

THE HIDDEN LIFE

A Call To Discipleship

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BOON-SING POH



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THE HIIDEN LIFE: A Call To Discipleship

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This book is dedicated to
the persecuted believers in China.

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Preface To This Edition

The years roll on fast. Outward circumstances may appear to change, sometimes quite dramatically, but human needs remain the same – not least the spiritual need of man. God's word is used by the Holy Spirit to save souls, and to edify souls saved. The word of God proclaimed in print supplements what is proclaimed in the pulpit.

A series of articles on the Christian life was published in the early years of the Gospel Highway magazine, when it was in hardcopy before going electronic. The articles were subsequently gathered together to form the substance of this book. That was in the 1980's and the 1990's, when the Charismatic movement was spreading like wildfire throughout the world. While countering the claims of the Charismatic movement, it was thought necessary to issue a call to God's people to return to old fashioned discipleship.

It is our conviction that the call to biblical discipleship is needed in every generation. This modest book is an attempt to contribute to that need. A new chapter, "Bear Your Cross

And Follow...", has been added. Our prayer is for a new generation of the Lord's disciples to be raised up, who would "hold fast/forth the word of life" (Phil. 2:16).

Soli Deo Gloria.

Boon-Sing Poh,
Kuala Lumpur, May 2020.

Foreword

This book is a call to a closer walk with the Lord Jesus Christ. It is a book about Christian discipleship.

Discipleship has to do with what a believer *is* before what he *does*. To reverse the order will be to court disaster. To ignore either will be to destroy true Christianity. Both the *character* and *behaviour* of the Christian are important. Our emphasis in this book is upon the Christian *character* since from it arises the Christian's *behaviour*.

The Christian life is "hidden with Christ" (Col. 3:3). Union with Christ leads to everlasting life, spiritual strength, and ultimate safety. What the world sees of the Christian is only the tip of the iceberg, the bulk of his true self being hidden from physical sight. Many are the internal struggles of the Christian, known only to himself and to God. Despite these, the true disciple of Christ can sing often, "You are my hiding place; You shall preserve me from trouble; You shall surround me with songs of deliverance (Ps. 32:7)."

The topics in this book cover the full range of the Christian's experience, from the beginning of spiritual life to the anticipation of glory. We are conscious of the many omissions.

For example, there could have been a separate treatment on prayer and meditation, on spiritual desertion, and on facing death. Limitations of various kinds, however, have called for us to stop.

Our aim is to instruct and to edify. May the reader derive much spiritual benefit from this book.

Boon-Sing Poh,
Kuala Lumpur, 1996.

One

Unless One Is Born Again...

Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God (John 3:3).

An obvious characteristic of churches today is shallowness. There is, first, a shallowness in Bible knowledge. People do not seem to be interested in a deeper understanding of the truth. Instead, all that they are concerned about is having ‘experiences’. It is not wrong to have experiences in the Christian life. However, experiences that do not arise out of the apprehension of truth are not worth pursuing. Those who yearn for a deeper experience of God should yearn for a deeper understanding of God’s word.

Then, there is also shallowness in the Christian life. There is so much emphasis on experiences but there actually is no depth in the spiritual life. A person who has a deep spiritual life walks in close communion with his God. He is caught up with the glory of his God. He so loves his God that he wishes

to give his all to Him. That type of knowledge of God is lacking in today's Christianity.

However, a closer examination will reveal that there *are* people who are earnest in their search for God. There *are* people who yearn for a deeper knowledge of God. They want to experience His power in their lives. We do know of individuals who yearn and moan for greater holiness, and for a closer walk with God. One indication is that the best selling book in our bookstore is "Holiness," by J. C. Ryle. Wherever we display our books, that book sells best. The very word "Holiness" seems to strike a chord in those who yearn for a deeper knowledge of God.

The new birth crucial

We see, then, that in the midst of the prevalent shallowness, there are those who yearn for a deeper knowledge of God. They yearn for more than what others are contented with. They do not want to be caught up in the 'wishy-washy' Christianity that is rampant. They want to be true disciples of Jesus Christ. To such people I address this message – *there can be no true discipleship without the new birth*. Jesus Christ says in John 3:3, "Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God." He speaks of a new birth that you must undergo before you can see the kingdom of God. To "see the kingdom of God" is to enter the kingdom of God. This is clear from a subsequent verse, "Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God." Put another way, you cannot be a true disciple of Jesus Christ without first being born again.

From these words of Christ, it is clear that there are two categories of people in this world – those who are in God's kingdom, and those who are outside God's kingdom. Those who are outside God's kingdom include people who are not concerned about true Christianity. They include also those who profess to be Christians but who have no interest in living a life of obedience to God. They call themselves "Christians", but there is no sign of discipleship in their lives. Only those who are in God's kingdom are true disciples of Christ.

Now, in a sense, both categories of people belong to God. God is in overall control of all things. We live in God's world. We owe our lives to God. We are answerable to Him. However, what we see in these words of Jesus Christ is that there are those who belong to God in the sense that they are true disciples of Christ. They have spiritual life, given them by God. Those who are outside the kingdom of God have not this spiritual life. They are spiritually dead. They are not true disciples of Christ.

Jesus Christ Himself clearly says that there are these two categories of people in the world. In verses 18 and 19 of John 3, He says, "He who believes in Him (that is, in Christ) is not condemned; but he who does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God. And this is the condemnation, that light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil." It is clear that there are two categories of people in the eyes of God. Those who live in darkness, and those who live in the light. Those who love

darkness are outside the kingdom of God. They are not disciples of Christ. Only those who live in the light are the true disciples of Christ.

Some people may say that we are too narrow, that we are too clear-cut, too distinct, in our division of people into these two categories. But these are the words of the Lord Jesus Christ. You either belong to the kingdom of God, in which Christ is the King, or you belong to the kingdom of darkness, in which Satan is king. There is no middle ground. A true disciple of Jesus Christ has Christ as the ruler, the King, of his life.

If you are in the kingdom of darkness, you are under the condemnation of God already. You do not have to wait till the last day before you experience the condemnation of God. This is where a lot of people get it wrong. They think that as long as they are not actively doing anything against God, they are all right. They may not be Christians, but they need not be against the Christian faith either. They are in some sort of neutral state in which God neither blesses them nor condemns them. That is a great mistake in their thinking. The Bible clearly teaches that right now God's anger is focused upon you. It is as though the roof is hanging by some strings over you and it is going to collapse on you at any moment. God's anger is settled upon you, waiting for judgment day to come down upon you in all its force.

It follows, therefore, that this is not a matter of no significance to you. It is not a matter for you to take lightly. It is impossible for you to read this message without being concerned.

Otherwise, what is the point of reading on? You might as well drop this article and stop reading any farther. You might as well go on enjoying life to the full and not think of judgment day. The fact of the matter, however, is that this is true. Very soon, your life on earth will be over. There will be no more opportunity to put things right. Your soul awaits the fearful certainty of facing the full force of God's wrath because of your sins. How you live now will determine your eternal destiny. If you are in God's kingdom now, you are safe for all eternity. If you are outside of God's kingdom now, you will face the judgment of God. The only way to change the situation is that you enter the kingdom of God now, in this life.

Jesus Christ says that you must be born again to enter the kingdom of God. We are not interested in what people say about this matter. We want to hear what Christ says. Here you are, in the kingdom of darkness. You want to be in the kingdom of God. Jesus Christ says you must be "born of the Spirit" in order to be there. As for those of us who are already in the kingdom of God, we wish to be clear about this doctrine of the new birth. Many of us forfeit the comfort that is ours because of not being clear about this doctrine. It is only when we are clear about this doctrine that we are able to help others find the way back to God. We have close friends, and relatives, and loved ones, who are still in the kingdom of darkness. We certainly do not want them to remain there. How are you going to help them if you are not clear about the way of salvation?

1.1 What It Is Not

Not by natural birth

So, let us come back to this doctrine of the new birth that Jesus Christ teaches. We must first be clear as to what it is not before we can be clear as to what it really is. The first thing taught here in the third chapter of John's Gospel is that the new birth does not come about by natural birth. In this world, a person who is born a prince will inherit the throne. A person who is born into a rich family will inherit the property of his parents. It is different with the new birth. You may be born into a Christian family, but you are not automatically born of the Spirit. You still need the new birth. Nicodemus was born a Jew, the special people of God. He could claim that he was a true descendant of Abraham. Yet he needed to be born again before he could enter the kingdom of God.

Not by learning

The new birth does not come by learning. A person may be educated so that he knows more. Some people who know more may behave better, but that does not mean that they are born of the Spirit. Good behaviour alone does not indicate that a person is born of the Spirit. You may train a child from young. You may give him the best education possible, until he graduates from university. All this will not cause him to be born again. Nicodemus had perhaps the best education of his day. He was trained as a religious leader. Despite that, he was outside the kingdom of God.

Not by rank

Rank or status in society will not help you either. You may be awarded a *datukship*¹, or some other titles, and none of these will cause you to be born again. You may have a noble birth, and yet remain in the kingdom of darkness. Nicodemus, by virtue of his being a Pharisee, was a member of the Council of Seventy that ruled the nation of Israel. Yet, he needed to be born again in order to enter the kingdom of God.

Not by rituals

Religious rituals cannot cause the new birth to occur. You may abstain from certain food which you consider unclean and eat certain food which you consider clean, but none of these will help you. You may fast as much as you like, but this will not cause you to be born again. You may give money to the poor, you may donate money to schools and associations, but none of these will cause you to be born again. As a Jew, and a religious leader, Nicodemus performed all the rituals of his religion. Yet, none of these could cause him to be transferred into the kingdom of God. In fact, Jesus Christ told him that he must be "born of water *and the Spirit*". Nicodemus was familiar with the Jewish proselyte baptism. A non-Jew had first to be immersed in water before he could be considered an adherent, or proselyte, to the Jewish religion. Nicodemus was also familiar with the baptism practised by John the Baptist. Immersion in water may have served its purpose in those instances, but Nicodemus was told he must be born *of the Spirit* in order to enter the kingdom of God.

¹Title of honour conferred by the Malaysian Rulers.

Not by money

If natural birth, learning, rank in society, and religious rituals cannot bring about the new birth, certainly money cannot buy it. You must remember that Nicodemus and Jesus Christ lived in the time of the Romans. The Romans classified people according to the place where they lived. Certain cities were regarded as Roman cities. Those who were born in such cities became Roman citizens automatically. Otherwise, to be a Roman citizen, you had to pay a certain sum of money. Many Jews could not become Roman citizens, but there were those who bought their citizenship. It is different with the kingdom of God. You cannot possibly become a citizen of the kingdom of God by paying a sum of money. If that were possible, Nicodemus would have been in the position to do so. No, money cannot buy you citizenship in the kingdom of God.

Many people in the world do not understand this. They think that acceptance with God can be gained by doing something. They are always concentrating on doing some things and not doing other things. To them, the key into the kingdom of God is the word "do". How mistaken they are! This wrong thinking has crept into the church. There are preachers who teach that in order to become a Christian you must do something – such as walking the aisle to the front of the church, raising the hand, or signing a piece of paper to agree to follow Christ. Others teach that you must "speak in tongues". Yet others believe that a child born to a Christian family automatically becomes a Christian. How mistaken all these people are! The words of Jesus Christ clearly show that the new birth is not

brought about by any of these things.

Why are emphasising all this? It is in order to make you see your utter inability to save yourself. It is in order to make you see that, left to yourself, you are utterly helpless and hopeless. Nicodemus came to Jesus Christ thinking that there was something he could do to earn his way to heaven. But that was not possible. He could do nothing to make God accept him. He needed to be born again, of the Spirit, to enter the kingdom of God. The new birth has nothing to do with what you can do. If you think like that, you are like Nicodemus. You will not be able to enter the kingdom of God as long as that idea remains with you.

1.2 What It Is

Quickly, tell me what the new birth is! That would be what you are saying at this point. But, you see, I am deliberately causing you to "sweat it out". Unless you come to see your utter helplessness, you will not appreciate what it means to be born again. Too many people take the doctrine of the new birth too lightly. They claim that they are born again, when in fact they are not. They use the term "born again" too lightly. They say their cars are "born again", their houses are "born again", and even their T-shirts are "born again"! You must come to grasp this fact – that you are totally unable to bring about the new birth. Then, and only then, will you be ready to receive the doctrine of the new birth.

A work of the Spirit

What is the new birth? The first thing you need to know is that the new birth is a work of the Spirit of God which changes your nature. This change of nature is what has been called "regeneration". The actual mechanism involved cannot be understood, just as we cannot understand how the wind blows – to where it is blowing, or from where it comes. All we can say is that the word of God is involved in the process. Jesus Christ says in Matthew 4:4 that "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God." The apostle Peter says that a man is "born again, not of corruptible seed but incorruptible, through the word of God which lives and abides forever (1 Pet. 1:23)." The Holy Spirit, in some mysterious way, makes use of the word of God to bring about the new birth. We cannot truly understand the actual mechanism involved. We cannot analyse it by drawing a chart, or plotting a graph, to depict the process. We cannot dissect it to see how the process actually takes place. But we do know that it is a work of the Holy Spirit. "The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear the sound of it, but cannot tell where it comes from and where it goes. So is everyone who is born of the Spirit (John 3:8)."

We must note, however, that although it is a mysterious work of the Holy Spirit the new birth is nevertheless a reality. When it does happen, we can know that it has taken place. Jesus Christ said to Nicodemus, "Are you the teacher of Israel, and do not know these things? Most assuredly, I say to you, We speak what We know and testify what We have seen, and

you do not receive Our witness. If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how will you believe if I tell you heavenly things? No one has ascended to heaven but He who came down from heaven, that is, the Son of Man who is in heaven." The new birth can be known, although the actual mechanism involved cannot be understood. We can experience the reality of the new birth. Jesus Christ reveals it, by His Spirit, to all those who are born again.

We are talking about spiritual life – life that is eternal. We are talking about living a life with God – being a true disciple of Jesus Christ. We may define the new birth as *a work of the Holy Spirit in changing the nature of a person, thereby bringing him under the rule of God*. The new birth is in some way connected with the word of God. It follows that if you wish to be born again, you must expose yourself to the word. You must read the Bible, and hear it preached. The new birth is totally the work of the Spirit of Christ. It follows that you must cast yourself totally upon Christ to be saved – to be born again. This leads us to the next point about the new birth.

Related to the cross

The new birth is related to the cross of Christ. John 3:14 tells us that "as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life." This is, of course, a reference to that incident in the Old Testament in which Moses lifted up a bronze serpent on a pole so that the Israelites who were bitten by serpents would not die. Jesus Christ is here alluding to His forthcoming death on the cross

of Calvary. Just as the bronze serpent was the means of saving the Israelites from certain death, Jesus Christ's death on the cross was going to be the means of saving people from eternal death.

The actual mechanism involved in the new birth cannot be understood. One thing clear, however, is that under normal circumstances there must be an understanding of the significance of the cross, without which there can be no new birth. In order to experience the new birth, you must come to appreciate the meaning of Christ's death on the cross. Jesus Christ died on the cross in the place of sinners so that whoever turns to Him in faith will be saved from the condemnation of God, from the clutch of Satan upon his life, and from eternal damnation in hell. This is the teaching of Jesus Christ Himself. The apostle Paul explains this clearly in 2 Corinthians 5:19, "God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not imputing their trespasses to them." And in verse 20, "He made Him (that is, Christ) who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him." It is Christ's death on the cross that brings reconciliation with God. The new birth is clearly connected with the cross of Jesus Christ.

Leads to conversion

The third point is that the new birth leads to conversion. A person who is born of the Spirit will be converted. He will be changed from his old way of life to a new way of faith. There is no such thing as a new birth that does not lead to conversion. God does not work by measures. When a person is born again, he *will* be converted. Conversely, a person is converted only

because he *has* been born again. Conversion involves two basic elements. First, it involves belief in Christ. Second, it involves a changed life.

We consider the first element. Jesus Christ says in verse 15, "... whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life." He says in verse 16, "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever *believes* in Him should not perish but have everlasting life." He says in verse 18, "He who *believes* in Him is not condemned, but he who *does not believe* is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God." (Emphasis added.) Clearly, belief in Christ is an essential element in true conversion. To be converted, you must trust in Him.

The second element in true conversion is a changed life. You cannot claim yourself to be converted unless you live a changed life. Too many people who claim to be Christians remain the same as before their profession of faith. Their lives continue to be as worldly and carnal. They have attitudes that are no different from those of their non-Christian friends. Such people cannot possibly be true converts. Jesus Christ says in verses 19 to 21, "And this is the condemnation, that the light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil. For everyone practicing evil hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed. But he who does the truth comes to the light, that his deeds may be clearly seen, that they have been done in God."

By describing what *unconverted* men are like, Jesus Christ

is actually showing us what *converted* men are like. People who are truly converted will come to the light, and they will live in the light. They have nothing to hide. They want to follow Jesus Christ, and be taught by Him. Unconverted people, on the other hand, do not follow Jesus Christ. Some of them may profess to be Christians, but they are seldom seen in the church. They do not like their lives to be exposed to the word of God. That would be too uncomfortable to them. They would rather live as they like, in their sins. But you cannot hide from God. God knows all your sins. Those who are truly converted will live a changed life. They will want to follow Jesus Christ.

1.3 Implications

What is the new birth? We know now what it is. It is a work of the Holy Spirit in changing the nature of a person, thereby bringing him under the rule of God. We know that it is related to the cross of Jesus Christ. We know also that it leads to conversion and a changed life. We must close with some practical implications.

Preach the gospel

There are people who object strongly to this doctrine of the new birth. They are strongly opposed to the idea that the new birth is not a work of man, and that it is totally the work of the Holy Spirit. They claim that if this were true, there would be no need for Christians to evangelise – to bring the message of salvation to the world. These people are greatly mistaken.

We have already seen that the new birth is related to the cross of Christ. God has chosen the means of hearing the gospel to save sinners. People must hear the message of the cross before they can be born again. It is important, therefore, that Christians bring the message of the cross to others. Preaching the gospel involves commanding and urging people to repent of their sins and to believe in Jesus Christ. When sinners come to the understanding that they cannot save themselves, they will whole-heartedly trust in Christ for salvation. When that happens, glory redounds to God alone. The preacher can only say that he is a servant of God in the work of salvation. He cannot claim any of the glory to himself.

Man's responsibility to repent

There are others who charge us with teaching "a theology of contradiction". They claim that if the new birth is totally the work of the Holy Spirit, man cannot be held responsible for his sins. "How can man be condemned to hell when he has no ability to save himself?" – they object. These people who object to the doctrine of the new birth have confused the responsibility of man and the grace of God. They have also confused regeneration with conversion. It is precisely because man is responsible for his sins that he must be condemned. It is precisely because he is unable to save himself that he needs God's mercy. A sinner must repent of his sins and believe in Jesus Christ. That is his work. But he is able to repent and believe only because the Holy Spirit has changed his nature, causing him to be born again. This is the Holy Spirit's work. The Bible declares, "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and

that not of yourselves; *it is* the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast (Eph. 2:8-9)."

Necessity of faith

Yet others charge us with teaching a "theology of despair". Here is a sinner – they say – who is convicted of his sins. He knows that he is condemned of God, and yet cannot do anything to save himself. You are driving him to despair – they say. In a sense, yes, the person is driven to despair. It is despair over his own ability to save himself. It is only when he despairs over his own ability that he will appreciate the message of salvation in Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ has done all that is necessary to save even the worst of sinners – by His death and resurrection. The sinner must cast himself totally upon Christ to be saved. The situation is very much like the father of the boy who was attacked by an evil spirit, recorded for us in Mark 9. We read in verse 24 that the father cried out and said with tears, "Lord, I believe; help my unbelief!" A sinner must similarly cry out, "Lord, I believe; help my unbelief!"

We see, then, that the doctrine of the new birth is no 'theology of contradiction', nor is it a 'theology of despair'. It is the theology of salvation. It is the theology of hope, of peace with God, of life eternal! It is a doctrine that is clearly revealed in the Bible and, therefore, cannot be false. Moreover, all three persons of the Godhead are involved in the salvation of the sinner. We are told in John 3:16 that it is God, the Father, who so loved the world that He sent His only begotten Son. We are told in verse 14 that it is Jesus Christ who would be lifted up so that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have

everlasting life. And we are told in verse 6 that the new birth is brought about by the Holy Spirit. If all three persons of the Godhead are involved in our salvation, we can be sure that all who are called of God will be saved. What glorious certainty there is in this doctrine of salvation!

Dear Reader, true discipleship begins with the new birth. If you are not born again of the Spirit of God, you are not a true follower of Jesus Christ. And if you are not a true follower of Christ, you are not in the kingdom of God. And if you are outside the kingdom of God, you are already under God's condemnation!

*Seek the LORD while he may be found,
Call upon Him while He is near.
Let the wicked forsake his way,
And the unrighteous man his thoughts;
Let him return to the LORD,
And He will have mercy on him;
And to our God,
For He will abundantly pardon.*
(Isaiah 55:6-7)

Two

Bear Your Cross And Follow...

25 Now great multitudes went with Him. And He turned and said to them, 26 “If anyone comes to Me and does not hate his father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and his own life also, he cannot be My disciple. 27 And whoever does not bear his cross and come after Me cannot be My disciple. 28 For which of you, intending to build a tower, does not sit down first and count the cost, whether he has enough to finish it— 29 lest, after he has laid the foundation, and is not able to finish, all who see it begin to mock him, 30 saying, ‘This man began to build and was not able to finish’? 31 Or what king, going to make war against another king, does not sit down first and consider whether he is able with ten thousand to meet him who comes against him with twenty thousand? 32 Or else, while the other is still a great way off, he sends a delegation and asks conditions

of peace. 33 So likewise, whoever of you does not forsake all that he has cannot be My disciple. 34 “Salt is good; but if the salt has lost its flavor, how shall it be seasoned? 35 It is neither fit for the land nor for the [a]dunghill, but men throw it out. He who has ears to hear, let him hear!” (Luke 14:27).

Luke 14:25-35 is most instructive on the subject of discipleship. The incident recorded occurred at a time when multitudes were coming to Jesus Christ. Instead of encouraging them to come to Him, the Lord uttered teaching that appear shocking, that would have had the effect of discouraging the people from following Him.

The passage shows that the Lord was not looking for a big number of people to follow Him but for genuine believers. We will learn what constitute true discipleship. This will have practical implications. One implication concerns how we carry out the Great Commission. The Great Commission is that great command of the Lord given to the local church to plant other local churches. It is recorded in various parts of the New Testament, the fullest account being Matthew 28:18-20. There, we are commanded to go into the world to make disciples of all the nations, to baptise them in the name of the Holy Trinity, and to teach them to observe all the Lord’s commands. If we have a wrong understanding of what constitutes discipleship, there would be no point for us to proceed to the next parts of the Great Commission, namely to baptise and to teach the ‘disciples’.

Another implication is that seekers – that is, those who are

thinking of becoming a Christian – will be misled in their understanding of discipleship. Wrong teaching will lead to wrong behaviour along the way. If they come to faith in Christ, their Christian life will be adversely affected in some ways. More seriously, they might have a wrong concept of discipleship and go about professing to be believers when, in fact, they are not truly converted.

We see now the importance of understanding what constitute true discipleship. From our text, which is Luke 14:25-35, we draw out four main points about true discipleship. These points may be stated as: "Not big numbers but genuine faith (vv. 25-26)"; "Not self-effort but the cross of Christ (v. 27)"; "Not half-heartedness but total commitment (vv. 28-33)"; and "Not temporary zeal but persevering faith (vv. 34-35)". Let us proceed to unravel each point step by step.

2.1 Not Big Numbers But Genuine Faith

The first main point about discipleship, drawn out of verses 25-26, is that it consists not in big numbers but in the genuineness of faith. Without true faith, there can be no true discipleship.

This was not the only occasion when the Lord appeared to discourage the multitudes from following Him. There was another occasion when this happened. The incident of the Lord feeding the five thousand followers in Galilee, with five barley loaves and two small fish, is well known to many. That miracle is recorded in all four Gospels. After that incident, the Lord would feed four thousand followers at the Decapolis with

seven loaves and some small fish. Our focus is on the feeding of the five thousand in Galilee. Multitudes followed the Lord after that miracle. In John 6:26-27 we have the Lord's response to the crowd who came looking for Him. He said, "Most assuredly, I say to you, you seek Me, not because you saw the signs, but because you ate of the loaves and were filled. Do not labor for the food which perishes, but for the food which endures to everlasting life, which the Son of Man will give you, because God the Father has set His seal on Him." The Lord went on to say, in versus 43-44, "Do not murmur among yourselves. No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him; and I will raise him up at the last day." The reaction of the people is given in John 6:60, "This is a hard saying; who can understand it?" The outcome is worth noting. We read in John 6:61-66,

When Jesus knew in Himself that His disciples complained about this, He said to them, "Does this offend you? What then if you should see the Son of Man ascend where He was before? It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh profits nothing. The words that I speak to you are spirit, and they are life. But there are some of you who do not believe." For Jesus knew from the beginning who they were who did not believe, and who would betray Him. And He said, "Therefore I have said to you that no one can come to Me unless it has been granted to him by My Father."

From that time many of His disciples went back and walked with Him no more.

The Lord did not hold back on the truth that no one can come to Him except he is drawn by the Father. The Lord did not hold back on the truth that genuine faith in Him is needed to have eternal life. Furthermore, He did not hide the fact that He knew there were unbelievers among those who followed Him. The outcome of such forthright teaching was that many of His disciples stopped following Him. They showed no genuine discipleship. They were coming to the Lord for the wrong reason, namely to gain materially from Him.

It seemed that with time, the crowd was building up again. Multitudes followed the Lord as He entered Jerusalem. This was when He turned around to give this teaching. He says, in Luke 14:26, "If anyone comes to Me and does not hate his father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and his own life also, he cannot be My disciple." Here, the Lord is again demanding true discipleship from those who follow Him. It is obvious that the Lord is not asking us to literally hate our family members, and even ourselves. Rather, He is using a strong contrast to emphasise the point that we must put Him first in our lives even though we love our parents, our wives and children, and our own lives. Elsewhere, He uses similar strong language. For example, in Matthew 5:29-30, He says, "If your right eye causes you to sin, pluck it out and cast it from you; for it is more profitable for you that one of your members perish, than for your whole body to be cast into hell. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and cast

it from you; for it is more profitable for you that one of your members perish, than for your whole body to be cast into hell." There will be problems if we take the Lord's words literally. If an eye causes us to sin, we pluck it out. If a hand causes us to sin, then chop it off. Every part of our body is going to cause us to sin, and we will have to remove every part. In the end, what are we left with? We know that having any part of the body removed will not prevent us from sinning – in thought, word, or deed. A blind person sins, and so does a lame person.

In the same way, we must understand that the Lord is not asking us to literally hate our loved ones. In fact, when we become true followers of Jesus Christ, we are enabled to love our parents, wives, and children more than before our conversion. That is because, when converted, we are transformed by the Holy Spirit from within to appreciate them better. Our hearts are made tender so that we value people around us, and those close to us, even more. We will love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength, and we will love our neighbours as ourselves. However, the Lord is always first in our lives.

Another example of how the word "hate" is used can be found in Luke 16:13. There, the Lord says, "No servant can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or else he will be loyal to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon." The Lord does not mean that serving God whole-heartedly require us to literally hate our employer on earth. He is not saying that we are to be loyal to God while despising our human employer. Rather, He is emphasising the point that our loyalty and commitment to

anyone on earth cannot supersede our commitment to God. God must always be first in our lives. Among all loyalties, loyalty to God has the priority. Whenever there is a clash of loyalty, we should choose to be loyal to our God. Thankfully, it is not often that we face a situation of having to make a choice like this. However, true discipleship requires that we put the Lord first in our lives, all the time.

The Lord had weeded out those who came to Him for the wrong reason, after the feeding of the five thousand in Galilee. He now weeds out those who are not prepared for total commitment to Himself. He is not interested in large numbers of people following Him but He wants those who follow Him to be true disciples. "Not big numbers but genuine faith" is the first lesson we learn. Despite this clear teaching, there are many churches that continue to use numbers attending the church as the measure of success. They look for quantity at the expense of quality.

This applies to us on the personal level as well. You must be careful not to choose to attend a church simply because it has a large congregation. Rather, you should choose a church that is faithful to God's word, in which the people are sincere and clearly love the Lord. That church will not be perfect, for there is no perfect church anywhere. The church is what you make it to be. You are yourselves not perfect and you will contribute to the imperfection of the church. However, what we are saying is this – choose a church that is faithful to God and His word, instead of a church that is big but shows no concern whether there is true discipleship in the people who attend.

Another application is in our evangelism. We must not seek a mere profession of faith in those we are reaching out to with the gospel. Our aim is to produce true disciples, not many professing believers whose faith is questionable. We know that salvation belongs to the Lord alone but it has pleased the Lord to use us as His instrument to bring the gospel to others. The Holy Spirit uses the gospel that we proclaim to convince and convict the hearers, so that they are finally converted. We want to see a genuine work of the Holy Spirit in the lives of the hearers. We do not want to be shoddy in the work of proclaiming the gospel and in assessing the conversion of the hearers. Let us look for true conversion rather than be anxious about having a big number of professing believers.

2.2 Not Self-effort But The Cross Of Christ

The next main point is, "Not self-effort but the cross of Christ", drawn out from verse 27. In other words true faith is focused on Jesus Christ who died on the cross. Verse 27 says, "And whoever does not bear his cross and come after Me cannot be My disciple." This teaching is found also in Luke 9:23. These words make one stop to consider two points. Before you start following Jesus Christ you must know who He is, and you must know why you want to follow Him. Our attention is directed to the person and work of Christ. This is basically the gospel, which the apostle Paul summarises as "Jesus Christ and Him

crucified" in 1 Corinthians 2:2.

Jesus Christ claimed, on many occasions, that He was from above while we are from below. He is the Son of God who has come to take upon Himself perfect human nature by being born from the virgin Mary. He is called "Jesus" meaning "Saviour". He is "the Christ" meaning "the anointed One", that is, the One appointed by God to be the Saviour. He called Himself "the Son of Man" because that is the title, in the Old Testament, of the Saviour God promised would come to save His people from their sin. He is the only Mediator between God and man. There is no other saviour apart from Jesus Christ. We claim this not because we are bigoted but because it is the teaching of the Bible. The person you want to follow is none other than the Son of God, the Saviour of the world.

Then, you must be clear why you want to follow Christ. The Lord had weeded out those who came to Him for material gain. Today there still are people who come to Jesus Christ to gain health or wealth for themselves. We must not come to Christ to gain health or wealth. There is a legitimate place for God's children to pray for healing from sickness, and for provision in life. God is not obliged to give health and wealth to those who are not His children. We become His children not by the good works we do, or by our effort at keeping God's law. You may do much good deeds and engage in many religious rituals, such as prayer and fasting, but none of these human efforts will save you. The good you do will never be good enough to make up for the sins you have committed against God. All your effort at changing over a new leaf, or cleansing yourselves, will not

succeed in changing your nature which is sinful. That is why your attention is directed to the cross of Jesus Christ.

Why is it that Christ here says we must bear our cross? Why doesn't He say we are to carry our pots and pans, or our ploughs, or – in today's language – our laptop computers, or our handphones, or plentiful money? The reason is that He does not want us to lose sight of His cross – that is, His death on the cross – which would happen before too long. The Son of God came to this world with a specific purpose to accomplish, namely to die on the cross to save His people from their sin. When John the Baptist saw Him coming, he pointed to Him and said, in John 1:29, "Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" Those who heard John the Baptist at that time readily understood the imagery of the Lamb of God. The Jews had been taught to offer up an unblemished lamb – one that was not lame, not blind, nor spotted – to God as a sacrifice for their sins. The lamb would be brought to the temple where the priests prayed, then slaughtered the lamb, and burned the carcass on the altar of burnt offering. The blood would be sprinkled on the altar in the temple and various other prescribed places. This was to show that the one who brought the lamb deserved eternal damnation for his sins against God, and that the lamb was being put to death on his behalf instead.

While Jesus Christ is from above, we are from below. We are descended from Adam and Eve who were created by God from the dust of the earth. It may be said rightly of us, "dust you are, and to dust you shall return" (Gen. 3:19). We have in-

herited the sinful nature of Adam and Eve such that we all sin against God in thoughts, words, and deeds. The good works we do can never make up for the sins we have committed against God. All our effort can never make our sinful nature clean. That is why we need Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God, to die in our place to pay for our sins. Only a perfect person can die acceptably in our place to make up for our sins. Only the perfect Son of God who has become perfect Man could die to save us. We are told in Matthew 20:28 that the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many. The word "ransom" shows that payment was made to save His people. We are told in Acts 20:28 that God has purchased the church with His own blood. The blood of Jesus Christ shed on the cross of Calvary makes our hearts clean. Another way of saying it is that the perfect righteousness of Jesus Christ is imputed to us who believe in Him – it is counted as ours. It says in Romans 3:28, "Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith apart from the deeds of the law." We learn from Ephesians 2:8-9, "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; *it is* the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast."

The Lord is reminding us that the life of a disciple begins with salvation by grace, through faith, in Him alone. You have no ability to save yourself, or others. You must cast yourself on Christ alone to save you. You must rely on His finished work on the cross of Calvary for your acceptance with God. In Matthew 7:14, the Lord says, "Narrow is the gate and difficult is the way which leads to life, and there are few who find it." To

be on the road to eternal life, you have first to go through the narrow gate. It is as though you can barely squeeze through the gate, which represents faith in Jesus Christ. It requires repentance, that is, a turning away from all sins. You cannot carry any hidden sin with you. You cannot bring any of the world's possession with you. You must not rely on anything other than Christ's blood to cover your sin. The cross of Christ is necessary and sufficient for your salvation. Once you pass through the narrow gate, you are to take up your cross and follow Christ. This we will consider in the next main point.

We must trust in the proclamation of the gospel for the salvation of souls. "Faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God (Rom. 10:17)." It is God's chosen way for His people to be called out of their life of sin to live the life of true discipleship.

2.3 Not Half-heartedness But Full Commitment

We come back to Luke 14. In verse 28 to 33, two illustrations are used to bring home the point that in true discipleship, there is no half-heartedness. Instead, there is total commitment to Christ. There are those who hear the gospel and become interested to hear more. They are not converted yet, but a spiritual hunger is stirring in them. They are challenged by what they hear. They might put up defences in themselves in order not to believe. At the same time, they want to find out more of the

Bible's teaching. They have become seekers!

We have seen how the Lord weeded out those who came to Him for the wrong reason of seeking material gain for themselves. On another occasion, He challenged those who procrastinated in following Him. This is recorded in Luke 9:57-62. There was one who said he was willing to follow the Lord wherever He went. The Lord said to him, "Foxes have holes and birds of the air *have* nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay *His* head." The Lord was saying to him, "Do not give a false impression of your enthusiasm, for I know you are not ready to follow Me because of your love of ease." Another said he had to bury his father first. Yet another said he must bid farewell to his family first. All of them were giving excuses for not following the Lord immediately.

Here, the Lord challenges those who are half-hearted in their commitment to Him. The first illustration concerns a person who builds a tower without first considering whether he has enough money to complete it. Wouldn't it be a big embarrassment if he completes the foundation and is unable to proceed farther because his money has run out? The next illustration is that of a king who goes to war against another king whose army is twice the size of his. Wouldn't it be a great embarrassment when he discovers that he cannot win and has to sue for peace? Both these illustrations show that the persons concerned had to give up because they did not count the cost in advance. As applied to following Jesus Christ, we are to understand that total commitment to Him is essential. No half-heartedness will do, otherwise we would give up follow-

ing Him before long.

Seekers are challenged concerning their commitment to Jesus Christ. They are interested in following Him but they have not fully committed themselves to Him. This is when they are challenged to count the cost of discipleship. How does this fit into our understanding that salvation is of the Lord alone?

We have noted that salvation is totally the work of God in Jesus Christ. At the same time, you are called upon to come to Christ by faith. You are called upon to repent of your sins. Repentance and faith belong together and cannot be separated. When there is genuine repentance, there will be true faith in Christ. Similarly, when there is true faith in Christ, there will be true repentance from sin as well. Theologically speaking, repentance and faith together constitute conversion. We have seen that faith is the gift of God in the Ephesians 2:8-9 passage – "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; *it is* the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast." Similarly, the Bible teaches that repentance is a gift from God. We shall look at one passage only to prove this. Other passages may be referred to, but Acts 11:18 is sufficient for our purpose. It says, "When they heard these things they became silent; and they glorified God, saying, "Then God has also granted to the Gentiles repentance to life." The believing Jews of the church in Jerusalem became convinced that just as repentance had been given to them by God, so also it had been given to the Gentiles. We see now that just as faith is a gift from God, so also repentance is a gift – it is granted, that is, given, by God.

A similar thing happens once you are converted. New life has been given to you, at the same time that you have to "work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who works in you both to will and to do for *His* good pleasure (Phil. 2:12-13)." You have to feed yourself on God's word and pray together with God's people. You have to worship God together, and partake of the Lord's Supper. You have to attend to "the means of grace", while God uses these means to sustain your faith. In our present passage, the seekers are challenged to not only trust the Lord alone for their salvation, but to continue trusting the Lord alone in their life of faith. Their resources for continuing in the life of faith are found in the Lord alone. They are not to trust the Lord partially while trusting in their own ability to continue in the life of faith. Total commitment to the Lord is essential to complete the life of faith.

This is where we must link total commitment to Christ with carrying our cross, mentioned in the earlier verse. We have focussed on the cross of Christ which is linked to the cross we have to carry. We must now pay attention to the cross that we have to carry. We must note also that in so far as *our* cross is concerned, suffering for the faith is expected. There will be self-denial and self-sacrifice needed in the life of faith. Temptations will come our way, and persecution will come to us because of our faith. These deserve separate treatment, which is done elsewhere. Here, we only note that it is not possible to live the life of faith without total commitment to the Lord. The two illustrations used by the Lord are intended to bring

out the necessity of trusting in Him alone to finish the life of faith. It is not a call to count whether we have resources of our own to finish the life of faith. This, we believe, is the correct understanding of the Lord's teaching. It cannot be that we begin the Christian life by faith alone and then continue the Christian life by trusting in our own strength and abilities.

Putting things together, you see that God is sovereign in salvation, at the same time that He uses means to accomplish His purposes. He uses His children to proclaim the gospel to all alike. Among our hearers, we do not know who are elect and who are not. Our duty is to proclaim the gospel to all. We are to proclaim the gospel as clearly and as convincingly as possible. At the same time, we are conscious that it is the Holy Spirit alone who will give spiritual understanding to the hearers, and convict them of their guilt before God. The Holy Spirit then makes them willing and able to turn to Christ in faith. This, as we know from John 3, is what is called the new birth – or regeneration. On the part of the hearer, he is held responsible for his response to the gospel. If he hardens himself and refuses to repent, he will be doubly guilty compared to those who have not heard the gospel. If he repents, it is because the Holy Spirit has worked in him to enable him to do so. In the same way, God uses the means of challenging the seeker to count the cost before embarking on the journey of faith. Is he willing to trust the Lord fully, or will he trust in his own resources to live the life of faith? The seeker who finally casts himself totally upon the Lord for salvation will trust the Lord to sustain him in the life of faith.

The person who understands this truth will be extremely thankful to God for his own salvation. Was not that how we felt when many of us were converted? We thanked God for our salvation and knew that He has been good to us who are so undeserving! The challenge to you is to trust Christ wholeheartedly. Do not let other loves hinder you from putting Christ first in your life. Do not let anything, or anyone, hinder you from full commitment to Christ.

2.4 Not Temporary Zeal But Persevering Faith

A final illustration is used by the Lord, in verses 34-35, to bring home the necessity of persevering faith instead of temporary zeal. In those days, the salt used was not the pure sodium chloride that we use today. Instead, the salt was mixed with gypsum and other minerals. There was the tendency for the elements in the salt to interact with one another when exposed to the air, so that it gradually lost its saltiness.

Salt was used for two basic purposes – first, to flavour food, and second, to preserve meat. Most food would not taste nice without some salt added to flavour it. Meat had to be preserved as there was no refrigerator in those days. When salt lost its flavour, both functions could not be performed well. It was either poured on the pathway to prevent vegetation from growing, or strewn over the dunghill to prevent flies from gathering. When the flavour of the salt was totally gone, it was not

even fit for these lowly purposes and had to be thrown away.

The illustration of salt brings out two lessons on the Christian life. Firstly, we are to be useful and fruitful in our service to God. We do not want to be like salt that has lost its flavour. Before conversion, a person generally thinks of himself first. Self is at the centre of his life. He is always thinking of what he can gain out of any situation. He thinks of his own welfare first. He thinks of the good of others only after his own needs have been secured. He gives to others only from what is left over. He hardly thinks of God's glory, if at all. When converted, the person's world view is reversed. He thinks of glorifying God first. He thinks of the good of others, and especially the church, next. He does not neglect his own good but that comes last in his order of priorities. In practice, we often have to help ourselves first, and set a good example for others. However, we are here referring to the change in our overall thinking when we are converted. A true disciple of Christ would think of being useful and fruitful in the service of the Lord, instead of what he may gain from following Him.

Secondly, the picture of salt shows that our faith in the Lord should be a lasting one. It is a common phenomenon to find enthusiasm and zeal in those who are new in any venture. New brooms sweep clean! There are those whose zeal for the Lord decreases with time. Their love for the Lord grows cool. The things of God no longer excite them. When that happens, there is the danger of becoming an apostate, that is, one who drops away from the faith. We are warned of apostasy in Hebrews 6:4-8,

It is impossible for those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, who have shared in the Holy Spirit, who have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the coming age and who have fallen away, to be brought back to repentance. To their loss they are crucifying the Son of God all over again and subjecting him to public disgrace. Land that drinks in the rain often falling on it and that produces a crop useful to those for whom it is farmed receives the blessing of God. But land that produces thorns and thistles is worthless and is in danger of being cursed. In the end it will be burned.

Those who drop away from the faith, and do not repent before they die, show that they were never true believers. The Lord is looking for true belief. He wants us to count the cost of discipleship, and that includes a willingness to follow Him all our life. As noted earlier, the Lord uses means to achieve ends. He preserves His people by His sovereign power through the use of means. As we make use of the means, we are able to persevere in the faith to the end of our lives. The means include reading the word, hearing it preached, attending the Lord's Supper and the church prayer meeting, and having fellowship with God's people as we serve the Lord. Through these "means of grace" we are able to abide, or remain, in Christ. We are reminded of John 15:5-6, "I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. If you do not remain

in me, you are like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned."

These, then, are the two qualities looked for by the Lord in those who want to follow Him. They must desire to be fruitful in His service, and they must continue following Him all their lives.

2.5 Conclusion

We have drawn out four main points from Luke 14:25-35. True discipleship involves: (i) not big numbers but genuine faith in Christ, (ii) not self-effort but trust in the cross of Christ, (iii) not half-heartedness but full commitment to Christ, (iv) not temporary zeal but persevering faith. Salvation is wholly the work of God in Jesus Christ, from beginning to end. Everything needed to begin the life of faith, and to continue in the life of faith, is found in Jesus Christ who died and rose again to save His people. The death of Jesus Christ on the cross of Calvary is central to the good news of salvation for sinners. One who desires to be saved from eternal damnation in hell, who longs for eternal life instead, must bear his cross and follow Jesus Christ.

Three

Grow In Grace And Knowledge

Grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ (2 Pet. 3:18).

T rue discipleship begins with the new birth. Unless you are born again, you are not a true Christian. The new birth leads to conversion, and from there, to an on-going Christian life. A mistaken idea held by many people today is that as long as you have had a "conversion experience", it does not matter how you live afterwards. That idea is fatally wrong. Many today profess to be Christians simply because they have "accepted Christ" some time in the past. They are constantly harping back on the "experience" that had happened to them. They are always giving testimony to the time when they 'walked the aisle' – when they walked to the front of the church, or the stadium, to indicate their acceptance of Jesus Christ. Or they

are always telling us of how wonderful a feeling they had, and what wondrous things happened, at one point in their life.

Now, we are not saying that a genuine experience of conversion is not important. What we are saying is that the proof you are truly converted is that you are still growing in the things of God right up to this moment. There is no such thing as a person who is born of the Spirit, and is converted, but who does not go on growing in the spiritual life. What we wish to establish here is that *a true Christian will show continual growth in grace and knowledge.*

You must note very carefully that we are referring to *continual* growth, and not *continuous* growth. Continuous growth is growth that is uninterrupted – without any break. That is not what we are talking about. The Bible does not teach that the Christian life consists in continuous growth, in which there is no lapse, and no falling into sin. All of us will throw up our hands in despair if that were the case. None of us will be able to live that sort of life, not even the greatest of saints!

Rather, we are referring to *continual* growth, i.e. growth that occurs repeatedly – going on and on. There is the possibility of interruptions here and there, but the growth goes on all the same. The Christian life is like that. There may be interruptions along the way. There may be lapses. There may be periods of stagnation. Our hearts may grow cold. We may fall into sin. But we will always be restored, and continue on in our growth.

The need for continual spiritual growth is taught in many passages of the Bible. We will, however, single out 2 Peter

3:18 for detailed consideration. The verse teaches that we are to "grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ". These are the closing words of Peter in his Second Epistle. In the exposition of these words, we must bear in mind what he has written in the body of the epistle. That way, we will not miss the intended meaning of these closing words. We will, of course, refer to other passages of Scripture as well in order to get a fuller picture of the teaching on this subject.

There are three main truths we wish to establish from the present verse. First, we wish to establish the importance of continual growth. Then, we wish to establish the importance of correct doctrine. Finally, we shall establish the importance of correct living.

3.1 The Importance Of Continual Growth

Why is continual growth important? At least three reasons may be found in this epistle of Peter.

Sign of spiritual life and health

First, continual growth is the sign of spiritual life and spiritual health. This truth may be drawn out from the first chapter of the epistle. Peter tells us, in verse 1, that he is writing "to those who have obtained like precious faith with us by the righteousness of our God and Saviour Jesus Christ". He goes on, from verse 5, to exhort the believers to add to their faith virtue, to virtue knowledge, to knowledge self-control, etc. Clearly, Peter is urging them to grow in their Christian life because spiritual growth is a sure sign of spiritual life.

Similarly, the same apostle says in his First Epistle, in Chapter 2:2, "as newborn babes, desire the pure milk of the word, that you may grow thereby, if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is gracious". You see what Peter is saying here. Christians are expected to grow because they have new life in Christ. The surest sign that a person is born of the Spirit is his desire for the word of God. We are not saying that he has to read the Bible twenty-four hours in the day. We are saying, rather, that he would have a desire to know what God's word teaches.

Not only is that the case, he would be applying God's word to his life. He wants to follow the truths he is learning about. His life will begin to change. He will begin to grow spiritually. If a baby does not grow, as he is fed milk every day, something is very wrong with him. Imagine a baby who does not grow in size, or who does not develop beyond just crying. As parents, we would be worried for our baby. If the baby does not learn to smile, to grasp at your finger, to turn over, to crawl, to sit up, and finally to walk, then something is very wrong with him. He may be alive, yes, but something is very wrong with him.

The same thing is true in the spiritual realm. A Christian who does not grow continually shows that something is very wrong with himself. See what Hebrews 5:12 says, "For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the first principles of the oracles of God; and you have come to need milk and not solid food." A Christian is expected to grow so that he may teach others God's word. He must not remain a spiritual baby who does not understand even the basic truths of the Christian faith.

We are told in 1 Corinthians 3:1-3, "And I, brethren, could not speak to you as to spiritual people but as to carnal, as to babes in Christ. I fed you with milk and not with solid food; for until now you were not able to receive it, and even now you are still not able; for you are still carnal." This was the rebuke levelled at the Corinthian Christians. Up to that time, they were still not able to handle the deeper truths of God's word. That, surely, was very tragic.

Sadly, we find the same situation prevailing in many of today's churches. We find churches that are full of spiritual babies. They cannot be fed the deeper things of God's word because they will go haywire, otherwise. Deeper truths will cause them harm, and they will in turn cause a lot of harm to others. That is because they are unable to handle truths in perspective. They cannot hold things in balance. They cannot grasp things in their proper proportions. Like babies who are fed chunks of meat, they have not the teeth to chew, nor the digestive system strong enough to handle them. And this is the case with those who have been Christians for five years, ten years, and even more! How tragic it is to have such overgrown baby elephants!

Spiritual growth is the sign that there is spiritual life. *Continual* spiritual growth is the sign that the spiritual life is well and healthy.

To prevent falling into errors

The second reason why it is so important to have continual growth is because without it, we are likely to fall into errors. The apostle alludes to this in the verse immediately before the

present one. He says in verse 17, "You, therefore, beloved, since you know these things before hand, beware lest you also fall from your own steadfastness, being led away with the error of the wicked". This is mentioned in view of the warning he gave earlier, in the second chapter, concerning false teachers and their destructive teachings.

It is a principle of Science that "nature abhors a vacuum". All of us would remember the experiment we performed in our school days. When you suck out the air from a flask that is inverted over a basin of water, the water in the flask immediately rises so that there is no vacuum. The same principle applies in the spiritual realm. The Lord Jesus Christ teaches in Matthew 12 that when a man has an unclean spirit driven out of him, the spirit will return with seven other spirits so that he becomes worse off than at the beginning. The reason is because the vacuum left in the man needs to be filled. If he does not receive the truth of God, he will not be filled with the Spirit of God. And if he is not filled with the Spirit of God, he will be filled by unclean spirits.

This is what Peter is concerned about here. If Christians do not learn truths, they will absorb errors. When a wrong teaching enters a person's life, it will have a detrimental effect upon him. There is no such thing as a "neutral error". Wrong teaching is like poison. Every drop of poison that you take in will certainly affect your system adversely. So, do not fool around with wrong teachings! Do not take doctrine too lightly. What you are will be determined to a great extent by the type of teaching that you absorb. If you absorb right teaching, it

will do you good. If you absorb wrong teaching, it will do you harm. The point we are making here is, if you do not grow continually in your spiritual life, you are likely to fall into errors of one kind or another. And you will certainly be harmed!

To keep us persevering

The third reason why continual growth is important may be discovered from Chapter 3 of this epistle. Peter tells of the return of the Lord to judge the world, the passing away of the heavens and the earth, and the coming of the new heavens and the new earth. Christians must "be diligent to be found by Him in peace, without spot and blameless (v.14)". Continual growth is important to ensure that we persevere on in the faith to the end. The "perseverance of the saint" is a doctrine taught in the Bible. Unless you persevere right to the end, there is no certainty that you will be saved.

Jesus Christ says in John 10:27-28, "My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me. And I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; neither shall anyone snatch them out of My hand." While it is true that Christ gives us *eternal* life, it is required that we to *follow* Him. Remember also the Parable of the Sower (Matt. 13). Not all who hear the word of God are saved. And not all who show a measure of spiritual growth are saved. There may be those who appear to grow well, like the third type of seed. But they grow only for a time. Soon, they are choked by the cares of this world. Only those who show spiritual growth all the way, and produce fruit, are true Christians.

Hebrews 6:4-6 is also relevant: "For it is impossible for those who were once enlightened, and have tasted the heavenly gift, and have become partakers of the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come, if they fall away, to renew them again to repentance, since they crucify again for themselves the Son of God, and put Him to an open shame." What is taught here is the reality of apostasy – a falling away that is permanent, and which leads to eternal damnation. There are those who not merely profess faith in Christ, but have actually experienced some degree of the Lord's goodness in their lives. We are not saying they are regenerate, because they are not. They are those who appear to be growing in spiritual things, like the third class of seed in the Parable of the Sower. Along the way, they wilfully renounce the Christian faith, and deny the Lord by living a life of sin. They fall away and never return. They thus prove themselves to be not true Christians!

Some people have difficulty with the phrase "partakers of the Holy Spirit" in that passage. They argue that if a person is a "partaker of the Holy Spirit" he must surely be a true believer. However, we must note that the word "partakers" is different from the one used in, say, 2 Peter 1:4 where believers are in view. In the Hebrews 6 passage, the word simply means "companions", referring to something that is merely external. These people are only externally influenced by the Holy Spirit. They do not have a changed nature that is wrought by the Holy Spirit, called the new birth. Just as the Holy Spirit restrains evil in kings, governments and other unconverted people, so also

He influences for good some who profess belief in the Lord Jesus Christ. Only, the work of the Holy Spirit in their lives is not a saving work. It is not that the Holy Spirit has been unsuccessful in saving them, but rather that such people were never the elect of God.

You see now the great danger of falling away. If you fall away, there is no certainty that you will return to the Lord. And if you do not return to the Lord, you will be lost! So, make sure that you do not fall away. And if you fall, make sure that you quickly repent and return to the Lord. Make sure that you are continually growing in the Christian life.

We see, then, that continual growth in the Christian life is important for at least three reasons. First, because it is the sign of spiritual life and spiritual health. Second, because it is the only way to prevent us from falling into errors. Third, it is the only way to keep us persevering to the end. The question that arises next is, in what do we grow? To grow is to increase. But what exactly do we increase in? 2 Peter 3:18 tells us that we are to grow in two areas – in grace and in knowledge. This shows us the importance of correct living as well as the importance of correct doctrine. We shall deal with the second matter first, for reasons that will become obvious as we go along.

3.2 The Importance Of Correct Doctrine

The meaning of 'knowledge'

The word "knowledge" is used in two different senses in Peter's Epistle. We read in 2 Peter 1:2-3, "Grace and peace be multi-

plied to you in the *knowledge* of God and of Jesus our Lord, and His divine power has given to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the *knowledge* of Him who called us by glory and virtue." The word "knowledge" as used here is a reference to our perception of God, or of God's perception of us, or of both. This is a *subjective* knowledge. We *know* God. We do not merely know *about* Him.

In verses 5 and 6 of the same chapter, the word is used in a different sense. It says, "But also for this very reason, giving all diligence, add to your faith virtue, to virtue *knowledge*, to *knowledge* self-control, ..." Here, the word is used to refer to truth. It is an *objective* knowledge. This time, it is a reference to what we know *about* God.

The word "knowledge" is used in this second sense in 2 Peter 3:18, which is the verse we are considering. We are to "grow in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ". The importance of correct doctrine is taught here. Not only must we know Jesus Christ, but we must know *about* Him as well. We are not saying that knowing *about* Jesus Christ is alone good enough. There are those who merely have a head knowledge of correct doctrine but who are not truly converted. They know *about* Jesus Christ, but they do not *know* Jesus Christ.

What we are saying is that when we do know Jesus Christ, it is important for us to know about Him as well. In other words, we are saying that it is important to know Christian doctrine. It is here that many Christians stumble. They think that doctrine is not important. They piously say that all that

they want is to be followers of Christ. They do not want to split hairs over doctrine, they say. Such people do not know what they are talking about. How can you possibly follow Christ if you do not know anything about Him? You may follow Him up to a point, based on the little you know of Him. But the point comes when you will be at a loss as to what to do next. You do not know what the Bible teaches and, therefore, you do not know Christ's will for your life!

Christian doctrine cannot be separated from Christian living. Your belief controls your behaviour. It is impossible to have correct behaviour without knowing correct doctrine. That is why the two matters are linked together in the verse we are considering.

Proportionate growth

The verse also suggests the importance of knowing *all* of God's word, and not just some favourite portions of it. Not only do we need to grow in *depth* of understanding of God's truth, but also in *breadth* as well. You would remember what the Lord Jesus Christ says in Matthew 4:4, "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God." It is the lack of knowledge of *all* of God's word that lead to the rise of the cults. Those who are involved with the cults stress certain truths at the expense of other truths. They even leave out important truths. Some even go to the extent of leaving out certain portions of the Bible, as happened with the Montanists in the past. Or, they may add to God's word so that these additions become more prominent than what is already contained in the Bible.

This is where living out the Christian life in the context of the local church is so important. It is in the local church that we must grow, and it should be from the local church that we serve the Lord. The local church is committed to the building up of the whole body of Christ, through the teaching of the whole counsel of God's word, and by those who are appointed of God to be teachers in His church. It is in the church that systematic, expository teaching is found. It is in the church that there is proper pastoral care. It is in the church that life as a body, in the biblical sense of the word, is possible.

You cannot say these of para-church organisations. Those who choose to join para-church organisations often show a certain lack of proportion in their grasp of truth, so that they are unbalanced in their Christian life. They may know certain truths well because of the particular emphases of that organisation, but are weak in other doctrines. Take the case of an organisation that is devoted to the evangelisation of students. Such an organisation will give heavy emphasis to witnessing, to follow-up, to the doctrine of salvation, and perhaps to some aspects of discipleship. A Christian caught up in such an organisation will be lope-sided in his understanding of truth and, therefore, in his Christian life. When the crunch comes, when a crisis occurs in his life, the weaknesses will show.

Essential qualities

To grow well in the knowledge of truths, two qualities are needed – *humility* and *teachability*. A person who is not humble will not be teachable. A person who is not teachable will not grow in knowledge of the truth. The apostle Peter said

this of the false teachers – "But these, like natural brute beasts made to be caught and destroyed, speak evil of the things they do not understand, and will utterly perish in their own corruption (2 Pet. 2:12)." He also described them as speaking "great swelling words of emptiness" (2 Pet. 2:18). These were arrogant people who were caught up in their own errors.

The Lord Jesus Christ in His days condemned the Pharisees for their arrogance and lack of teachability. The Lord taught so much, in public, and in their hearing. Yet nothing of what He taught seemed to register with them. There was a certain obtuseness in them. They were blind to spiritual truths. That was largely due to their sin of thinking that they already knew it all. In John 9:41, Jesus condemned them by saying, "If you were blind, you would have no sin; but now you say, 'We see.' Therefore your sin remains."

The absence of humility and teachability in unconverted people is understandable. But when these qualities are absent, or lacking, in Christians, it is inexcusable! God knows your heart. If you wish to progress in spiritual understanding, you must have a humble and teachable spirit. This was the experience of John Calvin. Consider the description of his own conversion. He was a student of Law at the University of Paris when that occurred. He said, "What happened first was that by an unexpected conversion He (God) tamed to teachableness a mind too stubborn for its years... And so this mere taste of true godliness that I received set me on fire with such a desire to progress that I pursued the rest of my (Law) studies more coolly."

Humility and teachability are so important to growth in knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.

3.3 The Importance Of Correct Living

The meaning of "grace"

Our text also shows that there is another area of growth that is needed, namely the need to grow in grace. We must, again, note carefully how the word "grace" is used here. Most Christians know that the word is often used to mean "the favour of God shown to undeserving sinners". Here I am, a sinner who does not deserve the love of God, and who does not deserve to be saved. Yet, God, in His mercy, provides a way for me to be saved. He actually extends His love to me, and actually saves me through faith in His Son, Jesus Christ. That is unmerited favour – favour that has not been earned by the sinner. That is the way "grace" is often used in the Bible. It is the unmerited favour of God shown to sinners.

Here, in our text, the word is used in a slightly different sense. It refers not so much to the favour of God shown to sinners when they are converted but, rather, to the *continuing work of God subsequent to their conversion*. We are saved by the grace of God; we continue to receive the grace of God in our Christian life. This "grace" of God is shown in two ways, and for two purposes. First, it is shown in the changed character of the Christian. Second, it is shown in the Christian's service to God. The first purpose, then, is to change the character of the Christian, and the second purpose is to make him more useful

in God's work.

The twofold work of God

This twofold work of God in the believer's life is described in 1 Peter 4:7-11. It says there, "But the end of all things is at hand; therefore be serious and watchful in your prayers. And above all things, have fervent love for one another, for 'love will cover a multitude of sins.' Be hospitable to one another without grumbling. As each one has received a gift, minister it to one another, as good stewards of the *manifold grace of God*. If anyone speaks, let him speak as the oracles of God. If anyone ministers, let him do it as with the ability which God supplies..." You see here a list of things which are, together, called the "manifold grace of God". These things actually fall into the two categories that we have mentioned – namely, qualities that make up the character of the Christian, and the abilities given to him to serve God. To be serious, to be watchful, and to have fervent love – these are qualities of character. To be hospitable, to speak, to minister – these are gifts, or abilities, with which to serve God.

Coming back to our text, we note that Christians are to grow in grace in this twofold sense – first, to become more and more like Christ in our character and second, to become more and more useful in the work of God. This is exactly what the Lord Jesus Christ taught in Matthew 5:13-16 – we are to be salt of the earth, and we are to be light of the world. If salt loses its flavour, it is good for nothing. If the Christian loses his Christian character, he is good for nothing. If light is hidden away, it will not lighten up the world. Christ says, "Let your

light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven (v. 16)." Good works must be done because faith without works is dead (James 2:26).

We must never make the mistake of separating "justification" from "sanctification". These are big words, but they have very simple meanings. To be "justified" is to be declared not guilty, and regarded as righteous. A person is justified before God not because of any good found in him, and not because of any good deeds he has done or ever hopes to do. He is justified solely by grace through faith in Jesus Christ. Once justified, he must continue to be "sanctified", i.e. he must grow in holiness and in conformity to the character of Christ. The apostle Paul tells us in Galatians 5:22-23 that "The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control." We would expect a true Christian to show more and more of these qualities in his life. Are these qualities seen in your life? Have you changed, for the better since your conversion?

We must also never make the mistake of separating faith from good works. A person is not saved by his good works, because no amount of good works will be good enough to make up for his sins against God. No amount of good works will change the sinful nature of the person. On the other hand, a person who professes to have faith in Jesus Christ but does not show any good work in his life cannot possibly be a true Christian. The "faith" he professes to have cannot be a saving faith. Good works will naturally flow out of one who has true faith in Christ. This is where we fear very much for certain people

who profess to be Christians, but never seem to be concerned for the welfare of others, and especially for the welfare of the household of faith. You are not concerned whether the work of God prospers or not. You are not concerned about the welfare of Christians around you, not even about the welfare of your own church members! It is right for us to question whether such a person is a true Christian at all.

Essential qualities

We have seen that growth in knowledge requires the qualities of humility and teachability. Similarly, growth in grace requires two important qualities – *submissiveness* and *obedience*. There should be submissiveness to God, and there should be obedience to His word. There can be no true obedience to God's word without true submissiveness to Him. This is where the true character of a person is seen most clearly. The word "Christian" itself means "a follower of Christ". There are so many people who profess to be Christians, but do not actually follow Christ's teaching. How do you follow Christ? It is by listening to Him and obeying what He says. Where do you find Christ's words? They are to be found in the Bible. The Bible is the inspired word of Christ. It follows that you must obey the teachings of the Bible if you are to obey Christ.

You would remember the command of God to Saul in the Old Testament to destroy all the Amalekites because of their sins. The command was to destroy every Amalekite, including their animals. Saul went forth to carry out God's command, but he did not do exactly as he was commanded. He left the king of the Amalekites alive, as well as the best of the sheep

and cattle. That was not true obedience. The prophet Samuel confronted him, but Saul protested that he had obeyed God's command. He claimed that he wanted to offer the sheep and cattle as sacrifices to God. But what is the use of sacrifices when there is no submission to God? What is the use of religious ceremonies if there is no obedience to God's command? God's word to Saul was, "Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice (1 Sam. 15:22)."

A true submission to God will lead to complete obedience to Him. If Jesus Christ is truly your Lord, and your Master, you would want to obey Him in all that He commands. You will not sit in judgment of His word. You will not question whether His word is applicable to you. You will not "pick and choose" what you like and leave out what you do not like. Are you that sort of Christian? Is Christ really your Master? If so, why do you question His word? Why do you not obey Him more perfectly? The Lord says, "If you love Me, keep My commandments (John 14:15)."

Continual growth in the Christian life is important. Correct doctrine is important. Correct living is also important. We are to "grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ". Having considered these three matters we are still left with the question, how exactly may we grow? What may we do, in practice, to ensure that we grow well?

3.4 Three Factors That Influence Growth

The quality of seed

In the Bible, the spiritual growth of believers is likened to the growth of a baby. It is also likened to the growth of a seed or plant. There are basically three factors that influence the growth of a plant. How a plant grows depends, first of all, on the type of seed that is planted. A good and healthy seed will grow well. A shrivelled seed that is half-eaten by mould will not grow well. Similarly, the growth of a believer will depend to a great extent on the type of person you are. We have earlier learned that the qualities of humility and teachableness, the qualities of submissiveness and obedience, are so important to growth. If such qualities are found in a believer to a great measure, he will naturally grow well spiritually. Conversely, when such qualities as these are lacking, the believer will not grow well. This is a key to your spiritual growth. Make sure that you are humble and teachable, make sure you are submissive to God and obedient to His word, and you will grow well.

The type of soil

The second factor that influences the growth of a plant is the type of soil it is planted in. A seed planted in soil that is not fertile will grow, but it will not grow well. A believer who lives in an unhealthy atmosphere, in which is not much spiritual influence, will be stunted in his spiritual life. That is why the company you keep matters so much. A believer who continues to interact closely with non-Christian friends will have worldly values rubbed over to him. I am not saying you cannot have

non-Christian friends. I am saying that if you interact closely with them – and spend most of your time with them – you are likely to be influenced more by them than they would be by you. That is why the apostle Paul says, "Evil company corrupts good habits (1 Cor. 15:33)." On the other hand, if you keep company with keen Christians – Christians who mean business with the Lord, who pursue spiritual and eternal values – you will grow well spiritually. "As iron sharpens iron, so a man sharpens the countenance of his friend (Prov. 27:17)."

The care received

The third factor that influences growth is the care shown to the plant. If the farmer does not water the plant regularly, if he does not add fertiliser when needed, if he does not watch out for diseases, if he does not prune the plant when needed, that plant is not going to grow well. It will not produce healthy fruits. The right amount of fertiliser has to be added, and at the right time. This is where the church you are in makes a great difference to your spiritual life.

Note very carefully that it is not our intention to criticise churches here. There are many true churches around, with which we have no problem having fellowship. These churches teach the word of God according to their understanding of it. They serve the Lord according to their ability and their understanding of the Bible's teaching. Yet, there are differences between these churches – differences that can be quite marked, and which will affect growth to a marked degree.

No church is perfect this side of life. But every church should endeavour to be as biblical as possible in doctrine and

in practice. There should be sound and systematic preaching of God's word. There should be proper pastoral care and biblical church discipline. There should be reverent and joyous worship that is based on the teaching of Scripture. A believer who is concerned to glorify God should seek out a church that is obviously endeavouring to glorify God.

Our concern here is with believers who are in churches that obviously teach errors of various kinds, and engage in practices that are according to the flesh, according to the tradition of men, and not according to Christ. A church that teaches salvation by works is not a true church. A church that undermines the authority and sufficiency of God's word by claims to prophecy and tongue-speaking is in serious error. A church that practises dancing, and is entertainment oriented, and engages in dubious "healings" and "exorcism", is not of God but of the world.

3.5 Conclusion

Continual growth in the Christian life is expected of every true believer. Correct doctrine is essential for there to be correct living. Growth in knowledge requires the qualities of humility and teachability. Growth in grace requires the qualities of submissiveness and obedience. The local church is the normal environment in which a Christian grows in grace and knowledge. A good local church is crucial to healthy spiritual growth.

Thank God that some of us have been saved in churches that are very defective! But we should not remain in a church

that is in serious error, or that wilfully teaches wrong doctrines. "Come out from among them and be separate, says the Lord (2 Cor. 6:17)." Join a church that is intent on worshipping God, and serving Him, "in spirit and in truth". The whole matter comes back to the individual believer. The ball bounces back to your court. The choice is yours. *You* have to decide whether you wish to grow spiritually, to grow well, to grow proportionately. You must seek out and join a church that will help you in this. The choice is yours. "As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord (Joshua 24:15)."

Four

Imitating Christ

Imitate me, just as I imitate Christ (1 Cor. 11:1).

The apostle Paul says in 1 Corinthians 11:1, "Imitate me, just as I imitate Christ." The Greek word translated as "imitate" here actually means "to mimic", or "to do what another does". Paul wants us to do what he does, just as he does what Christ did.

Paul was keenly aware of the power of imitation. Imitating others is perhaps the chief way by which people learn from others. Those of us who are parents would know this. Children tend to pick up our habits, whether good or bad ones. That is why it is so important for you, as parents, to set good examples, and have good habits. If you read by slouching in the chair and with your legs on the table, you can be sure that your son will soon pick up that habit. If you habitually keep your shoes neatly on the shoe-rack, your children are more likely than not to adopt the same habit. The Bible is full of teaching on the importance of setting good examples, and of

learning by following the examples of others.

4.1 What It Means

Wrong ideas

What does it mean to imitate Christ? It may seem that we are asking an unnecessary question here. The answer to that question appears so obvious. But let the reader think of the answer now. Do not be surprised if you find difficulty in answering it precisely. That, in fact, is a problem with many Christians. We often assume too much. We think we know when, in fact, we don't. That accounts for why there is so little effort made to deliberately and clearly imitate Christ. This leads to terrible consequences. Christianity is reduced to just a matter of believing in some doctrine connected with Jesus Christ. At least that is the impression that non-Christians have of the Christian faith. They begin to question the relevance of the Christian faith in today's world.

Then, there are those who think that to imitate Christ means to have a general disposition of kindness and love towards all. A preacher once made some strong statements against the wrong teachings of the Roman Catholics. Someone in the congregation came up to him afterwards and told him that he needed to be more Christ-like! That was the idea he had of imitating Christ – to be gentle and kind to everyone, to accept everyone, and not to offend anyone. It is true that Jesus Christ was gentle and loving. It is true that He helped the poor and the under-privileged. But He was much more than that. He

was firm and strong against sin and hypocrisy. He saved not only the poor but also the rich, and called all sinners to repentance. He demanded that His disciples follow His commandments and avoid all forms of error. He condemned religious hypocrites in the strongest of terms. To get a true picture of the character of Jesus Christ we must learn from the Bible.

The biblical meaning

In order to determine what it means to imitate Christ, we need to consider 1 Corinthians 11:1 in its context. We must therefore take 1 Corinthians 10:31 to 11:1 together. It is important that we do not allow ourselves to be misled by the chapter division here. The chapter and verse divisions in our present Bible were not in the original Scripture. They were added in by scholars to help us in the reading and study of the Bible. The passage reads:

"Therefore, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God. Give no offense, either to the Jews or to the Greeks or to the church of God, just as I also please all men in all things, not seeking my own profit, but the profit of many, that they may be saved. Imitate me, just as I also imitate Christ."

We must then compare this passage with the parallel one in Philippians 2:2-5. It reads as follows:

"... fulfill my joy by being like-minded, having the same love, being of one accord, of one mind. Let

nothing be done through selfish ambition or conceit, but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than himself. Let each of you look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others. Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus, ..."

We say that these two passages are parallel for a number of reasons. First, we note that both passages were written by the same apostle. The other apostles also refer to Christ as our example (1 Pet. 2:21-25; 1 John 2:6), but we limit ourselves here to passages that were written by the same apostle.

Second, we note that these are the only two passages in the New Testament in which we are specifically told to imitate Christ. Paul often urges believers to imitate others. Of course, he does not want us to imitate just anyone. He only wants us to imitate the right persons. And that is only in so far as they imitate Christ. He wants believers to imitate himself (1 Cor. 4:16; 11:1), to imitate God (Eph. 5:1), and to imitate other Christians (1 Thess. 1:6; 2:14). He also wants us to imitate the Lord Jesus Christ, and these are the only two passages that specifically exhort us to do so.

The third reason why we say that these passages are parallel is because the contents are the same. Both tell us that the imitation of Christ involves basically three things: (i) A unity of purpose, namely in seeking to glorify God; (ii) A lowliness in spirit towards other believers; and (iii) A helpfulness towards others, with the end that some might be saved. We shall consider them in greater detail later.

We note also that the last verse of each of these passages say the same thing. This has long been recognised by Christians. Christians differ only on what it means to imitate Christ. But they are all agreed that 1 Corinthians 11:1 is equivalent to Philippians 2:5. One says, "Imitate me, just as I imitate Christ.' The other says, "Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus."

By comparing these two verses, we come to the conclusion that to imitate Christ means to have the same "mind" that Christ had. In other words, it means having the same attitude, the same inner disposition, or the same spirit, that Jesus Christ had. This is plain and straightforward from a comparison of the two verses. Yet, there are people who come up with bizarre ideas of what it means to imitate Christ.

One wrong view is derived from the verses that come after Philippians 2:5. The passage, from verse 5 to verse 8, reads as follows:

"Let this mind be in you which was in Christ Jesus, who, being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God, but made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a servant, and coming in the likeness of men. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross."

From these verses the wrong conclusion is made that to imitate Christ means to actually act out the sufferings of Christ,

including His death on the cross. You might think this far-fetched, but that is actually done by religious people in various parts of the world. They would carry a heavy wooden cross in a religious procession, and be literally hung up on it after that by the use of ropes. Whether anyone has attempted being nailed to a cross I do not know. But all this is very wrong! These people may be sincere, but they are sincerely wrong. That is not what it means to imitate Christ.

Christ, our example

Verse 5 is already plain to us. It tells us to have the "mind", or attitude, of Christ. The verse does not tell us to act out Christ's sufferings. This means that the verses following are intended to serve a different purpose. It is plain to us that they are meant to explain what attitude it was that Christ had. In other words, they constitute an *exposition* of verse 5, on what it means to imitate Christ. At the same time, they act as an *illustration* of the teaching found in the previous few verses, that is verses 2-4, on what is involved in the imitation of Christ. We are interested at the moment with the exposition, not the illustration. We wish to know exactly what attitude Jesus Christ had that we must imitate.

The Son of God was equal with God the Father, possessing the same honour, the same glory, and the same power. He voluntarily gave up all these for a time when He was born as a man. He did not cease to be God when He took on human nature. Some people teach that He ceased to be God in some sense when He was born incarnate. That is not correct. Jesus Christ remained fully God when He became man. And He was

real man, but without sin. He voluntarily withheld exercising His power and His rights. He temporarily gave up His honour and His glory as the Son of God. He did not cease to be God in any sense.

He came to this world of sin to be identified with sinners. He came to serve others, and not to be served. He fulfilled the demands of the law by living a righteous and sinless life on earth. He died on the cross in the place of His people, and became sin. The punishment that all of us, believers, deserve from God fell on Him. Jesus Christ's death on the cross was not an accident. It was a deliberate act of obedience to His Father in order that sinners may be reconciled to God.

What was the attitude of Jesus Christ when He became man, suffered, and finally died on the cross? That is not a difficult question to answer. He was selfless, self-denying, and self-sacrificing. He was selfless, meaning that He did not think of His own good. He was self-denying, meaning that He did not insist on His own rights. He was self-sacrificing, meaning that He gave Himself for the good of others. Now, that is love – true biblical love! Compare this with the description of Christian love given in the well-known passage of 1 Corinthians 13 and you will agree that this is true love. This attitude should be in every Christian – the attitude of love to God and love to men.

This understanding of the passage would seem to be confirmed by the very first verse of the chapter. It says in Philippians 2:1, "Therefore if there is any consolation in Christ, if any comfort of love, if any fellowship of the Spirit, if any affection

and mercy, ..." Paul is appealing to his readers to have the love that was in Christ. The same idea is found in Ephesians 5:1-2, another "imitation passage": "Therefore be followers of God as dear children. And walk in love, as Christ also has loved us and given Himself for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God for a sweet-smelling aroma."

Jesus Christ fulfilled the two great commandments of God perfectly: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind"; and "You shall love your neighbour as yourself." To imitate Christ is to have the same attitude of love that Christ had.

Once this is understood, we will be prevented from imitating Christ in a crass and literal fashion. Nothing is achieved if we try to enact His sufferings on earth, and His death on the cross. None of us is divine like the Lord Jesus Christ. None of us can be born incarnate like Him. No one in this world can die on a cross as an atoning sacrifice for other people. We cannot even die to make up for our own sins, let alone for the sins of others! In fact, it would be blasphemous for anyone to even think that he can imitate Christ's person or work like that. It would be to think that you are in some sense divine. It would be to think that you are equal to Christ in essence, that you can accomplish the work that He alone could do.

Jesus Christ is a unique person. His work in saving sinners is also unique. All that is needed for sinners to be saved from their sins has been accomplished by Him. There is no need for anyone to try and make God accept him, either by doing good works or by undergoing sufferings. We need only to come as

we are to Jesus Christ and trust in Him for our salvation. The message of the Bible is "Repent and believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved." We are saved only by God's grace, through faith in Jesus Christ.

No, the passage is not teaching us to imitate Christ in a crass and literal fashion. Instead, it is teaching us to have that same attitude that Christ had when He became man, suffered, and died on the cross. It is the attitude of love to God and love to man that we must have.

It follows from this that only true disciples of Christ are able to imitate their Master. The inner disposition of love is found only in a regenerate heart. Only a person who has been born of the Spirit of God can love like that. A person whose nature has not been spiritually changed by the Holy Spirit cannot possibly imitate Christ. The command to imitate Christ is given only to disciples, not to those who are not true Christians.

Are you a Christian? A true disciple? If you are, then imitate Christ! If you are not, repent and believe in Jesus Christ for your salvation!

4.2 What Is Involved

To imitate Christ is to have the attitude of love to God and love to man. This attitude of love is not something intangible. It is not something vague. It is not just a feeling which cannot be defined in real, concrete, terms. As noted earlier, Philippians 2:2-4 and 1 Corinthians 10:31-33 are parallel passages that teach us what is involved, in practical terms, when we imitate

Christ. The description of the person and work of Christ in Philippians 2:6-8 further illustrates what this means.

Unity in glorifying God

From these passages we learn, firstly, that the imitation of Christ involves a unity of purpose in seeking to glorify God. The Corinthian Christians are told to do all things to the glory of God. They must not think of self. They must not insist on their rights. They must all seek to glorify God. The Philippian Christians are told to be like-minded, to have the same love, to be of one accord, of one mind.

We must not lose sight of the corporate aspect to this first point. Paul wanted the Corinthian Christians to be united as one body. They were in danger of being divided by certain members insisting on their rights and thereby offending the sensitivities of others. That is why he says in 1 Corinthians 10:23-24, "All things are lawful for me, but all things are not helpful; all things are lawful for me, but all things do not edify. Let no one seek his own, but each one the other's well-being." That is why he also says in verse 31, "Therefore, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God."

The same situation prevailed in the Philippian church. We read in Philippians 3:15, "... if in anything you think otherwise, God will reveal even this to you." Paul did not expect the Philippian Christians to have the same opinion on every issue. What he would urge upon them is to be united by having the same desire to do all to the glory of God. In other words, they must love God, and fellow Christians, with all their being.

The church is a covenanted community of believers, up-

holding certain truths in common. It should not be divided by strife and disagreement of various kinds. That is why it is important to have a Confession of Faith as the doctrinal basis of the church, That way all the members would know, and agree to uphold, the truths stated in that Confession. But we must not attempt to impose a boring uniformity upon the members. That would not be right. That would be impossible to do in practice. We cannot expect all the church members to have exactly the same opinion on every issue. For matters not affirmed in the Confession of Faith, there must be due allowance given for differences of opinion.

You must note that we are here not dealing with people who teach wrong doctrines. Paul is not saying that correct doctrines are not important. If we were to study Paul's writings, we would find that one strong note, in fact the strongest note, he strikes is the importance of being correct on doctrine. Paul knew that without correct doctrines, everything else would be useless. Our Christian life will be in shambles because the doctrine we hold determines our practice. Wrong doctrine will lead to wrong practice, and correct doctrine will lead to correct practice. Paul is here dealing with differences which do not affect the Christian faith.

Differences of opinion should not be allowed to divide the church. Yet, that is precisely what happens often. Quarrels and division arise, people get agitated, tempers flare, and all restraint is thrown to the winds! That happens because we are so fickle, and sensitive, and stubborn. We are so proud and sinful. It is here that the exhortation to imitate Christ

is so important. We must imitate Christ by seeking to glorify God. Our chief concern should be to bring honour to His name. And we must love the body of Christ, which is the church, by seeking its welfare. Once we have that aim or purpose for our life, we will not allow differences of opinion to divide us.

Lowliness of heart

We learn, secondly, that the imitation of Christ involves a lowliness of heart towards others. Too many of us are too proud to esteem others as better than ourselves. All of us know this too well. If we listen in to the conversation of a group of people, we are more likely than not to hear them trying to outdo one another. We are so good at boasting. We are so good at parading our strong points before others, and at picking on their weak points. We are no different from a peacock pruning his own feathers! Yes, this happens even among converted people!

It would be good for us to be reminded often that the holy angels are listening to our conversation each time. How ashamed we would be then! It would be good to be reminded that the fallen angels also are listening to our conversation. How they must be laughing at us, the children of God! They wait only for the opportune time to drag us down in our pride. Beware!

Those who do things out of selfish ambition or conceit will bring ruin upon themselves. They will also cause harm to others. How many brothers in Christ have been hurt by your selfish ambition! How many sisters in Christ have been hurt by your conceit! And how many preachers have been put under

tremendous anguish of soul, simply because there are others who treat them as their competitors! Paul tells us in Philippians 1:15-16 that there were those who preached Christ from envy and strife, from selfish ambition, not sincerely, supposing to add affliction to his chains. The apostle John tells us in his third epistle about Diotrephes who loved to have the preeminence among men, who uttered malicious words against the ministers of God, and who put others out of the church.

When the truth is revealed on the last day, it will be seen that many faithful servants of God have been hurt by ambitious and selfish individuals. The Lord will certainly vindicate His servants and condemn the rascals. The last day will also reveal that many potentially useful Christians have had their usefulness cut short because of their conceit. There are always such people in the church. Here they are, so gifted and so able! We expect them to be mightily used by God in His work in the time to come. But things do not work out the way we expected. Conceit creeps into their hearts and hide there like a thief. Selfish ambition begins to take hold of them, and soon they begin to change into persons quite different from what we expected them to be. Their usefulness will be reduced to nothing. The Lord will ensure that that happens. What a pity! What a waste!

O, for that lowliness that was seen in Christ! Imitate Christ in His lowliness!

Helpfulness towards others

The final point is that the imitation of Christ involves helpfulness towards others. What would happen if we just avoid

bringing dishonour to God's name? That would leave us with a negative turn of mind. What if we stop at having a lowliness of heart to others? That would leave us in a neutral state. The third point is that we must seek to be helpful to others. That gives us a positive frame of mind. We are not only to *avoid* doing certain things, and to *be* a certain sort of person towards others, but we are also to seek to *do* good to others.

This lesson had been taught by the Lord Jesus Christ Himself. When the Lord washed the feet of His disciples, He said, "I have given you an example, that you should do as I have done to you. Most assuredly, I say to you, a servant is not greater than his master; nor is he who is sent greater than he who sent him (John 13:15-16)." There is no indication here that feet-washing is to be a lasting ordinance like baptism and the Lord's Supper. What the Lord wants us to do is to serve others, not just in washing their feet when the occasion and the culture call for it, but in all other ways possible. What needs to be grasped is the necessity of a humility of heart to want to serve others and to actually make effort to serve.

We all know too well that if not for the grace of God operating in us, we would be people who prefer to be served rather than to serve. Thank God, we have been given a new heart at our conversion. We do have a desire to serve others now. The only problem is that remaining sin is always hindering us from being more helpful to others. We are so slow to learn. We are so quick to forget. That is why we need to be taught even the basic matter of how to serve others. And we need this reminder to be helpful towards others always. We should

be quick to think of the welfare of others more than our own. This attitude of heart is given to us by God. It is not simply an altruism, a good-heartedness, that comes from the human nature. Unconverted people may have a desire to help others, but that desire flows from a mere sense of morality. Ours is a desire that flows out of a renewed nature. That is what makes the difference.

We must do good to all, and especially to the household of faith. This is what the apostle Paul teaches us in Galatians 6:10. We must not grow weary in doing good. There are needs around everywhere. The person whom we think is so independent may be just the one who needs the most help. The strongest man has in him the heart of a crying boy. Do not make the mistake thinking that only mournful people need your help. The one who is out-going, belligerent, and even aggressive, may need your help the most. We must not wait until help is requested from us before we act. Look around and see if there is someone in the church whom you can help today.

We have an additional incentive to help non-Christians. Paul tells us in 1 Corinthians 10:33 that by being helpful to all there is the likelihood that some may be saved. People are converted not only by hearing preaching, but also by observing our Christian life. They are made receptive to preaching by our helpfulness and kindness to them. Of course, we must never give up the proclamation of the gospel while we do good to others. Indeed, proclaiming the gospel is ultimately the best way to help them since that is the means God uses to regenerate people and to give them eternal life. Moreover, the church

has been entrusted with the permanent commission to "make disciples of all nations". Paul himself was engaged actively in this work. But he also did good works wherever and whenever possible. Doing good became part-and-parcel of his missionary life.

It is strange that evangelical Christianity should be discussing doctrine and good works as though these are incompatible with each other. A casual reading of the Bible will reveal that the two are taught without any hint of incompatibility between them. James tells us that, "Pure and undefiled religion before God and the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their trouble, and to keep oneself unspotted from the world." He also says, "...faith without works is dead." The apostle Paul, whose teaching we are considering, is often known for his deep theology. That is true, for Peter himself acknowledges that of him in 2 Peter 3:15-16. But we must not have the wrong idea that Paul is only interested in doctrine and no more. This same apostle is teaching us, as part of his doctrine, that we must imitate Christ in His helpfulness to others.

4.3 What To Expect

Self-denial

What may we expect as we seek to imitate Christ? First, we must expect that there will be constant need for us to exercise self-denial. Self-denial is the first, or most basic, principle of discipleship. When we first turned from our sins to trust in Christ, we were actually giving up our self to follow Christ.

When we went through the water of baptism, we were actually declaring in public that we have renounced self to follow Christ. We did not cease from being our own selves by suppressing our own personalities, nor did we give up any legitimate work that we were engaged in. But we did give ourselves over to the Lord at our conversion.

The problem with too many of us is that we often hold back from following Christ perfectly in our subsequent Christian life. When the going is too rough, when the demands made on our time, effort, and money are too great, we tend to hold back. We forget that our Lord and Master never demands more from us than we are able to give. He is not harsh. He is not a slave-driver. He it is who says, "Come to Me, all you who labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy and My burden is light."

If this is true, it follows that the problem with our hesitancy to follow, to give, and to yield must be traced to our own hearts. The true test of our love for the Lord is in our willingness to give of ourselves, and to obey. Self-denial is the essence of the inner Christian life. Your rights must go. Your desires and comforts must go. Whenever these come into conflict with higher, spiritual purposes, they must go. You will often be put under such tests. To imitate Christ, you must be prepared to deny self.

Misunderstanding and abuse

Secondly, we may expect misunderstanding and abuse from

others. Obedience to God often leads to conflict with the world. Much as we try to do things tactfully, much as we attempt to avoid misunderstanding and clashes, we cannot finally avoid confrontation with the world. That is because the way of God is not the way of the world. Unconverted people have not the capacity to appreciate spiritual truths and spiritual values. They treated the Master that way; they will treat the disciples the same way. In fact, some people may even seek to destroy you and think that they are doing God a good turn!

No good and lasting work is accomplished for God without there being sufferings and trials. All who have been used by God to accomplish spiritual good have had their share of toil and tears. The misunderstanding and abuse they received from the world are often known only to themselves and their God. But what are all these compared to the crown of glory that awaits the faithful servant when he arrives in heaven? Be prepared to suffer misunderstanding and abuse from the world if you are to imitate Christ.

Acceptance and approval with God

Finally, we may expect acceptance and approval with God. Thank God that there is certainty of this! Christ suffered and died. He also rose from the dead and was glorified. After the cross is the crown. After trial comes triumph. That is why it says Philippians 2:9-11, "Therefore God also has highly exalted Him and given Him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those in heaven, and those on earth, and of those under the earth, and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to

the glory God the Father." Believers will share in the glory of Christ. They will reign together with Him. This is incentive enough for us imitate Christ.

4.4 Conclusion

A recurrent teaching of the Bible is that the total personality of the believer must be involved in our response to God's word. In the imitation of Christ, the mind must understand that God's people are to have a unity of purpose in seeking to glorify God. A lowliness of heart is needed to esteem others as better than ourselves. The will must move towards being helpful to others. Such a lifestyle will involve self-denial, while possibly attracting misunderstanding and abuse from others. However, we are comforted by the knowledge that we will have acceptance and approval from our God.

Five

Work Out Your Own Salvation...

Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure (Phil. 2:12-13).

How is a person saved? Not by his good works, but by the grace of God through faith in Jesus Christ. This is the message of the Bible. It is declared clearly in Ephesians 2:8-9: "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; *it is* the gift of God."

Here is a person who was born a sinner and who has lived in sin all his life. "No, I am not such a person," you protest. You are not? We do not wish to argue with you here. Suffice for us to quote Jesus Christ, "I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners, to repentance (Matt. 9:13)." Our concern here is with those who realise that they are sinners in the eyes of God. How is a sinner saved?

Here he is, lost in his sin. Left to himself, there will be no possibility of him being accepted by God. He has broken God's law. He has done things that he should not do. He has left undone those things that he should do. He has a sinful nature that needs to be changed before he can ever enter heaven, but there is none able to help him. Then comes a Christian who tells him that God Himself has provided a way for the sinner to return to Him. God has sent His only begotten Son, Jesus Christ, to this world. He lived a perfect life, and died in the place of sinners on the cross of Calvary. He rose from death and will return to judge the world. Whoever turns from his sins and trusts in Him will not perish but have everlasting life.

The sinner is now troubled by all that he hears. He is in such agony of soul. He has offended a holy God, who is angry with sin. Yet, the same God has provided a way back for the sinner. What a merciful God! But there are demands made upon the sinner. He must forsake his sins. He must resolve to live a life of obedience to God. He must cast his soul totally upon Jesus Christ to be saved. The cost of discipleship is counted. Pride has to be shattered. Self-righteousness has to be stripped off and thrown away. Oh, what a difficult struggle it is!

But the grace of God has taken hold of the sinner. The truth of the Bible has shone into his darkened soul. The Spirit of God breathes life into him. He stirs into life and, with clear resolve stretches out the arms of faith. He clings to Jesus Christ and trusts in Him for salvation. The person emerges from the darkness of sin into the light of God's kingdom. A child of God

is born!

Is that all that there is to the Christian life? Certainly not! Paul tells us in Philippians 2:12, "...work out your own salvation with fear and trembling..." There are three elements, or three truths, involved in these words.

5.1 A Purpose To Be Accomplished

First, there is a purpose to be accomplished, namely our salvation. We must note that Paul is addressing those who have become Christians. No doubt, he is aware that there are non-believers in the congregation at Philippi. The apostle is a very careful and discerning man. When he wrote to the Corinthian Christians, he very naturally lapsed into preaching directly to them. "We implore you on Christ's behalf, be reconciled to God," he said in 2 Corinthians 5:20. "Behold, now is the accepted time; behold, now is the day of salvation," he said in 2 Corinthians 6:2. Then, in 2 Corinthians 13:5, he said, "Examine yourselves as to whether you are in the faith. Prove yourselves. Do you not know yourselves, that Christ is in you? – unless indeed you are disqualified." This was because he knew that there were unconverted people in the midst of the church at Corinth.

Not all are believers

This is something that every preacher must always remember. Do not ever make the mistake of assuming that everyone who comes to a Christian meeting is a true believer. There are always those not yet converted. Some individuals may be think-

ing that they are Christians simply because they were born to Christian parents, or simply because they have been baptised in infancy, or simply because they have "made a decision for Christ" by walking to the front of the church at the bidding of the preacher. In reality, they are not "born again". They are not converted yet. They are not true Christians. Others may have come to church to find out more about the Christian faith. They know that they are not Christians, but they wish to find out more about what the Christian life is all about.

Paul does not assume that everyone in the church at Philippi are converted. In Chapter 1, verse 16, he talks of those who preach Christ from selfish ambition, not sincerely, supposing to add affliction to his chains. This may be a reference to unconverted people. Certainly, those he refers to in Chapter 3, verses 18 to 19 are not believers: "For many walk, of whom I have told you often, and now tell you even weeping, *that they are* the enemies of the cross of Christ: whose end is destruction, whose god *is* *their* belly, and whose glory is in their shame—who set their mind on earthly things."

Addressing Christians

It needs to be noted all the same that the majority of those to whom Paul is writing this epistle are true believers. They are "the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi (Phil. 1:1)." The teaching found in Philippians 2:12-13 is addressed to converted people. Christians are the ones who must work out their own salvation with fear and trembling. This may come as a surprise to you if you have been exposed to teaching that emphasises that "salvation is by faith in Christ, not by your good

works", or that "once saved, you are always saved". It needs to be pointed out that these statements are true, but only from a certain point of view. They are not true if wrongly understood. Let me explain.

It is true that a person may be saved only by exercising faith in Jesus Christ. Christ has done all that is necessary to save the sinner. He died on the cross of Calvary to bear the punishment that sinners should receive from God. Whoever turns from his life of sin and trusts in Christ as his Saviour will be saved. The sin of the believer is reckoned as taken away by Christ when He died on the cross. Christ's righteousness is reckoned as the sinner's the moment he casts himself upon Christ to be saved. Nobody can earn his way to heaven by doing good works. No amount of good works can cause God to forgive you the wrongs you have done against Him. Yet, God in His mercy sent His only begotten Son, Jesus Christ, to this world to save sinners.

Salvation a process

We must note, however, that there is a difference between 'justification' and 'sanctification'. A person is justified by faith in Christ. He is declared no more guilty, or forgiven and accepted by God, when he turns from his sins to trust in Jesus Christ. Justification is a "once for all" act of God. Once declared "not guilty" you remain not guilty in God's eyes, not because of anything good you have done, but because Christ has done everything necessary to fulfill God's law and to take away the punishment that you rightly deserved from God.

Justification leads to sanctification. While justification is a

"once for all" event, sanctification is a process that lasts the whole lifetime of the believer. Sanctification is the process by which the true believer becomes holier and holier in his life. He does not become perfect the moment he believes in Jesus Christ. Remaining sins continue to trouble him and hinder him in his spiritual progress. However, if he has true faith in Jesus Christ, he will continue to exercise faith in Him all his life. This faith will show itself in a changed life. He will not live as he likes. Instead, he will be seeking to please God by obeying what the Bible teaches.

We see now that salvation is not an event that occurs once and for all. It is true the Bible teaches that the moment you have faith in Christ you are saved. Paul, for example, said to the Philippian jailer, "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved, you and your household (Acts 16:31)." But the Bible also teaches that salvation is a present process and a future accomplishment. We are told in Acts 2:47, for example, that "the Lord added to the church daily those who were *being saved*." In Romans 5: 8-10, we have these words: "But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Much more then, having now been justified by His blood, we *shall be saved* from wrath through Him. For if when we were enemies we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son, much more, having been reconciled, we *shall be saved* by His life." (Emphasis added.)

Salvation, then, is a process. From the human point of view, that process began when we first trusted in Jesus Christ to save us. We are now in the process of being saved. It is like embark-

ing on a ship at Port Kiang, to travel to Tokyo. We are now on the ship. The ship is now moving to Tokyo. We are on our way to the destination. But we have not arrived yet. We know that, all being well, we shall arrive in a few days. When we turned from our sins and trusted in Christ, it was because we wanted to be reconciled with God. It was because we wanted to escape the anger of God and the eternal punishment in hell that we deserve. It was because we wanted to arrive in heaven safely, and to have eternal life. Now that we have trusted in Christ to save us, we are on the way to heaven, which is our destination. Our full salvation is not accomplished yet. It lies in the future.

A purpose in life

A Christian, therefore, has a purpose to accomplish in this life. He aims to arrive safely in heaven. He is preparing himself for the future. This is unlike the way so many people in this world live. People in the world live only for this life. They do not have any hope of the future. They just live on day by day, week by week, and year by year. At the most, they will prepare for their children by accumulating property for them, and by giving them a good education. But that is all. Their concerns end with this life. They have no hope of the next life. They do not want to think of what lies beyond this life. If they do, they will be filled with fear, and uncertainty, and confusion. They simply do not know what lies ahead, except that it will not be something that is pleasant.

Since there is a purpose to be accomplished, the Christian will live in a certain way. He wants to arrive safely at his heavenly home. He, therefore, lives in a purposeful way in this life.

He does not live as he likes but makes sure that everything he does is geared towards the goal, or the purpose, to be accomplished. He optimises everything in his life to accomplish that goal. We all know that it is so important for a ship, or an aeroplane, to travel exactly along the right path. If the ship, or aeroplane, were to go off course by just one degree, it will not arrive at its destination. So also, believers must make sure that they do not go off the course that has been plotted out by God in the Bible. We must not heed the many voices in the world that are trying to turn us to the right or to the left. We must stick to God's word if we are to arrive safely home.

This is where many professing believers have gone astray, and many of them have made shipwreck of their life. A lot of people begin well in their Christian life, but they end badly. They were so warm-hearted, so full of love and zeal for the Lord. They were so keen to bring the gospel to others, and so desirous of learning from God's word. Remember the time when your heart was melted by God's love, when your eyes flowed not only with tears of repentance but also of joy and peace. Those were the days when the Bible meant so much to you, when you were so keen to tell people about Christ, when you prayed regularly for the salvation of your parents, relatives and friends.

But what has happened along the way? How is it that you are no longer as zealous as before? Why is it that you have grown cold towards spiritual things? This is the state of so many Christians. They have allowed the things of this world to crowd out their spiritual life. They are found at Christian

meetings less and less. The piece of coal that was burning bright in the fire is now growing cold after being taken out. Your spiritual life is declining. The heat is going out fast. The light is getting dimmer and dimmer. Friends, wake up! You are going astray from the path of God! Return! Return now to your God!

Do not forget that there is a purpose to be accomplished in this life. Your salvation is at stake. Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling!

5.2 A Method To Be Used

This leads us to the second point, namely that there is a method to be used. God is very kind to us. He provides us with a target, an aim, in life so that we are not distracted by the many voices that are vying for our attention. We are given a sense of purpose in this life so that we are not swarmed by the many things that need to be done. Whatever may happen along the way, and however difficult things may become, we can still look up and see that there is the destination ahead of us. The people of this world do not have this sense of purpose that we have. When the waves come, they are overwhelmed. When they are lost in the jungle, they see only the trees that so bewilder them. For us, there is always the northern star to guide us. There is always the certainty that beyond all that is happening around us lies our heavenly destination.

Effort involved

This sense of purpose helps us to plot out a course in life. But

there is a method that we must use, and God is telling us that we must work at it. The word "work" means to exert effort. You don't just sit down and wait for the Holy Spirit to work in you. The Holy Spirit is involved in this work, of course. But our present text is not dealing with that. The text is teaching us that we must exert effort in order to accomplish our own salvation.

This is where a lot of people have it wrong. They say that it is carnal for a Christian to exert effort in the Christian life. They claim that any effort exerted by the Christian will counteract the work of the Holy Spirit in him. But why should that be so? The text, and many more in the Bible, teach us that we must exert effort and work. It is as we work that God is at work in us. The desire to work is given by God. The decision to work is given by God. The ability to work is also given by God. "For it is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure," it says in verse 13 of the same chapter. Remember that we are not talking about how a person is justified before God. Justification is by faith in Christ alone. We are here talking about the believer's sanctification. The believer must exert effort if he is to arrive safely in heaven.

But what do we work at? What do we exert effort in? Paul does not spell out explicitly what the Philippian Christians are to work at. Of course, he does give enough general directions to let them know exactly what is meant. They are to live a life of obedience to God without murmuring. They are to live a righteous life in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation. They are to shine as lights in the world. In short, they are

to live a life that is consistent with the gospel which they profess – "holding fast the word of life". These are all found in the verses following the one we are studying. From the totality of the New Testament's teaching, however, we draw out at least three major areas that the Christian must work at.

Exercising faith

First, we must continue to exercise faith in Jesus Christ. The faith we have is given by God. But that gift must be put to good use. Otherwise, it is useless. It is very much like the man who was given one talent in the parable of Jesus Christ. He buried what he had in the ground, and when his master returned he said to him, "Lord, I knew you to be a hard man, reaping where you have not sown, and gathering where you have not scattered seed. And I was afraid, and went and hid your talent in the ground. Look, there you have what is yours." You know the answer the master gave to that servant: "To everyone who has, more will be given, and he will have abundance; but from him who does not have, even what he has will be taken away. And cast the unprofitable servant into the outer darkness. There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth (Matt. 25:29-30)."

In John 15:5 the Lord Jesus Christ says, "I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing." You must continue to be attached to Christ. How can you be attached to Christ? It is by faith in Him alone. The person who has continuing faith in Christ has the Holy Spirit living in him and working through him.

Similarly, we read in John 7:37-38 that Jesus Christ stood

up on the last day of the feast in Jerusalem and called out, "If anyone thirsts, let him come to Me and drink. He who believes in Me, as the Scripture has said, out of his heart will flow rivers of living water." We know that Christ was referring to the Holy Spirit who would be given in abundant measure to those who continue believing in Him. This is the point that must be grasped. The present tense in Greek is equivalent to the present continuous tense in English. Jesus Christ was actually saying, "He who *continues believing* in Me, as the Scripture has said, out of his heart will flow rivers of living water."

That is what makes the difference between a person who is used mightily by God and a person who is mediocre in his Christian life. Of course, ultimately speaking, the sovereignty of God is involved. It is God who sovereignly distributes to each believer certain gifts to be used to His glory. But given two individuals who have the same gifts, it will be the one who continues on steadily in faith who accomplishes more for the Lord. As he continues to live by faith, and attempts to serve the Lord in faith, power is given him to achieve much for the Lord. The journey to heaven may be strewn with obstacles and difficulties of all sorts, but he will be able to overcome them by the power of the Holy Spirit. All his desires and efforts will be blessed by God because he constantly looks to the Lord in faith.

The means of grace

The second thing we must work at is participation in the "means of grace". God has appointed certain methods, or means, by which we receive His grace so as to continue on in the Chris-

tian life. In Acts 2:42 we read this about the early believers, "And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers." Our Catechism asks the question, "What are the outward and ordinary means whereby Christ communicates to us the benefits of redemption?" The answer given is, "The outward and ordinary means whereby Christ communicates to us the benefits of redemption are His ordinances, especially the word, baptism, the Lord's Supper and prayer; all of which are made effectual to the elect for salvation."

The early Christians did not look upon the gathering together of believers as an optional thing. They knew the importance of gathering together to hear God's word, to fellowship with one another, to take the Lord's Supper, and to pray together. They did it so heartily, without compulsion from anyone. That is why their Christian life was such a striking phenomenon to all around them. We read in verse 47 that they were "praising God and having favour with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved." Can this be said of our church? If not, why? Each and every believer has a part to play in the welfare of the church. We have noted that in any congregation there are those who are not converted. There are also believers who have slackened in their walk with God, and are now taking the means of grace lightly. Are you one of them?

The means of grace are not to be taken lightly, as though you can do without them and still continue on fine in your Christian life. We always have our excuses for not attending

to the means of grace. We are always too busy in other things. Our children need our attention, our wives or husbands need our attention, and our jobs need our attention. Now, we do not want to sound as though we do not understand the problems you are facing. All of us have our own responsibilities and burdens in life. But God understands all that. He does not want us to neglect all rightful responsibilities in life. He only wants us to put our priorities right. He wants our heart. There will be time enough for everything, and everything will be done well, if only our heart is right. The word of God to us, in Hebrews 10:24-25, is, "Let us consider one another in order to stir up love and good works, not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as is the manner of some, but exhorting one another, and so much the more as you see the Day approaching."

We must here single out the knowledge of God's word for special mention. One thing we cannot neglect is the word of God. Matthew 4:4 says, "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God." This is a verse that is familiar to so many of us, but few really take it to heart. Consider the amount of time you spend preparing food and consuming it. Without fail, you have your daily meals. But what of your spiritual meal? Hardly five minutes a day is spent in the reading and meditation of God's word. No wonder you are such shrunken and shrivelled souls!

If someone who has spiritual X-ray eyes were to look at you, he will see that you have a well-developed body but a limp and weak spirit. That will be the true picture of many who profess to be Christians. We have not been feeding on the

word of God regularly. That is why we are so weak spiritually. Remember what is written in 1 Peter 2:2, "As new born babes, desire the pure milk of the word, that you may grow thereby..." If you don't make effort to study God's word, if you don't read good books to help you in the understanding of God's word, if you don't come to hear God's word expounded in church, you cannot expect to grow to spiritual maturity.

Do you remember the incident about Moses who came down from the mount with his face shining? Moses communed with God, so that his soul was refreshed. He received God's word, and he spoke with God. His soul was refreshed, and his face shone with the glory of God. How wonderful it is to be refreshed spiritually – to know God's presence, God's smile, God's blessing! Such a man will be used by God to bless many souls.

Mortification

There is a third area we must work at, namely the mortification of sins. The word "mortification" is a big one, but it simply means "to put to death". Remember that we do not become perfect as soon as we believe in Jesus Christ. If we do, we would not be left in this sinful world. We would be translated into heaven immediately. But in the wisdom of God, we have been left here on earth to continue on battling with sins. There are remaining sins in our lives. The tree of sin may have been chopped down, but the roots are still there. They are ready to sprout new shoots at any time. The bad manager may have been driven out of the company, and a new one brought in. But the workers are still used to the ways of the former manager. The power of sin in our lives may have been broken, but the

parts of our bodies are too used to the old ways of sin to want to obey the leading of the Holy Spirit willingly.

To mortify sins is to chop off any new shoot that appears. It is to dig out the roots if it were possible. It is to prevent the old habits of the workers in the factory from exerting themselves. To put it in plain language, it is to put to death all sinful habits, all sinful deeds, and all sinful desires, in our lives. We are told in Colossians 3:5-6, "Therefore put to death your members which are on the earth: fornication, uncleanness, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry. because of these things the wrath of God is coming upon the sons of disobedience." We are told in Romans 8:13, "For if you live according to the flesh you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live."

The teaching of the Bible is clear. Hebrews 12:14 says, "Pursue peace with all men, *and holiness, without which no one will see the Lord.*" We must work out our own salvation.

5.3 An Attitude That Is Involved

There is a purpose to be accomplished in life, namely our safe arrival in heaven. There is a method that is involved, namely the exertion of self in the matters of faith in Christ, attendance to the means of grace, and the mortification of sins. There is a third truth that we must take note of, namely that there is an attitude that is involved. We must not stop at being correct in our purpose, or aim. We must not stop at being correct in our method, or way, of achieving our purpose. We must ensure

that our attitude is correct throughout as well. In all that we do, our aim must be biblical, our method must be biblical, and our attitude must also be biblical.

Assurance verses complacency

Many are the Christians who have seen a measure of growth in their lives and are thereby encouraged. That is right, and that is good. If you have grown in your understanding of truth, if you have grown in grace, if you have grown in your ability to say "No!" to sin, if you have grown in usefulness in the Lord's work, all these are good. It is right to be encouraged, and to be comforted by the knowledge that all these are indications that you are a true child of God. You should begin to worry if no growth is noticeable after you have been a Christian for three years, or five years, or ten years. Something is very wrong with your faith if you remain stunted in spiritual things.

Be careful, however, since there is a snare, or trap, along the way. There is a danger at every turn of the road. Every bend negotiated is advance for you along the road to eternal life. But danger lurks behind every such bend. When you think you have made some progress in your Christian life, you are likely to become complacent. That is when you might fall. 1 Corinthians 10:12 tells us, "Therefore let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall." This comes as an exploding bomb to those who are proud, who think they have arrived, who are no longer teachable. It comes as a welcomed reminder to those who have been careful. This text should be written on all our doors. We should always be reminded to be careful in our walk with God.

Fear and trembling

It is here that a correct attitude is so important. Yes, we must work at our own salvation. But it must be with the attitude of fear and trembling. The reason is that there are many dangers in our pilgrimage to heaven. The devil is always there to trip us up. Our flesh is weak, although our spirit may be willing to do what is right. And there are many temptations in the world. Moreover, we will not be able to do all that is commanded us if not for the work of God in our lives. "Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; *for it is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure.*"

5.4 Conclusion

One other matter needs to be cleared up before we close. We have yet to answer the question, "Can a true believer be lost?" The answer is, "No!" A *true* believer cannot be lost. But a *pro-fessing* believer may be lost.

The sincere but mistaken

There are those who sincerely think that they are believers but are in fact not God's people at all. They are sincere, and they sincerely think that they are true Christians, but in reality they have never known Jesus Christ in their life. They have an intellectual belief in Christ, but they are not truly trusting in Christ for their salvation. They may be trusting in the good works they are doing, or in their own righteousness, thinking that all these will make God accept them. But Jesus Christ Himself has declared: "Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' shall

enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven. Many will say to Me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonders in Your name?' And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness!' (Mt. 7:21-23)."

The calculating

Then, there are others who profess to be believers, but who are always doing the minimum possible to qualify for a place in heaven. These are calculating people (note: 'calculative' is grammatically incorrect), who think that it is good enough for them to just escape the fire of judgment. They do not want a place of honour in heaven. In their false humility, they think of just crawling into heaven by doing the minimum possible. After all, doesn't the Bible say, "If anyone's work is burned, he will suffer loss; but he himself will be saved, yet as through fire (1 Cor. 3:15)?"

This is the argument of one who is almost certainly going to be cast into hell! How can you possibly be converted when you continue to be so calculating in your life? You are perverting the true intent of that verse of Scripture. The appropriate verse for such a person is Matthew 7:20, "Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire." Another relevant passage is Matthew 25:29-30, "For to everyone who has, more will be given, and he will have abundance; but from him who does not have, even what he has will be taken away. And cast the unprofitable servant into the outer darkness. There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth."

The apostate

Finally, there are those who professed to be Christians but have fallen away altogether from the faith. They appeared to have genuine experiences of conversion, and their lives appeared to be as good as, or even better than, other Christians. The fact remains, however, that they have fallen away from the Christian faith and have no intention of returning to the Lord at all. Such people cannot possibly be true converts in the first place. They were never the elect of God. That is the only conclusion we can make. True believers will never be lost. If professing believers are lost, it must be because they were never true Christians. Such people are described in Hebrews 6:4-8, as we have discussed earlier.

We see now that there are those who profess to be Christians, but who are not truly converted. What about the true Christians? True Christians do not only profess faith in Christ, but continue to walk by faith in Christ. When they work out their own salvation with fear and trembling, the truth of John 10:27-29 is fulfilled: "My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me. And I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; neither shall anyone snatch them out of My hand. My Father, who has given them to Me, is greater than all; and no one is able to snatch them out of My Father's hand." The doctrine of "the perseverance of the saints" is a biblical one.

Six

Unless A Grain Of Wheat Falls...

Most assuredly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it produces much grain. He who loves his life will lose it, and he who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life. If anyone serves Me, let him follow Me; and where I am, there My servant will be also. If anyone serves Me, him My Father will honour. (John 12:24-26)

We return to a note we have struck before. It is a depressing note, but strike we must at it again: Today's Christianity is shallow, shabby, and man-centred! The vast majority of those who profess to be Christians do not know much of God's word, and they do not know the true power of God in their lives. They feed on their own emotions and feelings. They thrive on testimonies and hearing the dubious exploits of others. They talk about God dealing with their sadness, their anxieties, their itches. They wear crosses around their necks

but have not the spirit of the Cross of Calvary. They talk about the power of the Holy Spirit but have not the spirit of holiness in their lives.

The words of our Saviour in John 12:24-26 draw us back to contemplate on the true life of Christian discipleship. "Unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it produces much grain." You must die! Yes, you must die... if you are to follow the Lord, and be useful to Him!

The Lord Jesus Christ is not asking you to do the impossible. He is asking you to do what He has made possible. A grain of wheat will remain alone as long as it does not fall into the ground and die. But if it dies, it produces much grain. Jesus Christ first applies this truth to Himself. He then applies it to His disciples. These words in John 12:24-26 show us that *Christ had to die*. They show us also that *Christians have to die*.

6.1 Christ Had To Die

There are two main truths that we must grasp about the death of Christ. First, we note that Christ's death was unique and unrepeatable.

Unique and unrepeatable

That Christ was referring to His forthcoming death is clear. The Scripture declared on at least two occasions before this that "His hour had not yet come" (John 7:30; 8:20). On this particular occasion Jesus Christ says, in verse 23, that the hour has come! The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. For Christ to be glorified, He must first die. This is confirmed

by the subsequent verses. We read in verse 27, "Now My soul is troubled, and what shall I say? 'Father, save Me from this hour'? But for this purpose I came to this hour." In verses 32 and 33: "And I, if I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all peoples to Myself.' This He said, signifying by what death He would die."

The hour had not yet come. Now the hour had arrived! Christ was referring to His impending death. Just as the grain of wheat must fall into the ground and die, so the Son of Man must die.

Why must Christ die? He said in verse 33, that by His death He would draw all peoples to Himself. The message of salvation had thus far been confined to the Jews. Before this, Jesus had sent His disciples out two by two to preach to "the lost sheep of Israel". His death, however, was not meant to save Jewish believers only but for non-Jews as well. "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners." He did not come to save Jews. He did not come to save Jewish sinners. He came to save *all sinners* who turn from their sins and believe in Him.

We must not think of Christ's death as a mere example of self-denial. Nor must we think of it as an example of martyrdom. It is important to stress this point. Otherwise, misunderstanding will arise. This is especially so in view of verse 26 where He says, "If anyone serves Me, let Him follow Me." Fanaticism of various sorts are seen everywhere. A wrong understanding of what Christ is saying can lead to excesses of various kinds. We must, therefore, be careful. Extremists are always ready to seize on straws to build up a case for them-

selves.

What we must understand is that Christ's death on the cross was the only satisfaction, and atonement, for our sins. We have offended the holy God by breaking His laws, and not worshipping Him as we should. We live as though we are not answerable to anyone. We live as though we are the masters of our own destinies. We act as though there is no judgment day to face. But the teaching of the Bible is clear: "It is appointed for men to die once, but after this the judgment (Heb. 9:27)."

We know that this is true. Our conscience testifies that this is true. Yet, we try to suppress this truth. And many try to quieten their guilty conscience by turning to other gods, and to doing good deeds, and to religious rituals. But none of these will help you. Your guilty conscience will come back to you, and remain with you! And you know what you will get when the day of judgment arrives. The whole weight of God's holy anger will explode down upon you! You would know that you deserve the eternal condemnation of the holy and just God.

What we must see is the impossibility of men trying to earn their way to heaven. You cannot make yourself clean. You cannot make up for the wrongs you have committed against God. You cannot turn away the holy anger of God which now rests upon you. Only God Himself can arrange for His own anger to be turned away. The way He has done it is by sending His only begotten Son to this world to bear the sins of His people. When Jesus Christ died on the cross, He was actually bearing our sins – the sins of all who trust in Him. He died as a sacrifice in the place of sinners so that they do not have to

face God's holy anger. Christ's death on the cross satisfied the righteous requirement of God and established peace between His people and God Himself.

Christ's death is, therefore, unique. It is one of its kind. There can be no other such death. It is unrepeatable. No one can imitate Christ in His death. A thousand people can die voluntarily, in the place of a sinner, and yet cannot make up for his sins. Only a perfect sacrifice, a person who is Himself God, can die to atone for the sins of others. Jesus Christ's death was to save sinners. Whoever turns from his sinful life and trusts in Christ will not perish but have everlasting life. That is the promise of Scripture! Without the death of Christ, no one will be saved. No cross, no salvation! Christ's death was unique and unrepeatable.

A great harvest of souls

We note, secondly, that a great harvest of converts is promised. A grain of wheat that is buried in the ground will grow and produce much grain. Christ's death on the cross of Calvary will result in many souls saved. This comes to us as a promise. Jesus Christ says, "Most assuredly, I say to you...". Another way of putting it is, "Truly, truly, I say to you..." The note of certainty is there. We know that what Christ has promised, He will definitely fulfill. The prophet Isaiah had already foretold: "He shall see the travail of His soul, and be satisfied. By His knowledge My righteous servant shall justify many, for He shall bear their iniquities."

The question is, how many converts will there be? How much grain will be produced? The answer may be found in

Matthew 9:36-38, "But when He saw the multitudes, He was moved with compassion for them, because they were weary and scattered, like sheep having no shepherd. Then He said to His disciples, 'The harvest truly is plentiful, but the labourers are few. Therefore pray the Lord of the harvest to send out labourers into His harvest.'" Jesus Christ was here looking not only at the immediate crowd of people before Him. Rather, He was looking beyond them into space and time. He was seeing the multitudes of people throughout the world, and down the years, who were going to be converted. If this were not so, there would have been no need for the disciples to pray for labourers. They could have immediately preached to the people before them.

In the high priestly prayer of the Lord in John 17, we see a similar thing happening. There, Christ first prayed for Himself, then for the apostles, and finally for those who were going to be converted through their preaching. Jesus Christ was constantly looking ahead in space and time to the days when multitudes from all over the world will be converted.

The final passage of relevance to us is Revelation 7:9-10, "After these things I looked, and behold, a great multitude which no one could number, of all nations, tribes, peoples, and tongues, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed with white robes, with palm branches in their hands, and crying out with a loud voice, saying, 'Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!'" This is a glimpse of heaven. We see here "a great multitude which no one could number" worshipping God. The number of people

who will be saved is so great that no one can possibly count them!

One thing we must guard against is to think that the world will be Christianised. Just because there are going to be so many saved, we are not to have the expectation that the world will be filled with Christians. We must not think that Christians will influence the world more and more so that heathenism, materialism, and all that are opposed to God, and to godliness, will be driven to the background, and even subdued. The Bible never teaches that such a thing will happen. If anything, it teaches the opposite. It tells us, for example, in 2 Timothy 3:1-5, "But know this, that in the last days perilous times will come: For men will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boasters, proud, blasphemers, disobedient to parents, unthankful, unholy, unloving, unforgiving, slanderers, without self-control, brutal, despisers of good, traitors, headstrong, haughty, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, having a form of godliness but denying its power. And from such people turn away!"

Times are going to be so bad that even professed believers will be led astray. It says in 1 Timothy 4:1-2, "Now the Spirit expressly says that in latter times some will depart from the faith, giving heed to deceiving spirits and doctrines of demons, speaking lies in hypocrisy, having their own conscience seared with a hot iron, forbidding to marry, and commanding to abstain from foods which God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth." In Luke 18:8 the Lord says, "...when the Son of Man comes, will He really

find faith on the earth?" It is clear that times are going to get worse and worse right to the last day. We would expect that in any age, the number of believers is always a minority compared to the unbelievers. But the number of those who are saved will be a great multitude all the same.

How is the great multitude of saved people to be gathered in? If we add together the number of converts in our church in the past ten years we can hardly get a handful of people. If we add together all the converts in all the churches throughout this country in the past ten years, the figure is again unimpressive. The point I am making is this – under normal circumstances, the number of converts throughout the world in any period of history will add up to only a small number. The converts who come in are a small trickle each time, under normal circumstances.

We must not expect the world to go on for ever. The world will have to come to an end. It will be sooner than many of us expect. The question is, how are we to get enough converts to add up to the countless multitude that will be found in heaven? The answer is in revivals! There is such a thing as revival. We are not talking about an evangelistic campaign, as the word is being used by some people today. We are talking about a true, mighty, movement of the Holy Spirit such that through the preaching of a few preachers, thousands of people are converted. The day of Pentecost was a revival. Many similar revivals have taken place in different parts of the world since. God will move! God will bring revivals! Great multitudes will be saved in different periods of history, and in different parts

of the world. Christ will fulfill His promise to gather in a great multitude of converts through the preaching of the gospel.

A revival is something that is brought about by the sovereign will of God. No one can create a revival. At the most, we can prepare the ground and make the situation conducive to a revival. We can pray. We can reform our churches. We can be earnest in preaching the gospel. But it is up to God to give a revival. He may give it in our life time. He may not. Some people may preach well, and work hard. But they may not have many converts. On the other hand, others may reap where they have not sown. "I planted, Apollos watered, but God gives the increase," the Bible says in 1 Corinthians 3:6.

What is important is for us to work and pray with expectancy. Whether or not we are privileged to see a revival, we must work and pray. We must work at evangelising the world, preaching the word, training up preachers, and sending them forth to preach. We must also pray for labourers to be raised up, for true preachers to be sent forth, for God to save those who hear. We must work and pray! And we must do both with great expectancy. Matthew 9:38 teaches us this: "Therefore pray the Lord of the harvest to send out labourers into His harvest." John 12:24 teaches us this: "Most assuredly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it produces much grain."

6.2 Christians Have To Die

The next two verses in John 12 teach us that Christians have to die, in order that they may live fruitful lives. Verse 25 says, "He who loves his life will lose it, and he who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life." This verse teaches us that there must be a willingness to die for Jesus Christ.

A willingness to die

True, full-blooded Christianity requires this. Jesus Christ says in Matthew 10:37-39, "He who loves father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me. And he who loves son or daughter more than Me is not worthy of Me. And he who does not take his cross and follow after Me is not worthy of Me. He who finds his life will lose it, and he who loses his life for My sake will find it." Jesus Christ mentioned this in the context of persecution. He is telling all who wish to be His disciples to be prepared for persecution. Christians will be misunderstood, misrepresented, attacked, and even killed for their faith. This is a recurrent note in the Bible.

The very first book of the Bible begins with persecution. Abel was killed by Cain because Abel's worship was acceptable to God while Cain's worship was not. The note of persecution continues all through the Bible. The prophets of God were persecuted. The Lord Jesus Christ was Himself persecuted. His disciples were persecuted. The last book of the Bible is a book about persecution. It was written by John who was thrown on the island of Patmos for his faith. He wrote the book to comfort and strengthen those who were under persecution.

If persecution is taught everywhere in the Bible, why is it a missing note in today's preaching? Why aren't Christians preparing for persecution? Why aren't Christians persecuted in most parts of the world? Is it not because Christianity has become soft and compromising? Is it not because there is no real taking up of the cross to follow after Christ? We should not court persecution. But persecution must be expected whenever there is true, vibrant, Christianity. When most of the "free world" wallowed in materialism (i.e. living for things of this world) and atheism (i.e. the belief that there is no God), Christians in communist lands had had to undergo severe persecution.

Listen to the words of one persecuted pastor in Romania: "One day during interrogation an officer threatened to kill me. Then I said, 'Sir, let me explain the issue to you. Your supreme weapon is killing. My supreme weapon is dying. Sir, you know my sermons are all over the country on tapes now. If you kill me, I will be sprinkling them with my blood. Whoever listens to them after that will say, 'I'd better listen. This man sealed it with his blood.' They will speak ten times louder than before. So, go on and kill me. I win the supreme victory then.'" This man was not afraid to die for Christ. Because he was willing to die for Christ, he is today blessed with opportunities to preach to thousands since the fall of communism in Eastern Europe.

What will persecution do to us today? Will your faith still stand? Or will you deny the faith to save your life? When persecution comes, many will fall away from the faith. There is no doubt about that! In this current climate of soft, shallow,

flabby Christianity we cannot expect much. But those with true faith will stand. They will be prepared to die for their Lord, for their faith. They are the ones who "hate their lives in this world", but will keep them for eternal life.

A willingness to live

Christians must be willing to die for Christ. But not everyone is called to die the martyr's death. You may be willing to die for Christ, but you may not be put to death for Him. Most of us are not called to die for our faith. What is important is that while you live, you must be willing to live for Him. This is taught in verse 26, "If anyone serves Me, let Him follow Me." In many ways, it is more difficult to live for Christ than to be willing to die for Him. This life is so full of trials and tribulations, toils and tears. Many godly people would prefer to be with Christ which is far better. But, as with the apostle Paul, we should be willing to live on if only this will serve God's purposes on earth. In Philippians 1:22-23 Paul says, "For I am hard pressed between the two, having a desire to depart and be with Christ, which is far better. Nevertheless to remain in the flesh is more needful for you." This is the spirit we must have, to be willing to live for Christ while we are alive on this earth.

We must note that there is a difference between living "a living death" and living "a dying life". Most people in the world are living dying lives. They are alive, but their lives are dying, weak, and accomplishing nothing of lasting value. All who are without Christ live like that. They appear to be alive, when in reality they are dying. They are not only dying physically, but also spiritually. They are heading for eternal destruction,

however well they may think they are living.

We are not to live a dying life. We are to live a living death. By that is meant we have a life that is always dying to self, to pleasures, and to the things of this world. It is the life of self-denial. It is only as we die to these things that the life of Christ is manifested more and more in our lives. It is as we follow Christ that the power of His resurrected life is seen in us more and more. Out of our hearts will flow rivers of living water! Paul says in 2 Corinthians 4:11-12, "For we who live are always delivered to death for Jesus' sake, that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh. So then death is working in us, but life in you." Too many Christians fail to live like that. Instead, they live and die like Samson.

Remember Samson in the book of Judges. He was a volatile character who was capable of strong passions. God over-ruled his early weaknesses so that he judged the nation of Israel faithfully for about twenty years. He was commended for his faith in Hebrews 11:32 and 39. Then, towards the end of his life, he began to grow lax. He followed his own passions and got entangled with Delilah who brought about his downfall. Consider how he died. He was made blind. He was a prisoner. He had to entertain the people, including the great men and women of the land. With a mighty push against the supporting pillars, he brought down the temple, killing three thousand people as well as himself. So the dead he killed in his death was more than he had killed in his life.

"Hooray! Samson was great!" That is what many would think. But wait a moment. Was that the right way to live,

and was that the right way to die? God, no doubt, brought good out of the situation. But we must not take it that it was right for Samson to live the way he did toward the end of his life, and to die the way he did. Now it is clear that the way he lived was wrong, going after a Philistine woman and getting entangled with her. But what of the way he died? I suggest it was wrong as well because Samson was desperate. In a desperate situation, a person may desire to die, and in the process, drag along as many people as possible. Samson lived a dying life rather than a living death!

Instead of following Samson, we must follow Paul who followed Christ. We must serve the Lord, by following Him. There should be a readiness to die for Him if we are called to it. There must also be a readiness to deny self and follow Christ while we live. In order to live a fruitful life, you must be prepared to live for Jesus Christ's sake. You will be constantly labouring for the cause of Christ. You will be continually submitted to His will. You will be used much by Him in the work of the gospel. You will be the means of leading many souls to saving faith in Jesus Christ. And you will be given a strong sense of assurance of salvation.

Many people have problems with assurance. Some are so sure that they are saved when they have no business to be sure. They live more for themselves than for Christ. They have made some profession of faith somewhere along the way in their lives, but they do not have any desire for the things of God. They are prepared to accept the things that are convenient to themselves but refuse to submit to Christ when His

teachings are hard. Such people have no business to be sure that they are saved.

You can be sure that you are saved if you are not like these people. You have put your trust in Christ, and you continue to trust in Him. Your desire is to live for Him and to follow after Him. You are prepared to die for Him, and you are living a life of self-denial as best as you know how. Jesus Christ has promised that you will be with Him in heaven, and the Father will honour you. The surest way of having a strong sense of assurance is to be like that grain of wheat that falls into the ground and dies.

6.3 What About You?

Jesus Christ had to die. Christians have to die. "Unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it produces much grain."

The teaching of John 12:24-26 has never been canceled or withdrawn. How could it be? Christ's death was for the salvation of all His people. As long as the world remains, there will be people who need to be called out by the gospel. As long as the world remains, there will be the need for Christians to fall into the ground and die; and as they die, produce much grain.

This is hard teaching. But it is true teaching. It is correct teaching. In the face of so much that is wishy-washy in the professing churches today, in the face of such mass apostasy (i.e. falling away from the truth) today, who among us will

arise and go against the tide? Who will stand up for Jesus Christ? Who will burn themselves up for Christ?

Seven

Facing Persecution

"And the dragon was enraged with the woman, and he went to make war with the rest of her offspring, who keep the commandments of God and have the testimony of Jesus Christ (v.17)."

It has been said that a scarlet thread runs through the whole of the Bible, from the first page to the last. By this is meant that redemption by the blood of Christ is taught everywhere in the Bible. There is, however, another sense to that statement which is equally true. From the first book of the Bible to the last, the blood of the martyrs flowed.

This has been the pattern of things for the church through the centuries. From the completion of the Bible to today, believers have suffered and died for their faith. For as long as the present world continues, the followers of Christ will experience persecution. Persecution is such a dominant note in the Bible that it borders on irresponsibility for pastors not to teach their flocks and prepare them for it. Look at all the thousands of Christian books that have been produced in this one cen-

tury, and you will hardly find any that is specially devoted to the subject of persecution. We have records and biographies of those who have been persecuted, which are all very helpful, but there are not books and articles that deal directly with the subject of persecution. For this reason, Joseph Tson's published address to British Christians, "A Theology of Martyrdom," is a milestone in Christian publication.¹

What accounts for the dearth (scarcity) of literature on this subject? Perhaps it is because pastors find themselves inadequate to deal with a matter that they have not experienced firsthand. The more likely reason, however, is that Christianity in the so-called "free world" has become soft and compromising, so much so that persecution does not threaten. The church has become so acceptable to society that the world smiles benignly upon it. While the "free world" wallows in its atheism, materialism, and immorality, believers elsewhere have had to pay a heavy price for their faith. Up until 1989, before the fall of communism, Christians in eastern Europe were persecuted for their faith. At the present time, Christians in China and certain Muslim states are undergoing severe persecution for their faith. Persecution is a reality. We do well to take heed to the many warnings and teachings of the Bible!

We believe in the progressive nature of revelation – that the revelation of God comes to us progressively and cumulatively. The last book of the Bible speaks with a certain finality of its

¹Sadly, Joseph Tson seems to have gone astray theologically in recent years. See Wax, Trewin, 2010. A Younger Theologian's Letter To Joseph Ton. <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/trevin-wax/a-younger-theologians-letter-to-joseph-%c8%9bon/> (Last accessed, May 2020.)

own. The twelfth chapter of the book of Revelation gives us clear teaching on persecution. It looks at persecution from the air, like a bird, giving a bird's-eye view. It also looks at persecution with X-ray eyes, revealing the invisible forces that are at work behind it.

Three main characters

There are three main characters in this vision. There is, first, the great, fiery red dragon of verse 2. He is identified as "that, serpent of old, called the Devil and Satan, who deceives the whole world," in verse 9. The dragon is waiting to devour the Child of the woman, in verse 4. This male Child "was to rule all nations *with a rod of iron* (verse 5)." This reminds us of the prophecies of the Old Testament concerning the Messiah. It says in Psalm 2:9, "You shall break them *with a rod of iron*; you shall dash them in pieces like a potter's vessel." This is a prophecy of Jesus Christ, as is clear from Acts 13:33: "...As it is written in the second Psalm: 'You are My Son, today I have begotten You,'" which is a quote from verse 7 of that Psalm. Only Jesus Christ fits the further description of Revelation 12:5, "And her Child was caught up to God and to His throne."

Satan had, throughout history, attempted to destroy the Christ, and to prevent Him from accomplishing God's plan of redeeming for Himself a people. Cain was prompted to kill Abel, the godly seed. God raised up Seth to propagate the godly line, through which would come the Saviour of the world. Satan attempted to confound God's plan by blurring the line separating the godly seeds from the ungodly seeds,

through marriage between them. We read in Genesis 6:2 that "the sons of God saw the daughters of men, that they were beautiful; and took wives for themselves of all whom they chose." Things got worse, and God sent the flood that destroyed all except Noah and his family. The world became populated again. People were scattered after the incident of the Tower of Babel.

From the son of Noah, Shem, came Abraham and his family. From Abraham arose the twelve tribes of Israel. The Christ was to come from the royal line of the tribe of Judah. Satan almost succeeded in destroying that line when the wicked queen, Athaliah, killed all the princes except Joash, who was rescued by his aunt. At last, the Christ was born to the virgin Mary.

Satan again failed to destroy the Christ when Herod ordered all infants from two years old and below to be destroyed. Having failed to prevent the incarnation of the Son of God, Satan next instigated Peter to dissuade Him from going to the cross. You would remember Christ's sharp rebuke to Peter: "Get behind Me Satan! You are an offence to Me, for you are not mindful of the things of God, but the things of men (Matt. 16:23)." When Christ finally died on the cross of Calvary, He bore the sins of His people in order that they might have eternal life. Death was unable to hold Him, and on the third day, He arose from death. He was seen by hundreds of people, and finally rose to heaven. The male Child has been "caught up to God and to His throne"!

There is the third character to identify, namely, the woman

who gave birth to the male Child. No, she was not Mary! The description of what happened to the woman in the passage does not fit Mary, the earthly mother of Jesus Christ. We are told that the dragon persecuted the woman and tried to destroy her, but God preserved her. There is a loftier and deeper meaning to this than the sufferings of Mary. Verse 17 of the chapter reveals to us the identity of the woman: "And the dragon was enraged with the woman, and he went to make war with the rest of her offspring, who keep the commandments of God and have the testimony of Jesus Christ." Who are "the rest of her offspring"? They are those "who keep the commandments of God and have the testimony of Jesus Christ"! Clearly, they are believers – the followers of Christ! It follows that the woman must be the church. The church, that is, the people of God considered together, gave birth to the Christ. In Ephesians 5:25-27, the church is described as the bride of Christ. The church has other children, namely the true Christians.

7.1 Understanding Persecution

This passage of Scripture, namely Revelation 12, helps us to understand persecution. It shows to us why persecution occurs and what we may expect when it does occur. Under this main heading, "Understanding Persecution", we note three points.

Certain to occur

First, we note that persecution is certain to occur. Satan is intent on harming the church out of spite. He has been cast

out of heaven with the wicked angels who followed him. He is full of pride and would continue to be defiant against God. He caused the fall of Adam and, therefore, of the whole human race. He attempted to thwart God's plan of redeeming His people through the sacrificial death of Christ on the cross. He tried to detain Christ in death but failed, for God raised Him up from the dead.

Imagine how this mad dog is raging now! He has been frustrated time and time again. He ought to have known better. How could he possibly win over God? But he is mad, you see. A person who is mad cannot see reason. He cannot see sense. That is what a lot of people in the world are like. They would defy God, and shake their fists at Him. They would blaspheme against the holy God and pour scorn upon His precious church. They think that they will somehow succeed to dethrone God. But they are just dreaming! We turn again to the messianic Psalm we have referred to before, Psalm 2:1-3, "Why do the nations rage, and the people plot a vain thing? The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together, against the Lord and against His Anointed, saying, 'Let us break Their bonds in pieces and cast away Their cords from us.'" What is God's response to such provocation? It says in the next verse, "He who sits in the heavens shall laugh; the Lord shall hold them in derision."

Because Satan has failed to destroy the Christ, he now turns his rage against the church. He persecutes the church through his agents – the beast from the sea, the beast from the earth, and the harlot sitting on the scarlet beast. These agents of

Satan are described in Chapters 13 and 17 of the book of Revelation. The beast from the sea is a reference to persecuting governments. The beast arises from the sea of mankind. Revelation 17:15 and Isaiah 17:12 show us that the sea symbolises nations and governments. Then there is the beast from the land. This is a reference to the false religions and philosophies of man. James 3:15 and Philippians 3:19 show us that antichristian "wisdom" comes from the earth. There is, thirdly, the harlot Babylon, who sits on the beast from the sea. The description of the harlot's appearance in Revelation 17:4, and her merchandise in Revelation 18:9-20, show that this is a reference to worldly seduction. The enemies of the church may be classified under these three categories – the beast from the sea, the beast from the earth, and the harlot called Babylon. These are the agents of Satan, who attack the church in three basic ways – by physical force, by assault against the mind, and by appealing to "the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life".

Persecution is certain to occur. We must expect persecution to come to the church. The devil will assault the church through his three agents.

Will not triumph

The second point is that persecution will not triumph. We are told that God specially protects the church in the wilderness of this world for "one thousand two hundred and sixty days (v. 6)", and "for a time and times and half a time (v. 14)". These are equivalent expressions. If we divide the one thousand two hundred and sixty days by the thirty days in a month,

we get forty-two months, which is three-and-a-half years. Similar expressions are found in the book of Daniel. What these expressions mean is that God will not allow the church to be persecuted for longer than He permits. God is in control! The devil is not in control. The church may be persecuted for what appears to be an unending period, but God will bring that period to an end. Trials and tribulations might last a long time. It might drag on for twice that length of time. It may drag on farther from that point – for a time, and times, and... half a time! Yes, when we think that it will continue longer, God brings it to an end! Christians, take heart! Persecution will not last forever!

Not only that, persecution will not triumph! That is because Satan is doomed to fail. Someone has described him as a dog that is tied to a pillar by a chain, awaiting to be cast into eternal hell. His power is curtailed, but he is still a dangerous foe. We must not underestimate his power. He can cause tremendous damage within the limits of his power. One thing we can be sure of, however, is that he will not succeed to destroy the church. For as long as the world continues, there will be a witness for Christ somewhere. Civil authorities may attempt to crush the church, but they will never succeed. Churches may go apostate and lose their testimony, but Christ will raise up others that are faithful to Him. Christians may be killed, but there will be others to carry on the witness. We are told in verse 11, "And they overcame him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, and they did not love their lives to the death." This verse is pregnant with meaning. It

deserves an entire exposition of its own, which we shall not attempt here. We wish only to note that even the death of believers will be a victory over Satan.

Tertulian (c. AD 200) was right when he said, "The more you mow us down, the more quickly we grow; the blood of Christians is seed. The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church." Believers who die for their faith are overcomers. They overcome Satan by means of two things: "the blood of the Lamb", and "the word of their testimony". These are probably the two wings of the eagle referred to in verse 14, "But the woman was given two wings of a great eagle, that she might fly into the wilderness to her place, where she is nourished..." It is "the blood of the Lamb" that preserves believers, whether in life or in death. It is "the word of their testimony" that destroys and frustrates the attempts of Satan to discredit the name of Christ. The church will be preserved for as long as believers are covered by the blood of Christ, and for as long as they maintain a faithful witness.

Directed at the faith

Persecution is certain to come. Persecution will not triumph. The third point is that persecution is directed at the Christian faith. We must never forget why believers are singled out for attack. It is not so much that believers are, of themselves, important to Satan. It is more because they are blood-bought. It is more because they bear the testimony of Christ. You would remember that the Lord Jesus on a number of occasions declared that a disciple is not above his teacher. If they persecute the Teacher, they will persecute the followers as well. An illus-

tration will help you to understand this point.

Here are two families, A and B, living side-by-side. The rubbish collector did not turn up for a number of days, and the dogs have made a mess of the rubbish in the bin in front of Mr. A's house. The wind blows the rubbish over to the neighbour's house. The neighbour is unhappy about it. He does not dare to confront Mr. A because Mr. A is a big man. Mr. B is a coward. When Mr. A's son comes out to play, Mr. B begins to pour abuse upon him, calling him various sorts of name. Surely, if you were Mr. A, you would be able to see that Mr. B was in fact attacking you! That is the way Satan acts. He is a coward. He is wicked. He knows that he is no match against the Lord Jesus Christ. He now attacks the followers of Christ, out of spite. But the Lord knows. That is why, when Saul was persecuting the church, and throwing believers into prison, the Lord confronted him and said, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me ?" He did not say, "Why are you persecuting the church?"

Satan's intention is to dishonour Christ's name. He wants to discredit the Christian faith. He is interested in you only so far as you bear the name of Christ. If anything, he would prefer to let you live in dishonour than to have you die in glory. A stinking life is worse than an honourable death. But no follower of Christ would like to live a stinking life! I know, it is not easy to die an honourable death either. None of us, left to ourselves, would like to be put to death. But our preference should be to die honourably than to live in dishonour. And more so when the name of Christ is at stake. We would not

court persecution. We would not seek it. But when it does come, we are not to avoid it. What the apostle Peter said in 1 Peter 4:12-16 is relevant:

"Beloved, do not think it strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened to you; but rejoice to the extent that you partake of Christ's sufferings, that when His glory is revealed, you may also be glad with exceeding joy. If you are reproached for the name of Christ, blessed are you, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you. On their part He is blasphemed, but on your part He is glorified. But let none of you suffer as a murderer, a thief, an evildoer, or a busybody in other people's matters. Yet if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in this matter."

This raises the question whether a believer may flee when persecution comes. There should be no problem in this. Believers should feel free to flee for their lives when that is possible. The Lord had said, "When they persecute you in this city, flee to another (Mt. 10:23)." The situation is more difficult for church leaders. The Lord said elsewhere, "The hireling flees because he is a hireling, and does not care about the sheep (John 10:13)." Augustine probably gave the wisest answer to this very difficult problem when he said that the church leader may flee if he is a marked man, like what happened to Paul at Damascus. But if the whole community is in equal danger,

they should flee together or the church leader should stay with the people to minister to them. We know, however, that the church leader is often the one who is singled out for attack by the persecutors. This is an extremely difficult matter to decide, as only those who have undergone persecution know. May the Lord give you wisdom and courage to decide when persecution comes! The important thing for others is that we must not be too quick to judge, whatever the decisions of those who are under persecution.

7.2 Handling Persecution

We move on to the second main part: "Handling Persecution". Again, there are three main points to note.

The spiritual dimension

The first point is that when persecution comes, we must never lose sight of the spiritual dimension of the problem. It is all too easy, in the heat of battle, to forget why we are fighting. It is all too easy, in the heat of persecution, to forget why we are persecuted. I am not referring to the immediate cause of the persecution. I am not referring to the human, visible causes. I am referring to the underlying, invisible principles. We have seen that Satan is the real instigator of hatred against the church. He may be like a dog that is chained, but we must not underestimate his power. Within the circumference of that chain, he can still cause terrible damage. We are told in 1 Peter 5:8 that "the devil walks about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour."

Consider the sufferings of Job. He lost his property. He lost his wife and children. He contracted painful sores all over his body. From riches he came to rags. He became a despised man, misunderstood and misrepresented. Who caused it all? We are told very clearly in the Bible that the devil was behind all the sufferings of Job.

Consider the temptation of our Lord before His public ministry began. Again, it was the devil who came to torment Him.

Remember how Peter tried to prevent the Lord from going to the cross. From the Lord's severe rebuke of Peter, we know that Satan was behind that diabolical attempt.

On one occasion, when the Lord announced his forthcoming death on the cross, He said, "Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be cast out (John 12:31)." The Lord never lost sight of the spiritual dimension of His sufferings on the cross.

The book of Revelation defines very clearly the spiritual dimension of our struggles in this life. The twelfth chapter shows that persecution comes to us because Satan is behind it. It is important for us to grasp this truth because, otherwise, we would lose our balance and our poise. We would fail to see our sufferings in proper perspective. We would be plagued by questions like, "Why am I arrested and thrown into prison when I have never done anything wrong?" "Why am I charged by the authorities when I have never been involved in politics?" "Why should Christians be attacked when we constitute only a minority of the people in the country?" It will also prevent you from acting rashly against those who persecute you. When the

policeman takes you out for interrogation, it would be easy for a fit man, or a man trained in the martial arts, to strike him at the right point and he would be dead. But wait a moment! Before you do anything so rash, think! You may be able to overcome that one policeman, but you will get yourself into greater trouble. You would have killed someone who is just carrying out his duty. Perhaps he has added his own spite to your sufferings, but there is the whole system that he is caught up in which is wicked and corrupt. Moreover, is it right for a believer to retaliate by force?

Remember the ultimate reason why you are persecuted. Remember that Satan is behind all attacks upon Christians, and the church. Remember the spiritual dimension to our struggles!

The presence of God

The next point is that we must never lose sight of God. God is in control of the situation. He will not allow His children to be tormented a day longer than He has determined. We are to look to Him, trust Him, and commit ourselves unto Him. This is no pious talk. It is the teaching of Scripture. It says in 1 Peter 5:19, "Therefore let those who suffer according to the will of God commit their souls to Him in doing good, as to a faithful Creator." You must first commit your soul to Him before you can do any good. Any good that you do has to be done as unto a faithful Creator.

The presence of God is a powerful reality, as many who keep a close walk with God will be able to testify. And more so to the child of God who keeps close to his heavenly Father

in times of persecution. As the heat of persecution increases, the presence of the Lord will become more manifest. Remember how the Lord was seen together with the three friends of Daniel when they were in the fiery furnace. Whether the Lord is visibly present or invisibly present, it does not matter. He has promised to be with His people. He has promised never to forsake them. He will be present to comfort and strengthen them.

For that reason, we need not worry too much about how we are to answer our interrogators. The Lord said, "When they deliver you up, do not worry about how or what you should speak. For it will be given to you in that hour what you should speak; for it is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father who speaks in you (Matt. 10:19-20)." These words were spoken to the twelve disciples of Christ. These words are spoken to us, who are His disciples, today. For the same reason, we need not worry too much about what will befall us next, when we are under persecution. We commit ourselves unto God, and continue to do good even to our enemies.

Christian principles

The third point is that we must not compromise Christian principles. I know that this is easier said than done. But it is not impossible for us to remain steadfast even unto death. Otherwise, there would have been no need for such teachings to be given in the Bible. The Lord says, in Matthew 10:32-33, "Therefore whoever confesses Me before men, him I will also confess before My Father who is in heaven. But whoever denies Me before men, him I will also deny before My Father who

is in heaven." This teaching comes after the assurance that our heavenly Father is in control of all things, and that we are to fear Him more than we fear those who can only kill our bodies.

What would you do when a revolver is placed at your head, or a razor blade at your throat, and you are told to blaspheme Christ or be killed? None of us, left to ourselves, will be able to stand fast in the faith. That is why there have been those who denied the faith at the threat of death. But equally true is the fact that there have been those who stood firm, and preferred death to dishonouring the name of Christ. Not all of us are called to die the martyr's death. We should not court it. We should not desire it. But if it is required of us to face death for the faith, we must be prepared to die! Let us not boast that we will be able to remain faithful unto death. But let us trust the Lord to keep us faithful to the end.

Whether it is the quick death that comes through one pull of the trigger, one stroke of the razor, or one smite of the sword, or the slow death that comes through burning, drowning, or poisoning, it cannot be worse than to deny the Lord, and be tormented by a guilty conscience for the rest of our lives. Those who have denied the Lord should seek His forgiveness and rest in the assurance that the blood of the Lamb covers all his sins. But one and all, we should resolve to live honourably and die honourably for the gospel. May the Lord give us grace to die the martyr's death when we are called to it!

We must not compromise Christian principles in other areas as well. We need not tell lies when under pressure. But

we need not reveal information to those who have no right to know, either. We are to be wise as serpents, and harmless as doves (Matt. 10:16).

We must not retaliate, nor harbour hatred and thoughts of revenge. It is never pleasant to be beaten physically, to be abused verbally, and to be humiliated in all those ways that only the unregenerate are capable of devising. But to harbour a root of bitterness in the heart is to allow the devil a foothold into our lives. The bitterness will eat into our heart like a worm. "Beloved, do not avenge yourselves, but rather give place to wrath; for it is written, 'Vengeance is Mine, I will repay,' says the Lord (Rom. 12:19)."

We must not stop witnessing for Christ, who is the only way of salvation. The Lord said, "Whatever I tell you in the dark, speak in the light; and what you hear in the ear, preach on the housetops (Matt. 10:27)." It was in connection with this that we are told not to fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. We are to fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell. When fear silences gospel witness, the devil has won the victory! We must never allow persecution, or the fear of persecution, to stop us from proclaiming to all the gospel of "Jesus Christ, and Him crucified."

7.3 Preparing For Persecution

We come to our last, and practical, part of our study. We have sought to understand the nature of persecution. We have learned of how to handle persecution. We now come to "Prepar-

ing For Persecution". There are three main things we must do to prepare for persecution.

God's word

The first thing is that we must build up a knowledge of God's word. This is suggested by Revelation 12:11, "And they overcame him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony..." , as well as verse 17, "And the dragon was enraged with the woman, and he went to make war with the rest of her offspring, who keep the commandments of God and have the testimony of Jesus Christ." Believers must be marked by a clear grasp of the commandments of God. They keep the commandments of God because they know those commandments. By their testimony to what they know to be true, they are able to overcome the devil.

There is here the possibility of misunderstanding the promise of the Lord in Matthew 10:19-20, that the Holy Spirit will give you what to say in times of persecution. There are those who would not bother to learn the word of God because of this. This is nothing but to tempt God. It was never the Lord's intention that we should neglect the study of the Bible. We are told in 1 Peter 2:2, "...as newborn babes, desire the pure milk of the word, that you may grow thereby." We are told in 2 Peter 3:18, "...but grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ." The more you know God's word, and obey it, the more likely it is that the Holy Spirit will guide you. This has to be so because you are then "in tune" with the will of God and are, therefore, more readily used by the Spirit of God.

By the knowledge of God's word, I do not mean the mere memorisation of verses or passages of the Bible. Memorisation is good but a knowledge of the overall sweep of God's word is better. The memorising of Bible verses without the understanding of their meanings or contexts, is useless. A knowledge of Systematic Theology, of how the truths of God relate to one another, is good. A solid grasp of the doctrines of God, of divine sovereignty, of election, of the atoning death, of justification, of sanctification, and of glorification, will stand you in good stead when persecution comes. You may not be able to memorise any verse, but the truths you know will help you to stand every time you are knocked down. Like the ropes around a boxing ring, they will cause you to bounce back to face the enemy every time you are struck by him. This is not to minimise the value of memorising Bible verses and passages. By all means, memorise as many passages as you can. They will be very helpful to you. But you must build up a knowledge of God's word as well, so as to stand when persecution comes.

Never despise the value and importance of doctrine. Read good books, study the Bible, and listen to good preaching to improve your knowledge of God's word.

Christian character

The second way to prepare for persecution is to build up Christian character. Christian character is not built up overnight. It takes time. Those who are faithful in little will be faithful in much. Those who are obedient to God in small things will be able to be obedient in the greater things. We all know this principle too well. Take the case of a class of pupils in a school.

Often it is that we find one pupil more obedient to the teacher than all the rest. This pupil will often be laughed at and despised by others who look upon such obedience as a weakness. He will be called "sissy", "ninny", and so on, by the others. But note the life of this pupil as he grows up. You will find that the one who has strength of character, the one who accomplishes more good in life, the one who leaves his mark in society, is that same one who had been laughed at before, for being obedient.

The explanation for that is not difficult. It is not natural for fallen man to be obedient to rightful authority. The boy who had been obedient had to fight against the natural tendency in himself to disobey. Every battle fought and won is one more fibre added to strengthen his character. It is no wonder that the most obedient pupil always turns out to be the most useful, the most resourceful, and the most reliable man. This is a lesson to all children. Always learn to obey rightful authority, whether in school or at home. This is a lesson to all Christians. Always learn to obey God's word, and to submit to His will.

The same applies to the other qualities that are so much needed in times of persecution – patience, endurance, and perseverance. It is always a tragic thing to see Christians who began well end badly. Here you are, at an athletic meet, cheering your friend on. He runs the first round on the field with a smile on his face, a spring in his feet, and with powerful swings of the arms. In the second round, his smile is gone. In the third round, the spring in his feet is gone. In the fourth round, the swings on his arms are gone. Now comes the fifth round. His

face is contorted with exertion. His mouth gasps for air. His lungs feel like bursting. His legs weigh like lead. You cheer him on: run..., run..., run.., finish the race..., there is only a short distance more to go... He runs slower, and slower... He begins to stagger... And, to your amazement, and disappointment, he gives up and walks out of the race! Oh, what a blow! This is what happens to those who lack patience, endurance, and perseverance. The Christian life is like a race. We have to finish the race, however tough it may be. Thank God that it is not always trials and tribulations that we meet with in the Christian life. Thank God that there are seasons of respite, refreshing showers of blessing, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. But it is nevertheless a race that we must finish.

Brute force against our bodies and property is a fearful thing. More frightening, however, is the slow, draining, psychological types of torture that the enemies of the gospel are capable of devising. How would you fare when persecution comes? Will you be able to endure, and persevere on, in the midst of trials? You have to begin now, building up Christian character in your everyday life, if you are to stand in times of persecution.

Mutual support

The final point is that you must build up mutual support before persecution comes. This is where membership in a good local church is so important. There was this man I know, who was imprisoned for his faith. He had resigned from membership with one church and moved on to worship in another. He found this church not to his liking, so he and his family moved

on to worship in another church. It was then that he was arrested and imprisoned. The first church he attended visited his family once or twice, but did not do much to help since the family had left the church. The second church did not do much to help because the family had come to the church and gone. The third church did not do much to help since the family was new to the church and had not committed themselves to it. This was the unhappy experience of that family who was not committed to any church. It underlines the importance of integrating into a local church.

But isn't the church of Jesus Christ bigger than just the local church? Should not all Christians everywhere help out those who are imprisoned? Yes, the church of Jesus Christ is bigger than the local church. But it is the will of God, the teaching of the Bible, that every Christian should be a member of a local church. Yes, all Christians everywhere should help those who are imprisoned. But it is easier said than done in most situations. You cannot expect Christians who do not know you personally to minister to you well. It is your fellow church members who know you best and who can minister to you in the most effective ways. By being a member of a local church we are able to fellowship with the members of other churches more meaningfully. Our church stands in close fellowship with other like-minded churches. In times of need these other churches will rally around us to help. Our church has a looser fellowship with others who are not exactly like-minded, but who are nevertheless evangelical and true Christians. We are in a better position, as a church, to enlist or

accept their help as circumstances demand.

Never under-estimate the importance of building up mutual support. In times of trial, you will find it most comforting that your church is taking care of your family. In times of suffering, you will value the prayers of those who love you and know you personally. In times of persecution, you will be better able to stand because of the widening circle of support that comes from fellowship with other churches.

To prepare for persecution, you must build up a knowledge of God's word, build up Christian character, and build up mutual support.

"Yes, and all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution (2 Tim. 3:12)."

Eight

Facing Suffering

1 As the deer pants for the water brooks, so pants my soul for You, O God.

2 My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When shall I come and appear before God?

3 My tears have been my food day and night, while they continually say to me, "Where is your God?"

4 When I remember these things, I pour out my soul within me. For I used to go with the multitude; I went with them to the house of God, with the voice of joy and praise, with a multitude that kept a pilgrim feast.

5 Why are you cast down, O my soul? And why are you disquieted within me? Hope in God, for I shall yet praise Him for the help of His countenance.

6 O my God, my soul is cast down within me; therefore I will remember You from the land of the Jordan, and from the heights of Hermon, from the Hill Mizar.

7 Deep calls unto deep at the noise of Your waterfalls; all Your

waves and billows have gone over me.

8 The Lord will command His lovingkindness in the daytime, and in the night His song shall be with me—a prayer to the God of my life.

9 I will say to God my Rock, “Why have You forgotten me? Why do I go mourning because of the oppression of the enemy?”

10 As with a breaking of my bones, my enemies reproach me, while they say to me all day long, “Where is your God?”

11 Why are you cast down, O my soul? And why are you disquieted within me? Hope in God; for I shall yet praise Him, the help of my countenance and my God.

(Psalm 42:1-11)

The Psalms are very rich expressions of the life of a believer. They lead the believer in the worship of God, in prayer, and in expressing his feelings through the many experiences of the Christian life. They instruct him about God, the ways of God, and the Saviour who was to come. Psalm 42, in particular, helps us to understand sufferings, and prepare us to face them.

All of us has seen a wrestling match before, either in real life or on the television. In a wrestling match, two well-trained men face each other, eye each other, and cautiously move towards each other. Their arms lock, and a severe struggle between them begins. Here is Mr. A wrestling with Mr. B. Mr. A makes a move, and down goes Mr. B! If you are a supporter of Mr. B, your heart will sink as he goes down. Mr. B is down! But no, Mr. B makes a clever move, and down goes Mr. A! Your heart is uplifted as you see Mr. B on top of Mr. A. But no! Mr.

A rolls aside and hooks at Mr. B with his legs. Down goes Mr. B! Strength is pitted against strength, wit against wit. Great agility is needed, good techniques are needed, and endurance of the most unrelenting kind is needed! The struggle would go on, and on, and on... Finally, one of the contenders will emerge the winner.

Psalm 42 describes a wrestling match, not between two men, but between two conflicting powers in the inner being of a child of God. The two powers are called Sense and Faith. Here is a child of God, a true believer, who is undergoing suffering. His physical senses tell him that all is not well. His faith struggles against the onslaught of these senses to stay above the troubles of life. So Faith and Sense are engaged in a severe struggle for supremacy.

This Psalm was written by David, who is described in Acts 13:22 as "a man after God's own heart". David was a child of God. When did he face this suffering? What circumstances led him to such a struggle within himself? There were two occasions when David had to run for his life. On the first occasion, he ran away from Saul who was jealous of him. He ran from place to place, from one village to another. Along the way, he gathered around himself a band of rugged soldiers – people who were disillusioned with the reign of Saul. David's band of rugged soldiers were pursued by Saul's well-armed army. The second occasion was when David was an old man, ruling over Israel after the death of Saul. David had to flee for his life because his son Absalom wanted to take over the throne.

From the evidences available, it would appear that Psalm

42 describes the first occasion when David had to run for his life. Later on, when he became king, David wrote down his experiences in the form of a psalm that was dedicated to the chief musician of the royal choir. This psalm was sung by the sons of Korah, the descendants of the man who led the rebellion against Moses. The book of Numbers tells us that the earth opened and swallowed up the rebels, but "the children of Korah did not die (Num. 26:11)". The descendants of Korah became singers in the court of David.

This psalm divides itself naturally into two parts, each ending with a chorus, in verses 5 and 11, "Why are you cast down, O my soul..." This psalm unfolds itself like a play of two parts. Scene I is enacted, which ends with the chorus of verse 5. Scene II is then enacted, which ends with the chorus of verse 11. Or, to continue with our picture of the wrestling match, there are two bouts. Each bout ends with the triumph of Faith. In exultation, Faith calls out, "Why are you cast down, O my soul?"

8.1 The First Bout

Faith speaks (vv. 1-2)

Let us enter into the heart of David and observe the struggle between Faith and Sense. The faith in the believer is a gift of God. It, therefore, has the upper hand. So, we begin with Faith. David had on many occasions gone hunting deer. He would hide behind a rock, or a tree, and shoot at the deer. The deer would run, as David gives chase. David would move

from behind one tree to the next tree, and from one rock to another, in hot pursuit of the deer. The deer would run for dear life. Once in a while it would raise its head in regal majesty, listening attentively to determine whether his enemy is still pursuing. He would be smelling the air to try and catch the scent of the enemy. He would move on, stop to rear up his head, and run again. After such a hot pursuit the deer would be weary, and thirsty. He would look about for water, yearning to just have a sip of it somewhere.

As he discerns that the enemy is no where near, he begins to search for water in earnest. He would prick up his ear, and smell the air, to try and detect whether there is water. Finally, he hears the gurgling sound of water from a stream. Unknown to the deer, David is watching him. The deer leaps down to the stream, gingerly landing on a rock. He stretches out his neck, but finds that he is still too far from the water. He jumps to another rock farther down, and now begins to lap up the water.

David had seen how a thirsty deer behaved. At this time, he is himself running away from his enemy. His body is weary, his feet blistering, his knees bleeding from falls, patches of blood clots forming in various parts of his clothes. His hair is unkempt, not having had a bath for many days. He now pours out his heart in faith. Comparing himself with a deer panting for water, he pours out his heart expressing his desire for God. David is not desiring to die and be with God. As we proceed on in this psalm, we shall discover that he is actually desiring to be in the tabernacle of God – to worship God together with

His people. At the moment, he is far from Jerusalem. He has a correct theology, however, and knows that God is still with him where he is. His heart calls out to God, although he yearns for the peace and joy of meeting with God in His tabernacle.

Here is this band of soldiers all around David – people who are disillusioned with Saul, and have rallied around David. Here is David, perhaps lying down in the midst of these people, perhaps nursing his bleeding knees. Here are sentries posted all around him. In the midst of people who are loyal to him, who are ready to protect him, David cannot find peace and joy. Is this not the experience of many a child of God who is undergoing suffering? You have so many friends, and brothers and sisters in Christ, all around you. Yet you feel so lonely. It is as though no one truly understands what you are going through. It is as though your suffering is so unique. At this point, David pours out his heart to his God.

Sense speaks (vv. 3-4)

But you see, Faith is only a hair's breath away from Sense. If you are not careful, just a slight shift of your attention away from Faith will land you in the hand of Sense. This is what happens to David. Sense tells him, "No, David. No! Much as you yearn for your God, you are still a miserable wretch. Look at your condition. How pitiful you are!" As David is brought to realise his present circumstances, tears well out from his eyes. Perhaps he is not shedding tears in front of his followers, for fear of demoralising his already tired followers. But many times, in the dark of the night, he sheds tears. Sense tells him that all is not well with him, that he is a fugitive, running away

for dear life, that he is suffering much. As these thoughts come to his mind, more tears pour out of his eyes.

A person who is in tears would not have the desire for physical food. "How can I take any food in such circumstances?" He would not be able to sleep well. "My tears have been my food day and night." And all this is made worse by the remembrance of how the enemies had taunted him. You would remember what sort of man David was. When confronted with Goliath who jeered at Israel, David's anger was stirred up. He was not stirred up in a fleshly, self-righteous, way. His was a righteous anger, for he was more concerned about the honour of God than anything else. You would remember how he said, in 1 Samuel 17:26, "Who is this uncircumcised Philistine that he should defy the armies of the living God?" On the present occasion, in the midst of his trouble, David remembers that his enemies had jeered at him and said "Where is your God?" This cuts David at a tender spot.

Then, there is the remembrance of happier times. His thoughts move to the happier days of the weekly Sabbath worship, and the once-a-year national Passover feast, that were held in Jerusalem. David had been most enthusiastic. He was often among the first ones to lead the throng up Mount Zion to worship God. How happy and joyful were those occasions! How wonderful were those days! Memory of those happy times bring tears to his eyes.

How true this is of those who are undergoing suffering! The memory of happier days evoke an inner pain in us. You remember the happy times that you had had with your deceased

spouse. You remember the patter of those little feet of your deceased son. You remember how your deceased daughter used to grip your fingers in her little hand. O, how pleasant were those days! And how your heart aches now as you think of them! If other things will not make you shed tears, the memory of those happier days will. Sense tells David that he is not in those happier times.

Faith speaks (v. 5)

As you look at David, your heart cannot help feeling anxious for him. David is depressed. His spirit is down. He is sinking deeper and deeper. Oh, what is going to happen to him? You expect the worst. But no! David is a true child of God. Faith in him takes over. The deep inner conviction of spiritual reality calls out to God. "Why are you cast down, O my soul? And why are you disturbed within me? Hope in God..." Yes, hope in God! The child of God calls out unto himself to trust in God. "I shall yet praise Him. God is still my present help." Faith has the upper hand!

It would be nice to end here, on this happy note. Our friend, Faith, has won the wrestling match. But no! In real life, suffering does not go away just like that. You know what it is like, if you have suffered in some ways before. When the worst seemed to be over, another bout of sufferings came. One difficulty came upon another. One calamity came after another. There seemed to be no end to your troubles. You were often driven to despair. You had been driven to cry out, "How long, O Lord, is this going to last?"

8.2 The Second Bout

Faith speaks (v. 6)

Since David is a true child of God, Faith – the deep inner conviction of truth, the inner trust in God, – is still in control. His senses are crying out in pain, in loneliness, in agony. But Faith calls out to God and he pours forth his complaints to God, "O my God, my soul is cast down within me." Faith makes a deliberate effort to trust in God, to remember Him, even from where David is at the moment.

The river Jordan had always played a significant role in the nation of Israel. It runs through the nation from north to south, ending in depths of the Dead Sea, whose surface is 1,290 feet below the surface of the Mediterranean Sea. God had miraculously parted the water of this river, in the time of Joshua, to allow the Israelites to cross over into the promised land. As we trace the river north to its source, we go farther and farther up into the mountains of Hermon, in the region of Damascus. From the heights of Hermon, upon one particular hill called Mizar, David's heart is lifted up by the majesty of the scene, so that he calls out to God in faith. "Although I am far away from home, the Lord is still with me. Although my senses cry out that everything is not well, my faith will still cling on to my God. I can still pour forth all that is within me unto my God."

Sense speaks (v. 7)

We have noted that the distance between Faith and Sense is only a hair's breadth. They sit next to each other. When you

talk to one of them, you are virtually facing the other as well. At this point in David's life, they are actually locked in severe combat. David is probably seated on a rock at this time, observing the flow of the waters that feed into the tributaries of the Jordan. As his attention shifts to the present circumstances, he plunges straight into the clutches of Sense! Let us try and understand how this happens.

Remember that we are at the source of the river Jordan, right at the top of the mountains of Hermon. There the water of the river gathers momentum, falling from one rapid to another. And as David observes the water, he sees this huge column falling down the deep waterfall. That column of water goes down, and down, and down... When is it going to hit the bottom? David sees himself falling with the column of water. Down and down he goes, very much like a man who has fallen off a block of high-rise flats. He plunges down and down... This is often the feeling of those who are in suffering. The suffering seems to go on and on and on... When is this going to end? As David mused, the column of water hits the bottom, sending up a booming sound that echoes around the mountain. One boom follows another, so that they merge into one another.

Oh, it is so painful! One wave of agony comes after another. David feels that he has fallen down with the water to the bottom of the waterfall. The water is swirling and rushing all over him. He is dragged along, overwhelmed, and drowning! He is struggling for dear life! In desperation he clutches at the rocks. Oh, if only he can pull himself up this rock, which

will then become the rock of his salvation... Sense complains against God. "I cannot stand it anymore..."

Faith speaks (v. 8)

The complaint was directed at God. The shift of attention to God allows Faith to take the advantage, and he now gains control! In suffering, day appears to be night. The day appears to be so short, and the night so long. That does not mean that the day is preferred over the night. The person nursing some heartache often prefers to be in the night, to wallow in self-pity. So, there are the pains of the day, and the aches of the night! But Faith is in control at the moment. Faith says, "Never mind whether it is day or night. This one thing I know: if it is day, God will shower His love upon me; if it is night I will yet sing my song to Him, as a prayer to the God of my life."

Sense speaks (vv. 9-10)

But note: suffering is often prolonged. There is another fall for Faith, and Sense takes over. The struggle is quickened. The pain is more severe. God, who had been David's rock of salvation a moment ago, appears to have abandoned him. One moment Faith rejoices in God. The next moment, Sense complains against God. "Why have You forsaken me? Why do I go mourning because of the oppression of my enemy?" So fickle is human nature! But Sense is in control at the moment. Sense is ruthless, and would make the situation seem so bad. David thinks again of the taunts of his enemy, "Where is your God?". He feels it more intensely this time, as though the enemy is still before him and taunting him all day long. The bones are

the innermost structures of the body, and they are the hardest parts. David feels as though the blows of the enemy have penetrated so deep, and with such force, as to break his very bones!

Often, the tongue of man is sharper than a real sword. It cuts deep, and it wounds bad. "The tongue is a little member and boasts great things. See how great a forest a little fire kindles! (James 3:5)" Beware of your tongue! The unwise words you utter, the hurtful things you say, the unfair judgments you make, all go towards crushing the spirit of a man much more badly than you think. A wound on the flesh heals in due time, and leaves a scar. A wound to the soul might never heal at all! If it does, it leaves a very deep scar indeed.

Faith speaks (v. 11)

As we watch David, we fear that this friend of ours is finished – defeated and broken. But no! Remember that David is a true child of God. The suffering may be severe, but Faith has the final say! It is as though Faith brings suffering to a sudden end. This often happens. Just at the point when you think you cannot stand it any longer, God brings the suffering to an end. This is actually a teaching of the Bible. The book of Revelation, for example, teaches us that God will permit His children to undergo suffering for only so long, and no longer. He will sustain His children in the midst of trials "for a time and times and half a time (Rev. 12)." He will then bring an end to the suffering. At the point when we think that David cannot take it any longer, Faith intervenes!

As before, the chorus sounds forth. Faith asserts himself,

and comforts the much harassed soul. David stretches forth the arms of faith to trust in his God. "Why are you cast down, O my soul? ...Hope in God..." The curtain gradually falls, to the sound of this happy note.

8.3 Some Applications

Understand the effects

We have not finished yet. There are some lessons to be learned on how to face suffering. The first lesson is that we must seek to understand the effects of sufferings with the view of avoiding or alleviating them. The effects are never pleasant, nor good. We are not talking about the outcome, or results, of suffering. We are talking about the immediate effects of suffering. What are some of the effects we have seen in the experiences of David?

First, we learn that our spirit and our body are intimately united to each other. Whatever happens to our physical body will affect our spirit, and vice versa. It is often the case that spiritual depression is caused by some affliction or other in our physical body. We see this in the case of Elijah, when he ran away from the wicked queen, Jezebel (1 Kings 19). Various factors contributed to his nervous breakdown. There was his unrealistic expectations in the work of reforming the nation. There was the emotional strain involved in the confrontation with the nation's wicked rulers. Then there was the physical exhaustion that broke the camel's back. To ignore the emotional and physical aspects of his problem would be to adopt

an unrealistic and unbiblical stoicism. Man is made body and spirit. Physical exhaustion may not have been the root cause of Elijah's problem, but it was at least an important contributory factor. The cure prescribed for him may appear rather simplistic, but it pulled him through! What was that prescription? Food and rest! And more food and more rest!

Of course, there are Christians who are always resting. They seem never to exert themselves in anything, and they are content with a mediocre form of Christianity. To such, we cannot recommend rest, for they would then be resting from rest! We note, however, that there are conscientious Christians who are always trying to do well in their careers, and in their service to the Lord, but who become spiritually depressed. If you are one such, it would be good to examine your lifestyle. Of course, you must also examine your walk with God, your attitude towards His work, and the manner by which you are serving Him. But examine also your lifestyle. Perhaps what you need is not spiritual counselling, but some regular physical exercises! The cure for a family man facing similar problems may be to spend more time with his family, apart from doing some regular physical exercises. All this is for the reason that there is a very close connection between the physical and the spiritual sides of life. We must not treat our physical needs as something unspiritual or evil. Remember that *both* the body and the soul are redeemed by the Lord (Rom. 8:18-23; 1 Cor. 6:20). You are to take care of your body as well as your soul.

Then, note that sufferings have the effect of making us think that our situation is so unique. You begin to think that

nobody really understands. You think that you are the only one in the world facing that suffering for the first time. Self-pity sets in. Watch out about that!

Sufferings also have the effect of distorting and compressing our perspective of life, so much so that there is this tendency in us to want to withdraw from the company of friends. We just want to be alone, and we do not wish to have anyone around. Watch out for that tendency, and avoid it!

Then, the memory of happier days seem to hurt terribly. And problems seem to come one after another. Sufferings also have the effect of making us unduly sensitive to the words of others. Under normal circumstances we would just shrug our shoulders at the biting words of others, and feel none the worse for them. But in suffering, even the well-meaning words of friends are hurtful. You would tend to take them as attacks upon your person.

These then are the effects of sufferings. There seems to be so many of them! Take note of them. Understand that they are the effects of sufferings. Expect them to come. But do not succumb to them. Remember that God will not allow His child to suffer a day longer than what He has determined. All trials and tribulations will come to an end. The first point, then, is to understand the effects of suffering with the view of avoiding or alleviating them.

Trust in God

Then, you must put your faith in God. You must trust Him. This truth may appear so obvious. Yet, in suffering, a believer may be so caught up in his circumstances that the obvious is

obscured. That is why he needs to be reminded to just turn to God and trust in Him. God is the One who will deliver you. God is the One who truly understands you. He will vindicate His people. He will work out all things for their good. This is what we saw in David. In the midst of suffering, he deliberately turned his hope upon God. His inner conviction of spiritual realities told him to trust in God.

We see this truth expressed in 1 Peter 4:19, "Therefore let those who suffer according to the will of God commit their souls *to Him* in doing good, as to a faithful Creator." Although the words "to Him" have been added, they are necessary in order to convey the sense of the original Greek. What Peter is saying in this text is that in the midst of your suffering, you must commit your soul to God, your faithful Creator. There is this deliberate effort needed to put your trust in God. Otherwise, you might begin to panic, and things will get out of control. Little problems would appear to be like fearful giants. A certain short-sightedness sets in, and a little toad would appear to be like a monster to you. So, put your trust in God. The Lord your God reigns! He can never be thrown into a state of panic! He is in control of all things!

In Matthew 10:18-19, the Lord warned his disciples, "But when they deliver you up, do not worry about how or what you should speak. For it will be given to you in that hour what you should speak; for it is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father who speaks in you." If no deliberate effort is needed to trust in God, there would have been no need for the Lord to teach His disciples this truth. He would have just

let them be, and when the time came, the Spirit would have just spoken through them. But no, the Lord saw it necessary to teach His disciples this truth so that when the time came they would trust in their God. He realised that in the midst of sufferings, His disciples would need to deliberately trust in God, and He will be there to help them. That is the second point: put your faith in God. Remember what we have learned from Psalm 42. However far you are from home, however far you are from friends, and from Christian fellowship, however difficult your circumstances, God is with you and you can cast your hope on Him. *Trust in God!*

Do what is right and good

The final point we must learn is this – do what is right and good! Do not rely on your feelings and sentiments. Note carefully that I am not saying you should suppress your feelings and sentiments. That would be to make you less than human. I don't believe in a Christianity in which feelings play no part. God has made us human, and that includes having feelings. We must naturally allow our feelings to express themselves. If you need to weep, to cry, to groan, by all means go ahead and do it. Never suppress your feelings. More important, however, is that you must regulate and control your feelings by what you know to be right and good. The tendency in most people in times of suffering is to allow themselves to be controlled by their feelings. That is not right, and not good. It will make you vulnerable, and you would bring much harm to yourself and others.

We look at the example of David. He was tempted to with-

draw into himself. No one seemed to understand him, and he began talking to himself. He did not seem to find anyone capable of understanding him despite the fact that there were many friends around him. When you are in suffering, your friends would come around you like a swarm of bees, ready to rescue a fellow-bee that is wounded. The tendency would be for you to withdraw deeper and deeper into yourself. That would not be to your good. No doubt, there are the insensitive, self-righteous friends who would barge in on you in a most unhelpful way. Such friends need to learn to be more sensitive and restrained. But it would not be good for you to totally cut yourself away from even your close friends – brothers and sisters in Christ who love you and are concerned for you. Do not act according to your feelings, but do what is right and good!

Related to the need of fellowship is attendance at church meetings. The means of grace must be attended to. Do not stop going to the meetings of the church. A sheep that feeds on its own is sick. A Christian who stops attending church is spiritually sick. You know that it is right and good for you to attend those church meetings. Do what you know to be right and good! Don't act according to your feelings!

And never, never, ever think of committing suicide! Both the body and the soul are redeemed by the blood of the Lord Jesus Christ. You are no longer your own (1 Cor. 6:20). The Lord gives life, and He takes it away (Job 1:21). We are to place ourselves in the hand of God, and await His time to take us away. While we are alive, we are to live to His glory (1 Cor. 10:31). This is the teaching of Scripture. No child of

God should ever entertain any thought of suicide. Whenever such a thought comes to your mind, quickly drive it out as the temptation of Satan. It will be a great sin for you to commit suicide.

Of course, there should be no thought of giving up. Suicide is a violent way of giving up. Few people will attempt it. More people, however, would give up in the less violent ways. They would lose all their zeal, all their commitment, and all their motivation. They become disheartened, depressed, even cynical. Many good Christian works never get started – and if started, they never get finished – not because there is a lack of manpower, or a lack of financial resources, or whatever else, but simply because the people of God lack this quality called ‘stickability’. They are unable to stick on in whatever good work they do. They give up too easily. They lack endurance, patience and perseverance. When people give up so easily in what they are doing, is it surprising to hear that they are contemplating giving up the Christian faith as well? The doctrine of the perseverance of the saints is a biblical one. No true child of God will just give up on the life of faith.

Let me mention one final matter – prolonged spiritual depression is sin! That is a hard teaching. But let me prove it to you. A person who is in a state of depression has no more energy, no motivation, no will to do anything positive, right, or good. You become a useless Christian. The teaching of Scripture is that we continue to grow in grace, in knowledge, and in usefulness. Like a tree, we are to grow and produce fruit consistently and abundantly. We are to become more and

more useful in the service of God. Spiritual depression itself is no sin. It is part and parcel of the Christian experience. Some are more prone to it than others. But prolonged spiritual depression is sin. A Christian under prolonged depression is unfruitful. Indeed, he becomes a burden to the church. It is certainly not the will of God for a Christian to be unfruitful or to constitute a burden to the church.

Not only does the Christian become useless in the service of God, he is definitely a stumbling block to non-believers. Instead of showing forth the love, joy and peace of the Christian life, he is grumpy, sour-faced, and mourning all the time. He does not exude the fragrance of Christ in his life. The light is now hidden under the bed. The salt has lost its savour. He brings dishonour to the gospel, and to his Lord.

Then, we must note that the Bible does give us clear teaching on spiritual depression – to warn us about it, and to instruct us on how to get out of it. Psalm 42 is one such example. Numerous other examples may be quoted. We are told in Philippians 4:6-7, "Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God; and the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus." We are told in James 5:13, "Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray." All these are related to spiritual depression. If God has taught us how to deal with spiritual depression, how can we remain so long in such a state? Would we not be calling into question the sufficiency of God's word, and the efficacy of His teaching and promises? From that point of view, prolonged

spiritual depression is sin.

Let me hasten to add that I am not referring to those who are in constant depression because of some medical condition in their bodies. There are those who are prone to be in a state of prolonged depression because of some hormonal imbalance, or some biological deficiency, or some malfunction of the glands and organs. I am not saying that prolonged depression in such people is necessarily sin. They cannot quite help themselves. It is not wrong for such people to seek medical help. But they must also seek God for help. In God's mercy, your sufferings will be alleviated, if not removed.

Some people are more prone to depression than others. Differences in biological makeup, differences in character, differences in the work that we do, and differences in the way the Lord deals with us, account for the different degrees of proneness to depression. Some of the most godly and productive Christians have been those who were prone to spiritual depression. C. H. Spurgeon was one of them. Note, however, that Spurgeon never allowed himself to wallow in his state of depression. Being a true child of God, he trusted his God and served Him well.

Understand the effects of sufferings with the view of avoiding or alleviating them. Trust in God in the midst of your trials and afflictions. Do what is right and good, instead of following the dictates of your feelings. These are the ways by which a child of God is to face sufferings.

"For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory

which shall be revealed in us (Rom. 8:18)."

Nine

Facing Temptation

Watch and pray, lest you enter into temptation (Matt. 26:41).

Blessed is the man who endures temptation; for when he has been proved, he will receive the crown of life which the Lord has promised to those who love Him. Let no one say when he is tempted, "I am tempted by God" ; for God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does He Himself tempt anyone. But each one is tempted when he is drawn away by his own desires and enticed. Then, when desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, brings forth death. Do not be deceived, my beloved brethren (James 1:12-16).

Temptations are trials that come to Christians arising either from external or internal circumstances. They all have the common effect of troubling the heart of the believer. They can come in the form of direct physical attacks from the enemies of the gospel, or through the subtle suggestions of the devil, all of which are intended to shake the believer and to

cause him to sin. Often, the external and physical attacks tend to cause the believer to doubt God's promises, to become bitter, to feel despondent, even to lose faith. The external problems are therefore trials directed at the faith of the believer.

There are also those trials that come to us in private, unknown to others around us. There are the attractions of the world, the allurements of the flesh, the unworthy thoughts – all of which tend to lead us into actual acts that are against God's law. If anything, these hidden trials are more severely felt by the believer than the external attacks that come upon him. Many are the Christians who moan and groan because of the temptations that come to them in the secrecy of their hearts! O, how trying! How difficult it is to live a holy life!

Every Christian, whether young in the faith or older, faces temptation of one kind or another all the time. Young Christians are put under undue stress because of not understanding the trials within themselves. They are perplexed by the temptations, and are put under such stress trying to handle them. The more mature Christians are not spared these trials. In fact, they feel the onslaught of temptations more keenly than when they were younger in the faith. Many things that did not bother them in the past now become severe trials as they struggle to live holy lives before God. Yes, those who are mature in the faith also face temptations! Never think that the more you grow in spiritual maturity, the less you will be troubled by temptations. The sins of youth are found in the oldest Christian!

We see then the importance of dealing with the subject of

temptation. People must be taught the nature of temptations, and how to face them. Insufficient attention has been given to this subject. Preachers tend to deal with this matter superficially in the pulpit. We warn our people of the dangers of wrong views of sanctification, but do not provide them with adequate teaching on the biblical view. Just as with the subject of persecution, few books have been written on temptation. In my opinion, the best books on this subject were written by John Owen over three hundred years ago. These are found in Volume Six of his "Works" – one is entitled "Of Temptation", and the other is entitled "Remainders of Indwelling Sin in Believers". Someone needs to rewrite these books in modern English and have them published.¹ He would have done us a great service!

9.1 Entering Into Temptation

The Lord Jesus Christ understood the trials that His disciples were facing. He warned them, in Matthew 26:41, of the danger of "entering into temptation". The Lord had Himself been sorely tempted by the evil one when He embarked on His public ministry. We read of the attempts of Satan to lure Him into sin in the fourth chapter of Matthew. Here, in Matthew 26:41, He warns His disciples of the need to watch and pray, lest they "enter into temptation". That phrase "to enter into temptation" needs to be carefully understood. The Lord was not saying

¹This has been done under the titles, "Temptation: Resisted and Repulsed" and "Indwelling Sin In Believers", published by the Banner of Truth Trust.

that the disciples could be left with no temptation coming their way. Rather, He recognised that they were constantly being tempted, and were in fact under temptation already. What He warned them of was the danger of *entering* into temptation.

What it means

To "enter into temptation" is not the same as being tempted. It is also different from actually sinning. There are these three stages that are quite distinct. There is, first, the temptation that comes to every believer. There is then the state of having entered into temptation. There is, thirdly, the actual act of sinning. James, in Chapter 1:19-15 of his epistle, confirms that there are these distinct stages. In fact, we might say that James was expounding on the Lord's words in Matthew 26:41, on what it means to "enter into temptation".

James describes what it means to enter into temptation by using a picture of hunting. The hunter sets a trap, and installs a bait over it. He probably sends his dogs to bark from the opposite direction. The deer gets closer and closer to the trap, looking left and right, hearing the barks of the dog behind him. He looks back, then moves forward. Each step brings him closer to the trap. As he comes near he sees the bait, and he is excited. He comes nearer..., looks at the bait intently..., and is about to lunge forward to bite! The deer is now "drawn away by his own desires". He has entered into temptation!

A person who has entered into temptation is also said to be "enticed". This is a word that comes from fishing. You disguise the hook with the worm, and use it as a bait. You dangle the bait in the water, and very soon some fish will come to look

at it. One fish may look at it suspiciously, but there is at the same time the competition posed by the presence of other fish. The worm looks so tempting. "I have to get it before the others do!" The fish pounces, and drags at the worm. But, uurrgh! The hook has pierced his mouth! He is unable to escape! He is enticed!

This is what happens to a person who is tempted. The temptation flashes at him to gain his attention, very much like a bull-fighter flashing the red cloth before the bull. The devil tempts you from across the road, from the next house, or from the shops. Or it may be at your place of work, from the desk opposite yours. The temptation will be saying to you, "Come, come and join me. Come and do this. It is very nice. It is very good." That is the temptation. You are being tempted, but you have not entered into the temptation yet. Every believer will be tempted. You will not be spared. You will be tempted – to want to earn more money than you have need of, to commit adultery, to accept bribes, to pervert justice, to take revenge. The red cloth is being flashed before your eyes, to capture your attention, to provoke you, to stir up lust, to draw away your heart. You are being tempted, but you need not succumb to the temptation.

How it operates

Consider how temptation operates to get you entangled. The temptation flashes at you to get your attention. You take a look at it and turn away, so that the temptation does not affect you inwardly. It is an irritant that causes some annoyance, nothing more. But what if you take another look at it? Your

curiosity might be aroused. Like Eve, you make the mistake of responding to Satan's words. You might disagree with Satan, and rebut him. But that is what Satan wants you to do. He has thrown to you a line, and is hoping that you will grab hold of it. You take yet another look at the temptation, and this time you begin to stare at it. You attempt to turn away, but your eyes cannot help turning back to it. Your eyes are now fixed unblinkingly upon the object of your attraction! You have entered into temptation!

It may not be your physical eyes that is fixed upon the temptation. It may be the eyes of your mind, and of your heart. You begin to dwell on the temptation, at the same time that you attempt to dispel it from your mind. You imagine yourself in pleasurable situations, and the fantasy troubles you. You are perplexed by the whole matter. Pangs of guilt shoot at your conscience as you indulge in the pleasure. You begin to scheme ways of getting what you want. Your heart palpitates every time you dwell on those thoughts. This troubled state of soul shows that you have entered into temptation.

Brother, beware of the danger you are in! Sister, beware of the wiles of the devil! You have entered into temptation, although you may not have committed any act of sin yet. In fact, you do not have to sin although you have entered into temptation. In a sense, the temptation is in you at the same time that you are in the temptation! You are wrapped up in it, caught in the web of the evil one. The intoxicating, poisonous, influence of the temptation has gotten into you and is working in you.

You see now that to enter into temptation is something quite distinct from being tempted, and it is different from actually sinning. The phrase "falling into temptation" is often used to describe the same thing. In 1 Timothy 3:7, we read of the danger of "falling into reproach and the snare of the devil." In 1 Timothy 6:9, we read of those who desire to be rich and thereby "falling into temptation and a snare, and into many foolish and harmful lusts which drown men in destruction and perdition." It is a fearful thing to fall into temptation! At one moment you are standing well. At the next moment you are fallen!

How tragic it is for Christians to fall!

Its tendency

What will happen when you are unable to get out of the temptation? James says that "when desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin". Here is the picture of childbirth. Once conceived, the baby begins to grow, and develop. As surely as the baby is in the womb, so surely will it be born in due time. A person who remains in the clutches of temptation will almost certainly sin, sooner or later. So, before sin is conceived, get out of the temptation! You may not have sinned yet when you enter into temptation, but you are certainly in great danger of sinning at any moment.

Of course, sin is not just some action against God's law that you have committed. Sin does not have to be something that is external, and visible. The Lord Jesus Christ says that whoever looks at a woman to lust for her has already committed adultery in his heart. There is such a thing as the sin of cov-

etousness, which is likened to idolatry. There are such things as heart sins, just as there are actual acts of sin. Sins of the heart are just as bad as sins of action. Note, however, that the Scripture seems to distinguish between the state of "entering into temptation" and the actual act of sinning. You are sinning when the evil thought gains control over you and you begin to take pleasure in it. However, if the thought comes to you, and you are struggling to overcome it, you have not actually sinned yet. You have entered into temptation. That is why the temptation is troubling you so much. But you have not sinned yet.

Once sin is committed, it has the tendency to grow bigger and bigger. Like the baby in the womb, it will develop. And it will one day be born into the world! That is the way with sin. Once you sin, you are more likely to sin again. That sin will so overwhelm you that you will find it so difficult to stop it from getting worse. It is then that you will feel the chastisement of the Lord. Of course, He will punish you for it! Afflictions will come to you. No true believer will be spared the corrective discipline of the Lord. You will smart under God's chastisement, if you do not quickly repent and return to the Lord. Hebrews 12:6 says, "Whom the Lord loves He chastens, and scourges every son whom He receives."

When sin is not dealt with drastically, it will continue to develop and corrupt you more and more. The terrifying effects of sin will become more and more obvious to everyone. It will gnaw away at your soul. It will bite and chew away your spiritual vitality. Your conscience will be warped. Your

effectiveness in the service of God will be affected. Your eyes will become shifty, like those of a thief. You will soon begin to withdraw yourself from the company of other believers. That is often the effect of sin – it causes the person to withdraw into himself, like a sick sheep that prefers to eat on its own. Other believers will come around to minister to you, to encourage you and admonish you. The pastor will soon need to talk to you.

What if you still refuse to respond and return to the Lord? The Lord will withdraw His smile from you. All joy will evaporate away. You will soon become a dissipated soul – dried up, skinny, sick! The apostle Paul, in 1 Corinthians 11:30, speaks of those who were "weak and sick", and of many who "slept", meaning that they died. These people were judged not merely for their wrong approach to the Lord's table, but also for their sinful lives which did not match up with their profession of fellowship with the Lord at His table. If you harden your heart and persist in your sin, God will leave you to wallow in it. You will end up to be an apostate – a professed believer who falls away from the faith, like what is described in Hebrews 6:4-8. It is a terrifying thing to be ignored by God! You will be no different from those people described in Romans 1:24, "God also gave them up to uncleanness, in the lust of their hearts, to dishonour their bodies among themselves..." James says, "Sin, when it is full-grown, brings forth death".

9.2 Getting Out Of Temptation

You see now how terrible it is to enter into temptation. Before you actually sin, you should want to get out of that state of being in the temptation. How are we to do that? The Scripture points to four basic means.

Resisting temptation

The first way of getting out of the temptation is to resist it. James says, in Chapter 4:7 of his epistle, "Resist the devil and he will flee from you." A definite stand needs to be made against the overtures of the tempter, and he will flee from you, at least for a time. Say "No!" to the temptation and it will lose its power over you, at least for the moment.

Note very carefully the context of Jame's words. He says, "Therefore submit to God," in the same breath that he tells us to resist the devil. He says also, in the very next verse, "Draw near to God and He will draw near to you." Resisting temptation has to be done in conjunction with submission to God. When we are faced with temptation, we are to remember that that temptation is attempting to draw us away and make us sin against God. Will you sin against God? Or would you rather please Him? Resist the devil, and submit to God! The devil knows that when you draw near to God, He will draw near to you. God will empower you to break the spell of the devil. He will be with you to defend you and protect you. The devil knows that every time you resist him, God is present with you. That is why he will flee from you when you make a stand against his allurements.

The apostle Paul teaches the same truth when he constantly tells believers to flee from sin. He says, in 1 Corinthians 6:18, "Flee sexual immorality." He says, in 1 Corinthians 10: 14, "Flee from idolatry." The flight from temptation has to be done in conjunction with the flight to God. We are not only to flee from sin, but also to pursue righteousness. Paul says to Timothy, in 1 Timothy 6:11, "But you, O man of God, flee these things and pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, patience, gentleness." In 2 Timothy 2:22, he says, "Flee also youthful lusts; but pursue righteousness, faith, love, peace with those who call on the Lord out of a pure heart.."

This is in fact the biblical teaching of the mortification of sins. Sins in the life of the believer must be put to death. So also, temptations and lusts of various kinds must be put to death. You may not have committed any act of sin yet, but you must put to death the desires that are stirring in your heart. You must drive out all temptations from within yourself. Paul says, in Colossians 3:5, "Put to death your members which are on the earth: fornication, uncleanness, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry." Effort is needed. The will must be exercised. You must decisively make a stand against the temptations that come to you. Resolve not to be drawn away by the temptations!

Prayer and fasting

The next means taught in the Scripture is prayer. In 2 Corinthians 12:7, Paul speaks of the "thorn in the flesh", "a messenger of Satan," which troubled him. Although we cannot be sure what that was, it certainly was not something pleasant. Paul

tells us that he pleaded with the Lord three times that it might depart from him. This shows us that we must plead with the Lord to deliver us from whatever temptations that are troubling us. You must pray. You must always pray. You must always be praying, and be prayerful. Fighting temptation is a spiritual battle. You cannot expect to succeed without the Lord's help. The Lord has promised to hear His people. Jesus Christ says, in John 16:23, "Whatever you ask the Father in My name He will give you." He says in John 14:14, "If you ask anything in My name, I will do it." If the Lord has promised to hear His people, why is it that we do not frequently pray? We must pray for help when tempted.

God will answer your prayers in various ways. He might strengthen your inner man so that you can withstand the onslaught of the temptations. He might give you special strength to resist the devil. He might give you a heavenly-mindedness such that the temptation loses its attraction. He might remove the source of temptation directly, or He might providentially arrange your circumstances such that the occasion for sin does not arise. "No temptation has overtaken you except such as is common to man; but God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will also make the way of escape, that you may be able to bear it (1 Cor. 10:13)." God does answer prayers!

It may be that the temptation will not be taken away despite your prayers. You would then continue to be under much trials. But it would be for your own good, perhaps to keep you humble. Some people find a period of fasting helpful in

their struggle to overcome temptations. They deliberately set aside time to fast and pray, to study the word of God and to commune with Him. Some temptations, like demons, cannot be cast out except by prayer and fasting (Matt. 17:21). Fasting is a neglected spiritual discipline. It needs to be restored to its proper place in the life of the Christian. What needs to be noted is that while being tried by temptation, you need not have to sin. The Lord will give you sufficient strength to withstand the onslaught of the temptation. Only, do not give in to it and sin.

This is where we come to understand why it is that many veteran soldiers of Christ yearn to be with the Lord. As they get on in years serving the Lord, attempting to live a holier and holier life, they come to understand more and more the trials and tribulations of life. They become weary of the toils and tears of this world. They moan and groan under the strain of constant battle against the enemy of souls. But they are submitted to God's will. They will cleave to the Lord, and serve Him faithfully, for as long as the Lord wants them to be on this earth. Are you numbered among such faithful soldiers of Jesus Christ? Hold on, friends! Do not give up. Persevere on in the faith. The battle will soon be over. You will then be welcomed into the presence of the Lord!

The means of grace

The third way by which we may get out of the clutch of a temptation is to attend to the means of grace. Prayer and fasting are means of grace, which we have singled out for special mention. But there are the other means of grace. We are not

to forsake the assembling of ourselves together (Heb. 10:25). We are to hear the word of God expounded, to partake in the Lord's table, to be regularly present at the church prayer meeting. These are the means appointed by the Lord to keep our faith alive and well. These are also the means to help us get out of the temptations that trouble us.

Too many Christians underestimate the importance of the means of grace. They think that they can make it to heaven on their own. They are too independent – far too independent – in their ways! They fail to see the importance of integrating themselves into the church. They think that faith in Christ is all that matters, forgetting that the Christ whom they profess to follow has also given clear teaching on the importance of being a member of the church. Some who are members of the local church continue to act as though they are not members! They abuse the doctrines of "the priesthood of all believers" and "the liberty of conscience" to do as they like. They do not seem to understand what responsible church-membership means, and fail to attend church meetings regularly. They betray a frightening lack of submission to the Lord by their behaviour. It is you who will lose out if you do not attend to the means of grace!

It is often the case that when you are under severe trials, you do not feel like meeting with other believers. You do not feel like attending church meetings. That is when you must do what is right and pleasing to the Lord, instead of following your feelings. You know that spiritual feeding is needful for you. You know that fellowship with other believers is impor-

tant for you Therefore, go to the church meetings! Do what is right and good instead of doing what your feelings dictate.

Help from others

The fourth way of getting out of temptation is to seek the help of mature Christian friends. In the church will be one or two friends whom you can trust. Seek their help. Tell them your problems. Covet their prayers. It is striking that Paul often sought the prayers of others as he served the Lord. "In a multitude of counselors there is safety (Prov. 24:6)." James says in Chapter 5:16 of his epistle, "Confess your trespasses to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much."

It may be that an elder of your church can help you through some very trying times by meeting with you on a regular basis – to read the Scripture together, or to study a book together, and to pray. That is what the elders are there for! That is what Christian fellowship means! We must avail ourselves of all these methods appointed by the Lord to help us in our pilgrimage through this world.

9.3 Watch And Pray!

We have considered what it means to enter into temptation. We have also considered how to get out of temptation. It remains now for us to consider how to avoid entering into temptation. To avoid sinning, we must avoid entering into temptation. To avoid entering into temptation, we must prevent temptation from entering into us. To prevent this from hap-

pening, the Lord has commanded us to watch and pray. These are twin weapons which must be used together. As long as we are in this body of sin, as long as we are in this fallen world, and as long as the devil is active, we must watch and pray! There is no other way. A soldier who is not watchful will be caught by surprise when the enemy pounces. A Christian who is not prayerful will find himself impotent against the devil and his agents. Watch and pray!

When things are well

In order to really "watch and pray", we need to understand the circumstances that tend to lead people into temptation. The first situation is when things are going well with you. You get the job you applied for. You get the house that you prayed for. You pass that most crucial examination. Every thing seems to be working out well. That is the time when the devil is most likely to trip you and bring you down! The same is true of your spiritual progress. You have successfully worked through a book of the Bible, and derived much benefit from it. You have prayed for someone's conversion, and the Lord has answered your prayers. You have witnessed faithfully to a number of people, and the Lord has brought most of them to saving faith in the same period of time. You sense the smile of God upon you. Beware! The devil is watching you! He is likely to bring you down if you are not careful.

Jonathan Edwards understood this tendency very well. He knew that when a believer experiences the blessings of God, the devil is most likely to come and cause him to fall. He warned David Brainerd to be careful when he had some suc-

cess in the work among the Red Indians. Being older, Jonathan Edwards understood the wiles of the devil. The Scripture declares: "Let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall (1 Cor. 10:12)." Of course, you do not have to fall. The devil need not succeed in his attempts to trip you. You *can* continue to enjoy the presence of God without falling. The important thing is to understand that you are more likely to fall after gaining some spiritual success. You must, therefore, watch and pray!

Slackness and negligence

The next situation is when you are slack and negligent in your spiritual duties – such as in private communion with God, in tithing, in attending church, and in visiting those who are in need. You are so taken up with your job, with your studies, with your hobbies and other interests, that you become slack in your spiritual life. You are in a most dangerous state because you are likely to enter into temptation. Watch and pray!

External circumstances

Another factor to consider is the circumstances around you, which might be such that certain temptations are always there, ready to stir up your desires. Some people find this so in their place of work. Others find this so in the place of stay. In the office, you might find a young secretary who seems to be always shaking her bare legs before you. Or, you may be constantly exposed to attractive items such as money and jewellery. On your way home from work or study, you might have to pass a certain shop that parades things that always stir up unworthy thoughts in your mind. Some situations you can change,

or avoid, others you cannot. Whatever the circumstances may be, watch and pray!

Temperament

The last factor we shall consider is your natural disposition, or your temperament. Everyone of us is temperamentally different. God has made us this way. Our genes, our upbringing, our experiences in life, all go toward making us what we are. Some of us are more artistic than others. Some of us are better with our hands compared to other people. Some of us are very expressive in our conversation, while others speak with a boring monotone. Each one of us will have to know his own strengths and weaknesses. In everyone of us, there is always a besetting sin – a sin that tends to be committed every time we are not watchful. Often it is that we have to wrestle with the temptation to sin in that area. Know yourself, and your particular weaknesses. Avoid situations of temptation. Strengthen your areas of weakness by the means of grace. Watch and pray!

9.4 Forgiveness In Christ

The Christian life is a constant struggle against temptations and sins. It is as we strive to live a holy life that the Holy Spirit works in us to overcome the power of "the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life". The worldling cannot understand why we should be so concerned about living a holy life. The unconverted man can only wallow in his sins. The day will come when he gets tired of the pleasures of this life. The time will arrive when he realises that there is more to life than

just living for pleasures. Friend, are you tired of living in sin? Is your conscience troubling you? Are you struggling to be free from that cruel master called "Sin"? Turn to Jesus Christ for deliverance! Call upon Him to be merciful to you!

We watch and pray in order not to enter into temptation. When we have entered into temptation, we wish to quickly get out of it so that we do not sin. What if we do sin? Sin brings forth the chastisement of God upon us. Sin that is continued in, and unrepented of, will bring forth death. The true child of God will always return to his heavenly Father in repentance and faith.

However far you have strayed from God, however badly you have sinned against Him, there is always pardon when you repent. That is because Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God, has already shed His blood on the cross of Calvary. His blood cleanses us of all sins. The word of God declares that "if we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness (1 John 1:9)." It also declares, "Their sins and their lawless deeds I will remember no more (Heb. 10:17)." Therefore, let us draw near unto the holy God, in the name of His Son, Jesus Christ.

Ten

The Enjoyment Of God

Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom also we have access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and rejoice in hope of the glory of God. And not only that, but we also glory in tribulations, knowing that tribulation produces perseverance; and perseverance, character; and character, hope. Now hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit who was given to us. For when we were still without strength, in due time Christ died for the ungodly. For scarcely for a righteous man will one die; yet perhaps for a good man someone would even dare to die. But God demonstrates His own love towards us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Much more then, having now been justified by His blood, we shall be saved from wrath through Him. For if when we were enemies we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son, much more, having been reconciled, we shall be saved by His life. And not only that, but we also rejoice in God through

our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received the reconciliation. (Romans 5:1:11)

The Bible does not portray the Christian life as a bed of roses. Instead, trials and tribulations, and tears and toils, are to be expected. There is, nevertheless, a clear note of joy seen in the lives of many of God's people. There is delight in the things of God. There is the thrill of fellowship among God's people. And there is the exhilaration of enjoying God Himself.

Biblical examples

Adam had obviously enjoyed fellowship with God before the fall. We read of God walking in the garden of Eden in the cool of the day, seeking out Adam. God had appeared in the form of man and was interacting with Adam and Eve. The sweet fellowship between them was spoilt when Adam sinned against God.

Abraham is described as "the friend of God" in James 2:23, Isaiah 41:8 and 2 Chronicles 20:7. He enjoyed the presence and approval of God. Enoch and Elijah also kept a close walk with God, and were translated straight into heaven without experiencing death.

Then, there was David who revelled in God, saying in Psalm 73:25, "Whom have I in heaven but You? And there is none upon earth that I desire besides You." There was the apostle Paul, who was caught up into the third heaven. There was Peter, in whose epistle we learn that believers may, through faith in Christ, "rejoice with joy inexpressible and full of glory".

There was also John, "the disciple whom the Lord loved", who was "in the Spirit" on the island of Patmos, who yearned for the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ, saying, "Even so, come, Lord Jesus!"

Experiential Christianity

The Christian life is experiential in nature. It would be tragic if Christians were merely intellectual creatures. We are made creatures that have a subjective faculty as well as a rational one. Man is capable of great heights of feelings and wide ranges of emotional experiences. The enjoyment of God is not only a possibility but is, in fact, something to be positively commended.

The Puritans, that band of Christians in seventeenth century Britain who were well-known for their deeply doctrinal and experiential Christianity, encapsulated this truth in the Shorter Catechism. The Catechism asks, "What is the chief end of man?", and the answer given is, "Man's chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy Him forever." To enjoy God is to take delight in Him, to have a desire to be with Him, and to be happy in Him.

God will be enjoyed in eternity, but that enjoyment begins on earth. A Christian must enjoy God more and more in this life. That is so because the supreme place of enjoyment is in heaven, and we are heading there if we are "in Christ". Just as a believer grows in the grace and knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ, so also he must grow in the enjoyment of God. Indeed, the indications of Scripture are that there will be degrees of glory, and of the enjoyment of God, in heaven. Things are not

static in heaven. Rather, life there is dynamic in nature. The souls of glorified saints will be clothed with new bodies, the full number of the elect will be added to those already there, and the singing of praises unto God will become more glorious. There is no reason for this continuously progressive state to stop at some stage. Glory will redound to the name of the trice holy God for ever and ever!

The enjoyment of God on this earth is therefore not a matter of small concern. One of the most basic texts dealing with the nature of this enjoyment is Romans 5:1-11. Apart from the many obvious and important teachings pertaining to salvation that are contained in this passage, light is shed on what it means to enjoy God. The passage must not merely be analysed for its doctrines, but it must be appreciated with regard to its spirit – its style and mood. Faith, hope, love, joy and peace are all interwoven together. The word "rejoice", translated as "glory" in verse 3, is used a total of three times. "To rejoice" is to boast, to glory, to exult. It combines the ideas of joy, trust, and triumph. In short, the enjoyment of God is a prominent note in this passage. Out of this, and other related passages in the Bible, we may say the following things about what it means to enjoy God.

10.1 A Regenerate Heart

The first thing that may be said is that *the enjoyment of God is only possible in a regenerate heart*. Paul says in Romans 5:1 that "having been justified by faith, we have peace with God

through our Lord Jesus Christ". He is talking about those who have been justified by faith – those who have been made right with God – those alone have peace with God. It is not possible to have peace with God without faith in Jesus Christ.

Peace with God

This peace may be looked at objectively as well as subjectively. Objectively, it means that you have a changed status before God. You were once regarded as an enemy of God. You sinned against Him by breaking His laws and by living as you liked. You did not worship Him in the way He has appointed. Instead of peace, God's wrath rested on you and you were estranged (alienated) from Him. Now, things are different. You have trusted in the finished work of Christ on the cross in order to be saved. Christ's righteousness is now regarded as yours so that God treats you as not guilty, but righteous. Peace with God has been established through faith in Christ. No more are you an enemy of God. You are now His son or daughter.

This peace is experienced subjectively. You were burdened by the guilt of your sins before your conversion. The wrath of God hung over your head. The thought of God brought only fear and misery, not the joy and peace that you now sense. Peace with God is now yours to enjoy because you know that Christ has turned away God's wrath by taking upon Himself the punishment that you deserved. Conviction of sin gave way to this sense of peace when you first believed. What a sense of relief came upon you as the burden of sin rolled away! What joy came upon you when you looked in faith upon the cross of Calvary! Gratitude to Christ overwhelmed your heart, and

thanksgiving poured forth from your mouth towards God for His grace. Peace with God is now yours to enjoy!

Access to God

Apart from peace with God, there is access to Him. God does not live in the distant galaxies. He is here, where we are, but in a different dimension. The Scripture says that "He is not far from each one of us, for in Him we live and move and have our being (Acts 17:27-28)." We do not have to communicate with Him by means of radio waves. Through Christ, we are able to have direct access to God. We may be thrown into the deepest dungeon, or we may be shut away in the strongest prison, yet God is with us. Although God is not far from each one of us, He is not accessible to those who are without Christ. The king may be dwelling in the same city with a million of his subjects, but only a small number of those people get to see him. Certain qualifications are required before a person gets to see the king. So also with our access to God. Not everyone gets to see God, and enjoy the blessings of His grace. Only those whom He chose from before the foundation of the world gets to see Him. Only those who trust in Christ get to see Him. Those whom God chose from eternity will certainly come to faith in Christ in time. Jesus Christ has declared, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me." Have you trusted in Christ for salvation? If not, how can you ever have access to God?

Contrast with other experiences

This is where we must be clear about the difference between

the enjoyment of God and the mystical experiences claimed by followers of other religions. They might lay claim to various ecstatic experiences, but theirs are different from the true enjoyment of God. Spiritual things are spiritually discerned. The natural man is unable to experience true communion with God because his nature has not been renewed by the Holy Spirit. These religious mystics are not approaching God through faith in Jesus Christ. Their ecstatic experiences cannot be the same as those arising from communion with the true God. Whatever gods they claim to be in communication with cannot be the true God revealed in the Bible. If anything, those who worship other gods are often overwhelmed by a sense of fear of the unknown. They are often dogged by a sense of uncertainty with regard to their lives, both now and in the hereafter.

The enjoyment of God is possible only in a regenerate heart.

10.2 The Life Of Faith

The second thing that can be said about the enjoyment of God is that *it is deepened and enlarged upon by the life of faith*. Paul tells us that we "rejoice in hope of the glory of God (Rom. 3:2)." The day will come when the full glory of God is made manifest in this world. Every knee will bow to Christ. All the wrongs done us will be put right. We will be glorified. Our salvation will be made perfect. That day will come! In the mean time, we have hope. The hope spoken of in the Bible is a certainty. We are not in heaven yet. But we will certainly arrive there!

Rejoicing in tribulations

While waiting for that day to dawn, "we also rejoice in tribulations, knowing that tribulation produces perseverance; and perseverance, character; and character, hope." You see how the cycle is complete. The life of faith produces hope. Hope enables us to withstand in the midst of trials. Perseverance in trials builds up Christian character, and that in turn strengthens our hope.

We are not referring to the trials that come to us because of our sins or stupidity. There are those who bring upon themselves a lot of problems simply because they have acted stupidly. They are people who, instead of having a simple faith in Christ, are simplistic in life. They are naive people who are easily "taken in for a ride" by others. They are gullible people who fail to be "wise as serpents and harmless as doves". As a result, they bring upon themselves untold misery. We are not talking about those kinds of trial. Neither are we talking about the trials that come to us because of our disobedience to God's law. We will certainly suffer for the sins that we wilfully commit. Everyone will have to bear the consequences of his own sins.

We are referring to the trials that come to believers because of their faith. There are those who are intent on following Christ despite the difficulties and hindrances to the faith. They are confronted by countless difficulties in this hostile world. Temptations of various kinds come their way. Yet, they will not give up. Instead, they continue to plod on – living that life of obedience unto God, desiring only to glorify Him. Yes, we would actively seek to glorify God in order that we may enjoy

Him – now and in eternity!

Then, there are the trials and tribulations that believers face in common with others. Disasters do strike. Our health does break down. Death does occur in our homes. Tribulations of this kind also call for perseverance, faith, and hope. The Lord knows best. He is all-wise. "We know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose (Rom. 8:28)."

Character building

Character is built up as we persevere in the faith. A certain maturity will come upon us. The hope of future glory will be built up. And these will be accompanied by a sense of "the love of God" which "has been poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit who was given to us". In short, there will be a deepening and an enlarging of our experience of God. We came into the enjoyment of God when we were first saved. That enjoyment of God is enlarged upon and deepened by the life of faith.

You will understand now why the Christian who runs away from trouble will never become strong. What you must do when trouble comes your way is to face it. You would remember Daniel's three friends, who were saved in the fiery furnace. They were not saved *from* the fiery furnace, but *in* the fiery furnace. The Lord appeared to them and protected them. This will be our experience as we make a faithful stand in the midst of trials. The Lord may not appear in human form to us, but present He will be! We will emerge that much stronger. Our faith will mature. That is why we must not be too absorbed in praying for a trouble-free life. Instead, we should be praying

for strength and grace to go through the pains and trials of this life. We should submit to God, just as the Lord Jesus Christ did when He said, "Your will be done!" We should seek to glorify Him even in the midst of trials.

In this connection, we must understand the importance of training our children correctly. Some parents are over-protective about their children. They try to shield their children from difficulties of all sorts. For example, they would send their children only to Christian schools so that they will not be contaminated by the worldly values of non-Christian schools. They would not permit their children to watch the television because of the possibility of them watching undesirable shows. The children are forbidden to go to the cinema because to do so would be "worldly". The children are protected from countless other things, or circumstances, which are harmless in and of themselves. We are not saying that you should totally give up your responsibility to protect them. We are only saying that some forms of well-meaning "protection" are unnecessary and counter-productive. Furthermore, we are not discounting the possibility of sending your children to a Christian school that might have been started as a means of witness to the community, to provide quality education to all.

Consider how a mother bird teaches her young to fly. As the baby birds develop, the mother bird would nudge them out of the nest, and push them off the branches. That way, the baby birds are forced to stretch out their wings and fly to the neighbouring branches. And lo, before too long, the baby birds are flying! No, we should not over-protect our children.

Instead, we should be guiding them into the responsibilities of life. It is far better to teach them the principles of right living, and warn them of the dangers they might face, than to shield them from every possible trial. Your child will not develop well if you do that. When the time comes for such a child to leave home, or enter the university, or join the army, greater difficulty is experienced by him because he has been over-protected all his life!

The same thing can be said of the church and the Christian life. We would warn our church members of the dangers of ecumenism, doctrinal compromise, immorality, and the attractions of the world. But that is different from dictating to them which friends they should have, what company they should keep, and what gospel enterprise they should take part in. Far better it is to teach them what *sort* of company they should keep than *what* company to keep. In other words, we would teach them *principles* so that they might apply them in the varying circumstances of their lives, rather than dictate to them every move that they make. Our people are, after all, better trained than others. They know the Bible better than the average Christian in today's churches. Furthermore, they are living under the general oversight of the church. When they go astray, there are brethren who will correct them. When they are in doubt, they can consult the elders of the church. No, we would not shield our church members from society. Instead, we would let them loose into the world! Let them be the salt of the earth and the light of the world.

Resisting to bloodshed

This brings to mind the example of people like Elisabeth Elliot. She and her husband, and some other believers, gave their lives to preaching Christ among the Auca Indians in South America. Her husband, together with others, were killed. She returned to these same Indians in later years and was able to have a fruitful ministry among them. A person like Elisabeth Elliot has lived a rich Christian life. Yes, hers is a rich Christian life – rich in the sense that she enjoys more of God than most of us. You complain of your sufferings, but what are they compared to hers? "You have not resisted to bloodshed, striving against sin (Heb. 12:4)." Through her trials, Elisabeth Elliot remained a bright, calm, shining, spiritual lady who continues to worship and serve God up to today.¹

Many are the servants of God who have passed to glory as unsung heroes of the faith. We read of only a few here and there, but countless others have served the Lord faithfully whose biographies would be most stirring if they were written. There are countless numbers of men and women, and even boys and girls, who have suffered for their faith and passed to glory. They have lived rich Christian lives. They have lived in obedience to God. Their enjoyment of God on earth, and now in heaven, has been deepened and enlarged upon by the life of faith.

¹Elisabeth Elliot died in 2015.

10.3 Visible And Sensible Fruits

The third thing that can be said about the nature of the enjoyment of God is this – *it produces visible and sensible fruits*. We often use the word "sensible" to mean "having or showing good sense". But there is another meaning to that word. It can mean "that which can be sensed, or experienced". It is this latter meaning that we are referring to. Put another way, the enjoyment of God produces fruits that can be seen as well as experienced.

The love of God

We have quoted Romans 5:5, "Now hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit who was given to us." This verse tells us that the Holy Spirit who indwells the believer pours out the love of God in his heart. The "love of God" is first of all God's love for the believer, and then the believer's love for God. Both are meant, as can easily be proven from the context as well as from other portions of Scripture. The subsequent verses show that God's love for us is shown supremely in the sending of Jesus Christ to save us while we were still sinners. God is love, and His love for His people is shown objectively by the death of His Son on the cross of Calvary. That is a historical fact. That is a truth that may be known in the mind. But it is made known to the heart of the believer because of the presence and the working of the Holy Spirit.

The apostle Paul says elsewhere, in Romans 8:15-17, "For you did not receive the Spirit of bondage again to fear, but you

received the Spirit of adoption by whom we cry out, 'Abba, Father.' The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs – heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with Him, that we may also be glorified together." You see here that we are made sensible of the love of God to us by the presence and work of the Holy Spirit in our lives. Paul ends that chapter of Romans by saying that nothing, absolutely nothing, can separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord. This is, of course, a reference to those who truly belong to Jesus Christ. The point we are making here is that we are made sensible of the love of God in our lives. The love of God may be known and experienced!

The knowledge of God's love for us, of course, draws out from us a response. That response is love *for* God. The apostle John teaches this truth, saying, "We have known and believed the love that God has for us. God is love, and he who abides in love abides in God, and God in him (1 John 4:16)." He further says, "We love Him because He first loved us (v. 19)." The point is proven.

It should be noted that the word translated "poured out" carries the idea of "given in abundance". An illustration might help us to understand this. The potted plant, which was left unwatered for a couple of weeks in your absence, is now withered. The earth in the pot is parched. The first thing you do when you arrive home is to pour plentiful water into the pot. You see the water seeping and spreading into the earth. There is so much water that when you lift up the pot, it drips from

the bottom! That is the measure of God's love that is poured out into our hearts. It is given to us abundantly, to the point of overflowing! We know the love of God objectively, in our mind. That love becomes increasingly sensed in our lives as we live out the life of faith.

Love never alone

The next thing we must note about the love of God is that it is never alone. It is always accompanied by other spiritual graces. That is the wonder of it! Like the pearls on a chain, they are all linked together. You drag out one pearl from the box and the rest will follow, one after another. This truth is taught in Galatians 5:22-23, "The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control." Nine items are mentioned, but this is obviously not an exhaustive list. Other passages of Scripture show that there are other "graces" or virtues, that arise from faith in Christ. But these nine are sufficient to show that love is not the only fruit that is seen in the Christian life. When we have love, we will have the other fruits as well. In fact, all these virtues are classified as "the fruit (singular) of the Spirit".

This stands in contrast to "the works of the flesh", in verses 19-21, which need not all be found in any one person at a time. Just as the list of graces under "the fruit of the Spirit" is not exhaustive, so also the list under "the works of the flesh" is not exhaustive. This is clear from the fact that the given list ends with the phrase "and the like". There are other works of the flesh such as covetousness, deceitfulness, and lying that are not listed. To have the fruit of the Spirit in great measure,

we must eliminate the works of the flesh in our lives. Those who walk in the Spirit have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. The life of faith is a life of obedience to the law of God.

Practical implications

What are some practical implications of this to us? The first thing to note is that it is impossible for a Christian to have only one or two virtues without having the others. We sometimes hear Christians commenting on this verse saying, "It would be good enough if you have one or two of these fruits to a high degree." We know that these are well-meaning Christians who are trying to be humble. They attempt to exhort others to have one or two fruits rather than to have none. However, if we bear in mind the correct understanding of this passage of Scripture, it would not be possible for us to make such statements. All the Christian graces come together – love, joy, peace, and so on. Perhaps they are not all present in the same degree of prominence, but all of them are there to some degree. The gifts (or rather, graces) of God must be stirred up, and cultivated, such that they become more and more prominent.

This truth explains why it is that we are often wary of certain people who profess to be Christians. Some inner sense tells us to be careful with such individuals because their profession of faith somehow sounds hollow. We doubt that they are true Christians. The reason is that such a person may appear to have "Christian love", and perhaps "joy", but there is absent in him other graces. There is a certain inconsistency about the person. He seems so nice and good in some areas,

but is nasty and ugly in others. When caught off guard, the true colour of the person shows! This is one effect of the truth that "the fruit of the Spirit" is one. It shows up the ones who do not really have it.

Jonathan Edwards, that great theologian of the eighteenth century, put it this way, "Love is not the only affection, but it is the first and chief of them and the fountain of all others." When there is true Christian love, we would expect other Christian graces to develop sooner or later.

The love that we have been talking about is not a mere sentimental feeling. It is a love that is practical in its expression. It is a love that is selfless, self-denying, and self-sacrificing. It always looks to the good of others. This is the love that is described in 1 Corinthians 13. The love of God will lead to a love for men. The two great commandments are capable of being fulfilled by the Christian: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. You shall love your neighbour as yourself (Matt. 22:37,39)."

The enjoyment of God produces visible and sensible fruits.

10.4 Meditating On Truths

The fourth, and final, point is this – *the enjoyment of God feeds upon the contemplation and perception of truths*. For fire to burn, there must be fuel. The more fuel there is, of the right kind, the brighter it will burn. The truths of God in the Bible are the fuel. The more we meditate upon truths, the more we will grasp their spiritual meaning, and the more our hearts

will be inflamed by a love for God. Some people read the Bible too casually, without spending time pondering over what they have read. How can such people ever come to an enjoyment of God?

The primacy of truth

You will appreciate the crucial importance of meditating upon truths when you understand that the human personality is made up of three basic faculties – the mind, the heart, and the will. We are not referring to the human *person*, who is made up of body and soul, but to the human *personality*, which is made up of the three basic faculties of mind, heart, and will. God saves sinners by informing the mind, convicting the heart, and moving the will. That is what happens when you hear the gospel. True gospel preaching uses the truth to engage the mind, which in turn awakens the heart, and then arouses the will to act. That is what it means to speak to the conscience. Some people speak of the conscience as a separate faculty of the human personality. That does not make much difference to our present discussion. The point we wish to make is that the total man must be persuaded to respond to the gospel by the use of truths. The Spirit of God speaks to the conscience of hearers only by the truth. Any attempt to bypass the mind is illegitimate gospel work. All three faculties must be addressed, and in that order – the mind, the heart, and the will.

The primacy of truth is illustrated in the life of David. As we read his psalms, we cannot help noticing how he is often transported to great heights of enjoyment of God. We have noted how he said, "Whom have I in heaven but You? And

there is none upon earth that I desire besides You." This is the same man who said, "Oh, how I love Your law! It is my meditation all the day... How sweet are Your words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth (Psalm 119:97 & 103)!" The meditation of truths leads to the enjoyment of God.

Meditation on Christ

This leads us to a related point, namely that Jesus Christ is the sum and substance of all God's revelation. As we study the Bible, we will be led to see Christ more and more. If Christ is not seen, all your Bible study is in vain. You would remember that the risen Christ showed to His disciples, in Luke 24, that all the Scriptures spoke concerning Himself. You would remember that the voice from heaven said of Christ, "This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased. Hear Him (Matt. 17:5)!" You would remember that the Lord Himself said, "He who has seen Me has seen the Father (John 14:9)." Christ Himself had said concerning the Holy Spirit, "He will glorify Me, for He will take what is Mine and declare it to you."

It follows that our meditation on God's word should revolve around the person and work of Christ. This is what is taught in Romans 5:6-11. Paul is here declaring the gospel. The message is about God's love toward us in Christ. Our sin, God's wrath, our enmity with God – nothing of importance is left out. Christ death, justification by His blood, our reconciliation with God – all these are taught. The message is complete, balanced, full! Paul ends by saying, "We also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received the reconciliation." Note the word "rejoice". There is

a note of exuberance, of triumph, of pleasure!

Consider the example of Paul in his epistle to the Ephesians. In Chapter 1, beginning from verse 3, he contemplates on the goodness of God in the salvation of sinners. In the original Greek, verses 3 to 14 is one unbroken sentence! What happens is that as Paul writes on the glory of God in Christ, he gets carried away more and more. He forgets himself. He is so taken up with the wonder of God's love to His people. Almost every verse contains the phrase, "in Christ" or "in Him". Paul understands that the outworking of God's purpose revolves around the person and work of Christ.

At the end of verse 14, Paul pauses. He then proceeds to express his thankfulness to God, and again he gets carried away as he contemplates on the outworking of God's purpose in Christ. This goes on from Chapter 1, through Chapter 2, and all the way to Chapter 3. It is very much like watching an orchestra. The singers are singing, and the musicians are playing their various instruments in harmony. The drummer beats at his drum accordingly. As we watch, the conductor gets more and more agitated, the voices rise to a crescendo, the drummer beats faster and faster... and finally, "BANG!". The music stops at the end of Chapter 3! The drummer is exhausted, and so is Paul!

Paul had his spiritual experiences, as he tells us in 2 Corinthians 12. There, in his usual humble style, he tells us of a man who was caught up into heaven, and how he heard inexpressible words, which it is not lawful for a man to utter. He is, of course, describing his own experiences. In the Ephesian epis-

tle, Paul is being lifted up to great heights of experience as he contemplates the unfolding of God's purpose in Christ. Paul is here being lifted higher and higher, deeper and deeper, into the enjoyment of God.

All this centres around the contemplation of Christ.

10.5 Conclusion

We have learned four basic facts about the enjoyment of God. The enjoyment of God is possible only in the regenerate heart. The enjoyment of God is deepened and enlarged upon by the life of faith. The enjoyment of God produces visible and sensible fruits. The enjoyment of God feeds upon the contemplation and perception of truth.

God may be enjoyed more and more. The enjoyment of God is something to be coveted and cultivated. This life may be strewn with trials and tribulations, and toils and tears. But these are made bearable by the possibility of enjoying God. And as we enjoy God more and more, we are being prepared for heaven. There, in heaven, every tear will be wiped away. Death will be no more. Sorrow and pain and crying will cease. In heaven, our enjoyment of God will progressively deepen without all these earthly hindrances.

Pity the worldling who does not understand what it means to enjoy God!

Eleven

Waiting To Go Home...

These all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off were assured of them, embraced them and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on earth. For those who say such things declare plainly that they seek a homeland. And truly if they had called to mind that country from which they had come out, they would have had opportunity to return. But now they desire a better, that is, a heavenly country. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for He has prepared a city for them. (Heb. 11:13-16)

The doctrine of the last things had a profound effect on the lives of the believers in biblical times, both in the Old and the New Testaments. The high expectation they had of the future return of Christ, of the resurrection of the dead, and of the judgment to come controlled to a considerable extent the way they lived.

There were, of course, those who wrongly concluded that since Christ was going to return soon, all work was worthless.

The apostle Paul had to rebuke those who were idle because of their mistaken belief (2 Thess. 2, 3). We still hear of such people right up to today. There was the case of a student in one of our local universities who wanted to give up his studies because he believed that Jesus Christ will return at any moment. During the Gulf War, we heard from many pulpits in this land the claim that the doom of the world was near. Nothing had come of those prophecies! Today, many continue to be caught up in predictions about the future because of the Arab-Israel peace accord. We are not interested in such speculations and so-called interpretations of prophecy. What we are interested in is the teaching of Scripture concerning how we should live in view of the promises of God with regard to the future. We wish to learn from the men of faith in the past.

It is stated in Hebrews 11:13 that the patriarchs of the Old Testament time confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth. Of special interest to us is verse 14 which says, "For those who say such things declare plainly that they seek a homeland." Note that the words are in the present tense, and a general principle is being established. All who have the same outlook as the patriarchs – all who confess that they are strangers and pilgrims on earth – are actually declaring that they seek a homeland. As we proceed, it will become clear that it is the heavenly home that is sought. What this passage teaches is that the expectation of heaven should condition our living on earth. The patriarchs lived in a certain way because of their expectation of heaven. We, too, should live in a certain way because of the prospect of heaven.

How exactly did the patriarchs lived? Verse 13 gives us the answer, and verses 15 and 16 elaborates on the truths taught in verse 13. We shall therefore concentrate on verse 13, "These all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off were assured of them, embraced them, and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth." This verse may be divided into three parts, with each part suggesting a main lesson for us.

11.1 Desire The Same Faith

The first lesson is that we should desire to have the same faith that the patriarchs had. This arises from the first part of verse 13, which says, "These all died in faith, not having received the promises..." The patriarchs believed in certain truths which were not fulfilled in their life time. The Old Testament scriptures give many promises to the people of God, but they may be summarised under three.

Believe in the coming Saviour

The first promise was that a Saviour would be sent. It says in Galatians 3:8, "And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the nations by faith, preached the gospel to Abraham beforehand, saying, "In you all the nations shall be blessed." Abraham knew the gospel even before Jesus Christ came. He knew that one of his descendants would be the promised Seed who is the Saviour of fallen men. Placing his hope on this coming Saviour, Abraham was blessed by God. Abraham also knew that God would save people from all nations through faith in

the same Saviour, who is Jesus Christ. When Jesus Christ came, He said to the Jews, "Your father Abraham rejoiced to see My day, and he saw it and was glad (John 8:56)." It is clear that Abraham believed in the coming Saviour.

The same can be said of the other patriarchs. In Hebrews 11:26-27 we read this about Moses, "...esteeming *the reproach of Christ* greater riches than the treasures in Egypt; for he looked to the reward. *By faith* he forsook Egypt, not fearing the wrath of the king; for he endured *as seeing Him who is invisible*." (Emphasis added.) The point we are establishing is that the patriarchs had faith in the coming Saviour, and we should have that same faith.

We know that Jesus Christ has already come. He has already died on the cross of Calvary. He has risen from the dead and is now seated on the right hand of the Father in heaven. Jesus Christ has done everything necessary to save sinners by bearing their sins on the cross. The patriarchs had faith in the Christ who was to come and they were saved. We live on the other side of Calvary – after Jesus Christ has come. We need to have the same faith that the patriarchs had, and in the same Christ who has died to save His people.

The Bible plainly declares that Jesus Christ will return to judge the world, and to take His people to be with Him. The patriarchs looked forward to the first coming of Christ. But they also looked forward to the second coming of Christ. In fact, the first and second coming of Christ mark out the period during which the promise is fulfilled that all nations will be blessed with believing Abraham. This is in fact "the last days"

that the Scripture speaks about, in which "whoever calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved (Acts 2:21)."

We see now how the patriarchs had faith – they believed in the promise about the coming of a Saviour, and they believed in the Saviour who was promised. Today, we should have faith in the Saviour who has already come, and we should have faith in the promise that He will come again.

Believe in the reality of heaven

The second truth that the patriarchs believed was the reality of heaven. We are told in Hebrews 11:16, "But now they desire a better, that is, a heavenly country. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for He has prepared a city for them." The heavenly city is the perfect church of Jesus Christ, which God has prepared for all His people. When Jesus Christ came to earth, He ushered in His kingdom, or His rule, on earth. All who are born of the Spirit of God, all whose nature has been tamed and renewed, are added to His kingdom to form His church. This church will be perfect, and complete, when all the elect are saved. We know that Christ's church is in the process of being perfected because the believers in this world are imperfect. We read in Ephesians 5:25-27 that "Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for it, that He might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word, that He might present it to Himself a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but that it should be holy and without blemish."

We know also that the full number of God's elect has yet to be called in. Multitudes from all over the world will yet

believe. The harvest is plentiful, and the labourers are few. The grain of wheat has fallen, and it is producing much grain. The Christ shall see the travail of His soul and be satisfied. Many, very many, will be justified! The day will come when the invisible church of Jesus Christ will be complete and perfect. That will be the day when all the elect, both Jews and Gentiles, have been gathered in. "And so all Israel will be saved (Rom. 11:26)."

Hebrews 11:16 does not speak only of the heavenly city, but it speaks also of a heavenly country. Although the word "country" is not in the original, it is clearly implied, as a comparison with verse 15 shows. Furthermore, verse 14 says, "...they seek a homeland", or literally, "they seek a fatherland", which is a reference to one's own country. The heavenly city is, of course, in the heavenly country, just as the city of Jerusalem was in the country of Canaan or Palestine. A careful study of the Scripture will show that the earthly Jerusalem, which was on Mount Zion, was a picture of the church of Jesus Christ, and the land of Canaan was a picture of heaven.

We learn from the twenty-first chapter of Revelation that the day will come when the Lamb's wife, which is the heavenly Jerusalem, will descend out of heaven from God. When that happens, heaven and earth will be one! The old earth will be no more. "We, according to promise, look for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells (2 Pet. 3:13)."

The patriarchs had understood correctly that the promised land was a picture and a pledge of the heavenly country. Abraham, Isaac and Jacob could have returned to their native Meso-

potamia, but they chose to be in the promised land of Canaan. They were not over-smart people who disbelieved in the reality of heaven. They knew that heaven was real, and if heaven was real, hell was real as well! They certainly looked forward toward heaven, to be with their God. Canaan was a wild and strange country to them, but they knew that their pilgrimage of faith will ultimately bring them to heaven – their fatherland. The reality of heaven conditioned the way they lived. It should condition the way we live as well.

Believe in the resurrection

The third promise that the patriarchs believed in was the resurrection of the dead. We read in Hebrews 11:17-18 that Abraham really wanted to offer up his son as a sacrifice, in obedience to God. It was truly a test of faith. Abraham was on the verge of plunging the knife into his own son when he was stopped by God. It must have been extremely difficult for Abraham to have to offer up his son, but he was going to do it all the same. To him, obedience to God was more important than his own feelings. He trusted in God, and believed that his son would be resurrected after death. As it turned out, his son was not sacrificed and Abraham received him back as good as he had been resurrected.

We know that the Old Testament saints believed strongly in the resurrection of the dead. For example, we read in Job 19:25-26, "For I know that my Redeemer lives, and He shall stand at last on the earth; and after my skin is destroyed, this I know, that in my flesh I shall see God, whom I shall see for myself, and my eyes shall behold, and not another. How my

heart yearns within me!" It was this doctrine that sustained them in times of trial. They had a clear knowledge that there is life after death.

To the patriarchs, all three promises were bound up together. They were inter-connected. These were truths regarding the future. The patriarchs believed the promise of the coming Seed, who was going to be their Redeemer. They believed in the reality of heaven. And they believed in the resurrection of the dead. To them, the reality of eternal blessedness was the substance of their faith. This was manifested in their lives. What they could not see, they believed. Their faith controlled the way they lived.

Believe unto death

We are told, in verse 13, that "these all died in faith...". That means they all died believing. They believed right through to the end of their lives. It is one thing to believe when things are going well with you. It is another to believe when things get difficult. It is yet another thing to continue believing even when you are on the verge of death. These Old Testament patriarchs clung on to the promises of God right to the end of their lives. It is for that reason that God's approval rested on them. It is for that reason that their lives are displayed before us as an example.

Many of us may claim that we do not fear death, but as the years go by we begin to feel differently. We know that as the years roll on, we are getting nearer and nearer the grave. Furthermore, many of us have loved ones at home who are old and we know that before long they will die! The reality

of death has begun to creep upon us. None of us dare to say that when we are actually on our death beds we will not fear death. There is in us this natural fear of death. To most people, the thought of death is truly terrifying. Death is something mysterious to them. They do not know what lies beyond death. There is this powerful sense of meaningless void that confronts them, and they feel so utterly helpless. They are not sure what will become of their souls. There is that instinctive feeling that all will not be well with them. Satan makes use of the phenomenon of death to terrify those who are without Christ. At death, their souls are torn from their bodies and plunge straight into the eternal torments of hell.

Those who believe in Christ are different. The fear of death is natural to all men, but the sting of death has been removed from those for whom Christ died. The last stronghold of Satan has been broken by Christ when He rose from death. The believer may continue to have a sense of fear as he faces the serpent of death, but he will not be terrified because its fangs have been dug out and thrown away! That is why the apostle Paul could sing in triumph, "O Death, where is your sting? O Hades, where is your victory (1 Cor. 15:55)?" No, the believer, whose life is hidden in Christ, will not be terrified by death. Instead, there is the very real possibility of him facing it in triumph. Death is just a peaceful passage into the blessedness of God. Jesus Christ has removed the sting of death!

This is what we are told about the Old Testament saints. They died in faith. They died while holding on to the belief that there is life after death, that there is the resurrection of

the dead, and that there is heaven and hell. They believed in the coming Saviour, and knew that eternal blessedness with God awaited them. Who among us would not want that faith? We want to have the faith that the patriarchs had. This passage teaches us to desire the same faith that they had.

11.2 Have The Same Faith

The believers of the past had that faith because they allowed the promises of God to work in them in a certain way. If we wish to have the same faith, we must allow those promises to work in us in the same way as well. We must work towards having that same faith. This is what is taught in the second part of verse 13, "...but having seen them afar off were assured of them, embraced them..." Three steps are involved.

Mind, heart and will

First, they saw the promises from afar off. How did they see? They saw by their mind's eyes. They were not merely visualising something that was of their own imagination. "To see" here is not merely to visualise or to imagine, but to understand and have a clear idea of what was promised to them. They heard the doctrines, they understood them, and they knew that the doctrines were true. The things promised them were in the future. They knew that those promises were not going to be fulfilled in their lifetime. But they had a clear understanding of what those promises were all about. They might not have known all that there was to know, but to the extent that the revelation had been given, to that extent they understood it.

And they knew that those were the promises of God. God cannot lie. God is faithful. Whatever He revealed to them were true. Whatever He promised to them would come to pass. The things and events that had been promised were therefore real to them. That is what it means "to see" those promises from afar.

Secondly, we are told that they were assured of them. That means they were thoroughly convinced of the truth that they had heard. They were persuaded that what they heard were true. It is one thing to hear truth and to understand it. It is another thing to be convinced by that same truth. To the patriarchs, the promises of God were a burning reality to them. They were assured of them.

Thirdly, they embraced them, or clung on to them. In other words, they made up their mind to make those truths their very own. A person can be persuaded of some truth, but he may not want that truth for himself. But this was not the case with the patriarchs. Instead, they took those truths for themselves. They made them their own. They did not want the promises of God to go away from them. They did not want them to be like water escaping pass the fingers, or the wind that blows and is gone. Instead, they captured the wind. They retained the water. They made those promises of God their own. Their total persons were affected – the mind, the heart, and the will. For that reason, they lived differently compared to other people. The truths that they had heard, the truths which they were persuaded of, the truths that they had now embraced, became something that lived in them.

We see, then, the different phases involved in the hearing of truth. A person may hear the truth preached and explained. He understands what he hears, but it may not affect him. In other words, the truth touches his mind, but not his heart. With another person, the truth may touch both his mind and his heart, but not his will. In other words, he does not resolve to act on it. For truth to be of any good, it must touch our mind, heart, and will. The total person must be affected.

This is where we cannot help being concerned about some of our own people. You have understood the truth. You love those glorious doctrines which our church holds to, and this in an age when so many professing Christians despise doctrine! That is good. Now, that is where the danger lurks. You begin to take pride in the knowledge that you have. You indeed know, and understand, doctrines more than others, but these truths do not seem to affect you much. Let me tell you that it is a dangerous thing to be merely an intellectual Christian! In fact, it is a contradiction to be a mere intellectual creature who claims to be a Christian. We should understand doctrines correctly, and we should be persuaded of those doctrines. But we must also act upon those doctrines. Our lives should be changing for the better, being moulded by the truth.

The importance of doctrine

We are not saying that doctrine is not important. In fact, doctrine is basic to true faith. The true test of our faith comes when we are in trials – when sorrow and tragedy strike us. When a loved one is taken away, are you able to submit to God's will? When a leg has to be amputated, are you able

to say to God, "Your will be done"? When your business collapses, when you are persecuted for your faith, when disasters and enemies seem to be everywhere, will you still have faith?

The patriarchs who died in faith were characterised by this mark – they sought after God's word. They wanted to know the truth. And it is in the truth of God that they discovered the promises, which they embraced. They meditated upon these truths and found enjoyment and comfort in them. The truth worked in them. It was something experiential. It was something experimental. The truths affected their total being. And they were kept going by those same truths when trials came into their lives. Take the case of David. In Psalm 119 he said these words, "My soul clings to the dust; revive me according to Your word (v. 25)." "My soul melts from heaviness; strengthen me according to Your word (v. 28)." "This is my comfort in my affliction, for Your word has given me life (v. 50)." "I am afflicted very much; revive me, O Lord, according to Your word (v. 107)."

David found comfort in the word of God in times of affliction. Or, more correctly, David found comfort in his God because of the truths declared in His word. This was the same David who revelled in God's word, who said: "Oh, how I love Your law! It is my meditation all the day. How sweet are Your words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth! Through Your precepts I get understanding; therefore I hate every false way. Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path (vv. 97, 103-105)."

David is just one example. The Old Testament saints were

a people who wanted to know God's will, and therefore they searched the word of God. They meditated on His truths and made them part of their lives. It was as though their lives were animated by the word of God. The word of God had a profound effect on them. They lived out their lives according to what they knew to be God's will. They were a people saturated through and through with the truths of God!

Before considering the final point, let me ask you: Do you have a desire for God's word? Do you meditate on the truths of God? Do you allow those truths to soak into you, to become your own, to change your lives? Are you a prayerful Christian?

11.3 Live by that faith

We should desire the faith of the patriarchs. We should work towards having that faith. And, finally, we should live by that faith.

The patriarchs were men of faith who lived in a certain way. We are told in verse 13 that they "confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth." The words "strangers" and "pilgrims" are similar in meaning, but they are not identical. The difference between them can be put this way: one word has to do with the place or location, and the other has to do with the state or circumstances.

A stranger

The word "stranger" shows that the patriarchs were not in a land of their own. They regarded heaven as their home and, therefore, earth was not their home. They were strangers upon

this earth. The word suggests a number of things that should characterise the life of a believer. They characterised the patriarchs, and they should characterise believers today. Try to think of yourself in a foreign country. In a foreign country, you are not appreciated by the people. You do not belong there. Furthermore, in that strange country, you are more careful in your ways. You would not want to offend the authorities, and you would not want to offend the people around you.

That was how our forefathers felt like when they came to this land. They regarded China or India as their own country, and this country was not theirs. They looked upon their time here as temporary. They worked hard here, and they sent almost all the money they earned to relatives in China or India. When they were oppressed by the local people, they tended to give way to them. It is so different with those of us who were born and bred here. We will be horrified to hear any suggestion that we should "return to China or India". This is our own country and we will not think of anywhere else as our home.

A stranger is content with his lot. He does not demand for more. He is thankful for what he gets. He is not bothered whether he is treated as a first class or a second class citizen. He knows that he does not belong here. A stranger is also homesick often. This is particularly so in times of trials and difficulties, in times of loneliness. He longs for home at such times.

These should be the characteristics of a believer. He is a stranger in a strange country. He feels not appreciated in the world. He is careful not to cause unnecessary offence. He is

content with his lot. He is often homesick. We are to live as strangers in this world.

A pilgrim

The word "pilgrim" also suggests a number of things. It suggests to us the idea of a person who is travelling from place to place. He does not make any place his home. He is not going to build a nice big house to live in. And he does not get entangled in the affairs of the world. Abraham did not build a house and become rooted in the place. Instead, he pitched a tent which was easily folded every time he had to move. When the local people wanted his well, he just gave in to them. The same attitude was seen in Isaac. He did not want to defend his rights over the wells his servants had dug. He did not want to establish a permanent settlement. When the enemies quarrelled with him, he just moved on! As the pilgrim travels on, he finds himself very much alone. That is because there are so few people travelling the same way. He does not establish deep friendship with the people in this world because he finds that they have different ideals, different ideas, and different purposes in life.

A pilgrim would carry only what is necessary to him. He will not carry a lot of things. He does not want to be hindered in his pilgrimage. A pilgrim is different from a wanderer. A wanderer also travels from place to place, and does not make any place his own. But he is different from the pilgrim in that he does not have a clear direction where he wants to go. He just wanders about, according to the whims and fancies of the moment. A pilgrim, however, has a definite direction to travel.

He has a goal, a destination. He lives a purposeful life. He plods on steadily, and will not turn back to where he has come from. He may make a few wrong turns here and there. He may need to retrace his steps sometimes. But he knows the direction he must head for, and he is clear about his destination.

Abraham was a true pilgrim. He did not turn back to Mesopotamia. Moses was a true pilgrim. He did not think of going back to Egypt. His mind was clear. He was single-minded. He set his mind on the promised land, and never wavered. The other Israelites were different. They were not true pilgrims. They were so fickle-minded. They yearned to be back in Egypt. And they craved for the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic of Egypt!

A spiritual pilgrimage

Put the two figures together, and you get the true picture of a Christian. A Christian is a stranger and a pilgrim. He is not just a pilgrim, but a stranger who is a pilgrim. We emphasise this because you should not get the wrong idea of what it means to be a pilgrim. Today, transportation is so good that taking an aeroplane is like hopping onto a bus. You can go round the world so fast. You can visit your friends and relatives in different parts of the world so easily. You can go on leisure or business without much thought and preparation, especially when you have the money to travel. You may not be in one place for long, but that is hardly being a pilgrim in the sense we mean!

Similarly, those who hop from church to church, sampling the sermons everywhere they go, are not living the life of a

stranger and a pilgrim. They go from place to place, but they are actually enjoying themselves, and living in their own way, without reference to God and His truth. From the spiritual perspective, they live a careless and irresponsible life, with no clear sense of direction.

No! What we are talking about is a spiritual pilgrimage, in which there is a certain detachment from this world. There is a detachment from the material things of this world, the institutions of this world, and other things of that nature. When God wants us to move, we are ready to move. We are ready to serve Him wherever He sends us. We are not rooted to one place. And there is a longing for heaven. That does not mean we live an unrealistic life, or escape to a monastery or nunnery. Our feet are firmly planted in this world, but our hearts are in heaven. We are in the world, but not of the world!

We also live a persevering life. Trials come our way. Discouragement is often our lot. Disappointments are many. But persevere we will! The patriarchs gave up on the things of this world, but not the things of heaven. A child who is lost in the jungle will feel distressed. As he wanders around, he finally hears the distant voices calling for him. He will quicken his steps toward that direction. Never mind if he falls! He will pick himself up and quicken his pace. All he wants is to be home, to see Mum and Dad. The same is true of a Christian. As he faces the trials of this world, he yearns all the more to be home. He is not going to give up. Instead, he will press on, and on, and on... He knows that he is heading for the right direction. He knows that he will be home before too long. He

will be with his heavenly Father, and Jesus Christ, his eldest brother.

Beware of temptations!

In this regard, we must understand that temptations will be strewn along the way of the pilgrim. Satan will not leave the Christian alone. The patriarchs were faced with the temptation to turn back to where they came from. Abraham could have returned to the sweet comfort of Mesopotamia where all his relatives lived, but he did not. Moses could have thrown up his hands in despair at the complaints of the Israelites. He could have chosen to return to Egypt. If God did not open up the Red Sea again for them, they could have built boats to cross over. But we know that Moses did not give up on the pilgrimage. In the same way, believers are often tempted to throw away the life of faith and return to their former days of wallowing in sin. The apostle John tells us in his epistle that there are such things as "the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life (1 John 2:16)." Put another way, we are confronted with the appetites of the flesh, the attractions of the world, and the suggestions of the devil.

We know that many of our friends have succumbed to these temptations. They have not been content with what they had. They were always buying nicer cars, and bigger houses. They have changed to better jobs, or emigrated to better countries. Oh, the temptations are many! There are those who are not content to have one wife, or one husband, and have sought others. There are those who have been badly burnt in the process, while others are gleefully enjoying their current fares. We

are not immune to such things. Satan will assault us. He will sow doubts into our mind. He will make us question the reality of heaven, and of spiritual things. He will shake our convictions, and cause our commitment to God to waver. Friend, are you one of the victims of Satan? Wake up, lest you be drawn away! Turn away from your sins, and return to the Lord, who is always ready to forgive!

We bring untold miseries to ourselves because we are too attached to this world. We face problems of guidance – not knowing which college to go to, which job to take up, and whether we should emigrate to another country or not. Perplexities of various kinds come to us because we are not sufficiently detached from the attractions of this world. We are not saying that those who live as strangers and pilgrims will have it easy. We are only saying that decision-making becomes that much easier when we live a detached life. That is because a lot of the factors would have been trimmed off from our consideration, and we would only have to weigh up those factors that really matter.

11.4 Conclusion

We see now that the expectation of heaven should condition our life on this earth. We are to live the life of a stranger and a pilgrim. This involves three things. First, we must desire to have the faith of the patriarchs. Second, we must work towards having that faith. And third, we should live by that faith.

I remember those years when I was a student overseas. Every time the summer holidays arrived, poor little me had to pack all my worldly belongings into two suitcases and a number of plastic bags and move to another hall of residence. The university authorities wanted all the students who were not going home for the holidays housed under one roof, to make administration easier. When the holidays were over, we had to pack up again and move back to our former rooms. This happened every summer, to the point that I really got tired of packing and unpacking! Every year, I seemed to accumulate more and more things. Every time we had to move, I had to determine which item should be thrown away and which item kept. Each time that I picked up an item, I would be saying to myself, "No, I should keep this in case I still need it." Every year, I had to face this dilemma!

A time came when the final examinations were finished. When I knew that I had passed the examinations, when I knew that I was going home, there was this tremendous sense of ecstasy! When the final packing was done, there was no difficulty in determining which item to throw away! I knew that many of the things were no more needed. Even the precious lecture notes that had been accumulated over the years could now be thrown away. There was no more the attachment to those things. There was no more attachment to the place. There was only the joyful expectation of going home!

In life, trials and sorrow have a way of sobering us up. When sorrow comes, a lot of the things we deemed important fade into insignificance. When tragedy hits a loved one,

we discover that all our ambition for job promotion and all our cravings for a better life amount to nothing. When death is imminent we become detached from the world. Only those who have faith in Christ will feel comforted. They alone will have the joyful expectation of heaven. They are the ones who will persevere on despite the severe trials of life. They are not going to sit down and do nothing. They are not going to cry in despair in the room. Instead, they will press on in the life of faith. They will expend their last ounce of energy for God. They will live out the last stretch of their life to glorify the Lord. That is because they are waiting to go home.

The Scripture says, "For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, is working for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory, while we do not look at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen. For the things which are seen are temporary, but the things which are not seen are eternal (2 Cor. 4:17-18)." The Scripture also says, "And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose (Rom. 8:28)."

Friends, heaven is real! The resurrection of the dead is real! The return of the Lord is real! We are on our way home. Let us live the life of a stranger and a pilgrim on this earth. "For those who say such things declare plainly that they seek a homeland (Heb. 11:14)." Let us say with the apostle John, "Even so, come, Lord Jesus!"

*My God, how yearn I now for You,
In this world of toil and tears;
Straining to keep the crown in view,
Conflicts without, within fears;
Waiting for all to be made new,
When dawn the unending years.*

*Your way to me, O God, make clear,
In this world of sin and curse;
As a pilgrim and a stranger,
Its wares and cares dare I nurse?
O, let my heart these words utter,
"Even so, come, Lord Jesus!"*

*While Your light does in this world shine,
Help me Your word to proclaim;
Before night comes my gifts refine,
By Your pow'r my nature tame;
Into Your hands I now resign,
Help me honour, Lord, Your name.*

*By grace through faith in Christ alone,
A worm is spared ruin untold;
No more will sin be cause to mourn,
In that city paved in gold;
"Tis grace! 'Tis grace!" will I intone,
When gathered safe in the fold.*

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