



**Pointers
along
the way**



Vol. 9

Jacob Ninan

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ALONG THE WAY
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Devotionals that make you think

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#801 Walking together?

Whether it is in marriage or in a business collaboration, two people will find it very difficult to work out things unless they see things similarly at least on the core issues of goals, strategies and management. That is why the Bible tells us to be careful when it comes to serious relationships (2Co.6:14). "What partnership have righteousness and lawlessness, or what fellowship has light with darkness?" asks God. Let's take a look at these issues that can be critical in a relationship.

All of us have inherited a sinful nature from Adam and Eve when we were born into this world (Ps.51:5). This gave all of us an inborn inclination towards sin. We notice that as soon as babies grow up they start fighting, telling lies, acting selfishly, etc., even if their parents are godly! Later, people become self-seeking, pleasure-seeking, power-seeking, etc. Adam and Eve were thrown out of the Garden of Eden as soon as they sinned and lost their innocence, and the holy God could no longer have fellowship with them. He cannot have fellowship with us too, as long as we are in that natural condition.

But God then made it possible for us to be born again, receiving into our life His Spirit who gives us new desires and a new direction (Ez.36:26). Now we no longer like sin, and we want to be godly. From then onwards we seek to give up our old sinful ways and learn to live the way God wants us to (Ga.2:20).

What will happen if we get into a relationship (marriage, business, etc.) with someone who is not born again? He or she is still in the old sinful nature and cannot think in any other way than in their self-seeking ways. Ethics of society and the laws of the country may keep their excursions bound to some limits, but in their core, they are not seeking to be godly.

If we don't take this factor into considerations, we will be asking for trouble, which may surface only as time goes by. If it is a marriage, it can become truly miserable, and it may even end up in divorce which is

one of the most hurting experiences we can ask for ourselves or the children.

It is in God's love for us and wisdom that He tries to warn us so that we won't get hurt later. But it is a sad thing that many get fooled by looking only at someone's external behaviour and not realising what is lacking in their core. When people 'fall in love' sometimes they say, "This person is actually better than even some of the Christians I know!" Ok, as Christians we struggle with remnants of our old nature and we overcome only to more or less degrees. Some of our failures may be even obvious. But the Holy Spirit is still working in us and we aren't going to remain the same for long! But in the case of unbelievers, they may be able to put on an impressive show just to win someone's heart, but in the long run their core cannot but show itself outwardly too. By then things can be too late!

God's commandments are for our protection and to lead us to the best in every way.

#802 Through suffering

"Through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God" (Ac.14:22). This was how Paul 'strengthened' and 'encouraged' the disciples to continue in the faith. This is the kind of truth that we need to hear today, when many of us are struggling in the midst of different problems in health, finance, relationships, jobs, etc. The Enemy contradicts this by bringing in a false teaching that once we come to Jesus, everything will be fine for us! Preachers become popular by holding promises before the crowds that attract them even though they are based on false interpretations of scripture. Ultimately, many become disillusioned with God who didn't meet their expectations.

Even now, Satan is the ruler of this world (Ep.2:2). Therefore, when we become children of God we struggle against Satan's attacks on us who tries to discourage, misdirect, confuse, deceive and oppress us, with the ultimate aim of destroying us (Jn.10:10). We also suffer from the consequences of our own sins, the sins of others and living in this sin-cursed world. When things go wrong and we are in the midst of trouble, it is only natural that we cry out to our Father. But the confusing thing is that many times trouble does not go away and we are led to question the promises of God and His character itself.

That is why we need to learn to 'endure' – to be able to overcome these pressures that are coming upon us and to just 'stand' without crumbling (Ep.6:11). We overcome 'by faith' (1Jn.5:4). We know that the One we trust in is true, reliable, full of love for us, fully in control of all things, full of wisdom knowing what is good for us at all times. We know that He cares, and that He will ultimately bring out good from everything that happens to us (Ro.8:28).

As long as we try to understand why things are happening, what is going to happen, etc., we come up against our limitations. God has not promised to keep us informed of the details of His plans even though He has confirmed to us that they are entirely for our welfare (Je.29:11). Our job is to trust in Him and wait for Him to do what He thinks is best. Daniel's friends excelled in their faith when they faced death, knowing

that God was able to save them out of the fire but leaving the decision entirely in His hands (Da.3:17,18).

God is interested in watching the choices we make when we are confronted with suffering. We can choose to stand with God even though we continue to suffer, or we can find a way to escape by ignoring God's ways. Remember, we are those who, in the past, have chosen to please ourselves in spite of knowing it would be displeasing to God. Now we are being given the opportunity to choose to stand with Him even if we would suffer.

God holds the control. He knows how much we can handle. If we press on towards faithfulness He will be delighted with us even if we fall here or there. But He knows those who only want to please themselves and enjoy life even when it means leaving God.

#803 Jumping to conclusions!

Sometimes when we see someone doing something, we think we know why he is doing that, based on our knowledge and experience. But perhaps more often than not, we come to see later that we were wrong in our conclusions because there were other factors there that we had not taken into consideration! We thought we had understood the situation very well, but it was humiliating to see later that we missed the mark completely!

Some people conclude therefore that we shouldn't form any opinions at all! They think that was what Jesus meant when He told us not to judge anyone (Mt.7:1). But that is not realistic or practical. We can't help forming opinions in our mind when we observe people. In fact, it is necessary for us to form proper opinions because we need them to guide us when we have to deal with those people later. So, Jesus actually tells us to form opinions, based on true facts, rather than on prejudices or incorrect or incomplete facts (Jn.7:24).

To judge is not the same as forming opinions. It involves condemning someone (Lk.6:37). If, as a result of our opinion we begin to despise someone, that is also a matter of serious pride.

We do need to form correct opinions about people we deal with so that we can know how close we can get to them, how to protect ourselves from getting hurt and also to see how we may be of help to them. Humility teaches us that we don't know or understand many things and that there may be so many things we aren't even aware of. So it is safe for us to keep our opinions as being preliminary or tentative and be on the lookout for more information and understanding. In this way, when we get more information we are also able to change our mind and revise our position.

Recognising and living with the admission that we know only partly is an important key to spiritual maturity. It is the immature ones who are sure of themselves. In this way, an extreme level of self-confidence that is not open to correction is a sure mark of pride. (Psychologically speaking, we also need a healthy level of self-confidence, which, for the

believer, comes from being secure in the knowledge of the love of God for us.)

One of the marks of the spirit of the times is exalting self above others. People always want to save their face in front of others. Then it becomes difficult for us to admit that we made a mistake and accept the blame. But the actual fact of life is that we all do make many mistakes. And so, if we want to be wise, let us take the position that we have to be open to correction. This will exalt us in God's opinion about us (1Pe.5:6). How sad it will be to grow old without learning this, "A poor yet wise lad is better than an old and foolish king who no longer knows how to receive instruction" (Ec.4:13)!

It is by humbling ourselves before God again and again that we become humble – humility becomes a part of our life. God is looking for such people to bless them and to make them a blessing.

#804 John's baptism

When John the baptiser started his ministry he asked people to repent from their sins and get baptised as a mark of their repentance (Mk.1:4). He was insistent that only those who had genuinely repented should get baptised, saying that they should show the marks of repentance in action (Mt.3:7,8).

But the water baptism that Jesus brought was different! This became clear only after He had died and been brought back to life. It was only then that people could truly experience salvation, beginning with the forgiveness of their sins (Ez.36:25), and regeneration in their spirit by the work of the Holy Spirit by which God's laws began to be written into their heart and mind (vv.26,27). In other words, they would be born again (Jn.3:3). It was such people who could then illustrate by water baptism what God had done in their lives – their old life of sin having been put away and their beginning to experience the new life with a desire not to sin but to do the will of God in their life. That is what baptism signifies, by burying the old life in the water and the new person coming out from death to a new life (Ro.6:4). It is clear that only those who have repented from their sins, put their trust in Jesus as their Saviour from sins and then been born again can go through baptism meaningfully.

It is also clear that only immersing a person under water and bringing him out of it can represent this symbolism. But the debate among Christians is not only about the form but about baptising infants versus adults. If we understand the meaning of baptism we can see that it is not about infants versus adults but about baptising only those who have experienced true regeneration through repentance and faith in Jesus.

Many seem to consider getting baptised as one of the steps for getting accepted by God, among reading the Bible, praying, attending church, etc. Then baptism becomes another 'work' to make oneself acceptable to God. No, this is only for those who have already been accepted by grace through faith in Jesus (Ep.2:8).

Thus we ought to know the difference between the baptisms taught by John and Jesus. The apostle Paul was clear about this, so much so that he baptised those who had been baptised with John's baptism 'again' in the name of Jesus after making sure that they had come to trust in Him as their Saviour (Ac.19:3,4). The usual sequence that takes place in salvation is – a person hears the Gospel of Jesus, repents from his sins, puts his trust in Jesus for salvation from sins, gets baptised in water, and then gets baptised with the Holy Spirit (v.6).

It is true that many people in those early days got baptised in the name of Jesus without understanding its meaning or significance. For them it was only a matter of obedience to Jesus (Mt.28:19,20). But now we who have the advantage of having the Bible with us can do things with understanding. Religion follows rituals but a spiritual person can do things meaningfully and rightly.

#805 Who should we listen to?

Jesus was recognised to be the Messiah (the Christ) and the Son of God only by a few people while He was on earth. Even though crowds followed Him around to experience or at least see a miracle from Him, very few people understood Him enough to want to be with Him (Jn.6:26,66). People in His hometown thought they knew Him and His family, and could not figure out how such an ordinary Man had such wisdom or miraculous powers (Mk.6:2,3). They did not realise that here was a Man in whom the fulness of godhead dwelt bodily (Co.2:9). So they rejected Him. But the few disciples who were with Him slowly came to realise that He had words of eternal life (Jn.6:68).

The apostle Paul knew more of the mysteries of God than anybody else living at that time (Ep.3:3,4), but he was not recognised and respected as such a man by most people. His appearance and speech were not impressive (2Co.10:10). Even the believers in the church Paul had started in Corinth did not recognise his real worth. His notoriety of having been a persecutor of the church before he was born again followed him and the Jews pursued him everywhere to silence him.

Who do people like to follow? Impressive personalities, skilful speech, records of achievements, official recognition from religious bodies, miracle working powers, etc. People falsely assume that a man with such qualifications must be speaking from God, especially if he uses quotations from the Bible!

Only those who stand before the council of the Lord are able to bring out God's words for the people (Je.23:18). When they stand before God the first thing that happens is that they see their own filthiness and humble themselves (Is.6:5). Getting to experience deeper cleansing in their own lives and learning God's ways more intimately, they are now in a position to minister God's word to the people. It is only those who walk with integrity, live righteously and speak truth in their heart who can continue to stand before the Lord and hear Him (Ps.15:2). A man who is faithful in secret before the face of God even in little things is the one to whom the Lord will give true riches – a godly life and an

understanding of God's ways (Lk.16:10,11). But, a godly life or soundness of doctrine are not what it takes, sad to say, to pull crowds!

The sad fact is, there are only a few who bring us words from God. We need to take heed who we listen to. We have the responsibility to see if what people tell us are in line with what the word of God says (Ac.17:11). In these days of new doctrines coming up frequently we need to make sure that what we accept is 'sound' and helpful to lead us to a godly life (1Ti.6:3,4). What is the good of any doctrine if it does not help us to overcome our fleshly desires and to live closer to the Lord (Co.2:23)? Impressive speeches may give an appearance of wisdom, but if they do not help us to become more godly in our practical life, haven't we been wasting our time listening to them?

#806 The conviction of faith

How can we be convinced about things that cannot be seen (He.11:1)? Only when we believe they are true. When something is true, the opposite cannot be true also! If something is white, it cannot be black at the same time, even if someone believes it is black. So, our faith must be based on facts. When we say 'facts' we mean they are true. If they are imaginary, we can't call them facts.

Some people try to be very philosophical and say that whatever anyone believes is 'real' for them and others should not interfere with their faith! But if someone believes something is black when it is actually white, he is mistaken! If what he believes is wrong, his so-called faith is not going to do him any good, is it? On the contrary, it will mislead him and he will miss out on the truth that can save him (Jn.8:32). Doesn't it become the duty of those who know the truth to help those who are mistaken so that they too can find the truth?

Another aspect of Christian faith is that faith is not something that describes a state of our mind or a set of beliefs but a trust and confidence in God that causes us to yield our lives to Him and live according to His ways. Those who think it is a state of mind assume they have to somehow make themselves believe certain things and that when that happens, their faith is going to cause things to happen. Those who describe faith as a set of beliefs in their mind imagine that if their beliefs are right, automatically good things will happen to them. Both these groups of people assume that it is their 'faith' that will cause things to happen. But the truth is that it is God who alone can make things happen for us, when we place our trust in Him and not in ourselves.

Even though it may look as if we are trying to split hairs here, actually their implications are very practical! Only the right type of faith will work! If we have the wrong type of faith, we may keep hoping that it will work, but when our life is all over, we will discover that we lost our entire opportunity to know the truth.

There were two occasions when Jesus praised someone's faith, that of a Roman centurion (Mt.8:5-10) and a Gentile woman (Mt.15:22-28) whose daughter needed deliverance. Two common things from both cases are: they had complete confidence in Jesus as a Person with His ability and goodness of heart to do miracles for them, and they were both convinced about their own smallness. So instead of leaning on their own power or their faith they leaned on Jesus. Those were two sides to their conviction: they knew they could not handle their situation and that Jesus could. That is true faith.

A very common mistake nowadays is that people place confidence in their faith (indirectly on themselves) instead of leaning entirely on God. Many don't even give God an option to make any decision on their behalf! They think that if they have enough faith, God is bound up by that faith to give what they want. No. Submit to God!

#807 How do we understand salvation?

The single most important task that Jesus came to earth as a Man was to save us from our sins (Mt.1:21). This salvation includes forgiveness of all the sins we have committed and also our deliverance from our old habit of sinning so that we can be transformed in our nature to become like Jesus. After coming to faith in Jesus and receiving forgiveness, God's goal for us is that we should stop sinning (1Jn.2:1). If we are not moving towards this goal, there is even a chance that we have not really come to know God (1Co.15:34).

What is our approach towards sin after we have been born again? Is it all about receiving forgiveness of sins whenever we sin? In that case, it doesn't occur to us that God wants us to stop sinning! We imagine that God has accepted us and made us His children, and now we are safe because there is forgiveness for us. All we need to do is to confess our sins!

Certainly, God realises that after we are born again we are not going to become sinless and that we might fall into sin. So He has made the provision in His grace for our forgiveness (1Jn.1:9;2:1). But that doesn't mean that we can live like the rest of the world, seeking enjoyment and pleasure, trying to make a name for ourselves, etc. That path will invariably put less focus on stopping sinning. But God's plan for us is that we should stop sinning!

It doesn't mean that 'stopping to sin' will result in our becoming sinless. As long as we are on the earth, we will carry with us parts of our old nature (our flesh) with its sinful desires, and we are going to be tempted through these desires all the time (Ja.1:14,15). No one can assume that he will never fall. There is forgiveness if we fall, but the question is, is our heart bent on not sinning, and every time we are tempted in the different situations of life, are we going to fight against the temptation in order to avoid giving in to sin? Isn't there a big difference between these two ways of living?

The Bible talks much about 'overcomers'. Are these Christians who live more or less like the rest of the people but who bank on forgiveness to

take them to be with God when they die? Obviously not! These overcomers are those who have been paying serious attention to overcoming every temptation they were faced with, whether it concerned their action, speech, thought, motives or intentions (He.4:12). These are the ones who add 'virtue to their faith', not just becoming content with their faith (2Pe.1:5).

Some people seem to think that always trying to 'overcome sin' will be a morbid, monotonous life without any fun. But actually, the more we learn to overcome, the happier we will be, the closer we can get to God, the more insight and wisdom we can have for our daily life, the more useful we can become to other people, and the better off we will be in eternity.

On the other hand, think of the regret we will have in eternity if we have wasted our salvation on earth (Mt.16:26)!

#808 Grace and victory

One teaching that I heard when I was young as a Christian was this. God gives grace to the humble and He opposes the proud (Ja.4:6), if we are under grace sin cannot rule over us (Ro.6:14), and so, if we fall into sin, that means we are proud! Then what we need to do is to humble ourselves before God (Ja.4:10) so that He will be able to give us grace and sin will not rule over us. Simple? No, simplistic.

This is an example of a mechanical interpretation of the Bible. Another common example is to take Is.53:5 to mean that no sickness can affect those who believe in Jesus. What we need to do is to prepare our teachings in such a way that they fit together with all the other parts of the Bible in a cohesive way.

What Ro.6:14 means by being 'under grace' is that we are not under the old covenant where only those who obeyed all the Law could become acceptable to God (meaning nobody!), but under the new covenant of grace where our acceptance is a free gift God gives to us which we can never deserve. It doesn't mean that automatically sin will disappear from our life! In order to get victory when we face temptations, what we need to do is to avoid sin (put that sinful deed to death – Ro.8:13). We can see that this is not entirely up to God, but also to us. We may fail for various reasons – the temptation may take us by surprise, we didn't know what to do, our mind had not become sufficiently opposed to sin, we had indulged in this particular sin for a long time, we were already 'down' in our mind or feelings because of our circumstances, etc. If we don't give up when we fall, we can go to God for forgiveness (1Jn.2:1), ask God for help next time (He.4:16), learn about how to handle such temptations, etc. God will give us victory in an increasing measure.

As someone said, Ro.6:14 should be better understood as, "sin need not have dominion over you," rather than as "sin cannot have dominion over you." This would be in agreement with Ro.8:12 (we are not under obligation to live according to the flesh).

When I didn't know all this, whenever I fell into sin those days it drove me into condemnation, wondering where I had been proud, asking God to show me my pride, wondering if I was really 'under grace' after all, etc. But this was foolish and unnecessary. Now I know that grace is not something I qualify for by being humble and not having even an unconscious element of pride in me! When God accepts us, it is not only that we go to God as sinners (both in deed and also in being), but He also knows that He is dealing with someone who still battles with an old nature with its lustful desires (Ja.1:14). He knows that He is going to have to deal with the sinful nature that we are born with (Ps.51:5)) and even though He calls us saints, He has to deal with ungodly streaks that He finds in us, including the tendency to be proud.

Sanctification is progressive, as we discover our sinfulness, get cleansed and learn how to do better next time.

#809 Imperfect servants of God

Every one of God's servants on earth is imperfect; we know things only in part (1Co.13:9), yet we imagine what we do is right (Pr.21:2), we make many mistakes (Ja.3:2), and even though we think we can see other people's faults clearly, actually we are not able to see our own faults (Mt.7:3). Our bigger problem is, when someone tries to help us by pointing out our mistakes, we reject them and justify ourselves, instead of becoming wiser (Pr.12:15).

Just to take an example, look at Samson who defeated the Philistines and delivered Israel from them. His major fault was that he had a weakness when it came to women. Do we look at his weakness with women and overlook his work for God? That is one possible unbalanced view from our side. Another unbalanced view from Samson's side may have been to look at his victories over the Philistines and overlook his weakness with women. But the overall fact is that he did many great things for God which God recognised by naming him in the list of the heroes of faith in He.11. It is not that God ignored Samson's weakness either.

I think God recognises that all of His servants are going to be imperfect, (because that's the only kind He can get), and He is prepared to accept us with certain limitations. What He looks for is a devotion to Him from all our heart, mind and strength. He disciplines His servants so that we can go on towards perfection (He.12:10).

It is sad if when we receive a correction we reject it right away. There are several reasons why we do it. We may think of the ways God has used us and imagine that it is a sign of God being well-pleased with us. So we may think that all these 'accusations' that are coming are from the Enemy, and reject them. Another reason why we reject correction is because we think the person who is pointing out a mistake has no right to correct us because we are far ahead of him spiritually and in ministry. We can also attribute corrections to the Devil trying to hinder the 'great' work we are doing, or to people who are jealous of our accomplishments!

Paul was able to recognise that he knew only in part and that there was much left to learn yet (1Co.13:9). James was humble enough to admit openly that there was no one who did not make any mistakes (Ja.3:2). Peter who was the chief of the apostles before Paul came along and overshadowed him admitted that there were things Paul wrote which he could not understand (2Pe.3:15,16).

If we want to become wiser, we should be willing to receive correction, irrespective of the standing of those who correct us. The question to ask is not who they are to correct us, but only if what they are saying has some truth in it. Even if some of it is not correct, that does not mean that it is altogether wrong or that they have some ulterior motive in saying it.

The bottom line? None of us knows it all, and we all need to keep learning. Let us be humble in receiving correction and admitting our mistakes.

#810 Condemnation is sometimes good!

"Therefore there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death" (Ro.8:1,2). Why 'therefore'?

Unfortunately, the artificial chapter division makes some people to divide chapter 8 from 7 and assume that chapter 7 describes a kind of life that a Christian leaves behind and comes to the life described in chapter 8! But this 'therefore' makes us go back to the previous passage in Ro.7. To paraphrase vv.21-25, we can say, "I find myself struggling between two laws inside me, one that makes me want to do what is right, and the other that tries to force me to a life of sin. Jesus has set me free, even though this conflict still exists, by giving the upper hand to the law of God." Because we are now able to serve the law of God – the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus – there is no condemnation for us.

Ro.7:25 makes it very clear that the law of sin is still working in our flesh, and what we see in practice is that we fall occasionally due to various reasons. If we do, there is forgiveness which we can receive (1Jn.1:9;2:1), after which we can resume serving the law of God. There is still no condemnation for us.

Now think of two situations. Here is a group of people who have not come into Christ by being born again, but they are externally following Christian religious practices. Obviously, the law of God is not 'in' them, and the law of sin is working in their flesh. What happens if they live according to the flesh and take sin lightly, assuming on forgiveness? Can they still say there is no condemnation?

Another group has those who have come into Christ, but they have not taken their sin seriously, or they have backslidden. In other words, the ruling law in their practical life is the law of sin and they have not subjected themselves to the law of the Spirit. Can they rejoice thinking that there is no condemnation?

Won't it be good for these people if they feel the condemnation and that it causes them to come to the Lord in honesty and humility? Instead, if their leaders are proclaiming to them that there is no condemnation for them, is it not harmful?

How is it with us? Can we say that it is the law of the Spirit that is ruling us? Then we will be able to see the fruit of the Spirit increasing in our life (2Pe.1:8). If so, we can go to that 'therefore' and claim that there is no condemnation for us. Otherwise let us not try to hush the voice of conviction that comes from the Holy Spirit by calling it condemnation! Let us even check ourselves to ensure that we belong to Christ (2Co.13:5). If sin is ruling in our life, that ought to condemn us! Let us not allow preachers to whitewash over the areas we lack in, by quoting verses that do not apply to us (Ez.13:10).

Preachers who claim they are living in Ro.8 and not in 7 any more are not being honest. The two passages are connected.

#811 Power from above

Many people assume they know God because they have accepted many facts about God, without having been born again (Jn.3:3). Mostly, the reason is that they have not been willing to personally acknowledge themselves as sinners in God's eyes. Since Jesus came, first of all, to save us from our sins, if we can't admit we are sinners, we place ourselves outside of the Saviour (Mt.1:21). But among many who have been born again, comparatively few people have been 'baptised in the Holy Spirit'. Since the new birth is by the work of the Holy Spirit in them, and without having the Holy Spirit no one can be a Christian, they think that they already have the Holy Spirit and don't look for any further 'baptism' in the Spirit. But that is another thing Jesus came to do for us (Lk.3:16). This became possible after Jesus died and rose from the dead (Jn.7:39). Then He told the disciples to receive 'power' through the Holy Spirit (Ac.1:8).

Instead of serving God with this 'supernatural' anointing that comes from the Spirit, those who have not received it lean on their natural abilities. Even in reading the Bible, they use their own intelligence for understanding, instead of leaning on the Holy Spirit to reveal His truths to them, which He has inspired into those words. In this way, the cleverer and the more naturally talented people 'shine' in front of others, while those who are poor in spirit and who depend on God 'see' things of the kingdom of God (Mt.5:3).

On the other hand, many claim to have been baptised in the Spirit just to be accepted in such groups, without knowing the power of the Spirit or receiving His spiritual gifts. They make themselves utter sounds that imitate 'tongues' while speaking or praying to impress others. There are also others who go after 'power' so much that they are willing to receive power from even deceiving spirits.

Some Christians notice this excessive stress on emotional and miraculous experiences that lead many people to circumvent the instructions in the Bible, that they prefer to keep a safe distance from

such. But they back off so much that they miss the genuine experience of the Holy Spirit themselves.

We must believe that if we ask our Father for good things, He will not deceive us by giving us imitations or harmful substitutes (Lk.11:11,13). If we are clear that our motive for asking for the Holy Spirit is to receive power to be His witnesses – through a life demonstrating the fruit of the Spirit as well as by serving Him through the use of His divine gifts – we can be sure that God will give us the genuine experience.

For example, the gift of speaking privately to God in a language without understanding the meaning ourselves is something that lifts us up from an ordinary relationship with God to another level of intimacy (1Co.14:2). The gift of prophecy will enable us to tell people what God wants them to hear (v.3), perhaps without even realising we are speaking for God to particular people.

#812 Christianity based on personal opinions?

What is true Christianity based on? That Jesus, the Son of God, died to save us from our sins. When those who realise that they need this salvation repent from their sins and trust in Jesus as their Saviour, they receive forgiveness of their sins and begin to increasingly experience salvation from the power of sin in their lives. This is how it ought to be for every single person who wants to be a Christian, whether they come from inside or outside of a Christian background. In fact, God doesn't take any one into His kingdom any other way (Jn.3:3;10:1).

But what is happening all around the world is that many people think they are coming to Jesus just because they see Him as a Healer, Teacher, King, etc., without going through the path of repentance from sin. In fact, many preachers are proclaiming Jesus nowadays without any reference to sin at all! They seem to think that as long as people come to Jesus that will be all right! But sadly, most of such people who come to Jesus in any other way than as to their Saviour from their sins, remain more or less the same in their lives as before. Some people subsequently get to see Jesus as their Saviour and move forward. But others remain convinced that they are Christians because they have given recognition to Jesus in some way. Some of these people go to Bible colleges and begin afterwards to 'pastor' churches! But we can imagine the condition of people in such churches!

If only people would get back to the Bible! See what it says about Jesus, sin, God's love for us, His hatred for sin, and the plan He has made for saving us. See what is insufficient for our salvation, and what is necessary. We wish we could say, listen to your pastor! That has become very unreliable these days. Go back to the Bible where you can see the truth for yourself.

Many people say with some amount of disdain that they don't waste their time with doctrine but that as long as they believe in Jesus, everything would be ok. But nowadays the situation is that you might be believing in a wrong idea about Jesus or what He said. Such is the large scale permeation of wrong doctrines into Christianity.

How do we know which the truth is when there is so much or misrepresentation all around? Look for the doctrine that leads to godliness (1Tim.6:3). Here 'godliness' refers to a real, godly character seen in practical life – walking as Jesus walked – and not merely religious practices such as a lot of Bible reading, prayer, church attendance, etc. If a doctrine does not lead to overcoming our sinful desires and living in a godly way, that is not very profitable, even if it is useful to some degree. That is why Paul told us to turn away from teachers who bring genealogies, philosophies, etc., that are not really useful for godliness (1Ti.1:4;Co.2:23).

We can see that the time has become short and we cannot waste our lives with frivolities. Right doctrine is needed to lead us to right living.

#813 Enduring in trial

The Book of Revelation is a tough book to understand. It seems that God deliberately wanted to be vague about details while giving plenty of indications about the general direction things would be taking towards the end of this world. Some people try to interpret the book in great detail, for example, trying to identify the Antichrist, only to end up having to cover themselves in shame.

A part of God's intention in doing it this may be to get us ready mentally and spiritually to face difficult times as they come, rather than to satisfy our curiosity over the details. A couple of things we notice are the increase of calamities that will hurt or kill large numbers of people on earth, and the release of many evil spirits to the earth as time draws nearer to the end. Timelines have not been revealed to us. But we can see that people on earth, including God's children, are suffering even now from 'trouble' from these two 'fronts'. This is not the 'great tribulation', because the Antichrist has not been revealed yet, but perhaps we would be right to say that we are going through some level of tribulation right now, and things are likely to become tougher.

Physical trouble is comparatively easy to figure out, though not easy to bear, coming from sickness, natural calamities, accidents, etc. But perhaps what is more difficult to handle may be the attack coming from evil spirits. On one hand, we can notice global level changes that are taking place – gender confusion, blurring of roles of men and women, emphasis on personal rights, disrespect of authority, open immorality, etc. But on a personal level, more people are coming under depression, confusion, anxiety, fears, doubts, suspicion, hopelessness, breakdown of relationship, etc. Christians and Christian families are not exempt from these. In fact, Satan targets us particularly.

What do we do when our own thoughts and feelings trouble us? Do doubts about God and His promises crowd into our mind trying to drive us into hopelessness? We need to run to the Lord – He is our fortress and our shield and we can tell Him we love Him and that we know He loves us (Ps.18:1,2). We look for rest in our mind by holding on to trust

in Him even though we don't understand all that is going on and tough times continue. Hasn't He promised us that He will never leave or forsake us (He.13:5)? We believe He is with us even though we can't see Him or feel His presence. We ask Him for help to escape from the trouble, or if that is not to happen, to endure without giving up our faith or compromising on His values (1Co.10:13; Lk.4:6,7).

When God deals with the young in faith He may protect them with miracles. Now it is part of His training for us to take us through trials in order to give us eternal prizes (Ja.1:2-4). When God permitted Job to be tested by Satan, what he had to do was to endure, without receiving any explanations he was looking for. Now it may be our turn, and endurance is the key!

#814 Man's response to God

Many Christians know God's promise concerning His good plans for us (Je.29:11). What do we then do with this promise? Sit back and expect God to work out everything for us? The man who responds to God in the right way will begin to seek God with all his heart to get to know what God wants him to do and also for wisdom and strength to carry out God's plans (vv.12,13). If he doesn't respond like this, will God's plans work out automatically for him?

Many believers are afraid to 'do' anything from their side because they are very confused about 'works'. They have heard that we cannot be saved by works but only by faith, and so they try to avoid doing anything at all (Ep.2:8,9). But there are two types of works. One work is which many people do in order to qualify themselves for God's acceptance. The other type of works come because they have come to experience salvation; now they want to obey God in everything and bless the others. So, those who have been saved through faith show their 'good works' that proceed from their new heart. If such works are not coming from their lives, then they have to recognise that they have not actually begun to experience salvation (Ja.2:17). Perhaps the faith they think they have is merely an intellectual acceptance of some facts without leading them to repent from their sins before Jesus who alone can save them from their sins.

But another reason could be that we are just following our lazy, selfish way by which we expect others to take care of us while we wait to enjoy the benefits! It would be nice to have God do everything for us, wouldn't it? Perhaps that is how we understood grace?

A genuine conversion that leads us to be born again will have a deep sorrow over the fact that we have committed so many sins against God who created us. It's then that we are happy to hear the good news that God has prepared forgiveness for us. Then when we receive that forgiveness and also find that God has given us a new heart that hates to sin, we will turn with our whole heart towards stopping sinning and following our Saviour all the way (2Co.5:14,15). Ok, we may fail here

and there, because we are new to this kind of life and we have much to learn. But our heart will be set towards doing God's will and glorifying His name (Mt.6:9,10).

Because we are so excited about realising how much God loves us and has done for us, we become eager to tell others about it. The experience of His compassion towards us will also lead us to express the same compassion to others around us in many different ways. That becomes our 'ministry'.

How sad it is to see that for many people, religious practices such as wearing certain types of dress or following certain rituals are the prime features of what they consider as their 'spirituality'! But true conversion is in our heart, where there come a 180 degree turn in our attitude towards sin, and revolutionary changes in our attitude towards God and other people.

#815 Offended with God?

John the baptiser had a great role in history, as the forerunner for Jesus, the voice in the wilderness proclaiming the arrival of the Messiah, as a witness certifying that this was indeed the Son of God come to save His people from their sins. He said that he recognised Jesus as the Son of God when he saw the Holy Spirit coming upon Jesus after He was baptised (Jn.1:31-34). John knew that he himself was not the one who was significant but that his role was only to point out Jesus. He was content to be that, and he was fine when the focus of the people shifted from him to Jesus.

But then he was put in jail because he pointed out to King Herod that it was wrong of him to take his brother's wife for himself. This caused a great upheaval in his mind, making him to question things about God's relationship with him. Did he ask God why he was in jail for standing as a prophet for God? Did he have to deal with questions about whether this was a punishment from God for something he had done? Did he wonder why Jesus wasn't rescuing him as He was doing for many others, even raising people from the dead? Altogether, John may have felt confused, alone and left aside by God. So he sent his disciples to ask Jesus whether He was really the Messiah (Lk.7:18,19).

Before we throw a stone at John, let us examine our own life. Have we ever been in a similar situation, and have we ever felt like he did? Have we felt that we have stood for Jesus, proclaimed Him to others, seen and heard about the different miracles He was doing for others, and then wondered where He was when we found ourselves in a difficult situation? Isn't this an unexpectedly common experience?

Jesus' answer to John looks rather strange. He told John not to get offended with Him but to look at all the miracles He was doing for others (Lk.7:22,23)!

Would that be a sufficient answer for us? What the answer boils down to is this: "Look at what I am doing and understand who I am and what kind of a Person I am. That is what you need to know in order to take you safely through everything that happens to you."

We like to always have a good time, and we would like God to ensure that He keeps things trouble-free. But God has better things stored for us which are much more precious than a trouble-free time on earth. Our trouble is only short-term whereas His blessings are eternal (2Co.4:17). And God knows that there are some spiritual riches He can give us only through trial (Ac.14:22).

The other thing is that each of us is special to God who knows that we are all different and have come through different experiences. So He has a custom-made training programme for each one of us. We can't expect that what He has done for someone else is suitable for us. When we see what God is doing for others we can learn more about Him that will increase our faith in Him. He expects this faith to carry us through our peculiar situations without getting offended with Him (Ja.1:2-4).

#816 Overdoing 'humility'

Principles of behaviour have to be understood in context because what is good for one occasion may be totally wrong in another. In the context of following Jesus in order to become like Him, Jesus said that we need to deny ourselves, die to ourselves daily in order to do His will (Lk.9:23). Two wills come in here, that of God and ours. Whenever they are in opposition, we have to deny our own will. We give it up happily because we are getting a better deal by doing God's will. Our will is usually associated with sinful desires, and if we want Jesus to save us from our sins, we need to humble ourselves, put aside our will and do what He tells us. This is 100% right because Jesus is always right and always doing things for our eternal good.

But this doesn't mean that denying ourselves is the all-time path we follow in every area of life. Should we always give in to every person we meet? It doesn't even mean that we should always give in to everyone who has some authority over us. No human being is perfect even when they are anointed by God! We ought to have an attitude of submission towards them, and obey them whenever they want us to do something within their area of authority, even if they are somewhat unreasonable (Ep.6:5;1Pe.2:18). But we don't have to let them lord it over us to the extent of wanting us to go against God's ways or our conscience (Ac.5:29).

If some 'strong' spiritual leaders 'demand' an unquestioning submission to them, beware! A few such leaders can't even tolerate a difference of opinion on their biblical interpretation or ministry. We mustn't think that because they are 'anointed' by God they are to be like God to us. They too are only men and are imperfect in their understanding and knowledge. If we blindly keep submitting to them we won't be able to fulfil God's calling for our own life. It is sad to see people who seem to have thought that 'submission' is the way of humility and have become powerless yes-men having lost their own potential and unique identity.

We see many wives 'submitting' to their husbands even when husbands are abusing them harshly, effectively becoming the platform which supports such abusive behaviour. They don't even want to seek help from others, because they believe it is their duty to just submit always!

Always submitting may look like humility and godliness. But it's not always. Look at how Jesus behaved, taking the form of a servant in order to fulfil the Father's will even in death, and yet not cowering down before Herod, Pilate or the Pharisees (Php.2:6-8). He was thus able to fulfil His purpose in life.

It's not to promote pride or rebellion! It's just that people are all imperfect and that our dealing with different ones must be based on what is godly in that situation. We mustn't follow just one rule – humble yourself. Remember, there is a time to answer a fool and another time not to (Pr.26:4,5). Sometimes we have to disagree with men in order to obey God.

#817 Wisdom from above

Wisdom, or the ability to know the right thing to do in any situation, is something we all need, and something that can be missing in many situations. Many times we realise what we should have done, after we have done something wrong and when we thought over it! We may generally admit our need for wisdom, but it is not usually something that we can receive instantaneously (even though it has happened in rare cases like that of Solomon when he asked God for it). Jesus was anointed with the Spirit of wisdom (Is.11:2). This Spirit of wisdom gives us insight that enables us to see and understand things in different situations that usually escape the notice of many others (Ps.119:99). This is something we need to constantly seek, for more and more of it (Pr.4:7;16:16). We will begin to seek it only when we realise and admit how we lack it! But even then, we ought to be prepared for a lifelong pursuit after wisdom along with regular admission when we make a mistake.

There are some characteristics that stand out in a person who grows in wisdom. One is the fear (reverence, respect) of the Lord (Ps.111:10). It is not just to fear the consequences if we go against His wisdom, but to recognise God as the supreme wise Person and to submit to Him. This is very relevant to understand these days when many Christians seem to pay more attention to what the 'experts' say, even at the cost of overriding what God says in His word. We need to examine ourselves to see what kind of wisdom we are looking for! Ultimately, wisdom should help us to understand what the will of God is in any situation, and then to do it (Ro.12:1,2).

There is a wisdom that is worldly or even demonic that is opposed to the wisdom that comes from God (Jas.3:14,15). James talks about jealousy and selfish ambition in our heart that can block us from receiving wisdom from God. These are just two examples here. The anger of man or any fleshly attitude or desire in our heart can prevent us from getting the wisdom of God (Jas.1:20). In order to grow in true wisdom, we have to make sure that our heart is tuned in a godly

attitude (Jas.3:17). This includes desiring to understand the will of God above everything else and to do it.

Those who pursue after godly wisdom have to be prepared to be isolated from the so-called great people and experts of this world. Satan is who is influencing their mind, seeking to turn them away from God (Ep.6:12). These people may look down upon us, ostracise us and even work to put down our influence on the others. But Jesus has placed us here as the salt and light of the world (Mt.5:13,14). We must not allow the world to beat down our voice.

As the times draw towards the end, darkness will increase over the earth as godly wisdom gets replaced by demonic wisdom in the public places. But the rare ones who exhibit godly insight will become obvious, even though some may fall (Da.11:33,35).

With all our acquiring, let us obtain wisdom (Pr.4:7)!

#818 Leaving it all to God

God does tell us to transfer all our burdens to Him and to stop worrying (1Pe.5:6,7). What do we do after that? Do we carry on as usual, waiting for God to resolve them all? And then get upset with Him when that doesn't happen? That is to misunderstand what God has said. What He was asking us to do in the above passage was that we should stop worrying and trust Him instead. He didn't say, that was all that we had to do!

Imagine a girl asking God to find a husband for her and then thinking that one day Prince Charming will come riding on a white horse! Doesn't she have to start prayerfully considering different prospective candidates that come to her mind? In certain societies she may have to appeal to some marriage agencies to help her out! What this means is that we cannot put aside our responsibility to what we ought to and just put the whole responsibility on God. After having committed our matter before God, we ought to be listening to Him and doing what He tells us to do!

Some of our problems may be due to bad things we have done. In such cases, there are things we need to do to set things right, not merely by getting forgiveness from God, but also by apologising to people and changing our ways for the future. Imagine, instead, praying to God and expecting Him to sort out everything!

A couple who has problems in their marriage asks a man of God to pray for them, assuming that their problems are due to witchcraft or black magic someone is doing, without giving a thought to what they have been doing wrong to each other over time.

God's word tells us what to do in different situations (Ps.119:105). One of the biggest challenges we have is to be willing to face the fact that we have been doing many things wrong. Our tendency is to turn the focus on others or on God. Only humble people can acknowledge that they need to change. 1Pe.5:6,7 tells us to humble ourselves before God, and after having done that to cast our worries on God. If we humble ourselves we will admit that we don't know everything, there is much

we need to learn, and there are many things we need to change from our side. When God points out such things to us, we will be willing to obey Him and make changes in our thinking, speaking and behaviour.

Sadly, many people think that prayer is the only thing they need. Shirking their own responsibilities they think they are depending on God, while neglecting to do what He tells them to do! They continue to be and to do what they have been doing in the past, and expect different results to come out from God. This is a total misunderstanding of God's and our responsibilities. We have done wrong and we are now suffering the consequences, and now we are expecting God to clean up our mess without taking any responsibility ourselves! Many 'popular' preachers are also giving such messages, giving people a false hope that ultimately fails them. There is a reaping (Gal.6:7). Let's learn to humble ourselves.

#819 Misplaced inclusiveness

Jesus died to pay for the sins of the whole world so that anyone who wishes to come to Him is welcome (1Jn.2:2;2Pe.3:9). So, the call of the Gospel is totally inclusive; it is available to everyone from every race, language, culture, social level or history of sin. The blood of Jesus Christ can provide forgiveness from all sin and cleanse all of us who come to Him. Nobody needs to be excluded.

The words of the famous hymn make it clear, "Just as I am, without one plea, But that Thy blood was shed for me, And that Thou bid'st me come to Thee, O Lamb of God, I come! I come!" Anyone who honestly acknowledges his sinful condition can go to Jesus in sincere repentance and receive forgiveness and acceptance freely from God, by grace through faith (Ep.2:8,9). God doesn't demand that we should first change our lives to fit in with His standards and only then we can be accepted. If He had done that, none of us could be accepted!

When we go to God as sinners, He forgives us and accepts us as those robed with the righteousness of Christ (Php.3:9). Then He begins His work of sanctification in us, transforming us little by little to actually become like Christ in the way we live (1Jn.2:6). So, even though we were accepted just as we were, we cannot continue to live just as we used to! No one who has been born again through the work of the Holy Spirit would like to continue to practise sin (1Jn.3:9).

Now, there are those who have come to think they have become Christians without actually seeing themselves as sinners and turning away from their sins. Since no change has actually taken place in their lives, they continue more or less as before. What they need is a true conversion. There are others who had actually come to genuine faith in Christ but who have backslidden because of the attraction of sin (Mt.13:22). They need to become sober and repent (1Co.15:34). It will be great disservice to these groups of people if the church takes an inclusive approach to them!

If we take an inclusive approach in a mistaken understanding of love, towards those who will not admit their sins or repent, we will be out of line with God who looks at them differently. He wants them to realise that they are out of line (1Co.5:11). If we ourselves fall into this category, we need to wake up immediately and not take shelter under a false understanding of God's love.

God gives time for us to turn to Him in repentance (Lk.13:7-9). He waits for the prodigal son to come to his senses. God is extremely patient towards us. But He will not wait forever. In the days of Noah, God gave people a long time to repent, but finally the judgment came (1Pe.3:20). If we came to God in the first place because we were sorry about our sins, certainly we cannot continue in sin now, presuming on the mercy of God. On the other hand, we ought to seek God for help to overcome sin as we come to see it more clearly in our life (He.4:15,16). God surely wants to save us.

#820 So, you don't want to be a Pharisee!

That's great! Jesus was very vocal about the Pharisees to their face (Mt.23), and He warned His disciples to keep away from their wrong doctrines (Mt.16:6,12). The Pharisees were a group of religious Jews who started out with great zeal to keep all the laws of God. Their error was in missing the real intent of the law and focussing instead on the external. Their zeal was seen in their going on to tithe every garden herb they grew while missing out on heart issues like justice, mercy and faithfulness (Mt.23:23). They also devised ways to bypass the spirit of the law by finding clever escape routes. For example, when the law said they should not travel more than a certain distance from their house on the Sabbath, they redefined their house by removing the fences, so that they could consider the town as their home and walk around everywhere!

So, as Christians, we need to learn more and more to keep the laws of God from our heart, and not just externally. Putting this in another way, we need to be careful about keeping all the laws of God from our heart, and becoming pleasing to God because He has loved us and given Himself for us. We must not be happy with just keeping rules of external behaviour.

Isn't it possible that some of us are so scared of becoming a Pharisee that we have begun to think that wanting to keep the law is itself Pharisaical? Do we think that since it was not by keeping the law that we were saved, we should not have to keep the law now?

If we are truly born again Christians, we are no longer under the Old Testament laws which God gave to the people of Israel. But that does not mean that we are under no law at all! Jesus has brought us to a higher law under the new covenant which looks at obedience coming from the heart rather than merely externally. For example, if it was ok as long as we did not commit adultery physically, under the new standards we are not even to look lustfully at someone (Mt.5:27,28). Now we are under the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus which holds us to a higher and inner standard rather than the old laws.

Jesus said that if we loved Him, we would keep His commandments (Jn.14:21). He also said that He came to fulfil the law and that the law would stand in all its detail (Mt.5:17,18). Of course, for us, the laws related to sacrifices, rituals, festivals, etc., that were meant for Israel are not applicable because Jesus has fulfilled them in their true spirit (Co.2:16,17). But that does not mean that spiritual laws that stood behind them have no relevance to us. If we love Jesus, we will be zealous to keep all of His laws. We must not forget what Jesus said that the one who sought to keep even the least of His commandments would be considered great in His kingdom (Mt.5:19).

In trying to avoid being a Pharisee, let us not make a mistake in our approach towards the law. Let us make efforts to see what all God wants us to do and seek to do all of them, whether small or great.

#821 Christians and obedience

"He who believes in the Son has eternal life; but he who does not obey the Son will not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him" (Jn.3:36 NASB). It is not by obeying the law that we receive salvation but through repentance from our sins and placing our trust in Jesus as our Saviour. However, when we come to God like this in all humility and sincerity, God causes us to be born again, and begins to write His laws on our heart and mind (Ez.36:26,27). In other words, our faith in Christ will lead us to obedience to His laws (Ro.1:5). If this obedience is not growing in our life, we have not 'believed' in the proper sense of the term. Unfortunately, much of Christianity has taken away obedience from the life of Christians and over-emphasised 'belief'. The result is that a lot of people are imagining themselves to be Christians when they are not, and a lot of Christians are not able to grow in their relationship with Christ because they are not obedient! Also, anyone who teaches obedience is called out as legalistic or as going back under the law! Reverence for God has been replaced with frivolity and a casual approach.

Jesus said in the sermon on the mount, "Whoever then annuls one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever keeps and teaches them, he shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven" (Mt.5:19). How often do you hear these days that we should keep God's commandments? We only hear about believing and faith! James warned the early church about thinking that a so-called faith that is not accompanied by works of obedience is actually dead (Ja.2:17).

Jesus recognises as those who love Him only those who obey His commandments (Jn.14:21). Our love for Him is shown by the eagerness with which we seek to obey even the smallest of the commandments. Of course, we are not referring to the laws concerning rituals, sacrifices, festivals and other external practices. What we have now is the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus (Ro.8:2). Our obedience comes from our heart, where we increasingly hate the things that God hates and love to

do His will in everything. We learn to be careful not only with what we do and speak, but also with what we think and the attitudes we keep. That is how we show ourselves as children of God.

When we read the Bible, we ought to see what more we need to change in our life in order to obey God, and not merely to store up knowledge. It is through such obedience that we become transformed into the character of Jesus. How sad it is if we focus on ministry, church activities, declarations, etc., while our personal lives are not being transformed! How sad when we don't obey even the things we are able to, but wait for God's grace to change things while we sit with 'faith'! An enemy has done this.

We need to wake up, and if we have become alert, let us warn others. The time is very short.

#822 To speak as the Father teaches

Jesus had this testimony, "I do nothing on My own initiative, but I speak these things as the Father taught Me" (Jn.8:28). With those of us who speak or write to others about the things of God, how close it is to speak out our own ideas! The clever sayings with which to impress others, or to manipulate the listeners – these are so close to us that we may not even recognise sometimes what is happening. Do we also realise that Satan himself may come in the form of an angel of light and whisper into our mind wrong ideas in a such a way that we think they are true (Mt.4:3). This is how we may, unknowingly, originate doctrines of demons (1Ti.4:1). If we look around, we can see that this has happened even in the case of those who have been recognised as 'godly' brothers, who are known for their godly teachings, except that suddenly they come out with a wrong doctrine.

Recognising this possibility is something that should put a fear in our mind and prevent us from glibly coming out with all kinds of new teachings.

But avoiding wrong teachings is not our only goal. O to be able to hear from God and bring out His teachings to His people at the right time! We are all fallible people and we all make mistakes. But can't it be the longing of our heart never to do or speak anything on our own initiative and to speak or write only things that come from the Father? That is to speak prophetically! "One who prophesies speaks to men for edification and exhortation and consolation" (1Co.14:3). This is not to impress others or to make a name for ourselves but simply for the benefit of the listeners! Sometimes, the word that is needed is for correction, which may make us unpopular. But that is what the Father wants us to share.

Those who share the word of God are like watchmen whom God appoints. The responsibility God gives to such people is, "When I say to the wicked, 'You will surely die,' and you do not warn him or speak out to warn the wicked from his wicked way that he may live, that wicked man shall die in his iniquity, but his blood I will require at your hand" (Ez.3:18). At the same time, to have the privilege of being entrusted by

God to share His provisions with others is too precious to be taken lightly. "And the Lord said, 'Who then is the faithful and sensible steward, whom his master will put in charge of his servants, to give them their rations at the proper time?' Blessed is that slave whom his master finds so doing when he comes. Truly I say to you that he will put him in charge of all his possessions" (Lk.12:42-44).

It is not just about speaking or writing. Jesus gave the perfect example of doing nothing on His own initiative. We don't become like that overnight but we can grow towards it if we set our mind on it. Can't we set that as our goal and work towards it, not giving up even when we slip up? I am reminded again and again of what someone said as a motto, "To bless, and not to impress!"

#823 The illusion of religion

The old covenant was only a shadow of things to come, and when the right time came, Jesus established the new covenant which provided the substance that cast the shadow (Co.2:16,17). The old covenant religion was centred around the tabernacle with its outer court, holy place and most holy place, indicating levels of holiness that were required to approach God. But in the new covenant, our body is the tabernacle where God dwells (1Co.6:19)! Holiness is to be within our body, where, not what we eat or drink, but our thoughts, attitudes and motives are what determine the state of our holiness (Mt.15:19,20). Our spirituality has to do with heart and mind and not the religious things we do externally.

Following religion on the outside misleads us, making us think that all is fine between us and God as long as we do those rituals. We can carry out Christian festivals with great pomp and show and even meticulous attention to details, but we may not be holy inside us at all. People imagine that they have become acceptable to God through their regular church attendance, Bible reading, family prayer, etc., which can all be done with religious fervour but without any inner connection with God. Even many who truly know God mix religion with spirituality, which actually spoils their spirituality.

No one could excel the Pharisees when it came to keeping of rituals and ceremonies. They tithed even their garden produce and had Bible verses strapped on their forehead and chest. They kept aloof from sinners and made a fanfare of their public prayers. But Jesus pointed out that with all this religiosity, they missed inner holiness and inner virtues (Mt.23:23).

Just think of it! What is the use of strict adherence to religious practices if inside our mind we are full of hatred, bitterness, unforgiving attitudes, impurity, complaints, etc.? What has all that religion ultimately done for us? Generally speaking, religious practices give a sense that people who follow them are doing what they need in terms of religious duties that will bring them certain blessings. Are we

Christians to be reduced to mere external rituals, while our inner life remains just like that of common people?

The more attention we pay to the external practices, the less focus we will have on our inner life, which is what God looks at (1Sa.16:7). Instead of that, why don't we learn to look at what all is going on inside us? Don't we need to keep this temple holy for the Holy Spirit to live in? Don't we need to develop fellowship with God there, and allow Him to teach us His ways, lead us in the way He wants, correct us when we go wrong, and help us partake of His divine nature?

We can see where we stand if we look at what causes us more pain, when we cannot fulfil some external practice or when we find it difficult to forgive someone, just to take an example. Let us not allow ourselves to get deceived and waste our life, but let us seek to become truly spiritual.

#824 Consequences

What if we have been eating all kinds of junk food, and when we have become obese we pray for a miraculous return to normal size? What if we fooled around all the year and prayed that we would pass the exam in first class? What if we spent our money carelessly and prayed that God should miraculously wipe out our debts? Imagine if God answered all such prayers! We will have a world where everyone will be indulging themselves and getting all the consequences removed, encouraging everyone to indulge more!

"Whatever a man sows, this he will also reap" (Ga.6:7). Just like the law of nature that says if we drop something it will fall down, this is a law that God has set for mankind. The more serious the negative consequences our actions can produce, the more careful we will be to avoid such actions. Isn't this law good? When we are young, we don't have much first hand knowledge of how this law works, and so we imagine that 'nothing will happen' whatever we do! But the older we grow, we experience more and more of the consequences of the wrong choices we make, and we wish we had never made those choices. On some rare occasions God may miraculously wipe off the consequences in answer to our prayer. But what happens more often is that God allows us to face consequences that will teach us and others who see us to make to make wiser choices. We can't blame God for not answering our prayers in this context, because He is wise in letting us reap what we have sown.

We can begin to learn many precious things from God when we begin to acknowledge all our sins, mistakes and folly before Him, instead of blaming our parents, circumstances and other people. It may be that we have spent all our life blaming others that we find it extremely difficult to take any blame on ourselves. But God's word is very clear that we have all sinned (Ro.3:23). The first thing God wants from us is to acknowledge our sins (Je.3:13). Don't be taken up with thinking of what others have done to us, even though that may be very tempting. We

have to give an account only of ourselves to God (Ro.14:12). Leave the others to do that themselves.

However we may have messed up in the past, our future will be better if we have learnt our lessons from the past. Even if some of the consequences may never leave us on earth, we can make our life in heaven much better if we learn our lessons and change our attitudes and behaviour here.

How necessary for parents to teach their young children that there would be bad consequences for bad behaviour. That is what will prepare them for the future and save them from much harm. How foolish it is to protect them with a foolish understanding of love and keep overlooking their mistakes or covering up for them!

"Therefore humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you at the proper time" (1Pe.5:6). In our context, this humbling means to acknowledge how foolish and wrong we have been, and to change ourselves now.

#825 Excuses

Imagine going to a doctor and telling him our symptoms except that we hide what is embarrassing! Are we going to get healed? It is one thing when someone does this with other people because of the shame. But it is quite another thing if we try to hide things before God! Especially when He knows everything about us without our telling Him (He.4:13)!

Forgiveness of our sins is the basic condition that enables us to have a relationship with God. Without our sins being taken out of the way, no one can even stand before Him (Is.59:1,2). How can we ask God to forgive us if we won't acknowledge our sins before Him? This acknowledgement means that we take full responsibility for what we have done, admitting our guilt and taking the blame. But from the time of Adam and Eve, the immediate tendency of us human beings is to find some excuse for what we have done, by transferring the blame to others, our circumstances or God. When we do that, do we realise that we are not giving God an opportunity to forgive us? If we don't tell Him what we did wrong, what do we expect forgiveness for? A general, broad confession saying, "Please forgive all my sins," is not going to work, because God's forgiveness is not just a matter of ignoring our sins or overlooking them, but applying the blood of Jesus Christ over our transgression.

Some people blame their parents for the way they are. It may be true that some mistakes our parents made have affected us adversely. But, if we do wrong now, it is we who are responsible for our deeds, not our parents. Some others may blame some traumatic experience though which others have pushed them. It is many times true that such experiences affect our thinking and attitudes in a wrong way. But, instead of continuing to hold wrong attitudes and behave wrongly, isn't it our responsibility to get over such experiences and learn good ways of thinking and behaviour now?

The man who received just one talent compared himself to the others who had received more, and decided not to do anything at all with his talent. Can we not blame God for the way He has made us, with some

limitations compared to some other people, the circumstances in which we grew up, the opportunities we did not get, etc.? Aren't we going to be held responsible if we don't even use the abilities and the opportunities that we have been given? God is not going to demand from us what He expects from others. That was the wrong assumption this one talent man had made against his master (Mt.25:24).

We need to realise that whenever we make an excuse for our sins or our lack of performance, we are actually tying ourselves down from going forward with our life. When we don't confess our sins, we keep our sins from being forgiven, and we continue to have a distance between us and God. Whenever we blame God or circumstances we end up not doing even the things we can do. "He who watches the wind will not sow and he who looks at the clouds will not reap" (Ec.11:4).

#826 Tied to the past

Once in a while we come across people who are worked up in their mind about what they feel was some great injustice done to them years ago. They are still negotiating with the others who were involved, trying to point out where those people were wrong, and how they were right. Since time has flown, most people don't even remember the details, except these who have been chewing the cud over the years and claim to remember every detail. They aren't giving up, till they prove that the others were wrong. Imagine a few things that were not done 'properly' at a wedding, and decades later, the couple is still fighting about how those things should have been done! This makes them lose their sleep, and it also affects ongoing relationships, their performance at work, etc.

It is totally unrealistic if we imagine that all wrong things can be set right here on earth. We ought to do whatever we can to set them right (Ro.12:18). But obviously, there are many things that are outside our domain; we can't change other people, and we can't always make them do what we want. This is the reason God tells us to forgive those who have done wrong to us and to bear with the weaknesses of others (Ep.4:32;Ro.15:1). Our forgiving others does not erase their wrongs before God, and they have to deal with God themselves. But when we forgive others, it frees us from anger, bitterness, vengeance, etc. Can we see now that if we are upset with others, it hurts us by taking away our peace and joy, and filling us instead with bitterness and thoughts of revenge? For all we know, those who have hurt us are going around happily, perhaps not even aware that they have done anything wrong!

This is the devil's trick. He tempts someone to do wrong to us, and when that person does it, the devil keeps us bound to our bitterness. The devil got two birds with one stone! We foolishly imagine that it was not we who did something wrong but what the other person did was so unjust, and that this gives us a valid reason to be upset with them! Valid or not, it certainly robs us of our joy and it ruins our present and our future too!

Forgiving others is to let go! In the parable of the king and two servants in Mt.18, the first servant who was forgiven much by the king, could not forgive another servant. He seized that servant and began to choke him. Isn't that what we do figuratively when we refuse to forgive another person and let go?

We receive forgiveness from God for our sins, not because we deserve it, but because God shows us grace – unmerited favour. If we refuse to forgive someone because we think he doesn't deserve it, aren't we showing double standards? That is why Jesus warns that we risk losing our forgiveness too (Mt.18:35).

We would like everyone to be perfect in their dealings with us, but we are not perfect ourselves! All of us do many things wrong. That is why we cannot afford to be unmerciful to the others and impatient with their weaknesses.

#827 Looking through coloured glasses

When God forgives us our sins, He washes us clean and grants us a record that is white as snow (Is.1:18). When He says He will not remember our sins any more, what He means is that He will look at us now as if we had not sinned, and He will not hold our sins against us any more (He.8:12). God cannot forget what we have done, but He will not bring them up to His mind any more. This grace is so amazing that it almost looks fantastic. Now the question is, when we forgive others their sins, how we continue to look at them!

We know our human nature. We have a great tendency when we look at others, to focus on all their past sins and mistakes even to the point of forgetting all the good they may have done. Even if someone has been generally good to us, one mistake they make can so turn the focus of our attention, that from then onwards we look at them as 'bad' people! It is as if we have put on a pair of coloured glasses and we can see everything only in that colour. This is so unfair towards them!

Just think of it, who among us is perfect, without sin? The answer is, none. What if everyone looked at us as wicked people because they could remember what all wrong we have done to them in the past? Even after we have repented from our sins and changed in our behaviour, what if they keep thinking of us only as those who have committed those sins in the past?

God tells us to forgive others just as He has forgiven us, because of our faith in Christ (Ep.4:32). We have not been forgiven because we were good people, but as an unmerited favour from God. When we forgive others, it is not because they deserve it, but as coming from us who have been forgiven as a gift from God. Then, if God does not remember our sins any more, should we not stop thinking of their sins too? We can't forget them, but we need to stop holding their sins against them.

In a practical sense, we can't blindly pretend that they haven't done anything wrong. It is that even though we remember their sins, we seek to look at them as they are now, and not as they used to be in the past.

We ought to allow for their change, and not hold on to the same view that we used to have earlier, when they sinned against us. They have moved on, and so should we.

This is not going to be easy in practice, is it? Every time our memory brings up their sins before us, we have to remind ourselves that they have been forgiven already, and turn our attention to how they are now. That is how we want others to look at us. Even when we observe them now, let us be reasonable enough, not to let our past experience with them overshadow our present observation of them.

Every time we recognise that we are viewing someone through coloured glasses, let us take them off. Let us put on colours of mercy and patience towards them, remembering how the Lord is looking at us with compassion and tenderness. That is a part of becoming godly, or becoming like Christ (Co.3:13).

#828 Declaring the whole

When preachers (or writers) consider what they are going to say, now and then they are faced with the question about whether they should avoid touching certain subjects lest they should offend someone. Of course, our messages are not at all to be aimed at hitting out at anyone, hiding behind the pulpit. But are we tempted to hold back something in the message because that is not going to please someone, even though we know it is the truth and ought to be told? What are at stake are our popularity and acceptance, and the desire to be called back!

Jesus proclaimed the truth even to the point of offending the religious leaders and getting killed as a result. The apostle Paul declared that he did not shrink back from declaring the whole purpose of God – "all the counsel of God - KJV" (Ac.20:27). What would be the result if we don't declare the whole truth but keep back certain things that might offend someone? Our listeners cannot then receive the full potential for wholesome development and growth. They may grow up with handicaps in their lives or certain bondages from which they can never be set free. In the process of trying to be 'politically correct', have we damaged lives or held back things that could have helped them?

The point here is about our goal. Are we aiming at our own gain – money, fame, reputation – or are we seeking to bless others? Don't we want to be 'faithful and sensible stewards' whom the Master can trust to give people their 'rations at the proper time' (Lk.12:42)? These 'rations' (their portion of food - ESV) are not just what people like, in terms of taste, but what they need, in terms of nourishment. Again, are we concerned that our hearers or readers grow, or only that we gain in the process?

Paul was not aiming at making an empire or gaining a crowd of followers. His goal was, "We proclaim Him, admonishing every man and teaching every man with all wisdom, so that we may present every man complete in Christ" (Co.1:28). In order to do this, would he speak all the things that people needed to hear, or avoid saying things that would

'hurt the sentiments' of the Jews on one side and the Gentiles on the other?

When God appointed Ezekiel as a watchman for the nation of Israel, He told him to speak whatever word he heard from God (Ez.3:17). He was to tell the people all the messages from God, 'whether they listened or not' (2:7). Was this just a special ministry for Ezekiel, or a standard for everyone who has been entrusted with the responsibility for sharing God's word with people? God clarified to Ezekiel that if he chose not to pass on God's warnings to the people, the blame (God used the word 'blood') would be on his head (3:18).

When we stand faithful to God, some people may leave us or turn against us. But we know this, that in the end, it is the Lord's blessings that we need, and He will stand with us to the end. He will also honour those who honour Him, and not those who despise Him (1Sa.2:30).

#829 Grace is not a cover

Some people seem to have an idea that in the Old Testament there were commandments, but in the new, grace has come to cover us. Whenever we sin, there is free forgiveness, and so all we have to do is to make sure that we confess our sins. Having known the story of the passover lamb whose blood was painted on the doorposts and which protected the people in the house from the angel of death, they find comfort in thinking that the blood of Jesus now covers them, protecting them from God's anger. This is partly true, but unless we look at the big picture, we cannot understand the implications.

The blood of Jesus was shed for the forgiveness of our sins (Ep.1:7). When we come to Jesus repenting from our sins and believing that He died in our place to pay the penalty for our sins, His blood washes away our sins, and God puts away His anger towards our sins. He accepts us as His children, and grants us blessings and privileges.

But grace does not leave us there, where we continue to live as before, excusing ourselves saying we are only human. Grace has delivered us from darkness to light, and now we ought to live as children of light (Ep.5:8;Php.2:15). Grace gives us help for that (He.4:16). This verse tells us that there are two things we can obtain at the throne of grace, mercy and help. Mercy is for forgiveness, and help is for when we are tempted to do wrong. It will be a great tragedy if we don't understand the second part of grace as help in the time of our need to help us to live as children of light. If we don't understand this, we won't believe this, and we won't be looking for it in the situations of life.

There was a time when sin was defined among some Christians as going to the movies, drinking and gambling. No. Sin is everything against the will of God and against His nature. An indicative list of sinful behaviour is given in 1Co.6:9,10. But Jesus pointed out that it is out of a sinful heart that sinful deeds come out (Mt.15:19). He said that it is from anger that murder starts (Mt.5:21,22) and it is from a lustful desire that adultery comes (vv.27,28). Under the old covenant God

expected people only to avoid the external sin. But now God wants to set us free from the root itself. That is why grace came.

"For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all men, instructing us to deny ungodliness and worldly desires and to live sensibly, righteously and godly in the present age" (Ti.2:11,12). Grace gives us help to deny ourselves in order to follow Jesus in His example. That is how we can put away our old way of life and partake of the new life, which is the life of Christ (Ep.4:22-24). This is a much greater grace than just forgiveness of sins. This is our birth right as children of God. This is something we can receive now while we are on earth and while we are being tempted to sin. How sad it is if we satisfy ourselves with mere forgiveness of sins and continue to live a defeated life!

#830 By training or by birth?

I was born in a Christian family, and I was taught to read the Bible, pray, sing songs, etc. I went to Sunday School and the church choir. But it was only when I was 24 that I was born again! Before that, I behaved like a 'Christian' because of the training, and many people could have been fooled, but I did not have a real relationship with God. Without Christ in me, I was not a Christian at all, but I thought I was, and I gave people that impression.

Can some of you relate to Nicodemus, like I can now, who was a Jewish religious leader, but who did not really know God (Jn.3:10)? What he knew about God was only through training, but not in life experience.

At 24, I was aware of my sinful condition, but I tried to tell myself that I was not any worse than other Christians – till I came across some young people who had actually met with Christ and whose lives had been radically changed by this Jesus. Then I realised that I didn't have what they had. But I began to want it. I went and prayed to Jesus, asked Him to forgive me and change my life. That was when I was born again, by the unmerited favour of God (grace) through faith and in a way I could not boast about at all (Ep.2:8,9).

Now, this is one thing that is the heaviest on my mind, that like I used to be, there are crowds of people out there who do not really know Jesus, but who assume they are Christians. Perhaps they are banking on their Christian heritage, training, knowledge or even Bible college degrees, and assuming that they are no worse than any other Christians because they have not fallen into any gross sins. But Jesus has made it absolutely clear that unless we are born again, we will in no way be able to enter the kingdom of God (Jn.3:3).

We are not sinners because we have sinned, and there is no doubt that all of us have sinned. But we sin because we are born sinners (Ps.51:5). Our nature itself is sinful. In a real sense, sin is to live independent of God, living our own lives and doing what pleases us. Before being born again, we inwardly like to please ourselves, even when we know it is

displeasing to God. It is when we are born again that God gives us a new heart that does not want to sin but which is dedicated to pleasing God (Ez.36:26).

When Jesus died He paid the penalty for our sins and made it possible for the righteous God to forgive us. But our salvation is not complete if we are going to continue in our sinful ways and expect God to keep forgiving us. What we also need is a new nature itself. That is what this new birth gives. In one way, it is simple – we have to acknowledge our sins, turn to God's grace and receive forgiveness. The hard part is to be truly sincere and honest about it. This requires a deep repentance on our part (2Co.7:10,11). But when it happens, it makes us a new person; God changes us inside and we are no longer what we used to be. Without this, we are not even Christians, leave alone going to heaven.

#831 The Department of Faith

Most governments have several departments dealing with different subjects, but in some cases there is hardly any interaction among them. They may be acting independently of the others. What if that happened to our department of faith?

This department may be very busy, learning correct doctrines, rejecting heresies and even making a propaganda of its accepted list of beliefs. This is all very well, except if this department has no interdependence with the department of practical affairs! Imagine if our practical life is based on another set of values which are not connected with the faith we profess?

"Fight the good fight of faith; take hold of the eternal life to which you were called, and you made the good confession in the presence of many witnesses" (1Ti.6:12). One major aspect of this fight of faith is to strive to live more and more according to what we believe. In other words, our faith is not to be something we keep as a separate department in our life, while we continue to live like everyone else – doing things that are regarded as great in the eyes of people, which will get us the pleasure, fame or wealth that we are looking for, etc. (Lk.16:15). Has our so-called faith made any real change to our life? If not, that kind of faith is actually dead – without life and which will not give us the result that we hope for (Jas.2:17).

The greater danger is that, while this faith will not produce the result that we hope for, it also deceives us into thinking that everything is fine with us because we have faith! We think, salvation is by faith and so we are on the right track! Jesus warned us against the Pharisaical type of people who would go to great lengths to make disciples. But since they themselves were only legalists and did not have the life of God in them, their disciples too would not have any life. But now these disciples are given to think that they have life, and so they don't even bother to look for life! Jesus called them 'doubly children of hell' (Mt.23:15).

How tragic is this situation! They think they have believed and become children of God, but this belief is only a set of ideas they believe. These ideas have not touched their heart, they have not become convicted realising how sinful they are in the sight of God, there is no repentance from their past sins and their sinful nature, and there is no striving to order their life according to the will of God. Another way to describe them is as those who hear the word but do not obey them (Mt.7:26).

How can we know if we belong to this group? Just see how much of a match there is between what we profess to believe and how we actually live from day to day. Of course, in every case there will be some mismatch. But then ask this question, whether we are fighting this fight of faith, seeking to bring our practical life more and more in line with what we claim to believe.

If we don't see this fight going on in our life, we aren't even born again!

#832 "If My people..."

"And My people who are called by My name humble themselves and pray and seek My face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, will forgive their sin and will heal their land" (2Ch.7:14). This is a famous verse Christians quote when they face a calamity in their land or country. But in most cases no healing takes place, even after large groups of Christians gather together to pray. It is not because God's word is not true or that He does not keep His promises, but we have misunderstood the verse when we lifted it out of context!

This was what King Solomon asked God to do, when he dedicated the Temple he had built in Jerusalem for God. Here God is agreeing to reverse the calamity and heal the land if the people humbled themselves and returned to Him. We must not forget the fact that this 'land' was the country of Israel, God's people. If God was sending this calamity to the land of Israel, it was because Israel had sinned and turned away from God (read chapter 6). The calamity was the punishment from God for their sins, and when they repented from their sins, they would be healed!

Can we now claim this for our countries where we are living, where the people of God are only a small minority? If the people of the country have sinned, neglected God, blasphemed God, worshipped idols, broken all His commandments with disdain, persecuted God's people, etc., and God chooses to reach out to them by sending them warnings, can we humble ourselves and hope that the calamity will pass? Won't we be praying against what God is trying to accomplish?

Calamities are one way God tries to catch people's attention, wake them up from their spiritual sleep and help them to think seriously about their lives. They happen here and there, and now and then, but generally speaking, what we notice is that instead of turning to God, people get angry with God (Re.16:9), or distract themselves from serious thoughts by burying themselves in entertainment or drinks.

Shall we pray more intelligently that God will turn people's hearts to Him in the midst of calamities, and that people will come to the end of themselves with all their cleverness, science and technology, and turn to God instead of boasting in themselves? Shall we use such occasions to share with people about the love that God has for everyone and how He demonstrated it through the cross?

Of course, we too need to humble ourselves if we have not been shining as lights before the world but losing our own taste as salt because of careless living (Mt.5:13,14). Have we taken God for granted and neglected to do His will in our lives? Have we been paying little attention to get to know Him and His ways from His word? Have we even been the reason why God's name is being derided by unbelievers (Ro.2:23,24). It is good to humble ourselves. But let us remember the entire country is not us, and we must pray only along the lines that God is dealing with the country as a whole.

#833 Can I do all things through Christ?

When people say this, is this just an extension of "I can do it, I can do it?" That is the way many people seem to be actually saying it! Does it really work out after they say it? Perhaps it works as a self-addressed pep talk. But it is not a magic formula that works because we say it, even if we are truly born again Christians and 'in Christ'.

"I know how to get along with humble means, and I also know how to live in prosperity; in any and every circumstance I have learned the secret of being filled and going hungry, both of having abundance and suffering need. I can do all things through Him who strengthens me" (Php.3:12,13). Paul is referring here to learning to adjust to differing situations such as plenty and need, and saying that with the grace he receives from Christ he has learnt to be content with both kinds of situations. So we can also learn to take hold of the grace of God and learn to be overcomers. We can then become able to do whatever God wants us to do. Whenever we face our human limitations when we have to do the will of God, we can expect that He is able to give us help so that we can overcome those challenges.

If we are feeling timid when we are asked to give our testimony before a group of people, if we have to stand without compromising when we come under pressure, if we have to live from our side with situations which cannot be changed, if we face personal weaknesses which have held us in bondage for a long time, etc., – yes, the grace of God can make the difference for us. We can become overcomers through the grace of Christ. We can even be more than conquerors – for example, we can not only overcome but become those who can help others also to overcome. To repeat, we can become able to do whatever God wants us to do.

But it is totally out of place to say, "I can do all things in Christ" when we are thinking of doing anything we wish to do for our own personal dreams or plans. Have you noticed how it has become a trend in the world to motivate people to make big dreams for themselves and then to pursue after those dreams? It is fine to help people to get out of their diffidence or lack of motivation. But to use 'Christ' in this way is a total

misunderstanding of who He is. He is not a servant standing by like Aladdin's genie to do our bidding, and neither has He promised to help us with whatever plans we make for ourselves. Sadly, even in much of 'Christian work' it is people who make the plans and then ask God to bless them!

The priority Jesus wants us to have is to aim for lifting up the name of God and doing His will perfectly (Mt.6:9,10). If we make our own plans and ask God to bless us, we don't even understand the way God works with man. It is His prerogative to work in us to tell us what we need to do, and then our response is to work out what He has planned (Php.2:12,13). God is God, and we are only created people who are imperfect and sinful in every way.

#834 The value of faithfulness

"He who is faithful in a very little thing is faithful also in much; and he who is unrighteous in a very little thing is unrighteous also in much. Therefore if you have not been faithful in the use of unrighteous wealth, who will entrust the true riches to you?" (Lk.16:10,11). Faithfulness with money is a test God uses on us to see if we can be trusted with spiritual wealth. Money is what is referred to here as the 'very little thing' and the 'unrighteous wealth', compared to 'much' and 'true riches'. From this we can understand what is more important to God. From our point of view also, it should not be difficult to see what should be more important to us too. Obviously, money is not something we can carry with us to eternity. If we have been running after that all our life, we can see how that has landed us up in many snares, caused us to do unrighteous things, and robbed us of much spiritual wealth we could have gathered in that time (1Ti.6:8,9). What makes people run after money except greed and covetousness? On the other hand, what would lead us to be faithful with money? Being content with what we have.

Just do a little comparison. Imagine a man running after money and managing to accumulate a lot of it. Another man focussed on being faithful in the sight of God. In eternity, the second man will be 'wealthy' while the first man will be 'poor' even if he managed to reach heaven. But think of this also. The second man will be entrusted with spiritual insight and an anointed ministry even here on earth. I am talking about true anointing that touches and changes people's lives, and not something that impresses undiscerning people.

Is it only money we have to be faithful with? What about time that God has given us? In the parable of the 'minas' (Lk.19), ten people were given one mina each. One of them produced ten more, and another five, and they were also rewarded accordingly. Isn't this also a challenge for us to learn to use the time and opportunities that have been entrusted to us wisely and profitably, instead of 'enjoying' life and being lazy?

Many people are careful to ensure that other people have a good opinion about them, and their goal is to somehow impress others. But

what about recognising that it is to God that we have to give an account for every detail of our life (Ro.14:12)? He is One who knows even the thoughts and intentions of our heart (He.4:12). Our task is to be faithful before God (Ge.17:1).

What value will such people have in God's eyes who have learned to be faithful? One day such people will shine with a godly glory (Da.12:3). One day the Lord will acknowledge openly that they are worthy of reward and fit to be entrusted with great responsibilities (Mt.25:21). Isn't it much more profitable to pursue that within the limited time and resources that God has given us, than to go after wealth, pleasure, fame, etc.? Is this God's wakeup call for His people, because the time is short.

#835 Why do people resist God?

Look at the theory of evolution. If we look at it honestly from a scientific point of view, we can see that it is such a ridiculous theory. There are so many contradictions in it, and whenever some serious flaws are pointed out, someone will try to propose a different explanation or rewrite some part of the theory. But look at the passion with which it is being pursued! They will hold on to it as if their life depended on it. This is one way people can keep God out of their mind.

They are afraid to even consider God as an explanation for the world and life, because that will force them to recognise who He is. If they allow themselves to recognise Him, they know they will have to bow down to Him. They will have to give an account of their life to Him. They cannot continue to do whatever they like. This is the real essence of the issue. The real reason for resisting God is not, as atheists claim, a lack of evidence for God, but their unwillingness to submit to God.

And then there are many people who acknowledge God in their mind and words, but they still want to reign as the lord over their own life. They seek God for blessings and perhaps for social acceptance within their circles. They think they have found the best of both worlds, doing whatever they want and also getting blessings and protection from God. They think they can enjoy themselves in this life and also secure a place for them for eternity! Perhaps this is worse than the atheists because the atheists are plainly wrong, but these people are deceiving themselves.

If only these people came to know who God really is and chose to submit to Him! Once anyone comes to know God in the real sense, submitting is the only proper response (Ro.12:1). Then they will find out that submitting to God is not a bondage at all, but the greatest freedom ever (Jn.8:36)! He is the Creator and He knows what is best for us. Instead of making our own plans with the limited knowledge we have – we know too little of life, we don't know what is good for us, we don't know the future – it would be the wisest thing for us to lean on God as our Heavenly Father and let Him direct our paths (Pr.3:5,6). We

can't imagine with our mind the things God has prepared for us until we begin to taste them (1Cor.2:9). The pleasures we can experience when we stay in His presence cannot be explained to an outsider (Ps.16:11).

God says it is a foolish man who thinks there is no God (Ps.14:1). People don't realise how foolish it is to use our limited abilities to understand God and then imagine that whatever opinion we reach must be correct! Some think there is no God, and some make up their own gods with their imaginations, and both of them imagine they are right! They don't seek to know what God has revealed of Himself to man. That is why they are really 'foolish'.

Do we have much time to take such chances with our life? Let us humble ourselves in our own eyes and before God and submit to Him.

#836 The blessing of forgiveness

Forgiveness was great even under the old covenant, where the animal sacrifices could not actually wash away sins but only cover them (Ps.32:1,2). These sacrifices were only an intermediate step till the Lamb of God was sacrificed on the cross for the sins of the whole world (Jn.1:29). But even then, it was a great blessing to get to the place where God would stop imputing sin.

But when we come to the new covenant, we see that whatever God had to do to provide for our salvation got finished when Jesus died on the cross (Jn.19:30). The wrath of God which was due to fall on us because of our many sins was transferred to Jesus when He suffered and died in our place, and shed His blood (Mt.26:28). When our sins were punished with death – when our sins were placed on Jesus as He hung on the cross and then He suffered death on our behalf – the requirements of God's justice were completely met. We receive forgiveness freely, without any penance or self-inflicted punishment, when we repent from our sins and go to God. It is truly an unmerited favour God shows towards us when we identify with Jesus as our sacrificial substitute and

Saviour. God has washed us to become white like snow and there is no more record of sin anywhere to accuse us (Is.1:18;Co.2:14).

When this transaction has been completed between us and God, we can boldly take the assurance that there is now no more condemnation for us (Ro.8:1). The old devil, who is also called the accuser of the brothers, may trouble us again and again reminding us of our sins and making us doubt if our sins have been truly forgiven. But we should only remind ourselves that when we have confessed our sins, God has certainly done His part to forgive us (1Jn.1:9). It is not even necessary that we have to confess every sin that we have ever done to receive forgiveness, because no one can even remember all of them, but to realise that when we go to God acknowledging ourselves as sinners in His sight, He forgives 'all' our sins (v.7).

Another tactic of the devil is to accuse us whenever something bad happens to us, saying that it must be because of some sin in our life. But the fact is, when God accepts us as His children because of our faith in Jesus, His wrath towards our sins has already been totally removed (Ro.5:8,9). That is how complete God's salvation is. God has promised us clearly that once He has forgiven us, He is not going to hold our past sins against us any more (He.8:12). That is the meaning of justification – when the righteousness of Jesus is credited to our account and now in God's books, it is just as if we had never sinned (Ro.5:1).

At the same time, God knows that after we have received this forgiveness we might fall into sin again. That is why He has already made the provision for our confession and forgiveness (1Jn.2:1).

It is when we open ourselves completely before God and know that He has forgiven us, that we get boldness in our mind. That is to walk in the light.

#837 Hypocrites will be exposed

"Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy. But there is nothing covered up that will not be revealed, and hidden that will not be known. Accordingly, whatever you have said in the dark will be heard in the light, and what you have whispered in the inner rooms will be proclaimed upon the housetops" (Lk.12:1-3). Jesus was warning His disciples about hypocrisy saying that one day hidden things would get exposed. The problem with those who live in hypocrisy is that how they behave outside is not who they are in secret inside them. They are hiding sin inside and pretending to be good on the outside. At one point, Jesus called the Pharisees who were hypocrites as tombs that looked impressive on the outside while inside were bones and rotting flesh (Mt.23:27). Another comparison Jesus made was about keeping cups clean outside while inside they were full of self-indulgence (v.25). Jesus was warning people that whatever they tried to hide in this way was going to be exposed one day. However cleverly people may try to cover up their sins and give a false impression to the others, one day every hidden thing will be brought out into the light.

Now we must see another side too. Whatever sins we have committed in our life, however shameful they may have been, when we come to Jesus in true repentance and receive forgiveness, every record in heaven that had noted all those sins is going to be wiped clean and nothing will be left behind that can accuse us (Col.2:13,14). Even if our sins were red like crimson, after God has washed us with the blood of His Son, we will be made white like snow (Is.1:18). Another expression He has used is that He will cast all our sins into the depths of the sea (Mi.7:19). God has also made this great promise that after He has shown us mercy in forgiving us, He will not remember our sins any more (He.8:12). God cannot forget anything because He knows everything. But what He means is that He will not hold those sins against us any more.

Therefore, God is not going to expose anybody's sins once He has forgiven them. But He warns that He will expose everything that

hypocrites have tried to hide.

If God exposes our sins, that would be an indication that we have not been honest and humble before Him. It shows us that we have not been listening to His milder warnings till now, and that it has become necessary for Him to use sterner ways with us with the hope that at least then we would repent. He does not wish to humiliate anyone, and He keeps showing patience while He waits for us to admit our sins and repent. He will expose us only if that is the last resort He has to wake us up from our hypocrisy before His judgment takes over. If that happens, we need to understand that He is still waiting with His mercy for us to see if we would repent. It would be better for us to face the humiliation, humble ourselves and repent, so that we can still use this final chance, and avoid judgment.

#838 Leaning on ourselves?

There is no doubt that Peter loved Jesus sincerely and was willing to obey Him in everything. Peter said he was even willing to lay down his life for Jesus even if everyone else deserted Jesus (Mt.26:33,35). This was why God was able to reveal to Peter the secret that Jesus was indeed the Son of God, the Messiah that Israel was waiting for (16:16,17). But like most people, he did not know the depth of the weakness of our flesh (26:41). So, when the temptation came, he fell miserably. The redeeming point was that when he fell, he wept bitterly in repentance (v.75). He went on to lead the early church as an apostle.

Moses felt that with all his Egyptian learning and princely training he was going to deliver the people of Israel from slavery. He took matters into his own hands and went ahead, only to have to flee from Egypt and spend the next 40 years in a desert looking after sheep. But when he had finally lost all his confidence in himself, God was able to recall him to Egypt to actually be the deliverer.

Jacob may have heard from his mother how God had chosen him over his elder brother Esau to carry on the family lineage. Without knowing God personally, he used his own scheming skills to usurp the birthright from Esau and get the blessing from his father through deceit. But years later he came to see his own helplessness without God, when he heard that Esau was coming towards him with armed men! Finally he learnt to place his entire confidence in God and God was able to bless him.

Joseph was the favorite son of his father, and when God gave him dreams to indicate the call He had on Joseph's life, he did not hesitate to tell his brothers and parents. It took 13 years of slavery and prison life to prepare him with humility, so that when he was exalted in Egypt he was able to deal with his brothers in a kind way (Ps.105:19).

Paul, who used to boast of his Hebrew lineage, theological training and reputation as a Pharisee, had to fall down as a persecutor, blasphemer and an associate with killing, before he could truly bend down before

the lordship of Jesus the Christ. He became willing to count all things apart from Jesus as worthless (Php.3:7).

Have we learnt this lesson in our own life? What is our boasting, if only within our own mind if not before people? Is it our race, colour, looks, family, education, wealth, social status, etc., that makes us think we are special? Have we learnt that without Christ we can do nothing (Jn.15:5)? Without the anointing of the Holy Spirit, we can't touch anyone deeply, or do any work for God, however much knowledge or natural skills we have. God does not want us to think up new ideas and do many things for Him, but to do just what He wants (1Co.4:2 TLB). Have we come to the place of brokenness before God in our own eyes that we cling to God for leading and anointing for His work to be done through us according to His will, by His strength and for His glory (Ro.11:36)?

#839 Applying the truth

Suppose I say, "I am not a racist!" I may be sincere, but it will be only when I start looking at my thoughts and attitudes in different situations that I will be able to see whether it is true. This is an example of how we can have certain positions in our mind about different things and imagine that they are true about us in practice also, without checking to see how things are at the detail level. The problem here is that since we imagine we are all right, we don't take actual steps to cleanse ourselves in our heart and mind (2Cor.7:1).

A similar thing happens if we try to point out someone else's fault. Usually, the immediate reaction is that they are not like that but quite the opposite. That is what they sincerely think about themselves. They are pained that someone should think otherwise. This is our human weakness. We don't know ourselves much. We remember one or two times when we helped someone and think we are not selfish! We are, generally speaking, blind to many actual faults in our life. Because it is painful to look at our faults, we tend to avoid addressing them, or find some justifications for what we do.

If our parents 'always' found fault with us or were never happy with whatever we did, the chances are that we may have developed our own defence mechanisms to protect ourselves from our faults. We don't want to hear about our faults, and we find different ways of avoiding the truth about our faults from entering our mind. One of the results of this kind of attempt is that we make ourselves think that we are the opposite of those faults.

Another thing that happens is that when we hear about how God wants us to live, and we agree that we want to live that way, we begin to think that we have become like that. If we hear about loving our enemies and we really want to do that, we somehow imagine that we love them. But for these truths to become real in our life, we need to 'apply' them in practical situations.

One thing we can do at first is to think about how this truth is to be applied to our life. We think of different situations that we have come across, and see how we have actually behaved. Then we can imagine possible scenarios and see how we would behave. Finally, when we face real situations we try to apply what we have learnt and realise that we have a battle within us – between what we want to do and what our flesh tempts us to do (Ga.5:17). Then we can see if we have become what we wanted to be. e.g., if we are able to love our enemies.

If we don't work out our salvation in this way, it may even be that we remain with a lot of good ideas which have not affected our actual way of life. God is able to see the real us, and people around us can also see where we are failing. So, it will be foolish if we remain defending ourselves and deceiving ourselves. If we continue in this way for a long time, God may even allow us to totally get deceived (2Th.2:10). Let's teach ourselves to be honest.

#840 When God gives up on some

God is extremely patient—longsuffering is the word describing how He waits for people to turn to Him and find salvation. He does not wish that any should perish (2Pe.3:9). But sometimes another part of God's character takes priority and then He is forced to conclude that enough is enough. God's decision about giving the whole of mankind to destruction through the flood in Noah's days is an example (Ge.6:5,6). Another example is when He gave up on most of the people of Israel and decided that they would not enter the Promised Land because of their unbelief and disobedience (Nu.14:22,23). We must not imagine that because we are in the 'age of grace' He will not do that to us. We too are warned against letting in a heart of unbelief that can eventually lead us away from God (He.3:12,13).

Let's think of two possibilities of God giving us up now. The first warning is about those who know God in their heart but choose to dishonour Him—perhaps by neglecting to keep His ways or going after other things as priority in their lives—and then God giving them up (Ro.1:21,24). Another possibility is if we go on doing wrong—even though we know what we are doing is wrong—when He will give us up (He.10:26). It is not that He chooses to give us up from His side, which He has promised never to do (He.13:5). But it would be we who will be forcing Him to take such steps because of the deliberate choices we make.

At the same time we need to look at another side of God too. "A battered reed He will not break off, And a smoldering wick He will not put out, Until He leads justice to victory" (Mt.12:20). These are the people who are trying their best to overcome sin and live lives that are pleasing to God, but are failing because of their weaknesses, limitations or bondages. God knows their heart and shows great mercy and patience towards them—until He leads them to victory.

What makes the difference? The first is a deliberate choice people make even though they know they are doing wrong, and the second is a matter of human inability or limitations of their life circumstances. In

the first case the heart is wicked and deceitful, while in the second case the heart is right even though the flesh is weak (Mt.26:41). This is what we have to watch above all (Pr.4:23). It is very dangerous if we think we are 'under grace' and take it for granted once too much.

When we look at other people, let us learn to look at their heart more than what they are doing on the outside. If we look only at their external behaviour it may be that we totally misunderstand how God looks at them (1Sa.16:7). How can we understand what is going on inside their heart? By looking at the type of fruit that comes out (Mt.7:16). A good heart will bring out good fruit. If we notice such good fruit coming out from their lives, even though at this time some bad fruit are also seen, wait and see if the good fruit become more prominent and the bad fruit less.

#841 Are all things from God?

A girl whose boyfriend had broken off from her came to me for counselling. Her question was why God had allowed her to get heartbroken after leading that boy to her in the first place. Why did she think that it was God who had brought him to her? An assumption that God is the one who causes everything to happen. If such people are asked the question whether it is God who causes evil to happen to them, one common reply is that by permitting such things to happen to them, ultimately He is responsible. This comes from a lack of understanding about how God works with us.

A parallel problem some Christians have is to think that whatever happens to them has a spiritual reason. In this way some Christians imagine that any sickness they have must be because of God's anger towards them, or even because of some ancestor's sin. This was what some disciples of Jesus thought when they saw a man born blind. Jesus told them that (in that case) it was not because of anyone's sin (Jn.9:2,3). (We know that some things can happen because of sin too.)

All things that happen to us are not from God, but many of them are the natural effects of living in this world. We can become sick just like others, face a bully in school, have evil people hurt us, our marriages can go wrong, we can lose a job, die in a natural calamity, etc. If we are children of God, what cannot happen to us because God keeps a watch is that we are tempted beyond our ability (1Co.10:13). Another thing is that even when evil things happen to us, God turns them around to do some spiritual good for us (Ro.8:28,29). God teaches us how to deal with life on earth in a godly way that we become stronger and wiser to be able to handle life's challenges in a better way (Pr.3:5-8).

When God created man in His image, one of His characteristics that He shared with us was sovereignty, in a limited way, as He did with other parts of His nature. This is our free will to decide what we would do. This makes it possible for us even to disobey God and resist His advances towards us. We have misused this freedom in this way and so do others around us. We suffer when we do wrong and also when

others do wrong to us. Of course, our freedom is limited and God keeps a watch over us and protects us from severe harm (Ps.37:24). But He does permit a certain level of trouble to come to us from Satan, evil people and natural causes. Where we go wrong is if we assume that God is the one doing everything that happens to us.

We are the ones who have done all the evil that we have ever done, and we deserve punishment in hell. It is no use trying to justify ourselves, make excuses or put the blame on our parents or others. The sooner we accept our blame, the earlier we can experience salvation. Others who have done evil to us will have to give their accounts to God. Let us stop blaming God, but learn from our mistakes. Let us study the word of God and learn how to live in a godly way in future.

#842 The basis of our standing with God

Practically every religion shows the follower ways to get right with God, through prayers, sacrifices, penance, self-denial, offerings, pilgrimage, etc. There are things the devotee must do in order to find acceptance. When they do them, they think they have attained to or achieved approval from God. But God has revealed through His word that this way is actually impossible for man because no works can atone for our sins. Therefore, He offers us free acceptance through Jesus who has already made atonement for our sins on the cross. When we acknowledge our sins and receive this salvation as a gift, we are accepted before God.

We can understand then that it is not possible to go before God with our own righteousness, but when we receive the righteousness of Christ imputed to us by grace through our faith (Ro.5:17), we are fully accepted before God, and we are given full access to His presence (He.10:19). Our record of sins is taken away and God considers us as being white like snow (Is.1:18).

However, this looks like being too fantastic for us to believe in the daily situations when we encounter the presence of sin in our life—either in our failure in actual sinning or in seeing the sinfulness within our nature (Ro.7:18). Satan also takes much pleasure in accusing us day and night, and we cannot pretend that what he points out in us is not true. Then we find ourselves in a battle trying to choose between standing on what God tells us about the fact that we have already been justified in His sight, and the fact of what we see in our flesh.

The tendency to stand on our own righteousness—thinking at times that we are ok with God because our conscience is clear at the moment—does not leave us quickly. It takes us time to get used to seeing that there is always something imperfect in whatever we do, and learn to give up our attempts to feel acceptable before God on that basis. We need to come to the place where we stop looking for that way of feeling accepted by God, and realise that the only way to find acceptance with God is to receive it by an unmerited favour from God. In a practical

sense, this is a gradual growth in our understanding and faith that does not happen at once when we get converted.

The battle is stronger in the case of people with a certain temperament where there is a natural desire to do everything right—to be perfect—and to imagine that if only they tried harder they might reach that place. Everyone has to come to the place of seeing for himself that if he tried to make himself pleasing to God, he will only fail miserably. We have to learn to give up that idea and lean only the grace of God for acceptance.

When we learn to stand on God's grace, we can stand triumphantly and boldly without condemnation even while we are aware of the presence of sin in our flesh. Even though we fail at times against our wishes, God looks at our heart and sees that we don't want to sin (Ro.7:25;8:1).

#843 The gap between the mind and the body

"For what I am doing, I do not understand; for I am not practicing what I would like to do, but I am doing the very thing I hate" (Ro.7:15). There are two I's the apostle Paul mentions here, one concerning understanding and liking and the other concerning doing. The first I is his mind which agrees with the laws of God and likes to obey them. But he finds his body doing what he does not really want to (v.16). He discovers that his body is doing sin which his mind does not agree with (v.23). This is a lifelong conflict that occurs inside every born-again child of God. Some people try to ignore this reality within themselves and live in a doctrinal bubble that says that chapter seven is describing Paul's life before being born again, and that a true Christian lives only in chapter eight!

One of the many things God does when we are born again is to give us a new heart (Ezek.36:26,27). Now, in our heart and mind, we want to stop sinning. That is what God means when He says that we who were dead in sin now become dead to sin (Ro.6:10,11). But it does not happen that we automatically stop sinning. Our body that has lived so far in sin still continues to follow our old habits of the mind and body. That is why we now have to consciously prevent our body from going on in sin, and make sure that it is yielded to God to do what He wants (v.13).

This 'gap' between our mind and our body explains why we sometimes get shocked to find we have done something wrong even though we had determined not to do it ever again! It also explains when we point out to someone where he is wrong (because we can see his body doing it), he tells us that he is not like that at all! He is looking at his mind which is set on doing the right thing, and he has not yet understood that there is a gap between his mind and the body!

When we do something over and over again, it becomes a habit, and the next time we are faced with a similar situation, we repeat that habitual pattern without even thinking consciously about it. That is how we have accumulated a lot of sinful 'habits' in our life before we were born

again. Now that we are born again, it takes time before new habits are formed that overwrite our old habits. This will happen when we consciously choose to deny ourselves whenever we are tempted to do wrong, and instead do the will of God (Ro.8:13). The Holy Spirit will help us to do this. Obviously, this can take place only to the extent that our mind has become aware of different areas of sin and choose to deny them. That is why spiritual growth takes time and keeps us occupied lifelong.

We can see how much we need to let the light of God shine into our heart and mind through the study of God's word (Ps.119:105). Our mind must also be set strongly against sinning—in our thoughts, intentions, speech or action. This is a battle which we must not relax from time to time, because we may rebuild the patterns we are trying to replace!

#844 God's love and the narrow gate

On one hand, God desires all men to be saved (1Ti.2:4). On the other hand, His way of salvation is such that finally only a few will be saved (Mt.7:13,14). Is this a contradiction? No. But to understand this, we must get to know the proper meaning of salvation from God's point of view.

Sad to say, many people resist God's love towards them, and want nothing to do with His salvation because they want to live their own lives following after pleasure. That explains the crowds that are going on the broad way that leads to destruction. Unfortunately, many people who think they are on their way to heaven are also actually on the same broad way without realising it. They look at salvation as merely receiving forgiveness of sins. So they raise their hands, come forward, say the sinner's prayer or whatever the preacher tells them to do, in order to obtain it. After that, they assume that they are headed for heaven when they die. Then they continue to live like the rest of the world, seeking to make more money, enjoy all the pleasures of this world to the full, make themselves great in front of the others, etc. This is because they have not understood salvation as God has prepared.

When Adam and Eve chose to disobey the clear instruction that God had given them and to obey the Devil instead, they were making a switch from God to the Devil as lord. How the Devil got them to do that was by promising that they would become like God, knowing what to do, and being able to make their own decisions independent of God (Ge.3:5). Their happiness and fulfilment used to be in their relationship with God where they were entirely dependent on Him and submitted to Him. Now when they got disconnected with God, God's offer of salvation to all mankind is to get man to the original way of dependence on God, submitting to Him and doing His will. When we go to Him first as sinners, believing that only the death of Jesus Christ for our sins can allow God to forgive us, He forgives us and justifies us in His eyes. But then He begins to work in us, trying to slowly bring us to the place where we will happily submit to Him and do His will.

But many people only want forgiveness and not submission to God. They want to live their own lives. So, they are also walking on the broad way, but imagining that they are on the narrow way because they 'believe in Jesus'. I am not saying that those who have received forgiveness from God because of their faith in Jesus will not go to heaven. But I am saying that those who do not want to stop sinning and learn to submit to God have not really received forgiveness because they have not actually repented from their sins. Those who repent from their sins do not want to continue in sin any more, and so those who continue in sin have not repented from their sins at all.

When we see the amount of preaching that omits repentance from sin, we can imagine the large number of people who are deceived in this way!

#845 How we see ourselves

We all have an image of ourselves which tends to be somewhat different and usually better than what others think about us based on what they have observed. What God sees in us is the only accurate version and it is also different from our views as well as those of other people about us. Both God and others see in us things we are unable to see by ourselves. Therefore, one of the things we need to deliberately do when we are pursuing after spiritual maturity is to listen to what God and others tell us about us! If we have not developed this deliberate attitude of checking out what we hear from 'outside of us' we may miss many tips that could have helped us along the way. But our almost-spontaneous 'reflex' action to protect ourselves comes in the way many times. When we see that what we hear from others is different from what we think about ourselves, we may think that we know ourselves best and reject what could have helped us. A modern trend is to 'reject' all 'negative' ideas others give us and keep thinking only 'positive' ideas that help us to maintain a positive self-image!

"Iron sharpens iron, So one man sharpens another" (Pr.27:17). This is a God-ordained way of helping all of us through one another. But obviously, this cannot happen if we don't allow ourselves to be sharpened by someone else. We tend to avoid this because it pains to be sharpened when some abrasive surface (read critical comment) rubs against us. We may think that if only the other person would speak more kindly and in a palatable manner we could have accepted it. But that shows that we don't think strongly enough that we need sharpening.

The apostle Paul had great mysteries revealed to him by God, and God had used him to take the Gospel to many places and initiate churches there. Yet what did he think of himself? "For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh; for the willing is present in me, but the doing of the good is not" (Ro.7:18). He considered himself the chief of all sinners (1Ti.1:15). This is ample proof that he was in the habit of examining himself regarding his inner life before God all the time, and

that his self-image was not all about his external accomplishments! Therefore, even though he kept his conscience clear before God all the time, he knew that there were things from his sinful nature that he still needed to be delivered from (Ac.24:16). So he allowed God (and others) to shed light on the hidden faults in his life (1Co.4:4).

When we look at the blueprint for our life, as we behold the glory of the Lord (2Co.3:18), will we not simultaneously see more of our sinful nature from which we need to be saved? So, let's learn to overcome our self-protection mechanisms and make ourselves open to correction. In making ourselves vulnerable in this way, we will find healing. But if we cling to our 'positive' self-image and protect it from scrutiny, how can we start seeking God to help us to become like Jesus?

#846 Clash of ministries

It is inevitable that what we do defines us to some extent, and this is applicable to the ministry each of us has in the body of Christ. So, one is known as a pastor, another as a teacher, another as an administrator, etc. God has placed each of His born-again children as parts in the body of Christ, each to do some particular function in that body. But we tend to forget that "the body is not one member, but many" (1Co.12:14). It is natural for the flesh to think that whatever function we do is more important compared to what someone else is doing! The teacher thinks that no one else bothers about an accurate interpretation of the Bible, and the evangelist thinks that no one else seems to care about perishing souls! But the fact of the matter is that each one of us is important to God. What we need to keep in mind is that if the body of Christ is to do the will of the Head, all of us need to learn to work together with the other members of the body.

What will a pastor do without an administrator? Who will a teacher teach if the evangelist didn't bring in people to the church? If there aren't helpers in the church dealing with many practical things that have to be done in the church, can the preaching or the Bible study alone keep the church going?

"Be subject to one another in the fear of Christ" (Ep.5:21). (Nowadays feminists are misquoting this verse to override the following verse which tells wives to be subject to their husbands (v.22)! V.21 is not saying that husbands should also submit to their wives! What the passage from 5:22 to 6:9 gives are specific examples of submission in different areas.) Let us look at v.21 in the context of the different members of the body of Christ working together.

In this case, submission depends on the task involved, rather than one's rank as in the military, where rank outweighs all other considerations. If we were to follow the military convention, in the church everyone has to do whatever the pastor says even if it is a matter of paying taxes or designing a building! But what we need to do is to recognise who is gifted in different areas and submit to them when it comes to that

function. This may mean a 'higher ranking functionary' like a pastor may need to submit to a plumber in his work, and the plumber to the pastor when it comes to how to manage the spiritual aspects of the church. A pastor or an evangelist may need to submit to a teacher regarding doctrines, and all of them to a prophet who warns them about a deviation the church is taking.

This cannot happen until all of us understand what the Lord wants us to do and our boundaries, and learn to overcome our fleshly desires for prominence, having our own way, and dominating others. Our goal has to be that it is the will of Christ as the Head that needs to be carried out by the body, and that the function that each of us has to carry out is not more important than that. We need to learn how to work together with others.

#847 Walking in the fear of God

Many Christians seem to be confused, thinking that walking under the acceptance of God through grace and walking in the fear of God are mutually exclusive. They think that if God has accepted us as a gift of grace, without demanding any level of qualification from us, there is no more place for fear. Doesn't it say that knowing the love of God towards us casts out the fear of punishment (1Jn.4:18)? Hasn't the wrath of God been taken away from us (Ro.5:9)?

But, having been received freely according to the riches of God's grace, how shall we live now? Just as we please? Let's not forget that even though God has caused us to be born again through the Holy Spirit, we still carry the remains of our old nature (the flesh) with its abundance of sinful desires that still tempt us to please ourselves and sin against God (Jas.1:14)? The Holy Spirit in us is battling against these desires (Ga.5:17). Aren't we the ones who have to choose which side we shall take, with the Holy Spirit or with our flesh?

If we want to walk according to the Spirit and not carry out the desires of the flesh, we need to fear lest we should slip up and fall to the attractions of the flesh. If we pretend that we don't get tempted to yield to the flesh because now we are filled with the Holy Spirit, let us not forget how Jesus Himself was tempted (He.4:15). It is a false belief if we think that when we were baptised in the Holy Spirit, our old nature was destroyed. No, let's remember, we are expected to keep the old nature crucified, not giving it a chance to be fed by our yielding to its desires (Ga.5:24). In order to do this, we need to depend on the power of the Holy Spirit to put to death the deeds our body is tempted to do (Ro.8:13).

If we know how weak we are with regards to sinning because of our flesh, and how dependent we are on the Holy Spirit to strengthen us, we will fear and take care lest we fall (1Co.10:12).

When preachers exalt the glories of the grace of God, let us not forget that we still carry a flesh around with its lusts and passions. When they

point out verses telling us about the glorious position God has brought us into by His grace, let us keep in our mind side by side the many warnings given to us throughout the New Testament. If all that we had to do was to recognise who we are in Christ, which God has appointed for us in His plan, let us not assume that we have already reached there and have already become perfect.

The apostle Paul, even though he was one of the greatest exponents of grace, did not forget the ground on which his feet were still. He saw himself as the chief of sinners, in whose flesh there was nothing good, and he fought his bodily desires knowing that there was a possibility that he himself could be disqualified even after he had believed and proclaimed the gospel of the grace of God (1Co.9:27). We have not reached that level of spirituality, and let's not think we are free from sin!

#848 Walking with God

Do we think that 'walking with God' is an extremely rare privilege given to individuals like Enoch? No, it was what Adam and Eve enjoyed every day before they fell. It was what God designed us for, and it is when we live like that that we find the maximum fulfilment in life. When a child of God calls Him 'Father', he or she has the right to walk into His presence freely, and spend all the time with Him. That was what God asked Abraham to do, to walk before Him and to be perfect (Ge.17:1).

When Adam and Eve chose to disobey God and eat from the tree of knowledge of good and evil, it was not merely a matter of disobedience. It was actually a declaration of independence. That was what the Devil made Eve believe, that if she ate that fruit she could have her own independent knowledge of good and evil, and she could be independent like God, doing what she liked (Ge.3:5). We are her children, born into this world wanting to do our own thing (Ps.51:5). That is the essence of sin – to please ourselves, to do what we like, irrespective of what God tells us.

Salvation is not merely forgiving of our sins, but a restoration to the state where God wanted us to be. It is not that God graciously forgives us our past sins and makes provision for our forgiveness in future whenever we confess our sins. Many people seem to think that way, and continue to live their lives as before without any turning away from sins. But those who have been truly born again and made children of God want to stop sinning and to cleanse themselves from all of the different aspects of their old sinful nature (1Jn.3:3).

Another thing that happens in such people's lives is that they now want to be pleasing to God in everything in their life. They want to know more clearly what God wants them to do in different situations, and make themselves living sacrifices for God (Ro.12:1). All their life revolves around what God wants, and what will bring glory to Him (Mt.6:9,10). Even though they are living in this world like everyone else, their heart is bound to God and in eternity (Col.3:1). That is how they learn to walk with God.

People tend to think that walking with God will be a monotony, always having to read the Bible, pray, etc., and missing all the fun in life. But those who have tasted the life God has prepared for them recognise that it is in His presence that we can enjoy true and lasting pleasure (Ps.16:11). Those pleasures are not only while we are on earth, but also through eternity (1Ti.4:8).

Even so, what really draws us to this life of walking with God is not so much the pleasure we can get but the satisfaction in knowing that we are with God, knowing that we are doing what He wants. We cannot imagine a life that is better than that.

Of course, this is a life we grow into, not something that we get overnight through some great experience. The way to this life involves taking up our cross daily, denying ourselves and following Jesus (Lk.9:23).

#849 Are we obligated to sin?

We know we are born into this world with a sinful nature (Ps.51:5). It is only natural that we sin in many ways as temptations come our way. But then we get born again as we repent from our sins, and place our trust in Jesus as our Saviour and Lord. Then God plants His nature within us like a newborn baby who has to grow up towards God's character in every part of life. But this new nature which is from the Holy Spirit finds opposition from within us from our flesh (Ga.5:17). We have lived according to the flesh following its desires till we were born again, and now we are faced with the choice whether we will live as before or start following the Holy Spirit.

Grace is not just unmerited favour God shows towards us in forgiving sins, but also His help for our practical life (Heb.4:16). God says that with the help the Holy Spirit gives us, we don't have to have sin dominate us as before (Ro.6:14). So, we are no longer under the mastery of sin and we are no longer obligated to live according to our flesh (Ro.8:12). We must not take this to mean as if we will no longer have any problem with sin, because we have to face the temptation to sin every day of our life. We can see that Jesus Himself had to face all the temptations we face now, and overcome (He.4:15). Therefore, it is not going to be an easy 'walkover' for us. Some Christians do not make this distinction between being tempted to sin and being free from the domination of sin over us, and either take sinning as an unavoidable thing in life or pretend as if there is no more sin in their lives.

But the fact is that God has taken away the compulsive force of sin over our life when we were born again. Now He wants us to voluntarily choose every time not to give in to the temptations but to overcome by leaning on the strength of the Holy Spirit (Ro.8:13). On one hand we know that we are not under any compulsion to yield to sin, and on the other hand we must realise that we need to watch and pray at all times not to yield to temptation (Mt.26:41).

It is very common that, even though we may be determined not to yield to sin at any time, we may fall because we have not become strong

enough yet to resist or because we have not yet learned about the different schemes of the devil. God knows this, and therefore He has provided a way for us to get back to Him by confessing our sins and receiving forgiveness (1Jn.1:9). One of the battles at this point is to avoid giving up, and to hold on to the promises of God for our victory.

As we go on, we will discover that just like the layers of an onion, there are deeper layers of sin in our flesh. When we think we have got victory at one level, we find that there are still things we need to deal with which we had not recognised before. When we have victory over our external behaviour we have to deal with our thoughts and attitudes, and then at a deeper level, with our intentions. But God will lead us closer to Him (Php.2:13).

#850 How God uses Satan

A question many people ask is why God doesn't simply destroy Satan and prevent him from doing so much harm. God can do it if He wanted to. He is the one who created Lucifer as an angel, and Lucifer rebelled against God and became Satan. God could have destroyed him at that point. But now Satan and his group of demons try their maximum to deceive and turn people away from God, and also to oppress them. God places restrictions on Satan about how much he can do, as we see from the story of Job. But we must remember that people can give demons access through their carelessness, from where they attack them.

To understand the situation, we have to go back to the way God created man. God created man in His image (Ge.1:27). A part of this image is our 'sovereignty', our free will, that gives us the ability to choose what we want to do. We must understand that it is only because we have this free will that we are able to love, because if love is forced, it cannot be love. But this free will also opens up the possibility that we could choose to do wrong. That was what Adam and Eve did when they disobeyed God. Now, salvation is to bring us back to the place where things can be right between us and God again. Forgiveness of our sins is just the beginning of this salvation. After that we need to learn, or God wants to teach us, how to choose to do His will at all times and then enjoy the blessings He has prepared for us. We can't enjoy God's blessings if, after we have been forgiven, we continue to do what we like. But Jesus has shown us the way of taking up our cross daily, with the intention of dying to self and living for God, denying ourselves and following Jesus (Lk.9:23).

Here is where Satan comes in, to tempt and oppose us when we seek to follow Jesus. He comes to us with deceptive offers as he did with Eve, and in this way, God is able to give us opportunities to choose God. We see that it was the Holy Spirit who led Jesus into the desert to be tempted by Satan for forty days (Mt.4:1). Temptations are necessary for us because it is when we are tempted to choose sin and its pleasures that we can learn to deny ourselves and overcome. That is how we can

partake of the divine nature, to be transformed into the character of God.

But what can happen is not only that we can get deceived by the schemes of Satan and fall into sin, but also that through our carelessness we can allow demons to get control over different areas of our life. God stands by to teach us, and deliver us from our sin and folly, but it is we who have to want that victorious life. God is not going to hand it to us on a plate, but He wants us to long for it, ask for it, and seek for it by denying ourselves and following Jesus. That is how we can experience the deeper cleansing of sin in our life after receiving the forgiveness of our past sins. Many people make the mistake of thinking that God will do everything from His side. No, we do make our choice.

#851 Why pray?

Since God who loves us knows what we need even before we ask Him, wouldn't He automatically give us whatever we need (Mt.6:8)? Then why do we have to pray? Using a similar logic, some people are saying that since the death of Jesus has already paid for all our future sins, we don't have to confess our sins every time! These are single track trains of thought that do not take many other factors into consideration. Real life involves many different factors in many dimensions. We cannot have a balanced understanding of life unless we bring all such factors into consideration. That would involve bringing all the truths in the different parts of the Bible together and not leaning entirely on some verses here and there.

After promising the people of Israel the coming of the new covenant, God said that He would wait for Israel to ask Him to do it for them (Ez.36:37). It was when the children of Israel who had been made slaves in Egypt started crying out for help that God sent Moses to deliver them (Ex.2:23,24). Why would God wait like that?

First of all, we need to come to the place of recognising and acknowledging our need. It is not easy at all to get to that place. We may first try all kinds of ways to manage things by ourselves before we come to see that we need God to help us. So, God waits for us to ask for help before He gives help. As you know, no one can really help those who don't want any help.

Secondly, prayer to God indicates our trust in Him. People who accuse others of having no faith when they do not receive what they have asked of God are totally mistaken, because it is because they have faith that they ask. Those who don't have faith in God will not pray, but will keep on doing everything they can, or keep looking to people for help.

Thirdly, we must not forget the fact that God does not like to violate the free will He has created us with. When we pray to God in our need, that is like inviting Him to intervene in our life and giving Him 'permission' to do so.

When we pray out of our recognition of our utter need for help and our dependence on God, that is when God is in a position to help. But then, if we know God for who He is, we must also be willing for Him to answer our prayers in ways He sees best. He sees the big picture, the entire picture, and knows what is good for us especially in view of eternity. He wants most of all to transform us into the character of His Son and prepare us for eternity. We should remember that many times this can be accomplished only through suffering here on earth. God does not like to see us suffer, but sometimes, just as a painful surgery is what is required to heal a patient, He allows us to go through temporary pain in order to give us an eternal bliss (2Co.4:17). Sometimes He does not give us what we ask for because He knows we have asked in ignorance, not knowing that it is not good for us.

The humbler we become and the better we know our Father, the more we will pray.

#852 Are you being made whole?

"Now I would remind you, brothers, of the gospel I preached to you, which you received, in which you stand, and by which you are being saved, if you hold fast to the word I preached to you---unless you believed in vain" (1Co.15:1,2 ESV). The Greek word used here for 'saved' can mean 'make whole'. This is addressed to us who have already become brothers and sisters in Christ through faith, reminding us that we need to hold fast to the word, if we want to continue to be made whole. Sadly, many preachers give the impression that if we have received forgiveness of our sins from God we are already saved (implying that there is nothing more to be done). Some others teach that we have been already made whole in the eyes of God.

Our destiny is to be seated in the heavenly places with Christ (Ep.2:6). But we are not there yet. Here, when Paul talks about us being in the heavenly places with Christ, he is talking about our position in Christ. We must be realistic enough to recognise and admit that we are still on earth now, being pulled and attracted by the things of this world. We are in this battle to overcome these temptations and make the choice to be pleasing to our Saviour. We should not be living now in a doctrinal bubble that tells us everything is fine with us, when actually we are facing the battle from our own lusts, the pull of the world and satanic deceptions.

We just have to ask ourselves if we are whole already. That would mean we have already become like Christ in every way, and all that is coming out from us is Christ-like! No, we haven't! We have been freely forgiven all our past sins, justified before God, and now we are being sanctified, which means we are being purified more and more, set apart for God more and more. The first step we need to do after we have been made children of God through grace is to realise that after having entered through the narrow gate, now it is the time to walk through the narrow path that leads to life (Mt.7:13,14).

How can we walk along this path? According to what we have quoted from Paul in the beginning, by holding fast to the word he has preached

to us. The word of God is not for just giving us a broad understanding of salvation, but for helping us to take different steps on this path that leads to life. That is why it is called a 'lamp unto my feet' (Ps.119:105). Do we know the word enough to know these steps, or is our knowledge limited to a few verses we have heard from a preacher?

Do we want to be wholly saved, from every bondage in our life and from every un-Christ-like way we think, speak and behave? Then let us study God's word, and listen as God speaks to us personally. Let us also be serious students of the word, knowing how to put together God's truth from different parts of the Bible (2Ti.2:15). Let us be those who faithfully and humbly apply the truths to ourselves, willing to admit where we have been wrong and make changes of direction and practice.

#853 Is this promise for us?

Many Christians have this practice of looking through the Bible for sentences that look like promises and claiming them from God, and getting disappointed when things don't work out. For example, some take what God promised to the people of Israel in a special situation that they had to just stand there and see the salvation of God, to excuse their inaction and irresponsibility to do what God has told them (Ex.14:13). Then other people point out one of the rules of interpreting the Bible that we should examine the context of the verse to ascertain whether it is applicable to us or to someone else in a particular situation.

But then some people apply this rule literally and avoid trusting in some promises of God that are applicable to us. The case in point is Jer.29:11, "For I know the plans that I have for you,' declares the LORD, 'plans for welfare and not for calamity to give you a future and a hope." If we look at the beginning of the chapter we can see that this is addressed to the people of Judah who had been exiled to Babylon by God Himself for their backsliding and idolatry. Once we see this context and identify the people to whom the promise is given, shall we automatically say it does not apply to us?

Judah had sinned and turned away from God, and even after they witnessed what happened to Israel ('her sister'), they had not turned back to God (Ez.23:11). Then God had to go to the extreme step of disowning them and handing them over to a cruel master, Babylon. This promise, given to them in such a situation, shows us the heart of God, His character. We see the same heart revealed in a more general way, as a part of the laws of God in Lev.26. There God warns the people how He would punish them if they disobeyed His commandments. But there is a very revealing sequence here. If one level of punishment did not turn the people back to God, He would raise the level of punishment a notch up, and so on. What comes through is not how strong God's punishment can be, but that in all this harsh punishment He gave them, His hope was that it would make them sit up, take notice, repent and turn back to

Him! That is the heart of God. He does not take any delight in punishing people, but in His love for people He does not give up on them but keeps on hoping they would turn back to Him.

When we see this in this perspective, we can see that this is as applicable to us as His people as it was to Israel and Judah. God's plans for us are for our welfare, and not for our calamity. Even in punishment or chastisement, it is His love that moves Him (He.12:6). His chastisement comes from a heart that is unwilling to see His children suffer, but only because He hopes that at least that will help us to turn back to Him. His plans are for our welfare and future and not for our calamity.

When we read the Bible, let us not approach it as a book of rules but as a means through which we can get to know our Father and His ways better.

#854 Political thinking

When Jesus was rising in popularity among the people, the Jewish rulers became jealous. But without recognising and dealing with this jealousy, they reasoned among themselves that it was going to be detrimental for the country, and so it was better to sacrifice one life than to put the whole country in jeopardy! It appealed to everyone who heard it, except that this was not the real reason behind the plot to kill Jesus.

The Pharisees wanted Jesus to prove that He was their Messiah by doing a miracle. Yet they were not willing to recollect the memory of the hundreds of miracles Jesus had done among the people.

When the chief priest asked Jesus whether He was the Messiah and He replied affirming it, he turned it around as if it was blasphemy. Jesus had His miracles and His blameless life to back His claims, and yet the chief priest turned it around as if Jesus was making a false claim. It was a no-win situation for Jesus.

When Judas returned the thirty pieces of silver which he had received as the price for betraying Jesus, the Jewish rulers could not accept it into the Temple treasury because they said it was 'blood-money'! Remember, they had had no qualms earlier about putting an innocent Man to death for their selfish gain, and now they were being very 'sensitive' about minor aspects of propriety! They wanted to present a picture about how careful they were about keeping the sanctity of the Temple.

We need to understand that in any situation there are many factors at play, some of which are more important than others. But those who play 'politics' can always bring out a less important factor into the limelight and exaggerate it in such a way that an innocent person gets depicted as a criminal, and a criminal is seen as a 'saint'. We can see that this kind of politics is played not only among political parties but also by ordinary people in their interaction with others. We need to

make sure that we are not playing politics ourselves and also that we are prepared to face it from others who are less scrupulous.

When we are determined to be truthful and sincere in all that we do, we find that no matter how innocent we are, people have a way to turn things around against us. A common example is when one man does wrong to another and then points to the second man not forgiving him! This is really 'injustice' and not being 'fair'. But that is life! That is why we have to be willing, as disciples of Jesus, to overlook a lot of offences against us, forgive those who do wrong to us, and bear with those who are not changing (Col.3:13)! On the other hand, we have to learn to avoid this politics from our side. Let us stand with truth, and take care about how we deal with the others. Remember, there are many factors in any situation. Let us not try to strain out the 'gnats' while swallowing camels (Mt.23:24). Also, when we notice the 'speck' in another's eyes let us make an effort to get rid of the 'log' in our own (Mt.7:4,5).

#855 According to the spirit

Some people take every imperative statement in the Bible as a commandment. For example, they take it that if someone slaps us on one cheek, we have to physically offer the other cheek for them to slap (Mt.5:39). Some make a joke of it by pointing out different literal interpretations: only a left-handed man can slap us on our right cheek, which is rare, and another to say that after we have offered our cheek once, we are free to do anything else we like! But jokes apart, it is obvious that when Jesus Himself was slapped, He didn't offer His other cheek (Jn.18:22,23). If we were to take an entirely literal approach, what would we do with Pr.26:4,5?

A mistake we can make when we read the Bible is to read it just as we would read an earthly book, especially as if it was a legal document spelling out what we ought to do in different situations, or as if it was a book of science, written with every word precisely in place to mean what it says. But though it is the word of God in the sense that this is what God has passed on to us to reveal Himself and His ways to us, it is to be understood as a spiritual communication trying to pass on spiritual truths to us (1Co.2:14).

So, when we read the Bible, we must depend on the Holy Spirit to speak to us personally through the written word. Sometimes He may show us a personal application of a verse for a special occasion which we should use for our special situation and not for forming doctrines for everyone. What the Spirit reveals will be in line with the heart of God that has already been revealed in the written word, and will not contradict with other parts of the Bible. This is why we have to interpret different verses along with what the Bible says about the subject in other places.

In places such as where Jesus tells us to turn the other cheek, when we compare that with what He Himself did later, we can see that it was not meant to be obeyed literally. Then what did He mean?

This whole passage in Mt.5-7 is about our inner heart attitudes under the new covenant which Jesus was going to bring about through His

death, in contrast with the old covenant that God had made through the Law with Israel. The main thing we see is that the new covenant is about what goes on inside us. For example, it is not enough now not to kill anyone, but not even to hate anyone enough to want to kill him. It is not just to avoid physical adultery but to avoid desiring someone in our heart. When we see things in this context, we Jesus trying to teach us to move away from retaliating with an approach of 'eye for an eye', etc., and to learn to be forgiving and bearing with others who are evil towards us. We cannot literally give to 'everyone' who asks, for another example. What Jesus is trying to teach us here is that we need to learn to bear with people who are evil and unreasonable, instead of retaliating in an 'eye for an eye' legalism. The peak of this passage is about loving our enemies!

#856 The problem with the church

"But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name" (Jn.1:12). The crucial factor is how we receive Jesus. He is not waiting around hoping that some of us will do Him the favour of accepting Him. No, He is doing us a favour by coming down from His Father, suffering and giving His life for us because, without Him, we were going to be doomed to hell for our sins. We cannot now receive Him as someone who is there to take care of us whenever we pray! But we must receive Him as our Lord and Saviour, and submit to Him in everything He tells us to do.

Jesus was Himself clear that if we wanted eternal life, we would have to enter through a narrow gate, where we would have to turn away from our selfish, sinful life and choose to follow Him, and then we would have to follow Him through a narrow way where we would have to take up our cross daily and deny ourselves (Mt.7:13,14;Lk.9:23). He also clarified that very few would find this way.

But the Jesus who is being presented nowadays is as one who will heal us, make us rich, solve our problems and come to our aid at our beck and call. He will top it all with a mansion in heaven too! This is a no-cost-to-you-offer which is easy for all to accept! But many find afterwards that things don't work as promised. Some continue lifelessly with the routine they have picked up, and some even give up altogether. Can you think of churches full of people like this who have no real relationship with Jesus except in name? In their heart and thinking, they are just like every other unbeliever in the world. But some of them get active in the social activities of the church, and some use their natural skills even in preaching and Bible studies. But there will also plenty of jealousy, strife, competition, greed, power-play, party-spirit, bitterness, etc., all carried out in the name of Christ!

What is wrong is with the entry criteria. Recruitment policy is unclear, and there is no orientation programme to follow. All kinds of people enter, and in addition to the chaos that will inevitably follow, there is a

teeth-grinding agony waiting for many when they wake in the wrong place in eternity.

Now it is the responsibility of those who are truly born again and who serve as apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers to do their work properly. It is these people who have the onus of bringing in people properly and training them in the church to function as members of the body of Christ (Ep.4:11,12). If they keep quiet, God is going to ask about the 'blood of the sheep' they will find on their hands (Ez.33:8).

It is not just some individuals who have gone astray, but the system itself is corrupt. We need to pray to the Lord of the harvest to send in more true labourers (Lk.10:2). We must pray for a re-kindling of the fire of God to work among His people. But then each of us must also take up our responsibility.

#857 A crash course in godliness

Forgiveness of our sins followed by transformation into the character of Jesus is the best gift God can give to us who were bound in sin and headed for hell. This is offered to us free and without pre-conditions, and anyone who acknowledges his sin, repents and turns to Jesus for salvation can receive it. But many are so enamoured by the things of this world that they choose to remain in sin and enjoy its pleasures. Others who receive this offer may choose this present life more than eternity (Lk.12:19), or may backslide (Mt.13:22).

Sometimes God offers us a crash programme for us to be plucked away from clinging to our earthly life and to be given an opportunity to seek after God and His life. "For behold, the Lord GOD of hosts is going to remove from Jerusalem and Judah Both supply and support, the whole supply of bread And the whole supply of water" (Is.3:1). God may take away something on which we used to lean, or make life difficult for us. Some dream crumbles, we lose something we valued, or adversity hits us with force. This may appear as if God was punishing us. No, He is trying to wean us away to Himself. If our life was comfortable and without problems, we would not feel like seeking God. But now, when such 'support' is taken away from us and our 'foundation' disappears from under us, we suddenly feel helpless.

Actually, in such situations, we have a choice of response. We can hate God and leave Him, or we can draw nearer to Him and cling on. This choice determines the direction of our life and our eternity. We need to remember that eternity is far more important than the comfort of our present life, and that taking the suffering of this life in the right way can be the key that unlocks eternal blessings (2Co.4:17). It can be the shake-up that we need to call our attention to what God has planned for us which we have been missing so far.

"Bodily discipline is only of little profit, but godliness is profitable for all things, since it holds promise for the present life and also for the life to come" (1Ti.4:8). A godly life is a blessing even while on earth, because it keeps us steady, satisfied and fulfilled during all the ups and

downs of life. And certainly, godliness is the only thing of value in eternity. But many times we are so involved with the things of this life that we may lose focus on godliness. God may warn us and send us many exhortations and we may still not wake up. Then His love for us is so great that He will send some 'calamity' to wake us and give us an opportunity to go through a crash course in godliness.

We have to learn to look at things this way. Jesus must become the Pearl of greatest value for us, and we must learn to sell off all other pearls we have and run to purchase it. We must hate the sinful life that we have by nature, and long to become like Jesus in the way we think, speak and behave. Only then will we be able to receive everything that Jesus died to give us.

#858 We are just voices

"This is the testimony of John, when the Jews sent to him priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, 'Who are you?' And he confessed and did not deny, but confessed, 'I am not the Christ'" (Jn.1:19,20). The question is what we think about ourselves. We can't hope to impress God or any discerning people by belittling ourselves by using similar words because they can detect our false humility. But what do we think of ourselves in the solitude of our mind—when we think of the things we have done and what others think about us? A most-accomplished but a highly godly man called Paul recognised and owned that he was only a broken earthen vessel in which God had graciously chosen to place some treasure (2Co.4:7). He also realised that one goal that God had in entrusting this treasure with him was that he should faithfully pass it on to other people (2Ti.1:14). He was not to take glory for himself in this, but to make sure that he should not keep anything back to himself when it could profit others (Acts.20:27).

Contrast this attitude with famous people who think they are serving God while they proclaim in subtle and not-so-subtle ways how great they are and what all they have accomplished. What it shows is that, while some of these people have started their life with God at one time, they have moved away from His presence and begun to glory in themselves. It is comparatively easy to talk about the grace of God over us when we are nobodies or just beginning to serve God. King Solomon distinguished himself from most other people when he asked God to give him wisdom to rule over the people, instead of asking things for himself. But as he increased in wealth and accomplishments, and got a name for himself, he strayed away from God towards idols.

John the baptiser knew that he was only a voice supposed to point out the Messiah to the people (Jn.1:23). He also knew that one day the focus would shift from him to Jesus (Jn.3:30). Isn't this our calling when we are called to be voices telling other people about our Lord Jesus Christ? Shouldn't we recognise that it is not about us, but Him? Well, it does matter how we present Jesus and how we represent Him in our life. But

ultimately, it does not really matter what people think about us, but only what they think about Jesus.

How sad it will be if God uses us and causes us to bear fruit for Him, and it goes to our head and we begin to think there is something special about us! If we want people to call us by grand titles, even as if we were to be revered, we want people to bow before us or kiss our hand, what are we thinking about ourselves? If we feel disturbed if people don't acknowledge the degrees we have gained, the number of books we have written, the number of people who work under us, the amount of funds we operate, etc., can we say we aren't glorying in ourselves?

The question we need to ask is, what do we privately think of ourselves, or enjoy thinking in our mind?

#859 Ananias and Sapphira today

Just as the church began to grow after its beginning, some people started a trend of selling their property and giving the money to the apostles to help the needy ones. A couple called Ananias and Sapphira also sold some property and gave a portion of its proceeds. But they chose to pretend as if they too had given the complete value, just like the others. But they got exposed by the Holy Spirit and fell dead before the apostle Peter. When the people heard about it, it produced a great fear of God in their heart (Ac.5:11). Outsiders began to fear to join the church (v.13)!

Such things have hardly happened afterwards. It is not that God changed His mind, or that He doesn't mind sin so much now as to punish it drastically like that. He gave us one example, and now He is giving us the opportunity to learn from that lesson to be careful in our life to fear Him and to deal with our sins with the fear of God.

But what seems to be happening is that people are only preaching about the grace of God, and not also about His righteousness and justice. As a result, people even inside the church think that it is not very serious to sin because God will simply forgive. Also, they think that God won't deal with them as He did with Ananias and Sapphira.

Suddenly, that seems to have changed. People with great name and recognition for Christian work are being exposed for their secret sinful lives, and overnight they lose their ministry, empire, livelihood and reputation. Suddenly, others have begun to fear, wondering when it will be their turn!

Even the hidden motives of men's hearts will be exposed one day when Jesus comes (1Co.4:5). All that people have tried to hide from others and everything they have pretended to be will be exposed (Mk.4:22). This is inevitable when Jesus comes at the end of this age. But what we see is Jesus giving us an advance warning now to wake us up from spiritual sleep and teach us the fear of God, before the final judgment comes.

If we will judge ourselves now, God will save us from the judgment to come (1Co.11:31). God wants us to stop sinning (1Jn.2:1), but if we fall, there is forgiveness and cleansing if we confess it honestly and sincerely. But if we hide it (even from God) and carry on with an external life of 'ministry', God promises us that He Himself will expose us, if not today, at least on the final day of judgment.

God does things in such a way that He does not bring judgment on us suddenly. He loves us dearly, and what He wants is not to destroy us but that we should repent and turn back to Him (2Pe.3:9). So, He gives us warnings in different ways, in an increasingly stronger manner if we still do not pay attention. It is only when we keep ignoring His warnings and keep on going after our own interests that He exposes us openly. But even then, as long as we are alive, He still gives us that final opportunity to repent, before the final judgment falls on us (Pr.29:1).

#860 Misplaced ambitions

It is understandable that those who believe they have come to exist on earth as a result of chance, try to get the maximum pleasure they can before they cease to exist. They think that this life is all that they have, and all their focus is on this short life-span. We who have been born again and given eternal life with God also live here on earth for a short time, but our focus is on the eternity to come! That is what matters; that is what will last.

"The world is passing away, and also its lusts; but the one who does the will of God lives forever" (1Jn.2:17). All these lusts (desires) of this earth—the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the boastful pride of life—are only for this earth, and we will be fools if we focus our entire life in pursuit of these things that are definitely going to disappear one day.

But we are all being tempted through these desires. The crux of the temptation is to make us believe that we must satisfy these desires at any cost because they are so attractive and valuable! But are they? Are they so important to us that we are willing to sin against God in order to fulfil them? At the peak of such temptations, God's commandments, His plans for us, what He has prepared for us, His warnings against wrong doing—all become less important to us than meeting these desires.

Can we afford to live like that? Have we understood what we stand to lose if we give in to these worldly desires, or what God has prepared to grant to us if we deny ourselves the pleasure of these desires and choose to be pleasing to Him? Don't let the Devil fool us as he has done in the past. It is time for us to sober up from the drowsiness of this delusion.

What God has planned and kept in store for us is actually far beyond our imagination (1Co.2:9). Imagine giving all that up for momentary pleasure or passing gain! Whatever we store up on earth, whether it is money, pleasure, name or recognition, is not something that will give us

value in eternity. The whole earth itself is going to be destroyed one day (2Pe.3:7). Also, think of the corruption that we add to ourselves every time we give in to temptation, which will certainly make it more difficult for us afterwards to make the right decisions (Ga.6:7,8). Every time we sin, we are choosing to move away from God.

How sad to see 'Christian' leaders telling people to follow their dreams (read desires)! What Jesus said was the exact opposite, "Do not work for the food which perishes, but for the food which endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give to you, for on Him the Father, God, has set His seal" (Jn.6:27). Everyone who drinks the 'water' of this world will thirst again, but we are being offered 'living water' which alone can quench our thirst (Jn.4:13,14).

We start by making one decision to live entirely for God, and then we carry our cross daily, deny ourselves and follow Jesus (Lk.9:23). That will take us closer to God and His plans.

#861 Only believe vs. obedience

Many people are taught by preachers that since Jesus has done it all for them, all they need to do is to believe. As a result, many are not taking any responsibility for their own action, and they are expecting God to take care of everything for them. Finally they get disappointed.

"For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments; and His commandments are not burdensome" (1Jn.5:3). In the context of the new covenant which Jesus made, we must not think of 'commandments' as merely the Ten Commandments. It refers to anything that the Spirit of Christ tells us to do (Ro.8:2). This goes wider and deeper than the old covenant laws which were mainly related only to our external behaviour. Now we have to obey God to the extent that every thought in our mind has to comply with the heart of God (2Cor.10:5).

We must not think of this as a burden we cannot manage. When we know how much God loves us and what He has done to restore us to Him, we love Him and want to be pleasing to Him in every way. We understand that every command or instruction He gives us is for our good and for our protection from harm. Keeping His commandments keeps us within the boundaries of His care and protection, and then it is that we will be happy and able to enjoy our life. Satan wants to make us think that by giving in to his temptations we can enjoy life. We know it is a lie. Every time we give in to such desires, we ourselves make our future more miserable (Ga.6:8). Just look back on our life and see how we are suffering now for all such mistakes we have made!

On the other hand, the more we comply with the life of God, we find that it reduces the chances of future suffering, and we enjoy God's peace knowing that He is with us.

A major part of the problems we have to deal with in our life now has come from the consequences of our sins in the past, where we disobeyed God and gave in to what our desires demanded from us. When we came to Jesus, even though He has forgiven all those sins, many of their consequences still follow us. They make us feel ashamed

of ourselves now (Ro.6:21). To regain that lost ground, now we need to make sure that we don't repeat the things that we used to do, and also that we now learn to 'sow to the Spirit' and reap eternal life.

Obedience is our responsibility. It is not something God will do for us. As He works inside us through the Holy Spirit to give us godly desires, we must work that out in our behaviour. It will be foolish if we wait for God to suddenly give us a godly life. We have to make that choice every time we get tempted. That is when we have to make sure that we are determined in our heart not to sin again but to obey God in everything, including what we think and desire. With this determination we must actually obey every prompting of the Holy Spirit.

If we don't have this heart of obedience, we just don't love Jesus (Jn.14:21). We must not fool ourselves. We are not born again.

#862 Baptised into death

"How shall we who died to sin still live in it? Or do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus have been baptized into His death?" (Ro.6:2,3).

To understand this, let us remember that before we came to Christ, we were 'dead in sin' (Ep.2:1). Our sins had separated us from God, and we were spiritually dead. But when we recognised and admitted we were sinners, confessed and turned away (repented) from our sins, God forgave our sins as a free gift. He was able to do it because Jesus had already suffered the punishment for our sins. We are able to receive it because we trusted in Jesus as our Saviour. God then made us His children, and gave us a new spiritual birth by the Holy Spirit making us alive towards God.

When we get baptised, it is not baptism that gives us the new birth or makes us dead and then alive in Christ. That takes place when we are born again by grace through faith. When we go through baptism we are identifying ourselves with Jesus who died for us and rose again. We are also making a declaration through baptism that we want to live now onwards with a clear conscience towards God (1Pe.3:21). In other words, God has given us a mind that does not want to sin any more. But after the baptism, as we face the different temptations that come up, we have to work out in our daily life that decision which we testified to in baptism.

Sometimes people don't interpret the Scripture in the big context of the whole Bible, but take each verse as a complete expression of truth. For example, they think that since they have been 'baptised into His death' it is baptism that makes us dead to sin. No. Baptism is something by which we testify to what God has done in our life by forgiving our sins and giving us a new spirit that does not want to sin, and, at the same time, express our desire to follow Him by obeying Him in everything and overcoming sin.

Some others think that when they have gone through baptism they are dead to sin and there is no more any sin in their lives! They try to claim this in their doctrines, but everybody else can see how they are still falling into sin here and there! A correct interpretation of doctrine must also be in line with practical experience! Otherwise we can have different doctrines that give some fantastic pictures but which do not match with reality.

We have been made 'dead to sin' meaning 'dead towards sin'. It does not mean that there is no more sin in our life or that we don't have to deal with sin any more (1Jn.1:8). It means that now we hate sin and our goal is to stop sinning (1Jn.2:1). This is the result of the new birth (1Jn.3:9). But now, with a mind that wants to overcome sin, we must daily move in that direction and deny ourselves when we are tempted to sin in order to obey God (Lk.9:23). In order to do this, we must become careful to present every part of us to God to do His will, and stop yielding to sin (Ro.6:11-13). It is not automatic.

#863 Can faith save us?

Many people seem to think that once they come to the place where they have great faith, they can do anything, and nothing will be impossible to them. So they try to gather more and more faith, by repeating Bible verses, memorising them, and making declarations of what they believe is going to happen to them. Because they believe certain things in their mind they imagine they will happen.

The question is, what or who is going to make things happen. Their faith is going to make things happen, or they are going to make things happen through their faith? If these things are true, where is God in this picture? Do you really think that you are going to have faith and then your faith will accomplish great things? What do you need God for? Or have you become like God, able to do whatever you want and believe?

This is a totally wrong approach towards faith. To begin with, we are not saved by our faith, but by God by His unmerited favour towards us (Ep.2:8,9). We receive this free gift of salvation through our faith. But our faith is not what saves us, but God by His grace. Certainly, if we don't have faith, we can't receive what God is offering us. Again, we can't save ourselves even if we have a lot of faith!

This whole understanding of faith is wrong if it is used like these people are doing. If we think through this, we can understand that what they imply through this word 'faith' is something they achieve or reach up to by making sufficient effort to believe. They think that once they have come to a place where they have become sufficiently convinced about something, that is faith.

No. Our faith is our trust in God and dependence on Him. We come to trust God when we get to know about who He is, about His character, and His thoughts and plans for us. We trust in God, we accept His word, and then we are willing to place our whole life in His hands and do whatever He tells us (He.11:6). God is the One who saves us, and only He has the ability to do that or do any miracle for us. We can receive all these things from Him when we trust Him. For example, when we

understand and believe that Jesus has taken the punishment for our sins, we can then go and ask Him for forgiveness and receive it. It is totally out of place to imagine that we somehow build up our faith and then we can experience salvation or miracles.

When we know God as who He is, and ourselves as creatures, we will depend on Him entirely even for our existence. He is the only One who has power, neither our faith nor our words (Ps.62:11). By our faith we can ask Him for whatever we need, and know that it is He on whom we are dependent.

This deviant understanding of faith is a part of the worldwide infiltration of the concept that tries to make us independent of God wanting to do whatever we want. This was the original temptation that came to Eve when Satan told her that she could get to know good and evil herself and become like God (Ge.3:5). It led to sin.

#864 Walking by the Spirit

"If we live by the Spirit, let us also walk by the Spirit" (Gal.5:25). What is it for us to 'walk by the Spirit'? Is it about speaking in tongues or having special experiences? No. It is for us to live every moment of our life according to the leading of the Holy Spirit. After we are born again and we grow up to become mature sons and daughters of God, our daily life is expected to be 'led' by the Spirit of God (Ro.8:14). In other words, what we do, speak, think and plan will all come increasingly under the control of the Holy Spirit. But unfortunately because of wrong teachings many receive these days, they imagine that Jesus has taken care of everything for them, and all they have to do is to have a certain level of religious activities such as Bible reading, prayer and church activities. For the rest they can just go on enjoying life doing what they like!

Isn't this tragic? It was to save us from our sins and our self-centred life that Jesus came and died. If we aren't being saved from the power of sin increasingly in practical life and we are not becoming more like Jesus in the way we think, speak and behave, we have not understood the Gospel!

Some people even think that since Jesus has kept the Law, we don't have any more law that we need to keep. And, they say that Jesus had brought us into freedom, which they interpret as being free to do what they feel like. No, we have not been made lawless. Our freedom is from the guilt of sin and the bondage to sin that compelled us to sin. Now we are free to do what we know to be right and good and are not under compulsion to follow the desires of our flesh (Ro.8:12). We need the power of the Holy Spirit to resist the temptation of giving in to our flesh and to do the will of God in our life (v.13).

When we have the Holy Spirit living in us, He makes our conscience become more sensitive than before. In our old life, when we felt the pull of temptations, we just gave in to it, only making sure that we would not get caught. Now the new life is not that after we give in to sin we ask for forgiveness. Now we don't want to sin. We find that we are not strong enough to resist the temptation always, and so we try to learn to lean

on the strength from the Holy Spirit more. This gives us more and more victory in daily situations.

We also see that the Holy Spirit takes us to a higher level of laws compared to the old covenant. The old covenant would consider someone blameless as long as he kept the Law externally. If he committed adultery he would be punished, but he would be considered 'not guilty' if he lusted after a woman in his heart but kept himself from the physical act. But the standard of the Spirit is higher (Mt.5:27,28). So, if we are led by the Spirit, we would become very sensitive not just about what we speak and do, but also about our thoughts and intentions. Now we can see what it is for us to walk by the Spirit. We follow His laws and lean on His strength.

#865 What is victory?

We face temptations of different kinds every day. In general, they attract us with some offer of pleasure or gain for which we have to sin against God (Ja.1:14,15). Just as Satan tempted Eve to disobey God in order to become like God (!), most of the times our temptations exaggerate what we will gain while hiding what the implications are in God's eyes and what the consequences will be. Victory means to say no when we are tempted.

Temptations come in the form of ideas or thoughts, which may come from our mind, other people or from demons. If we 'do' something wrong following these ideas, we sin. We can also sin in our mind, without doing anything externally, if we choose to let our imagination run, chewing over the idea in our mind and deriving pleasure. Victory is when we don't accept the idea but reject it straight away.

Anyone who has tried to overcome temptations, especially powerful things such as anger or sexual lust, will find soon that it is impossible to get victory by our own strength. We will be fighting against the desires in our own flesh. Born again Christians don't want to sin, but then our desires fight to get our attention (Ga.5:17). Even if we manage to resist them occasionally, especially at times when important people are watching us, we can fall unexpectedly, and especially when we are feeling 'low', meaning when we are tired or worn out physically or mentally. These are the times that show us that sin dwells deep within us (Ro.7:21). That is when we learn to cry out to God for help to overcome (Mt.5:4,6). Victory is not about receiving forgiveness after we fall but preventing the fall, even though forgiveness is available from God if we fall when we confess it (1Jn.1:9).

"My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness" (2Co.12:9). The secret of true victory is here. It is when we see and acknowledge our weakness before God that He gives us grace (help) to overcome (He.4:16). As long as we imagine that just by trying a bit harder we can get victory, we will continue to fall. On one side, if we don't try as hard as we can, it shows us that we don't really want

victory. But on the other side, if we have not become fully convinced that unless God helps us we cannot have any victory, victory will keep evading us!

In that sense, it is good that we fall in the beginning, till we see our total impotence in fighting against sin. If we don't give up but continue to look to God for help He will give us the victory. When we get true victory we will have no doubt in our mind that it was purely because of God's grace!

Victory is not something, which once we receive it we cannot lose. If we become self-confident or proud and become careless with temptations, we can fall any time, however long we have been living in victory (1Co.10:12). That is why we have to put on the whole armour of God to protect every part of our life from the enemy and be vigilant and watchful (Ep.6:11;Mt.26:41).

#866 Superficial faith

Imagine a man thinking that all that one needs to do if he wants to be a Christian is to say with his mouth that Jesus is Lord and to believe that Jesus rose from the dead, based on Ro.10:9. Or another man thinking that all he needs to do to get his sins forgiven is to confess them (1Jn.1:9). These are words from God's word, but the problem is that these people are taking just some parts of the word of God and thinking that it is all that there is to it. What they have missed is the understanding of what sin is in the sight of God, seeing themselves as sinners as God sees them, recognising what they deserved as the punishment for their sins and what God had to do in order to save them from sin, and then repenting for their sins before God. As a result, they do not get their sins forgiven or get born again even though they think they are following the Bible!

If someone preached salvation in the above superficial manner and the listeners thought it was so simple and received it happily, the fact remains still that no actual change has taken place in the listener's heart but he assumes that everything is fine for him in relation to God. What a shock he will get when he gets to the final judgment!

Isn't it therefore good for everyone who assumes he is a Christian to examine the validity of his faith and salvation? One may superficially assume that I am judging him or bringing him condemnation. But I say this out of a sincere love and concern, and a wish that no one should be deceived in this manner. If there has been deception in this area, it is of a fundamental nature, and our eternity will be ruined because of it.

If people who just presume they are Christians, because they believe certain verses such as the ones given above, then go to Bible colleges which teach things in a superficial manner, and come out to become pastors of churches, what chances do their listeners have for becoming true Christians? I know there are people and churches like that, and that is why I am writing this so plainly even at the risk of someone thinking I am judgmental.

When we read the Bible, we need to read it as if we are looking into a mirror, to see what God really thinks about us, where we stand before Him, what He wants us to do and where He wants us to change. Let us not read it in order to complete a daily duty, or even to get points for our sermons! Let us not hold on to verses like the above to placate our conscience or to convince ourselves that it is all well with our souls. Let us be honest with ourselves in the sight of God when the Bible points out our faults, because that is God trying to save us. Instead of keeping up a great self-image, justifying our failures or shortcomings, or putting the blame on others, let us accept we are sinners who need a Saviour. That is what will lead us to salvation.

Satan has blinded the minds of many (2Co.4:4). But it is in our interest to make sure we get saved. Therefore, examine God's word.

#867 Crucified with Christ

What Christians have all understood is how Jesus was crucified for us and how His death was for the punishment of our sins. But Paul then speaks about two other crucifixions. He says, "Knowing this, that our old self was crucified with Him, in order that our body of sin might be done away with, so that we would no longer be slaves to sin" (Ro.6:6), and "I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself up for me" (Ga.2:20).

Our old self refers to our old sinful nature because of which we used to sin. Whenever some temptation came to us that enticed us to sin, this nature agreed with it. So, we would generally give in to sin. But when we came to Jesus we repented (turned away) from our sin and decided we didn't want to sin any more. That was when this old self was crucified. God gave us instead a new self with His nature in it that hated to sin because it was the nature of God (1Jn.3:9).

Paul then takes it to the next level. Now it is not merely about not sinning, but about whose will we do, ours or Christ's. Now we can place ourselves on the cross as crucified with Christ and declare that it is no longer our will we want to do, but Christ's. This is "Not my will but Yours, Lord," in continual action. In another place, Paul uses another image to depict the same meaning, talking of placing our bodies as living sacrifices in order to be able to continually do God's will in everything (Ro.12:1,2).

Now we can understand that if we have not entered in our life into all the three crucifixions, our Christian life is never going to be what it ought to be. We may wonder what is wrong, or blame different things for our lack of fruit in our life, but this is the way for us to have a proper relationship with God.

Sadly, a large number of people have only heard about Christ dying for them. They interpret this as if everything was and will be done by Christ, and they can simply enjoy the benefit. But having said that they

are still far from being happy. Naturally. If we don't have a hatred for sin in order to stop sinning, and we know that there is forgiveness for us if we sin, won't we take sin carelessly and continue sinning? If we want to stop sinning but we don't see the challenge of our will being crucified in order to make way for God's will to be done in our life, we will not be able to enter the kind of life Jesus came to give us.

There are things God has done for us. He has paid for our sins so that we need not face judgment, and He has regenerated us and given us a new heart that does not want to sin. But there are things we need to do in response from our side. We must take up our cross daily and deny ourselves in order to do God's will (Lk.9:23). We must also have a determination in our heart and mind that it is God's will alone that we must do in everything.

#868 Checking with reality

"We are a fragrance of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing" (2Co.2:15). We do want to be like that, and we wish we were more like that than what we really are! So, is this a statement we can simply accept for a fact or make ourselves believe? Aren't statements like this to be taken as personal challenges for us individually? "God has not given us a spirit of timidity, but of power and love and discipline" (2Ti.1:7). This is what God wants us to have, but have we actually come to experience this in reality? Will they actually become a reality if we go on confessing or declaring them? These are examples of how we can actually live in spiritual poverty but convince ourselves or make ourselves believe something else.

Spiritual growth means not merely to know more Scripture or to be very familiar with the external practices of religion, such as a regular 'quiet time', prayer, church attendance even taking part in ministries. It means to be transformed in our spirit to think more like God, share His values, doing what He wants, and counting everything else as being less important. If this is happening, verses such as the above will also become more and more of a reality in our life. But if this is not happening, we will only be deceiving ourselves if we make ourselves believe such statements about us.

On the other hand, we can believe whatever God says or promises, just because His word says so. We can believe He will never leave or forsake us (He.13:5). Once He has forgiven us, He will never hold our sins against us any more (He.8:12). Etc. If we don't believe what God says, we become actually unbelievers in those instances.

In order for the holy God to be able to accept us sinful people with all our imperfections even after we have repented from our sins and trusted Jesus as our Saviour, He credits the righteousness of Christ to us. Now He can deal with us as if we were righteous people. But in reality, we have not become righteous yet but are going through a process of sanctification by which little by little we are being transformed. If we were to hold to this imputed righteousness and

make ourselves believe we are actually righteous, we are under a great deception. Check with reality. When we do that we sadly find many things in us that are not righteous, and then we learn to cry out to God, "Wretched man that I am! Who will set me free from the body of this death?" (Ro.7:24). Then God will help us to experience a greater deliverance from the hold of sin in our life and to actually become more like Christ.

If we don't make this difference in our mind, we can fool ourselves with eternal consequences by declaring statements from the Bible telling us how we ought to be. We must check such statements with our actual life and see how much it is true in us.

It is sad if we are living in 'doctrinal bubbles', isolating ourselves from reality. One day those bubbles will burst.

#869 By faith or dead works?

Some people think of 'living by faith' as the life of 'servants of God' who do not have a regular income but who expect to receive gifts from others! No. We are all expected to live by faith, because without faith it is impossible to please God (He.11:6). V.5 talks about how Enoch was pleasing to God and we can see how he must have walked by faith.

V.4 tells us how Abel offered a sacrifice by faith. It was this sacrifice by faith that made his offering better than his brother Cain's. Some people explain that it was because Abel offered an animal sacrifice while Cain had only offered the fruit of the ground. We see from the law of Moses that Cain's offering was also an acceptable form of sacrifice to God. What made it unacceptable to God was that it was not given in faith. If Abel had offered an animal sacrifice but not in faith he also would not have been accepted!

Let us try to understand what it means to offer something to God in faith. Faith is our trust in God that comes out of a personal relationship we have with Him. We know Him, we know He can be trusted, we know that what He tells us to do is for our very best, and then what we offer to Him is out of our love for Him, gratitude to Him, etc. It will not be out of a sense of duty that we do it, nor will it be out of fear that He might hit out at us if we didn't. In that kind of a relationship as a child to the Father, it is not the material of the offering that matters, but our motive and attitude as we give it. That seems to be what made the difference between Abel and Cain.

Look at our life to see if we are really living by faith, or only thinking that on a certain day in the past we came to Jesus by faith. Whatever service we give to the church or to His people, whether we give money, use our talents, sing in the choir, help others, pray for others, attend Bible studies, etc., are we doing them from our heart because of our faith in God and love for Him, or merely because they are what we are supposed to do?

Whatever we do, we are to do it from the heart 'as unto the Lord' (Col.3:23). It is when we do things because of our relationship with the Lord and our heart's delight in them, that we are living by faith. If we are not doing things by faith but merely because of religious compulsions, they become 'dead works', and just like Cain's offering, will be unacceptable to God.

Isn't it good to examine our life in this light and look at the different things we do? Next time we stand in a worship service and sing songs with clapping or raised hands, see how much meaningful it is in our heart, or if we are just singing along while our thoughts are somewhere else. I am not thinking about our level of concentration. But if our heart is not in it, can we say it is being offered in faith?

What we can understand from the example of Abel and Cain is that this is how faith makes the difference. Let us try to clear ourselves more and more from dead works.

#870 Counterfeit victory

It is rare, but sometimes we come across someone who claims he is living in total victory or even that he has not sinned for some years! If it is a leader, people dare not question him, thinking that he must be living such a high standard of life which they have not reached. But those who know such people closely can see how such claims are not true. Those who do not know much of the Bible may stand in awe of them remembering their own poor state. But perhaps some innocent one may blurt out that "the king has no clothes!"

Let us not live in an imaginary bubble made up of our own special doctrines which do not match with reality. For example, if our doctrine tells us that victory is a level we reach after which we cannot fall in that area, we then have to give some false explanation when we do fall after we have claimed we have victory! Or we redefine sin! But victory refers to overcoming when we are tempted (Ja.1:14,15). If we have learnt how to have victory in a particular temptation, that doesn't mean we can't be tempted there again or that we can't fall again. The Bible warns us, if we think we are 'able to stand' in any area, to take care to ourselves lest we fall (1Co.10:12). Can't we fall? We will fall if we take victory for granted and become less watchful and careless (Mt.26:41). And who can claim that he has become so 'perfect' that there is no more possibility of becoming careless even for a moment?

The apostle Paul did not claim that kind of a victory. He took special care of himself because he was aware that he was quite capable of falling, even after coming into the kind of life and understanding God had given him (1Co.9:27). He was so aware of the depth of sinfulness in his fallen nature that he knew that except for the grace of God he had no chance of victory (Ro.7:24,25).

There are some who teach that Rom.7 is a description of Paul's life before he was converted or before he was baptised in the Holy Spirit, and that Rom.8 is the description of a Spirit-filled victorious Christian. But doesn't this Spirit-filled life also face frequent challenges? Remember, the Holy Spirit led Jesus into the desert to be tempted by

Satan. Of course, He did not sin. But can we say that since we have the Holy Spirit we will not face temptations or that we will not fall? Paul testifies of facing unrest, having fears within and even being depressed (2Co.7:5,6). It is also recorded how he once lost control when he was struck on the mouth (Ac.23:2,3).

I am not advocating or justifying defeat. As we learn to be faithful over time, we do experience more and more victory. But we need to be aware of the possibility that we can fall if we don't take pains to overcome. We are warned of the Devil looking for a chance to devour us if only he could catch us off guard (1Pe.5:8). If we see how deep sin lies within us, let us walk in fear lest we fall. Let us also walk in humility without twisting doctrines, trying to impress others.

#871 COVID and unanswered questions

As the pandemic began to spread and large numbers of people began to die, it again raised many questions. Was God going to protect His children from this deadly pestilence? Were all those who died unbelievers? Were Christians who died from COVID without sufficient faith or with unconfessed sin? Did all who prayed for their healing lack faith? The practical answer to all these questions is no. Yet it is very difficult or actually impossible for us to understand God fully in relation to such questions.

If one were to try to understand the answers to such questions before one would believe in God, that is highly unlikely. But what if we begin with trust in God, knowing that He has loved us so much that in order to save us from perishing, He sacrificed His Son Jesus for us? If we have personally experienced this salvation, it would be difficult for us to imagine that God is unjust, unfair or undependable. The answer that would satisfy us is that God always does right, even when we can't understand why He does things. That is, in essence, what it means to walk by faith.

Those who are personally convinced about the goodness of the Lord through their experience of undeserved kindness and mercy towards them will find it easier to believe that there must be a very good reason in God's mind why He lets one man live while He takes away another. In the early days of the church, God allowed King Herod to kill James, one of the three apostles close to Jesus, and sent an angel to miraculously save Peter. Can we explain why? We can add two more pieces to the puzzle—this Peter had recently disowned Jesus, and it goes against common sense to waste all the special training James had received. But that did not shake John, the brother of James, from following Jesus. John knew Jesus loved him, and also that he loved Jesus.

Many people are praying for protection from the infection, and many others are praying for healing, without any doubt in their minds that God is able to do anything. Yet many of these prayers are not answered. Does it mean that God cannot be trusted? For the people who somehow

want to convince themselves that there is no God, this provides a good reason. But nobody can explain away the fact that this is the same God who gave His only Son because He wanted to save the world from sin (1Jn.2:2). This is the fact that has changed millions of hopeless sinners in very miraculous ways over the centuries after Jesus died, who saw their sinfulness and saw no other way to be saved except through Jesus. Such people are so convinced about the love God has for them that they are willing to give up everything including their lives in order to serve this God.

If you pose questions to them about suffering and God's love, not many would be able to give apologetic answers. They may admit that they don't have all the answers. But they can answer that they know God only because Jesus died for them. That is the way of faith.

#872 Young Christian girls going wrong

I am writing this with a lot of concern as well as compassion for girls who make a terrible mistake when it comes to marriage. As they grow through their teenage years, they begin to develop a longing to get married, which is quite normal. But if they find themselves still unmarried after some time, and family members and others begin to question them about their marriage plans, they begin to become somewhat desperate too. Then one of the things they do is to get attracted to unbelievers or even married men, imagining that they have finally found someone who loves them.

There is a good reason why God tells His children not to get married to unbelievers (2Co.6:14). We cannot enjoy a satisfying relationship in marriage unless we are agreed on the direction we want our marriage to go. If one is a child of God and the other of the Devil, how can they be agreed about the most important part of their lives (Jn.8:44). The man may show a nice behaviour externally, but time will inevitably show what is inside. If the girl really knows Jesus as her Saviour and the Holy Spirit dwells in her, she needs to know that it is a huge mistake to get married to a child of the Devil. Just look around and see the number of cases where the marriage has gone sour because of this one factor.

Girls may argue that this particular man is actually better than many believers they know! He may be putting on a show just to impress and deceive her! The believing man may have a bad start, but ultimately he can become a better husband because God is working in him. But the unbeliever is only going to go from bad to worse. Some men may promise girls that they will have freedom to go to church and there will be no interference on religious matters. Even assuming that this will hold true afterwards, which doesn't happen many times, will that bring the couple to enjoy a oneness of heart and mind, which is the blessing of a happy marriage? Some girls make themselves believe that God has brought these men into their life so that the men could ultimately become converted! Do you think God will first ask you to disobey Him, in order to bring about a good ending later?

Psychology teaches us that when people become 'infatuated', the thinking part of their brain gets sidelined and they can no longer understand or accept reason. So, it is important that all believing girls should be clear before they come to the question of marriage, that they will only get married to believing men. It is true that this can be challenging, especially when there is pressure from parents or others. But remember it is your life. If you give in to this pressure, you are the one who will have to face the consequences even after your parents are no longer there.

Please remember at the same time that all men who claim to be believers are not. Get to know them. Ask God to show you.

Remember you have a heavenly Father who cares for you more than earthly parents can.

#873 Happy festival, RIP, etc.

When we live in a multi-cultural society, we need to be on the lookout lest racial, religious or communal differences colour our attitudes towards others. We know the same God is the Creator of all people, and that all people were created in His image. All of us are born in sin and carry a distorted picture of God's image in our life, but God has presented the sacrifice of Jesus as the remedy for everyone's sin (1Jn.2:2). If any of us, irrespective of which background we come from, is born again when we receive this salvation, God makes us children of God. But even this difference between children of God and others does not give us any right to look down on anyone or to treat them as less than human.

Having said this, there is a huge difference between children of God and others. Children of God have been born again by a supernatural work of God in our life, and the Holy Spirit dwells within us. God gives us a new heart because of which we want to stop sinning and only do the will of God in every part of our life (1Jn.3:9). The whole direction of our life changes 180 degrees from our old way when we used to give in to sin without resistance, to one where we want to be entirely pleasing to God. This makes us very different from what we ourselves used to be and also from others who have not experienced this salvation.

We wish others will also have the same experience as we, and so we take pains to share the good news with them. But many of them don't want to hear about it, and they continue to worship many other gods. But there is really only one God, and what many worship as gods are actually demons or evil spirits who act like gods (1Co.10:20). And then, when they have festivals celebrating their gods, how can it be that we celebrate along with them or wish them? Do we understand what we are really doing?

Many people say, "Rest in peace," when people die. But yet we know that no one can rest in peace unless they have experienced salvation by receiving Jesus as their Saviour, and their sins have been forgiven.

Are we trying to be polite, or are we really ignorant about the implications of what we do? The current trend in the world is to think of all religions as being essentially the same, and to behave as if all people and all philosophies are good and acceptable. But can we subscribe to this approach without totally compromising what we know from Jesus?

"Jesus said to him, 'I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father except through Me'" (Jn.14:6). We have believed this, and have come to experience this as a practical truth in our life, and now can we water this down and pretend as if it is really not true? Or as if it really is not an important issue? Then our own knowledge of Jesus becomes questionable. What exactly do we believe about Him? Has our born-again experience been just an idea that can be interpreted in different ways? Do we want to compromise in order to please men?

#874 Incomplete prayer

When the criminal on the cross requested Jesus to remember him in His kingdom, was it all that was to his prayer? No. Earlier he had indicated what he thought about himself, that he deserved the punishment that he was getting. This was what formed the foundation for his prayer. The prodigal son asked his father to treat him like a servant, because he considered himself unworthy to be called a son. What would have happened if the criminal had prayed for acceptance without the acknowledgement of his sins, or if the prodigal son had just walked in and claimed his place back as a son?

Sometimes this is what happens when people pray. A man who is in heavy debt prays for God to do a miracle and clear up his debt, and a couple whose marriage is on the verge of breaking up prays for a supernatural restoration of relationship. Sadly there are pastors who proclaim that all we need to do in any kind of distress is to pray to God and that He will do a miracle. But what if acknowledgement of sin and repentance are not present?

If the debt has come up because of years of careless spending or impetuous decisions, what will happen if God clears it up miraculously and the man has not learnt any lesson? Imagine if the couple has been neglecting to take care of their relationship for a long time, will it suddenly become happy and stay like that for long if they have not learnt to change?

Many times we suffer because of our mistakes. But when the consequences hit us, we want to be delivered from the suffering that has come, but many times we don't even pause to examine why we are suffering now. Then there is no realisation that it was our own doing. When we pray for relief we get upset with God for not taking the consequences away, as if it was His fault! This is how sin has muddled our thinking.

We must remember that God is not just a loving and gracious God who forgives us, is patient with us and is willing to hear and answer our

prayers. He is also a God of justice who cannot let the guilty sinners go away without punishment (Nah.1:3). If we have done wrong and we have not even admitted it, how can He just take away the consequences?

But when we confess our sins, He will forgive us (1Jn.1:9). God has already placed the punishment for all our sins on His Son when He died on the cross. When we admit our sins and go to God for forgiveness, He is able to grant it to us, because it is already paid for and waiting. But if we just ask for blessings from Him without having cleared the guilt of our sins, God cannot grant them to us.

Jas.5:14-16 illustrates this point. We can always go to God and ask for healing from sickness, and if this sickness was not specifically due to our sins, there is no problem. But if we know in our heart that this particular sickness is due to some sin we have committed, then is it not justice that we should first confess our sins before asking for healing? Perhaps this is what is lacking in many prayers.

#875 Is God in everyone?

Some people believe that God and man are of the same essence, and that salvation for man is to recognise this, and to enter into the experience of that reality. But God tells us through the Bible that He created us out of the mud of the earth and gave us life. In other words, we are not God, but only beings He has created. There are some other Christians who think that because God has created men and women in His image, therefore all human beings have God in them (Ge.1:27). According to them, we should look at people with the recognition that God is in them, and therefore give them respect and dignity. But, being made in the image of God is not the same as having God in them.

In contrast to animals which have bodies and minds, we have been made as a composition of body, soul (Gk.psucho, mind) and spirit. Even though we can derive this understanding of this human 'trinity' from the different parts of the Bible, one place where it is mentioned clearly is 1Th.5:23, "Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be kept complete, without blame at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ." God is a spirit without a physical form, and so the part in us that is similar is our human spirit. Angels are also spiritual beings without a body. It is through our spirit that we can communicate with God. And it is this part of us that died instantly when Adam and Eve sinned (Ge.2:17). This 'death' here means disconnection from God, and this is how all of us who are born afterwards are born in sin (Ps.51:5). It is only when we acknowledge and repent from our sins and receive Jesus as our Saviour that our spirit gets regenerated and we are brought into fellowship with God. Regeneration is a work of the Holy Spirit in our spirit and without that, human beings do not have God in them.

What is it then to be created in the image of God? One part is that we have a spirit with a potential for a relationship with God. The other thing is that we have capabilities similar to God's which help us to function in ways that are similar to His. One important thing we have to remember is that all these capabilities are very small compared to

God's infinite abilities. God is omnipotent, omniscient and omnipresent. But our might and knowledge are small, and we have to move around physically to be in different places. God is sovereign, but our sovereignty (free will) is limited. We can think, feel and make decisions just as God does, but in a very limited way. These are the effects of being made in the image of God. Another fact to recognise is that all of our capabilities have been distorted as a result of the Fall.

Obviously, this is very different from thinking that all people have God in them. It is wrong to say that when we look at people, we see Jesus in them, except as a recognition of a potential which they can have if and when they get born again.

#876 One test for spiritual growth

How is our spiritual life, day to day, in a practical sense? Is it about certain things we do, such as Bible reading, prayer, attending church, church activities, etc.? Of course, from looking at the opinion Jesus had about the Pharisees who were specialists in such things, we know that these things can be actually disconnected from what is going on inside us. It is what goes on inside, our thoughts, desires, plans, ambitions, intentions, values, etc., that make us spiritual, carnal or natural. How much attention do we give to these things?

Imagine if we are involved with our work, buying, building, etc., most of the time, apart from the 'Christian' activities mentioned above, and if we fall into any sin such as losing our control or saying something hurtful we say sorry and ask God for forgiveness. Then we might imagine that we are not committing gross sins such as adultery, murder or robbery, and that we are nice, decent Christians. But is it possible that we have not been paying much attention to what is all going on inside us?

Jesus says, "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you clean the outside of the cup and of the dish, but inside they are full of robbery and self-indulgence" (Mt.23:25). These people were more than careful with how they behaved outside, but when it came to their inner life, it was all wrong. But they were not aware of it, and they thought that God was very impressed with them!

What this teaches us is that what is going on inside is more important to God than how we behave outside (1Sa.16:7). Concerning the outside, we may be careful to preserve our reputation before people, and our motive in watching our behaviour may not be actually to be pleasing to God. That can be seen if we are free with our thoughts – indulging ourselves with all kinds of thoughts thinking that no one can know – while imagining that we are living good Christian lives.

But if we indulge in jealousy, bitterness, unforgiveness, revenge, sexual imaginations, selfish agenda, scheming to put others down, etc., how

can we consider ourselves spiritual? If, at the same time, we are proficient in our Bible knowledge and discussing doctrines, taking part in intercessory prayers, and doing other things in the church, people may give us the same respect that they gave the Pharisees.

"For I say to you that unless your righteousness far surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven" (Mt.5:20). If we have only an external righteousness, it is not enough proof to show that we have been saved. If we are truly born again, a change would have come in our attitude towards sin (1Jn.3:9). Let us remember that sin here refers not only to what we commit externally, but where we indulge ourselves in our heart and mind, away from the view of the people around us. Let us allow the Holy Spirit to point out to us wherever we go wrong, without calling it 'condemnation' (Is.30:21)!

#877 How vulnerable are we?

'Vulnerable' means capable of being attacked, getting hurt or wounded. We constantly face the possibility of coming under attack from Satan (1Pe.5:8). But even if he were to leave us alone, the strong desires that are in our old, fallen nature or flesh are sufficient to form sources of temptation to sin (Jas.1:14,15). These sinful desires can come up in different situations, whether we are alone by ourselves, interacting with people, or facing challenges or attractions from the world around us. In other words, with such a variety of attacks coming up against us, all of us are so vulnerable that it is surprising if we don't fall now and then, especially when the temptation comes from unexpected quarters or when we least expect them. Growing in spiritual maturity is to become more discerning and stronger to resist when temptations hit us.

When we look at the various parts of the armour God wants us to have in order to defend ourselves from the attacks that come from different directions, we can see that it is not easy to be so careful that we don't get hurt in any way. Actually, all of us are very vulnerable. But by defining temptations or failures to different levels, we can imagine that we have victory, but we need to go and look at deeper levels, as when we peel onions. For example, if we think of anger as when we hit out physically at others and we are able to stop that, what about anger coming out in words, or in our thoughts and attitudes? Simply because we don't commit adultery with anyone physically, can we ignore the lustful thoughts that can be going on inside us? In the same way, are we in the habit of ruling out jealousy, covetousness, greed, complaining, unforgiving attitudes, judgmental attitudes, superior feelings, etc.?

One of the most dangerous steps to take in this context is to consider only our external behaviour, as the Pharisees did. Then we may think we are very holy or spiritual, when God thinks of certain things in us as 'stinking' (Mt.23:27). We may also not be aware that some of the people also can notice this stink, and are keeping quiet out of politeness! Worse still, when someone tries to mention it to us, we 'shoot them

down'! Do we really want to continue to 'walk in darkness' where we resist light from coming into our hidden areas and exposing what is producing this stink (Jn.3:19,20)?

We must not forget the fact that our whole life is open before God, even if we try to make ourselves believe no one knows certain things (He.4:12,13). If we really want to walk in the light before Him, we have to let the light come in more and more and expose us before God. He is not going to be judgmental, but waiting to sanctify us in our body, soul and spirit, entirely (1Th.5:23). It was for that reason that He sent His Son to us. Let us train ourselves to open ourselves fully before Him and to listen to what He has to say (Jas.4:8-10). He wants to bring us cleansing and healing in every way.

#878 The crux of the Gospel

What was the decision Adam and Eve made when the devil tempted them in the garden? If we read the narrative carefully, we can see that it was to eat from the tree of knowledge of good and evil so that they could become like God themselves, have knowledge within themselves and become able to live their own lives. It was not a simple disobedience to God.

What was the original plan God had for Adam and Eve when He gave them that test? That they should trust Him and His words, and do whatever He told them, even when other things attracted them and seemed to offer them advantages they had not thought of before.

So, what was the plan God made for our salvation? All of us have lived that life of independence, doing what we liked irrespective of what God thought about it, making our own plans according to whatever we wanted. Our salvation must be to bring us back to the original plan that God had for mankind, that we should trust Him and do whatever He tells us. Then, on His part, He would take complete care of us and provide us with all that we needed.

What would happen if He just forgave our sins and let us continue to do whatever we liked? What kind of a salvation would that be? But that is the kind of salvation many people have in mind when they come to Jesus. They believe that the grace of God is so great that He will not only forgive them all their past sins, but He will also keep on forgiving them afterwards every time they did what they wanted! On the top of that, He will give them everything they ask for, so that whatever they do, He will take away the consequences, and replace those consequences with blessings of every kind!

Imagine what heaven would be like, if people continued to do whatever they liked and God kept on forgiving them!

Preachers preach this and people listen to it, and they don't see any incongruity in the whole idea! They make themselves believe that all this is an amazing display of God's grace—undeserved favour—towards

us. But actually it is an utter distortion of His grace. God might as well have decided to just overlook everything that we have done and still do, instead of having to sacrifice His own Son in order to become able to meet the demands of His justice and righteousness and still forgive us. Even common courtesy on our part would have required that we should respond to this love by giving up our own lives and starting to live for Him (2Co.5:14,15). God took the entire cost on Himself to be able to provide us free forgiveness. It was certainly not with the plan of letting us continue in our old ways. His grace is meant to make us new people, who will deny ourselves what we feel like doing, in order to do what God wants us to do (Ti.2:11,12).

God wants to make us a new people, with a new heart and a new spirit, who submit to Him, depend on Him, learn from Him and do all that He tells us to do. That is the transformation that salvation brings us. Don't go for a false gospel.

#879 Two types of brokenness

"The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; A broken and a contrite heart, God, You will not despise" (Ps.51:17). What kind of brokenness is spoken of here? David, who wrote this psalm, is referring to the brokenness that is acceptable to God. But there is also another kind of brokenness which is not what is meant here. We need to know the difference.

It is true that all of us have sinned before God, living our own life and doing whatever we wanted. The consequences of this kind of life break us (Ga.6:8). This breaking corrupts us, or destroys or distorts our inner being, our personality. Something in us has become hardened, certain values have become twisted in our mind, and the power of the desires in our flesh has become stronger. We have become broken as a vessel that God was trying to make out of us. Another way of getting broken is from the result of hurt, harm or abuse by other people. This abuse can be of extreme levels or even what is usually ignored as being ordinary. But they all result in our spirit and mind getting warped in different ways. For example, our whole attitude to people or God can be distorted.

Now we need God to make us into a new vessel, as only the Potter can. That is called being born again and then getting more and more sanctified or set apart for God.

If we don't get born again, this brokenness is not acceptable to God. There are millions of people who are broken like this, but who do not even recognise it or feel ashamed about it. They blame God or other people who have hurt them. The right kind of brokenness is to recognise and admit to ourselves and to God that we are messed up. That is when we see the need for salvation. But we also see that we are unable to save ourselves. Then it is that the Gospel of Jesus Christ begins to shine in its glory before our eyes and we run to Him as our Saviour.

Without this second type of brokenness there can be no repentance. But those who see themselves as broken in this way want something more than forgiveness. They want a transformation in their lives. They want to be set free from the power of sin in their lives and also to become like Jesus in His character.

"Come to Me, all who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest" (Mt.11:28). Have you heard this Gospel? Or, was what you heard only promising you health and wealth, and easy forgiveness? Think about yourself as God sees you, accept the reality of your brokenness and be broken before Him. "A BENT REED HE WILL NOT BREAK OFF, AND A DIMLY BURNING WICK HE WILL NOT EXTINGUISH, UNTIL HE LEADS JUSTICE TO VICTORY" (Mt.12:20). He will not reject anyone who goes to Him in this brokenness (Jn.6:37).

Don't remain in your hardened condition, blaming God, the world, your parents or other people. Come to the Saviour who gave Himself and died in order to provide salvation for us. There is hope for everyone who goes to Him in humility. Your life can be transformed and become like Jesus.

#880 If we don't love the truth

'Truth' can mean different things, such as facts, conformity to reality or actuality, a true statement, or the quality of being correct. Jesus, as the Son of God, personified truth, and everything about Him was true. As those who are following Him in order to become like Him in His character, we also need to become more and more true in every part of our life. For example, hypocrisy and pretence should be disappearing more and more.

2Th.2:1-12 speaks about the coming of the Antichrist who will try to deceive people by pretending to be true, even to the extent of claiming to be God himself, and win them to his way. While people assume that they are following the true God, he is actually leading them against God. This deception is already at work, in a smaller but increasing manner, through many preachers who are being influenced more or less by the spirit of the Antichrist. When people listen to them, it seems to them that they are listening to messengers who are bringing them 'light' (2Co.11:14).

Paul tells us that for us, what we need to take care in order to avoid getting deceived is to love the truth (2Th.2:10). When we listen to preachers we may think we want to understand the truth, and so, like the people of Berea, we may be even taking steps to verify if what these people preach is according to the Bible (Ac.17:11). That is necessary, but not enough. What we see here is that we also ought to have within us this 'love for the truth'.

Imagine if we are trying to hide or excuse some sin in our life. Then when we read the word or listen to it, we would be very keen to find something that would justify or excuse our sin! For example, we would be delighted to hear about how rich and wide God's love and grace are towards us, and imagine that God will just overlook our sin. Haven't we deceived ourselves here? If we really love truth, we would acknowledge our sin, know that it is totally opposed to God's character, and beg God for forgiveness and help to overcome. So we see how it is also our

response to truth or reality that decides whether we would be deceived or not.

Deception is becoming more powerful and common, and it is a real battle for us to discern what is true and what is erroneous. Getting to see this error is not just about whether the preachers can back it up with Bible verses, but also about whether this teaching will lead us to victory over our sins and becoming more like Jesus. To be able to do that, we should be very clear about where we stand with respect to sin in the sight of God in terms of practical reality. Instead of finding cover for our sins, we should be willing to stand completely open before God and allow His Holy Spirit to bring light into our hidden areas so that we can repent.

There is a powerful trend in the world telling people to think good about themselves and avoid negativity. We should overcome this, and become real before God if we want to be saved from deception.

#881 Learning through prayer

When we started learning to pray, perhaps we believed that all we had to do was to ask, and that whatever we asked for, God would give us. But then we began to experience that we did not receive all that we asked for, and this was a bit confusing for us. Some people have given up praying or even their faith in God when this happened. But in one way this was like learning physics in school when we were taught that light travelled in straight lines. But later we heard that when it passed from one medium to another, light bent a little! The first lesson was a basic one, and we got to know more details as we progressed.

Look at what happened to the most famous prayer of Jesus, asking the Father to remove the cup (the cross) if possible. He prayed this three times and yet it was not granted. The great thing about Jesus is that He knew this could happen even when He prayed, and He submitted to the Father even as He asked for what He wanted (Mt.26:39).

In the case of the apostle Paul who was suffering from what he called a thorn in the flesh, he prayed three times for God to remove it. (By the way, nowadays some people don't even ask God, but simply 'declare' that it is gone!) Paul could have imagined that he was praying without ceasing, without giving up. But at the end, the thorn still did not go away. But he got an unexpected answer from the Lord that this thorn was for his good, to help him to depend on Him entirely to carry him through, even as his thorn still remained (2Co.12:9).

Doesn't this teach us that we can learn new truths from God as we pray, especially when we are waiting on Him in connection with some major issues that we are dealing with? We may be looking for our problems to go, but God has some things of greater value to give us. We may have been praying about earthly issues, but God may be offering us priceless things for eternity. We may find it somewhat strange at first to accept that the 'thorn' is still troubling us, but we can see that even so, it is still a great bargain when we see how it is going to be a blessing for eternity!

Paul was able to receive this blessing because he was mature enough to understand it. He could appreciate it that the great spiritual lesson of knowing how to be dependent entirely on the Lord was more valuable than getting the thorn removed from his earthly life (2Co.4:17).

Shall we learn to look at our prayer life like that? Are we only used to rattling off a list of prayer requests and keeping track of how many times we completed it or how long we prayed? Shall we make our prayer a dialogue with our heavenly Father? After we make our requests to Him, shall we wait to ask Him what He thinks about them? Especially when we don't get what we asked for, why don't we learn to ask God why He thought it would be better for us? We may get to hear Him teach us precious spiritual lessons that can transform our whole way of life and lead us to a closer intimacy with God.

#882 The hardness of our heart

One day, when Jesus was saying that God's plan for marriage was for a lifetime, the disciples asked Him why Moses permitted people to divorce their wives easily. Then Jesus clarified that it was because of the hardness of men's hearts (Mt.19:8). Because all of us are born in sin, we have this hardness in our heart as a part of our sinful nature. This nature gives us a tendency to always look out for our selfish interests. It is natural for us to resist anyone or any circumstance that hinders us from doing whatever we want. We may call it a weakness, but actually it is a mark of our old selfish nature which is strong in itself until we crucify it with the power of the Holy Spirit (Ro.8:13). On the other hand, we are very weak when it comes to doing what God wants us to do, which many times involves denying our sinful nature!

Let's look at the narrow gate and the narrow path in this context. The gate that opens to eternal life is small, and the way we have to walk afterwards is narrow. In order to enter through the small gate, we have to make a determination that henceforth we want to do the will of God and not our will, and as we walk along the narrow path we work this out in actual life situations by denying ourselves and doing the will of God.

It is not enough to enter the gate at some point in our life to be sure that we will reach God's destination for us. It is not just about receiving forgiveness for our sins and the promise of a place with Christ. He wants to transform our life to make it more like His in every aspect of character (Ro.8:29). This is the work of the path we have to walk in daily.

When we begin this journey we may be very zealous to follow Jesus with our whole heart. But we soon learn that we did not know the full extent of the hardness of our heart when we started out. Different situations can reveal it to us a little at a time, if we are open to the voice of the Holy Spirit. But even then we may be totally unaware of certain blind spots that we all have. Whenever God has shown me some blind spot in my life, which has corrupted my whole behaviour in a certain

way, and I realise how I have been like that all the time without even realising it, I am overwhelmed, in somewhat of a similar way as Isaiah did when he saw the glory of God (Is.6:5). Then I am also struck by the thought that there must be many more such blind spots for me to see still!

When we recognise this reality of the hardness of heart that there is in us, we can begin to stop thinking that we have reached somewhere or accomplished something. There are miles to go... The great apostle Paul, having become so much like Jesus and done so much for Him, thought within himself that there was much ahead towards which he had to run (Php.3:12,13).

This also changes our attitude towards others drastically. We learn to stop looking down on others because of their faults but to respect them wherever they are better than we. Way to go!

#883 Praying with burden

Like many things we do from habit, our prayers can be mechanical, following a pattern rather than from the heart. For example, if we say, "Lord, we pray for the government, we pray for those in authority, etc.," without even mentioning what we are praying for them, aren't we just following a pattern without meaning, even if we are apparently trying to follow scriptural instructions (1Tim.2:1,2). If we have a long 'prayer-list' and our goal is to go through it fully, what have we finally accomplished except feeling good that we have done it again?

Another common misunderstanding we have is that the longer time we spend in prayer, it will add virtue to us. Have you heard someone teaching, "Before every sermon you deliver, there must be at least of two hours of prayer"? Of course, we cannot be effective in any ministry that we do, without a prayerful dependence on God. But is it about the time we spend in prayer? Is there any special merit in having an all-night-prayer, especially when it is actually filled with songs and messages? Do we imagine that God can be influenced by showing Him how much sacrifice we are making in terms of time? Praying without ceasing is not about endless praying, which is not practically possible, but about not giving up (1Th.5:17).

Jesus has certainly said that when two people 'agree' concerning something they ask God for, they will receive it (Mt.18:19). But does this happen mechanically if we get a crowd together and pray?

Prayer is essentially a request we make to God (Php.4:6). It cannot be a demand on God or a way to pressurise God based on our thinking that we have met certain conditions such as how much faith we have, how long we are praying for something, how many people are praying, etc. Of course, we must pray in faith, trusting in our Father who loves us and who is eagerly taking care of us, wanting to answer our prayers even before we put them into words (Is.65:24). We must know that every plan He has for us is for our welfare (Je.29:11). We must also trust Him to make the right decision concerning our prayers, knowing that His plans are far better than ours.

Another thing to understand is that God pays more attention to the prayer that is coming from a righteous and upright heart (Jas.5:16). Even if we make prayers in public with impressive words, God will not even listen if we are hiding sin in our heart (Ps.66:18). He is also compassionate to listen to prayers coming from a broken heart crying out in need (Ps.51:17). Because of this He may at times answer the prayers from helpless people even if they are not yet His children.

When prayer comes out from our heart as a cry, moved with a burden, it won't miss God's attention. The more we recognise our total dependence on God for even the small things we need to do, the more we will pray. Then it becomes another form of praying without ceasing because prayer becomes a part of our attitude itself. It is no longer mechanical.

#884 Job description, not title

"And He gave some as apostles, some as prophets, some as evangelists, some as pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the building up of the body of Christ"

(Eph.4:11,12). What do we see here? That Jesus has given different people to the church with responsibilities for helping the people in the church to grow spiritually and become more like Jesus. For example, a pastor is a shepherd who is to feed the sheep and generally take care of them, provide appropriate food for them, protect them from harm and lead them to green pastures and still waters. This is how he has to serve his Lord and the people He has entrusted to him.

But imagine a 'pastor' who exploits his sheep, demands money for the church so that his salary can increase, gives them fast-food that appears, smells and tastes nice without sufficient nutrients but with damaging ingredients, and moves on to another congregation that offers him better prospects! They are not shepherds but those who have come in to take advantage of unsuspecting sheep like wolves in sheep's clothing who have come in to devour the sheep. Or another 'pastor' who is planning to increase the congregation to increase his status and prestige so that he can be well known.

"And the Lord said, 'Who then is the faithful and sensible steward, whom his master will put in charge of his servants, to give them their rations at the proper time?'" (Lk.12:42). This is what the Lord expects from His pastors, faithfulness. But many of them are interested in their position, honour, wealth, perks, etc., without their focus being on serving people according to the Lord's leading. Many of them insist on being addressed as 'Pastor' and will give a withering look if someone calls him 'brother' (Mt.23:10). This is in spite of Jesus saying very plainly that we are 'all brothers' (v.8). They are keen on going on to rise to senior pastor, area supervisor, regional director, etc., rather than learning how to serve their people better. They would like to have prominent positions on the platform during conferences or public meetings, and important roles wherever they are, whether it is

marriage or funeral. "Touch not the Lord's anointed" is a favourite verse they quote, some of them even prophesying calamity if anyone questions them or disagrees with them.

Of course, we ought to respect and give honour to those who are serving the Lord and His people with love and sincere care. Thankfully there are some such ones around. But what do we see mostly?

When people think of 'pastor' (and others) as titles, some big churches give it to many people, with 'pastors' responsible for different activities in the church that are not even connected to shepherding! Don't think that it is just a matter of semantics or the evolving use of words. This comes from separating these words from job descriptions and treating them as titles, leading to a dilution of the jobs themselves.

#885 Theological exaggeration

Every matter has many sides to it, but it is one defect of our fallen nature to give importance to one or two aspects of a matter and overlook the others. An example is when someone falls in love with another, and becomes 'blind' to the faults of the other. When it comes to theology, if we exaggerate any part of the truth to the extent that we ignore others, we end up with a caricature of the reality.

For example, because of the unbalanced preaching of the Gospel these days, many people think of God as being love and imagine that the God of the OT is different from that of the NT. This cannot be true (Jn.14:9;10:30). If only we piece together observations of God from all over the Bible, we can see that He is not only love, but also holy, righteous, just, impartial, sovereign, etc. How He behaves in different situations will depend on what is suitable for each situation. He will show mercy to those who repent, but judgment to those who refuse to repent (Ro.11:22).

We need the full Bible to get the big picture of God. If anyone emphasises one aspect of God above others, when it comes to other parts of the Bible that seem to contradict it, they will have to twist words or redefine terminology.

Some people exaggerate the sovereignty of God and find no place for the free will of man. They pick out verses that seem to support this view. But then there are also many other verses that talk about the responsibility of man to choose the right thing and the rewards and punishments that come depending on what we do. The solution is to place all the Bible together and understand that in His sovereignty, He has created man with a certain limited domain within which he is free to make choices. If we look only at God's sovereignty, we have to come to a God who is unpredictable, who is arbitrary in what He does, and who ultimately becomes responsible for all the evil there is in the world! This is a complete misrepresentation of God.

Another example is hyper-grace, where the grace of God is exaggerated to such an extent that there is nothing else that a Christian needs to consider. Fear of God, repentance, confession of sins, denying oneself, obedience to God, etc., seem to become unnecessary and irrelevant to those who come under grace. Yes, the undeserved favour of God is so unimaginably beyond our mind that we get overwhelmed even thinking about it. In one sense we can say that we cannot really exaggerate it. But the problem is that the NT is also full of things God wants us to do, warnings we need to take heed not to fall from grace, and exhortations to help us to keep moving forward. Once when I was talking to a hyper-grace follower, I said that if we followed the hyper-grace teaching we would have to ignore large portions of the New Testament, and he agreed with me! Surprisingly, even that recognition did not turn him away from his conviction!

One mark of growing in maturity is becoming more balanced.

#886 Believers, yet foolish

Jesus spoke a parable of ten young girls who were probably bridesmaids holding their burning lamps, waiting for the bridegroom to come for the wedding. So far, so good. But unexpectedly the bridegroom came late, and these girls had all dozed off. Finally when he came, five girls got up to greet him and go with him to the wedding. But the other girls noticed that the oil in their lamps was almost dry. They were not able to be in the bridal march!

If we leave all the details aside and look at the core message in the parable, it is a warning for us about not being ready for unexpected situations in life. Let us look at ourselves to see how we fare on that count. Let us broadly classify ourselves into two groups.

Group 1. We rejoice in knowing that God has graciously forgiven our sins and promised us a place in heaven. He has credited the righteousness of Jesus into our account so that this robe of righteousness covers all our nakedness. He forgives us our sins and heals all our diseases. He watches over us, protects us and provides us all we need. His plans are only for our welfare, and He makes everything to work for our good. He has prepared mansions for us in heaven where even the roads are laid with gold.

We meet every Sunday to clap and raise our hands and sing songs of praise and worship, and we keep a regular daily time for reading the Bible and praying. After all this, we live our life here just like everyone else, making money, reaching for positions, enjoying ourselves, etc. We are shocked when small or big calamities come our way and we even get disappointed with God!

Group 2. (Same as above except for the last two sentences!) But we realise how God has been gracious with us, how He has not treated us the way we deserve. We now want to live our entire life for Him, getting to know Him more, doing His will and sharing this good news with others. We want to become like Him in every way we think and behave.

Of course, this grouping is not absolute and many may fall somewhere in between. But the point is, are we growing in our closeness with the Lord? Are we becoming transformed from faith to faith and glory to glory? Then we will also be become more able to face the troubles that come our way. That is like having more oil in our lamps to deal with unexpected delays.

How sad it will be if we pat ourselves saying we are believers and then finally get rejected! The reason for this in some cases may be that we were only imagining that we were believers. Another reason could be that as believers we took things for granted and did nothing to work out our salvation. In both cases, there was no endurance.

In the parable of the sower, the seed was the same but the grounds were different. The same Saviour and Master, but different approaches we take with regards to our salvation. Let us stand before God now and see where we are, instead of getting a shock at the end. The takeaway passage is in 2Cor.5:14,15.

#887 Our will

We can learn something from Jesus at Gethsemane. Here was the Son of God praying to the Father three times to ascertain whether there was any other way for the salvation of man except through the cross. At the end He chose to set aside His own will and to submit to the Father's will (Mt.26:39). Was this a drama being played out for the benefit of the spectators or was there a real struggle in the mind of Jesus as a Man?

That the Son of God would lay down His life to pay for the sins of man was a plan that God had determined even before the world was created (1Pe.1:18-20). Jesus Himself knew this and mentioned it several times to the disciples before the time came. Yet, when the time actually came when He was going to be arrested and put to death, the Son of Man struggled with the decision. In fact, He asked the Father three times about the same thing. And when the people came to arrest Him, He knew that even then there was an opportunity for Him to call for the help of angels to deliver Him (Mt.26:53). Just look at the struggle going on in His mind between His will and the Father's! Truly He was tempted just as we are (He.4:15).

Look at what happened to Peter. He was sure that he would never deny Jesus even if it meant that he would lose his life (Mt.26:33,35). His intention was clear, and this was what he was determined to do. But he never expected the kind of situation that he faced when Jesus was being tried and a servant girl questioned his association with Jesus. His earlier determination was not strong enough to pull him through that test and he failed miserably.

These two examples of Jesus and Peter illustrate the fact we have been created in the image of God, with the ability to make choices about what we want to do and what we will actually do. If we did not have this free will, we would not have been like God in the way we have been created. Being made in the image is not being made with a little bit of God in us or, as some wrongly teach, as being essentially gods ourselves! That concept comes from eastern religions. But God made us like Him with the ability to think, feel and to make choices of our own.

Eve and Adam misused this freedom of choice to discard what God had told them and to do what would make them independent. The ultimate aim of the salvation which God has prepared for us is to get us back to the place where we will voluntarily choose to submit to His will. The first step in this process is to forgive all our past sins and to give us an opportunity to come under His will. But what happens if we receive forgiveness and imagine that we can continue to receive forgiveness, and then live the same way that we used to live? We will not be able at all that way to be transformed into the image of His Son, who denied His own will and submitted to the Father even when it came to giving up His life.

Read the Bible with this understanding and see what we find. It will almost be like getting a new Bible!

#888 Standing on the shoulders of giants

This is a metaphor indicating that when we grow further in understanding, it is because we are able to build further on what we have learned from those who have gone before us. When we stand on the shoulders of others, we can naturally see much farther than they were able to see. If we were standing on the same level as they, this could not have happened. This is what happens with every improvement in technology, for example. Subsequent generations are able to go beyond their previous generations because they can take advantage of everything that their predecessors have discovered. Isn't this so even in discovering spiritual truths?

Martin Luther and others who ushered in the Protestant Reformation were making a huge change in the theological understanding of those days. But did they understand everything fully? Can we take everything Luther taught as the final word? By no means! We are still learning more and more, delving into the treasures hidden in the word of God. Now we know more about the theology of salvation than Luther did. But does that make us greater than Luther? Not at all! We started our learning with the advantage of beginning from where he left off, and going further. If it weren't for him, and we were still in the time of the Reformation, where would we be?

There are two things we can learn from this. We are not to think that we are better than all our predecessors for the advances in spiritual understanding we have made from where they stood. Let us be grateful to them for giving us a running start, as in a relay race. We could not have done this without them. But let us also recognise that those coming after us can go much farther than we have been able to go. Let us learn to rejoice in that, recognising that God's wisdom is getting revealed more.

Let us think of this as a relay race that started from Adam and Eve. From generation to generation, a learning process has been going on, with one generation passing on the baton to the next. The one who is running currently has the advantage of having learned from the

mistakes of the past generations and also from the challenging examples from the past. If he has learned his lessons well, he can run better than all the previous generations.

But those who have not bothered to learn from history repeat the same mistakes. We can make this mistake of not learning from previous mistakes either because we foolishly venerate the older generations or because we are not conscious of the fact that we too can make mistakes.

God is our Judge who is righteous and just in giving each one his reward. This reward will not be based on how much we have produced but how faithful we have been with what we were given, as we can see from the parable of the talents. From those who have been given much, He will expect more (Lk.12:48). Let us not compare ourselves with others but learn to be faithful before our Lord with what He has given us (Gen.17:1).

#889 Restoration to God

There are people who talk about restoration of man's dominion over the earth or about the restoration of the earth to its state before it degenerated due to man's sin. But isn't it more important for us to understand and experience our full restoration to the original plan that God had for His relationship with man?

When Adam and Eve sinned, it was not a simple case of disobedience to God. The nature of the temptation to which Eve fell is very significant for us to understand what man lost in that failure. Before the Fall, they experienced an open and free relationship with God where God would be with them, and they felt no need because God provided everything for them. They would love and respect Him, and recognise their dependence on Him for their entire life. But the essence of the temptation to eat the fruit from the tree of knowledge of good and evil was that then they could have this knowledge for themselves, and that they would be self-sufficient, like God (Gen.3:5). This looked so attractive to Eve that she was willing to risk the consequence of 'death' - eternal separation from God.

Where are we now after the Fall? We feel alone, far from God, having to struggle for our survival, corrupted in our thoughts, filled with negative feelings and making wrong choices thinking they are right! That is what our independence from God has actually resulted in. Eve wanted to become like God, but as the consequence we came out of the covering and support of God. We learn to our despair that without God we can do nothing.

But the love of God for us whom He has created made a plan of salvation for us, to restore us to Him. Forgiveness of our sins and acceptance before Him are certainly what bring this salvation to us. But they are just the gates that open our way into this salvation, which is to restore us to what He originally intended for man. That means not just forgiving the past, but also restoring us to a life of constant fellowship with Him (1Jn.1:3). The more we actually leave the paths of darkness

and walk in the light, the greater fellowship we can have with Him. This is not doctrinal gymnastics but a practical way of life.

When we seek to live in fellowship with God – in our thoughts and intentions and not merely in our actions – we find that we cannot manage that by ourselves, however sincerely we try. Then we learn to abide in Him and let His power seep into us, as from the tree to the branches (Jn.15:4). In other words, we learn to give up our independence and learn to live in total dependence on God in every way. We learn from God as we read His word, submit to Him, act according to His wisdom and seek for power daily to do His will. Then we find that as He gives us the desire to do His will, He also gives us the power to do it, and we are able to actually do His will in practical ways (Php.2:12,13).

Unlearning our independent ways and learning to depend on God daily take time and perseverance.

#890 The man with just one talent

In the parable of the talents, Jesus tells us about three men who were entrusted with 5, 2 and 1 talent respectively. 'Talent' here was a unit of money in those days and not what we usually understand these days. However, it represents the resources that the Master has entrusted us with and using which He expect us to work and produce fruit. The man with five talents made five more, and the one with two made two more. But the one with one talent did not even attempt to work with it. His opinion about the master was that he was a hard man who demanded more from people than they could do (Mt.25:24).

His opinion was completely wrong. What the master did was to give different amounts to his servants 'according to each one's ability'. He knew more about this servant than the servant knew himself! The master knew that this servant could not be trusted to handle more than one talent, and even there this servant failed him.

As I thought about this servant, it occurred to me that perhaps his problem was that he saw that the master had not given him as much as he had given the other two servants. Perhaps he thought that he would not be able to produce as much results as the other two, and that he would cut a sorry figure in front of the master when he returned and asked for accounts. He assumed that the master would ask him why he had not produced as much output as the others. This made him so upset that he did not feel like doing anything for the master!

Actually, what happened at the end was that the master was more than just. He appreciated both the man with five talents for producing five more and the man with two talents who produced two more, in exactly the same way (v.21). In other words, his appreciation was not based on the quantity of the output but the faithfulness each one had shown with what they had received. If the man with one talent had made just one more, he would have received the same appreciation!

The problem is when we compare ourselves with others, instead of trying to be faithful with whatever we have. Then many of us can feel

just like the one talent man and think that because we can't do what others can do, then we can't do anything at all. But God is not asking us to do more than what we can, but to do just what He has given us to do. We may not have the abilities or the opportunities that some others have. But there are certainly things we can do.

Do we feel like this? Do we look at what others are doing and get discouraged because we can't do what they can? Let us remember that the Lord created us the way we are because He wanted someone just like us! If He wanted us to be like someone else and do what they do, He could have easily created us to be like that. What we all need to do is to stop comparing ourselves with others but to see how we can do things better each time in order to be faithful to the Lord. If we don't do our part, the body of Christ will lack that much (Col.1:24).

#891 God's bigger plan

Some Christians have a very limited understanding of God. They know God as their Father who is almighty and able to do anything He wants. Then they assume that since no father will want his children to suffer, He will always protect us from all forms of suffering. In other words, He will keep us always in good health, and He will prosper us so that we can enjoy this life doing whatever we like.

Suffering of any sort does not figure in that theology. But sooner or later everyone will have to admit that there is a lot of suffering in this life. To put it simply, suffering comes because of sin, not only ours but also from others. There is no way any of us can escape from suffering while we are on earth. Of course, once we are with God in eternity, He will take away all suffering (Re.21:4). Till then, we have to accept the fact that suffering will be there for us in one way or another.

Suffering serves at least three purposes for us. We recognise our need for God when we go through suffering, it teaches us that sin has consequences and it teaches us not to sin any more. Many people ask the question why a loving God would allow so much of suffering in this world. Now we can see that it is truly God's love for us that He uses suffering to draw us to Him. Just imagine what would happen if there was no suffering! We would live our way, not bother about God and never escape from the power of sin in our life.

There is another kind of suffering God wants us to take on voluntarily in order to stop sinning. That is the suffering that comes when we have to deny our sinful desires in order to do the will of God (1Pe.4:1). If we avoid this suffering, we can enjoy the pleasures of sin for a moment but then suffer the pain which the consequences bring us.

The more we learn to choose to 'suffer in our flesh' rather than to give in to sin, the stronger we also become able to bear the other kinds of suffering that there are in this world. We learn to overcome temptations and reduce the suffering that could have come from yielding to them. When other people sin against us, we become able to forgive and bear

with them which reduces our suffering drastically, instead of harbouring anger, bitterness and malice towards them and suffering in our mind with all such thoughts.

The highest plan that God has for us is that we can partake of His nature – His character (2Pe.1:3,4). He cannot just give it to us but just as we made choices that led us to sin, He wants us to choose to behave like Him. His master plan includes using every form of experiences and suffering that we go through, and how other people mistreat us, to work this for our transformation into the image of His Son, Jesus Christ (Ro.8:28,29). Once we see this master plan that God has for us, we will be so gripped with it that we will 'happily' go through our sufferings in such a way that this can be accomplished in our life (Ro.5:3;Ja.1:2,3). This is a new and life-giving way.

#892 Sympathy for our weaknesses

When God looked down from heaven, He saw not only the guilt of our sins, but also the weaknesses with which we struggled because of which we could in no way make our own way back to Him. When Jesus came here to open our way back to God, He learnt what it meant to be tempted like us (He.4:15). Now He tells us that He understands our struggles and sympathises with us. He stands ready to help us now by giving us forgiveness when we fall and help to overcome (v.16). As God and Man, we know that Jesus understands us completely and that we can always find comfort and encouragement from Him.

As human beings it is not easy for us to balance the ideas of God's holiness and justice that demand our punishment when we fail, and His mercy and patience waiting for us. If we think about the first we tend to feel condemned and discouraged, but if we think of the second we stand in danger of taking it for granted and taking sin lightly. But as we learn to hold both together, our excursions to both sides become less and we learn to find stability of heart, trusting in the love of God and hating sin more.

When it comes to being sympathetic to the weaknesses of others, it becomes very difficult for us. One reason is that God knows everything about us and so He really understands the struggles we go through, but we don't have that kind of understanding concerning the others. We either become too hard on them or too lenient with them. But here is where the Holy Spirit helps us to remember from where God has lifted us up, what it cost Him to pay for our sins and how we are far from being perfect even now. This brings us to the place where we can show mercy to the others, just as God has done for us.

It helps us when we realise that we can never fully understand others or sympathise with them because we are very limited in our ability to know them. We don't know the struggles they have had in growing up, what experiences of pain and suffering they have gone through, their different limitations regarding their intelligence, personality, knowledge, parental upbringing, etc. We may be aware to some extent

about how we are working with a lot of baggage from our past, but we don't even know that much about others.

"Bearing with one another, and forgiving each other, whoever has a complaint against anyone; just as the Lord forgave you, so must you do also" (Co.3:13). 'Just as the Lord forgave us' is what gives us power to forgive others. If we feel someone does not deserve mercy, we only have to look at how God has forgiven us. When we find it difficult to continuously bear with someone, we only have to think of how our God has to bear with all our imperfections even years after He gave us a new birth.

Receiving freely from God on one side, and giving freely to the others – we need to grow in maturity in both directions. One cannot be sustained without balance from the other. Exercising one side also helps us to strengthen the other.

#893 Claiming to be wise

"Claiming to be wise, they became fools" (Ro.1:22). "They exchanged the truth of God for falsehood" (v.25). This is a problem some Christians have when they read the Bible. The context here was about people going away from God to idols. But we can apply it to another context also.

God in His love for us has given us the Bible for revealing what kind of a Person He is, how He created us, what went wrong with us and what we need to do to get back to Him. He managed to use a variety of authors to convey what He wanted us to learn about getting into a relationship with Him and living the kind of life that represents His character (2Pet.1:3). We may wish sometimes that He had told us many things in more detail and more plainly, but what we can see is that to understand God's ways we have to seek it like people look for hidden treasures (Pr.2:3-5). We also have to have a heart that is willing to obey God after He shows us the truth (Jn.7:17). Then we will begin to have our spiritual eyes opened and see things from God's point of view. That is to be spiritually minded.

But isn't it possible to study the Bible as if it is merely a human writing, just as we study books in our schools and colleges? We may think that if we learn the Hebrew and Greek languages in which the original Bible was written, we will then be able to get to the 'real' meaning of the text. Of course, that knowledge is very helpful as far as understanding what the authors had in their mind. But spiritual insight will come only when our 'heart' seeks after God (Ps.42:1).

When we come to the Bible and find there things that are not unambiguously clear, one temptation is to speculate about what is not given there. The cleverer and the more knowledgeable we are, we may imagine that our ideas must be right. Then we may go on to publish such ideas and the greater the reputation we have or the more marketing we do, we may convince a lot of people to accept our new ideas. But the question is whether these ideas are true or merely

speculations (1Ti.1:4). Even new churches have been started based on some unique ideas that none of the others knew!

Can't we accept the idea that whatever God thought we needed to know, He has revealed, and what He has kept hidden are really not necessary for us to know at this time (De.29:29)? Why then do we go on to speculate about what God has chosen to hide? To show off our cleverness? As we saw in the beginning, that is a path that will lead us away from God and perhaps even to destruction.

A preacher called Thomas Campbell (1809) said, "Where the Scriptures speak, we speak; and where the Scriptures are silent, we are silent," as a general guideline for avoiding controversial opinions of men. This is not God's law which is to be followed literally but a helpful concept to think about. One part of humility is to abide within the boundaries God has laid out for us in His wisdom. Why don't we major on what God has revealed clearly?

#894 God cannot deny Himself

"The statement is trustworthy: 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 will also deny us; If we are faithless, He remains faithful, for He cannot deny Himself" (2Tim.2:11-13). There is comfort here, as well as a warning. The comfort is in knowing that our God is always the same, He is not unpredictable from time to time, and therefore we can rely on Him completely. If He has promised something, He will keep it, and He does not say anything without meaning it. Every single plan He makes for us is for our welfare, even when we cannot figure them out, and He does not do anything that will harm us (Je.29:11). This passage says that He cannot deny Himself in the sense that He cannot take on any position other than being true to Himself, and He will be faithful to keep all His promises.

But there is also a warning here. We need to see there is a big difference between how we people tend to think and behave and how God does. For example, if a favourite friend or close relative of ours does anything wrong, we are tempted to bend the rules for their sake, even though we know that would be wrong. If we do that, we would not be faithful to ourselves or to God. We would be acting contrary to what we know to be right. But God is not like that. He cannot be unrighteous even for a moment in order to favour someone He is very proud of. We can see when we go through the Bible that He would show no partiality to anyone or stop being righteous for a moment for their sake. See how Moses lost the opportunity to take the people to the Promised Land because he dishonoured God at the last moment by disobeying Him.

So God says that if we deny Him, He would be forced to deny us. No matter how faithful we may have been and what all we have done for Him, we cannot expect Him to overlook our sins. Of course, there is forgiveness for us if we sin, but not if we imagine that God will forgive us and take sin lightly. God has to be faithful to being Himself, He cannot give up His righteousness or justice in order to accommodate us. Even when He forgives us, it is not as if He just overlooks our sins or takes

them lightly as if they do not really matter. He has to be righteous and just too. He is able to forgive us only because our sins have already been punished through the death of Jesus and because we accept the position that what we deserve is judgment and that forgiveness is through His sheer grace.

If we have been thinking of God as if He was a man, let us stop that (Ps.50:21). Let us not expect that He will be after all kind and merciful and will not take our disobedience seriously. No, He cannot deny Himself, and He will always be faithful to Himself and in that way He will also be faithful to what He has revealed to us. Our love and gratitude towards Him should also be balanced with respect and awe towards His unchanging ways. There is really no contradiction here.

#895 Faith cannot ignore reality

Once after dealing with a blind man, Jesus asked him if he could see anything. The man answered that he could only see people like trees. Then Jesus had to lay hands on him again and this time the man could see everything clearly. What happens now if a 'healing preacher' insists that someone can see normally when he cannot, or if the blind man says he cannot see even after the preacher has laid hands on him? The preacher may say that the man has no faith or has some unconfessed sin. (That is another subject.) But what if he insists that the man has been actually healed or healed in the spiritual realm and that he has to confess that?

That is the confusion about faith. Are we expected to confess we are healed, when we can see we are not? Jesus did not say that to the blind man. Once when He healed ten lepers, He told them to go and show themselves to the priests who had to certify that they were healed, and as they obeyed Him and went, they got healed. Even here, He was not asking them to claim or pretend they were healed before they were healed.

Faith is not make-believe where we force ourselves to believe that something is real when it is not, hoping that by doing so it will become true. Wouldn't it be a straight lie? We can say we believe Jesus is able to heal us or do any other miracle for us, but that does not mean that we can say we have been healed when we have not. Faith is based on facts. In this case the facts we believe in include God's ability to heal us, His heart of love towards us, etc. In other words, this faith is our confidence in Him as a person. We trust Him as we know Him and then we place our confidence in Him.

Even when we are fully convinced about God's ability to heal or do any other miracle for us, one thing we may not know at different times is whether He will actually do it for us. Our faith in God as a person we have come to know is one thing (He.11:6). If we have to have faith that He will indeed heal us, or do a miracle for us, that has to be a special faith, or a gift of faith which gives us an assurance that He will do it

(He.11:1). If God speaks to us and gives us that assurance, then we will know it will happen (Ro.10:17). Then we can confess that it will certainly happen. But even with this, we cannot say it has already happened.

"Therefore, I say to you, all things for which you pray and ask, believe that you have received them, and they will be granted to you" (Mk.11:24). This is not positive thinking, but it is a trust in God that finds rest after leaving the answer to the Father.

The three men facing death in the furnace had faith in God as a person. But at that moment they did not know what exactly He would do (Da.3:17,18). Just because they believed that God could do miracles, they did not confuse that with being foolishly sure that it would happen.

One character of God is righteousness. He will not ask us to do anything unrighteous such as denying reality.

#896 A man who seeks God

Those who have seen God for who He is and themselves as He sees them will have a healthy restlessness that drives them to get closer and closer to Him. Those who think they are right with God and do not see any need to press on to know Him and His ways better have not really seen Him at all. On one hand, God is the pearl of greatest value for which we are willing to give up all our earlier pearls, and on the other hand the wonder of His grace towards us who truly deserve only His judgment causes us to cling to Him for life itself. Many people who consider themselves as Christians have not had their eyes opened to see things this way, and that is a great warning for them to realise that they have not yet become true Christians. They may have come 'near' to God through different paths such as miraculous healing or answers to prayer, but Jesus was radically clear that unless we are born again, there is no way to be in the kingdom of God (Jn.3:3). Before we can walk as Christians, we must become one, and that is only through seeing ourselves as sinners in the sight of the holy God, confessing and turning away from our sins and receiving forgiveness based on the sacrifice of Jesus on our behalf.

Having entered through the narrow gate, we now have to walk on the narrow path that differentiates us from the way the people of the world live. When we begin to show the fruit of the Holy Spirit in our daily life, that is the ultimate proof that God has made us His children. We also become aware that if we are to bear this fruit, we have to abide in Him because we cannot bear such fruit by ourselves. Let us look at a few of the characteristics of those who abide in Him.

One important thing is that we now trust in God entirely and what He has said in His word, instead of leaning on our own understanding (Pr.3:5-7). World opinions change with time, and so-called experts come out with theories that go contrary to godly values. But even though we are living in this world, we must remember that we have been taken out of this world to be a special people for God. We are to be

conformed into image of His Son Jesus rather than to this world (Ro.12:2).

The more we recognise the sinfulness of our old nature which is still in us and which keeps opposing the work of the Holy Spirit in us (Ga.5:17), the more strongly we will cling to the help that comes from God. Then we can experience that grace not only shows us unmerited favour but also gives us help to overcome when we are tempted (He.4:16). The weaker we recognise ourselves as and cling to God, we give God the opportunity to work His power through us (2Co.12:9).

Our very life and existence are from God. The more conscious we become about that, we give up our self-confidence, self-sufficiency and boasting and learn to lean on God and submit to Him (Ja.4:14,15).

So a man seeking God is not just someone who is trying to find God, but also one who wants to be more in line with God.

#897 Are you bound to the church or God?

There are churches which teach that when an infant is 'baptised' he gets born again and becomes a child of God. This blocks those churches from preaching that people must repent, believe in Jesus and be born again. There are churches that teach that when people eat the wafer in communion, they are receiving Jesus in their heart. What a simple and easy way, avoiding the pain of having to acknowledge themselves as sinners, repent from their sins, and trust the grace of God entirely for their salvation!

Think of different things you have been taught in your church which you know are not true or right, but which you accept just because you are in that church. They need not be just doctrinal but also practices that have been carried on for years and have become a tradition. They may be things your founders have taught, and you think you dare not even consider that they may be wrong.

We are not going to be admitted to heaven based on which denomination or church we have come from. We are all going to be judged based on our private lives – what we have thought, spoken, done, planned, schemed, etc. Motives and intentions are going to be judged more strictly than what we actually did. When we get to those, it is going to be tough to see that we cannot take cover under the teachings and traditions of our church, or the organisation where we worked, etc. It is each one to himself.

Walking in the light before God whose eyes penetrate to the depths of our heart is not easy (He.4:12,13). But this is why He has given us His word. When we look at the mirror of the word and allow it to show us where all we are wrong, it gives us the opportunity to cleanse ourselves. Our thinking and understanding do not have to be bound to the confines of our church, but we can come out of that box and go directly to God's word and let Him speak to us.

When we hear God through His word, we are obligated to act on it. The first thing, of course, is to cleanse ourselves where we have been wrong,

and to start behaving in the new way which He has shown us. Then we can move on to influencing others around us, including in the church. We can all be little influencers bringing about little reformations in our own little circles.

Churches may not be willing to make any changes because they will have to first admit they were wrong before. If it is difficult for us individuals to admit our mistakes, it can be more difficult for leaders to admit their collective mistakes. So these little reformers are not going to be welcome but looked upon as trouble makers who are trying to ruffle the feathers. But we cannot give up our understanding of the truth just because others do not accept it, because it is not with these people but the Lord with whom we have to deal (He.4:13).

Thinking outside our boxes is primarily for our cleansing and growth. We submit personally to God's truth, and then God will take care of using us as light to others.

#898 Righteousness and mercy

God is righteous and merciful at the same time. Because of this, He could not just decide to show us mercy when we actually deserved punishment. If He had done that, then He could not have been righteous. Justice had to be met in dealing with us. The wisdom and the love of God are seen in the way He met the challenge. He took our punishment on Himself so that then He would be free to forgive us. We can see that when He showed us mercy, it was not at the cost of ignoring His righteousness or justice.

It is not easy for us to conceptualise how righteousness and mercy work together. We would tend to take one or the other side at a time, and be merciful to some to the extent of ignoring their faults, or show a righteous indignation demanding punishment or unwillingness to forgive their sins. This is an area where we have to grow in maturity.

How would we deal with someone who has done us wrong? Some would say they can't be forgiven because of the enormity of the harm they have caused. They feel totally 'righteous' about it and think that it would be unfair to forgive such people. But then they forget how God has forgiven them. Was that really fair in that sense? No. But remembering how we deserved judgment and how God showed us mercy is what helps us to forgive others who have hurt us (Col.3:13).

Now, after we have received forgiveness from God as an expression of undeserved mercy, we ought to show the same mercy towards those who have sinned against us. If we think we should receive mercy even though we don't deserve it, but we don't want to forgive others because they don't deserve it, that would be unrighteous! That is what Jesus illustrated through the parable of the two servants where forgiveness was taken back from one because he refused to forgive the other (Mt.18:35).

As children grow up, we can notice that their sense of fair-play is stronger than their ability to show mercy. When they play games or face discipline, one response they have is to complain that things are not

fair, according to their understanding. When this sense of righteousness is developed without a balance from mercy, they become legalistic, and hard and demanding towards the others. On the other hand, if they start doing unrighteous things themselves and cover things up, this part of their conscience becomes dulled. Some people who grow up like that take cover behind the concept of mercy, saying, "Judge not!"

Those who are honest with themselves as they grow up keep recognising more and more that they are very much faulty in themselves. Or, when the Holy Spirit convicts them as they hear the Gospel, they become suddenly aware of how much they need mercy and how little they deserve it. When they find grace as the unmerited favour that God gives them to deal with their shortcomings, they also learn to be merciful to others around them.

How we need a balance for ourselves and towards others! That is to partake of the divine nature.

#899 Spiritual discernment

A woman I was counselling said that she was a spiritual person because she got up early to read the Bible and pray, and she always tried to do the right thing. But she did not recognise as wrong the hatred she had towards someone! Isn't this to live according to our natural understanding rather than being led by the Spirit of God? Paul wrote to the Corinthians that they were still immature and he could not talk to them on deeper issues (1Co.3:1,2). There are deeper things in life than what are seen on the outside, and that is why we need spiritual discernment (1Co.2:14). When we operate at the natural level, we rely merely on what we see and hear or according to the letter of what it says in the Bible.

There are two conditions for receiving spiritual discernment. One is that when God reveals something to us, then we should be willing to obey it (Jn.7:17). Why should God show us something if even after God tells us we are still going to decide whether we are going to follow it or not? Secondly, God will test us to see if we will trust Him and obey even when we are not able to understand it (Pr.3:5-7). This was what He did with Abraham when He asked him to go to a place which He would only show later.

If we remain as natural people, we can still become Bible scholars who know Hebrew and Greek and bring out ideas that no one has thought of before. But then we cannot also be godly people who manifest the fruit of the Spirit in an increasing manner. We will all admit that these fruit are more valuable in the kingdom of God than academic degrees and accolades from people.

Even in dealing with other people, don't we need to be discerning and going deeper than what they are saying or doing? If a man says he is a believer in Jesus, should we take it at face value or should we discern if God is at work in him even if he is at an infant level, spiritually speaking? Of course, our aim is not to sit in judgment and see where each man stands, but to be able to relate to each one in an appropriate manner and perhaps be able to help him.

There are different levels of spiritual discernment. Some who have a ministry of casting out demons need a way of discerning for their work the presence or activity of demons. But we all need to be growing in discernment, whichever ministry we have been entrusted with. For example, a Bible teacher who can speak to the need of the people he is addressing can be more effective than another who is doing a verse by verse exposition. The latter is good at one level, but we are exhorted to seek for the gift of prophecy, when we can bring forth from the word what the Lord would have us to share with the particular people we have before us (1Co.14:1)?

"And this I pray, that your love may overflow still more and more in real knowledge and all discernment" (Php.1:9). "But solid food is for the mature, who because of practice have their senses trained to distinguish between good and evil" (He.5:14).

#900 Our sinful response

Think of someone who has hurt you. You think that it was unfair, uncalled for, beyond acceptable limits, and especially unexpected from a person like him or her. Every time you think about it, it hurts, and sometimes it hurts more because the practical consequences of that person's act continue even now, long after it happened. How do you respond?

Our old nature is such that any of us can sin if we yield to temptation, and temptation can overpower us when it comes from unexpected directions and at what we would consider as inappropriate moments when we are weak from the circumstances. However godly we may have become and transformed by the grace of God in our lives, it still remains a fact that we don't fully understand every propensity we have towards sin that remains in our flesh. So, we can say that we are all blind to different aspects of our self-centred attitudes and behaviour, which come out of our life and hurt others even when we don't see how they could have hurt anyone. That is not only because we are 'blind' but also because we have this peculiar tendency to find justifications for anything we do. We are so deeply self-centred in our thinking that we are many times unable to see things from any other points of view (Je.17:9).

As a result, even when we are the ones who have done wrong, we have this tendency to see only the other people's faults and imagine that what we have done was justified under the circumstances! For example, we can do something wrong, and then focus on the fact that the other person is not forgiving!

We have now addressed two scenarios, one where someone else has hurt us, and the other where we have hurt someone else. In both cases, isn't it our response to the situation that should come under our judgment mostly? First take out the log from our own eyes before we try to take out the speck from the other's (Mt.7:3)? But it is my observation from my own life and others including otherwise godly people that this is most challenging! Unless we make a determined

effort to focus on judging ourselves, we will find ourselves having all kinds of reasons to blame others and to justify ourselves.

This is a very crucial area of life to process if our goal is to become truly godly. But the common concept of godliness is about external compliance to disciplines such as church attendance, reading the Bible, praying, etc. But Mt.23:25,26 is extremely relevant to us in this connection. Next time we have a problem with someone, can we just take up an exercise to keep away for the moment from what the other person has done wrong and focus on what is going on inside us in the way of our inner response? Let us meditate deeply on "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing" (Lk.23:34). This can be the thing that will set us apart from a mere profession of godliness and lead us in the true way of godliness. Let us remember that our heart can be very deceptive when it comes to this.

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 has been married to Susan from 1975. They stay in Bangalore, and they have five grown up children and eight 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, 900 messages have been compiled into nine 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 distribution at the web site.