



**Pointers
along
the way**

Vol. 8

Jacob Ninan

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Devotionals that make you think

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Pointers along the way #701

Is that all we need to do?

Moses told Israel at the Red Sea, "Stand by and see the salvation of the Lord which He will accomplish for you today" (Ex.14:13). But is this a verse anyone can pick up now and claim that we don't have to do anything but wait for the Lord to act? Perhaps the Lord will speak this word to us in a specific situation but can this verse be offered to the general public as a promise from God for all time?

"Ask, and it will be given to you" (Mt.7:7,8). Why is it that many believe this and ask, only to find that they don't always receive? Even those who ask in faith and with a good conscience?

Preachers give out many promises like this, and there are also books listing such 'promises'. Many are excited when they believe them, but disappointed when things don't happen as they expected or as they were made to hope for. Sometimes this is enough to put off people completely from their faith.

All this comes from a misunderstanding of the Bible. Since the Bible is the word of God, people think that every word in the Bible can be taken at its face value. As a result, they don't look at the context and see if it is applicable to them, or if there are other passages in the Bible that clarify the meaning or provide the balance. There are those who underline every sentence in the Bible that has the appearance of a promise as if it is a promise. What is most disturbing is to see preachers handing out these 'promises' without making the necessary effort to check if they are universal promises that can be received by everyone. There are conditions attached to many promises (God saying, "If you do this, then I'll do that for you."), some promises were only for certain people in particular situations, and some are not promises at all.

For example, the verse quoted above from Exodus was for Israel at the Red Sea. But that was not everything they had to do in all situations in their life! When they came to different situations later, God told them different things to do. The verse about asking and receiving is in the context of asking a father for things, where we know that the father ultimately decides what is good for the child. Other parts of the Bible tell us that there is guarantee for us

of receiving what we ask for only if it is according to the will of God (1Jn.5:14).

It is very much needed that we should not only read the Bible ourselves (and not just receive promises from others), but we should also learn how to read the Bible and interpret it properly. It is important that those who teach the Bible should teach their hearers practical methods to use when they read the Bible. The Bible should not be treated like a bag into which we can dip our hands and come out with a promise for the day.

The Bible is to lead us to know God in a personal way. It is not in itself the source of our strength. If we don't meet with God through the Bible and know His ways, the chances are that we are misusing the Bible as a 'magic book'.

Pointers along the way #702

Two kinds of tests

When God allowed Satan to tempt Job to leave Him by giving him trouble, that was one kind of test. Job was so righteous and upright in his life that God could boast about him to Satan (Job.1:8). Satan's argument was that it was God's provision and protection that placed Job in a comfortable place where he wasn't really being tempted. Satan suggested that God should allow him to trouble Job and then see Job getting upset with God and leaving him (vv.9-11). Of course, Job didn't sin even then.

The test was essentially trying to shake up an upright man and see if he would hold on to his faith under pressure. When our comfort zone is shaken up, when calamity hits us unexpectedly, when we think we are being treated unfairly by people or circumstances, when our suffering is not due to our own fault – that is one kind of test. Our tendency is to complain, and to find fault with God because we think life is not fair to us. Many people think, "I haven't done anything wrong. Why is this happening to me?" Philosophical questions come up in our mind, as with Job, concerning the presence of evil in this world and God's role as a perfect, almighty, loving Father. This kind of test is not easy to face because it doesn't make sense to us.

When we face such things in our life it comforts us to know stories like that of Job and what is going on in the heavenly places. This helps us to recognise that our Father in heaven is fully aware of what is going on, and that He is on our side. When the Devil accuses us, we have an Advocate on our side interceding for us. We can also get an experience of realising how small we are, and how little we really know. This will make the foundation of our faith stronger.

We see another type of test in the case of Peter. He was a zealous disciple of the Lord who was willing to stand with His Lord and even to die for Him, even if the others left Him (Mt.26:33;Jn.13:37). In his case, Jesus said that he was going to betray Him and yet hoped that he would not lose his faith (Lk.22:31,32). Peter fell, but kept his faith in the Lord because the Lord sustained him with an encouraging look (v.61).

If we fall as a believer, this is the kind of test we face with regard to our faith. We know in theory that there is forgiveness with God (1Jn.1:9), but we feel we are unworthy. We didn't want to sin, and, like Peter, we actually wanted to be most faithful to the Lord. This fall is difficult to take. It hurts our ego, brings us very low and causes us to want to hide from the Lord in shame (Ge.3:10).

But just as the fall helped Peter to have a more sober estimate about himself, we too can learn to think less about ourselves and lean more heavily on our Lord for our keeping (Jude.24,25). It helps us to clean out more facets of self-righteousness and pride that might be lurking inside us. It helps us to learn to watch and pray more earnestly (Mt.26:41). It also helps us to be compassionate towards the others.

Pointers along the way #703

Covering up will hurt!

If we fall down and get a cut on our hand or leg, it is not sufficient to put a bandage on the wound. The wound may get infected and cause more serious problems. What we need to do is to wash the wound properly, apply medicine for disinfecting it and then bandage it up. Wounds in our mind and heart can actually be more serious because they may go unnoticed, and we may cover them up with pretensions. Then they fester inside, and cause deep damage to our thinking, feeling and behaviour.

"When I kept silent about my sin, my body wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night Your hand was heavy upon me; my vitality was drained away as with the fever heat of summer. I acknowledged my sin to You, and my iniquity I did not hide; I said, 'I will confess my transgressions to the Lord'; And You forgave the guilt of my sin" (Ps.32:3-5).

This is not what modern teaching is! Now we are taught to think positively, avoid the negative, take our place 'in Christ' and believe that God has forgiven all our sins even before we sinned! "We're good!" we tell others, and swallow the pain more deeply. 'By faith' we go through the motions of praise and worship and can't understand why we are still 'messed up'!

The truth will set us free surely, but only when we accept it (Jn.8:32). The first truth to accept is that we have sinned (1Jn.1:8,10). Then, after that, we can come to the truth that we have a High Priest who understands what we are going through (He.4:15), and who intercedes for us (7:25). We can confess our sins honestly and sincerely to God, repent, and receive forgiveness freely without any punishment (1Jn.1:9).

When we cover up our sins – by pretending we didn't do them, blaming others, minimising them, excusing ourselves – our guilt remains and gnaws at our heart painfully. Our self-esteem suffers, our boldness goes down before God and people, we try to withdraw or go on overdrive to make an impression. Unawares, we form strategies of behaviour that can affect every area of life and make things go increasingly bad for us. Covering up our sins will really hurt! It becomes a downward spiral, maybe so slowly

at first that we don't notice it, but soon we find ourselves caught in sinking sands.

God is waiting for us to 'come to our senses', get back to Him and open up everything to Him. This is what it means to come into the light. Unless our sin involves hurting others, we don't have to go around confessing all sins publicly. We will find that God is not angry with us; He always knew what was happening, and His heart was aching with compassion towards us. He will wash our sins, and give us a clean slate again (Is.1:18,19). Once we have experienced this, we can learn to avoid wasting time with long drawn guilt and shame, and to be open with the Lord on a continual basis – 'walking in the light'. It is not that we don't fall, but we are no longer trying to hide or cover up, but walking with openness.

Pointers along the way #704

Love of money

God warns us that those who love money will fall into a trap that will ruin them (1Ti.6:9). The mark of loving money is that we run after more and more of it. We may first look for money to meet our needs. When we are able to meet our needs, we suddenly discover that there are more needs to be met. When we didn't have enough money, there were many things we didn't desire because we knew they were out of our reach. But now those desires come alive, and we think we couldn't live without many new things. We look for more money to meet those needs, and the cycle continues at higher levels!

When we become occupied with our pursuit of money, we also find that we think it is alright to cut corners to avoid losing money and to get more of it quickly! We find excuses to justify our unrighteousness ('Everybody does it', 'If we have to live in this world we can't be so fussy with legalistic rules', 'Our intention is good', 'God wants us to enjoy life'). The Devil is eager to give us wealth so that he can get us caught in the trap.

We can argue that there is nothing wrong with money in itself and that it is the love of money that is wrong (v.10). Jesus referred to money as the 'unrighteous wealth' contrasting it with true riches (Lk.16:11). Money can lead us to unrighteousness easily, but true riches are the spiritual wealth of becoming like Jesus. But we close our eyes towards the love of money that comes in when we begin to go after it earnestly and it begins to occupy prime spot in our mind, because we tell ourselves we are only trying to meet our needs. But the funny thing is, our needs are never satisfied! The Bible tells us to learn to be content (1Ti.6:8). But we point out that Abraham and Job were wealthy, and quote verses from the Old Testament. We don't seem to realise that the focus changed in the new covenant to becoming like Jesus (Ro.8:29) and gathering treasure for eternity (Jn.6:27). Jesus tells us to seek God's kingdom and His righteousness *first* and promises to give us all what we really need (Mt.6:33), and not to be like all the other people who are eagerly seeking after earthly things (vv.31,32).

There are riches that pass away, as Jesus illustrated in the story of the rich man (Lk.12:16-21), and treasures that will have value in

eternity (Mt.6:20). There are pleasures that are sinful, or which take our mind away from God, and there is immeasurable pleasure living in the presence of God (Ps.16:11) and pleasures beyond imagination stored up in heaven for us (1Co.2:9). When we set our heart on God, pleasures on earth will become less meaningful and less attractive. Our joy comes from being pleasing to God.

How sad to fritter away our time and energy by pursuing after money and its pleasures while we are storing up nothing in heaven by serving God, His kingdom and His people! Let's keep to the bottom line, we *cannot* serve God and wealth at the same time (Mt.6:24). It's better to believe this than to discover it too late!

Pointers along the way #705

Second hand salvation?

Many preachers assure people too quickly that they have become children of God through grace, even when there has been no conviction of sin, repentance or understanding about what the death of Jesus offers for the sinner. These preachers are too eager to add to their numbers, and conduct caesarean section on pre-term babies. And then they are not around when these babies struggle with life's challenges!

God encourages us to check for ourselves whether our faith is genuine and we are truly God's children (2Co.13:5). This is valid especially now when the Gospel message has been distorted much. Preachers misquote verses out of context or without telling people what the other parts of the Bible say. Or they misinterpret verses to mean things God never meant to say. So there is a great danger for us to assume or make ourselves believe that we have already become children of God. We may try to avoid the pain of discovering we were mistaken or the trouble of checking. But isn't it better to undergo tests and get proper treatment than to tell ourselves everything is fine and die unnecessarily?

God may use different things to draw us to Him, even by doing miraculous things for us or giving answers to prayer. But when we get near to God because of them, we should see His holiness and mentally fall down before Him in recognition of our sinfulness (Is.6:3-5). It is then that God offers us salvation by

giving us forgiveness through the death of Jesus in our place (vv.6,7). Answers to prayer do not tell us that everything is fine between us and God; they only show that God is good. To establish our relationship with God, we must first approach Him as sinners without hope in ourselves (Mk.2:17).

God has raised up teachers to explain God's ways to us. But we must know that the best of teachers can make mistakes (Ja.3:1,2). So we must not mark our salvation entirely based on what they say. We need to develop the habit of checking with the Bible what we hear, irrespective of how well known the teacher is (Ac.17:11). We can also use commentaries by godly men and check with what other teachers have to say. This does not mean we are showing disrespect to our teachers but recognising that anyone can go wrong.

I recognise that there are those who cannot do this because of natural limitations and need help from others. Such people have to be more careful about choosing their teachers. We should look for those who sincerely care for us, and stay away from those who are after money or who are trying to become great. But laziness is not an excuse for getting deceived about our salvation.

In the early church when there were no printed Bibles to read, Christians had to be careful to keep their heart right before God and to walk in obedience to what they understood. The apostles were not always available in the different local churches to clarify their questions. People knew that they had to be careful for themselves and one another.

Pointers along the way #706

Authority in the home

Many men are enamoured by the authority they think they have over their wives at home and they try to enforce it, only to meet with resistance from the wives. Many wives think their husbands should be taking up more responsibility in the home and are never hesitant to remind them about it! This conflict can give rise to heated words and even ends up in blows in many families. What does God's word have to say?

1Co.11:3 says that the husband is the head of the wife and Christ is his head. As the head, his responsibility is to love his wife as Christ loved the church *and gave Himself for her* (Ep.5:25). When the husband loves his wife in this way, he will show it by taking care of her needs, providing for her, protecting her, etc. The problem comes when the husband does not think of such responsibilities but only of his 'authority'. He thinks his word should be final, and everyone in the home should simply do what he says. The fact is that in a practical sense, no one can exercise authority in a pleasant manner unless those under his authority respect him. He can say his wife does not respect him, and then try to enforce his authority more. But the more he does this, the less his wife will respect him and the less his actual authority becomes!

At the same time, the wife is looking at the way the husband is shirking his responsibilities and keeps trying to prod him to become more responsible. She does not realise that the more she does this, she is causing him to think that she has little respect for him! Then the cycle of this kind of behaviour becomes stronger and the couple and the children suffer. If only the wife recognises that only when she shows respect for her husband for the position of authority that God has given her husband (Ep.5:22) the husband is likely to be motivated to take up more responsibility! But she thinks she is helping her husband to become better through her constant reminders!

Think of an ideal situation where a husband sincerely loves his wife and is trying to do everything he can for her good, and she respects him for that and shows that respect to him in the way she talks to him and behaves with him! Of course, this is an ideal and not a realistic situation. But this is the goal towards which we

ought to strive. This is how we need to press on to perfection, instead of blaming the other person and trying to correct them.

One thing that will help us in this direction is to realise how imperfect we ourselves are in every way, and give allowance for the other's imperfections too. If we understand how many situations in our life have shaped us this way, then we can be merciful in thinking that our spouse may also be bearing some baggage from their past. It is also good to know that even when our intentions are right, the many basic differences between the spouses can still cause misunderstandings. How important it is then to constantly try and understand our spouse better and better!

Pointers along the way #707

Want to be rich, Christian?

In spite of the fact that Jesus said it would be easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God (Mt.19:24), and the warning that those who are trying to become rich will fall into traps that may even destroy them (1Ti.6:9), people still go after riches. Especially when the preachers of 'prosperity gospel' convince them that it is their right to become rich, they plunge into the 'Christian' schemes of getting rich – paying tithes, planting seed money, bargaining with God after fasting, etc., without realising that there is great danger there.

On one hand, it is natural that those who suffer lack will want to have things easier. There is nothing wrong with that. Our heavenly Father knows that we have needs to be met (Mt.6:32). That is not what Jesus says about wanting to be rich. He is concerned about those who are never satisfied with what they have, and are also pursuing after more money, more luxury, more thrills, more fun, more variety, more experiences, etc., in order to enjoy this life to the maximum. What happens is that such people begin to give second priority (and later no priority) to pursuing after walking closer to God, accomplishing His will, proclaiming Him more, building His kingdom, caring for His people, etc. What we treasure most in our heart will become our god. In this case, the love of riches will become our god, and we will leave God behind.

The reason why it is difficult for rich people to enter God's kingdom is that they have more than enough money to meet all their needs, and they believe in their heart that with their money they can handle everything. In other words, they don't really 'need' God. Even if they give some lip service to God and make a show of giving Him some of their money, their heart is not with God, their dependence is not on Him, and they think they can manage quite well. That is why God says that the poor of this world usually have more faith than the rich (Jas.2:5), because the poor have no option but to seek God.

God tells us that we should be content if we have enough for our needs (1Ti.6:8). This is our safety from the attractions of this world – gourmet food, fancy clothes, luxurious homes, the latest

cars and gadgets, travel to exotic places, and many other forms of pleasure. But what if we get all these and lose God (Lk.12:19,20)?

What if we end up becoming poor in eternity, not having gathered for ourselves treasures in heaven (Mt.6:20)? *Godliness* gives great gain in this life and the life to come, especially when it is accompanied by contentment (1Ti.6:6). That is the abundant life Jesus gives. That is why Jesus emptied Himself of His rights as God and came down as a Man to give us true riches. Are we dumb enough to imagine that we can love God and earthly pleasures at the same time even though God expressly tells us no (Mt.6:24), or that we can turn to God once we have enjoyed our life enough?

Pointers along the way #708

The harsh realities of life

When man fell, God's plan of salvation was to restore him to the position he lost, which he could have had if he had not sinned. To understand that, let us look at Adam and Eve before the Fall. They had the option of eating from the tree of life or the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. The Fall resulted from making the wrong choice. As a result they became independent of God and had to fend for themselves against the odds that were now against them. They could have made the right choice, and then they could have lived for forever enjoying the benefits of good choices. The tree of life was not just about living forever, but the main thing was that they could have the life of God in them. Obviously, they would have had to make many other choices down the line, but by eating from the tree of life, the life of God would have helped them to make the right choices. So we must understand that salvation includes bringing us to the place where we receive the life of God in us and start making the right choices. It is not merely about forgiving our sins, after which we would go on doing whatever we wanted! This is where the preaching of the Gospel has failed. Nowadays there is hardly any mention of turning away from sin and living according to the life of God within us.

Many people, after hearing only the gospel of forgiveness, think that now God is going to provide everything for them and give them a most comfortable life on earth. But the stark reality that hits them soon is that life on earth is harsh in so many ways. In

every situation we have to make choices between living according to the life of God in us or pleasing ourselves. That is why Jesus described the life of a disciple as having to carry his cross daily and to deny himself in order to follow Him (Lk.9:23,24). People are confused when hardship of various types come to them, because they had been expecting God to protect them from all that! Instead of recognising that these hardships are tests where we have to exercise our choice between being pleasing to God and pleasing ourselves, first in our heart and then in action, we feel like complaining to God and others. Instead of seeking to make the right choices, we seek deliverance from problems!

The New Testament is full of warnings about trials coming in our way, even of a fiery type! The aim of these warnings is to prepare us mentally to face them and also to remind us that overcoming in these trials and standing true to our faith is what will be gainful (rewarding) for us from the point of view of eternity.

This cannot be accomplished in our lives if we don't understand this is the purpose of our life on earth, and also if this is not the primary goal of our life. Even compared to the goal of completing the ministry God has entrusted to us, this goal of personally being faithful to the Lord in every aspect of our life has to grip us more. This emphasis is missing in preaching and personal lives.

Pointers along the way #709

Bringing up children

The Bible teaches us that when we get a new baby who looks so sweet, he was 'born in sin' (Ps.51:5) and would soon show his true nature by lying, fighting, etc. So we parents are exhorted to train them up in the right way if we want them to learn to walk in godly ways (Pr.22:6). This means that we have to teach him many times to say no to what he feels like doing (Lk.9:23), which is something he will resist. But we must remember that if we persevere in showing him the right way, without giving in to his tears or tantrums, it will ultimately save him from a lot of misery (Pr.19:18;29:15). At this point, discipline will be a mark of our true love for him (Pr.13:24;He.12:6). At times, depending on the resistance we face from him, the severity of the discipline has to be increased, even to the point of using a rod (Pr.23:13).

The key to disciplining children is the parent's love for him. When it is done, as it happens usually, in irritation or anger because he is disturbing the parent, that is when it becomes abuse instead of discipline. This is what makes many people turn away from disciplining children, thinking that they want to avoid abuse. But the Christian parent who wants, more than good food, clothes or education, the very best for his child, will make sure that he builds a foundation of love that is clearly understood by the child, on top of which he builds godly character using discipline.

Christian parents cannot take for granted that their children will automatically become Christians if they go to church and Sunday school and learn to say 'Hallelujah' or whatever! Getting them 'baptised' as babies or even as young people will not make them Christians. They need to be individually born again, through repentance from their sins and putting their trust in Jesus as their Saviour. Parents need to keep praying for the Holy Spirit to work in their children's hearts as they explain the Gospel to them.

One serious impact on parenting took place when some 'expert' psychologists in the 1950s came up with the opinion that every child has to be allowed to develop his/her unique personality, and that parents should not interfere in that process by trying to influence them with their own ideas! They also said that any parent forcing the children to follow their instructions was in fact abusing their authority! Even many Christian parents, in spite of

their professed allegiance to the inspired word of God, were fooled into believing that these experts knew better than God! So they began to refrain from discipline, and the sad result can be seen all over the world in several generations.

When will we realise that the Creator has more wisdom about what the created ones need than the cleverest of the created ones? When He gives instructions in His word about different aspects of our practical life, don't we need to pay close attention to them, rather than to the so-called experts who come and go and whose opinions vary?

Pointers along the way #710

Doctrines vs. experience

Christian doctrines must be based on teaching in the Bible, and not on traditions or someone's experience. This may be further qualified by saying that the teachings of Christ and His apostles must supersede the teachings of the old testament, since we are now under the new covenant which Jesus brought (He.8:13). One contrast between the Roman Catholic Church and evangelical Protestant churches is that the Roman church gives almost equal value to church tradition as to biblical teaching, and evangelical churches profess to follow 'only the scriptures'.

But even among evangelical Christians there is difference in practice about how doctrines are formed. One man said that in all his years of experience he had never seen a Christian partially controlled by a demon while he had the Holy Spirit. I have. But my teaching is not just based on experience but what the Bible warns a believing Christian not to give the devil a place in his life (Ep.4:26,27). Another man said that laying on of hands for the baptism in the Holy Spirit and receiving spiritual gifts was the prerogative of only the apostles, because he was not aware of anyone who was doing that now. Again, based on experience! But what do we see if we look at the Bible for teaching?

He.6:2;1Ti.5:22, etc. There are whole denominations who teach that the time for spiritual gifts was over with the apostles because they have not seen them among them, and there are other denominations who proclaim such experiences. Who is right? We just have to see why three chapters in the Bible were given to us (1Co.12-14) on this subject! When we evangelical Christians on one hand say that the Bible is the inspired word of God for all times, how can we also say that some portions were only for the church in Corinth? Especially when we take 1Co.13 out of that portion with great veneration?

True doctrine must be based on the Bible, must be consistent with the teaching of the Bible as a whole, and must be also consistent with experience. If some doctrine is very profound but not true in general experience, we need to examine it further. Perhaps there are things we are not doing right from our side to experience what is given in the doctrine. But then there must be at least some others who have experienced it. If no one has experienced it, the teaching becomes doubtful. (This is similar to

the Old Testament guideline about prophets – if what the prophet says doesn't happen, he wasn't a true prophet.) If no one has experienced it, the doctrine may not have been understood properly.

This is one reason why all of us must be open to correction about what we believe. We must recognise there are many things we don't know, and when others who know some more or some other things tell us something, that can improve our knowledge. Which is more important, to know the truth and to experience it, or to hold tenaciously to our viewpoints, protect our denomination and lose true experience?

Pointers along the way #711

Are we shrewd as Christians?

Many people are puzzled about what Jesus meant when He praised an *unrighteous* manager in a parable (Lk.16:1-8). When we realise that most times when Jesus used parables He was only trying to make just one or two points, and we look for that point, we find that what He tells us is to be shrewd in our practical life! Of course, He was not saying it was OK to be unrighteous! He wants us to be shrewd as serpents while being harmless as doves when we deal with evil men (Mt.10:16) who are waiting there to take advantage of our innocence, make use of us for their advantage, jump over us when it comes to promotions, etc. When we call ourselves children of light as separate from those who are still walking in darkness, what many of us do is to skip being shrewd! We live in our world of Bible studies, prayer meetings and quoting different verses, and we don't learn how to deal with practical things in life! We get into debt, we don't know how to live within our income, we don't know how to save for our future, we are short of money when sickness hits, our relationships get broken, our children wander away right before our eyes, we don't become experts in our area of work, we don't do our work efficiently, etc. All we know is to go to our pastor and ask him to pray for us! We believe naively that God will take care of us automatically without our doing anything on our part to stay close to Him, seeking His wisdom, discerning what is going on around us and then doing what He wants us to do!

The word of God gives us insight, even more understanding than our superiors (Ps.119:99), instruction in behaviour (Pr.1:2-4), protection from sin (Ps.119:11), the general direction for our life and also practical guidelines (v.105). Once we understand this, we will seek for wisdom more than anything else (Pr.4:7), and then God Himself will give us understanding (Pr.2:2-5).

Many Christians are discussing about whether the rapture will come before or after the tribulation, *more than* about what they should be doing now. Others are finding out that 'white' stands for purity and 'blue' for Christ, etc.! In these ways our lives will be disconnected from the real life we have to live on this earth here and now, and then when we face practical challenges here we don't know what to do. We aren't able to understand the situations we are living in and what we are likely to face, and so

we don't prepare for them, while we are occupied with 'loftier things' like how many times the word 'faith' occurs in the Bible!

"These are the things you should have done without neglecting the others" (Mt.23:23) is something that should hit us on our face! Jesus was saying that some things should be more important for us than others. If it's foolish to gain the whole world and lose our soul, isn't it also foolish to have all Bible knowledge and go through all the church rituals and yet not know how to live in this world from day to day?

Pointers along the way #712

The present vs. the world to come

"Momentary, light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison" (2Co.4:17). Many times we think our trouble is not momentary or light, and that is what bothers us. This 'eternal weight of glory' seems imaginary, far away and out of reach for now. So we put this verse away as another nice saying, and we don't seek to understand what it means! That is our loss, because there is a lot of comfort and encouragement packed into these words.

But Jesus demonstrated for us how to live on this earth with our eyes set towards heaven. For Him, what would happen in eternity outweighed the things He faced on earth. The greatest example is that He suffered and died for us, knowing that it would turn out for the salvation of multitudes. He empathised with Martha and Mary as they wept for their dead brother (Jn.11:35), but He was willing to let them go through temporary grief in order to grant them greater faith in the end and to bring glory to God (vv.4,6).

We tend to think of death as the end of life, but from God's point of view, it is just a door into the heavenly life. As a result of our viewpoint we grieve when someone dies, even though if the person was a child of God there is greater reason for rejoicing. From a human point of view we would think that it was a waste for God to allow James to be killed after all the training he had been given, but from God's point of view it was not an end to His plans but the beginning of another phase of His plans. When Christians are persecuted and martyred, they pass on to a higher life in eternity. There is special recognition and role in heaven for the saints who have lost their lives for the Gospel (Re.20:4). The apostles who were beaten up for preaching the Gospel rejoiced that they were counted worthy to suffer for His name (Ac.5:41).

If we go through the sufferings in this world without compromising faithfulness to God, there is a crown of life waiting for us in heaven (Jas.1:12). We really don't know what this 'crown' means. It is a crown of 'life' and not some material thing. It is a heavenly blessing that will more than compensate for what we go through in this life. At that time, what we felt were mountains here that could not be moved would be seen to have

been the means for training us and making us a bit more like Jesus.

Therefore we need to learn to endure what comes our way and which does not just go away even after much prayer (He.10:35,36). If we seek to find out what God is trying to tell us and to do in us, that experience will become meaningful and fruitful. If we can learn to live with eternity in view and live with an eye for the glory that is to be seen in eternity, it will not only comfort and encourage us while we are here, but also help us to bear more fruit for God. But if we live here only seeking to have a good time or to achieve something great here, we will have many regrets there. Our Lord is waiting.

Pointers along the way #713

Time-line of salvation

"Are you saved?" is a question some well-meaning people ask. They assume that salvation is a one-time event. But salvation begins with an event when a man is regenerated in spirit, forgiven his sins and accepted by God as His child. But then, after that a process called sanctification is to follow in which he is freed more and more from the power of sin to become like Jesus in character and behaviour. God works inside us to give us a desire and strength to do His will and we submit to Him by denying ourselves and doing His will (Php.2:12,13:Lk.9:23). Finally we get glorified in the life to come when we receive a new body like that of Jesus after the resurrection. So, salvation just *starts* with forgiveness of sins! But many people seem to think that this is all there is to it, and once they have it they are fixed for eternity! Some then expect to receive the full benefit of salvation immediately!

As a result of this error, people claim promises without going through the process of sanctification, and get discouraged when 'nothing happens'! Without cooperating with God and making the right choices when they are tempted, they expect God to do everything for them.

In a somewhat similar parallel, some people expect all the troubles in this life such as sickness or poverty to disappear all of a sudden by 'simply believing', without recognising God's time-line. They don't realise that the effects of sin in the world will not disappear just because Jesus has brought forth salvation. God's plan is that the problems in this earth are going to be corrected only when the new heavens and the new earth come. Till then we will have to reckon with having to face all kinds of problems on this earth (Jn.16:33). How we face such difficulties and the choices we make will directly affect the process of our salvation (Ac.14:22).

In a variation of this erroneous understanding, some Christians are working hard to change the world system with the aim of restoring it to the original state before sin, and making it the (physical) kingdom of God right now. First of all, this earth is only going to become worse in every way. The way God is planning to deal with it is to destroy it with fire (2Pe.3:7,10) and to create a

new earth and new heavens (Re.21:1). This is similar to God giving us a new self instead of reforming our old sinful self which is hopelessly corrupt and only fit to be put to death. If we don't understand this time-line, we may get out of step with God. Focussing on reviving the earth and reforming the world system could be like putting the cart before the horse. What is primary is to restore people to God. When people overcome sin, their lives will be changed, and they will also influence society and environment for the better. On the contrary, if people are not changed, whatever improvements we make in the world will be short-lived or reversed.

Our personal salvation and our ministry for the Lord must fit in with His time-line (1Co.3:11-15).

Pointers along the way #714

Regeneration vs. backsliding

Many Christians mistakenly assume that to backslide is to go back to a life of open sin and defiance towards God. As a result, many who are backslidden do not consider themselves so and face grave danger. Backsliding can finally end up in such a condition, but backsliding began much before it came to this stage. If we want to remain true Christians we need to watch out for backsliding in our heart because it can creep in unnoticed very easily and often. We must realise that if Satan could not manage to keep a man from becoming a Christian, he would be trying his best now to reclaim that man to himself.

When we are born again (Jn.3:5) and become Christians we can notice certain immediate changes. We now have a hatred and revulsion towards the sinful things we used to do earlier, and we notice a desire to know God more and to be pleasing to Him. We begin to give up certain things we used to do and start certain new things we have not done before. This is the result of regeneration that the Holy Spirit does in our spirit (Ez.36:25-27). This is not a perfect or complete change in our heart, but a seed of what is to ultimately grow and become more like Christ. (If no such change has happened in our life, we must realise we have not really been born again. Compare 1Jn.3:8,9).

What happens in backsliding is the reverse. We begin to lose our delight in the things of God and feel greater attraction for the things we once gave up. I am talking about a change of direction in our heart, and not an occasional effect on our feelings which could be due to physical or psychological disturbances. If we notice this change of direction in our heart we must recognise that we are backsliding, and get back to our first love as quickly as possible (Re.2:4,5). We should not take it lightly, or imagine that we can play around with the old attractions for a little while before we get back to God. We may underestimate our weakness and find ourselves being swept away in a current too strong for us. Our Lord has told us to watch and pray at all times so that temptations do not overtake us (Mt.26:41).

The fact of the matter is that powers of darkness are after us to get us to turn back from God (Ep.6:12). They have thousands of years of experience misleading people, and the cleverest or the

godliest of us is not a match against them. Our safety is to cling to our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ who is the Captain of our salvation. We ought to become sensitive to His promptings through His Spirit and maintain that sensitivity by doing whatever He tells us. We need to feed ourselves with the word of God (1Pe.2:2), pray at all times without giving up (Lk.18:1), and value fellowship with other believers (He.10:24,25). We should have at least some friends who will tell us the truth about us.

Many who assume they have been born again do not have any evidence of regeneration in their lives, and many who are backsliding are not aware of it.

Pointers along the way #715

Our protection from the Devil

Satan is too clever and too powerful for us to handle by ourselves. But the One who has conquered him and disarmed him of his powers is our Saviour (Col.2:15). Our Lord is able to keep us from falling (Jude.24), either to the lusts in our flesh or to the schemes of the Devil. But it is dangerous to presume on this and walk about carelessly because the wily Devil is moving around looking for naive Christians who can be trapped (1Pe.5:8). If we want to be safe, we need to put on the *whole* armour of God (Ep.6:11,12).

If we allow any chink in our armour, the Devil is going to attack us through that gap. This is what we need to be careful about, to keep the whole armour on.

God warns us not to allow anger to persist in our heart for long, because the Devil will use that to work up his attack against us by pumping angry thoughts and revengeful ideas into us till we end up in violent action or breaking up relationships (Ep.4:26,27). If we hold on to unforgiving attitudes towards anyone else, that gives the Devil another foothold in our life to work with (2Co.2:10,11). These two passages illustrate the point that if we hold on to *any* sin knowingly in our life we have a chink in our armour. Then we can't bank on God to keep us from falling. Jesus told us to watch and pray knowing our weakness (Mt.26:41).

There are people who dabble with occult practices out of curiosity or for thrills. These are direct contacts with demonic powers, and if we play with fire we can't hope to come away unharmed. Many have opened the way for demons into their life through this path. Another entry for demons is through worship of idols because the power behind lifeless idols is Satan working through his demons (1Co.10:20).

God tells us not to serve our bosses with 'eye-service' (Ep.6:5,6), doing our work well only when they are watching us. When we, as Christians, are expected to walk before God, do we do right and avoid what is wrong only when people are watching us? If so, there are bound to be many chinks in our armour! Then it will be no wonder if the Devil is able to attack us, in our thoughts first and then increasingly more powerfully in other areas too. This can happen even if we don't believe in demons or say that we are

in Christ and expect the blood of Christ to protect us! It will be we ourselves who open parts of our armour for the devil to attack us.

The answer is not just in getting 'delivered', because if the chinks in the armour are not closed up, the attacks will resume! There has to come a repentance in our life and a beginning of fear and trembling in working out our salvation. We should not take grace for granted or expect Jesus to give us protection while we continue with sin or wrongdoing. God has accepted us out of His unmerited favour towards us, and now He gives us grace (power) to walk in His ways. But if we choose to continue in sin or to enjoy its pleasures, we will suffer the consequences (Ga:6:7,8).

Pointers along the way #716

The 'dignified' Christian!

This type of Christians are most keen to keep their reputation in front of others as 'dignified'. They don't like to participate in any controversial discussions in case they get caught on the wrong foot by some people. They would rather keep their opinions to themselves, if possible, or take the milder option out of two sides. They feel safer to quote what others have said and leave it there without expressing their own opinions. They want to be on the side of the 'experts' in order to be on the safer side. Their comments and opinions, whenever they are forced to voice them, will be always politically correct within their circles, and they are not even averse to shifting their position according to the circle they find themselves in. They would like to have the reputation of being a 'mature' person and flee from the possibility of being considered radical or fanatical by anybody. One wonders if they have any convictions at all!

These are like salt that does not have any flavour left (Mt.5:13). If we are to know the truth in a way that sets us free, one wonders if truth means anything real to these people or are just notions in their head. Like the people in Athens whom Paul met, they may like to listen to truths without allowing those truths to make them take a stand. We can't find such people standing up for what they believe (except in their safe circles), and hardly helping anyone around them to come to their position.

When Saul thought that people who followed Jesus were confusing and turning fellow Jews away from the true God, he went all out against them and was even willing to destroy them. When he finally realised his mistake and understood that Jesus was indeed the Messiah he was waiting for and the Son of God, he turned completely around and began to proclaim Jesus boldly! It was this attitude of Saul (later named Paul) which helped him to preach Christ and start many churches in most parts of the known world. He faced hostility from the Jews who became so agitated they wanted to kill him. But that only made him all the more eager to share the truths about Jesus everywhere he went. *He would not hold back any part of the truth that could potentially help his hearers (Ac.20:26,27).* He had to finally pay with his life for what he believed and proclaimed. But even knowing about

such a possibility did not hinder him from preaching and writing about everything he had learned (Ac.21:13).

There is a place to take a non-denominational approach when we work together with other Christians. But that does not mean that we are not gripped with some of the truths we believe in to the extent we disown them! If we totally adhere to the so-called minimum common denominator approach we may do well in political coalitions. But when we try to be dignified Christians in this way we lose some of our edge and the light that we should be sharing may become dim. Our Saviour may even become disillusioned with us (Mk.8:35).

Pointers along the way #717

Trust and obey

If we don't trust the Lord we can't obey Him except when it is convenient for us! But obeying Him is the only way we can get to the higher plane He wants to take us to! If we must obey Him when we are unsure of how things might turn out, we must believe that what He tells us to do is the best for us. We must know that He cares for us and always plans for our best (Je.29:11), and that He is able to take care of every situation that follows our obedience.

We may worry about what people might think of us if they know what we are doing. But this is one bridge we must cross and not go back on, by believing that what God thinks of us is all that ultimately matters (Mt.10:37-39). If this issue is not settled in our mind, there will be hesitation and confusion at every step (Pr.29:25). If we are not willing in our heart to go with Him no matter where He leads us, there is no guarantee that we can even understand the will of God in any situation (Jn.7:17), let alone be able to do it. But once we determine firmly that we would obey God rather than man (Ac.5:29), everything starts to become clearer.

Another thing we may worry about is what would happen if we obeyed God in something particular. Of course, it is wise to sit down and count the cost before deciding to do anything (Lk.14:28). But what can take us through that crisis is to believe that God is already aware of the consequences of our obedience, well in control of the situations, and He has already prepared things and people in advance for our sake. It is not that there would be no problem along the way, but that He will our best in the end.

We must know God's will before we obey! Many things we need to obey are clearly given there in the Bible. Once we read and understand what He wants us to do, there should not be any hesitation in doing those. For many other things which are not specifically spelt out, there are principles revealed there which we need to apply in discerning His will. Instead of taking the trouble to do this, some people make a mistake when they claim to have 'faith' and do what they themselves want. Some others try to imitate others imagining that God will do for them what He has

done for others, not realising that He has not promised in general for everyone the particular things He has done for some others.

When the will of God is not clear for us in some situations we ought to wait on the Lord to hear what He would tell us to do. This is another thing many are not prepared to do because they expect instant solutions.

If we truly trust our Lord, that is the faith that will produce works. People who have been fed on false grace are averse to hearing anything about what we have to do in order to obey God. They want to receive everything freely 'by faith'! It smells of spiritual laziness and shows that we are not earnest in wanting to do the will of God. That is not the character of someone who loves God (Jn.14:21). If we love Him we will obey Him.

Pointers along the way #718

Living in a doctrinal bubble?

Doctrines are biblical teachings meant to lead us to a godly life, and a godly life is the goal of God's salvation. If our doctrines don't have any use for us in this direction or if they have no connection with practical life, should we waste our precious, limited time arguing about them? It is unfortunate that many Bible colleges and many individual pastors and teachers spend a lot of time discussing non-essential issues when critical issues that affect practical life are left untouched?

Theology forms the basis of Christian living; wrong theology can't be expected to support right living. But isn't *applied theology* more helpful to people than cold theological facts without life?

For example, there are doctrines that apparently describe a victorious life. They quote different verses to show that we *have* victory. But this actually amounts to implying we have no sin (1Jn.1:8)! But we only have to look closely at ourselves to see that we don't always have victory. We fall sometimes and need to confess that to God to get forgiveness (v.9). But if we hold a doctrine that says we *have* victory, we need to twist meanings of words (play with semantics) to show that our failure is really not a failure (our sin is not a sin), our sins are already covered by the blood of Jesus and don't count as sins(!), it wasn't a sin but a mistake, etc. Then we are trying to live inside a doctrinal bubble and are quite disconnected from real life! What we need is to find doctrines that address practical situations that we face in real life and show us what to do with them.

When we make doctrines that don't work in practice we are being intellectually dishonest. We can't get away by saying, "Let God be true and every man a liar" (Ro.3:4) because this verse doesn't mean that in order to make God's word appear to be true we should hold on to doctrines that we know are false! When doctrines don't work, it means we haven't understood them rightly, or that we haven't connected them with other parts of truth that balance them. It is better to say we don't know, and start looking for right doctrines.

In the above example about a victorious life, there are verses that tell us what God has done to provide us with what we need for

that life. These are available to us 'in Christ'. But there are other verses that tell us what we need to do in order to appropriate God's provisions and actually experience victory. These are not verses that tell us how to *earn* our salvation (which we cannot ever earn), but how to avoid things that will keep us away from salvation or how we can receive salvation. If we preach only what God has given us 'in Christ' without telling people how they can really experience it, we end up blowing doctrinal bubbles. We are either ignorant about the full part of the truth, or we are being dishonest by talking only about parts of the truth that appeal to people's emotions and make the preacher acceptable to them.

Pointers along the way #719

If we don't act on what we hear

Many consider themselves to be believers because they 'believe' in Jesus. When the Philippian jailer asked Paul what he should do to be saved, the simple answer was, "Believe in the Lord Jesus" (Ac.16:30,31), wasn't it? They think because they believe they are fine with God, because salvation is through grace and not by works (Ep.2:8,9)! But when the jailer believed, he was now willing to obey the Lord in baptism, wasn't he? What kind of belief or faith is there when one does not have any change in life to show for the faith one professes to have? It is dead and of no use for salvation (Jas.2:20).

What if we 'believe' in so many doctrines but do not live according to them? When we hear or read truths that convict us do we keep aside ones that are inconvenient to us? If we know in our heart that a certain doctrine is true but choose not to follow or proclaim it, where do we stand before God? Do we console ourselves by saying we are 'accepted in Christ'? Do we go on to find out ways of circumventing the truth by counter arguments or explain it away saying that it was only for those days of the apostles? Do we become active in opposing that doctrine so that we can become stronger in convincing ourselves? What happens to our conscience when we suppress the truth? "The wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who suppress the truth in unrighteousness, because that which is known about God is evident within them; for God made it evident to them"

(Ro.1:18,19). God may even send a spirit of delusion on them because they refuse to love the truth in their heart (2Th.2:11,12).

Why do we go in that direction? One reason is that we want to preserve our reputation before people, especially in our denomination. Another reason is that we don't want to risk losing any material or social advantage we may have in remaining where we are. But we end up losing God's pleasure and anointing over us. Every step of obedience we take towards God opens up new vistas of spiritual blessing we were not even aware of before. Every step taken at the cost of something to ourselves can become a major milestone in our journey with God and ministry (Ge.22:16,17).

What was the real difference between the two men who built houses in the parable of Jesus? Both of them heard His words, but one of them did not act on them (Mt.7:26). His house fell. We can say that his dreams and expectations crumbled in the end. It is not about how much of His words we know or even preach but how we let them direct our lives. God is looking for those who will 'tremble before His words' (Is.66:2). Giving greater respect to His words is a mark of how much we have actually come to know Him. As He examines us, mere theological knowledge or even success in ministry because of gifts will not indicate our standing before God. It will be good for all of us to ask Him to search us and tell us where we go wrong (Ps.139:23,24).

Pointers along the way #720

Closing our mind

One of the mistakes we Christians make is to close our mind against the conviction of the Holy Spirit, assuming that it is an accusation or doubt coming from the Devil. It is the knowledge of the 'truth' or reality that can set us free from all the corruption that is there in our flesh (Jn.8:32) because of which we are so very unlike Christ. When truth comes, it exposes the actual situation in our life. Even though it is painful for us to face it, that is the first step we have to take towards being set free. What happens when we close our mind to such painful realities is that we remain at the same spiritual level or even backslide, while at the same time assuming that we are doing fine.

Think of what happens when a man who is not born again assumes that he is a child of God because of some false assurances. Now and then he comes across things that wake up his conscience and alert him to realise he needs to be born again. But then he tells himself that he is a child of God by remembering some past event and also misquoting verses that do not really apply to him. On the contrary, if only he would examine himself based on the word of God – has his direction of life changed towards God now, does he now have a hatred towards all sin, is he in a battle to stop sinning with constant cries to God for help, are his thinking and practical life getting more and more like Christ? If the answers are 'yes', then he can be assured of his salvation.

"God has not given us a spirit of timidity, but of power and love and discipline" (2Ti.1:7). 'Sound mind' as in the KJV can be translated as 'discipline' and 'self-control' also. This is what God has planned for us. But don't we need to see if we are actually experiencing these in practical ways? Or should we close our mind and 'claim' that these are so? Some people take 'sound mind' to imply that Christians cannot have mental illnesses! When they become ill, they refuse to treat it, as they would have done for other physical illnesses, but keep claiming that have a sound mind!

There may be many doctrines where others disagree with us. Isn't it necessary to examine their teachings before coming to conclusions? Or do we simply assume we are right and stay put with our doctrines without questioning them?

There is a place to close our mind towards the Devil's attacks. For example, after we have forgiven someone and the thoughts of what he has done keep coming back, we have to refuse to entertain those thoughts further, saying we have already forgiven him. If we have actually experienced being born again and that has changed our life entirely, we shouldn't waste any more time going over that question again.

The Devil knows whom to trouble with doubts and whom to soothe with false assurances. Our safety comes from being honest before God and being willing to receive whatever He tells us and then to do it. Then we are not 'insecure' and can deal with challenges without wavering.

Pointers along the way #721

God's not upset with imperfection

Some sensitive Christians feel condemned almost all the time because they are painfully aware of their imperfections. Many, if not most, are upset when they have to deal with imperfection in others! But God, who is entirely perfect in every way without any flaw or blemish in Him, does not get worked up about the imperfections He notices in all of us. That is because He is very realistic and is fully aware that we were born in sin (Ps.51:5) and that we can't help being imperfect in whatever we do. He says that He knows 'our frame' and that we are made of dust. He has compassion on us when we fear and tremble before Him (Ps.103:13,14).

In a sense, we should be very much concerned about our own imperfections, because only then we will seek to press on to perfection (He.6:1). The problem with many Christians these days is that they tell themselves they are 'perfect in Christ' and refuse to be 'negative' by looking at their actual failures and lacks. But when we behold the glory of the Lord (2Co.3:18), if we don't at the same time see our own filthiness in comparison (Is.6:1,5), our transformation into His glory will remain merely imaginary!

At the same time, we must remember that it is not because of our being good enough that God has accepted us as His children, but because He is gracious (Ep.2:8,9). Then we will have a balanced picture where we humbly seek His grace for forgiveness and for transformation into His likeness (He.4:16), without getting into condemnation at the same time.

We also learn to bear with the imperfections in others (Co.3:13), the more we realise how we ourselves are only vessels of His mercy (Ro.9:23). Then we realise that we lost any right we might have had to judge or look down on others when we became recipients of unmerited favour from God (Mt.18:32,33).

While rejoicing in God's grace towards us, what we must also remember is that God will be very much upset with us if we are not *pressing on* to perfection from our state of imperfection after we have received His grace. That is what He means by saying that if we were lukewarm He would even 'spit us out of His mouth' (Re.3:15,16). Imagine God went to the extent of sacrificing His

only Son in order to become able to show us grace, and when we receive grace we just laze around, taking things for granted instead of showing our gratitude towards Him (2Co.5:15)!

On a practical note, even if there may be short ups and downs in our spiritual growth, we need to make sure that the overall trend in our life is upwards. There is forgiveness if we have fallen down and even lost time. But God takes it very seriously if we are not serious about our life with Him, seeking after more of Him, repenting in humility if we grieve Him, learning from our mistakes to do better afterwards, and increasing in our eagerness to fulfil His plans for our lives and to bring honour to His name. He hates it if we become lukewarm and take Him for granted.

Pointers along the way #722

Desire of our heart

"Delight yourself in the Lord; And He will give you the desires of your heart" (Ps.37:4). What *are* the desires of our heart? A big house, a new car, visiting a distant country, making a lot of money? If such are the desires uppermost in our mind, it shows us that what we treasure in our heart is tied to our life on this earth. If these are the desires in our heart even after coming to Jesus, it shows us that our primary reason for coming to Him was only to get earthly blessings. Then what kind of 'delight' was it that we had in the Lord? What Jesus wants is for us to seek the treasures of eternity instead (Mt.6:20,21).

It was very different for Jesus. The primary desire of His heart was to do the will of His Father (He.10:7). This desire was so dominant in His life that He derived satisfaction and meaning in His life from knowing that He was doing the Father's will (Jn.4:34). The apostle Paul had his mind set on completing what the Lord had called him to (Php.3:13,14). Earthly fame, riches and pleasure were like 'dung' to him in comparison!

When God gave King Solomon freedom to ask anything he wanted, he asked for wisdom to rule the nation well (1Kg.3:9). It is even more remarkable that this answer came in his dream, indicating that it was truly the desire of his heart and not something he asked in false humility! No wonder God was so pleased with him! What is *our* desire in the innermost being of our heart?

The desire of our heart shows whether we are spiritual people who desire God's glory to be seen and His will to be done (Mt.6:9,10) or carnal people who only seek things for themselves. This will not only determine how much we will enjoy God's pleasure over us in this life but also in the life to come. Carnal people think only of the here and now. If we are carnal we won't understand that this life is a preparation for the life to come, and that by wise and sacrificial choices here we can reap (true) riches for ourselves in eternity (Jn.6:27). It is sad to see many use Ps.37:4 as a basis for claiming from God whatever they desire! There are preachers who tell them to 'dream big' and to 'expect great things from God' – all in relation to the earth! If only the preachers and the hearers took that to refer to eternal values!

It is very much possible that when we begin our life with the Lord we are very zealous and single-minded to be pleasing to Him, but we drift away to earthly pleasures when He adds earthly blessings to us. That was what happened to Solomon himself (1Kg.3:13;11:4), and many others we read about in the Bible. He got away so far from the Lord as to worship other gods, but it looks like he never realised this had happened to him. How sad to let this happen to us! It is necessary to begin well, wholeheartedly. But then it is all the more important to remain faithful all throughout life and finish triumphantly. Let's cleanse ourselves from all defilement of spirit as seen in our desires (2Co.7:1).

Pointers along the way #723

One great lesson

Anything that lasts to eternity has to be from God; He is the true eternal One. When He does a work in us, it is actually supernatural because man cannot reproduce it. The greatest miracle is not healing the sick or even raising the dead because all these people die at the end, but those who loved to sin beginning to hate it, those who loved only themselves beginning to love God and other people, and carrying this life into eternity. Only God can do this, and no amount of human learning, skill or experience can manage to produce such miracles.

Those who serve God by ministering to people, whether it is through evangelism, teaching or any other ministry, ultimately come to recognise that God's work is *God's* work and we cannot accomplish it without Him. One may have the best of knowledge in one's area of work, may have developed great skills in doing it through years of experience, may have the latest technical support, may employ the best psychological tools to influence people and may use the most successful marketing strategies known to man. But all this cannot move the person we are ministering to one bit if God is not working through us (many times in spite of us). "'Not by might nor by power, but by My Spirit,' says the Lord of hosts" (Zec.4:6).

It is not that we don't need to get prepared through learning, getting trained and developing expertise. But our dependence cannot be on such things. If we have all this and more, but God is not with us, nothing lasting can come from all our efforts, even though we might dazzle undiscerning people with our cleverness and abilities! This is one of the greatest practical lessons the Lord teaches us.

Whatever our line of work is, we need to learn to depend more and more on the Holy Spirit to work in us and through us. Nothing of any real significance can be accomplished otherwise. However much knowledge, skills or experience we have, we have absolutely no ability within ourselves to transform another person's thinking or behaviour that will make them a little closer to God and a little more like Jesus. But that transformation is what they really need! The best thing we can do is to make ourselves available to the Holy Spirit as a channel He can work

through. Then His work will be supernatural, much beyond what we could have imagined.

Our knowledge, training and experience can be useful to the Holy Spirit to work through us; we are not to neglect them. But our dependence on the Holy Spirit must be deep and genuine, touching every aspect of our ministry. We must also be clear in our mind not to accept any glory for ourselves but recognise in the depth of our heart that it is all by *His* power and might, not ours.

It is only too easy for even the best of us to slip away from our dependence on God and begin to trust in ourselves. That will be our downfall. It has happened to many of God's servants and that is what we need to watch out against.

Pointers along the way #724

Who can turn the tide?

Many preachers are not preaching the real gospel that Jesus came to save sinners (1Tim.1:15) because that is not what would make them popular and rich. Many 'natural' men (1Cor.2:14) who are not born again and who therefore do not have the Holy Spirit teaching and guiding them become preachers and 'Christian' leaders, and become the reason why many people are not receiving their needed food daily (Lk.12:42). Offers of wealth and health as being the main attraction of God are diverting many people from the truth. Many others are being enticed by a false teaching on grace that obliterates major parts of God's character such as righteousness, hatred towards sin and justice and presents only unmerited favour towards people, which is very attractive to the ear (2Ti.4:3). Some people are being manipulated by control-crazy leaders who want to rule over them and make them feel that they are submitting to God in that way. Many people give up on church altogether because the 'sickness' they see in the church is worse than what they themselves came seeking healing for! It looks as if godly people are disappearing from the world and the ungodly are flourishing (Ps.12:1).

When the Lord sees that His people are going astray and He feels like destroying them, He looks for someone to plead for them (Ez.22:30)! Before He would destroy Sodom and Gomorrah He listened to Abraham who tried to convince Him out of that. But the sad thing is that many times He does not find anyone mediating for the people (Is.63:5). Most often people are only seeking their own gain (Php.2:20,21), and their prayers are only about their own desires.

God has promised that if His people repented, turned back to Him and sought Him He would relent of the disaster He had made to come upon them or planned (2Ch.7:13-14). This is a well-known promise, and there are thankfully some who take this seriously and try to organise mass prayer meetings based on this theme, seeking to regain God's favour on His people. But many times there is hardly any acknowledgement of their sins or any repentance and turning to God. It becomes times where songs are played and messages are given, but without any conviction of sins coming on the people or a genuine humbling of themselves before

God. Perhaps the mistake is planning for a large attendance and trying to make things 'interesting' for those who come!

The need is for people who 'fear the Lord' and who are genuinely troubled about the things that are happening in the church to stand before Him and plead for the people (Mal.3:16), without waiting for organising big meetings and starting large projects with fancy names to attract people. Such are few in number, and the Lord puts a seal on them (Ez.9:4). Their prayer is more meaningful and effective (Jas.5:16) than a thousand people who come together to have a good time! They pray with a burden, and they also do whatever they can to proclaim the true gospel and correct error.

Pointers along the way #725

What is our blessed hope?

What is our hope of a Christian? For the atheist, there is no hope of a life after death, and if he has any hope at all, it is only that all his misery on earth will be over with his death. For Christians who know there is a life to come, they emphasise different aspects of that life generally based on what they have gone through in life. For some it is that there will be no more death but they can live forever (Jn.11:26). For some others the greatest thing is that they can escape hell and have a life in heaven (Re.20:15). Some people are looking forward to meeting their loved ones again who have passed on earlier (1Th.4:13). Some think of freedom from the pain and sorrow of sickness, handicaps, poverty and failures (Re.21:4). Some think much of the mansions Jesus has prepared for them and the golden streets to walk on (Jn.14:2,3). Some think of having no people there to trouble them. This list can go on.

There is nothing wrong with this list. In fact, all this and more are included in the promises God has made to His people. Whatever has gone wrong with this world will be set right in the new heaven and the earth, and it is right to look forward to that. 'Comfort' is part of the blessing we receive when we believe what God says He has prepared for us. After writing about the rapture, Paul tells the believers, "Therefore comfort one another with these words" (1Th.4:18).

However, there are some things that ought to occupy our minds much more than what is mentioned above. "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His great mercy has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to obtain an inheritance which is imperishable and *undefiled*" (1Pe.1:3,4). Note the word 'undefiled' which means 'pure'. Now look at what John says, "Beloved, now we are children of God, and it has not appeared as yet what we will be. We know that when He appears, we will *be like Him*, because we will *see Him just as He is*. And everyone who has this hope fixed on Him purifies himself, just as He is pure" (1Jn.3:2,3).

Many people claim to have seen Jesus in a vision or a dream. But none of them has seen Him *as He is* because no one can see God

and live. But when we stand finally before Him face to face after having been transformed to become like Him, we will be able to see Him as He really is. This - to finally see the One who has given Himself for us - has been the strongest desire of many godly people who have come to know Him intimately while on earth. When they were moved by this desire, their response was to purify themselves to be just as pure as He is. Godly people long to be free from their sins.

What happens if we are longing for all the things similar to what is in the list above, but are not taking care to purify ourselves in our thoughts, intentions and behaviour? The chances are that we have not heard the Gospel properly.

Pointers along the way #726

Is God in control?

If I fool around with my studies and fail in my exam, can I tell myself that God allowed me to fail in order to teach me humility? God had nothing to do with it. I am just reaping what I have sown. No way I can blame God for it!

Many Christians don't agree! They ask, "Are you saying God is not in control?" My answer is, "Are you saying that God made me fail? Or that He could have made me pass in spite of my lack of preparation but He chose to teach me humility? No, I failed because I didn't study well. Don't blame God for that."

A lot of our problems remain and become worse because we have the habit of not taking responsibility for our mistakes. We try to blame everyone and everything else and even place the blame indirectly on God! But as long as we don't admit our faults we cannot receive forgiveness or transformation.

Classifying everything that happens as the will of God comes from thinking of God's sovereignty in an exaggerated way. Some think because God is almighty and does whatever He wants (Ps.115:3), therefore whatever happens is either His will or what He has permitted. But to think that whatever He has permitted is also His will because He could have prevented it is not right. In His sovereign will, God has created us in His image, and one part of that image is our free will or the ability to make our own decisions. When God did this He knew that we might sin, but when we sin we are to be blamed and not He! It was we who chose to sin and not He.

Another mistake we make from this misunderstanding is leaving things to God and not doing what we ought to do, believing that God is in control and He will do everything right. For example, we don't save for our future thinking that God will take care of it. On the other hand, we do wrong things and think that God will anyway work things for our good.

God is sovereign, but the free will He has created us makes us responsible for our actions because we do them by our own choice. God is also sovereign in the sense that He is able to overrule anything at any time He wants. He is in overall control of

our life, but He has given us freedom to make our own choices and so we are responsible for the choices we make.

Repentance begins with taking responsibility for our sinful actions (Jer.3:13). It is only when we do it that we can begin to become real. Even when there are things outside of our control, our response to such things is still within our control. Because of the sinful nature that we are born with, we are initially not able to make the right decisions. But when we are born again and God gives us a new mind, we begin to hate the old ways and want to do God's will. Then the Holy Spirit begins to teach and enable us to actually make the right choices (Php.2:12,13). This is a lifelong process which begins in our mind – where we recognise things we have been doing wrong and change over to thinking according to God's laws – and results in action (Ro.12:2).

Pointers along the way #727

Why do you 'go to church'?

Many people think of 'church' as a building, and so the phrase 'go to church'. But originally, it was the name for an assembly of believers in Jesus who gathered together frequently to listen to the apostles' teaching and fellowship (Ac.2:42). So, why do people 'go to church' now?

To fulfil a sense of duty? Listen to the choir? Meet friends? Find someone to marry? Develop business contacts? Try out new dresses? Hoping to get rid of problems? Receive God's blessings?

The (universal) church consists of all who have been born again by faith in Jesus as their Saviour, and this church meets locally in small groups. However, not everyone who comes to a meeting of the church is necessarily born again, but some may be there because of motives such as the ones given above. God uses the church to reach out to them and hopefully add them to the real church. All those who are born again are, spiritually speaking, only babies in their relationship with God and the knowledge of God and His ways. One way in which He helps them to grow is through the church.

The pattern of the church given in the New Testament is as a corporate body (the body of Christ) where everyone has something to contribute to one another in terms of building up towards spiritual maturity (1Co.12:7;Ep.4:16). Even though what we usually see presently is one man taking the lead, we need to keep in mind that even such a situation need not prevent others from making their contributions – serving with their spiritual gifts in different public or private capacities.

When we think of growing up spiritually, we can identify two broad areas – our personal growth where we get increasingly freed from the power of sin and get transformed into the character of Jesus, and our relationships with others. It is God's plan that the church working through its members should provide teaching, guidance, comfort and encouragement in these directions. Many times the failure is when we keep waiting for others to change and start taking care of us, instead of also trying to see what we ought to do to bless the others.

Instead of merely listening to the choir if we join with them in worshipping and praising God meaningfully from our heart, what a difference it can make to our personal life and relationship with God! God is waiting for such people to enjoy *His* relationship with them (Jn.4:23)! When we join in our heart with our own personal prayers and petitions to God and listen to the word that is shared, that becomes an opportunity to meet with God and receive His answers. In turn, this begins to show us how to improve our relationship with others. Then, when we work together with the others in the ministries of the church, that gives us opportunities to see where we lack or go wrong and also to give to and receive help from one another.

There will be problems and challenges too! But that's how we grow, develop and mature; not by backing off or keeping away!

Pointers along the way #728

What do you want from God?

It's only natural that when we face difficulties in life those who believe in God will go to Him for help. He is our Father, and He is our Provider, Protector, Wisdom, Fortress, Shield, etc. We shouldn't be super-spiritual and pretend we don't have any practical needs or imagine that we wouldn't want to trouble God about our earthly needs. God knows that we are in need of many things in life (Mt.6:32), and He encourages us to ask (7:7) even though He knows what we need even before we ask (6:8).

But asking for our need is different from seeking after what we treasure in our heart. Jesus said that the kingdom of God is something that we ought to seek just like some men go after hidden treasures (13:44). The question is whether it has become valuable to us like a treasure, or, more than any earthly treasure that people value. This is what will motivate us to run after it. If we don't have this value God in our heart, we will end up treating Him only as a handyman who has to come running to us whenever we want Him to do something for us.

Someone has prayed this prayer, "Lord, help me to be what You want me to be, and to do what You want me to do." Do we understand what this means, and can we make this our prayer too?

God created man in His own image to be perfect and without blemish. But sin has messed up things. Our thoughts go wrong, negative feelings dominate our mind and we aren't able to make the right choices and to do the right things all the time. This brings us much sorrow and hardship every day, and it also hurts others around us. When we come to God through Jesus, His blood cleanses us and makes us fully acceptable to God (He.10:22). We are fully sanctified (set apart) in His sight (v.10). But on our side, there is much work to be done to experience that in real life. That is the same as becoming more and more like Jesus in practical life which God has already planned for us (Ro.8:28,29).

The other thing is to do what He wants us to do. Each member of the body of Christ has a particular task to fulfil (1Co.12:7). This includes every part of our life such as building our family, doing our job, and contributing something to the others using the

spiritual gifts God gives us. God's plan is what can lead us to the most fulfilling life we can have on earth. We know that this can't be done if we are running after things in this world such as money, fame, pleasure, etc. In other words, God's will for our life can't get done until we see that as the top priority in our life and put aside our own earthly ambitions and people's opinions.

May the eyes of our understanding be opened to see what God has prepared for us (Ep.1:18), may we treasure it above everything else in life and may we run after it with speed! One day we will see that the things we have to give up along the way in order to run towards this goal were nothing in comparison. Till then we run in faith trusting God and His word, and He gives us strength.

Pointers along the way #729

Abraham, the father of faith

Abraham was the father of the Jews but he is also known as the father of all those who have become children of God through faith in Jesus Christ (Ro.4:16). There are others who walked by faith in God, but Abraham stands out as one who remained in faith against all odds. When God promised him and Sarah a son he was 75 years old, already old and beyond the age of childbearing. But he believed what God promised because it was God who had said it, and that faith was what was counted to him as 'righteousness' (v.3). But then, Abraham and Sarah didn't receive the promised son for another 25 years! Even though they had some doubts now and then, on the whole Abraham held on to God's promise. We can imagine how things went every year as they got older and the chances of their ever having a child plummeted down! But the wonderful thing was that they didn't believe what nature and common sense told them when they pitted such notions against what God had said, but they held on to God's word (vv.19-21). That was a remarkable faith! No wonder Abraham received the title of the father of faith!

We too are to walk in faith in the paths of our own lives even though our circumstances may be different from Abraham's. But we too may have our tests of faith that look just as difficult! The example of Abraham is given to us so that we too may learn to persevere without giving up.

We must be sure that we are holding on to something God has promised us and not doggedly holding on to something we want for ourselves. We mustn't even say that what God did for someone else He *has to* do for us, unless it is something He has promised for everyone, because God does many things for individuals as special cases. Faith is not something we create in our own mind but which is based on God's word of promise which He has spoken to us (10:17).

But once we are clear that what we believe is something God has promised all His children or something He has told us specifically, we can dare to think that God will definitely fulfil it. If we don't believe that, it would be unbelief which is certainly displeasing to God. Remember, all of Israel except two people who believed perished in the desert and could not enter the Promised Land!

Jesus came to save His people from their sins (Mt.1:21). He came to set captives free (Lk.4:18). Because of His death on the cross in our place He has done everything needed for our salvation from sin (He.7:27;Jn.19:30). As a result, we are no longer obliged to serve sin (Ro.8:12). Sin need not rule over us any more (6:14). This is a promise given to every child of God.

The question is if we will believe it. It is a choice we make whether we will believe what God has said or believe our circumstances. Our situation may be less severe or even worse than Abraham's. But our trust is not in us or our abilities but in God who has promised things to us. If we hold on in faith, we too can see the fruit just like Abraham.

Pointers along the way #730

Wounded people

We are *all* wounded people. No one has escaped the damage to our body, mind and spirit which we were born with! We were not only born in due to the Fall, but the fact is that we all have sinned against God in many ways and *personally* come to deserve the curse of God on sin (Ro.3:23). Besides, growing up with imperfect parents and facing many painful circumstances in life have also broken us in various degrees.

Then we come to Christ! Wish this would make us perfect in a moment! But what really happens is that the seed of God comes into our spirit and begins to grow and influence every part of our life (1Pe.2:2;1Jn.3:9). This is a life-long process called sanctification by which God wants to transform us a little at a time to the character of Jesus (Ro.8:29). But depending on where we started from and how seriously we have been involved with sanctification (Php.2:12,13), we all carry with us huge burdens of our fallen nature and the way we grew up.

This comes to a head when two people get married. All their differences in their personality, skills and background show up their contrasts in many ways! Each one thinks it is all the other person's fault! Some of them come for counselling expecting that their spouse will be made perfect and then it will become easier for them to manage life!

But we all have to reckon with this fact: as long as we live here on earth all of us are still going to be *imperfect*. Paul was perhaps the most zealous Christian of his time, filled with the Spirit and knowledge, and he too had to admit that he wasn't perfect by any means (Php.3:12). James made this humbling statement, "My brethren... we all stumble in many ways" (Jas.3:1,2).

If we are honest with ourselves we too have to acknowledge this about us – we are far from being perfect. We don't know many things, we have many weaknesses, and even when we intend well we sometimes mess up things! There is so much we need to work on in our life. How we need to walk around in humility and dependence on God's grace – *mercy* for our sins and *help* to overcome (He.4:16)!

Where is our humility to be seen more than in dealing with others? Instead of being occupied with looking for their faults and taking every opportunity to let them know, don't we need to 'accept' their faults as a part of their humanness and bear with them? We may have heard much about forgiving others when they sin against us (Ep.4:32;Co.3:13). But don't we also have to focus on 'bearing with one another' (Co.3:13)?

This means to 'accept' the others as they are, not demanding that they should be perfect towards us, knowing that we don't always understand the struggles they have had and are going through now. It is to be patient with them (1Th.5:14;2Ti.2:24;1Pe.2:20). It is to recognise that they and we are fellow pilgrims in this journey of life and to give up the self-centred expectation that everyone's duty is to be good to us. In this way, we will serve the law of Christ.

Pointers along the way #731

Activating the prophetic gift?

Following the fashionable trend of speaking in tongues that bloomed with the charismatic movement, the current thing seems to be to prophesy! 'Everyone' would like to prophesy, 'speak into' other people's lives and 'declare' life and healing into broken situations. But just look around and see how many of these 'prophecies' actually come true! Hardly any. But what is happening is that the listening believer is scared to ignore what the prophet has said, thinking of what would happen if they disobeyed God. They even do nonsensical things such as getting married to someone who is very obvious to everyone else as a wrong choice, just because a 'prophet' of God told them.

Then there are 'schools of prophets' training people to become prophets and where their gift of prophecy can be 'activated'. I am wary of this word 'activation' which is not in the Bible but which has connections with the New Age movement. But there is also a wrong theology prevalent among this new prophetic movement.

Spiritual gifts are given to individual members of the body of Christ according to what God has chosen for each one (1Co.12:11). We can ask for any gift, and in fact, we are exhorted to seek them earnestly (14:1). But the final decision is with the Lord. He distributes different gifts to each one (12:8-10). It is very clear that some people have certain gifts while others have some other gifts (vv.29,30). For example, it says that all are not prophets, i.e., all don't have the gift of prophecy. But, at the same time, it does not mean that each one can have only one gift. Obviously, Paul had several gifts.

But some people wrongly teach that everyone can have any or all of the gifts. They quote Ep.1:3, "Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing." This is talking about us collectively, and not individually as we have already seen. Another favourite quotation is from 1Co.14:31, "you can all prophesy." That's not fair! Here it is talking about avoiding confusion in a church where several prophets are present, saying they need to do it one after another! The full quotation is, "you can all prophesy one by one," which is connected to vv.29,30! We should interpret verses according to their context!

Why should we desire the gift of prophecy? Because that is a gift that "speaks to men for edification and exhortation and consolation" (v.3). Not to have control over the others or to shine before them! The real gift of prophecy is a very useful one, and that is why Paul emphasised that when asking people to earnestly desire spiritual gifts (v.1). Later on in the same chapter, he tells people to prefer this gift over that of speaking in tongues (which has its own benefits for oneself and for others).

The problem is if we believe the false teaching as given above and assume that we can prophesy. Then we go through the 'activation' steps without the Lord having given us that gift. Then it hurts us and others.

Pointers along the way #732

Living by the promises

"He has granted to us His precious and magnificent promises, so that by them you may become partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world by lust" (2Pe.1:4). There are some people who take each verse in the Bible at its face value and treat it as an independent truth. They will find this verse to say that all we need to do to receive the divine nature is to believe in God's promises. But we need to understand that the way the Bible has been written, we need to read every verse along with all the other verses to get the full meaning.

This verse, for example, is followed by verses that tell us to add virtues to our life saying in v.8 that it is by doing so that we will ensure our being fruitful. In other words, if someone receives the promise of the divine nature and just waits for it to be given to him, he is not going to receive it! There is something we need to do from our side too.

In many cases, a promise of God is clearly attached to some condition that says if we do something God will do something. What would happen if we catch what God has promised He would do, without our doing what we are expected to do? Disappointment! But in some other cases, the conditions are not clear in the immediate context of the verses describing the promise and we need to have a broader understanding of God and His ways to see what we need to do.

One the one hand, it is the knowledge of a promise of God and our belief in it that prompts us to start expecting it. On the other hand, when we know there is a promise for us, we begin to do what ought to do in order to receive what is promised. For example, when we know that God has promised us His divine nature through His covenant of grace, we begin to expect it in faith and 1) put away all the corruption that is in us that is against His nature, and 2) learn to think and behave according to His virtues in the different situations of life.

God works in us giving us a desire and the ability to do His will, and we respond by denying all the sinful tendencies that rise up from our flesh and seek His help to do what we know to be His will (Php.2:12,13).

Human nature tends to fall to one extreme or the other, and it is difficult for us to stay balanced. Some of us just believe in the promises and passively wait for things to happen. Some others become so occupied with 'doing' that they think everything depends entirely on them. But there is a balance which we have to come to in our mind as well as in practice. Many times we learn this only after making mistakes this side or that. But we need to aim for that balance, because that is where the truth lies.

Over the centuries of Christianity, people have argued strongly on both sides. But either side does not succeed till they come to see that the other side too has a part of the truth. Finally it is when we come to find the place of balance and actively cooperate with God that we come to rest.

Pointers along the way #733

Are doctrines important?

Some Christians say as long as they do the right things, they don't need to worry much about understanding doctrines. For them, doctrines are only for theologians to discuss but ordinary people need not waste time getting into them. Is this true?

'Doctrine' means 'teaching' in simple terms. Christian doctrines teach us about God, His nature and character, His relationship with people, His expectations from us and what He has planned for us. Is our Christian life merely about doing what is right, or does it include becoming what God wants us to be and doing what He wants? I hope it is clear now how we need to pay attention to doctrine in order to live our life properly and to the full!

But immediately we face the challenge of knowing which the right doctrine is, because there are so many wrong doctrines out there! When God has revealed His truths in the Bible, Satan keeps trying to deceive us and lead us away from God and His truths (Mt.24:11;1Ti.4:1). Many 'leaders' are also deceived and they lead many astray, and none of us can claim that what we know is fully right in every way. So, we need to become more desirous to learn more and to discern what is right and wrong or good and evil (He.5:14).

We need to learn how to 'rightly divide' (interpret correctly) the written word of God (2Ti.2:15). Sometimes, things are written plainly for us to understand, but in many cases we have to make special efforts to understand the correct teaching by comparing with other parts of the Bible and looking at the big picture. We realise the Bible hasn't been written in a textbook form, and this forces us to study it deeply in order to search out the meanings from all over the Bible. There are concordances that show us all the places in the Bible where a particular word is used in the Bible and cross-references to connect verses with related verses in other places. There are also commentaries by godly people which we can refer in order to get what different people have already concluded. Such resources are available even on smartphones!

Jesus mentioned about the need for an honest and good heart (Lk.8:15) which is necessary to be able to bear fruit. If we can get out of personal and denominational biases and look at the word with an open heart, we can find the truth more easily. If we study the Bible out of intellectual curiosity or with the intention of producing an article, sermon or thesis in order to impress people, without an intention to submit to and obey whatever the Lord reveals to us, that is one sure way of going astray (Jn.7:17).

It is only when we understand the way clearly that we will be able to help others to find the truth and to walk in the right way (1Ti.4:16).

Sad to say, many depend on testimonies of others, personal experiences and what 'prophets' tell them, without themselves knowing the word of God and hearing from the Lord personally. True experience will follow right doctrine, not vice versa!

Pointers along the way #734

Insecurity and intolerance

In John 13 we find a beautiful story of how the Creator of the world humbled Himself in front of the people He had created, and that too sinful, imperfect people! Jesus knew who He was from eternity past and His relationship with the Father, and He knew that His identity was not dependent on what people thought about Him. He knew He would not lose His self-image even if people despised Him, misunderstood Him, showed Him disrespect, did not value Him for who He was, thought He was just like them, etc. He knew He did not have to cling on to any prestige (Php.2:6), or worry about denting His reputation. So He took some water and washed the feet of His disciples. The King of Kings took on the role of a menial servant right there because this was a model He wanted to teach them.

Now, consider ourselves. Do we hold on to our prestige, show off our position and get others to serve us to show them who is greater? Are we touchy on the subject of authority and submission and do we make a point of keeping everyone in their 'rightful' places?

That is because we are insecure about ourselves. We don't value ourselves as God sees us, and we are hyper-sensitive towards people's opinions. We like everyone to respect us and not know who we really are. We are unwilling to recognise our failures or faults because we fear our image will crash. We defend ourselves by justifying our mistakes, passing the blame to others, putting on a victim's role, etc. If we are leaders we want others to recognise us as such, and we cannot even tolerate a difference of opinion with us. Any disagreement with us is treated as rebellion!

In theory we acknowledge we are sinners saved by grace. We admit, in a general sort of way, that we are imperfect. But in practice, we are very touchy when our mistakes are pointed out. We may preach that we are all brothers and sisters, but in practice we get offended if someone doesn't address us as 'pastor'. We may even proclaim passionately how we ought to be servant leaders but actually we find it difficult to serve and we would rather be treated as leaders.

One reason for all this could be our basic insecurity about who we are in relationship to God. It hasn't gone deep enough into our mind that God has actually wiped away our sins with the blood of Jesus and we stand before Him clothed in His righteousness. We haven't accepted the fact fully that we will continue to be imperfect in this life but that it doesn't change our status as children of God. We haven't actually accepted our imperfection to the extent of being able to bear with that in others.

The more we come to accept the reality concerning our relationship with God, the better we will be able to serve others without any sense of being benefactors or superior. Then we will not be worried about what people think about us, knowing that they cannot understand us fully anyway and that what they think cannot change our status in the eyes of God.

Pointers along the way #735

Will God do everything?

God is working in us, so let's work out our salvation (Php.2:12,13). God has seated us in the heavenly places, so let's keep our mind on things above (Ep.2:6;Co.3:1,2). We are crucified with Christ, so let's take up the cross and follow Jesus (Ga.2:20;Lk.9:23). We have crucified our flesh with its lusts and desires, so let's put to death the deeds of the body (Ga.5:24;Ro.8:13). God has made us dead to sin, so let's stop giving our body to sin (Ro.6:11,13). What? Is the Bible inconsistent with itself? No. We need to learn to understand it in the right way.

One thing is, spiritual truths cannot all be put into precise human language. Scientific writing seeks to express facts accurately and precisely to the extent knowledge is available. But science is confined to material things and how they work. Spiritual things many times refer to things that cannot be seen physically (even though their effects can be seen). The ability to see and understand spiritual things comes when a man is born again (Jn.3:3). But then, as one grows in the knowledge and experience of God, this spiritual discernment becomes clearer. That was why Paul prayed for the Ephesian disciples that their spiritual eyes might be opened (further) (Ep.1:18).

When God created us, He gave us a certain amount of free will – the ability to make our choice based on our knowledge and interest. Once He did this, He was, in fact, giving the control of a part of our life to us. He will not normally interfere in that area unless we ask Him to. But what this shows is that there are things God would do for us, and there are also things we ought to do from our side.

Because our 'flesh' is born corrupted because of the original Fall (Ps.51:5), we seem to have a natural aversion for taking responsibility for what we ought to do. We like it when God will supernaturally do things for us, clean up our mess and make good and great things happen to us. So we have this tendency to focus on the promises of God more than His instructions for us. Then we refer to selected verses from the Bible which tell us about what He has done and prepared for us, and claim that He will do everything and we only have to believe! We make ourselves

believe that this is the way to give Him the entire glory! We refer to anything we have to do as 'works' or depending on the strength of the flesh! The truth is, God has done everything from His side that we need for our salvation, and Jesus was able to say on the cross, "It is finished." God has also prepared and kept everything that we need for our life (2Pe.1:3). But there are things we need to do in order to receive what God has already prepared. First of all we must believe that God has planned to give us all He has promised. Then that faith prompts us to take action to experience them in practical life (Ja.2:21,22). If this action does not come out, then our faith is merely imaginary. We need to respond to God by faith and then receive.

Pointers along the way #736

Freedom from bondage

Jesus came to fulfil this promise of God, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me, because He anointed Me to preach the gospel to the poor. He has sent Me to proclaim release to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind, to set free those who are oppressed, to proclaim the favourable year of the Lord" (Lk.4:18,19) which Isaiah had prophesied (Is.61:1,2). The Jews thought that the Messiah would come and liberate them from the rule of the Romans, and they rejected the real Messiah. Many people now expect Jesus to deliver them from the bondage of situations they are in – physical, financial, relational, work-related, etc., and that is just like the Jews of Jesus' days! Many times they get frustrated with Jesus because He doesn't meet their expectations!

Jesus came primarily to save us from our sins – not just the punishment for sins but even the power of sin itself in our life (Mt.1:21). If this is not the Saviour we are looking for, we are likely to be disappointed. Jesus said that all these other things that people were usually seeking would be given to us if we were seeking the kingdom of God and His righteousness first (Mt.6:33). The kingdom of God is in our life if God is king there, to the extent we allow Him to rule over our life. His righteousness is pure and holy and that is what He wants to transform us into (Ro.8:29).

One of the things God does when a sinner comes to Him repenting of his sins is to wash away his sins with the blood of Jesus Christ, and to give him a new heart (Is.1:18;Ez.36:26). Giving us a new heart is done by letting the seed of God be born in our spirit through the work of the Holy Spirit (1Jn.3:8,9). This 'seed' is observed in a hatred for sin which we didn't have earlier, and this is what distinguishes us from those who are not born again (v.7).

If we think we are born again believers and followers of Jesus Christ but we are not keen on overcoming sinful bondages in our personal life, we must realise that we are not born again in the proper way. It may be that we have never seen ourselves as sinners in the eyes of God who deserve hell, and we have not gone to Him seeking for mercy. Our confession of Jesus as our Saviour may have been just nominal without understanding what that means practically, or our heart was not really there. In that case

there may be frequent falling into sin without moving towards victory over it, there may be bondages in the mind (thinking, feeling, choices) which cause our behaviour to be unlike Christ, or there may be even demonic influences in our life. The genuine child of God seeks to be set free, but the others blame everyone else, circumstances and even God for the things that are happening to them and remain bound.

But we don't have to remain in such bondages. Jesus has come to set us free (Ro.6:14;8:12). But we need to seek Him and want victory. He can't help those who won't acknowledge their need and seek His salvation. That would be tragic.

Pointers along the way #737

Speaking in tongues

Why am I writing about this controversial subject which some Christians think is from the Devil? Because it is a very useful gift from God. I don't agree with those who teach that speaking in tongues is the only sign of being baptised in the Holy Spirit (1Co.12:30). I do agree with those who warn that there could be demonic counterfeits (even some people from other faiths speak in tongues) and that a lot of what is going on is human manipulation (making ourselves say 'bababa') and not from the Spirit. But all this should not keep us away from the genuine gift which will edify us (1Co.14:4). It's not for public display to show others how 'spiritual' we are, but speaking to God things that are beyond understanding.

Paul was a very intellectual man but one who walked by faith. He spoke a lot in tongues privately without understanding what he was saying but believing that God understood (vv.18,14). He also believed that when the Holy Spirit gave him the words (Ac.2:4). God was able to hear what Paul really needed to pray (Ro.8:26,27). This helped him to balance his human walk based on his understanding with leaning on God. He used his understanding and also his faith to walk by (1Co.14:15).

If we truly want to express ourselves to God, we pray, not with pious, formal words but with words that come from our heart. We see that sometimes the things we want to express are too deep for words. Sometimes praise just overflows our mind and there are no words to use that are adequate. Sometimes we don't even know what exactly to pray for. Then we can thank God for this gift through which we can depend on communication through the Holy Spirit.

But if we are looking for thrills or something to impress others with, beware. What we may be getting may be a serpent in the place of the fish we ask for. There is a lot of deception in this area and warnings are certainly in place. However, if our heart is right with God and we ask for spiritual gifts in order truly to serve God, He promises us that He will not disappoint us, and also He will keep us safe (Lk.11:11-13).

I know there are many out there who shy away from anything supernatural out of fear that it could be demonic, or because they have been wrongly taught that supernatural things ended with the apostles. But please examine the Bible with an open mind and see what it actually says. I personally think that in these days when the Devil is becoming more and active with his deceptions, God is also working through His Holy Spirit to equip His people to overcome. Everything supernatural we see now is neither entirely from God nor the Devil. Certainly we need discernment. But we must not miss what God has prepared for us. Nor should we stay back in 'caution' trying entirely to protect ourselves. There is much work to be done in the kingdom of God and we certainly need the power of the Holy Spirit working in us and also through us. "Desire earnestly spiritual gifts" (1Co.14:1).

Pointers along the way #738

God is still righteous!

An exaggerated view of grace has deceived many Christians into believing that since they have been saved by an undeserved favour from God, they need not bother about having to 'earn' anything from God. When you read 'earn' just now, if it totally shocked you, it may show that you too have come under that influence. We have been taught to believe that there is nothing we can ever earn from God but that everything we receive is a gift of grace from God. There is a subtle difference here, and let me try to make it clear now.

No one can earn favour from God and no one can qualify for God's acceptance. Those who try to keep the law hoping to find acceptance from God fail (Ro.10:3). Knowing that every single man has sinned and disqualified himself from God, God has made the way of acceptance entirely dependent on His grace – unmerited favour – which we can receive when we repent from our sins and put our trust in Jesus. But then, once we have been justified by grace we enter into the lifelong process of sanctification where God works along with us. It's not done entirely by God and how much we get sanctified depends on how much we work out our salvation (Php.2:12,13). Our faithfulness is involved here, and God is righteous and just to rate our reward on how faithful we have been (Mt.25:21). Depending on how faithful we are to put to death the deeds of our body with the power of the Holy Spirit God gives to us, that is how much we will partake of God's nature (Ro.8:13). If we sow bountifully we shall also reap bountifully (2Co.9:6).

But if we imagine that since God started by giving justification freely He will do everything else for us freely, we make a big mistake. If we sow according to our flesh, we will reap corruption (Ga.6:7,8), and this will have eternal consequences. It is only if we 'endure' that we will 'reign' with Him (2Ti.2:11,12). When we all finally stand before the Lord, some who shone here will hide their faces, and some whom others didn't recognise will receive great praise from God (Mt.19:30).

God hasn't stopped being righteous and just. Is it possible that in being taken up with His grace we lost sight of this? Did we think that now that we have been made children of God and promised a

place in heaven there was nothing we needed to do except to enjoy ourselves?

But Jesus made things very clear. He said that if we wanted to follow Him we would have to take up our cross daily, deny ourselves and follow Him (Lk.9:23). If we loved anything or anyone or even our own life more than Him He wouldn't consider us worthy of Him (Mt.10:37,38).

The question is about our love. If we love Him we will obey Him (Jn.14:15). We will love Him once we see how much He loves us and what He has done for us because of that. But if we think because He loves us He will do everything for us freely, we don't really know Him properly. Perhaps we have been deceived by false preaching through a spirit of lawlessness.

Pointers along the way #739

Marks of growth

There was a time when Saul of Tarsus thought he knew God and that he was serving Him with zeal and earnestness. The kind of God he imagined he knew permitted him to kill his opponents and think that he was doing God a service. Then one day, he met with the true God who opened his eyes to see Him, and Saul became a completely different man! He realised that he hadn't truly known God till then, and gave the rest of his life to getting to know Him in every aspect of doctrinal and experiential knowledge (Php.3:8,10). He understood now that many of his fellow Jews were also mistaken as he was, even though they were full of zeal for God in their own way (Ro.10:1,2).

Is it possible that some of us may be going on in life with religious zeal and yet we don't know God in the right way? We may be zealously loyal to our church and very active in serving God in the way our church teaches. But can we ignore the possibility that our church may also be wrong in different ways and our leaders misled in their understanding or practice. We cannot tell ourselves that God will notice our sincerity and all will be fine. Don't we need to individually make sure that we are following God with true knowledge apart from sincerity?

Of course, knowing God is a never-ending growth. But we need to make sure that we are going in the right direction. I would suggest two tests we can apply to ourselves to check our direction.

One test is to ensure that we are always willing to learn and receive correction. For this, we need to recognise the fact that we don't know everything (1Co.13:12) which also implies that some things we think we know may be wrong or imperfect.

The second test is to see if we are increasingly becoming able to 'love' others, including those who disagree with us. It's not about liking them or what they do, but realising that the difference between us and them is far smaller than the difference between us and God! After all, they are all our fellow creatures even with many differences with us.

If we have any 'holier than they' attitude towards those from other churches or even other faiths it only shows we don't have a

proper understanding of our own standing before God as recipients of grace. Saul was 'blameless according to the Law' and yet his attitude towards Christians at that time showed how far he was from God. If we have a 'we and they' attitude towards others there's something seriously lacking in our life even if we are full of knowledge and have a great name. God has not been able to teach us true humility. Jesus was able to be with prostitutes and tax collectors along with the right attitude because He loved them. Of course, He did not become like them, but He gave us an example of humility along with His purity.

The Pharisees kept their distance from 'sinners'. Jesus was angry with them because they thought they were great scholars and saints even when they lacked compassion on needy and sinful people (Mt.9:13).

Pointers along the way #740

No condemnation

"Therefore there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (Ro.8:1). The reason we are not under condemnation is simply that we are in Christ Jesus. The words "who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit" which follow this verse in the KJV were not really there in the original manuscript. This makes a lot of difference to us if we were imagining that only if our practical life was perfect could we have freedom from condemnation. No. We cannot live a perfect life on earth ever, and if we were waiting for perfection before we could be free from condemnation we would be feeling permanently guilty. But no. When we come to God trusting in the sacrifice Jesus made for our sins, our guilt is taken away and God justifies us before Him (4:5).

"Therefore ... no condemnation." There were no verses or chapters in the original text, and this artificial start of Chapter 8 tends to make us discard the previous chapters and treat this one as a standalone treatise on the life in the Spirit! The immediate verse before this says, "Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, on the one hand I myself with my mind am serving the law of God, but on the other, with my flesh the law of sin" (7:25). What! Paul is thanking God even while admitting a duality in his life – serving the law of God in his mind while serving the law of sin in his flesh! Isn't it wrong to disconnect this, pretend we don't have a flesh any more, and treat Chapter 8 as if chapters 6 and 7 are not relevant any more to believers?

Some may have a tendency to hold doctrine far above life and pretend as if there is no connection between the two – saying we are now in the Spirit according to Chapter 8! But let's be honest. We are tempted daily by the flesh (Jas.1:14) which is sometimes influenced by the world or the devil, and we may fall. In our mind and heart we *do not* want to fall (that is how we serve the law of the Spirit of life), but sometimes we discover we have done what we shouldn't have. That's our flesh serving the law of sin. We may not be always aware this is happening when we fall and realise only later what we have done. But when we realise it, we can ask for forgiveness. If we are humble enough to recognise this possibility and stand honestly before God, the Spirit can show us what happened and help us to do better next time.

But the fact of the matter is that even when 'we serve the law of sin in our flesh' there is no condemnation from God! He knows that we didn't mean to, and that we are serving the law of the Spirit in our heart and mind. He knows that as long as we live with this flesh we are not going to be able to fully follow the Spirit in everything and at all times. Therefore He takes away our condemnation even though that is what we deserve technically.

Of course, this doesn't mean we can indulge the flesh as we wish because that would not be walking according to the law of the Spirit in our heart and mind!

Pointers along the way #741

God's greatest challenge

In God's plan for our salvation He has already determined that we should become like our Saviour in our nature and behaviour (Ro.8:29). He is working towards this goal through everything that happens to us (v.28). The thing that hinders this great goal is our free will! If God had created us without a free choice and programmed and re-programmed us at every step we would all have become like Jesus immediately after returning to God from our sins. But because we decide practically at every moment of our life whether we will do God's will or our own, and because we don't always and consistently choose His will, we remain imperfect and mixed up.

When we ask God for patience in our life, do we expect that God will answer that prayer by making it impossible for us to feel impatient in any situation? What happens is that He allows difficult situations to come across our life where we have to choose to exercise patience! In the same way, do we expect that after we pray, our anger, lust, worry, fear, bitterness, selfishness, pride, etc., will disappear and we won't feel any such thing anymore? No, it is only by denying ourselves when we feel such things and choosing to obey God that we will be able to overcome (Ro.8:13) and it is only when this becomes a habit that our nature gets transformed into His.

We follow Jesus as His disciples because we want to be delivered from our sinful ways and become like Him. What we have to do then is to take up our cross daily, put our will on it every time and do what Jesus wants us to do (Lk.9:23).

Of course, when we try to do it we find that we are unable to be consistent every time. We are carrying in us the old sinful nature (which we are supposed to keep crucified - Ga.5:24), we are tempted to do wrong and please ourselves because of the strong desires that are there in our nature (Ja.1:14,15), there are so many temptations all around us in the world (1Jn.2:15,16) and the Devil also is waiting everywhere trying to trip us up (1Pe.5:8). Every failure should draw us closer to God seeking to depend more on His strength, having less and less confidence in ourselves, and hating sin more and more. That is the way forward.

There are some Christians who claim that they have already come into victory through faith. Such people redefine sin and limit it only to certain sinful actions, and when they stop doing them they claim they have victory. But for those who will stand honestly before God's penetrating eyes and acknowledge wherever they have fallen short in deed, thought, intention and attitude, it is a journey and not an event. Towards the end of his life Paul had to say that he had not become perfect (Php.3:12).

Yielding of our will to God every time we are tempted, asking for forgiveness every time we realise we have come short, never giving up when we see we are still far from the goal, and constantly seeking God for help, understanding and strength is the way forward.

Pointers along the way #742

Knowing the truth

Most of us know the verse, "You will know the truth, and the truth will make you free" (Jn.8:32). But this is a part of the larger saying from Jesus, "If you continue in My word, then you are truly disciples of Mine; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free" (vv.31,32). So, there is a proper way of knowing the truth that will bear fruit by setting us free. The wrong way of knowing truths is seen from the example of many who read the Bible daily, come out of Bible colleges and yet do not know God personally. Their knowledge is merely intellectual, and they can even teach using their natural abilities. But those who truly know God can see through their spiritual ignorance.

Continuing in the words of Jesus as His disciples goes with the desire to become like Him in thoughts, words and action. With this desire driving our life, our quest will be to discover from God's word through the enabling of the Holy Spirit the truths that will set us free from living according to our fleshly (carnal) desires and our natural inclinations (1Co.3:3). The Holy Spirit will enlighten our heart and mind as we read or listen to God's word and we will discover truths about our needy condition, truths about what He wants us to be and truths about how we can get there.

Mere intellectual knowledge puffs us up (1Co.8:1). Because of our mental understanding of truths we may begin to imagine that we are actually great, when, in fact, our behaviour indicates otherwise! That is why we have to gain knowledge of the truth as disciples "who are willing to learn in order to become like the Master." The attitude of a disciple will make a big difference in how we understand things and what we do with our understanding.

If we read the Bible with the intention of finding something to speak or write about, we will get many interesting points, and if we are naturally gifted, other people will get impressed with our knowledge too! But if we have let God's word break our natural strength and we have begun to lean on the Holy Spirit for strength and wisdom, we can see people getting affected in such a way that they will want to change their lives too. Do we want to impress, or do we want to bless?

When we speak or write with the anointing of the Holy Spirit, 'natural' people may think that we are speaking mysteries because they cannot understand spiritual things (1Co.2:14). What we say does not make sense to them. But once they surrender themselves to God and give up everything in their natural life in order to follow Jesus as His disciples, their eyes get opened (Ep.1:18) and they begin to see truths in the words they have read before!

Instead of imagining we know everything, if we take the position that we need to learn everything in the way God wants us to, then we can truly begin to learn. Then we can put aside our strong opinions, biases and prejudices, and sit at the feet of Jesus and ask Him to teach us. He will set us free.

Pointers along the way #743

The head of the house

"I want you to understand that Christ is the head of every man, and the man is the head of a woman, and God is the head of Christ" (1Co.11:3). Many wives dislike this verse along with the one that asks them to submit to their husbands (Ep.5:21-23). Many male teachers like to point out that Eve was created for Adam to be *his* helper (Ge.2:18). This has resulted, along with the influence of a heathen culture, in even many Christian husbands treating their wives like a second-rate creation. As the head of the home, they expect to be obeyed without question and they also think that any opposition deserves to be put down firmly, justifying even violent attacks towards their wives! The resistance from women to this kind of approach is understandable.

The misunderstanding on the part of the husbands comes from considering 'head' in terms of 'authority' rather than 'responsibility'. Then it becomes an extension to their pride and selfishness. But it doesn't go well with their having to 'love' their wives as Christ loves the church and give themselves for them (Ep.5:25)! But think of it as God entrusting the husband with full responsibility for his family. Then he not only has to provide for and protect his wife and children in terms of financial and material support, but he ought to take the *responsibility* to care for every aspect of their welfare. He has to be *seen* in practical ways as being there for them whenever they need him, whether it is for emotional support or material help. Then he is involved in every aspect of their lives, knows what they need and does his best to provide it for them. Then the wife is able to look up to him as her husband and the children as their father. Will it then become difficult for the wife to submit to him or for the children to honour and obey him?

This does not happen if the husband/father is only seen as an authority figure. Especially if the husband/father is seen as a 'distant' person who imposes his will on them and demands subservience from them.

Men, by their nature, have a psychological need to be respected by their wives. Wives do not realise many times how their critical comments deprive him of a large chunk of the meaning of his life.

Then such wives cannot understand why their husbands do not seem to 'love' them, which is what wives have as a great need in *their* psychological build-up! When, as God's word says, when the wives show respect to their husbands who is struggling to handle different aspects of his responsibilities at home, it becomes easier for their husbands to express their love and affection for their wives!

Women are not created for the sake of men any more than men are created for women. Men or women cannot be complete without each other (1Co.11:11) except in cases where God gives a special gift to remain single (1Co.7:7). Those who value their spouse as a gift from God as a travelling companion in life (1Pe.3:7) can learn to 'enjoy' their married life.

Pointers along the way #744

Recognising our need

We have sinned. We are lost. God in His justice could have sent us to hell for any of our sins. But because of His love for us He has decided to make a way back for us from sin. That's why He took the punishment for our sin and provided us a Saviour. But do we now act as if we are doing God a favour by 'accepting' Jesus as our Saviour? Because He has done everything on His part to make it possible to get back to Him, do we sit here and expect that He will also do everything else for us? Shall we now sit and enjoy ourselves, doing whatever we want, ask Him for protection and help at all times, ask Him to waive our sins when we indulge ourselves now and then, ask Him to pick us up from whatever mess we create for ourselves, ask Him to pretend He is rejoicing over us while shutting His eyes to what all we are doing, etc.? Don't we have any responsibility to live right, now that He has given us a chance to return to Him?

No, many Christians say! They say God does it all, and it will be wrong for us to do anything from our side pertaining to salvation! It's all grace, isn't it? How can we go back to the Law by thinking that we should obey Him, etc.?

Contrary to what many Christians imagine, God will not save anyone against his or her choice. He will not save anyone who does not *want* to be saved. He will not pick some people, work in their lives even against their desires, and transform them into His image. What He will do is to tell us about His offer of salvation, and then He wants to see if we will respond to Him by acknowledging our sins, repenting, and putting our hope and trust entirely in Jesus as our Saviour. Not only then but also at every stage in our life He will stand by with help for us whenever we ask.

But people love their sin. If someone offers them salvation from hell without their having to do anything they are just delighted with it. But they don't want to give up their lives and walk in a narrow path with few along with them. They want an easy and comfortable life and they expect that God will always take care of them and answer all their prayers. Taking up their cross or denying themselves are things they don't like to hear about.

Can you see the deception here? It is this false gospel that is mostly being preached all over the world, and many, many people are deceived into thinking all is fine with them because they have 'accepted' Jesus.

For us to be saved, we must *want* to be saved. We must recognise we are lost in sin and be looking out for a way out of sin's guilt and power. It is only then that Jesus is seen as the good news and the pearl of greatest value. Only then will we be able to put aside everything else and run after Him. It is only such people He will be able to save. Such people pursue after not only forgiveness of sins but also deliverance from the power of sin. They can't be satisfied till they know they are walking closer and closer to Jesus as time goes by. Where do we stand?

Pointers along the way #745

Attitude of lawlessness

The Bible talks about 'the mystery of lawlessness' which is at work among us (2Th.2:7). To be lawless is, of course, to be without any law. But laws are what tell us what to avoid and also what to do. To be without any law to guide us is, in effect, to throw away our protection and guidelines at the same time. We just need to look around, and perhaps in our own life, to see how neglecting some law has landed people (or us) in a mess!

When children are born into this world the only law that is working in them is the law of sin which we all have inherited from Adam (Ro.7:23). This is why parents need to train them to walk in the ways of the Lord (Pr.22:6). Parents are to teach children to obey, speak the truth, consider the others, work hard, keep their word, apologise when they go wrong, forgive others, develop the habit of praying and reading the Bible, etc., and when the right time comes lead them into a personal relationship with Jesus.

But many times, parents focus more on providing the children with good food, clothes, toys, education, etc., and driving them towards high achievements in life, than on training for a godly life (1Ti.4:8). On the other hand, they give training to the children to be lawless by modelling a lawless life by speaking lies themselves,

not keeping their word, doing the very things they tell the children not to do, etc.

As an example, let us look at traffic rules which are meant for everyone's protection. But when parents violate traffic rules with the children watching them, allow the children against the rules to drive motor vehicles even before they are old and mature enough to handle the responsibility, they are passing on to the children an attitude of lawlessness.

It may be said that for all practical purposes, the only law that many people seem to have is, "Don't get caught." They think that as long as nobody catches them, whatever they do is OK. Some people add another part to this law saying that as long as we don't hurt anyone else whatever we do is fine.

God told Abraham to *walk before Him* and to be perfect (Ge.17:1). When we recognise that it is with God that we have to do, and start living before Him, we will discover that the law of God goes deeper than the Law of Moses. The Ten Commandments were just the preliminary level of the laws of God. Jesus clarified this by pointing out that it was not enough to avoid killing someone or committing adultery physically but that it was all about our heart. "Watch over your heart with all diligence, For from it flow the springs of life" (Pr.4:23). If we want to be faithful to God (and experience more of His closeness in our life) we ought to pay attention to the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus (Ro.8:2) who works in us to convict us, correct us and show us the way forward (Jn.16:13).

If we don't deliberately swim against the current in this world, which is the spirit of lawlessness, we will be pulled along with it.

Pointers along the way #746

Choosing to sin

We may fall into sin not knowing we are sinning, and find it out only later. When we come to see that sin we need to confess it to God and receive His forgiveness. As long as we live with this flesh it will be necessary for us to confess these sins to God and receive forgiveness (1Jn.1:9). If someone imagines he isn't sinning in any way he is walking under a delusion and resisting the voice of the Spirit (v.8). If we walk honestly before God we will see that even after becoming children of God we have to deal with deeper and subtler forms of sin every day.

But there is a big difference between falling into sin against our wishes and choosing to sin knowingly and deliberately. Paul testified from experience that he found himself doing things he actually hated because of the 'law of sin' that was working in his flesh (Ro.7:15,17). This means that he didn't like what he found himself doing, and he didn't actually want to do them. But he found that the sinful nature in his flesh was doing things which he really hated.

Because of his new birth through the grace of God and his faith in Christ (Ep.2:8,9), he had received a heart that did not want to sin (1Jn.3:8,9). But he found himself doing sinful things he hated in his heart. Anyone who is honest and sincere can identify himself with this kind of experience.

God wasn't seriously disturbed about Paul's failures because in his heart he was an honest and sincere disciple who wanted to become like Christ in all his ways (Ro.7:25;8:1). If we feel bad about ourselves when we find ourselves ending up doing sinful things even when we didn't want to, we can receive encouragement knowing that our Father knows our frail frame (Ps.103:13,14). We know also that we have an Advocate who knows exactly how we feel because He was tempted like us on all points but did not sin at all (He.4:15).

But falling into sin accidentally or unknowingly is very different from choosing to go ahead with what we already know very well to be sin. We are tempted to give in to temptation because the bait is attractive, promising us some pleasure or advantage. When we are born again, the Spirit of God tells us that what we are

being tempted to do is displeasing to God (Is.30:21). But if we go ahead because we don't want to give up the pleasure or advantage, we commit sin, knowingly and deliberately. This is very serious.

In the Old Testament, there were provisions for people or even leaders to make sacrifices for doing wrong ignorantly or unintentionally (Nu.15.22-29). But anyone who sinned 'defiantly' was to be cut off from the people because he was blaspheming the Lord and despising His word (vv.30,31).

God wants to deliver us a little at a time from all sin (Ro.6:14;Ex.23:30). But knowingly committing sin is very serious before the Lord with dire consequences. If we do not stop ourselves from that, it will be unrealistic to expect that we will be set free from sin's power and become like Jesus.

Pointers along the way #747

Obedience of faith

Our faith in God is essentially our confidence and trust in Him. When we get to know who God really is and understand His love for us we respond by putting our trust in Him. The immediate change that comes in us is to believe whatever He has said and want to do everything He wants us to do.

The Bible tells us that 'faith' comes by hearing the words concerning Christ (Rom.10:17). It is when we hear about God sending His Son to die in our place because of His love for us that we see ourselves as sinners who deserve punishment for our sins and turn to God for forgiveness. This is 'repentance' and 'faith' seen side by side. Without repentance there cannot be a true faith in God and without faith we cannot receive what He is offering us for our salvation. When some people associate faith with only 'believing that Jesus died for sins and rose from the dead' without any repentance taking place and a trust building up in God, they miss the real point. Such people are not really saved!

One of the fruit of a living faith in God is our desire to obey Him. Without such obedience our so-called faith is bogus (Jas.2:26). But here comes a lot of confusion because of an exaggerated preaching of grace that says that obedience pertains to living under the Law, and since a Christian has been freed from the Law there should not be any 'legalistic' emphasis on obedience! But this leads to carelessness with sin as if how we actually live doesn't matter because we are 'under grace' (turning grace into a license for sin Jude.4;Ro.6:15).

What we see in practical life is that when we want to obey God we immediately come across resistance from our flesh, fed by the attraction of the world and the schemes of the devil. That is when we have to deny ourselves, put our sinful desires to death on the cross and follow the life of Jesus to do God's will (Lk.9:23). That is what our faith in God and His word naturally leads to. It takes strong determination and effort from our side to obey God at all times. This is why the Christian life is called a battle; it's not about having a good time singing songs and going out for picnics together!

Paul understood that as an apostle his task was to bring about obedience to God through faith (Ro.1:5). He worked day and night to share with the people whatever was necessary to help his hearers to come to maturity as Christians (Co.1:28). This was a big challenge, but he didn't spare any effort to convey the full measure of the purpose of God to his hearers (Ac.20:20,27).

The Holy Spirit warns us that some will fall away from the (true) faith, getting their consciences seared - not allowing the Spirit to convict them about what is wrong with their practical lives after professing a faith in Christ (1Ti.3:1,2). Deceitful spirits are at work telling people that when they are under grace they are 'safe' no matter what they do.

If we truly love God let's show our faith by obeying Him in everything (Jn.14:15).

Pointers along the way #748

God remains faithful

"It is a trustworthy statement: For if we died with Him, we will also live with Him; If we endure, we will also reign with Him; If we deny Him, He also will deny us; If we are faithless, He remains faithful, for He cannot deny Himself" (2Ti.2:11-13). Some who exaggerate grace usually quote only a part, "If we are faithless, He remains faithful" saying that even if we are not faithful to God, He will still be gracious to us. But that is not what He is saying!

We need to understand the truth that our experiencing His love and grace in an increasing measure will depend on how we respond to His grace. To some, this might sound like heresy! Do you think I am saying we earn God's love and grace by what we do? Of course, we cannot earn God's favour by doing good, but we can receive every good thing from God only as something we don't deserve. When we first come to God through repentance and faith we receive forgiveness of our sins and become children of God as an undeserved favour towards us. But once we have begun to receive His goodness by His undeserved favour towards us, how we respond will determine how we will enjoy His grace more and more in our life.

In a story Jesus told His disciples, there was a servant who was forgiven by his king when he was unable to repay a huge amount of debt. But when this servant refused afterwards to forgive another servant for a small debt, his forgiveness was taken back and he was put in jail. Jesus said, "My heavenly Father will also do the same to you, if each of you does not forgive his brother from your heart" (Mt.18:35). So, after we have received forgiveness from God freely, how we forgive others will determine how we experience forgiveness in future. A refusal to forgive others cancels out our eligibility to receive forgiveness even though it is by grace.

While explaining grace from God, Paul was compelled to exclaim, "What then? Shall we sin because we are not under law but under grace? May it never be!" (Ro.6:15). Can we live as we like once God has brought us into grace? No. The way we live must show what we understand about what we really deserve in the face of God's holiness and righteousness and what He has actually given

us. Our life should show our gratitude to God and lead to a genuine respect (fear) of His standards.

"If we deny Him, He also will deny us. If we are faithless, He remains faithful, for He cannot deny Himself." He has to be always true to His own nature; He cannot do anything contrary. He is able to forgive our sins because their punishment has already been taken by Jesus and we accept what He says about our sins and sinfulness. He is patient and merciful to us as a Father because He knows our fragile frame (Ps.103:13,14). If we fall even while we are seeking to obey Him in everything He has made a provision for forgiveness (Ro.6:17,18;1Jn.1:9). But what if we continue to sin carelessly and knowingly after we have come to know His grace (He.10:26)?

Pointers along the way #749

God drawing people

There is a process that is going on in everyone's life by which God draws them to Him through His Son. He does this in many different ways in people's lives, but we can be sure that He *is* doing it everyone's life (1Ti.2:4;2Pe.3:9). Sometimes He does this through His word that is shared in multiple ways. Sometimes it is through calamities that force people to think about life and death. Sometimes God shows His work through miraculous healing or snatching from the jaws of death. Some people respond to Him by seeking Him, turning away from sin, etc., which is what He wants. But the sad fact is that the majority of people ignore God or explain Him away with natural reasoning. Many actually get upset with God instead of recognising how He is reaching out to them.

What about us who have come to Him through faith and know Him personally as our Father? How do we respond to the different things – good and bad – that come across our path? If we believe that God is in full control and He will only allow good things to happen to us, we will be in shock and may even be tempted to turn against Him. But the fact is that He has never promised that to us. He is not in "full control" of things because He has handed over a lot of that control to us! That is how He has created us and that is why He holds us responsible for what we do (Ro.14:12). He has also told us that we will go through much trouble while we are here (Jn.16:33) but that He will cause even trouble to work something good for us – if we love Him and want to become like Him (Ro.8:28,29). He can manage to make us more like Jesus *only* if we seek to respond like Jesus in the different situations of life (Ro.8:13).

So, in all the situations of life we can find God drawing us to Him. He wants to teach us something new, correct us where we have been going wrong, train us in the way we ought to go, etc. But are we looking at Him or at people who give us trouble and thinking only about getting out of our predicament?

We may have heard how trouble can make us better people or bitter. It depends on which direction we are looking. We look at the trouble and then we can only become more bitter because all trouble is troublesome for us. But if we realise that God is trying

to draw us closer to Him we can have an entirely different view of the situation.

Trouble is real to us, and we cannot wish it away or ignore it. We are forced to deal with it every day, and some days are harder than others. But what can make the difference to us is the way we look at it. If we can see right there that God is drawing us, it certainly gives us strength to face it in the right way and to come out of it as a better person.

God doesn't draw us only to the initial experience of knowing Jesus as our Saviour. That may be behind us now, but now we have the chance to recognise His drawing by which He is trying to give us more of His salvation in practical life. Let us respond (Php.2:12,13).

Pointers along the way #750

No getting away with sin

Many misunderstand grace thinking that once they have been 'saved' by faith in Jesus they have come 'under the blood' and sin is covered automatically. Certainly there is no condemnation to those who are in Christ (Ro.8:1). But it doesn't mean that because we are under grace sin has no consequences on our life. If we sin after we have come under grace the first thing we ought to do is to confess it and receive forgiveness (1Jn.1:9). If there is sin that we are aware of but we don't deal with it in this way, it will come in the way of our fellowship with God (Ps.66:18). Confessing it helps us to maintain our relationship with God. But there is another consequence of sin that we may not usually think of. That is the damage that sin does to us personally and to others around us.

God told Adam and Eve that if they disobeyed Him by eating the forbidden fruit they would 'die' (Ge.2:17). This death pertains mainly to the breaking of relationship with God. But the other aspect of this death is the corruption that comes to the one who sins. God makes it very clear that if we do anything to please the sinful desires in our flesh we would 'reap corruption' (Ga.6:7,8). Everything sinful we do will affect us in our body, soul and spirit. We won't be the same as before. We may be more aware these days of how we can get affected physically. But our mind will get affected by distorting our personality as well as our relationship with other people. The openness of our access with God and our sensitivity to the Spirit will also suffer. We may give place for feelings of guilt, doubt, fear and insecurity. Many times this kind of effect may not be observable immediately and we may not be aware of it, but nevertheless it will show in the long term.

God did not design us for sin but for a godly life. If we are godly, everything in us works well for us. But every time we sin it goes against us and distorts the image of God in us more.

The devil tries to deceive us by making us think that if no one knows what we have done we will not get affected by it. But it's with God that we have to do (He.4:13). Even though He forgives us graciously we cannot escape the consequences affecting us personally and those around us. We have more than enough

trouble coming to us because we live in this world, but if we sin we are actually making more trouble for us ourselves!

God's plan of salvation is not merely to forgive our sins but also to make us into a people who can 'proclaim His excellencies' (1Pe.2:9). We proclaim this not just with our lips but also with God's fragrance that comes out of our daily life (2Co.2:14). The more we overcome the temptations that draw us to sin, the better this fragrance can be felt by people around us (2Co.4:10). We can overcome by the power of the Holy Spirit when we choose to deny the pleasures that temptations offer us and do the will of God in our life (Ro.8:13). Then it will conform us more into His image.

Pointers along the way #751

Be prepared!

When special occasions come, people wish one another a good future in earthly and heavenly lives. Preachers give messages holding out prospects of miraculous interventions from God that will make life healthy and prosperous. 'Prophets' promise breakthroughs that will change our life around. Then there are 'positive-focused' people who filter out every hint of what they consider as negative and keep away from people who bring bad news. Everybody seems to accept these as a part of life!

But we can't forever keep ourselves within this Utopian bubble we have created with our imagination! Any moment reality will come in and burst it! It feels nice to imagine good things and hope that everything will be good because none of us likes pain or sorrow. But pain and sorrow are a real part of this world, and whatever 'faith' we try to exercise it doesn't eliminate pain. We'll have to wait for eternity, only when pain and sorrow will disappear entirely (Re.21:4).

In the meantime, those who put such false hopes in front of people are like those who dangle a carrot in front of a donkey to urge it to go forward – it always remains out of reach! For people who think better than a donkey, disappointment brings disillusionment and causes some to even turn away from God. So what have such preachers achieved? They have retained their popularity but hurt the hearers. What if they had prepared people to face hardship and to exercise faith in the right way?

Jesus was a realist. Look at some of the things He said. "Blessed are you when people insult you and persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of Me" (Mt.5:11). "In the world you have tribulation, but take courage; I have overcome the world" (Jn.16:33). "But I say to you who hear, love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you" (Lk.6:27,28). If we think that God is going to work in such a way that we don't face any trouble, we are going to be shocked.

Instead of giving people a false hope and trying to live in a world of fantasy isn't it good for us to be equipped spiritually and mentally so that when problems do come we can face them in a

better way without collapsing? For example, to know that whatever we face, we will have our Saviour standing with us (Mt.28:20)? Can't we take comfort from knowing that even in the most difficult times there is a way God can provide for us to deal with it (1Co.10:13)? Even if we fall, God can make sure that we don't lose it totally (Ps.37:23,24). God will stand by to ensure that no problem becomes too much for us (Ps.66:12). He will cause all things to work together to bring out some more Christ-likeness in us (Ro.8:28,29).

As years pass by and we get nearer to the end of this world it is going to become worse on the earth and tougher for Christians (2Ti.3:1). Instead of trying to build a fools' paradise why don't we encourage and strengthen one another to overcome?

Pointers along the way #752

Justice may have to wait

One of the senses that children display from their conscience is about justice. When they play or in other situations they come out with the statement, "That's not fair!" We too feel the same at different times when we see a culprit goes free, the wicked prosper and the godly suffer, we don't get what we deserve, we are punished for something we didn't do, somebody doesn't forgive us even when we apologise, others don't understand us, etc. One typical question that people ask is, "If God is almighty and also loving, why does He permit so much evil in this world?" Many such questions reflect the underlying issue, "Can we find justice on the earth?"

When God chose in His sovereign wisdom to create us in His image including a little bit of sovereignty in ourselves – our free will – He knew He was opening up a possibility for evil to come into the world. He knew that men and women might choose to do wrong. Starting from Adam and Eve, that is what we people have brought into the world. So injustice forms a large part of our experience here. We wish it wasn't, but it is there.

Under the Law, external justice was given such a great importance that people were permitted to take an eye for an eye, etc. (Ex.21:24,25). When Jesus taught about the shift of focus from the external to the internal in the new covenant, He said that we ought to rather suffer injustice than demand justice for ourselves, forgiving even our enemies. Isn't that what He was saying in the passage in Mt.5:38-45, rather than giving us actual rules to obey such as turning our cheek?

By this He was not prohibiting us from seeking justice or helping others to find justice, but telling us indirectly that it would not be always possible for us to get justice in this world. We ought to reckon with this and be prepared to suffer if need comes. It involves overlooking faults, forgiving sins, not taking offence easily, not keeping an account of wrong suffered (1Co.13:5), etc., when it concerns ourselves (while at the same time taking up for others who are being oppressed). This kind of behaviour comes from Christian maturity which we need to press towards.

If we are hung up on demanding justice for ourselves in every situation, we will never be able to grow up in our spiritual life. We have then forgotten that it was because God let His mercy overtake His justice that we have been forgiven (Jas.2:13). As those who have been shown mercy that we didn't deserve, we ought to show mercy to the others even when they don't deserve it. There will be a time when God will sit in judgment and pass orders with a balanced mixture of justice and mercy. Till then let us remember that it is likely we don't have this balance in our judgment and refrain from acting out of our pride, hardness of heart and ignorance. Let us place more attention to learning how to show mercy than to demand justice from others. Compassion is more important to God than sacrifices (Mt.9:13).

Pointers along the way #753

The sun and the moon

When the Lord teaches us to pray, the most important point of that prayer is that the Father should be glorified (Mt.6:9). That is one mark of a truly spiritual man that he seeks the Father's honour and not his own. There are many ways we can honour Him – by worshipping and praising Him, denying ourselves in order to do His will at all times, sharing with others about who He is and what He has done for us, fulfilling the ministry that He has entrusted to us, etc. Honouring Him through our lips and ministry is one thing, but a greater challenge is to honour Him through the way we live – in our thoughts, attitudes, motives, words and deeds. If we don't take up this challenge, anything else we may do may impress people but not God (He.4:12,13). Ultimately, our life is more important to God than the songs we sing on Sundays, and our daily life doing His will is what counts as true worship (Ro.12:1,2).

We as people are the ones who actually do the will of God in our lives, but the power and strength must come from God. We are not only incapable of knowing or doing the will of God by ourselves because of our fallen nature, but also whatever we do must be aimed at honouring Him and not to become great in ourselves (Ro.11:36). We can look at ourselves as fragile, crude earthen vessels into which God has chosen to place the treasure of His grace (2Co.4:7). The sweet aroma that comes out is actually His and not ours even though it is coming from us (2Co.2:14). It is as we yield to Him, give up our own plans in order to follow His, and do His will and not ours that this aroma can be felt more and more.

Another analogy is that of the moon reflecting the light of the sun. The moon has no light of its own. But we see light from the moon when it is in a position to reflect the sun's light. The glory that we can reflect in our life is from God. Without Him we cannot do anything good (Jn.15:4). Just as the moon shows different levels of light from the sun our own life may not always God's glory to the full at all times because what we do is imperfect. Sometimes, if we fall, we may show no glory at all but only darkness like the new moon. But God's desire is that we should be those who conquer the challenges in an overwhelming way (not getting defeated most of the time or merely scraping through) (Ro.8:37).

When we are able to live that life we will know that definitely it is the grace of God working in us (1Co.15:10).

But what a tragedy if we have had the privilege to hear and respond to the Gospel but still didn't understand its significance or didn't value it sufficiently but spent our life seeking great things for ourselves! What great disillusionment and shock will await those who used the Gospel as a means to amass wealth or fame for themselves!

But let those who love the Lord take care to live for Him, seeking His glory and doing His will, and giving our lives as a sacrifice to Him even while we are still alive (Ro.12:1).

Pointers along the way #754

The blessing of the Spirit

We talk much about the fruit of the Spirit (Ga.5:22,23) and wish for them. We may even pray for them. But we ought to connect this with the 'good soil' in the parable of the sower which alone can bear much fruit. Jesus describes people with the good soil as those "who have heard the word in an honest and good heart, and hold it fast, and bear fruit with perseverance" (Lk.8:15). In other words, can we hope to bear much fruit of the Spirit if we don't take care to keep our soil good?

'An honest and good heart' is so crucial for the 'soil' which is something God values much. Holding tightly to the seed which is sown in our heart (and keeping our eyes focused on the goal) and not giving up even when we come under pressure are the other things.

In the Beatitudes, Jesus talked about receiving blessings. Did He talk about material blessings which many people run after, or the fruit of the Spirit? He describes there many aspects of a good soil – recognising how poor we are in our spirit, mourning before God because we find ourselves manifesting the opposite of the fruit of the Spirit, showing gentleness and mercy to the others, hungering and thirsting for the righteousness of God to be seen in us, keeping ourselves pure in our heart, seeking to build peace with others, not giving up even when we are put to trouble for seeking God's kingdom and righteousness first in our life, etc.

But it may be that even though we pay lip service to our love of the fruit of the Spirit, what we really want is an enjoyable life. Thankfully God has given us many things to enjoy (1Ti.6:17) and there is nothing wrong in enjoying them. But isn't it possible that we get so taken up with enjoying ourselves in this world that we forget, in effect, seeking the fruit of the Spirit?

This is why Jesus tells us to keep our eye 'single' (KJV, 'clear' NASB) which means to have a clear focus on the direction of our life (Mt.6:22) and to seek His kingdom and righteousness *first* in our life (v.33).

We have to avoid the extremes of trying to be ascetics with no connection to the world and 'living it up'. We cannot judge other people's hearts on this matter accurately even though in many

cases things are obvious. Our attention should be on finding out where our own heart is and making sure that it is a good soil on which the fruit of the Spirit are growing.

Spiritual growth is not automatic just because we have been born again. We can see even on earth that some have progressed much in their relationship with God compared to others. This difference will show even in eternity – some will shine brighter than others (1Co.15:41,42). It depends on how good the soil of our heart is and how we hold on in the midst of the adversities we face in life. It grows from how well we realise what God has done for us in saving us from sin and how grateful we are for that. Those who love Him will obey Him and they will bear much fruit. God shows no partiality.

Pointers along the way #755

Where many Christians get stuck

Sin entered into this world when Adam and Eve disobeyed God. We don't know how much they understood the implications when Satan tempted them. Eve thought that she was making a great choice because the physical fruit looked attractive and delicious and it was going to make her wise (Ge.3:6). She also believed Satan when he told her she wouldn't actually die as God had warned her.

But the implications of this choice were profound. Choosing to trust and obey Satan instead of God was virtually handing over their allegiance from God to Satan. By doing what felt good in opposition to what God had said was a declaration of independence from God's rule in their life. This independence caused the loss of relationship and fellowship with God and a retraction of the protection and nurture of His love and care, and they very soon discovered that their own understanding of good and evil was insufficient for them in daily life. Death came in immediately, corrupting the pure and innocent mind and spirit and making them sinful, and starting the physical degeneration that would ultimately result in their physical death.

Many Christians seem to think that the solution to this distance from God is to obtain forgiveness of sins and to get back to God. Even though the forgiveness of our sins coming freely from God is a great thing in itself, it is far from sufficient to get to even the kind of relationship that Adam and Eve had with God and each other before the Fall. After we have been forgiven, if we go on sinning again and again, how can there be any serious fellowship with God even though there is forgiveness?

Think of what would happen if we would learn more and more to overcome in our temptations, and our desires, thinking and behaviour become more in line with God? Our fellowship will become deeper and more enjoyable! After having been delivered from the guilt of sin through justification, the fruit of sanctification will set us more and free from the slavery of sin (Ro.6:16) and increase our closeness to God. Isn't that really the way to experience salvation?

Christians seem to get stuck with forgiveness, thinking that it is all there is to salvation! As a result, many do not enjoy much of the fruit of salvation Jesus came with. Living with forgiveness alone while we are still held captive by sin doesn't seem to be the abundant life which Jesus has promised (Jn.10:10). Abundant life can't be a life of comfort and ease in the presence of sin ruling in our mind, words and action.

If we truly want to experience abundance of life that comes with freedom from the slavery of sin, it comes only by submitting to the laws of God – not primarily in the external aspects or in a legalistic way but in following the laws of the Spirit from our heart (Ro.8:2). That is not possible if we look only for forgiveness of sins but when we accept, recognise and hold Jesus as the Lord of our life in all its aspects (Ro.6:11-13;12:1,2).

Pointers along the way #756

Grace and law

'Grace' is often thought of only as unmerited favour from God by which He freely forgives us our sins when we go to Him pleading the blood of Jesus shed for us. But there is more to grace than this. He.4:16 talks about going to the throne of grace for two things – mercy in the form of forgiveness of sins and help in our time of need. While we do need mercy, we must also look at grace as God's help for us in every kind of situation.

Every single one of us has sinned, and there is no way anyone can get acceptance from God by being good enough (Ro.3:20). So grace provides us a way of acceptance as a generous gesture from God. After that, it is not that we can go on living our life as we used to before, doing whatever we like whether it is sin or not. Now God has given us a heart that wants to be pleasing to Him (Je.31:33). We no longer want to sin. In other words, we now want to obey everything that God tells us. We must understand that this obedience comes from our new heart because of our love for God, and not because we want to obey Him in order to find acceptance!

So, under the new covenant we have been set free from the demands of the Law. But that doesn't mean we don't have to abide under any law! Now God has written His laws into our heart because of which we *like* to do what they say (Ro.7:6). Just as many children don't like it when parents tell them to stop playing and start studying, people who haven't come into grace think that the law is a burden. But when they understand that the law is meant for their good, to bring them blessings (De.28:1,2) and to protect them from calamities (v.15), then they want to obey! That's why the Bible says that the law was meant for the lawless, to keep them within bounds (1Ti.1:8,9).

But when we now try to obey God, we find that our old sinful nature is fighting against it (Ro.7:21). The Holy Spirit who is now in our heart joins this fight on our side (Ga.5:17). We soon find out that without His help we are unable to overcome the strong desires that come up from our flesh. But then, grace is the help the Holy Spirit gives us to put our sinful desires to death and do the will of God (Ro.8:13).

Now we are not without any law, even though we have been set free from the old demands of the law that made us feel that somehow we have to find acceptance from God. We now have the law of the Spirit of life in Christ in us (Ro.8:2). This law goes deeper into our heart than the old covenant laws. Earlier it was OK if we felt like killing someone if we finally didn't actually kill him (Mt.5:21,22). Now we know we can't be pleasing to God if we look at people with lust in our heart even if we keep ourselves free from having any physical relationship with them (vv.27,28). Even though this law in our heart is higher than that of the old covenant, we get empowered to keep it when we lean on grace (help) that we receive from the Holy Spirit.

Let's make full use of the grace of God in our life!

Pointers along the way #757

An unchanging love

That God's love towards us does not fluctuate is a truth many of us take for granted. Why God's love never changes is because He never changes (Mal.3:6). He is not given to whims or fancies. Once He has chosen to love us, He says that He will never forsake us (He.13:5), which means He never stops loving us. His love towards us is also called 'everlasting love' (Je.31:3). But even though this truth is so well-known to us, why do we still find ourselves doubting it at different times?

It may be because we think God is just like one of us (Ps.50:21). We are subject to many types of changes. Things that happen to us have a tendency to make us think, feel and behave differently. What people do to us can provoke us to respond differently. Changes in our biochemistry can affect our mind to warp our thoughts and behaviour. Even a change in the weather can affect our mood! Because we are like this and we are used to seeing other people like this, it is natural to think God is also like this. But He isn't!

God's behaviour comes from who and what He is. He is not fickle-minded and He is not pushed around by circumstances or different people. He is the only One like that. On our part, we ought to become like that, but the fact is that we aren't there yet. The more we grow in that direction, the better we are able to appreciate the fact that God is unchanging. "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever" (He.13:8).

God knows how fickle we are, and He takes that always into consideration in His approach towards us. He overlooks our minor ups and downs graciously and generously with a large heart, and is not nit-picking to point out every mistake we make. This should be very comforting to us to know, and so we mustn't get worried about His relationship every time we realise we have slipped up. God knows how fragile we are, and He treats us as a loving Father who knows we are made of dust (Ps.103:13,14).

Of course, this doesn't mean that He ignores it when we move away from Him going after other things that can take His place in our hearts. He monitors our heart's direction, and that is very important to Him because that is where we have our values

(Pr.4:23). This is not about momentary fluctuations but our choosing to deviate into a path that will take us away from Him. He is jealous over us that He doesn't want us to be deceived by anything that appears to be attractive to us in the short term but whose end is destruction. If we ignore His warnings at this point and venture out too much in a wrong direction He is even willing to inflict pain on us in the form of discipline (He.12:11) so that we may turn back to Him. That too is a mark of His unchanging love towards us.

We need to be 'grounded' in the knowledge of this love (Ep.3:17,18) so that we may not waver when we cannot understand the different experiences we go through, holding on by faith to the truth that our Father's love for us never changes or ceases.

Pointers along the way #758

Multi-sided learning

In our Christian growth, because of our limited ability to understand and process things, we tend to learn things one thing at a time. Sometimes as we read or hear God's word, one particular thing stands out for us. That is the Holy Spirit pointing out something to us. When we are sincere, we get so moved by it that for some time we can't think of anything else. We think this one thing is the reason for our failures or lack of growth, and we start working on it. We may not realise we are somewhat lop-sided because we are focussing on one aspect of truth to the neglect of many others. We notice that sometimes churches have split when one person was so taken up with 'one truth' that he felt that the rest of the church wasn't paying enough attention to it.

It is good for us to be excited about truths in such a way that we are moved to action. But we must remember that any one truth is not the full truth, and that we need other truths also to keep us in balance!

When we begin our Christian life some of us are very confident of ourselves and our natural abilities and we may start out 'doing things for God'. Sometimes leaders tell young people to serve God by using the natural abilities God has given them instead of asking God what He wants them to do. Natural abilities may impress some people, but God's work can only be done through God's power (Jn.15:4), through depending on the Holy Spirit to break us down at the natural level and to build us up spiritually. So these people make mistake after mistake and finally learn that they are to be totally dependent on God for producing any spiritual results (Pr.3:5,6). When they overcome their disillusionment over their failures, they can now begin to produce lasting results through the Spirit.

But if they have lost all confidence in themselves and they now wait on God to initiate and do everything for them, they get disappointed again! He wants us to be actively involved in His work (Ps.32:8,9). Actually God wants us to depend on Him and His strength, and thus develop our own spiritual muscles trying to understand and do the will of God (He.5:13,14).

Some others start with a poor image of themselves because of their earlier failures before they came to Christ. What they need to learn first is that when they depend on God He can do mighty things through them in spite of their past failures. But after that perhaps they have to still learn that God wants them to use their abilities under the guidance and strength of the Holy Spirit.

We first learn that we cannot do anything spiritual without God and that we can do all things through Him. Then we need to go on to doing everything with the full conviction that it is all God's work and not ours, and at the same time presenting all of us and our abilities to Him to use as He wills (Ro.12:1). God wants to make us strong men and women who will do exploits for Him without attributing any honour or recognition to ourselves.

Pointers along the way #759

True riches

Even if we had all the money in the world and all that money could buy, when we cross over to the other side of eternity what would make up our riches? 'True riches' are something else altogether. Whatever other riches we may have enjoyed on earth, if we don't have what counts in eternity we will end up among the poorest at that time! Jesus mentioned the phrase 'true riches' in Lk.16:10,11 where He made it clear that if God were to entrust us with true riches, one of the conditions is that we must have been faithful with the use of money here on earth. It's not about having lots of money, but being faithful in the use of whatever money we have. We go wrong if we think we can do what we like after we have given a part to God! Jesus referred to wealth as 'unrighteous wealth', possibly to indicate that wealth has the dangerous potential to make us unrighteous (1Ti.6:10). We will go wrong if we crave for or run after it (v.9).

Just because Jesus mentioned only money in the context of the secret of gaining true riches it does not mean that faithfulness is required only in the use of money. What about how we deal with the other parts of life, such as the use of time, abilities, skills, opportunities, etc.? Certainly we should understand that 'faithfulness' in every area of life that we deal with is an indicator to God about whether we can be entrusted with greater, more valuable responsibilities. We ought to be aware that God is watching over everything in our life, especially over our thoughts and intentions of our heart (He.4:12) to see if we are trustworthy, reliable people. Faithfulness is not only about being righteous but also in keeping ourselves accountable to God in whatever we do.

It is not difficult for us to see that what is precious in the sight of God – true riches – must be only things we can carry with us into eternity. Consider, for example, about how much we partake of the divine nature, become like Jesus. Does this happen automatically, or does it have to do with how we live faithfully seeking after His life? What about getting more and more insight into the things of God (some people call it 'revelation') (Ps.25:14;Mt.13:11)? Who are the ones who are going to be entrusted with spiritual ministries that can transform other people's lives (Mt.25:28,29)?

Seek and we will find. We can see how things will be if what we are really seeking after, even after we come to Christ, is really to enjoy this life, become wealthy or famous, get power or position, etc. Then surely we cannot have 'true riches', even though people who have no spiritual discernment may admire us or envy what we have. Many who appear to be 'first' (or on the top) here will be seen to be really at the end of God's list (Mt.19:30), even if we manage not to lose our salvation (1Co.3:12,13). What is the use, ultimately, if we 'gain the whole world' and end up with nothing of eternal worth? Let us focus on setting right priorities and being faithful.

Pointers along the way #760

Defining moments

Think of when God asked Abraham to sacrifice his son and he was willing. That was the test that put Abraham on the top of God's list of faithful people at that time (Ge.22:16-18). This was a defining moment for Abraham which God brought before him suddenly, but whose significance Abraham probably didn't recognise. Another such moment was when young Joseph was enticed by his master's wife and he ran from her (Ge.39:9). On the negative side we can think of how David fell when he saw Bathsheba, how Rehoboam decided to ignore the advice of the elders, and many other examples. They too didn't recognise the far-reaching impact of such choices they made.

Maybe, looking back, we too can identify such defining moments in our life. Certain specific good choices we made have turned out to be pivotal direction-setters in our life. Perhaps there are also moments where we have made choices that have affected us catastrophically. Probably, when we were facing such choices we were not aware what great things were hinged on those choices. Now, in hindsight, we may wish that we could remake those choices. But that can never be.

If we have made wrong choices, it is not as if it is all over for us even though it might look like that to us. If only we would humble ourselves and acknowledge our mistakes to God, He will have a Plan B for us. But a lot of people look only at the crumbling of Plan A and are unable to see that with a merciful God there is always a way to turn our mistakes to produce something good (Ro.8:28). In repentance and rest we can be saved, but many are not willing (Is.30:15). They are overwhelmed by the damage to their ego and find themselves unable to trust God.

These defining moments present to us a choice between God and something else – pleasure, wealth, name before people, human relationships, etc. Usually this choice comes before our mind privately without other people even knowing what is going on. That makes it look easier for us to give in secretly to the temptation thinking that no one would know. Nowadays, because of the preaching of false grace, we are also tempted to think that we can get away with it because God is gracious! But it is finally with God that we have to deal (Ro.14:10,12). He takes note of

every choice we make to put Him first in our life before people and things. He will reward each one also justly and without partiality.

Even though we cannot fully anticipate the result of our choices we have to realise that it will turn out to be best for us now and in eternity if we are determined to stand true to God in every situation. It doesn't also need much wisdom to know that every time we sacrifice God's will in order to choose our own pleasure we stand to lose heavily. May we ask God for understanding and help in choosing Him and His ways at all times, no matter what the cost appears to be, because it is certain that the cost of compromise will certainly be far greater and irreversible.

Pointers along the way #761

What happens when we sin?

Do we find it difficult to understand why God considers sin to be such a great offence that He has prepared hell for sinners? When He says that the wages of sin is death – eternal separation from God – many people seem to think that the punishment is disproportionate to the crime. That is because we have not thought about it and understood what sin really is.

When Eve ate the forbidden fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, it was not just a matter of simple disobedience. If we look at what transpired between Satan and Eve when she was tempted, we can see that many factors were involved in her choice. 1) She didn't believe what God had said that if she ate that fruit she would die, and she chose to believe Satan who said she wouldn't die. 2) She stopped trusting in God and began to trust in Satan. 3) She stopped believing in God's love for her and concluded that He had a selfish motive in denying her that fruit. 4) She moved from the lordship of God to the lordship of Satan. 5) She made herself her own authority and independent of God. 6) She moved out of the protection and provision of God and landed herself vulnerable to attack from Satan. 7) She gave more importance to how she felt about the fruit than to what God had told her. 8) She handed over the dominion over the earth that God had entrusted to Adam and Eve to Satan who now became the prince of this world. 9) She defiled all of humanity that would come from her.

Did she imagine that all this was involved in that simple act of eating that fruit? No. But neither do we when we disobey God's commandments and sin. Is it any wonder that we imagine it is just a small matter that God should simply overlook?

When Jesus died on the cross, He went through that separation from the Father that was the sum total of what we all deserve (Mt.27:46). For Him who had been one with the Father through all eternity, this was more painful than all the physical torture that He went through. This was what He pleaded with the Father the night before He was crucified to see if it could be avoided if possible (Mt.26:39) because He had been prepared earlier itself to physically die for us (Mt.16:21). Can we see the extent of His

love for us that He was finally prepared to make even this ultimate sacrifice in order to save us?

Jesus came so that He could not only forgive our sins but also that He could save us from sin (Mt.1:21). His whole aim is that we should stop sinning (1Jn.2:1). How sad it is that we take sin so carelessly as if it is something acceptable or inevitable? Each one of our sins cries out, "Crucify Him!" We don't also realise how our sins cause a distance between us and God and spoil our fellowship (Is.59:1,2) because we think that all we have to do to be restored is to confess them (1Jn.1:9). Do we think that since we are saved by unmerited favour from God it wouldn't matter if we sinned now and then (Ro.6:15). The chances are we don't even know Him.

Pointers along the way #762

Do we want to get better?

We know about the man whom Jesus healed who had been waiting for 38 years by the side of the pool hoping to get well. The question Jesus asked him was if he really wanted to be healed (Jn.5:6). There are different ways to interpret this incident and take lessons. Some can say that if he really wanted to be healed he would have done something more than just hoping to get healed. We really don't know what his limitations were and why he didn't do anything more. But the fact that the man stayed there so long even though things looked so hopeless is itself a sign of his desire to be healed. Ultimately that got him healed!

Many of life's situations are like this. Things seem to drag on and on and there is no hope in view. There are times when we need to do something more than what we have done so far, such as seeking help from others. We may need to change some of our ways: if what we have been doing hasn't helped, it's unrealistic to expect that it will in future. The main thing is to keep aiming for the resolution of the problem without giving up.

Take the example of an alcoholic who comes to the Lord in repentance. There are cases where the Lord miraculously takes away the desire from him and empowers him so that even the smell of drinks does not tempt him. But in the majority of cases there is battle involved in gaining mastery over alcohol.

It may be similar even in the matter of overcoming sin. If God gives us instant victory, praise Him! But in most cases there is a battle. God is interested not just in stopping the sin, but also in moulding our overall character. For example, He wants to show us how helpless we are without His strength, teach us how to become vigilant against temptations, and perhaps become able to teach others the way too. What is being tested in the meantime is our perseverance in seeking for victory. What can happen is that we give up along the way, 'accept' our limitations, lower our expectations from God, find justifications for our failures, find others to put the blame on, etc.

"You have need of endurance, so that when you have done the will of God, you may receive what was promised" (He.10:36). One of the things David prayed for after he had fallen in sin was a

steadfast spirit (Ps.51:10). He used to be 'a man after God's own heart' till he fell, and he used to have a very intimate relationship with God, as we can see through his psalms. But he had slowly backslidden after he became king, and now he fell so badly. Now he realised that he ought to have been steadfast in his seeking after God without letting up (Ps.27:4).

No one who puts his trust in God and seeks Him will ultimately be put to shame (Is.49:23). Situations may not always work out for us because there are other people also involved, but God will always help us to come out on the top. He can strengthen us in our inner man so that we can rise up in our heart and mind over our situations. That's a big victory indeed.

Pointers along the way #763

'Unpleasant' truths

"Strengthening the souls of the disciples, encouraging them to continue in the faith, and saying, 'Through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God'" (Ac.14:22). Have you thought that warning them about coming troubles is meant to *strengthen* and *encourage* them? But the apostles were realistic. They knew that this world was going to be full of trouble (Jn.16:33) and they didn't want the disciples to be unprepared. They didn't want the people to 'come to Jesus' looking for a life of comfort and fun and possibly turn away in shock when trouble hit them.

The New Testament is full of warnings. There are warnings about our fallen nature, there are warnings against temptations, there are warnings on getting deceived, there are warnings of Satan's schemes against the children of God. These warnings are to point out the dangers ahead and to tell us how terrible it will be if we go ahead and ignore them. But yet, how often do you hear preachers give these warnings? You just have to scan the internet to see that a whole lot of preachers are preaching only about the good and great things to come. They seem to be exalting the grace and power of Jesus when they tell you strongholds are going to be broken, your troubles are going to vanish, money is going to pour in, everything you do is going to succeed, dream big and see your dreams coming true 'beyond your asking or thinking', etc. But they are proclaiming a false gospel and even a false Jesus even though some of them are well-meaning. The problem is that 'when the rubber hits the road' – when the reality of life confronts the people – there are crashes and broken dreams.

Some preachers hold up Jesus as the One who will remove all problems, heal all their diseases, take them to heaven, etc., when they preach the Gospel. Just as crowds followed Jesus to experience His miracles, many flock to such meetings, only to be disappointed later. Jesus knew what was happening and told the crowds to their face that they should instead seek the 'food which endures to eternal life' (Jn.6:26,27).

How many preachers have you heard telling you that if you have become a 'believer' in Jesus you should now learn to become a 'disciple' who denies himself when he has to choose between his will and the will of God, takes up his cross daily to be crucified on

it as a living sacrifice before God and follows the life and teachings of Jesus (Lk.9:23;Ro.12:1)? How many tell you, following the words of Jesus, not to look for a life of comfort here but to cooperate with Him as He seeks to set you free from the power of sin even in your innermost being (Mt.1:21;Ps.51:6)?

Even now, the world has become so callous regarding sin and morality and it is influencing the people of God also to compromise more than ever before. Certainly, the pressures against us are great, but our God is greater. But the truth of God is still available to those who want it. Seek and we can find, even now.

Pointers along the way #764

Preachers who go astray

One prophecy from the Bible that is very relevant for today is, "The time will come when they will not endure *sound doctrine*; but wanting to have their ears tickled, they will accumulate for themselves teachers in accordance to their own desires" (2Ti.4:3). Just look around and see this happening in various forms. Some preachers offer health and wealth, some proclaim grace that takes away all responsibility from us, some come up with fascinating interpretations of end times prophecy, some market miracles, some promote supernatural experiences, some make their speech very emotional, some peddle pop psychology to make you feel good, etc. It is becoming extremely rare to find preachers who share *sound doctrine* – teaching that will help the hearers to conform to godliness (1Ti,6:3,4) – who stand personally before the Lord (Je.23:22) and bring out words each time according to what the people *need* (not what they like) to hear (Lk.12:42).

Can we afford to be without discernment these days? Can we allow ourselves to be awed by the speaker's name and swallow all that he says without checking with the Bible if what he says is true (Ac.17:11)?

These are also times when preachers go astray by demonic deceptions (1Ti.4:1). This can even happen to godly teachers if they are not aware of this possibility and open themselves to all 'bright ideas' that come to their minds. We should not forget that since Satan knows that his days are numbered he is becoming more active, and he uses all kinds of tricks to deceive us. If, instead of sticking to the plain teachings of the Bible and checking if new ideas are useful for godliness, we are aiming at creating a sensation or impressing the listeners with something new, we make ourselves wide open to deception. It is not that demonic doctrines will come along with gross forms of sin because then a godly man can easily recognise them, but they will come with an appearance of wisdom or 'revelation' (see Co.2:23).

It is very sad to see in front of us preachers who began well slip into a tangent, having got bored with the plain and simple Gospel and the way of salvation, going after 'new' and 'fascinating' subjects that will cause their gullible listeners to sit with their

mouths open and wonder at the preacher's knowledge and abilities.

But I want to address mainly those who are sitting and listening to preachers or reading their books. Be very vigilant to detect error in teaching or direction. Don't let the teacher's reputation, his charismatic personality or his oratorical skills deceive you. Learn to know the Bible yourself, cross-check with other teachers especially of the earlier century who are known to be godly to see what they have to say about the subject. We need to preserve ourselves because these are dangerous times, and our eternity is what is at stake. Not even our loyalty to our pastor or the church should stand in the way or make us ignore the warnings of the Bible.

Pointers along the way #765

His flesh and blood

"So Jesus said to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you have no life in yourselves" (Jn.6:53). Many who were initially His disciples left Him when they heard this because they got offended with this (v.66). Even now many don't understand this. Some wrongly think that this refers to the communion where they eat the bread and drink the wine. But what we eat and drink or do physically cannot give us the eternal life that Jesus gives. The bread and wine are for us to remember what Jesus has done for us (1Co.11:24-26) so that we can examine our life and rededicate ourselves to Him. They do not give us life in a mystical kind of way.

What does it mean to drink His blood? In simple terms it means that we recognise, acknowledge and accept for ourselves what it does for us. His blood was the sign of the new covenant because of which there is forgiveness for our sins (Mt.26:28). There is no forgiveness in any other way or in any other name. To receive this – drink it – we need to recognise we are sinners in God's eyes, admit it to Him, turn away from sin and receive forgiveness as a free gift from Him. Jesus shed His blood for the forgiveness of the whole world (1Jn.2:2), but we are not forgiven until we come to Him in faith like this.

Jesus broke the bread and gave His disciples saying it represented His body. His body was broken on the cross for the bearing of our sins. There was also another way in which His body (flesh) was broken for us. That was when every day of His life He (virtually) carried His cross, denied His will when He was tempted (He.4:15) and did the Father's will. When we have come to be forgiven and accepted as children of God through the blood of Jesus Christ, don't we also need to walk in His ways in this manner (1Jn.2:6)? It is when we do this that we actually partake of His divine nature.

What if we come to God through the blood of Christ, know that we have eternal life, and then live our own life, doing whatever we like, pleasing ourselves? That is when we treat the blood of Christ which was shed for us at great cost as if it was dirt cheap!

Then we imagine that we are 'free from the law' and we can do anything because the blood of Christ will forgive us!

But it is those who eat His flesh and drink His blood who have eternal life. I am not saying we have to earn this life. No, we receive it by grace through faith (Ep.2:8,9). But when we have been given access to God by this grace (v.18), don't we need to make use of that access and learn to live a life that is pleasing to Him? Only then can we be obedient to Him (1Jn.2:3,4), do His will instead of ours (Lk.22:42) and bring great delight to His heart and honour to His name (Jn.15:8). We may think this is hard on our flesh, but that is what will get us closer to Him, enhance our fellowship with Him and make our life meaningful and fulfilling (Jn.14:23). Then our heart will be set on Him.

Pointers along the way #766

Checking out new doctrines

We have to recognise the fact that it's becoming more difficult to live faithfully as Christians (2Ti.3:1 TLB). Many of us are going through tough situations, and it becomes more challenging when we can't find any explanation about what is going on. The situation becomes complicated when new teachings come up which appear to provide quick solutions. Let's look at a couple of teachings.

When there are inexplicable calamities happening in families, someone comes up saying that these are due to curses resulting from some ancestor's sins. They quote Deut.28 which lists examples of different curses that God would place on those who disobeyed His commandments in the old covenant. Since the present calamity resembles one of those curses, people quickly assume they are under a curse, and proceed to ask someone to break the curse. That person rebukes the devil and breaks the curse. Everyone seems to be happy. But did you just notice that according to Deut.28 God was the one to put the curse, and someone has just broken it by rebuking the devil! What about the fact that when we are in the new covenant of grace, our curses were taken away by Jesus and God has instead placed us under His blessings (Ga.3:13,14)? What about the fact that God has said He would not punish children for their father's sins (Ez.18:20)? Actually, it was not God who brought these calamities but Satan trying to trouble God's people and also bring deceptive doctrines in the bargain!

There are times when God gives someone supernatural faith and he speaks and it happens just as he said. There are other times when people spoke foolish things and Satan used that opportunity to make them happen. When people can't understand what is happening someone comes up with a teaching that our words have power and what we say will happen! Then they misquote Pr.18:21 and Jas.3:3-5. But we are just created human beings even after getting adopted as children of God and our words have no such supernatural power. If we really had such power, why is it that when we speak nothing happens almost all the time? But these people quote a few instances to prove this teaching, while they can be explained simply as from God or from Satan as said above.

The problem is, instead of taking God's word just as it is written, people are trying to fit the word into different situations. For example, if we take the plain teaching of God's word that God won't punish children for their father's sins, and He has taken our curses on Himself, we can be immediately start looking at other explanations instead. But many people get taken in by such teachings because they don't know the word of God themselves and because these teachers sound confident and have examples to show!

The solution is to get to know the character of God and see how new teachings reflect on His good, loving, gracious, compassionate, righteous, impartial nature. Don't swallow anything just because the teacher is famous!

Pointers along the way #767

As long as it works!

We see people who have some sickness which causes them much suffering become willing to go to any quack who offers a miracle cure. Have you come across Christians who, when they come to serious problems in life for which they have tried every available remedy, finally resort even to witchcraft? Their desperation for a solution drives them to ignore the warning in their mind regarding prudence and folly and even right and wrong.

This happens on another level when it comes to experience versus doctrine. Many people do not seem to be concerned much about the correctness of the doctrine they follow, as long as they seem to get 'results'. Every manifestation of supernatural power gets taken in as the power of God. The mesmerising personality of a speaker makes people assume that whatever he speaks must be true. Miraculous healing or resolution of problems is taken to prove the validity of doctrines. The largeness of the congregation is considered to show the anointing of God over the pastor. In India where there are a very large number of deities, each one answering prayer in specific areas of life, people go from temple to temple for blessings irrespective of the character of the deity! Is our attitude similar when we reach out to different pastors or teachings when we search for solutions to our problems?

Everything that is supernatural is not from God! Satan is notorious for counterfeiting many of God's gifts in such a way that it needs an expert to recognise the difference (2Co.11:13,14). He is very creative in bringing out teachings that appear to be authentic to a careless listener but which hide poison inside (1Ti.4:1).

Just as he did when he tempted Eve in Eden, one of his aims is to malign the character of God, and he also wants to ultimately take away from us what God has done in us and then to destroy us (Jn.10:10). This is something we have to be very careful about, to see if a teaching makes a caricature of God's nature – whether it is by exaggerating His wrath or His grace.

Another thing the Devil does is to initially give us what looks like a blessing, and then begin slowly to lead us away into

ungodliness. Or he may give us excitement and thrills without any real spiritual growth.

The Bible speaks about holding on to 'sound' (healthy) doctrine. The doctrines we believe shape our thinking and then our practical life. If the teaching we follow is really 'unhealthy' we are not going to grow healthy spiritually. Sound doctrine is related to godliness (1Ti.6:3). If a teaching has no contribution towards godly living, that shouldn't be something we should spend time on. If it leads to ungodly lives, we should run far from it!

It becomes essential to examine doctrines in this way, even if the preacher produces what appears to be results in dealing with our problems! The crucial thing is that we need to be connected to God in the right way, and no way climbing over walls will succeed in the end (Jn.10:1).

Pointers along the way #768

Light in darkness

Sad to say, a lot of preaching nowadays is about Jesus who will solve all our problems, give us healing and prosperity in every way, etc. But once people come to Jesus hoping for such a life, they are unable to relate to the actual suffering that comes to them in many ways – physical, financial, relational, spiritual, etc. Many people give up their faith in God, thinking that He is not what He is made up to be by Christians.

Real life has ups and downs – mountain top experiences and dark valley experiences. There are consequences of the personal mistakes we all make, there are those who hurt us for their own reasons, there is the chaos we experience in a world that is going away from God, and there are attacks from Satan. It is natural for us to wonder why bad things are happening to us who have God as our Father, while wicked people seem to be enjoying their life (Job.30:26;Ps.73:2,3).

But we do have a Father who is known for His love (1Jn.4:16). He never changes (Mal.3:6). He is always the same in His character (He.13:8). The more we know Him personally, the more we get to see His unchanging and trustworthy nature. We can rely on Him.

But when we go through times of darkness it is difficult for us to continue to trust in Him. What we experience in terms of trouble seems to be more real to us than the thoughts about God who seems to be far away and unreal. We are even tempted to decide that our faith in God and our experiences with God may have been imaginary. Then we become ready to give up.

The fact is, the only way to experience God is through faith, and the only way to know God more is by getting our faith to become stronger. Our faith can become stronger only when we are stretched beyond our present levels of faith and when we are forced to rely on faith alone and not on what we can feel or see. So, when we stand in darkness, not knowing what the future is going to bring, wondering what God is planning to do, we get an opportunity to assert our faith in God and tell ourselves that He will see us through. We are not saying that God will do what we want, but that we are willing to trust God and let Him do what He wants with us. When we make that decision, we find that 'light'

will come into our heart, comforting, strengthening and encouraging us, and then our thoughts and feelings will also experience the results of that light. Even if the situation does not change immediately, we get an assurance that we are safe in God's hands (Ps.112:4).

One mistake we make is to expect light in our situations and no darkness. But God is more interested in giving us light in our heart, and when that happens our life is blessed even when we are still in darkness as far as our situation is concerned. This is to walk by faith and not by sight, and this is to be more than just conquerors. At the end, what we have gained in terms of spiritual wealth will be far greater than all the physical suffering we went through (Job.42:12).

Pointers along the way #769

Misplaced faithfulness

The Pharisees complained one day to Jesus that His disciples weren't taking care to wash their hands before food. Jesus used that occasion to teach the disciples where true priorities ought to be. It wasn't about external things but what went on inside the heart. Jesus knew that the Pharisees were like impressive tombs on the outside with their faithfulness to keep the external rules they had made for themselves, while it was rotting and stinking inside their hearts (Mt.23:27). Jesus said, "Out of the heart come evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, slanders. These are the things which defile the man; but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile the man" (15:19,20). The danger is that very few can see the inside while most are impressed by the outside!

What are some of the external things many people follow religiously these days? Going to church, reading the Bible daily, paying money to the church, 'serving' in the church activities, saying 'grace' before meals, etc. But what is going on in their minds and hearts? Complaints about others, unforgiving attitudes, ways of making more money, lust, anger and hatred, bitterness towards God, selfish desires, etc. Will church attendance or Bible reading compensate for these?

Physical health is a god for many nowadays. There is great attention to counting calories, time at the gym, eating only organic food, etc. For many others, it is about relaxation with the TV or cinema to de-stress themselves. Some others make up 'bucket lists' to fulfil their dreams before they leave this world.

While people focus on 'having a good life' they don't realise that their minds are being coloured and shaped by the wisdom, philosophy and values of this world, in a very surreptitious way. They become more and more conformed to this age (world) from which Jesus came to set them free (Ga.1:4). They place more value on what the 'experts' say than to what God says in His word. They adapt their Christianity to their present time, not realising that this world lies in the hands of the evil one (1Jn.5:19), and that their goal should be conformed to the mind of God.

We get exposed to the world all the time whether we want it or not. There are also things we choose to expose ourselves to, e.g., contents of the media. Obviously we can't run away from the world. But don't we need to be careful when we choose things that are optional to us. Above all, don't we need to fill our minds with the wisdom of the word of God so that our minds can be transformed to the way God values people and things? Don't we also need to choose what we allow to enter our minds from outside?

Faithfulness is required in every area of our life. But isn't it most important to be faithful in our heart and mind which determines our relationship with God first of all, and also with one another? Isn't our character what will be valuable both in this world and the world to come (1Ti.4:8)?

Pointers along the way #770

Cast your cares

A story is told about a villager who got a ride on a lorry. The driver looked back to see him still carrying his load on his head! The villager explained that he was thankful for the lift, but he didn't want to misuse the driver's kindness by making the lorry carry his load too!

If we tell the Lord about our problems in prayer and still insist on worrying about them, aren't we being just as silly? Some of us even justify ourselves saying that our worry shows that we are concerned about the situation. If we didn't worry, wouldn't it show that we aren't bothered about it at all?

When the storm rose up in the sea and the disciples saw Jesus sleeping peacefully, their question to Him was, "Aren't You bothered that we are about to die?" (By the way, Jesus sleeping in the midst of the storm was no indication of His faith but that He was asleep and wasn't aware of the situation! But the fact that He was calm when He suddenly woke up and saw the storm *was* a mark of His confidence in the Father!) But Jesus rebuked them for their unbelief! This may seem somewhat harsh if we don't understand faith in the right way.

God tells us to cast our anxieties (worries, cares) upon Him, knowing that He cares for us (1Pe.5:7). To do this, first of all we must be sure in our heart and mind that our Father really cares for us, that He knows every detail of what is happening to us, that He is almighty and sovereign to do whatever He thinks is needed for us, etc. Secondly, if we trust Him, we must deliberately transfer our worries to Him.

If we say we have transferred our worries to Him but still worry about things ourselves, there is something wrong. We haven't actually transferred anything, but we are still holding on to the worries because we aren't sure that God is enough. It's really unbelief, isn't it?

This transfer is not about washing our hands off all our responsibilities in the matter. We must be surrendered to Him, trusting Him that He knows what is best for us and being willing to do anything He tells us. Many times, what we need to do is to acknowledge our mistakes and sins and take steps to set things

right. We can't palm off that responsibility to God! But once we have waited on God, heard what He has to tell us and done what we need to do from our side, we need to stop worrying.

This has to do with our knowledge of God and our faith in God. This faith is our personal confidence in Him. If we claim to know Him but continue worrying, doesn't He have reason to rebuke us for our unbelief? Without this faith, how can we be pleasing to Him (He.11:6)?

Our encouragement comes from knowing that the disciples who were rebuked many times for their unbelief grew up in their faith to the extent that finally they were even willing to lay down their lives for Him. If we are worriers now, we don't have to continue like that with all our excuses. We can start learning to trust God in real life situations and not merely with our lips.

Pointers along the way #771

The good that we look for

Most Christians are familiar with Ro.8:28, and many quote it when something goes wrong, saying that God is going to do something better for them. For example, if someone loses a job, he will say God will give him a better job, and when someone loses some money he will say God will give him much more! Most people relate this 'good' to some earthly benefit.

But v.29 describes what God means by good in v.28 – to become conformed to the character of Jesus His Son. In other words, even the calamities that happen to us can be used by God to instil in us some of His nature if we allow Him. It is not that God does not care about our earthly life or that He never gives us any material good but that the most precious thing He can give us is His nature. For those who align themselves according to His purpose for their lives can learn to respond to afflictions in such a way that they obtain 'an eternal weight of glory' – as part of the divine nature (2Co.4:17). For example, a difficult situation can help us to become more patient or teach us to love our enemies. But that is not what most people are looking for.

When Paul was put in prison for preaching the Gospel, he rejoiced that this caused many to get to know the Gospel who may have never had that opportunity otherwise (Php.1:12). In a human way he would have been happy if he was released from the prison. But even that was not what was uppermost in his mind. He was not even thinking of the divine nature he could partake of through that suffering. He went beyond what could be beneficial to him physically or even spiritually, and looked for the glory of God and His will getting done on earth (Mt.6:9,10). He had become a spiritually mature man by this time.

What is our mind set on (Co.3:1,2)? What are we looking for in our life? If our dream (bucket list) is earth-oriented we have to recognise ourselves as being carnal Christians. If our goal is to partake of God's nature we are beginning to become spiritual. But when we begin to seek God's kingdom and His righteousness foremost in our life, that is when we become mature Christians.

Whatever stage we are in now, there is something higher we need to pursue (1Co.2:9). The worst thing we can do in this context is

to live to enjoy this world as if there is not even a world to follow (1Co.15:19). We may not realise what we are going to miss while we are on earth, but once we find ourselves in the life to come we will see clearly what we could have received and what we lost. In addition, our regret will be intense when we realise that there is no more chance to gain what we have lost.

Many people have not even heard of such possibilities because all the gospel they have heard was about earthly blessings. Those who have heard the true Gospel have the responsibility therefore to spread it around so that more people can get to experience all that God has prepared for them. That was Paul's ambition, to proclaim the full Gospel.

Pointers along the way #772

How shall we serve?

"For our exhortation does not come from *error* or *impurity* or by way of *deceit*; but just as we have been approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel, so we speak, *not as pleasing men*, but *God who examines our hearts*. For we never came with *flattering speech*, as you know, nor with a *pretext for greed*--God is witness--nor did we *seek glory from men*, either from you or from others, even though as apostles of Christ we might have asserted our authority. But we proved to be gentle among you, *as a nursing mother tenderly cares for her own children*. Having so fond an affection for you, we were well-pleased to impart to you *not only the gospel of God but also our own lives*, because you had become very dear to us. For you recall, brethren, our labour and hardship, how working night and day so as *not to be a burden* to any of you, we proclaimed to you the gospel of God. You are witnesses, and so is God, how *devoutly* and *uprightly* and *blamelessly* we behaved toward you believers; just as you know how we were exhorting and encouraging and imploring each one of you *as a father would his own children*, so that you would walk in a manner worthy of the God who calls you into His own kingdom and glory" (1Th.2:2-12).

Here is how Paul describes the way he served people. He was very careful to avoid error or deceit. He didn't flatter people or try to impress them and seek money or honour from them. He was tender with them as a mother or father, caring for them enough to labour for them. Above all, he did everything aware of the searching eyes of God.

This is not an example to admire, but to compare ourselves with. This is the stuff true servants of God are made of, and our duty is to check if we fall short of it. If we look around, we can see blatant neglect of these values and, on the contrary, scheming and manipulating to gain something from the people. They aren't really serving the people at all but exploiting the people to serve themselves.

But what about us, whatever service we are rendering to God and His people? Is it about us or them? Is it about us or God? Are we really serving God and His people or our ministry is a way for us to become great or wealthy?

We may not be some great 'servants of God' but simple people who want to serve God. We can't change the others, but we can begin to change the way we live and serve God. We can eliminate in our lives things we see 'great' people doing and start becoming careful to live before God to whom we have to give an account one day. We can't afford to think that people are happy. This is not the day of reckoning but that day is surely coming. We may fool people, but we cannot mock God before whom all things are laid totally bare (He.4:13). We cannot think that the 'great ones' are doing many things that we consider as wrong and God's blessings are still upon their work. Surely God is allowing these things for a time because He loves the people, but surely a judgment is coming.

Pointers along the way #773

What are we living for?

Paul told Timothy, "The aim of our charge is love that issues from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith. Certain persons, by swerving from these, have wandered away into vain discussion, desiring to be teachers of the law, without understanding either what they are saying or the things about which they make confident assertions" (1Ti.1:5-7 ESV). Our charge = our mandate. Carnal Christians aim for pleasure of different forms and that is what they essentially live for, assuming that since their place in heaven is sure they might as well enjoy life here. It is also seen among Christian workers – those who think they are serving God – that many are not living with the goal of becoming more and more full of love, guided by a pure heart, a good conscience and a sincere faith.

It was true even in Paul's days and more so now that many of those who call themselves servants of God are really only seeking their own (Php.2:20,21). Their real aim is for a bigger position and greater wealth and power.

Let us examine ourselves. Can we not take this upon ourselves as the mandate given to us from God? Not just a mandate, but a great privilege offered to us who were lost in sin and away from the kingdom of God at one time? Of course, we ought to grow up and become able to serve Him and the others (He.5:12). But what is the most important thing we are living for? Is it to be filled with divine love? And to have everything in our life to be pure and undefiled – motives and desires included?

One day when our life here is over and we stand with the Lord on the other side of eternity and we get a clear perspective of relative values, should we put down our heads with regrets for wasting our life seeking earthly pleasures and gain?

Is it asceticism and seclusion from the world that the Lord wants for us? No. He wants us to live in this world with the heart of citizens of heaven (Php.3:20) pining to become more and more like our Lord in our thoughts, words and deeds. Then we will also be light and salt to the world.

It is our heart that is to be different. While we work, eat and sleep like all others in the world, our heart is to be set on the things

above (Co.3:2). Protecting ourselves from being evil towards others – harming and hurting them, exploiting them for our benefit, not concerned about how it affects others whatever we do, etc. – and learning to love others and be concerned about their welfare should be a spontaneous attitude on our part. Whatever we do on earth, our ambition is to be pleasing to the Lord (2Co.5:9). That is to be the signature of a disciple of Jesus.

Studying the Bible and serving God in the ways He has called each of us are good and necessary. But even if we become known for the spiritual gifts God has given us, if we miss becoming filled with love for God and His people, we will essentially be nothing (1Co.13:1-3), and all this so-called service will be burnt up (1Co.3:12,13).

Pointers along the way #774

Marks of a true Christian

'Mass production' of 'believers' through watering down of the Gospel (omitting conviction of sin and repentance) has a lot to do with the quality of the product – low quality of love for the Lord, absence of zeal for turning away from sin, unwilling to suffer anything for the Lord, etc. It is dishonest to the truth to excuse this condition of present day believers by hoping that grace would cover all that is lacking! Don't we need to realise that if we are going with a false hope that we have become children when actually we are still headed to hell, that would be the worst self-deception of all?

How did Paul know that the Thessalonians were truly converted? When he saw their response to the preaching of the Gospel – with the power and conviction of the Holy Spirit and their willingness to face tribulation with joy (1Th.1:4-6). It was easy to see that something powerful had happened in their lives that changed their lives around.

When the true Gospel is preached, where the Saviour is presented as coming to save people bound in sin, to forgive us and to change our lives to that which is pleasing to the Lord in every aspect, those who become convicted of their sins and sinfulness repent and turn to the Lord with hope. Then the Holy Spirit works a miracle in their hearts, giving them a new heart and writing His laws upon their heart and mind (Ez.36:26,27). That is how Christians are born.

Compare this with people now who repeat prayers asking Jesus to come into their lives and they are not even sure if anything has happened. They have not even seen themselves as sinners deserving hell, they have not chosen to turn away from sin in their lives, and they have not decided to obey and follow Jesus at all costs. They have not heard that such things are essential for Christians.

Many such people join churches where some of them who have natural talents for singing or speaking are immediately given prominent roles. Now these people will never again think they need to repent and be converted!

Because things like this occur frequently, can I request those who read this to examine yourself and see how things are with you? If the Holy Spirit convicts you, don't brush it aside as an accusation of the Devil. Acknowledge your sins to God, ask for forgiveness and ask Him to help you not to sin again. We may fall, but a true Christian does not *want* to sin (1Jn.3:9). God will forgive us when we ask Him when we fall (1Jn.1:9), but those who take advantage of this and go on sinning have not really known God. They have not become children of God, and they are on their way to hell even if they follow many external 'Christian' practices, including baptism. Our eternal destiny is what is involved. Let us not jeopardise it by giving all kinds of excuses for ourselves.

God wants all people to be saved (1Ti.2:4). While the Gospel is preached by some, a false gospel is also being preached by many that has already misled many (Mt.13:25).

Pointers along the way #775

The One we believe

Towards the end of his life, the apostle Paul had much to look back on regarding what the Lord had done through him. But he also had reason to look at all the hardship and suffering he had gone through and question himself whether he had made a mistake or whether he had been a fool to have spent his life like this. It was only natural that it would occur to him to wonder whether it was worth it all! Even as the one of the greatest apostles of all time he had reason to wonder. But he finally concluded that he didn't need to be ashamed at all (2Ti.1:7-12).

The one thing that kept him going forward without losing heart was that he knew whom he had believed (v.12). Paul had come to know God personally in such a deep and intimate way that he was able to put aside all doubts and questions and cling on to Him. He had learnt that in the midst of everything dark and painful, his Lord was always reliable and trustworthy. Even when he could not understand many things and could not figure out what to do based on all his theological knowledge and experience, he knew that he could leave everything in the hands of the unchangeable One. This God would carry him through, and in the end he would be able to see that God had accomplished what He had set out to do in Paul and through him.

We also face such tests at times, even though on a much smaller level. Our test is also to see if we would give up on God when we can't understand what is going on. The closer we know God, the more challenging is the trial that unanswered prayer brings, and the more we know the ways of God, the stronger is the test we face when things don't seem to fit in with them. God doesn't always answer our prayers and many times He doesn't even give an explanation. The only way we can overcome in such tests is to hold on to our trust in the One we know and believe in.

To *survive* in such tests is what we can do to *overcome* them because the test is about whether we would continue to trust in God when we can't see Him or experience His help. Wasn't this the essence of the test Satan put Job through? Satan was telling God that Job trusted Him only because he could always experience His protection and care. The test Satan proposed was

to remove this protection and see how Job would react (Job.1:9-11).

We are not Job, and our tests are (thankfully) at a much lower level. But there is certainly a similarity in the essence of the test. We can apply the same approach in our life that Job used in his life to overcome. Just as Job survived his test by holding on to his faith in God, we too must continue to trust in God even when we can't know what is going on. Job had no idea what was going on behind the scene between God and Satan, and neither do we. We don't know what God has in mind when He allows us to go through such situations. But we can learn to overcome in the same way Job did, as also Paul. Our God won't fail us too. We will see it after God brings us through.

Pointers along the way #776

What about the Old Testament?

There are people who actually ignore the Old Testament part of the Bible and read only the New Testament. Without the OT we can't properly understand the NT! The NT is built on the foundation of the OT. But at the same time we must know that the concept of the old and new parts of the Bible is different from the old and new *covenants* which God made. The old covenant made through Moses is now obsolete (He.8:13)! What is now operating is the *new* covenant which God made through the blood of Jesus on the cross. The old covenant existed even when Jesus lived on the earth and the new came only when He died.

The heart of the old covenant was the Law, with the condition that God would bless those who kept the Law and curse the disobedient (Deut.28). Obviously, *no* one except Jesus was able to keep the Law fully (Ro.3:20,23). One of the reasons why God gave the Law was that everyone would get to see and admit that they had sinned (v.19). Once a person comes to this understanding, he will cry out to God for mercy, and that is when the new covenant will become attractive to him (He.8:12). Under this covenant, God will give such a man a new heart, write His laws on his heart and help him to walk in His ways (Ez.36:26,27). This man now wants to stop sinning and live in obedience to the Lord.

The old covenant was a major part of God's overall plan for man's salvation. Without it, God could not go on to the new. The old was like a guardian looking after a child till he came of age, able to take up his responsibilities (Ga.3:24,25). Once he acquires this sense of responsibility he doesn't need a law any more telling him to avoid sin under threat of curses! He himself wants to be pleasing to the Lord.

Before we can come to the place in our practical life where we are 'free from the Law' (Ro.7:6), we should know what it is to find ourselves helpless *under* the Law. That is how we can know what unmerited favour (grace) really means for God and us. This is the antidote for the error that exaggerates 'grace' without realising the serious problem of sin. And it is the Old Testament that helps us to learn this, by looking at what God asked Israel to do and how they failed, and seeing how we ourselves fail when we try to obey God in everything. Then we learn to go to God for both

aspects of grace – mercy and help (He.4:16). We also see many sides of God which are not obvious from the New Testament.

We certainly need the OT. But we need to remember that we are not under the old covenant but the new. We are free from the Law, and we mustn't be looking now for its blessings and curses! We are under the law of the Spirit of Christ (Ro.8:2) which transforms us inwardly. The greatest blessing now is that we can be victorious over temptation and become more like Jesus. We shouldn't miss this, by getting taken up with the earth-based blessings of the old covenant. Seeking godliness has to be first, and then God will give other things too.

Pointers along the way #777

Entering into His rest

The writer of the Letter to the Hebrews mentions that there is a rest that God has prepared for His people which some have not entered at all (He.4:1). Is it possible that any of us has failed to enter into that rest till now? To know that, we must understand what this rest means.

One clue is from v.10 that describes a characteristic of someone who has entered this rest. It is that he has 'rested from his works'. In this context, we know that man's strongest works are done to please God and to find acceptance from Him by doing whatever man thinks God demands of him. All religions of this world follow this path in one way or another. But the Bible tells us that it is not possible for anyone to qualify like this before God (Ro.3:20). All who follow this path are constantly in unrest because they can never know till they die if they have been accepted by God! God wants to give us rest here! By faith we can become justified before God through repentance and receiving His undeserved favour (Ep.2:8,9). Those who have experienced this salvation know the value of this rest!

Another way we get into unrest is by pursuing after love and recognition from people. What we get in this is never enough! We compromise our values in order to find acceptance from them and we try to impress them and get a name through wealth and achievements. But this makes us very insecure and robs our peace and sleep. This too can disappear if we give up such man-oriented ambitions and focus on just doing God's will for us, whether people recognise us or not.

For sincere disciples of Jesus, another area of unrest comes from finding that they are very different from Him in their behaviour and even thinking! We keep discovering in the situations of life that things come out from us that are dishonouring to our Lord (Ro.7:22,23). We ought to enter into rest in an increasing manner just like the people of Israel entering the Promised Land by overcoming the different Canaanites who used to live there, one by one. For example, shouldn't we be becoming less and less anxious about the future as we get to trust in God more? This way involves the process of sanctification that should be going on in a progressive manner all through our life.

What if we have not entered into this way of rest, even if we have considered ourselves 'good' Christians? God says that it is possible even now to enter into this path of rest (He.4:6,7). The most important thing is to have trust in God (v.3) and to become obedient to Him (3:18,19). We also need to be consistently diligent (labour - KJV) not only to enter this rest but also to remain in it (4:11).

By giving up trust in our good works to become pleasing to God but trusting in His grace, we can get rid of that huge unrest. Giving up seeking great things for ourselves and choosing to do God's will alone will bring great rest into our heart. As we trust God and begin to obey Him in all things, our rest will increase!

Pointers along the way #778

Stop sinning!

"Become sober-minded ... stop sinning; for some have no knowledge of God" (1Co.15:34). "Wake up from your drunken stupor ... and do not go on sinning" (ESV). This warning was addressed not to unbelievers but to the people in the church in Corinth. It may well be needed for us too. We too need to wake up from our stupor and become sober if we have drunk from the false doctrine of hyper-grace. This exaggeration of grace does not say so explicitly, but it implies that since God's favour towards us is entirely undeserved and nothing we do can earn it or lose it, it doesn't really matter how we live. These teachers may not actually say that we can sin freely now because we are under grace (Ro.6:15), but they imply that if we sin it doesn't really count against us!

One variation of this teaching is to emphasise that since Jesus died just once for the sins of the world, it necessarily means that even our future sins have already been paid for and forgiven. While it is true that there is provision in the death of Christ for the forgiveness of sins that might come up in the future, we should not imagine by implication that there is no need for us to be concerned about sin.

What appears on the surface to glorify God by proclaiming the riches of His grace has turned out for some people, just as the apostle Paul saw in those early days, to be like a proclamation of a licence for sin. That is where they have become 'drunk' and got into a stupor! In that state, their actual sins don't really worry them and they don't seem to take any serious effort to avoid sinning.

How are things with us? Has this false doctrine managed to bewitch us? In our desire to follow Jesus, are we taking care to avoid sinning (1Jn.2:1) – to avoid doing what we know to be sin and to please God instead, or is that something that rarely concerns us? Falling into sin inadvertently is different. God knows that we might *fall*, and He has promised that He will forgive us if we confess our failures (1Jn.1:9). But if we cannot identify any conscious effort on our part to stop sinning, we must conclude that we have become drunk with this wrong spirit and that we need to wake up urgently. In some cases we may even need to

check to see if we are really born again and have come to a relationship with God.

Some people believe that it is entirely God's work to deliver them from sin. But it is very clear that only if *we*, with the help of the Holy Spirit, put to death (and not allow to take life) the sinful things our flesh wants to do that we will live the life of God (Ro.8:13). God helps us by working inside us, but it is for us to choose not to sin, overcome the temptations to sin and do what is pleasing to Him (Php.2:12,13). If we don't do our part, we may either not succeed in getting victory or, worse still, make ourselves imagine that we have victory when everybody else can see it's not real!

Real grace includes mercy for forgiveness *and* help to overcome (He.4:16).

Pointers along the way #779

A personal check-up

The most damning self-deception is when we imagine we are safe in Christ when we aren't even born again. This deception has become very common because many don't point this out. Paul, Peter, John and James had questions about the status of many of those who claimed to be Christians. Writing to the church in Corinth Paul said they should test themselves to see if they were really 'in the faith' (2Co.13:5). Peter told his readers to verify their own salvation lest they were deceived (2Pe.1:10). John described in his letter various differences between those who were and were not born of God (e.g., 1Jn.3:7-9). James pointed out that those who claimed to have 'faith' but didn't have any fruit to show for their faith were still 'dead' (Ja.2:17).

One of the things Peter points out is that a true Christian will be occupied all the time with Christian living! Whatever we do, we'll be concerned about if it is pleasing to God, according to His will and honouring to Him. Peter uses the words faith, moral excellence, knowledge, self-control, perseverance, godliness, brotherly kindness and love (2Pe.1:5-7), and tells us that a true child of God will be really diligent to cultivate these. In other words, a child of God will be working all the time on such aspects of life. Peter warns people who, by implication, are occupied with

life in this world and all its attractions, that they may either have forgotten what Jesus had to pay in order to save them or they may not even be properly children of God (vv.8,9). That's why he asks everyone to make sure how they stand before God (v.10).

The warning James gives is absolutely on the spot for many people now who feel quite safe about themselves because they have 'faith' in Jesus – and "everyone knows that it is faith and not works that can save us"! What James says is that it is possible for us to have a wrong type of faith – which is quite useless because it hasn't resulted in any transformation in the way we live.

Many people are scared of examining their own heart to see if their faith is genuine because they think their fragile faith will get shattered or that they will be giving place to the Devil to disturb them. But isn't that like avoiding going to a doctor because he might tell us some 'bad' news? That bad news can be what will get them final healing! Isn't it better to know now if we have been deceived about our relationship with God than to be told about it at the judgment?

Pointers along the way #780

Blind spots!

One day my wife said to me, "Oh, you are sitting here with the dog!" I replied, "No, I am just sitting here, not with the dog!" Then I realised that she was only making small talk with me and not expecting me to analyse her sentence for accuracy. But my goal was to be accurate in what I said rather than to connect with her! Then I also remembered someone telling me years ago that he detected an air of an expert in me when I talked to other people. When I looked at myself at that time I couldn't see any of that in me because, I thought, I was only trying to help people by giving suggestions. But now I can see how he could have been right.

How we see ourselves is not always the way others see us. Isn't it good then to listen to their feedback? The Bible reports about us human beings that because of our fallen condition, it is easy to imagine that we are right when there is much to be corrected (Pr.21:2). If we want to be a blessing to others in every place, is it sufficient to be right in our own eyes but also that the others should also be comfortable with us? Psychology calls this emotional intelligence which people like me can lack who have focussed on being logically right. But perhaps this is not about me but many of you can also relate to this?

Isn't it possible that we can spend our whole lifetime without being even a bit aware about what people think about us? Of course, we need to avoid the other extreme of worrying about what they think and drive ourselves into a bondage (Pr.29:25). Freedom comes here when we realise that what really matters is what God thinks about us. But at the same time, God many times tries to give us understanding through the comments other people make about us. If we throw that all out, we will remain blind for a long time! We will also miss what we could have become if we had been open to suggestions and even corrections.

On the other side, I have also noticed that sometimes when I tried to give some helpful suggestions to people they seemed to think that I was finding fault with them! That was not my intention at all but sincerely to help them! Now let's ask ourselves what our response generally is when someone tells us what to do. Do we think they are judging us, being critical towards us, etc.? The point is, even if they are judgmental or critical, can we not take it

in a good way and try to learn something from them? Some wise man has pointed out that sometimes our friends think they shouldn't hurt us and keep quiet when they see something wrong with us, but many times our 'enemies' who want to hurt us actually tell the truth (or some part of the truth) to us!

We know it doesn't come to us easily to receive correction. One thing that has helped me in this area is to recognise that the whole point of salvation is to correct what is wrong with me and make me like Jesus. The first step in that salvation is for me to admit where I am wrong and then I can go on to asking God for help.

Pointers along the way #781

Not burdensome?

"For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments; and His commandments are not burdensome" (1Jn.5:3). For whom are the commandments not a burden? For those who 'love' to keep them! It is obvious that for others who like to do their own thing God's commandments are seen as getting in their way or as something that takes fun away from their lives. Such people consider these same commandments as spoil-sports or unreasonable restrictions! This should show us where our heart stands in relation to God!

It is a fact that none of us is born here as an angel. We are all born in sin (Ps.51:5). After we are born, this sinful tendency shows up very early in our behaviour. Actually we are all born as 'children of the devil' (Jn.8:44) because we come from Adam and Eve who surrendered relationship with God by yielding to Satan on that fateful day. That's why we need to be 'born again' to become children of God.

It is when we come to God in humility and sincerity, admitting our sins and asking Him to forgive and accept us because we believe that Jesus died on the cross in our place, that God causes us to be born again (regenerates our spirit which was 'dead in sin' (Ep.2:1) and disconnected from God) by the supernatural work of the Holy Spirit. This is the promise of the new covenant that He will give us a new spirit, write His laws into our heart and mind and help us to walk in His ways (Je.31:33; Ez.36:25-27). Then, of course, we will begin to 'love' God's laws and hate our old sinful ways (He.1:9).

Now we can check for ourselves whether this has taken place in our life – this will tell us whether we have truly become children of God.

In these days when the Gospel message has been watered down and the narrow gate that opens to life has been made wide (Mt.7:13,14), many are mistakenly assuming that they have become children of God headed for heaven. Instead of getting a shock after death, we can know now itself where we stand in relation to God. A Christian name, birth in a Christian family, going to church, baptism or becoming active in Christian activities

can't substitute for being born again (Jn.3:3). Even if we sincerely think that it is well with our soul, we would be mistaken if we have not been born again.

A very common mistake many people make is to merely 'accept Jesus as their Saviour' in their mind without having seen themselves as sinners in God's sight who deserve His judgment and yielding themselves to Him trusting in His love for them. It is not a matter of the words we use but what goes on inside our heart and how we relate to God.

But God has opened the Gospel to everyone saying that 'all' who call on Him will be saved (Ac.2:21). No one will be rejected who go to Him in sincerity and truth (Jn.6:37). Instead of pretending that we are good people whom God must accept or justifying ourselves before Him, why don't we choose the path of humility and respond to this great salvation He is freely offering us?

Pointers along the way #782

Able to keep us from stumbling

"Now to Him who is able to keep you from stumbling, and to make you stand in the presence of His glory blameless with great joy" (Jude.24). Does this mean that we never stumble? No (Jas.3:2). God is 'able' to keep us from stumbling, but He cannot do it by Himself. He needs us to submit to Him.

When I said 'God cannot' was I negating His almighty power? No. In His sovereign wisdom, He created us in His image, and part of that image is the ability to make choices. If we didn't have that ability we wouldn't have had the ability to sin and we wouldn't even have had the ability to choose to love Him! We have been created 'sovereign' within God-prescribed limits.

This is why we cannot expect God to do everything for us, without our taking individual responsibility for what we ought to do. We sit and wait for God to give us a godly character without our denying ourselves (Ro.8:13) when we are tempted by our lusts to do wrong (Jas.1:14,15)! We pray and pray that God should heal our relationships without taking any steps on our part to set things right with others. We refuse to take medicines and insist that God has to heal us miraculously. He is able, but there are things He has enabled us to do, and if we won't do them, we can't get the results we want.

This is also why we end up blaming God for the evil things that happen to us. Perhaps we are only suffering the consequences of our own foolish behaviour or we are getting hit by the wrong things others do or the chaos people have made on the earth. We blame God because we think He should have prevented such things!

If God always prevented everyone from doing wrong or took away the consequences, He would be interfering with our free will. When He created us with a free will, He knew that there could be bad choices we make and that we would suffer because of them. He prepared His plan of salvation for us even before He created the world. That is why He 'cannot' overrule in everything man does, even though He does intervene when things go outside His overall will. But He allows us to suffer from the consequences of our wrong actions in order that we may learn not to repeat them.

It is when we learn this that we begin to act more wisely and also seek for His help for us to make the right choices and to be able to do accordingly (Php.2:12,13). We see very clearly in this passage that there are things God will do for us and also that there are things He wants us to take responsibility for.

God will save everyone who seeks Him (Ro.10:13). He is able. But which man or woman is there who always calls on Him without depending on their own strength? Is it right, then, to blame God for what goes wrong? In all such situations, let us learn to find out what we need to correct in our thinking and behaviour and then do what we need to. Let us ask Him more earnestly to give us the right understanding and the strength to do what is right always, including to set things right.

Pointers along the way #783

Would you prefer love?

Wouldn't we like to have God as someone who loves us, showers good things on us, forgives all our sins, heals all our diseases, handles all our problems, etc.? Who wouldn't? But another side of God demands that we live right according to the ways He shows us, warning us that if we don't we will face consequences. Who likes to know that part of God and become accountable to Him?

There are those who presume on the love of God for them and live their own life, and there are others who live wondering if He would ever accept them. It's obvious that both groups are missing some part of God and as a result their lives are skewed. There is the love of God which we can bask in, and there is also the fear of God that can guide us to live right.

It is the love of God for us who know that we don't deserve it because of our sins that draws us to God. Those who are drawn to Him because they experience some miraculous help from Him should also learn eventually that this is not all that God can do for them but that it is the big sin-question that God wants to help us with in the end. If sin is not dealt with in our life and we are not set right with God, all the other benefits we may receive from Him will be useless in terms of eternity!

But the way God deals with our sin is not just to forgive us but to 'save us from our sins' (Mt.1:21). This is what Jesus said He would do - "He anointed Me to preach the gospel to the poor. He has sent Me to proclaim release to the captives, And recovery of sight to the blind, To set free those who are oppressed, To proclaim the favourable year of the Lord" (Lk.4:18,19). He wasn't preaching a social gospel here but that He would free us from a life of sinning. "He was pierced through for our transgressions, He was crushed for our iniquities; The chastening for our well-being fell upon Him, And by His scourging we are healed" (Is.53:5) - healed from a sinful way of life. If this deliverance from the power of sin is not there, our salvation would be incomplete. But salvation *is* complete, and His promise is that sin shall not rule over us, now that we are in His grace (Ro.6:14). This grace includes mercy for our forgiveness and help for us to overcome when we are tempted (He.4:15,16).

When we want to learn to overcome in temptations, it is the fear of God that helps us to balance our tendency to take His love for granted. We realise we are accountable to Him, not just for what we do, but also for our thoughts and intentions (vv.12,13). This fear teaches us wisdom (Pr.9:10) in the practical way we live, recognising that everything we do has to be right in His sight (Ro.14:12).

The more wisely we live our life, the more clearly we understand the mystery of God's love for us and we become constrained to show Him our love by living for Him (2Co.5:14,15). Then we also learn to cry out to Him for help to know His will and to overcome in temptations (He.5:7). Think what we'll miss if we look only at love!

Pointers along the way #784

Disappointed?

Disappointment in life touches all of us and sometimes it can be very difficult to handle. When it comes unexpectedly the shock sometimes drives people even to suicide. Sometimes there may be even what appears to be seasons of disappointment when, as they say, "everything goes wrong!" If parents have always tried to shield their children from disappointments and failures even in games, they are unprepared for that part of life when they become shattered by their disappointments.

We need an 'anchor' that keeps us safe from drifting away into confusion and hopelessness when the storms of life hit us. It is not enough to know in theory that Jesus is our Anchor but we must also know how to hold on to Him when the actual situations cause turmoil in our minds. It is one of the big challenges to faith when we have hoped for something from the Lord and it doesn't happen. Our faith must be realistic, based on real promises of God and not our wishful thinking or verses in the Bible that do not relate to us.

When the early church started with Pentecost and the apostles began to preach Christ with power, opposition also came up. Herod put James to death and was planning to kill Peter too when God intervened and delivered him by sending an angel (Ac.12:1-10). Imagine what we would have thought and felt if we were in the family of James! Wouldn't we find it hard to understand why God permitted him to die after having trained him for three years in the 'core group' of the apostles? Where was God's protection? Can we now trust this God for our own protection?

We may never be able to solve this perplexing question here on earth. Our anchor is to trust in God's love and wisdom even when we can't figure things out. Our faith is not based on knowing answers to problems but what we know about God (He.11:6).

One of the most difficult challenges we face is death, either of our loved ones or our own. We tend to look at it as the 'end' of our life on earth (2Ki.20:1-3). Then it is only natural that we are disappointed when it comes. But look at it from God's eyes. For Him it is the beginning of a glorious life for His child. None of us can imagine the wonderful things He has prepared and kept

ready for us over there (1Co.2:9). If we look at it this way, we may be able to understand that He didn't consider James' death as a loss but as a glorious transition.

What about the lesser disappointments in our life? From the earthly point of view they are painful. But think of God being able to turn them around to work out something for our eternal good (Ro.8:28,29)! When we hold on to this anchor by faith, we allow God to add to our character godliness that will last through eternity (2Co.4:17). This anchor can take us beyond the veil that ushers us into God's presence, not just when we die but now by faith so that we can walk in victory over our disappointments. On one side earthly pain hits us, but on the other God gives us hope to hold on to.

Pointers along the way #785

Diversity in how God works

One common mistake we make is applying to ourselves promises that are not really there from God or those that are not meant for us. We think we can look for promises all over the Bible and claim what we find. But we mustn't forget the fact that there is no one as creative as our God and diversity is a hallmark of His character. No two trees or flowers He makes are the same. When it comes to man, we are all so unique – in our body, mind, experience and capabilities. What God does with each one of us is also unique. He causes us to be born with a particular DNA, go through particular sets of training through experience and at the end there are no two of us exactly the same.

The work He wants us to do is also different for each of us. He specially chooses for us the ministry He wants us to have (1Co.12:11) and even gives each one the special emphasis that comes out from our particular make-up. No two teachers or no two pastors are the same. No two people can agree on all the doctrines because it is not just about the way we interpret the scriptures but also the particular shape of our mind into which interpretations go, based on our background and experiences!

How God deals with each one is also unique. In a general way we can say that what He has done for others He is able to do for us. But what He will actually do for us will be unique for us. God may heal someone miraculously, ask someone else to go to the hospital for treatment and even take someone to be with Him without healing here. When Mark says how believers in Jesus will experience miracles (Mk.16:17,18) it is not that all of us will experience all of those every time in our life. These things will happen among the people of God, but we cannot take it that we can 'claim' all of these for ourselves. You may have heard of those who have (actually) tested God by handling poisonous snakes based on these verses, and died (Mt.4:6,7). When Jesus sent out the disciples to go and "Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons" (Mt.10:8), they were given a special authority as apostles to do all of these and more. But what happens now is someone may cast out demons, someone else heal the sick and someone raise the dead, but this is not something all of us can 'claim' as rights or promises given by God to everyone.

When we don't understand this, people are taught to expect miraculous things saying that God did that for someone else. When that doesn't happen many are disappointed and some even fall away from the faith.

But then, what can we look forward to when we pray in faith for miracles? We believe that God is quite capable of doing any miracle He chooses, but we choose to submit to God's will in each particular case. We can ask Him to do a miracle for us but we will not insist that He has do it for us because He did it for someone else. Which do you think is the higher faith – demanding from God or submitting to God (Da.3:17,18).

Pointers along the way #786

Payback time

When Esau became hungry at the end of a day, he asked his brother Jacob to give him some porridge. Wily man that he was, Jacob said that Esau could have it only if he sold him the birth right he had as the eldest son of Isaac. Esau's response was that the birth right didn't really matter because his hunger was what was important. The Bible records that in this Esau 'despised' his birth right (Ge.25:29-34). But when the time came for Isaac to bless Esau with the birth right, Jacob deceived him and got the blessing. What is interesting is Esau's reaction when he came to know this. He said, "He has supplanted me these two times? He took away my birth right, and behold, now he has taken away my blessing" (v.36).

Did Jacob take away the birth right from Esau? No, Esau gave it to Jacob! Now it was payback day. He couldn't have the blessings because he had actually given them away earlier. We know that the way Jacob received his father's blessings was not right at all. But what we need to learn from Esau's reaction is that he didn't see it was really his choice that had given away the blessing.

Before we start thinking how foolish Esau was, let's take a look at ourselves and recall how we too have made wrong calls and then when the payback came we too couldn't see we had caused that to happen! We blame others or even God. It's not a matter of a short memory but a mark of our sinful nature. This nature will try its best not to face our own faults and find all kinds of explanations for what happens except that we 'asked for it' by our choices.

Esau cried much when he realised that he had lost the blessings (27:34). But he didn't repent of his foolish choice. As long as he wouldn't repent there was no chance of getting any blessing even if he cried loudly with regret that he couldn't get any blessing (He.12:16,17). But imagine what could have happened if only he had acknowledged his folly and cried out to God in repentance!

Let's not misunderstand grace as an unmerited favour that God will show to everyone and expect that no matter what we do and what choices we make at the time of testing, God will simply bless us. Certainly God is exceedingly gracious. But we can qualify for

becoming a recipient of this grace only if we repent (Mt.4:17). If our entry into grace was through repentance and faith, our daily walk with Jesus must also be through repentance and faith, mustn't it?

God is not asking us to be perfect so that He can accept and bless us. He knows that we are only going to be imperfect as long as we are here on earth. But He wants us to be honest and acknowledge when we go wrong (1Jn.1:8). He is willing to forgive (v.9). But He cannot bless us if we will not be humble before Him and walk as if we were perfect and put all the blame on others, situations or even God. Let's not wait to learn it the hard way when the payback time comes. Just think of how much we can miss from God's blessings because we wouldn't humble ourselves.

Pointers along the way #787

Who is God?

God is a Person without form and the One who created everything. He is almighty, all-knowing, wise, loving, merciful, holy, righteous and just. If someone worships a snake or thunder as god, it is clear that he is not looking at this God. How then can people say that no matter which god anyone worships they are really calling the same God under different names? For those who think like that, God is just a concept in their mind and not a real person, and then it is not difficult to imagine that it is all right for people to have different concepts of god in their mind. For such people, one question they ask is why anyone else should bother as long as these people are happy with their concept and it satisfies their need for god!

But God is a real Person with whom we can have a real relationship. As our Creator we are accountable to Him on His terms, and it is from Him that all blessings come. We need to have the true understanding of who God is and how we can relate to Him. It's not about having any philosophy of life that satisfies our mind by providing some answers to questions that come up. Many people seem to be satisfied as long as their religious leaders give them some explanation because the people assume that these leaders know what they are talking about. But if we examine all these man-made philosophies we can see that they are not coherent in themselves and they do not provide a comprehensive explanation connecting God, man and His dealings with us. God has revealed Himself to us through time in the Bible, and what we see there is able to connect everything together in such a way that they make sense like nothing else does.

Many people, including some people who consider themselves as Christians, read and discuss different philosophies and conclude that 'this group believes like this', 'that group like that' but 'I think like this'. It doesn't seem to bother them that these concepts don't make any practical difference in the way they live daily, as long as they know how to quote great writers and teachers!

"And there is no other God besides Me, a righteous God and a Saviour; there is none except Me. Turn to Me and be saved, all the ends of the earth; for I am God, and there is no other"

(Is.45:21,22). There is no one else who loved us so much that He gave Himself in order to save us from our sins (Jn.3:16). But this God is also our Judge before whom we will have to give an account for our life one day (Ro.14:12). So, each of us has to make sure that our understanding of God is right, we have a proper relationship with the true God and that our life is in line with what He wants from us.

Someone says it will be impossible to everyone to go through all the different concepts of God with our limited mind and time, and find out which is right. Yes and no. If we sincerely search for the Truth, God promises He will direct our path. "You will seek Me and find Me when you search for Me with all your heart" (Je.29:13).

Pointers along the way #788

Doubts

'Doubting Thomas' has got a bad name from people because he wouldn't believe Jesus had risen from the dead until he had seen Him. But, on the other hand, those who will believe everything without checking are called 'gullible'. We appreciate the example of the Bereans who checked out the preaching of Paul the apostle with scripture before accepting it (Ac.17:10,11). Jesus rebuked His disciples for doubting instead of believing (Lk.24:38). Where is the balance?

Doubts about various things is one reason why people fall away from the faith. We may also be perplexed at times with different questions in our mind – why a loving and almighty God allows evil to rule, how a loving God can send people to hell, why God is not answering our prayers, what can we do about problems we find in the Bible, etc. We can mostly find satisfactory answers to doubts if we would consult with godly people or read their writings. But if we brood over our doubts without seeking help, we may even enter into a situation where deceiving spirits find it easy to inject our mind with the idea that God cannot be trusted, or that He doesn't exist. God warns us that before the day of the Lord there will be a great apostasy (falling away) (2Th.2:3).

God has not arranged things in such a way that all our doubts can be cleared, because there are many things He has not revealed to us. There will be always questions left, and always things that our small minds cannot explain or understand. So, if our relationship with God is going to depend on understanding everything about Him, we will fall away at some time. There are some others who try to escape from this problem by not allowing themselves to think about such issues altogether. That will not work for all the time because occasions will come in life for everyone when we need some answers.

Ultimately we have to come to the place where we are comfortable even when knowing very well that there are things we don't understand. Our life has to move from living based on facts we can explain to living by faith in God as a Person whom we know personally. Of course, our faith in Him is based on facts we know about Him, but it is also based on the confidence we have developed in Him that has come through personal experience

with Him. It is only then that we can survive doubts that come to us from time to time. We can then draw upon our 'Ebenezer' of knowledge that says, "So far God has kept me, and I can depend on Him to take care of me even in the future" (1Sa.7:12).

This doesn't mean that we stop looking for answers. The more clearly we see the answers, the more quickly we can put away the doubts that come up in our mind. We also become able then to help others around us who are struggling with doubts.

On the final day we are not going to be examined regarding our knowledge, but on how close we have come to Jesus. Cleverer ones can deal with apologetics, but even the least of the saints can get to know God (He.8:11).

Pointers along the way #789

Seeing ourselves

After Cain carried out one of the most heinous crimes by killing his brother Abel, when God pronounced the judgment on him he felt that the punishment was more than he deserved (Ge.4:13). He didn't see the seriousness of his sin. Our sinful nature is also the same. We look for mercy and compassion from God when we sin but we think the others deserve greater punishment even when their sin is smaller than ours. When we have had a quarrel with someone else, we say, "I just said/did this, but *he...*" Jesus was right when He asked us to take off the beam in our eye before attempting to remove the speck in another's eye (Lk.6:41,42).

This needs training ourselves to think differently than how it is natural for us. Instead of trying to wriggle out of the responsibility for our sins/mistakes, we must determine firmly that we want to face up to them and deal with them. We can ask God to open the eyes of our understanding and help us so that we can turn away from our focus on other people's sins and give attention to what we have done wrong. Psychology has identified many 'defence mechanisms' which people use, and one common use is to turn the attention away from our mistakes to others.

We must understand that without cleansing ourselves from every defilement of flesh and spirit we are not going to partake of the divine spirit and become like Jesus (2Co.7:1). We mustn't attribute to Satanic accusation every conviction the Holy Spirit brings about things that must be set right in our life. The sense of guilt we feel when we do wrong must not be confused with condemnation that comes from the Devil. This guilt is a pointer from the Holy Spirit towards the area in our life that needs to be dealt with. When we confess our sins we can get rid of the guilt (1Jn.1:9), but without recognising and dealing with the guilt we will not confess our sins!

We can come to the place where recognition of our sin does not drive us into hopelessness because we have come to see the compassion and understanding of God towards us coupled with His hatred for sin. But if we draw back from facing our sins because of the fear of feeling the guilt and shame, we effectively close up the path of being set free from sin more and more in practical life – sanctification.

The path of sanctification involves the renewal of the way we think about sin, ourselves, God's character of holiness and mercy, other people, etc. There is pain when we get wounded from our sins but healing can come only after we clean up the wound thoroughly by facing up to our sins and confessing them to God and then applying the balm of His forgiveness. If we try to avoid the pain and then claim healing straightaway we will have those sins festering inside us. We will remain the same without any transformation. But that is not God's plan for us. For everyone who takes up his cross daily and follows Jesus God promises the life of the Master (Lk.9:23) – from death to life, from ashes to beauty.

Pointers along the way #790

Going on with Jesus

Many people go to Jesus seeking answers to their prayer, and when they get healed or their problems get resolved, some of them follow Him by joining churches, Bible studies and prayer meetings. This is good, because the miracles they have experienced have revealed to them who He is. But the biggest reason Jesus came was not to help us with our problems on earth but to save us from our sins (Mt.1:21), meaning not just to forgive us our sins but also to deliver us from our sinful ways and to transform us into the life of Christ (Jn.8:36). The hope is that those who get to know Jesus will learn more from Him and get to experience all of this salvation that He has come to give them.

But, sad to say, many think of Jesus only in terms of meeting their needs here on earth. When they hear about the life to come they seem to think only that Jesus has assured them a happy place in heaven. They don't know God's full salvation and so they are not pursuing after a life of victory over sin and becoming like Jesus in daily life. What many preachers proclaim is only a blessing on earth, and the 'abundant life' Jesus proclaimed (Jn.10:10) is taught as living 'the good life' on earth. When we look around we see different churches whose focus is only to proclaim healing, deliverance and provisions for the earthly life.

So we see people who have become 'believers' in Jesus continue to live in defeat – to anger, lust, worry, bitterness, unforgiving others, love of money, jealousy, greed, covetousness, complaining, discontentment, justifying themselves, blaming others, etc. They continue in this way thinking that they can confess their sins and receive forgiveness! They have not even understood that Jesus came to give them much more – a truly abundant life.

Jesus said that if we habitually committed sin we were actually slaves under the power of sin (Jn.8:34). He has come to set us free (v.36).

If there is no such desire within us to be set free from the power of sin, the chances are that we are not really born again. One of the marks of those who are born again and have become children of God is that they have received a new heart from God and God's laws are being written into their heart and mind (Eze.36:26,27).

If this is not so and all we look for is a 'good life' here, we are not born again and we have probably presumed on it.

In the case of those who came to Jesus for their earthly needs, once they get to know Jesus they need to go on to knowing Him in relation to every part of their life, yielding their whole life to Him and making Him their Saviour and Lord. Otherwise they will deceive themselves and miss out on what God has made ready for them.

For others who have come to know Jesus as their Saviour we need to see if we have drifted away from Him after getting drawn after the attractions of this world or getting occupied with the troubles of this earth. Backsliding is very easy. We too mustn't miss out on God's promises.

Pointers along the way #791

Sheltering under excuses

There are many promises God has given, some to specific people under special circumstances and some to all His children. There are verses in the Bible that look like promises but we can understand from the context and from looking at other parts of the Bible that they are really not promises at all. For example, "Train up a child in the way he should go, Even when he is old he will not depart from it" (Pr.22:6) is not a promise but an exhortation for us to take parenting seriously. If we look around we can see children who have been brought up by godly parents going astray afterwards.

What happens when someone comes across "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household" (Ac.16:31)? Some people take this as a promise and assume that their children are guaranteed to be saved because they, the parents, have believed in Jesus. But then, without sharing the Gospel with the children and leading them to salvation, teaching them to pray and read and obey the Bible, and guiding them from early childhood to make the right decisions, many of these children become, at best, lukewarm nominal Christians. The Bible teaches us that salvation is not family-wise (or church-wise) but an individual experience.

In my middle thirties I heard one man saying the Lord had had told him He would take care of his family as long as he took care of God's family. At that time I thought this was a great promise! I began to occupy myself more with my 'ministry' and have less time for ministry to my family. Later I came to see how foolish this was, neglecting the responsibility for the family which God had entrusted to me while imagining that I was serving God!

When someone dies, many people comfort themselves thinking of some promise God had given them years ago, even when there is no evidence of that promise having made any difference to the person. Can we hold on to the letter of some promise even while we ignore the spirit behind it?

We have this strong evil tendency, to shirk our responsibilities and then to take cover under 'promises' of God. Certainly God has promised to take care of us, but because He has given us certain

responsibilities and also abilities to carry them out, He 'cannot' interfere with our choices. It will be foolish for us to make all kinds of wrong choices and do wrong things and then 'claim' God's promises to cover them.

This tendency is one reason why the false preaching of hyper-grace is attractive to many people. That gives them the impression that since it is 'all by grace' God will work out all things well for them even though they are not doing many things right! It is absolutely true that salvation is by God's undeserved favour towards us (Ep.2:8,9). None of us can be good enough or do good to earn it by works. But can we receive forgiveness if we don't admit our sins and repent, e.g., and then live without obedience (Ro.1:5)? There is a response to grace that God wants from us.

Pointers along the way #792

Conviction of sin

If we go to a doctor to get cured of illness, the first thing we need is an admission that we are ill and we need healing. Just knowing a doctor and putting him in our 'contact list' doesn't do anything to cure our illness. Yet that is what many seem to expect when they go to Jesus and ask Him to be their Saviour. There is no recognition of their sins and sinfulness, no feeling bad realising that they deserve the punishment of hell for their sins, no wanting to get free from sin or admitting that they are unable to free themselves from the power of sin. Yet these people assume that their sins have been forgiven, and continue to live in the same old way, banking on the forgiveness that they think is theirs.

Many of those who have become aware of their sinfulness have been taught that all their sins – including future sins – have already been forgiven and so they train themselves to avoid all sense of conviction of sin as coming from unbelief or accusation from the Devil, and don't confess their sins to God or people.

Many have been taught that their old life from the flesh has been totally replaced by the life in the Spirit and so their battle has become one of a mental assertion of who they are in Christ and denying the existence of actual battle between the pull of the new man and the dragging of the old man. Their doctrine has become an imaginary shell in which they hide and ignore the reality of lusts and desires.

A simple explanation of reality is this. It is when we repent from our sins and turn to Jesus as our Saviour and Lord that we are born again. When we are born again, God gives us a new heart and begins to write His laws into our heart and mind (Eze.36:25-27). Now we begin to hate sin and no longer want to sin. As a result we crucify our flesh (and keep it there till it dies slowly) (Gal.5:24) and yield to the new man (Ep.4:22-24). To make this happen we need to submit to the Holy Spirit and deny the desires of the flesh (Ro.8:13). This is a lifelong process where the new life in Christ gains more of the territory of our life in practical terms and our old life in the flesh loses power more and more.

Instead of trying to live in an imaginary world of doctrines, we ought to be engaged in this battle against sin, receiving

forgiveness freely as we repent from sin, denying our sinful desires with the power of the Spirit whenever we are tempted, and becoming more and more godly like Jesus as time goes on. A genuine faith that brings us into a relationship with Jesus begins with repentance from sin and continues with an attitude of repentance as we see sin in various forms in our daily life (Lk.24:47).

Let's move from a world of emotional excitement of listening to fancy doctrines, forceful preaching and moving choruses to come to reality. Read the whole Bible instead of just the teachings of your favourite preacher and see that God's goal is to set us free us from every aspect of sin in a practical sense.

Pointers along the way #793

The kingdom of God

In Romans 14, Paul's emphasis is on how we should be sensitive about stumbling another believer by flaunting our ideas against him. But in the middle of this teaching we find the precious statement, "The kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit" (v.17). The whole Bible centres around the fact that all the problems in the world are due to sin entering into our life and that the Gospel proclaims that Jesus has come to set us free from the hold of sin (Mt.1:21). In the context of this Gospel as proclaimed by Jesus and the apostles, our primary goal must also be to seek for this liberation from sin and to be restored to the original plan of God.

As Jesus said in a parable, the Enemy has come and sown tares in the midst of the preaching of the Gospel. Now a lot of preaching is about how we can come to Jesus for our 'eating and drinking' – representing all our needs for our life on earth! Many preach about health and wealth as the gospel, saying that as sons and daughters of the King we should expect to live it up and enjoy 'the good life'. Salvation from sin has been made to equate forgiveness, leaving out deliverance from the power of sin in our lives. 'Grace' has been hyped up implying that we don't have to do anything from our side except to praise and thank God for what He has given freely to us. There is no mention of repenting from our sins or fearing God lest we should fall into sin again. We can even see that those who proclaim the true Gospel are getting maligned, saying that they don't know the liberty of the children of God and they are living under the law even though grace is available.

But the kingdom of God is about a life that is getting increasingly free from the power of sin – manifesting more and more righteousness, joy and peace in all we do. If this is not actually happening, except perhaps in doctrinal interpretation, we need to see whether we have entered the kingdom at all. It is a matter of our life.

When God brings us into His kingdom His goal is to win us back from the hold of sin in our life and transform us into the image of His Son (Ro.8:29). Everything doesn't go smoothly in our lives, but He promises us that even the challenges we face in life will be

turned around to ultimately cause His plan to work in our life (v.28).

But even in interpreting this passage, people have been misled to look for God causing all things to work for better 'eating and drinking' – all things concerning the earthly life. Even when looking at Mt.6:33 which is the culmination of Jesus trying to tell us not to let our primary focus be on earthly things but on the kingdom of God, people still look at it as if Jesus is promising us to take care of our earthly needs!

Where we stand on this issue shows us whether we have seen and entered the kingdom of God or not (Jn.3:3,5). It's not about our church activities in which we may participate heartily, looking for blessings!

Pointers along the way #794

The gate opens wider

Talking about salvation, Jesus said there was a gate through which to enter and a path to walk in (Mt.7:13,14). They are both so narrow that only a few are going to be saved and the majority are going to miss them! Note that those who finally get destroyed also pass through a gate and walk along a path, possibly assuming that they are safe! Many of them have entered through a gate by a definite act, but sadly it is not the gate that leads to salvation. Jesus described this false gate as a broad gate. So, what we need to make sure for our own life is the gate we enter through is the right one.

It depends on how we read the Bible. If we treat each verse in the Bible as self-sufficient, stand-alone truths we can go wrong many times because actually many verses contain certain truths only partially and in order to understand the truth fully we need to combine them with verses from other parts of the Bible.

"Whoever will call on the name of the Lord will be saved" (Ro.10:13). While this is true, it doesn't mean that all we have to do to be saved is to call on the name of the Lord. This tells us one part of the nature of the Lord who wants all men to be saved (1Ti.2:4). But this alone would tend to make the gate too wide! "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved" (Ac.16:31). While this describes the main ingredient of the response we need to have on our side, this too is 'broad', not mentioning the full aspect of what we need to do. "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). Because one important element is still missing in this statement, this too can make the gate broad by itself.

What is the message that Jesus preached? "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Mt.4:17). This was the same message that John the baptiser came with and which Peter preached on the Day of Pentecost (Mt.3:2;Ac.2:38). This repentance is implied in 'believing in Jesus' because if we know Jesus as One who came to save us from our sins, believing in Him would include our acknowledging ourselves as sinners before Him and believing in as our Saviour from sins. So all the above

verses we quoted above describing the way to be saved must be understood only along with this part of the truth.

The way of salvation is narrow because very few people are willing to see themselves as sinners and to see that they need to repent. If repentance from sin is not a part of salvation that is preached, it makes the gate so very wide that it becomes possible for practically everyone to walk in. Actually many have walked through this gate and assumed that they are now saved!

Did we have any marks showing we have repented when we came to 'believe' in Jesus (Mt.3:8)? These marks include a godly sorrow over our sins and an earnest desire to change our ways (2Co.7:10,11). Do make sure that you enter through the genuine, narrow gate and find true salvation.

Pointers along the way #795

Gifts and calling

Soon after I was born again as a young man, I was with groups that were focussed on evangelism. I learned from them that the main purpose of someone who has come to Christ was to bring others to Him. So I went into it with zeal, witnessing to everyone I met wherever I went, passing out tracts, writing letters to my relatives and friends, etc. At the end of two years, I realised that not one person had come to Christ. I was very disappointed and asked the Lord why there was no fruit in my life. The answer I got was that evangelism was not for me but that it didn't make me any less as a Christian because my calling was something else. Later, as I was getting disillusioned with churches I was attending I thought maybe I should start a church like some others were doing. I started one, but gave it up soon because I realised I was not suited to be a pastor of a church. As time went by I came to realise that my gift was not preaching but one to one counselling and teaching through writing.

If we don't recognise our calling, we will try to follow our own ideas or imitate others. Perhaps we can't avoid this phase because it may be needed for our learning. But it is God who decides what He wants each of us to do, and He gives us spiritual gifts accordingly (1Co.12:11). We won't really succeed if we go any other way.

When people come to face the question of their calling, sometimes they base it on the natural abilities they have from God. A person with a good voice decides that he or she is going to become a singer for God. But sometimes natural abilities are not at all an indication of what God wants us to do. Moses thought that since he was not good at speaking, he couldn't be the leader God wanted (Ex.4:10). Many times God uses spiritual gifts more than natural abilities. Sometimes dependence on our natural abilities can even become a hindrance to the calling He has for us (Is.5:21). Jacob in the Old Testament had to be broken in his physical strength before he learned to submit to God.

The apostle Paul learned that cleverness of mind was not what was going to touch people's lives (1Co.1:17). He depended on the working of the Holy Spirit who alone was able to change those who heard and responded to his message (1Co.2:3-5). Paul was a

brilliant man, but he knew that if he impressed them with his clever words there could not be any lasting work done in the life of people.

Pointers along the way #796

The power of the word?

Do our words have power in themselves to make things happen, for good or bad? That is basically what many people think these days as a result of a wrong doctrine called 'word of faith'.

According to it, if we want something good to happen, we must speak it out by faith and then it will happen. Also, we must be careful to avoid speaking negative things because we will make them happen too. The key word for this teaching is Prov.18:21, "Death and life are in the power of the tongue, And those who love it will eat its fruit." Taken literally, it says that our words have power. But do they?

When God created us, He gave us several abilities with which we can do many things. Anything more than these requires *supernatural* power. God is almighty and He does have supernatural powers. Angels and demons also can do some supernatural things. To speak and make something happen is not a natural ability we have. This is easy to see if we look at all the things people speak, most of which never happens. That proves that our words don't have that kind of natural power.

But the above verse seems to be saying that our words do have power of their own – without any reference to faith or God. So obviously, that verse is not to be taken literally. What it *is* saying is a warning to be careful with our words because they can have serious consequences. If it was referring to some natural power that words have, just imagine what chaos would be resulting from all the words people are actually saying!

If the power was in our words and things happen just because we speak, where is the place of God in this? Think of it. For New Age believers who consider god to be a mere force or essentially the same as us, it's not difficult to believe that words have power. They speak about faith also in a similar way, as if when we have 'faith' we can make things happen. Nowadays people talk of 'activating' our faith through words! Isn't it possible that it is the New Age philosophy mixing with Christian doctrine that has given rise to such wrong beliefs?

Power belongs to God absolutely (Ps.62:11). Without His permission nothing can happen. When He created us in His

image, He has shared some powers with us with which we are able to do many things. But there is a limit to our powers, and beyond that we ought to lean on God entirely. This dependence on God is a part of true faith, and we must know that without Him we can do nothing, by words or faith. When we do speak according to His will, it's He who makes things happen, not our words.

Demons who have certain powers we don't have are also waiting to deceive us into thinking we can be like God (Ge.3:5). We need to be careful also because some people are using demonic powers and we shouldn't think such powers are from God!

Jesus and the apostles have warned us about deception increasing in the last days (Mt.24:11;1Ti.4:1). Let's not be gullible and believe all preachers or think too much of ourselves.

Pointers along the way #797

Serving the King

Somebody invited me to a discussion on how to reach our city for Christ. One man presented a proposal for constructing a church for every kilometre of major roads. Another man suggested that it should be one church for every 1000 people. What shocked me most was, the organisers just encouraged discussion on this without any objection.

Why do we think that God's work can be done by human power and through human wisdom? The above case was actually worse, thinking of churches as buildings and thinking that the important thing was to build them and expect people to just fill them! Others think that our natural abilities are what must be used for the kingdom of God, e.g., if we have a good voice our calling is to sing and bring out DVDs!

The kingdom of God is the work of the Holy Spirit in which He uses people who are yielded to Him. He sometimes makes use of natural talents God has given people, but He works even with those are not gifted and who appear to be unattractive in a natural sense. The apostle Paul was said to have no charismatic or impressive personality or oratory skills (2Co.10:10). But when he depended entirely on the Holy Spirit he was able to impact most of the then known world for Christ! The important thing is to lay ourselves down before the Lord and depend on Him to guide us and work through us in His wisdom and power.

Of course, God sometimes chooses His servants and trains them in natural ways before He entrusts them with spiritual responsibilities. Moses and Daniel had a lot of secular training, and Paul a lot of scriptural knowledge before God began to use them in His work. But in every case God tests us to see if our priorities are right and if we will be faithful in small things, before He can entrust us with spiritual responsibilities (Lk.16:11).

What can one accomplish for God with his own wisdom and strength? Only things that will get destroyed in the fire later (1Co.3:12,13). Paul knew this and he was very careful not to depend on his knowledge or skills when it came to serving God (1Co.2:3-5). How opposite is what many churches do when they

invite the famous, the talented and the successful people of this world to speak to them or work in their committees?

What God is looking for are people who are surrendered to Him (Ro.12:1). What He wants is not our clever ideas or talents but a willingness to do just what He tells us. "Now the most important thing about a servant is that he does just what his master tells him to" (1Co.4:2 TLB). Isn't it good to begin by asking the Lord, "Lord, what do You want me to do?" Whatever it is that He wants us to do, isn't it wise for us to recognise that nothing in God's kingdom can be done without His power, and then to ask Him to supply us with His anointing to serve Him according to His Spirit's power and leading? Isn't it also necessary to cleanse ourselves from every secret desire to seek wealth, honour, position or prominence before people (2Co.7:1)?

Pointers along the way #798

The curse of nominal Christianity

Paul had a great burden for his fellow Israelites who were seeking God with zeal but completely missing Him (Ro.10:1,2). Not realising that they could *never*, however much they tried, manage to become good enough to be accepted by God, they were making the mistake of rejecting His free offer of salvation through Jesus the Christ (v.3). To receive acceptance as a free gift seemed to be foolish in their eyes because they felt that God could not accept anyone who wasn't good (1Co.1:18). When they felt that they were better than others around them they imagined that they would now be acceptable to God (Lk.18:11).

What do those who are born in 'Christian' families think many times? They know the true God, they are in the right religion, they have been baptised, they attend church and read the Bible, etc. They think God couldn't be so unrighteous as to reject them. The Gospel message is for all those in other religions, they think. Isn't this the worst deception of all, to imagine we have been accepted by God when we aren't, in truth? Jesus used the phrase 'twice as much a son of hell' – they are children of hell but they don't realise that because they imagine they are children of God (Mt.23:15)! That is a curse that many in the Christian religion are under!

Jesus said, to paraphrase, that He didn't come for those who thought of themselves as good people but those who realised they were sinners (Mk.2:17). To realise that we are sinners is the first step towards salvation. This happens when we come to see God as holy, righteous and just and how sin looks like in His eyes. When we hear about the judgment of God coming on every sinner – with or without a religious background – then we tremble before Him and realise that we have no hope at all because we are aware of many ways in which we have sinned before God. It is then, and only then, that we 'hear' the Gospel, that Jesus came to save us sinners, that there is free forgiveness available with God and that He will change our lives and help us to stop sinning (1Ti.1:15). We go to God asking for forgiveness and believing that Jesus has already taken the punishment that was due to us.

That is how we are born again, and without it, *no one* can enter the kingdom of God (Jn.3:3).

Jesus came to this world and died in order to save the ungodly (Ro.5:6). That was how God demonstrated before us not only His love but also His righteousness and justice (v.8). Sin had to be punished and there could be no free forgiveness that violated His justice. But Jesus took our punishment so that the love of God could be given freely to us.

We can receive this salvation only if go to Him and acknowledge that we don't deserve it and that we are helpless without it (vv.6,8). This is where nominal Christians fail: they can neither acknowledge that they are undeserving of the love of God nor that they are incapable and helpless when it comes to making themselves to be deserving.

Pointers along the way #799

Answers to prayer

Some messages on prayer are about what we need to do in order to ensure an answer to prayer. In other words, they describe things we can do which will assure us of getting our answer or at least improve our chances of getting what we want. Some people give the impression that if we do these things then God will have no way to refuse us. For example, getting someone to 'agree' with us, getting a lot of people to pray for us, fasting and praying, making a vow to God in return for His answer, praying the whole night, or sowing some 'seed money' are supposed to make sure that we get what we want. If this is true, isn't this the same as forcing God to do what we want? Do you think God is someone who can be forced?

No. This is totally wrong. Is God an inanimate force like electricity which will start working if you make the proper connections? No, He is a living Person who thinks, feels and makes His decisions. He is all powerful, all knowing, all wise, present everywhere and sovereign, and no one can make Him do anything. But the arrangement He has made with us when He created us, and especially after we have become His children, is that we can pray to Him for whatever we want (Jn.14:13). This prayer is not a demand or a claim we make on Him, but a mere request coming from a child to the Father (Php.4:6). As our Father, it is entirely up to Him to decide whether to give it to us or not.

If God were to give us whatever we asked, wouldn't He be a foolish father? Many earthly fathers are foolish like that, and they end up spoiling their children. But our Heavenly Father knows what we really need, even when we don't, and He will grant to us only things that He thinks are good for us. John makes it clear that only when our prayers are according to God's will that we can have the assurance that we will receive an answer (1Jn.5:14,15). Some people try to prove that God answers all our prayers by saying that no is also an answer. But that is just playing with words because when we ask God for something we think He has answered it only when He gives what we have asked for. If He says no, then He is not giving us what we ask for! (If our prayer was to ask for guidance and He answers no, then it *is* an answer.)

So, in order to know what we should pray for, for which we can expect an answer, we need to get to know what kind of a person God is. The more we understand Him and His ways, the better we can know what to pray for. That is why God has given us His word to learn about Him.

Once we understand that God is the one to make the decision, and we know that He loves us dearly and He knows what is best for us, then it becomes easier for us to accept when there is no answer. Our limited minds may not understand the reasons why He has said no, but we can believe that He has our best at heart, and that He is able to turn even the evil that happens to us for our eternal good (Ro.8:28,29). Then we can become more mature in our prayers.

Pointers along the way #800

What is grace?

When religions show us different ways to become pleasing to God and secure our eternity, many from Christian backgrounds also assume similar ideas. They rely on their good behaviour, church attendance, Bible reading, prayer, etc., to gain credits before God. Some boast in keeping the Ten Commandments and think that since they are 'Christians' and aren't committing any serious sins, God can't refuse them admission to heaven. They get angry with those who say that salvation is a gift that cannot be earned.

Grace, as an unmerited favour shown by God towards those who actually deserve punishment in hell, is clearly unreasonable to anyone who thinks. How can He call me a sinner? How can God send 'good' people to hell? How can He ignore all the sacrifices I have made? How can it be right to say that it is by simply believing in Jesus that people can be accepted?

But look at it another way. Is there anyone in the whole world who has never done anything wrong, in deed, word or thought? When God who is holy and without sin looks at all the sins we have done, can He just overlook any of them? Don't we have to honestly admit that we too deserve punishment? So, here is the situation. The whole world deserves punishment and there is nothing anyone can do to earn forgiveness from God. But God is love, and He doesn't want to punish any of us whom He has created. In His love and wisdom, He chose to take all of our punishment on Himself so that we could be spared. That is why Jesus died on the cross, the sinless One bearing the punishment for our sins. That is grace.

This good news of grace is open to everyone. But only those who accept its terms can receive it – anyone who admits that they deserve the punishment of hell for their sins and that it is only because Jesus has died in their place that they can receive forgiveness, receives forgiveness, freely! Those who aren't sorry for their sins and who don't really want to stop sinning can't receive this gift, even though it is free!

Grace has two parts, forgiveness for the sins we have done, and help to overcome temptations in the future (He.4:16; 1Jn.1:9). All who have truly come into grace get help to overcome their sinful

nature in the different situations of life and become more and more godly (Ti.2:11,12).

Grace has been distorted in many ways: since grace is free, everyone will ultimately get saved; since it is a free gift from God, there is nothing we need to do from our part; since we are covered by the righteousness of Christ, God doesn't look at our actual lives; since grace covers all our sins, including the future ones, there is no need to confess our sins; there is no need to deny ourselves when we are tempted, because the Holy Spirit will fight for us; we mustn't listen to any voice that convicts us because there is no condemnation for us; our old nature has been taken away and we have only to rejoice and give thanks, etc.

Have we come to know the true grace of God?

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 1975. They stay in Bangalore, and they have five grown up children and seven grandchildren.

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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 800 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.