flawed pieces of art marred by sin? It is because God knows this that He sent His Son to redeem us (1Ti.1:15). Our value is not measured by our flaws but by the price God has paid to redeem us. That is what should form our self-esteem.

If we have been redeemed by God when we acknowledged our sins (and not hid behind a facade) and received the gift of salvation by trusting in the sacrifice of Jesus in our place, we must now realise that God is trying to complete His work of redemption in us by setting us free from our sins and transforming us into the likeness of Jesus (Ro.8:28,29). If we cooperate with Him in this work, He will be able to transform us into the masterpiece of art that we were meant to be. The way He does this is by showing us our flaws and our asking Him to change us there into His nature.

How foolish of us to resist this work by protecting our self-image whenever some flaw gets revealed! Then we will remain the same as before or even become worse! But whether this revelation of our flaws occurs as the Holy Spirit speaks to us through the word of God or through someone pointing out our flaws to us in the everyday interactions of life, wouldn't it be advantageous for us to look at it and deal with it? Hasn't God shown us His love by accepting us as we are, even when He is aware of every bit of corruption that is in us and is not shocked when they come to light? Shouldn't we be basking in His love and allow Him to work with our imperfections so that the final product will be perfect?

Pointers along the way #652

Why don't you fast?

Some disciples of John the baptiser came to Jesus and asked Him why He and His disciples were not fasting as they did (Mt.9:14). John used to wear a dress made of camel's hair and his normal food was locusts and wild honey (3:4), and so it looks like his lifestyle tended to be of the ascetic sort. That group of people came to believe that their lifestyle was actually the spiritual thing to have because they were living sacrificially. So, what the disciples of John were asking was why Jesus didn't follow their lifestyle. What Jesus told them was essentially to be in line with the time and need, and not to be sticky about some rules they liked for themselves (9:16,17).

Jesus' lifestyle was different. His focus was not on what He ate or drank but doing the will of the Father at all times. When He was offered lavish food at times He ate that happily, so much so that He was accused of being a glutton (11:19) and with sinners (9:11), and when He didn't have even a place to sleep in He managed without complaints (8:20). Paul the apostle also learned the important lesson of being content with what he had, be that *little* or *much* (Php.4:11-13).

Disparity in lifestyles has been a topic of great agitation for people of all time because we are unable to define what the right lifestyle should be for a Christian. We like to think *our* style is normal. But there are always people who are poorer than we, and the question that troubles a sincere seeker after the truth is whether it is right for him to live at his standard while his brother has less. The answer is not to become like his poor brother because then he too would become dependent on others as his brother. When Jesus pointed out that there would always be poor with us (Mt.26:11) He was indicating that since this was one of the results of the sinfulness of man, we cannot expect a Utopian situation of equality in this life. Under the circumstances, what we need is for the richer among us to be generous towards others who have less means to take care of themselves (1Ti.6:17,18). There is something essentially lacking in our spirituality if we see a brother in need and close our heart towards him (Jas.2:15,16), especially if his need is of a pressing nature (Ti.3:14).

Neither communism nor socialism is the answer because they are both

idealistic and do not stand the test of being realistic. On the other hand, the question of how much we ought to help others should always exercise our hearts as against how much we should provide for our own family which is our direct responsibility (1Ti.5:8). There are many other parameters also that come in this equation such as whether the needy brother ought to work harder (2Th.3:10), whether there are others who ought to be more responsible towards him (1Ti.5:4), whether he is being disciplined by the Lord at this time (He.12:9,10), etc.

Instead of judging others about lifestyle, let us keep an open, compassionate heart towards those in need.

Pointers along the way #653

Do we keep an account of wrongs?

Think of a man who keeps an account of money others have borrowed from him and he is occupied with finding ways of extracting those amounts from them with interest. Now think of what goes on in our mind when we think of people who have done us wrong in the past. Are we agitating over how we can get back at them, how we want God to make them bleed for it till the last drop, how we can expose them so that everyone will know the truth, how we can confront them and make them fall cowering at our feet, etc.? We may think that we are only being righteous and fair and that they deserve all this and more. But righteousness and justice are not the only things we are to consider.

To understand this, think of where we stand before God. This holy God is so perfectly righteous, holy and just that it would be totally fair for Him to send us straight to hell for the sins we have done (Ro.6:23a). That is what we deserve. But He has been gracious to us, not counting our sins against us but crediting the righteousness of Christ into our account when we repented and placed our trust in Him (4:5;5:8). Being the undeserving recipients of God's mercy towards us, we have lost our rights of being able to judge anyone else. If we have received this forgiveness of our sins freely from God, we have no right to be unforgiving towards anyone else. That is the lesson of the parable of the king and the two servants in Mt.18.

If we have been properly humbled by having to go to God in humility and honesty and acknowledge and confess our sins to Him without trying to justify any, we would not even have the heart to want to take revenge on others or to want to see them suffer for their sins. Now ask ourselves what we do with the account of wrongs we have suffered from others!

The right way to deal with the sins of others against us is to forgive them. When God tells us to do this, He tries to help us by reminding us of how we ourselves have been forgiven (Ep.4:32;Co.3:13). Then we can make a decision in our mind and forgive them as a matter of choice.

When the entries from the account in our mind concerning others come up for attention, we can then remind ourselves that the debt has been cancelled.

When we do this regularly in our mind, we can overcome even the whispers the Accuser makes against others, and we will also find that our feelings don't trouble us as strongly as before.

By forgiving others we are not pretending as if they haven't done any wrong or that they haven't affected our lives. We may be still suffering from the consequences of those wrongs. But what we are affirming is that we have let them go free from our hands, and placed them in God's hands who will deal with them wisely, righteously, justly and mercifully (Ro.12:17-19).

When we were going over the accounts again and again and waited for judgment to fall on the others, it was we who suffered from sleepless nights and heartburn! How foolish and silly!

Pointers along the way #654

Prayer as fellowship

People seem to think of prayer as a means to get things from God. Many teach about *how* to pray in order to ensure answers, using techniques such as worshipping God first, thanking Him for all His benefits and then asking for what we want. Others tell us to catch hold of a promise from the Bible, hold it before God and then to claim an answer from Him. But all this seems to miss the point of prayer. Of course, in its simplest form prayer is a *request* to meet our needs (Php.4:6), (and not a *demand* or *claim*). Praying in Jesus' name (Jn.14:13,14) is not using a *mantra*, but recognising the fact that our standing with God is based on Jesus being our Saviour and Lord, and making sure that our requests are in line with His character and will (1Jn.5:14).

But prayer is much more than requests. It is a means of communicating with God and sharing our life with Him that enriches our fellowship with Him. It is when we see prayer like this that we can think about praying without ceasing (uninterruptedly) (1Th.5:17). Think of going through the day sharing all our thoughts, words and deeds with Him. We consult with Him about what we should do, how we can deal with a particular situation, telling Him what we really feel, sharing with Him about the difficulties we face from our self for doing what He wants, asking Him for wisdom and strength, confessing to Him when we fail and asking for forgiveness, thanking Him for helping us to go through situations victoriously, praying for others we see in need, asking for wisdom to do what we can do to bless them, etc. This means we are in touch with Him even as we do our earthly work, eat, travel, relax, deal with other people, etc. As the Holy Spirit convicts us about what we have done wrong, we can learn from Him what exactly went wrong and how we can do things differently next time (He.4:15,16). When we feel overwhelmed by the burdens we have to carry we can lean on Him, share them with Him and find comfort and encouragement (Mt.11:28-30). He brings to our mind the things He has spoken to us earlier (Jn.14:26). We learn to become more understanding and merciful towards others, and can even get the right word from the Lord to bless them with (Is.50:4).

It is as we feed ourselves with the spiritual food of God's word (1Pe.2:2), and draw on His strength through prayer, that we grow in fellowship with God and become mature. This is also how we get to know Him closely and

intimately. We can't jump into an intimate relationship with God by acting 'familiar' with God or calling Him 'Daddy'! As we open our life to Him and allow Him to deal with the intimate details of our life we get to know God as holy, righteous, loving and merciful.

When God asked Abraham to walk before Him and to be perfect (Ge.17:1), wasn't He also indicating the way to become perfect, by walking before Him? We can't grow by merely accumulating Bible knowledge (Jas.1:22) or spending long times in mechanical prayer (Mt.6:7).

Pointers along the way #655

Moving from head to heart

One major spiritual problem which we make for ourselves is that we keep truths merely in our head in an intellectual sense without allowing them to affect our practical lives. Then those truths are of no use to us, but they deceive us by making us think that since we know and accept them we are fine! Many who 'believe' that Jesus died for the sins of the world still remain as unbelievers in reality because they have not yielded to that truth personally.

Let us look at one example to see how this approach can affect our daily Christian lives. We know the verse that says that when we confess our sins God forgives us (1Jn.1:9). We have heard it and we 'believe' it. Then why is it that even after we have confessed our sins we get troubled by doubts about whether God has *really* forgiven us or if He is angry with us? The truth from this verse is just another idea that we have filed away in our head, but it has not changed our life in a real sense. But truth is supposed to set us free once we know it (Jn.8:32)!

Someone said that in many people's lives there is a foot long gap between the head and the heart. Unless truth comes down from the head to the heart, it is not going to change our lives.

The crucial question is, "How can we move truths from our head to our heart?" The answer is so simple that it escapes our notice!

We are not to just hear the word of God but also to *meditate* on it. This is not to empty our mind as new age teachers say, but to think deeply and to ponder over the truths we have heard. We think about what they really mean, what the implications would be and how we can obey them in our daily life. We think of practical situations where these truths come into play, what we have done in the past, and what we ought to do from now onwards. We may be compelled in some cases to study the Bible regarding this particular subject we have seen and see what the rest of the Bible says about it. At the end we may find ourselves deciding to change our behaviour and to ask God for help to do that. This is how our heart gets changed by the truths we read from the word of God.

Now we can see how these truths will simply remain as some more ideas that we like, which are stored away somewhere in our head but which do not really have any connection with our practical life, if we just hear or read them.

If a preacher takes the trouble to go beyond merely quoting verses and stating truths to expounding the truths in all their dimensions, and we are listening carefully, we can meditate at the same time and experience the change of heart.

Jesus talked about the different responses to hearing the word of God in the parable of the sower. He explains that the one who has a good ground is the one who "hears the word and understands it, and grasps it" (Mt.13:23 AMP). He does not merely hear it, but he takes steps to understand it to the extent of grasping hold of it. It is he who can bring out fruit from his life.

Pointers along the way #656

Generational curse or neglect?

'Generational curse' is a false doctrine that came up comparatively recently. Neither Jesus nor the apostles taught about it. 'Visiting the iniquity' in Ex.20:5 does not mean that God will *punish* children for the father's sins, because that is something God has expressly said is unlike Him (De.24:16;Ez.18:10). But it implies that the natural consequences of the sins of parents will be borne by the children for generations. Many can identify how parental abuse or neglect, especially in the childhood, has affected them lifelong. Too much strictness or discipline, and unrealistic expectations have driven many to have poor self-image and a belief that whatever they do is not going to be enough. Favouritism and comparison with siblings have compelled some to be always proving themselves before others in order to feel important. On the other hand, neglect by the parents (under the guise of giving the children freedom to develop their own personalities or avoiding 'control') may result in self-centred children growing up with hardly any social skills, or others getting into bad company and learning all the wrong things.

When God tell us to train our children in the right way (Pr.22:6), it is because they *need* a lot of training. They have a great potential, and it is not automatically that they learn to follow God and fulfil His special plan for them. All the world is teamed up against God and it attacks godly values and practices through distorted forms of 'human rights', 'respect for all', 'secularism', and 'political correctness'. It stirs up the children through the media with desire for pleasure and feeds them with violent and immoral forms of pleasure. The children grow up with scant respect for authority, expecting that it is their right to get what they want and learning to use illegitimate means to fool others and to have their own way.

Parents themselves are so caught up in the rat race for career growth, more luxury, more comfort, more fun, etc., that they have no time either to sort out their marital problems or to attend to the children. The dysfunction which they have inherited from their parents is passed on to their children in an amplified way. Some people think this is all a curse or witchcraft and try to break it through special prayers and rituals!

But it is very simple for us to see what is going on if only we think about it.

The solution is not to send the children for counselling(!), but for the parents to recognise what they have done wrong and change their ways! What we do as parents affect not only our children but also generations to come. We should be the ones to stop the dysfunction now, and to make every effort to set things right. It may mean apologising to our children(!), and showing our repentance now with spending time with them, listening to what they have to say, trying to understand their points of view, and relating to them in a respectful way. God wants to do that (Mal.4:6).

Pointers along the way #657

Beyond the local church

There may be times when we have to move from the local church because of serious errors in doctrine (about God, Christ, salvation, etc.) or in practice (spiritual abuse, excessive control, immorality, etc.). But we should not be leaving every time we see something we don't like or agree with because then we would not be able to stay anywhere! Let us face the fact that no local church is perfect because none of us is perfect. But staying in an imperfect church need not limit our own growth if we learn to look beyond it to the word of God.

Some people say that what was good for their grandparents and parents is good enough for them. But that is a retrograde stand. We need to be always going in the direction of perfection, correcting errors and mistakes in our own lives and also learning from the mistakes of others. The way to do that is to keep looking at the 'perfect law of liberty' as we study God's word (Ja.1:25) and submit to it. That way we can go personally beyond the errors and lacks we notice in the local church. Each one has to decide whether the differences he has with the church are serious enough to risk a confrontation with the church or walking away from it, or if he just needs to bear with them as with other human limitations. This is a mental and spiritual exercise that we should be engaged in, which will help us to become more mature and which may also become a blessing to others.

It is natural that as we grow in experience many questions will rise up in our mind about whether certain things we have been doing were right or good, and also similarly about other people. These questions may be about doctrines and their practice. We would be totally off course if we place ourselves in the position of an all-knowing, all-sufficient person and judge others (Ro.14:10). But that doesn't mean we shouldn't be thinking about what others say and do so that we can learn from that (1Co.2:15). By the same token we should be open to receiving correction from others even if it comes in a crude or accusatory form, because we stand to benefit whenever we get corrected. God's primary purpose in giving us salvation is to lead us to the place where we will be without blemish before Him. This cannot happen without a continuous striving towards perfection even as we exist in a state of imperfection (He.6:1).

If we are the kind of people who are content to receive all their spiritual food second hand from their church, it only shows that we are not really serious about our spiritual life. We would not do this with our physical food!

We have an opportunity to become more obedient to God in our personal lives whenever God shows us something from His word, even if our local church does not teach that particular matter. Not all local churches will permit us to do this, fearing that we might disrupt the functioning of the church. That is when we need wisdom! But the fear of man should not prevent us from fearing God!

Pointers along the way #658

Is it supernatural?

Many Christians, like the Sadducees of Jesus' time, do not believe in the supernatural, and they try to find some explanation for everything that looks beyond the natural. On the other hand, many Christians who believe in the almighty God who intervenes miraculously in human lives jump to conclude that something must be from God if it is supernatural! It is sad to be led astray by the Devil while we are thinking God is leading us in special ways.

What would you do if you had a 'visitation' from Jesus or an angel proclaiming the word of God who told you about some special task you were called to accomplish? You would naturally be greatly thrilled at this experience and you may become willing to do anything you are told. But would you still take care to examine what you are told with the word of God to see if you are really hearing from God or a deceiver? Or would you assume that your experience must be genuine because it is Jesus you saw or the angel was quoting from the Bible?

Jesus warned us about deception attacking children of God especially in the 'last days' (Mt.24:24). Most times it doesn't look like deception because it comes to us 'in the name of Jesus' (vv.4,5) or using the words of God. Paul warned about deception from Satan when he disguises himself as an 'angel of light' proclaiming what seems like 'light' from God (2Co.11:14).

There are books written by people who were listening supposedly to the direct words of God as they humbly waited on Him. Many of those words appear to be encouraging and comforting, but the deception is in what is *not* written. The picture we get after reading such books is of a very 'nice', lovable God. Without any mention of God asking us to repent from our sins and learn to walk rightly before Him, the picture is a deceitful caricature of the real God.

Suppose you got a vision or dream telling you about the great plans God has for you which makes you feel somewhat superior to the 'ordinary' Christians and you neglect to consult anyone else or God's word to see what you are supposed to do, isn't that a way to ultimate ruin? So many people who sincerely thought God was directing them have finally destroyed themselves

in this way.

As you read the Bible and you suddenly get a bright idea, is it something for the next sermon, a bestseller you are to write or a new movement you are to start? Such bright ideas came to Jesus too in the desert. But He was watchful against temptation because He knew the Father's words, His own humanness, the existence of the Deceiver and the history of others who had fallen. So He told His disciples to watch and pray at all times (Mt.26:41).

God *does* do many supernatural things. But everything supernatural does not come from Him. He wants us to check things with His written word which He has given to us as a standard and a benchmark against which we can calibrate everything else. If we get fooled we may hurt many more people than just ourselves.

Pointers along the way #659

Be 'perfect'

By a quirk of the sinful human mind, most people seem to connect this for all practical purposes to how *others* should be towards them! The others should be understanding, patient, loving, caring, forgiving, listening, spending time with them, helping them, etc.! This is especially true in marriage, and more so in a Christian marriage where expectations tend to go high! It turns out disappointing because nobody is perfect, and the longer we wait for the others to change, the greater our frustration! We have no problem admitting we are not perfect, but we want everyone else to be perfectly accepting and considerate towards us.

In such a state of affairs, what did Jesus mean by asking us to be perfect just as our Heavenly Father is (Mt.5:48)? If we take 'perfect' to mean 'without any fault', it is impossible (1Jn.1:8). But if we look at the context of this verse we can understand that what Jesus meant was that our love should be as broad as God's, not only to those who loved us or who were lovable. What Luke mentions in the same context in his book is that we should be merciful to the others in the same way as God (Lk.6:36). It will be wrong for us to take this phrase 'be perfect' out of context, and broaden it to refer to an impossible level of faultlessness.

Some people take it very personally and feel condemned practically all the time because they find themselves imperfect. Strive as they might, they always find themselves coming short of their own expectations. This takes away their boldness before God and people and some of them constantly question their experience of salvation.

God asked Abraham to walk before Him and 'be perfect' (Ge.17:1). Most modern translations avoid using this word 'perfect' for fear of misleading people and substitute with 'blameless'. To be 'blameless' is more within our reach because it implies that we must intend well in our heart and not have wrong intentions in whatever we do. We are told to *press on* towards perfection (He.6:1) or maturity. This does not mean that we ought to become perfect and without fault while we are on earth but that we should be moving slowly but steadily in the direction of perfection. In other words, this means that we need to take our sanctification seriously by which we become more

and more like Jesus, or perfect.

Once this is understood and grasped, we need to reckon with the fact that as long as we live here we are going to meet with imperfection all around us and inside us too. This is the practical balance. Pressing on towards perfection and expecting to face everything still imperfect in many ways! For example, working towards a better marriage and still dealing with an imperfect one. Working out our sanctification so that we become more like Jesus and at the same time bearing with others who are not like Jesus in many ways just as we are. In all this, we can seek to keep our heart right with God, blameless and with only good intentions towards everyone.

Pointers along the way #660

Seeking after the truth

Not many people seem to be seriously interested in knowing the truth. Most are only looking for ways to enjoy life, and truth is something they want to keep away from. Some, like Pilate, disdain the truth by philosophically shrugging it off. Some like to discuss about the truth, making it look as if they are earnest about it. But they are only trying to satisfy their curiosity, like two people from different churches asking questions about what the other church believes and practises! Paul realised that some people in Athens made it their hobby to discuss novel ideas. But when they heard the truth they just moved on to other 'truths'!

But it is the truth that can set us free (Jn.8:32) from ignorance and the bondage we all are in to greater or lesser degree because of sin (v.34). Jesus, the Truth, is the Saviour who sets us free (v.36), but He sets us free by first letting the light shine over the darkness in our lives (Ac.26:18). It is therefore crucial for us to seek to know the truth more and more in every area of our life.

However, the mere knowledge of the truth will not set anyone free, but only if one follows in his practical life the truth he comes to know. Another way of putting this is to say that faith that does not result in acts of obedience to the truth we believe in is dead (Jas.2:26). But a deeper secret of the spiritual life is that unless we are really and sincerely keen on living according to the truth we get to know, God will not give us the discernment to know what the truth really is. This is implied in Jn.7:17.

This means that we may study the Bible in detail, refer to the meanings in the original languages, read commentaries of great scholars, get degrees in theology and still miss the truth if we are not interested in letting the truth affect the way we live. Early in my spiritual life someone confronted me with a challenge to look at a controversial subject among Christians. He asked me to examine that subject from the Bible with an open mind and with a promise to God that whatever God showed me I would obey! Looking back I see how that became a big milestone in my spiritual path.

We all have so much that is wrong in our lives in what we believe and do,

even after becoming children of God. Some of it we are aware of, but a lot of it we are still blind to. The path of sanctification leading towards perfection is travelled by getting to know more about where we are wrong and changing it. It is only when we *want* to know the truth about where we are wrong and what is right, and we are determined to *change* our lives when God shows us the truth that God is going to give us discernment concerning the truth (Jn.7:17). Isn't this what Jesus meant by talking about our eye being clear (Lk.11:34)? It represents what we are looking for, our goal, our motive. If this is not clear, no 'light' is going to enter our life, and then we may even be great Bible scholars without any true knowledge of God.

Pointers along the way #661

Healing of the mind

As a result of the Fall, our mind has a tendency to think foolishly, feel negatively and set wrong goals. One aim of God in saving us is to restore us to the original perfection He had in mind for man. But even after we have become children of God, we tend to have different attitudes towards the concept of mental troubles. Some deny them altogether, misquoting 2Ti.1:7 (KJV), claiming that God *has* given them a 'sound mind', and denying the reality. Some recognise their problems, but because of the stigma associated with mental disorders choose to suffer rather than seek help. Some keep praying for a miracle from God without receiving the help He has provided through other people. Sad to say, comparatively few seek help from qualified professionals along with prayer.

Mental health problems are of different types, some needing medication from psychiatrists and others needing short or long term psychotherapy or counselling. Professionally qualified Christians who know the Lord and His ways personally have a great advantage over secular therapists in that they bring God into the picture and address also the spiritual problems of people including those of demonic origin, apart from the psychiatric and psychological aspects.

A lot of problems people face in their personal lives and dealing with others originate in the way they grew up, especially in their childhood. (There are other problems and causes too, but this is the focus here.) The human child has a great potential for growth and so he needs many years of training, especially from his parents (Pr.22:6). Unfortunately this is an area where things are going from bad to worse with neglect and abuse (verbal, emotional, physical and sexual) on the rise. A large percentage of children get 'rejected' (the opposite of being loved, accepted and treated affectionately), including those who wrongly conclude they were rejected because they misunderstood some well-meaning step their parents took. Children, with their limited knowledge and ability to think, form their own strategies of coping with their pain (usually self-protection, self-rejection or rebellion), and this distorts their mental development to various degrees. As adults they find themselves suffering from disorders of different intensity. Some problems become so deep-rooted that it becomes too difficult to correct, but

many others can be helped to come to differing levels of recovery, if only they would be open to receiving help.

Sometimes the process of recovery includes bringing to mind the past hurt and dealing with the details along with the help of the Holy Spirit and getting into God's perspective of things and His long term plans. Even though it may look too painful to get back into the past hurt, the result will be a deep inner cleansing and a fresh and hopeful outlook on life. Psychology and theology come together to bring healing to the whole person, with new attitudes towards life and people.

Pointers along the way #662

Positive going negative

There is a strong trend in the world, to focus on the positive and keep away the negative in order to be successful and happy. This ignores a practical fact that we can't become positive until we deal properly with the negative. As a result, all this push for the positive is only translating people into a world of make-believe where they try to imagine things are positive and close their eyes towards the negative.

First there is the positive gospel where all one has to do is to 'accept' Jesus. Any talk about sin and hell will be highly negative and will disturb the hearers! But how can a man repent unless he knows about his sins and their consequence? Until he acknowledges his sins and turns his back on them, how can he get to the Saviour to receive forgiveness?

Then comes the 'good' news of who God has made him 'in Christ', a new creature seated with Christ in the heavenly places with all things made new! No one tells him that he has to put off his old nature (Ep.4:22), keep it on the cross (Ga.5:24), take up his cross daily and deny himself in order to follow Jesus (Lk.9:23)! All he needs to do is to make positive confessions and everything will work out for good! If things happen to go wrong, he just has to command the mountain to go fall in the sea! He is not told that the devil will be after him and how he has to be watchful (1Pe.5:8) after putting on the whole armour of God (Ep.6:11).

The new 'believer' is promised that once he came to Jesus everything would be nice and bubbly. He can just sing worship songs to the latest beat and have a blast every Sunday.

Unfortunately, when the realities of life hit the new 'believers' many of them go back to their old lives. Some are too ashamed to do that after professing salvation and learn quickly to create a facade of words, songs and activities behind which they can hide their real selves and pretend everything is going well.

The salvation Jesus came with is real, dealing with the problems and challenges of daily life and not a euphoria couched in words and activities. Jesus helps us to face life honestly and squarely. There are a lot of negative

things we have to deal with which come from our old self (Ro.6:12,13), a sinful world around and the fury of the devil directed at us. Jesus not only shows us how to deal with these but also walks with us and sometimes carries us through. In the end we become wiser and stronger, even able to help other people. We can see this if we read the Bible honestly and seek after God with all our heart. We can see how many things we are exhorted to 'do', how to deal with the negative things and how to become positive in a real way.

Let us not fritter away our lives with nice music and thrilling videos imagining that that is all there is to salvation. Don't live in an imaginary positivity. Let us face reality and deal with it, and experience the truth of God's love, wisdom and power that will transform our practical lives.

Pointers along the way #663

Following Jesus, along with the others!

All of us who have chosen to follow Jesus are different in so many ways. Our understanding of what it means to follow Jesus, what we look for in following Him, our clarity on what He wants us to do and not do -- all these vary based on the teaching we have received, the background we grew up in, our personality traits, the church group we are in, our personal knowledge of the Bible, etc. As a result of this, we hold different values and practice different customs, emphasise different doctrines, and we even consider certain things to be 'right' while some others consider the same things 'wrong'!

Fellowship with other believers is one of the things God has given to us as a help in growing up spiritually, as we encourage, comfort, teach, challenge and correct one another. At the same time, it is one of the challenges of life to live and work with others who are different from us. Many times we get rubbed in the wrong way, and we are tempted to withdraw or even attack. But this 'rubbing' is supposed to smoothen the rough edges and fill up the lacks for both of us. This does not usually happen without our getting hurt at times, or confused, perplexed or angry at other times. But it becomes easier when we realise that others are also under 'renovation' by the Lord just as we are (Ro.15:7). The process of bearing with difficult situations and people, forgiving others and asking for forgiveness ourselves, and caring for others and going out of our way to help others in practical ways as well as through prayer and encouragement adds up to growth both for us and for others.

One thing we keep in mind is that because of our fallen nature, our predominant characteristic is selfishness. As a result, we tend to see and focus on the other people's faults and to be blind to ours. This is something we need to consciously look for, to see where we are going wrong, and how we need to do things better. This is required for our spiritual growth, and often to be done even when there is no reciprocation from the other side! We should not give up, even when we cannot find any change from the other side!

Another thing to be remembered as we personally seek to get closer to the Lord and to become more and more faithful to Him is that we need to be

faithful to the Holy Spirit working through our conscience even when others around us do not see things the way we do. One usual thought that comes to us is to question why we should hold up a high standard when others who are reputed to be even leaders do not worry about such things. But remember, if we have been given more light, He expects more from us (Lk.12:48). If we give in to popular standards, even what we have may be taken away from us (Lk.8:18). As someone has said, if we have chosen to be disciples of Jesus, there will be things He will not allow us to do while He may overlook them in some others. Perhaps our being different is what may make others think.

Pointers along the way #664

The way of escape

"No temptation that comes your way is beyond the course of what others have had to face. All you need to remember is that God will never let you down; He'll never let you be pushed past your limit; He'll always be there to help you come through it" (1Co.10:13 MSG). Most translations say that God will provide a way of 'escape' along with the temptation. Some people think this means God would take away the temptation itself. God does that at times. But most often He allows us to face temptation so that we can come through it as a better person, a little more mature and a little more like Jesus.

How does He help us to go through the time of testing? This is where His love and wisdom come in, to give us the right type of help that we need, not only to deal with our situation but also to give us the training we need at that particular point in our life. This could be to comfort or encourage us, or to challenge us to put off the things in our life that are holding us back from making progress and becoming what He wants us to be. He may do this by reminding us of some word He has spoken to us before, by blocking some path we expected to go in, bringing someone into our path to tell us something or to make us think in new directions, etc.

One mistake we make is to expect God to do for us what we figure out is the best thing. Sometimes we think He will do what He did for us earlier or what we heard He had done for others. People mistakenly think that this is what He.13:8 means! But God custom designs His help for each one of us! His goal is not for us to escape from the situation but to endure or bear the temptation. This means that in the end we come out on top of the situation rather than crushed under it. We are not to get damaged through it but come through it better off than when we entered it.

Our understanding of what God wants to do in us makes the difference in how we face situations. If we are waiting to escape from them, we may beat our head against the wall and get hurt finally. But if we are looking out for learning what He wants to specifically in each situation, we can look in the right direction. Even if we can't figure out what exactly He is doing, we can go through by trusting Him and holding on to Him. Perhaps later on we may be able to look back and understand what He accomplished in us.

Let us remember that the essence of every temptation is for us to make a choice for God against our own desires or preferences. Therefore it would mean that the right way to go through the temptation would many times involve giving up something from our side in order to receive what God is offering for us. Even though God is mindful of our earthly needs and He provides them for us (Mt.6:31,32), we should not miss out the eternal lessons and transformation that He wants to give us through our daily situations (2Co.4:17). For that, our heart must be looking at Him to see what eternal work He wants to do in us (Co.3:1,2).

Pointers along the way #665

What is Jesus worth to me?

It's one thing to sing about how precious Jesus is to us and quite another thing to choose Him above other things in our daily life. We are all tempted many times, in many ways, to choose money, pleasure, fame, favour of man, etc., at the cost of denying Jesus, disobeying or displeasing Him. In a sense this is the essence of temptation. Christians can be put into groups in relation to their response to temptation. Some keep Jesus and daily life in different compartments and find no incongruity between singing songs of worship and then living just like unbelievers the rest of the time. Some struggle between the two, but give in now and then to forgetting Jesus, and justify themselves saying that if we are to live in this world we have to take some pragmatic steps. Some others also struggle between the two, but their constant endeavour is to be faithful to Jesus and they feel terribly pained when they fall. Where do we stand?

How precious Jesus is to us is seen not in the songs we sing, but in comparison to things and people in our life. Jesus pictured the kingdom of God like a pearl merchant who found one pearl more precious than everything else he had, sold off all else and bought it (Mt.13:45,46). What we can learn from this is that if we really want to belong to His kingdom, we must value Him more than everything else. The rich young ruler failed when he chose to hold on to his wealth than follow Jesus (Mk.10:21). Satan tried to tempt Jesus Himself with power and fame by bending a little to him (Mt.4:8-10).

Many times we find ourselves in a place where if we stand with Jesus some of our relatives or friends may get upset with us. That is when we are tested to see who is more important for us, Jesus or our friends or loved ones. Jesus has not given us any excuse when He said that if we loved any of our loved ones *more* than Him, we could not really be His disciples (Mt.10:37).

Many times we are to choose between pleasing Jesus and pleasing ourselves. Sin often offers us pleasure, but it is transient and temporary and ultimately leads to our ruin. Esau is portrayed before us as someone who chose temporary pleasure and threw away his birth right (He.12:16,17).

Satan tries to intimidate us by pointing out how much we will lose if we chose Jesus in such practical situations. He says we might lose our fun in life, job, money, position, family, friendship, etc., and that we would regret it afterwards. He tries to persuade us to choose the immediate gain and to ignore the eternal implications.

But Jesus is both for now and for eternity. He is frank enough to tell us that if we follow Him we might suffer opposition and loss on this earth (Mt.10:34;Jn.16:33). But we must think of the ultimate and lasting blessings in comparison to the temporary suffering here. He will take care of us here, but we will get eternal wealth, pleasure and friendship in the place of the earthly ones (Mk.10:29,30). What is it worth to us?

Pointers along the way #666

Bearing fruit

Many Christians wrongly assume that all we need to do in order to bear fruit is to *abide* in Christ. This is based on Jesus' teaching that if we abide in Him we will bear fruit and that without Him we can do nothing (Jn.15:4,5). The whole truth revolves around how we understand 'abide'. If we think that since all true born again believers are 'in Christ' then it looks as if all we need to do is to remain 'in Christ'. Many times this leads to a passive recognition of the fact of being in Christ, and then we can't understand why we aren't bearing fruit!

Being in Christ is not the same as abiding in Christ. Being in Christ is a judicial position God has given us, and removing us from that position is not something God will do except in extreme situations (Re.3:5). But abiding in Christ is something we have to ensure moment by moment. The way to do that is by keeping God's commandments (Jn.15:10)! In other words, it is only as we walk in God's ways that we can remain close to Him and bear fruit.

Bearing fruit includes the fruit of the Spirit which we bear in our character and also bearing fruit in the ministry which He has entrusted to us. Let us look at the fruit of the Spirit for now. The fruit that is natural for us is what comes from our flesh (Ga.5:19-21). But in order for us to bear the fruit of the Spirit (vv.22,23), we need to be led by the Spirit and also to walk by the Spirit (vv.18,25). We need to also keep our flesh and its desires crucified (v.24). The psalmist also confirms that it is only those who forsake the way of sinners and think constantly with great delight about the law of the Lord who will bear fruit (Ps.1:1-3).

This is not a passive abiding but an active and deliberate devotion to walking with the Lord and doing His will. It will certainly imply giving up our natural tendencies that come up from our old life (flesh). We can know how to do this and be strengthened to do this as we allow ourselves to be led by the Spirit every moment of our life.

This means that *every* part of our life has to be open to God for His deep and intensive scrutiny and also that our heart must be willing to receive correction and rebuke as also teaching and guidance. It goes without saying that when

the Spirit convicts us of sin we must be quick to admit it and turn away from it instead of hiding from God or justifying ourselves.

Isn't it actually easier for us to be involved in Christian ministries even with great sacrifice or to pray long prayers than to allow the Spirit to lead us in the hidden parts of our heart where intentions and motives get scrutinised (He.4:12)? That explains why actual fruit is much lacking. But God's desire is that we should all bear *much* fruit and bring glory and honour to Him (Jn.15:8). Shall we not repent in our heart and turn to God rather than satisfy ourselves with the name and reputation that come with ministry? God gives grace to the humble (Jas.4:6). Shall we humble ourselves (v.10)?

Pointers along the way #667

Two dangers of grace!

The grace of God is the most amazing truth in God's dealing with man, and it continues to amaze us the more we experience it. Through His grace (unmerited favour) He accepts us even though no natural logic can qualify us to find acceptance from the infinitely holy God (Ep.2:8,9). Also, He gives us grace (help) by which He transforms us from ashes to beauty (He.4:16;2Pe.1:3,4). We may wish that He should do everything for us automatically. But He wants us to ask for it (Ez.36:37) and then submit to His Spirit (Ro.8:13).

But there are two forms of danger that we might fall into like two cliffs on both sides of the path of grace. We may have natural tendencies to prefer one to the other, or we may even stray to either side again and again. This can happen without our realising it till we almost fall off from the cliff! The word of God tells us to watch out, and experience also helps us to learn to be more careful!

"For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery" (Ga.5:1). We can get back under the Law. The concept of undeserved favour is so unbelievable to the natural mind that some time after we have believed and accepted it we may start wondering if grace is really enough. We think that if our life is not good enough He would not be very happy with us. The fact is that there is some truth in this in that He expects us to make progress in our transformation into the Christ-like life and if we do not show any progress even after He has done much for us, He is not going to be happy (Lk.13:7). But the lie that the Devil brings into the situation is to imply that God has stopped loving us or that He has turned against us. His love and mercy will never cease (Je.31:3;La.3:22). God's promise to us is that He will *never* leave or forsake us (He.13:5b). Even as we repent of our failures and shortcomings we must rejoice in His forgiveness and restoration and hold on to hope. Another way back to the Law is when grace changes us we may become confident in ourselves.

The other danger is that we might take grace for granted and become careless with our life. "For you were called to freedom, brothers. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh," (Ga.5:13). We must be led by the

Spirit (v.18) and keep our old desires crucified (v.24). Only then can we bear spiritual fruit. The error is to assume that since God has accepted us freely He has no expectations about how we respond to Him. Forgiveness is taken casually and presumed on. We tend to dull the pricks of our conscience and the conviction of the Holy Spirit as if they are the accusation of the Devil. But the absence of the fruit should alert us to our real condition.

These two dangers of becoming 'legalistic' and following 'hyper-grace' are always close by. Just knowing about these teachings is not enough. We also need to be aware in humility and honesty of what is going on with us in our heart and mind.

Pointers along the way #668

Man the glory of creation

It was at the end of God's creation of the heaven and the earth, and after creating all the living creatures on land, water and air, that God finally created man. What was special about man was that he was created in the image of God (Ge.1:27). Even though everything which God created was 'good', it was after man was in place in the midst of and in charge of everything else that God exclaimed that it was 'very good'. Here was man in His own image, with the ability to think, feel and choose with his mind and a spirit to communicate with Him. Even after man had sinned, the image of God was marred and all man's faculties became corrupted, God never took away His image in him. The final goal of salvation is that God's image in man should be fully functional in the way He intended.

He is now working through the Holy Spirit in those who have been born again to transform us little by little into His image (Ro.8:29). That will happen when we submit to the Holy Spirit and put to death the tendencies that rise from our old nature (v.13). God will not do it by Himself without our choice, because the freedom He has given us to choose is one of His most prized gifts to us, and He will not override that. Therefore, what we sow, we will reap (Ga.6:7).

The more we become like Jesus, the more we will be able to experience freedom in exercising our faculties according to the will of God. As we get renewed in the way we think (Ro.12:2), thinking in godly ways, we will also experience more liberation from the rule of negative feelings in our mind, and we will also be able to make proper choices in line with the will of God.

One way Satan tries to hinder this growth is by deceiving us to think that we must not 'think' but only believe! How many Christians are held in bondage in this way! The ability to question, learn and change is very much needed in the process of restoration of God's image in us. Another way the Devil works is by over-emphasising 'submission' of 'the ordinary brothers and sisters' to the pastors or leaders, even wives to their husbands, in such a way that free thinking is curtailed (He.13:17;Ep.5:22). People are taught to believe that humility implies unquestioning yielding.

This has an appearance of wisdom in the eyes of people (Co.2:23), but actually this is preventing people from exercising their God-given faculties. Think of the example of Jesus who was bold to the point of appearing to be arrogant before the Pharisees and Pilate who tried to intimidate and subdue Him. Think of the 'young' Paul questioning the senior leader Peter when the latter went wrong (Ga.2:11). Paul didn't give in one bit to those who tried to enslave him (vv.4,5).

Humility is not to make ourselves weak and to let others trample us down. It is to have a sober judgment of ourselves in order to let the image of God function freely in us (Ro.12:3).

Pointers along the way #669

Grace plus?

One contention in the early church was that unless one was circumcised he could not be saved (Ac.15:1). After the apostles prayed and debated about this it was concluded that circumcision was not necessary. When the doctrine of salvation became clearer in the course of time, Paul stated that it was only by grace through faith (Ep.2:8,9). The implication was that if salvation was by the unmerited favour from God, nothing we could do could qualify us for it or was necessary to add to it (Ro.4:4,5).

But circumcision is not the issue that troubles Christians these days. But haven't you heard people say that unless we are baptised in water in addition to having faith we cannot be saved? They quote Mk.16:16 to prove this. What they don't realise is that the Bible cannot teach one thing in one place and another in another place! When the rest of the New Testament teaches salvation by grace, surely there must be some other meaning to this verse! Especially when the second half of the verse mentions only believing as the thing that avoids condemnation! (There are even some who practically believe that baptism alone will save people. Some 'baptise' babies and others baptise adults and assume that now those are saved!)

For a larger number of people who have been born again through faith a question that still remains is their relationship to keeping God's laws. Surely there are many verses in both the OT and NT that talk about the importance of keeping God's commandments and warning that those who don't keep His commandments are deceiving themselves. How do we understand this rightly?

Salvation is by grace *through* faith. What exactly is this faith? Of course not just accepting some facts such as that Jesus is the Son of God and that He died and rose from the dead. Even demons believe these (Jas.2:19). But to receive salvation through God's unmerited favour towards us we must first know and believe that we *don't* deserve His favour. This is the conviction of our sins and sinfulness. If this conviction is genuine there will also be a resulting cry wanting to be saved from our sins. It is only then that we value the fact that God sent His Son to die in our place so that He could forgive our sins. In other words, faith that doesn't include conviction of sins and

repentance is incomplete. Repentance is not 'works' as some accuse, but only the proper response towards God in order to receive His grace.

Once we are born again through the work of the Holy Spirit who gives us a new heart and writes His laws on our heart (He.8:10). This will give us a strong desire to keep God's commandments and our life will change (Jas.2:22). We don't do this *in order to* find acceptance from God, but as a result of His accepting us freely! If we say we are saved by grace and after that we start including something else in our thinking that what we do will win us favour from God, we go back under the law (Ga.5:1,2). Our standing with God is based only on grace.

Pointers along the way #670

Overcoming fear

Jesus told His disciples again and again, "Fear not!" Fear, anxiety, worry -- are all about the future when we don't know what will happen. The future is not something we can control, even if we manage to do everything needed in the present. This sense of powerlessness adds to our fears. Even when we think about the promises of God, we are stricken by the memories of things that have gone wrong for us as well as the others in the past, and we wonder if things will go well for us now. The Devil tells us that we are not good enough for God and that we will always be imperfect in whatever we do, and so we can't expect God to keep His promises for us, even if He has kept them for others! Even though we try to think that we have faith in God's promises, our mind tells us that we do have doubts!

One big mistake we make is when we disassociate our faith from our relationship with God. Some people try to work up their faith by positive thinking and confession, repeating Bible verses to themselves, resisting doubts, etc., and think that when they get to a state (hopefully!) where they have no doubts at all, then they can get what they want with their faith. The mistake is that they think it is *their faith* that brings the miracle, not recognising the fact that in this they are depending on their faith and not on God.

Some others happily receive truths about God, agree with them, and think that now they have faith and that God will make everything work out fine for us. Here the mistake is in assuming that 'faith' in our head will automatically bear fruit.

Yet another mistake is to imagine that when we have faith God will always keep us free from problems or when the problems come He will immediately snatch us out of them. But in reality we all go through many problems and they don't just go away when we pray (Jn.16:33;Ac.14:22).

Faith, at its root, is essentially our confidence in God. It is *He* who has the power (Ps.62:11) and not our faith or words. It is He who will do great things when we trust Him, and it is not we who will accomplish great things by our faith. When the time of trial comes, if we place our confidence in God as our

heavenly Father who loves us, cares for us, knows everything that is happening to us, and who is mighty to do whatever He thinks is best for us, *then* our anxiety will disappear. Not when we try to think positively, imagining we are holding on to God's promises. We shouldn't be holding on His promises in the place of holding on to Him who has given the promises.

When we hold on to God *when we face trouble*, we know we are safe like children holding their father's hands. We know He is in control. We can remember how He has led us through the problems even though at that time we had felt it was hopeless (Ps.37:25).

Shadrach, Meshech and Abednego trusted God so much that they left their future in God's hands, and that made them fearless (Da.3:17,18). It is only like this that we can overcome fear.

Pointers along the way #671

Do we look at the mirror?

Reading the Bible as a duty or to prepare a message isn't going to do us any good personally, if we remain the same afterwards. But when we look at it as at a mirror that shows us what God thinks about us, it gives us an opportunity to cleanse ourselves and to become more like Him (2Co.3:18). It is when we allow God to show us the dirt in our life that we can seek Him for cleansing and become better people, more like Him (Jas.1:23,24).

But the blindness that is over our flesh (old sinful life) (Ep.4:18) does not disappear easily unless we crucify it (Ga.5:24) and constantly put it to death through the power of the Spirit (Ro.8:13). All of us are blind to a greater or lesser extent about the sins and mistakes we commit. We are unable to see them till the light of God shines into our heart, and that will happen only when we open ourselves to His light and are willing to humbly acknowledge them and change.

Look at one example from the life of Moses. There was a time when God asked him to strike a rock with his rod for water to flow out (Ex.17:6). But the next time he was asked only to speak to it (Nu.20:8). But Moses was angry and frustrated with the people this time and instead of just speaking to the rock he struck it with his rod, calling them rebels (vv.10,11). God still gave water to the people. But He reprimanded Moses for not honouring Him before the people and told him that he would not be able to take the people into the Promised Land (v.12).

We can see clearly that even though the people were disbelieving God's ability to provide them water, it was for Moses' own proud behaviour that he was disciplined. But the sad thing is that he could not see his own fault even later. In De.4:21, which was his closing message to the people before he died, he said that it was because of them that God was angry with him!

No, God is not like that. He will not punish anyone for someone else's sins (Ez.18:20). How could He be angry with Moses for the people's sins? But Moses couldn't see his own fault here because his anger was still focused on the people's unbelief.

Now we cannot look down on Moses because we have been guilty of the

same wrong attitude many times in the past. We may thinking in the same way many times even now without realising it. This is our old human nature. And that is why we need to make special efforts to look at the mirror and see in God's light where we have gone wrong, even when we can easily see the faults of others. That is the only way we can make progress. How sad it will be if we go down to the grave imagining great things about ourselves when God has seen so many sinful and foolish things we have done without even acknowledging them?

God is forgiving, as He was to Moses. What Moses couldn't do was to lead the people into the Land, though he himself entered it at the time of Jesus' transfiguration. But what we lose is our opportunity to cleanse ourselves and become more like Jesus.

Pointers along the way #672

How much can we stretch God's mercy?

God is someone we can't design according to our fancies. We need to find out what He is like and then accept it. But we have a tendency to 'like' the 'nice' features of His nature like love and mercy and downplay others like righteousness, justice and impartiality. Yet, how much ever we try, He will remain who He is and will not fit into our mould.

Some people emphasise God's mercy so much that they conclude He can never hurt anyone. They find verses from different parts of the Bible and finally come to the doctrine called universalism, which is essentially that He will finally save everyone and not punish any! What is more common among born again Christians is imagining that there is forgiveness always available even if one goes on sinning because "His mercy endures forever" (Ps.136) and "His mercies are new every morning" (La.3:22,23). These verses are indeed true, but we may misunderstand them.

God's mercy has to be always kept balanced with other aspects like His righteousness, because otherwise we will have a distorted picture of Him. What does "His mercy is upon generation after generation toward those who fear Him" (Lk.1:50) mean? It means that if we want to be sure of receiving mercy from God we must go to Him with respect. "But there is forgiveness with You, that You may be feared" (Ps.130:4). The fact is that if we take His mercy for granted or presume on it and become careless with sin, we can't assume that we will receive it. On the other hand, the Bible makes it clear that for all those go to God in repentance and godly sorrow, God's arms of mercy are always open (Lk.15:20;Jn.6:37).

God warns us many times because He knows that we might just have this tendency to stretch His mercy to cover our careless unfaithfulness. He.10:26 warns against *going on sinning*. This is about going on doing what we know to be wrong, defiantly or blatantly. Those who are failing even though they are struggling to overcome should not wrongly apply this to themselves and lose hope. But those who plan on asking for forgiveness and then go ahead with sin need to worry.

Those who take mercy for granted need warnings but those who fail while

struggling against sin should be comforted. But the former tend to 'rejoice' over proclamations of mercy and the latter tend to lose hope thinking they have gone beyond the scope of mercy.

God's mercy is fresh for today even if we have availed of a lot of it till yesterday, if we go to God in repentance and sorrow, not wanting to sin again. He will offer it tomorrow also. But we would be fooling ourselves if we imagine God is so nice that He won't mind if we enjoy a little bit of the pleasures of sin here and there. It will be painful to discover how 'hard' He can be on those who defy Him (Ro.11:22), and what we have lost in the process. If He chastises us, it will still be from His love, for our good, for us to repent, but it will be painful to go through (He.12:6,11).

Pointers along the way #673

Willing to own up?

When Adam and Eve ate from the tree of knowledge of good and evil, unexpectedly for them, the knowledge they got was a very distorted one! Overnight they became experts at finding ways to wriggle out of their own responsibility for the wrong they did and to put the blame on someone or something else! This is the tendency we are all born with now. But a transformation takes place when the light of the Gospel enters our dark mind. We *begin* to see ourselves as sinners who deserve the judgment of hell on our lives. If this does not happen, then the conversion is not genuine, and such a person's spiritual experience is at best superficial.

But it looks like this conviction does not become clearer and clearer as it ought to, in many lives. The closer we get to God who dwells in perfect 'light', we are supposed to see more and more of the hidden areas of our life and how corrupt we are to the core, according to our 'old man'. We are supposed to lose our confidence in ourselves and become more dependent on God's grace as time goes on. But actually this process may not have even begun in some of our lives, got stuck at some level, or not made much progress. When we have a problem with someone else, don't we quickly see what is wrong with that person and fail to see anything wrong with us? Even when there is obviously something wrong with the other person, we still fail to see what was wrong in our response! There is a lot of blindness in our spiritual sight. Jesus was right in comparing it with having a log in our own eyes while we try to take off the speck in the other's eye (Mt.7:3-5).

Another area where we fail to see light is when we think of the contribution of our parents and the experiences of our childhood in shaping us. It may be true that some of us have suffered damage in our psychological development because of the neglect or abuse we have faced in our growing years. (It is possible that sometimes our parents did something good for us but we misinterpreted it because of our limited understanding. Even then we may have suffered damage.) Now we may be going around upset with those who harmed us and with God for handing us such a bad start in life. But as long as we continue in this approach to life, we may not realise that we are only adding further to the damage.

Why don't we own up to the fact that even when others have done us harm,

our wrong response to them has hurt us deeply? Why don't we realise that what we are now is the result not only of the circumstances we have gone through but also of all the choices *we* have made in response to those circumstances?

Joseph had 13 years of adversity in his life beginning with his brothers selling him off, and ending up in prison. But he kept his faith in God and His ultimate plan for his life, and made the right choice to forgive his brothers and move on (Ge.50:20). Are we willing to own up the responsibility for our life and start making the right moves at least now?

Pointers along the way #674

Not of us

It is sad to see someone trying to cast out a demon and asking the demon, "Do you know who I am?" or shouting loudly trying to make the demon submit. They don't realise it is not their power that can cast out demons but the authority of Jesus in His name. It is not of us (2Co.4:7 KJV). This gives us boldness, because it is not about how godly we are, how much we know the Bible, etc. It's about the fact that Jesus has overcome the Devil and all demons, and disarmed them of their power when He died and rose up (Co.2:15). If we belong to Him, He has granted us the authority to cast out demons (Lk.10:19). The sons of Sceva tried to use a formula "In the name of Jesus" without knowing Him (Ac.19:13).

But it is not only with respect to demons that we need to remember this, that power belongs to God (Ps.62:11) and that He will not give His glory to another (Is.48:11). In whatever we do, if we can remember this, we can subject ourselves to Him and depend on Him as wholly as possible. For example, in preaching or doing any other ministry, if we are conscious of the fact that it is not we who can bless others but God, we will learn not to depend on our cleverness or skills but on His anointing that alone can bring about lasting results.

When Joshua was going to take Jericho, the first city in the Promised Land, he listened to God and His instructions. But after that great success, he thought he knew how to handle things by himself at Ai, the next city, and failed miserably. Isn't that our tendency too? A little bit of success and it goes to our head. We begin to think *we* have done it! And our pride goes before a fall!

The apostle Paul knew what a dangerous position he was in, where he could easily trust in himself because of his cleverness, knowledge, heritage, training, etc. So he took extra care not to project himself or his oratorical skills when he shared the Gospel with the Corinthians (1Co.2:3-5). He wasn't trying to impress them but to bless them with the pure truth of God which alone could save them. Otherwise, they could have been left with the impression, "What a great speaker!" and missed the penetrating power of the Holy Spirit.

Relying on the power of the Holy Spirit to work through us is one of the powerful secrets of ministry. We can do this only when we know how impotent and helpless we are without Him, whatever theatrical skills or special effects we employ. Waiting on Him to speak the word that He gives, and speaking in the way He wants, we can seek to leave the people thinking about the message they heard rather than the greatness of the messenger. Whether we plant or water, it is only God who can give growth (1Co.3:6,7).

If we truly know who the Lord is and our position before Him, our highest goal will be to ensure that He receives the glory that is due to Him (Ro.11:36). We will seek avoid getting into the limelight, and if it comes to us we will be quick to pass on the glory to Him openly or in our heart.

Pointers along the way #675

Forgive *me*

Have you realised there is big difference between asking God to forgive our sins and asking Him to forgive us? Of course, we need to ask for forgiveness for our sins (1Jn.1:9). But there is more depth when we see ourselves as needing forgiveness for the way we *are*, than for what we have done! When the tax collector stood in the temple and prayed, he said, "God, be merciful to me, *the sinner!*" (Lk.18:13). Some scholars point out that he said "the sinner" and not just "a sinner."

It is possible when we ask for forgiveness for our sins that we may be thinking we are generally good people except that we slipped up in this one instance. It is good we are convicted of our particular sins. But how much more cleansing can take place when we see that we, as individual people, are corrupt to the core? Even the good things we do are tainted by the corruption of selfishness in some form. When God enables us to do something we take some credit for it. When things go well we tend to backslide by becoming careless about spending time with God (1Co.10:12). Our concern for other people's needs becomes polluted by looking down on them. Etc.

When Christ came to pick us up we were *dead* in sins and dead towards God (Ep.2:1). We were living independent of God, doing our own 'thing' (4:18,19). This is the 'old man' the remnants of which we are still carrying about, the 'flesh' from the desires of which we are being tempted (Ga.5:17;Jas.1:14). It is this deep inner corruption from which Jesus is setting us free, as we yield to His Spirit (Ro.8:13). As we move closer to God in honesty, openness and sincerity we see that we sin because we are sinners, and that it is not the sins we fall into that make us sinners! It is God's desire that we become 'true', 'real' and holy in the deepest parts of our life (Ps.51:6). This perfection will be completed only when we have been 'glorified' in eternity.

At the same time, that is to be the direction in which we move towards God. We ought not to be satisfied by getting our particular sins forgiven but we ought to press on in the direction of perfection (He.6:1).

Paul illustrates this truth by the fact that he was progressively seeing himself

as the least of the apostles (1Co.15:9), the very least of all saints (Ep.3:8) and finally as the chief of sinners (1Ti.1:15) while at the same time becoming more like Christ in his life and understanding and also more powerful in his ministry!

What have we learned from God in the past year that we didn't know before? Have our opinions about ourselves become smaller and more realistic? How has our life been bearing the fruit of the Spirit? How much useful have we become to others in Jesus' name? Has our gratitude increased towards God just for loving us?

It's not just about God 'accepting' us (Jn.6:37), but also our progress. We are not perfect. But are we in the right direction? Remember, God looks more intensely at our heart than our outside appearance (1Sa.16:7).

Pointers along the way #676

Suffering from sin

Someone does something wrong to us. That makes us angry with him. For the next couple of days this occupies our mind, makes us lose our mood, and we even lose our sleep and appetite thinking about that man's evil. We may think of returning it to him in a greater measure so that he will learn a lesson and never do it to us again. And if we actually do it, it escalates the problem to the next level, and our unhappiness lasts for a longer time. We tell ourselves that it is this other person who has caused us all this suffering and that it is all his fault.

But have we ever paused to think that *it is our response* to this person that has caused us all the misery for us? In most cases that man has been going around without even a thought about us while we may have even lost our interest in life! We think it is not fair. But have we thought that even though he has done something bad to us, we *chose* to react like this, and that it was this reaction that caused us all the problem? Couldn't we have chosen to react in a different way altogether and avoided all our misery? Or do we imagine that when someone does something wrong to us we *have* to be miserable afterwards?

One of the results of the Fall is that our abilities to think, feel and choose rightly have been damaged. As a part of this, we have even lost the awareness of the fact that we *have* an ability to choose what we think and that what we think will determine how we feel. For example, what would happen if we think like this when someone does us wrong? "Poor man, I forgive him because he doesn't even understand what he is really doing (Lk.23:34). There must be something troubling him. But why should I also do bad or feel bad just because he has done something wrong? Thank God He has taught me His ways." Our anger, bitterness, thoughts of revenge or wanting to teach him a lesson, etc., disappear, and we can have a peaceful time, eat well, sleep well, etc. Now we can think soberly and calmly about how we should respond in a practical way to what he has done.

The Devil tries to hit two things with one stone; he tempts one man to do us wrong, and then after that he knows we will be angry with that man. If we fall to that temptation we cause ourselves *unnecessary* suffering! We are

suffering now for 'no fault of ours' but because someone else has done wrong! Aren't we being foolish to let ourselves suffer like this when we have the God given ability to respond differently and enjoy God's peace?

"Consider Him who has endured such hostility by sinners against Himself, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart" (He.12:2,3). Jesus is our example. How He behaved and reacted was always good and right because He was not allowing others to determine His own behaviour. He decided always, as He was led by the Father, to do the right thing no matter how unreasonably or badly others treated Him. As a result, even though provocations came He enjoyed His peace all the time.

Pointers along the way #677

What is your dream?

Many motivational speakers, including preachers, tell us to dream big and to pursue it. They point out that an aimless life is a wasted opportunity leading to frustration and misery. Preachers excite us by saying Jesus came to give us an abundant life (Jn.10:10) and that God will give us the desires of our heart (Ps.37:4) so that we can live life to the full. We start dreaming about becoming famous, making it big in our career, amassing huge wealth, enjoying ourselves to the maximum (trying new cuisines and drinks, dressing up, going for adventure sports, travelling to exotic places), etc. We may not know that all who start this journey don't reach anywhere near their dream, and that others who managed to go on find at the end that it didn't really satisfy them (Ec.2:1-11)!

Jesus narrated the parable of a rich man who achieved more than he would ever need, but who was going to die and find that his soul was still empty (Lk.12:16-21). The takeaway from the story was that he ought to have been 'rich towards God' instead. What would be the ultimate benefit if we had it best in this life and found ourselves lacking in the next (Mt.16:26)? Ought we not to work for eternal things while we still have time instead of wasting our life with things that will one day perish (Jn.6:27)?

Sad to say, many people, even after they think they have come to Jesus, are only concerned about their life on earth. Some of them have 'come to Jesus' only for dealing with earthly problems (v.26). Many of them have not even heard anything about repenting from their sins and turning to Jesus for salvation from their sins. That is why their mind turns to earthly goals even when Jesus talks about an abundant life referring to the eternal life. Hopefully many of them will ultimately understand the Gospel properly and respond to Jesus from their heart.

God never promises that whatever we dream He will give to us! He will give us what we desire in our heart if our delight is in Him (Ps.37:4). What kind of dreams would we have if our delight is in Him? *Our dream will be to fulfil the dream He has for us!* Joseph didn't make up his mind that one day he was going to become a great leader. But what he did was to follow the dream God had placed in his heart. That makes the big difference. Preachers should be

talking about surrendering our lives to God without reservation and seeking God to find out what He wants us to accomplish for Him. And then we can put our heart and strength into doing what He wants us to do.

How many lives are getting wasted around us even among Christians! People make up their mind about what they want to do without hearing from God, make schemes to get it done, manipulate things and people to get to their ambitions, and think they have made it, not realising that all their work is going to get burnt up one day (1Co.3:14,15). Only what God plans and does in His power for His glory will remain. The secret is to be a part of that.

Pointers along the way #678

What is pleasing to the Lord?

Abel offered a more pleasing offering to God, than Cain (He.11:4). Why was this more pleasing? We may have heard that it was because he offered a blood sacrifice while Cain gave only grain. This is an assumption and not actually mentioned in the Bible. What *is* mentioned is, "the Lord had regard for Abel and for his offering; but for Cain and for his offering He had no regard" (Ge.4:4,5). Both blood sacrifices and grain offerings were required later under the Law, and so it was not the type offering that displeased God regarding Cain. What is important to note is that it was not just about the offerings, but also (mainly) about Abel and Cain themselves. Their personal character and relationship with God also had something to do with it.

We see that it was 'by faith' that Abel offered a more pleasing offering to God (He.11:4). Without faith it is impossible to be pleasing to God (v.6). It was possibly without faith that Cain made his offering. What does it mean to make an offering 'by faith'?

It is not, as many preachers tell us, to make an offering as a 'seed' with the hope of getting a hundredfold return! This is like a business investment which is not what is pleasing to God. Since it is that we ought to live and walk by faith (Ro.1:17;2Co.5:7), looking at the eternal things that are not yet seen rather than the earthly things that are seen now (2Co.4:18), faith in God is something that produces in us a way of life. It gives us a relationship with God, and it is from this relationship that we make offerings or sacrifices. It seems to be obvious from Cain's subsequent reactions that he did not have this relationship with God.

When we have a relationship with God through faith, we can see many different things that go on inside us. We see ourselves as sinners accepted freely by God by grace. We know that we don't deserve anything good from God while what we really deserve is His wrath. We are filled with gratitude to God and our response is to give ourselves as living sacrifices -- not wanting to do our own will but His will all the time (Ro.12:1;2Co.5:15). We worship Him not only with our lips (He.13:15), but also with our life surrendered to Him. It is with such an attitude that we give money or service.

On the contrary, will the Lord be pleased if we give money out of a sense of duty or hoping for a reward in return? That is not 'by faith'. If we serve God in order to be seen by men or to receive praise, or to find favour with God there is no faith there. Without a relationship through faith, giving a large amount of money or making a huge sacrifice is wasted with God, while giving a cup of water (Mt.10:42) or just two small coins (Lk.21:2,3) is precious in His sight if it is by faith.

God pays more attention to our heart and why we do things rather than to what and how much we do. This truth must revolutionise our thinking and all that we do if we are to bring meaning and purpose to our life.

Pointers along the way #679

Balanced spirituality

What is it to be spiritual? To be very keen to observe rituals, forms and practices and to keep a mental list of do's and don'ts for ourselves is not spirituality but religiosity. To be spiritually minded is to pay attention to what is going on in our heart (spirit) in the sight of God and to seek to be pleasing to Him in everything. People generally do not make this distinction, and so when they see a man who spends a lot of time in prayer, reading the Bible, 'going to church', etc., they assume he is spiritual. A spiritual man may also do these things, but merely doing them without a sensitivity towards God in our heart does not make us spiritual.

Then we can have a problem of classifying religious practices as spiritual and everything else as secular, earthly or worldly. We think that abstention is spiritual. People think that going to work, eating and drinking, sleeping, doing exercises, relaxing with music, a good book or movie as earthly or worldly. Thus we have monks or nuns who move away from common life and spend most of their time with 'spiritual' activities. But look at Jesus. There was a time He worked as a carpenter. He ate, drank and slept like everyone else. He had no problem with going to wedding celebrations, attending dinners given by Pharisees and mixing with sinners whom the religious people avoided. But His heart was devoted to the Father, and He kept Himself without sin even as He moved around and lived in this sinful world.

If we take a super-spiritual attitude and 'give up' earthly things and spend all our time reading the Bible or praying, it will finally affect us badly. We are not people with just a spirit with which we connect to God, but we also have a soul (mind) and a body. It is God's desire that we experience His blessings in all three aspects of our being (1Th.5:23). Although we must seek God's kingdom and His righteousness *first* in our life (Mt.6:33) and our mind must be set more on the things above than on the things of this world (Co.3:1,2), we must not neglect to pay attention to the needs of the body and our mind too. Of course, whatever we do, we must do for the glory of God (1Co.10:31). But we will suffer in the long run if we don't take care of the needs of our body and mind also.

Our body needs good food, good exercise and good rest. Our mind needs excitement, relaxation, and development in knowledge and understanding and the ability to analyse situations and make proper decisions. Even though our body and mind can be denied satisfaction at times in order to give importance to the things of God (Lk.9:23), if they are neglected for long periods it can affect our physical and mental health also. If that happens we will also get hindered from accomplishing the will of God! One mark of spiritual growth is getting better balance among our body, mind and spirit. This usually takes place as we exercise our mind about it and allow the Holy Spirit to teach and correct us (He.5:13,14).

Pointers along the way #680

Conflict in the Body

The church of Jesus Christ on this earth is called the Body of Christ and all born again believers in Christ are members in it (Ro.12:5;1Co.12:12), irrespective of which local church they belong to. Those who are not born again are not members of this Body even if they belong to some local church! Membership in the Body is according to the names that are recorded in the Lamb's Book of Life (Re.21:27). Each of us has a part to play in the functioning of the Body for which we are gifted differently (1Co.12:6,7). As a result we all have different concerns about the work of the Body and we find ourselves differing in how we go about with our ministry. But that is not our *only* difference! We are different in so many ways from one another -- temperament, family background and experiences, intelligence, skills, knowledge, education, etc. This diversity among the members of the Body leads to a lot of conflicts.

A man is so very loving and kind but he cannot say no to anyone. Another one is very tender and compassionate but tends to overlook justice and discipline. One is taken up with justice and rights but he cannot overlook anyone's sins or weaknesses. One is very strong on being neat and tidy but is not careful about punctuality. One man wants to help everyone but he doesn't know how to avoid meddling. One is so prayerful but he is not known for action. One is very 'anointed' in ministry but he is failing in family life.

What this also shows is that we are all in different training modules! Even though the ultimate goal of our training is to become like Jesus, right now we seem to be attending very different classes. One has to manage his anger or lust, and another his passivity or laziness! All this causes many problems in dealing with one another. We can't understand why some others are like that, and also why they can't be merciful to us!

But God knows what He is doing, and He causes even these conflicts to work together for our good (Ro.8:28). In other words, one brother's faulty behaviour has a chance to train us to gain in some virtue (Jas.1:2-4)! And our sinful behaviour provides an 'opportunity' to someone else! But we are not used to thinking like this. When we have a conflict with another, we wonder how he could be like that (noting his problem area), not realising that some

weakness is being exposed in us too at the same time. In the same way, we keep patting ourselves on our back thinking of our strong areas that we are using in this conflict! If you have done wrong to me, I think of your wrong and you think of my lack of forgiveness. And I think about how I never do what you have done, and you think of how good natured you are usually and this was only a slip!

If only we can think first of taking the beam from our eyes (Mt.7:3) we would be able to see better and also contribute towards the overall building of the Body of Christ (Ep.4:16). In this way we can grow individually and collectively towards the fullness of Christ.

Pointers along the way #681

Experiencing the love of God

God's love for people is so outstanding compared to His other characteristics that the Bible says He *is* love (1Jn.4:16). He loves us so much that He sent His only Son, Jesus, to die for us so that we can get to have a relationship with Him as His children (Jn.3:16). Jesus died for the sins of the *whole world* (1Jn.2:2), showing that His love makes no difference among human differences such as race, colour, language, community, intelligence, education, wealth, etc. He loves every one of the people He has created. But the fact is that not everyone experiences His love in the same way.

There is a love of God everybody experiences, irrespective of whether they believe in God or not. This love is what He has for people just because He is the One who created them. It is because of this love that He provides for their general life on earth even if they are atheists (Mt.5:45) and not looking for Him. It is not just Christians who get food to eat, clothes to wear, places to stay, jobs to earn their living, etc. But this is the lowest level of experiencing God's love. People may not even realise they are enjoying the love of God here.

But then there are those who are seeking God for different needs in their earthly life, such as healing, a promotion in their job, a resolution for their problems, money to clear off their debts, etc. Some of these people get to experience miraculous answers to their prayers, and they realise that God is real, He cares for them, He understands their cries, etc. Some of them become 'believers' in God, start going to church, reading the Bible, etc. But this knowledge of God is limited to meeting their earthly needs. Sad to say, many preachers are catering only to these needs of people and portraying God only as the One who provides.

A closer step towards God brings people on their knees in recognition of their sins and coming to God through faith in Jesus. They get born again, and get a relationship with God as His children. They experience His love in the forgiveness of sins and also in having God as their Father, experiencing His love through fellowship with Him.

But there are others who get still closer to God, when they learn to deny

themselves and do God's will in their lives (Lk.9:23). When they keep choosing God above themselves, other people and things on earth, they experience a closeness to God beyond what others know. When Abraham was willing to sacrifice his son Isaac in order to obey God, God saw clearly how much he valued Him (Ge.22:12). This opened a new level of closeness for Abraham with God.

There are different levels at which we can experience God's love for us. But it is only when we open doors one after another with appropriate keys that such experiences become available to us. And, it is when we keep seeking Him for greater closeness that we find these doors and get a chance to enter through them. God loves us all, but we experience His love for us according to how we respond to Him.

Pointers along the way #682

Why go after other gods?

When God made the (old) covenant with the people of Israel, they heartily told Him that all that He had said, they would follow (Ex.24:3). They meant it sincerely. But their history is full of instances when they went after other gods, got into bondage, cried out to God and He rescued them. How could this happen?

We Christians are to keep that history in mind so that we ourselves will not turn away from God (1Co.10:6). We may not immediately go after sculptured idols or other faiths, but there is danger, nevertheless, that we might stray away from God going after things that eventually take the place of God in our life. It is good for us to think of how we may go after other gods just as it happened to Israel.

One way this happens is when one wants to marry a person from another faith or no faith. Even though God warns against it (2Co.6:14), and we have the example of how Solomon's foreign wives turned him to other gods (1Ki.11:4), people still think it will be all right for them!

For those who want to enjoy pleasures of this life without limit, the commandments of God can appear to be unnecessarily restrictive. They begin to reason to themselves that there is nothing wrong in enjoying life, but soon they may cross God's boundaries beginning with what they call 'little' compromises. In this case these pleasures have become gods in their life. It can be a pursuit after money, thinking that once we get enough of it, we can have all we want in life. The *love of money* is very deceptive (1Ti.6:10), and we will find that we have to bow a little here and there to Satan in order to get more of it (Mt.4:8,9). It may be too late when we discover that we cannot pursue God and wealth at the same time (Mt.6:24).

Another way we can get attracted towards other 'gods' is when we get disappointed with God, when He does not answer our prayers. If that happens it is actually only because He does not think what we have asked for is good for us or if He has something better for us. But if we do not believe this, we may try to seek other means to get what we want. Some use money, the help of influential people, and other religious practitioners to get things done.

Some even go after psychics, astrologers, those who practice black magic, etc., seeking things for themselves!

The people of Israel may have become fascinated by the festivals and practices of their neighbours, or sought idols to get 'blessings' (without having to 'obey' God or give up sinful desires). Living among people of all kinds of faith, we may get influenced by them, not recognising the compromise creeping into our minds. We may forget that we are to influence them and not the other way.

The way of God is a narrow path in this life where only a few people walk (Mt.7:13,14). But there are treasures that God keeps for those who endure and overcome (Jas.1:12;1Co.2:9). It is not enough to start or to be sincere, but we need to hold fast to what we believe, till the end (He.3:14).

Pointers along the way #683

Doctrine and life

Think of a local church which emphasises the doctrine about all believers being members together of the Body of Christ (1Co.12:12,13). Suppose people in that church imagine that because they believe this doctrine they are *the* Body of Christ and no one else! Another church teaches that since the early church had only one church in any locality and it was known by that locality, e.g., the church in Corinth, we should not have different churches in the same place. But what happens when they start calling themselves *the* church in that locality, to the exclusion of all the others? Another church wants to be in the '144000' (Re.14:1) as a distinct group among all believers. But can someone who is in that church assume that because he accepts this doctrine he is in that number and others are not? There are many other examples!

Is spiritual qualification based on what doctrine we follow or how we live? What are we going to be judged for, our knowledge of doctrine or how we have actually lived our lives? The Bible is very clear that our judgment (evaluation or assessment) will be based on our deeds (2Co.5:10). As those who have been made children of God by His grace through our faith, there is not going to be any judgment on us (1Th.5:9) like the one the other people will face which will determine their eternal destiny (Re.20:12). Our 'judgment' will be to assess our *fruit* in life and ministry so as to give us rewards and responsibilities (See the parable of the talents in Mt.25).

How deceived we will be if we merely take pride in our doctrine and look down on others who do not value our doctrine as much as we think they should! Knowledge of doctrine is not to be an end or goal in itself. It should equip us to live better lives and to serve the Lord and His people better! If our life and service have not become any better, what right do we have to get excited about our doctrine? And certainly, if we have rightly understood any doctrine of God it should result in more humility in our heart which is seen in our behaviour rather than pride that looks down on others!

The basic problem is that we get taken up with some 'form' and imagine that the form is the same as spirituality. But spirituality is about an inner reality, isn't it? A correct form of doctrine can lead us to a correct experience of

spirituality inside us. But it is not automatic. There is a good chance, as can be seen all around and in our own life if we are honest, that we start taking pride in our form and miss the inner development that God wants to lead us to.

Also, there are all shades of doctrines, but not all of them are equally important or capable of leading us to a godly life (1Ti.6:3). Here again let us avoid the tendency to spend too much of time on doctrines that are merely peripheral. They may add to our knowledge and give us an appearance of being scholars, but they may only make us puffed up (1Co.8:1) and not make us any more godly that we were before!

Pointers along the way #684

Ten commandments or more?

Some people say, "I keep the Ten Commandments and so I am sure God will take me to heaven." Some have questions, "Should I keep all the other commandments in the Old Testament? Hasn't Jesus added many more commandments? How is it possible for anyone to keep all the commandments? Doesn't the New Testament teach that we are free from the Law? Etc." It is very clear that keeping commandments as a way of receiving God's approval doesn't work, because *no one* is able to keep them all (Ga.3:10,11). Coming to Jesus through faith includes acknowledging this about ourselves and asking for forgiveness on the basis of His taking our punishment on the cross. Anyone who thinks he is good enough for God because of his good life is totally mistaken. Jesus is God's solution for helpless, sinful human beings.

But didn't God give the Ten Commandments and say that if anyone obeyed them they would be blessed? He did. But one goal of the commandments was to lead people to realise they were unable to do that. Paul who tried hard to keep the whole Law came to see that when he came to the last one, which was about coveting or lusting after things, he got exposed (Ro.7:7,8)! When Jesus came He explained how the real expectation of God was for us to obey Him in our inner being, and not just to be satisfied with keeping our external actions pure. He said how anger is at the root of murder (Mt.5:21,22) as lust with adultery (vv.27,28). At this point, anyone who trusted in keeping the Ten Commandments can see that he has no hope apart from seeking mercy from God as an unmerited favour.

Under the new covenant which God made through Jesus, He made it clear that His acceptance of men is only going to be on the basis of grace which we have to receive through faith (Ep.2:8,9). This frees us from having to struggle to keep all the law and always wondering if we would make it. But we come into the law of the Spirit of life in Christ (Ro.8:1,2) by which we get renewed in our heart and mind, giving us a desire to do what God really wants and an ability to do it (Php.2:12,13). When we come into this kind of life which God gives when we are born again, the other kinds of laws in the Old Testament that pertained to sacrifices, festivals, clean and unclean things, etc., become irrelevant for us, because they were only intended to prepare the people for

the coming of the new covenant (Co.2:16,17).

Now, as born again Christians what we need to do is to be renewed in our mind and understand the finer aspects of what God requires from us (Ro.12:2) as we behold the life of God which is revealed in the life of Jesus as we read the word of God (2Co.3:18). As we see how different our own life is from that of God, we now have the opportunity to put away our old way of life and put on His way (Ep.4:22-24). That is how the requirements of the law will get fulfilled in us in reality (Ro.8:4), which have already been credited to our account in God's eyes when we believed in Jesus.

Pointers along the way #685

How could David become so blind?

This man after God's own heart who had fought lion and bear by faith, brought down Goliath, refused to hurt the Lord's anointed, and taught Israel about God through many psalms fell into adultery and murder one day. The whole nation must have known about it, but he seems to have been blind to it till the prophet Nathan confronted him. These two parts of David's life do not seem to match. Though the Bible does not say how this happened, we can perhaps make a guess in order to learn some lessons for ourselves.

Perhaps David thought that since he was the king who made rules for the nation, he was not accountable to the people. But then he forgot that he was indeed accountable to God. Perhaps he thought that no one knew about it except Joab his commander and so he could get away with it. But perhaps no one dared to talk to him because he was the king and their own life would be in danger if they questioned him!

If we are in a position of authority over some others perhaps the reason no one points out our sins may be just that. Perhaps people are just too polite about it or thinking that it is none of their business. But does it mean that we are without sin if no one is talking about it? We are accountable to God who is everywhere, in whose eyes there is nothing hidden and who knows even the thoughts and intentions of our heart (He.4:12,13). Our standard of measuring our spiritual progress is not what people think about us or how much we are 'serving God' but what goes on inside us -- what we think about ourselves in the secret of our thoughts, what we do away from the eyes of man, why we do what we do, how honest we are before God about every detail of our life, etc.

There is nothing much great if we acknowledge our sins when we are caught. But our honesty before God is tested by how we deal with God about the details of our private lives on which we are not even likely to be caught by people! Here again, why we speak and do things is more important than our deeds themselves. If we really want to become spiritual, we have to learn to live before God (Ge.17:1;Jas.4:10), irrespective of the good or bad opinion people have about us. It is also likely that if we have a reputation built on our gifts or ministry, people may have a better opinion about us than is true! But,

in the ultimate analysis, the only thing that will count is what God thinks about us, and there is no fooling Him.

When Paul's turn comes to receive a crown from the hands of Jesus who will tell him, "Well done, you good and faithful servant," Paul may give the Lord the crown back reminding Him that He deserves it for showing grace to a blasphemer and persecutor (Re.4:10,11). It is that kind of humility and honesty that will earn him a crown first of all! In spite of all the name and fame Paul received among Christians, he was also honest enough to see that there was nothing good in his flesh (Ro.7:18) and that he was still doing things he didn't want to do (v.20).

Pointers along the way #686

Uncomfortable looking comfort

James opens his letter urging us to do something that seems to carry a strange contradiction, "Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials" (Jas.1:2). Mortal people that we are, how can we be expected to rejoice when we are going through trouble? He says 'various trials' meaning that he has the whole wide spectrum in mind! What we would naturally feel are things like anger, anxiety, fear, doubt, despair, discouragement, etc. This is natural because we look at the natural things, 'the things that are seen', the things concerning different aspects of our life here on earth. We feel bad when things seem to be too difficult for us, unreasonable or out of our control, and the outcome seems to be uncertain. But what God says is that if we turn our eyes from this world to the eternal one, these feelings can be replaced by joy (vv.3,4). Overcoming in the midst of trials -- not giving in to temptations and enduring (surviving the attack against our faith) -- transforms our character into godliness.

If this understanding grips us and we can turn our mind towards what our trials can accomplish, then those trials lose their teeth. We are then able to look forward with expectation (1Co.2:9) rather than fear the future or look at it gloomily. Paul points to the 'eternal weight of glory' that can become ours when we face trials in the right way when we look at the things not seen and not at the things that are seen (2Co.4:17,18). When we do this, our old way of life gets given over to death while we receive the life of Jesus into our new nature (v.10).

It is clear that for this to happen, the life of Jesus must be really valuable in our eyes, more valuable than the comfort and pleasures of this life. Only then will we be able to see our trials as 'momentary and light' afflictions. We must have also learned to walk by faith and not by sight (by our senses).

It is natural that we pray for trials to be kept away from us and for relief when we face them. But the practical reality is that we cannot entirely keep them away. They will be there, as Jesus Himself has warned us (Jn.16:33). We must not be shocked when even 'fiery' testings come upon us (1Pe.4:12). God knows how much we can bear (1Co.10:13), but He also knows that unless our faith is tested through fire, its genuineness cannot be assured. Even if it appears to us that our trial is more than we can handle, we can overcome it

when we receive grace to help us (He.4:16).

Finally, God tells us to comfort ourselves with knowing that one day all this will end, when we are taken up to be with Him (1Th.4:17,18). In other words, we are not to expect that trials will disappear before that! We must be mentally prepared knowing that they will come, and when they do come we can turn our attention to what God wants to do in us through them even as we pray for relief and the strength to go through with them. Here is a part of God's comfort that is hidden from natural eyes.

Pointers along the way #687

Rejection, acceptance, ministry

How did David come to become a man after God's own heart? How did he get to know God's heart so well that we see poured out through his psalms? Perhaps his experiences as he grew up will give us some clues.

David was a handsome man with many natural abilities such as in music, boldness before danger (1Sa.17:34,35), valour and strategy in warfare (2Sa.17:8), etc. He was the youngest of eight brothers in his family, and neither father nor brothers thought much of him. We see this because when Jesse, David's father, presented his sons one after another to Samuel who had come to anoint the next king of Israel, he had not thought of David as a possible candidate until Samuel pressed him for it (1Sa.16:10,11). Another time, when David took some food for his brothers at the battle front, his eldest brother derided him saying that his place was with the sheep (1Sa.17:28). So David's portion in life at that time was to be alone with the sheep, despised and rejected by his family. But many of his psalms were born out of this experience. Loneliness and the derision of his family led him to find his comfort and consolation from God. That was where his faith grew, and his frank exchanges with God helped him to know the heart of God and His ways.

Joseph was sold off as a slave by his brothers, and for the next thirteen years he went from one calamity to another. But he got to know God through those tough circumstances and he did not give up his faith, till finally God raised him to the position of leadership in Egypt.

Like a lot of people do, these two men could have complained about their lot in life and become bitter with God and turned against Him. Instead they chose to make God their refuge and strength and thus triumphed in their life. Not only that, they both became sources of great blessing to people around them and examples to millions later on.

In God's scheme of things, calamities are also things that can be turned around to bring good (Ro.8:28,29). But this does not happen automatically without our cooperation, because if we become bitter, it can turn us away from God. But if we look to God at such times and receive the comfort He

will give us, we can become so enriched in our lives that we can begin to comfort others (2Co.1:3,4). I have noticed that several people who have come to me for counsel after suffering the consequences of rejection by parents, siblings, school teachers, spouse, etc., when they find acceptance and comfort from Christ, want to become counsellors themselves.

When we suffer and there is no human being to turn to, there is God to whom we can turn, who stands waiting to welcome us to His embrace (Mt.11:28;Re.3:20). His comfort is of an eternal nature, not only helping us in our present trouble but also giving us eternal treasures (2Co.4:17) such as knowing His heart and having fellowship with Him (1Jn.1:3). It fills us with gratitude for God's grace He has freely given to us and leads us to further depths.

Pointers along the way #688

When the system is corrupt

We get concerned when something goes wrong with a Christian, a family, a church or a Christian organisation. We wonder how it can happen among Christians. We wrestle with different types of solutions based on prayer, counsel, mediation and intervention. But many times these solutions don't work and the problems only get bigger. We throw up our hands and feel sad about the way Christ's name is getting maligned. Isn't this happening across the board, in every area of life and work?

In some cases it becomes obvious that some of the people involved are not Christians at all at heart but only in name. But this is easier to grapple with as an idea compared to situations involving Christians who are active in 'ministry'! We don't need to judge them and imagine we are better people. But it's difficult to understand how they could behave like that!

The issue is not just about individuals because problems are happening on a much wider scale than a few individual cases. The cause goes down to the root level, not to any fault with Christianity but to the way it is proclaimed and taught. Faulty practice is based on faulty concepts.

The problem God tries to deal with is sin, and Jesus is His solution for that (Mt.1:21). But when people don't even see that as *the* problem but come to Jesus looking only for health, wealth and comfort they have truly missed the Gospel. But they think they have 'come to Christ' and carry on with their natural way of thinking and sinful desires. When people are convicted about their sins and the church offers them only forgiveness and a promise of heaven they remain in their spiritual infancy without even realising it. When the church offers people entertainment in the form of 'worship' service and sermons that tickle their ears, they miss the way of denying themselves, taking up their cross and following Jesus in the process of sanctification (Lk.9:23). Especially if the church offers them some form of involvement in its various activities people think now they are in 'ministry' and don't realise what is lacking in terms of integrity and how they appear in God's eyes.

With a large number of such 'mixed crowds' is it any wonder that they cause problems everywhere? Yes, we need to deal with the specific problems, but

without dealing with the root issues such problems will not get resolved or decrease. There is corruption in every department of the church.

The Lord wanted to plant wheat, but an enemy has sown many weeds in the same field. Instead of trying to pluck out the weeds, which might result in throwing out some wheat too (Mt.13:24-30), let us make sure that what we plant is wheat (God's way of salvation from sin). Let us also be vigilant enough to see the enemy coming with weeds (false doctrines, mixed truths, human ideas), and drive him away. Let us not be men-pleasers because ultimately we will end up grieving our Lord (Ga.1:10). Finally, have *we* understood the Gospel right, and are we following it right?

Pointers along the way #689

When exhortations bounce off

We are all imperfect. We know how it affects us when other people hurt us because of their imperfections. But we may not be aware to the same level when *our* imperfections hurt others! But they do! When that happens we usually get some feedback -- silence, outburst, accusation, gossip or a gentle suggestion. How is our response? If it is always to defend or justify ourselves we are probably only spiritual babies. But even those who have grown up in Christ have the tendency now and then to block feedback from others. This is not healthy at all, and it is something we need to work on.

"Iron sharpens iron" (Pr.27:17). One of the ways by which God helps us to be transformed into the likeness of Jesus is through our interaction with other people. Many such times, when our sinful nature slips out and we get a feedback (gentle or attacking), it is God pointing out to us where we need to change. He is not condemning us but showing us the next lesson in our syllabus. But since we have not had this lesson before, we are unable to see immediately that it applies to us! We come out with all kinds of measures to escape having to admit we did anything wrong. What happens is that this 'exhortation' bounces off from us, and gets wasted.

It is natural that we think we are not like what the others are saying about us because we have not looked at that area of our life -- our thoughts, motives, attitudes and behaviour -- from this point of view earlier. We may even remember some incident in our life where we have done differently from what the others are implying about us, and that confirms our assumption that we are innocent or the others have misunderstood, etc.

But the fact remains that at our particular stage of our development we are ignorant (and therefore blind) about so many wrong and sinful things that we are still doing. It is possible that others can see some of them clearly, because they affect them, even though we cannot see them. If we recognise this as a fact, instead of denying that we have done anything wrong, we can examine them honestly to see if what the others are saying is right, or if there is at least *some* truth in what they are saying. If we can't still see anything wrong, it is good to ask the Lord to show us if there was anything wrong. If we finally get convicted about our wrong, we can humbly admit our wrong before God and others and set things right. Then we would have taken one

more step towards becoming like Jesus.

What will happen if we don't take these steps but are still waiting for God to change us? In Mt.25:31-46 there is a parable of Jesus about two groups of people both of whom did not recognise that what they did to others was as if they were doing it to Him! In our context can we see that God is trying to transform us but we can't see His hand there because we are only looking at other people? Perhaps we have missed it so far, but can't we begin to learn this new lesson now and start working on it?

Pointers along the way #690

Faith under test

For many people when their faith is under test, the question that is bothering them is, "Is God really able to do this?" These are people who don't know God. Perhaps they have heard about God from other people and now they are wondering about Him with respect to their own situation. Some others know that God can do anything, but their question is, "What is the Lord going to do for me?" Knowing about God's ability is different from knowing His will. There are many things about God's will that are revealed in His word, and we can expect God to do them for us. It is unbelief not to expect that. But there are things God has not specifically promised to do for us. As children going to the Father, we have the freedom to ask Him *anything* we wish to have (Jn.14:13,14). But just as children get to know that their father will choose what they will receive from him, we must know that our Heavenly Father has enough wisdom to know what is good for us. We must know He will only give us what He chooses to be the best for us (1Jn.5:14).

There is a deeper level in which our faith is tested, when we don't get what we ask for! We would imagine that when we are in a difficult situation and we know that our Father is almighty, He would step in and deliver us! Or, we would think that if it is a good thing we are asking for, He would surely give it to us. But God's silence or inaction leaves us perplexed. At this point we are tested concerning His character -- His love and compassion towards us, His awareness of the details of our life, the trustworthiness of His promises, His forgiveness of our sins, etc. These tests are hard to bear, coming on top of the practical struggles we are going through.

This test strikes at the core of our faith -- what we think about God at the bottom of our heart. Is He really a good God, can He be trusted, is He angry with us in His holiness and righteousness, if we can't expect Him to take care of our problems on earth how can we trust Him with heaven, etc. We can be sure when we get to this place that Satan will be around with his plans to steal our faith and destroy us (Jn.10:10). He has thousands of years of experience in placing doubts and insinuations against God in our mind.

Instead of giving in to Satan's suggestions and getting deeper into confusion, we need to encourage ourselves in the Lord (1Sa.30:6). What we can do is to remind ourselves about the incidents in the Bible where God preserved His

people, hundreds of other Christians who have held on in faith (He.12:1) and our own experience with God in the past that shows us that He has not failed us in the end. If we persevere and endure the time of testing, the Lord will give us 'the crown of life' or crown us with life (Jas.1:12) -- we would have partaken a little more of the nature of Christ. Greater than that, wouldn't the Lord be delighted to know that we trusted in Him even in the midst of adverse situations? And we wouldn't be put to shame!

Pointers along the way #691

The empathetic Christian

The righteousness and the mercy of God met perfectly together on the cross. They hardly do that in our practical lives. By our natural temperament we tend to lean more towards righteousness or mercy than the other. As we begin to grow in the Lord, we may sometimes switch between righteousness and mercy, but we rarely get them balanced. It is one of the marks of maturity that we move towards a balance in these opposite looking virtues. Another example could be about 'not judging' (meaning not condemning or despising others) and 'judging righteously' (forming a balanced assessment about people or situations) (Mt.7:1;Jn.7:24). We may find ourselves more on one side of the argument than the other!

It becomes interesting when two of us are on opposite sides of the tension. When one of us is emphasising the need for righteousness and the other on mercy, the arguments can become really hot! Both of us think that we are on the right track, and we have got verses to back us! Think of two parents discussing about whether to overlook a child's mistake or to be firm about it. What is lacking is the ability to look beyond ourselves and to see things from the other's point of view. That can start only when we are convinced that there are truths outside of our own experience, or, in other words, truth is not confined to what we have gone through. The multi-sided aspects of truth or wisdom can only be explored if we are willing to look beyond ourselves.

Empathy is one of the most important requirements of a counsellor. It is the ability to put ourselves in the shoes of another and understand how they feel and what they think. One who tries to counsel another without empathy tends to tell the other person that such and such is what they have gone through in their own life and that it is what the other should do. The mistake is not realising that each of us is different, and how we look at things may not describe another person's point of view. This is not easy if we have gone through tough situations and made certain choices, because then we may insist that everyone else also should make the same choices.

Our goal should be to become like Christ in a well-rounded manner and not to become a specialist in any one aspect of life (Co.1:28). We should become righteous but equally merciful too. Wisdom is to know when to show what,

and how much of one and how much of the other are needed in different situations.

If you think this doesn't apply to you, the chances are that you need it seriously! Let us have our eyes opened to see how unlike Christ we are before we can proceed to become like Him. This also needs balance -- to see how unlike we are like Christ in our thinking and behaviour and also to recognise that we God has accepted us as if we were perfect! The next time we have a conflict with another, let us learn to listen to him more and understand his world better. Perhaps then we can also learn to help him better (Mt.7:3-5).

Pointers along the way #692

The second chance

The old covenant which God made with Israel through Moses was very different from what He made through Jesus. In that, God's blessings were based on how people behaved (De.28). What God was operating on in this covenant was His righteousness, even though He didn't stop being merciful and gracious in an overall sense. We see how Moses who had risen to great heights of leadership and closeness with God was penalised for dishonouring God by disobeying Him (Nu.20:8-12). Elijah who exalted God's name over Baal at Carmel ran in fear of the wicked queen. That virtually marked the end of his ministry which got handed over to Elisha. These two men of God did not lose their salvation, and God gave them their due respect afterwards. But they lost what they could have been if they had not failed at that part of their life and ministry. There are Joseph and Daniel, on the other hand, who had a clean record till the end.

But we see God working differently in the new covenant. His promise is that He will not remember our sins any more (He.8:12) and that He will be with us always (13:5). The example we see is Peter who denied His Lord three times but was so restored to Him that he lived to lead the inauguration of the church on the Day of Pentecost, open the Gospel to the Gentiles and write two books of the New Testament. God is still righteous, but He operates the new covenant based on His grace.

Grace does not mean that we can fail and then things will go on as before. We may face discipline (12:6), but He will not leave or forsake us. But we must remember one important point. If we fall, we must acknowledge it, confess it and repent from it. This is not just to be from our mouth (1Jn.1:9), but repentance must come from our heart and be seen in our actions (2Co.7:10,11). That was what Peter did, when he realised what he had done. If we take it for granted that God forgives, that may be the reason why there is no real restoration with God.

There is no record of Moses or Elijah having repented like that. In fact, Moses seems not to have realised ever what he had done wrong, because he thought it was the people's fault (De.4:21).

It may be that after we have messed up something in our life, we keep looking at other people, how they reacted unfairly, misunderstood us, were not merciful to us, etc., and we fail to see how we have grieved the Holy Spirit by our behaviour and dishonoured God. We think we have acknowledged our sins (perhaps after getting caught), but we may not have humbled ourselves before the Lord from our heart. We may be still justifying ourselves secretly in our heart by blaming someone else who provoked us or some situation in which we were caught. That is no genuine repentance!

But whenever there is genuine repentance, there is great rejoicing in heaven. There is restoration, a promise of never to remember that sin, and a reassurance of God' love and mercy and His presence. There is a second chance with God.

Pointers along the way #693

If we don't endure?

Many have been taught that once they are born into the kingdom of God, they can't be 'unborn' no matter how they live, and they will always be God's children. Some of them also believe that it is through baptism that one is born again, and once they have had that, they are safe. There are many verses quoted to prove this position, but I would earnestly suggest that you also examine the many other verses that point to the contrary. In brief, let me say that the Bible teaches that God would never let go from His side anyone who has been born again, but also that there is a dangerous possibility of our walking away from God.

To be born again is not physical like our human birth. Our relationship with God as our Father is on a spiritual level unlike the physical relationship with our human father. This spiritual relationship is based on grace (unmerited favour) from God's side, which is received by us through our faith in Him (Eph.2:8,9). It will get broken if we give up our faith. Paul reminds the Gentiles that if the Jews got broken off as branches and they got grafted in, they could also get broken off from the tree, *if they lost their faith* (Ro.11:19,20).

We may lose our faith for several reasons. Perhaps it is due to some great disappointment with God because He didn't answer our prayers as we expected, or He didn't act according to what we thought 'we had faith for'. It could be because we aren't willing to give up some sinful pleasure at any cost. Or maybe we can't figure out something about God and we conclude He can't be real or true. We all may know people who have given up their faith, or we ourselves may have faced strong temptations to doubt God. We mustn't forget that the Devil is going to try His best to confuse us and turn us away from God (1Pet.5:8).

That is why there are so many portions of the New Testament that warn us to be careful, alert, vigilant and to endure till the end. If it wasn't possible to fall away from the faith after we have been born again, wouldn't all these verses become meaningless?

There is also a direct warning from Jesus that we should be 'overcomers' if

we don't want to risk our names actually getting erased from the Book of Life (Re.3:5). He is not one to scare us with false threats!

Solomon went after other gods towards the end of his life and served them (1Ki.11:4-7). Perhaps he repented before he died, but if not, what would God do to him (De.8:19)? Demas, one of the workers with Paul 'loved this world' and left him (2Ti.4:10). Again, we don't know how his life ended. But what would happen if he didn't repent? We aren't attempting to judge such people, because we have no right or knowledge. But we can take a warning from looking at such possibilities.

Isn't there a chance that we don't fully accomplish what the Lord had planned for us because we got diverted? It's also possible for us to lose out. That's why we must make every effort to endure till the end.

Pointers along the way #694

Cleanse ourselves?

We may be quick to admit we are not perfect. But then, after having said that, what do we do about it? Do we take comfort thinking that God is merciful and will forgive? Do we say that since Jesus has already died for all our sins including what we might do in future we don't have to feel any guilt? Do we reiterate what we are *in Christ* and tell ourselves that since God is looking at us through Christ, there is nothing to worry? What do we do after that? Do we go on as before, study the Bible more, or work on our ministry? Nothing changes in our life, but we comfort ourselves saying that God will complete what He has begun in us (Php.1:6)!

But God tells us clearly that we ought to cleanse ourselves from *every* defilement of flesh and spirit and perfect our holiness (2Co.7:1). That means there is something we must do in order to become more holy (set apart for God). One thing we can do for that is to clear up every unholy thing we find in what we do, say and think (defilement of the flesh) and every crooked thing in our motives and intentions (which defile our spirit). Are we doing this at all? How can we do it? If we don't do it, how can we expect the Holy Spirit to bring His fruit into our life, and how can we become more like Christ?

There are two simple things we can do. When we realise we have done wrong, either in an act or in our intention, the first thing is to admit it to God and ask Him to forgive us (1Jn.1:9). That will take care of our guilt. But secondly, don't we have to prepare our mind in such a way as to avoid repeating our sin the next time? This is probably what we forget to do even if we remember the first step.

God is working in us through the Holy Spirit, showing us where we have gone wrong. Now we need to work it out (Php.2:12,13). He will help us. He wants us to (progressively) stop sinning (1Jn.2:1). But He cannot help us if we do not cleanse ourselves rightly when we see sin defiling us. We would then end up doing the same thing again, maybe in a worse manner. That will not make us more like Jesus.

Satan tries to deceive us through a partial preaching of the truth, the part we

don't need to hear at that time, and omits the part we need to hear. He deceives preachers and then those who hear them. If we want to experience the fullness of salvation, we cannot depend entirely on preachers. But God has given us His word which we can read for ourselves and learn from. Then His word teaches us that there are things we need to cleanse in our life which we cannot expect the Holy Spirit to do for us.

We fall when we make wrong choices when we are tempted. We can experience salvation only when we learn to make the right choices. The Holy Spirit will convict us and He will prompt us. But finally we have to make the choice to do right. That choice is to stop doing the same sinful thing we have done in the past and to start doing what God wants us to do. God strengthens us, but now we need to do right.

Pointers along the way #695

Who do we listen to?

Every thought that comes to our mind is not from our mind! Some of them could be from our mind, some from God, some from other people's opinions and some from the Devil! In the same way, every thought that we think is from God need not be from God. It could even be from the Devil who sometimes masquerades as an angel of light (2Co.11:14), appearing to be from God. Especially when he comes quoting from the Bible we need to be extremely careful to examine what exactly he is trying to make us believe. His goal is *always* to steal and destroy (Jn.10:10), even if he gives the impression that he is there to bless us. He is known as the Deceiver because he uses wily ways to fool and mislead us.

Look at a common situation. Here is a sincere Christian battling with temptation, recognising that he is not always winning, and feeling bad about how he is failing his Master. Then the Devil reminds him from the Bible about how God hates sin, how strict His laws are, how He is always righteous and deals without partiality with anyone who sins, etc. The Christian believes this is coming as conviction from the Holy Spirit and mourns his condition to the extent that he fears his salvation may be lost. He becomes miserable and begins to lose hope, until finally he is able to hear the real voice of the Holy Spirit who comforts and encourages him.

On the other side, look at a carnal Christian living for the world, enjoying all the pleasures without bothering to see if they are pleasing to the Lord. Satan comes to him too, this time reminding him of who he is *in Christ*, of all God's mercies that are new every morning, how salvation is by unmerited favour, how he doesn't have to do anything to earn God's blessing, how he should just believe, etc. It causes this man to sing loud praise and worship songs on Sundays and go home happily thinking that everything is just fine. He assumes that when the Holy Spirit tries to convict and warn him it is the voice of the Accuser trying to condemn him, and he discards all such warnings.

Satan is a master at quoting the wrong verse. Unless we are familiar with the different things God has said, we are likely to go off track. When the Holy Spirit speaks to us, He speaks seeking to help us. This 'help' may involve

pointing out our sin or error, but will always give us hope, inviting us to receive forgiveness and change of heart. But when Satan speaks, he tries to hide our real need from us and lead us away from God. He makes things look hopeless, blows up the size of our sin, and condemns us. He puts pressure on us by which we feel we have no choice but to follow his instructions. But our safest step is to throw ourselves into God's merciful hands and trust Him to do the right thing. When we do that, the pressure and the darkness disappear and peace comes in.

As we go through this exercise we will learn to differentiate between the two voices, and stop assuming that it is always either one of the two.

Pointers along the way #696

Ask and receive

One common mistake many Christians make in reading the Bible is to take and interpret verses out of context. One reason for this is that pastors fail to teach them guidelines for reading and understanding the Bible.

"Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you" (Mt.7:7) is one such verse that gets misunderstood in this way. If we don't get what we ask for, we are told to keep on asking till we receive. If nothing happens after some time, we may be told that we didn't have enough faith to receive it, or that there may be some unconfessed sin in our life (or our ancestor's) that is blocking the answer. First of all, our ancestor's sins are not going to be thrust upon us (Ez.18:20). Secondly, if we didn't have faith in God, we wouldn't have asked Him in the first place! The third possibility that there could be unconfessed sin in our life needs to be checked out and cleared before we can proceed (Ps.66:18).

But what is missing here is the explanation that is available in the context itself. Mt.7:11 says very plainly that if our earthly fathers know how to decide what is good for us, our heavenly Father will certainly know much better what is good for us. Just as our earthly fathers decide that some things we ask for are not good for us, our Father God also makes some decisions about our prayer. This is one of the reasons why some of our prayers are not answered. If preachers simply tell us to keep on asking for whatever we want, we might end up wasting time or setting ourselves up for disappointment! Wouldn't it be better if we are taught to understand the will of God better, so that we can then ask Him for things more intelligently (1Jn.5:14)? If we do that, we will grow in understanding and maturity in the knowledge of God instead of dealing with God only regarding asking and getting.

As we live here on earth, we will have many earthly needs, and it is only natural that we ask God about them. God understands that (Mt.6:32). But then we ought to grow in our relationship with our Father and become more and more mature. Things of eternity should capture our mind more than things that would perish (Jn.6:27;Co.3:1). That we are not like Jesus in our behaviour should disturb us more than having material needs. Then we would begin to engage with God about becoming more like Jesus. We will learn the

strategies and tactics of spiritual battle and get trained in a practical way (Ps.18:34). We will learn about the schemes of the enemy (2Co.2:10,11) and become able to resist him.

How sad it is many people are being attracted to Christ as the One who will meet all their earthly needs, and all their life their prayers are only about those! What they try to learn is how to get God to give what they want, with various techniques, going after men of God, and attending miracle meetings. How they miss the central point of why the Saviour came and what we need to be saved from (Mt.1:21)!

Pointers along the way #697

Clash of natures

People can be grouped in different ways. One is to divide us as those who seem to stand strongly for what is right and others who care more not to hurt the feelings of others in what they say or do. The first group is quick to point out when someone does wrong. They can't seem to be quiet until they have proved that the man has done wrong. The second group knows that a wrong has been done, but they want to overlook it because they think it would cause a lot of unpleasantness which has to be avoided at all costs. Just think. Both groups have something right and something else wrong. The first group is right in saying that wrong has been done, but perhaps they go overboard in trying to establish and pin down guilt without thinking of whether it is really that serious. The second group is right that they don't want to make a mountain out of a molehill and cause unpleasantness to everyone. But they may go wrong in not calling wrong wrong and this may cause the wrong to go on.

The problem is that both groups think they are right and generally miss seeing where they are going wrong. So everyone continues to stay as they are, without any transformation into maturity. In addition, they find fault with the other group for the wrong stand they are taking! Both sides have reasons and arguments about why the other group's stand is wrong and how everyone ought to follow them. In fact, they have laws in their mind that tell them that in such and such situations they should behave in a certain way.

When we look at Jesus, we can see how balanced He was, *doing everything according to the need of the moment* rather than by any one-sided position. He didn't live according to any inflexible law which had to be blindly followed. No. He understood the spirit of the law and knew as things came up, when He needed to behave in one way and when in another way. He could act with compassion with the woman who had been caught in adultery without ignoring her sin (Jn.8:1-11). He could openly rebuke the Pharisees for their hypocrisy even though He knew they would be offended (Mt.23:27).

Perhaps we are beginning to understand that there are other sides to the truth that we had never imagined before. We may never have imagined that there could be anything wrong in the positions we have been taking. Our outlook

ought to become broader and we must learn to look at things from the other person's point of view also. Have we been assuming that just because we knew that our position was right the other person's position must be wrong? Perhaps we are both right in the different stands we are currently holding on to, and we are both wrong in assuming that the other person is wrong. The other man may be working on another part of the truth we are unaware of at the moment! Once we remove this log of presumption from our eyes (Mt.7:5) we may be able to appreciate what the other person is saying and, as a result, become more rounded off in our life!

Pointers along the way #698

Blown up sovereignty

When someone says God is completely in control of everything and everything that comes to us is from the hands of God, it appears to magnify God as supreme. As can be understood from itself, it is wrong! If we think about the practical implications we can see how this distorts the true nature of God. It would imply God not only does good things, but He is also responsible for all the evil in the world! In seeking to magnify God's infinite power and sovereignty, it ends up caricaturing Him as a partly evil person whom we can't adore but only live in fear of, wondering what He will do next!

We mustn't forget the limited sovereignty (free will) God has given us in His sovereignty! It is this sovereignty Adam and Eve misused in disobeying God and submitting to Satan. It is this people use to do evil to one another, and everyone suffers. If we abdicate our sovereignty thinking that God will do everything according to His will, we can even blame Him for our sins! We need not lift even our finger to do things rightly if we believe anyway it is God's will that will get done. We need not preach the Gospel to our children (or others) if we think they will anyway get saved if God has sovereignly elected them! But truly, God works in us, therefore let us work out (Php.2:12,13). He has given us everything, so let us 'add' (2Pe.1:3,5).

Why do Christians get this kind of understanding? I would say that one major reason is a misunderstanding of the inspiration of God. They take each sentence in the Bible as the word of God without considering that it is written in man's language with its finiteness of expression. As a result, God's truth has to be gleaned from all over the Bible. If we do this we will find that truths in many verses are balanced by other truths in other parts of the Bible. So when we come across verses that tell us about the absolute sovereignty of God we need to see them side by side with truths about the freedom of choice that God has created us with.

An absolutely sovereign God who is responsible for everything that happens, including evil of the worst kind, ceases to have any attraction for man. Isn't it the love of God that prompted Him to give His Son to die for us that draws us to Him? If we were to think that this God may send the worst kind of

sicknesses or accidents our way tomorrow because of some inscrutable part of His nature, would we fall before Him and adore Him? If any calamity comes our way should we simply submit to it as a gift from our Father?

I know that a cold reading of some verses can give such ideas. That's why I am emphasising the need to look at all the truths in the Bible together as different dimensions of God. Our worldview must include not only God but also demons and people of all kinds. Our understanding of inspiration must also include the part man had as the joint author. In our zeal to exalt God and His works let us not insult Him by ignoring some parts of His truth.

Pointers along the way #699

The way of life

Christians are taught from right and left, it's all of grace from God. In order to confront the legalistic way where we have to do something or the other to earn our salvation from God, which is the basis of all false religions, the emphasis is on how we have to do nothing to be saved but only to receive by faith (Ep.2:8,9). But where wheat is being sown, an enemy is also sowing tares, while the sowers are sleeping (Mt.13:25)! Forgiveness of sin is made so free by preachers that there is no need for repentance from sin or even an acknowledgement that we are sinners headed for destruction! So, thousands are given the (false) impression that they have already become children of God when all that has happened is that they have said a prayer asking Jesus to come into their heart and become their 'personal Saviour'. What would this mean to people who have no idea what they need to be saved from? Then they are taught that every blessing is theirs 'in Christ Jesus' when they are not even in Christ Jesus. Every failure to see any result in practical life is blamed on their lack of faith or some unconfessed sin including ancestral sins.

Jesus said that we would know the truth and the truth would set us free (Jn.8:32). What if we don't even know the truth about our sins? And why Jesus had to come to the earth in the first place (Mt.1:21)? What if we aren't even looking for salvation from sin but only a place in heaven and blessings on earth? The (false) freedom we are offered is an illusion that our sins have been forgiven and we are now children of God.

The promise for Israel was the Promised Land. For Christians it is becoming like Jesus (Ro.8:29). What if our promised land is interpreted as being in heaven instead, which will happen only after we die? Then all we have to do is to enjoy our life here while we are here. Our prayers then will all be for blessings for this life. So we continue in sin and take forgiveness as a matter of right?

Jesus said very sadly that the majority of people would be walking on the broad way that led to destruction while there would be only a few who chose to walk on the narrow way to life (Mt.7:13,14). The enemy has deceived them. He has managed to influence a majority of preachers to preach an easy way of 'salvation'.

For the one who has become hopeless because of his sins, there is hope in Christ (Mt.9:12). For the one who confesses his sins and repents from them there is forgiveness and acceptance from God. For the one who will deny his own will in order to do God's will there is also transformation into His nature (Lk.9:23,24). When we are willing to lay down to death our own righteousness and accept we are sinners, there is forgiveness. When we are willing to lay down our self-efforts and depend entirely on Him, we can partake of His life too (Ro.8:13). There is a narrow gate to enter and a narrow way to walk in. What is easier is to walk in through the broad gate and walk on the broad way.

Pointers along the way #700

Two deaths on the cross

All Christians are familiar with the fact that when Jesus died on the cross, the sins of the whole world were placed on Him; that was why He died. He died on the cross for us. But another death also took place on the cross. That was when we were crucified with Him (Ga.2:20). This happened in God's mind when He placed us in Christ when He died on the cross, even though we didn't physically exist at that time. We didn't die for our sins; Christ died for that. What was this death that we died with Him? It was our death *to sin*. God says that Jesus not only died for us -- our sins (1Co.15:3), but He also died *to sin* (Ro.6:10).

When Jesus died for our sins, He paid the penalty for our sins so that we could be forgiven. But when He died to sin, that was to give us an attitude of hatred towards sin, just as He has, so that we would no longer like to sin but we would hate to sin. This is what we experience when we are born again through faith in Him (Ro.6:1,2). Our response when this happens is that we place our flesh on the cross from our side, because it was through the desires in the flesh that we were being tempted to sin (Ga.5:24).

God tells us to consider ourselves now as 'dead to sin' (Ro.6:11) because that is the new attitude He has given to us. Now we are not to yield any part of our body to commit sin (vv.12,13), because God's grace has taken away our old willingness to sin and given us a hatred for sin instead (v.14).

Now we see that whenever we are tempted to sin, we need to put that desire to death on the cross by the strength the Holy Spirit gives us (Ro.8:13). That is the meaning of taking up our cross daily, denying ourselves and following Jesus (Lk.9:23). In this way we work out our salvation daily, because God is working in us to hate sin and want to do His will, and also giving us help to do it (Php.2:12,13).

We know that our salvation has three phases -- justification, sanctification and glorification. Jesus died on the cross for our forgiveness from which we get justified before God (Ro.5:1) and accepted as His children. He has then started us off on the way of sanctification by giving us a heart that hates sins and wants to do the will of God. When we recognise this, we respond by

seeking to keep the flesh crucified and placing each lust on the cross to die as we are tempted daily. This is the process through which our life is being transformed from our old sinful nature to the nature of Jesus Christ. We can see that without the above response from our side, God is unable to provide us this sanctification.

Many Christians who think that God will do everything from His side do not realise that He expects us to respond rightly to the work He does in our heart and mind. Through this process, He wants to reverse the act of Adam and Eve by which they chose to do their own will and deny the will of God. Our salvation will become complete only when we choose to deny ourselves in order to do His will.

About the author

Jacob Ninan (b. 1948), has master's degrees in engineering, and counselling and psychotherapy. He retired in 2008 from the Indian Space Research Organisation as the Programme Director for international cooperation. He met with Jesus while studying in Bangalore in 1972, and from then onwards has been an ardent student of the Bible, reading hundreds of Christian books, listening to hundreds of messages, and being very active in the church in speaking, counselling, writing, editing, etc. He runs the 'Comfort & Counsel' web site (www.c-n-c.org) where he has published a large number of articles on practical Christian life and counsel. With advanced training in Christian counselling, he has been counselling individuals and couples, and also facilitating in counselling training programmes for many years. Jacob Ninan joined the editorial board of the Christian magazine Light of Life in 2008, and is currently contributing as editor, writer and web master. Jacob Ninan has been married to Susan from 1945. They stay in Bangalore, and they have five grown up children and seven grandchildren.

You may contact the author at jninan@c-n-c.org

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About the book

Pointers along the way are brief messages on the practical Christian life, originally sent out weekly through email to those who asked for them. Now, after completing 700 messages through the grace of God, they have been compiled into seven 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.