

DEAR CHRISTIAN

Biblical principles designed
to encourage an intimate
and progressive relationship
with the Lord Jesus Christ



Tom Wontrop

“But I am afraid, lest as the serpent deceived Eve by his craftiness, your minds should be lead astray from the simplicity and purity of devotion to Christ” (II Corinthians 11:3).

The Christian life is a single-hearted pursuit of one goal: to know Christ! When God's people become distracted from this pursuit, entanglements result which greatly hinder relationship to the Lord Jesus. Dear believer, there is a way back to a life of unhindered union with Christ where green pastures are abundant and living waters freely flow.

Dear Christian

Biblical principles designed
to encourage an intimate
and progressive relationship
with the Lord Jesus Christ

Tom Wontrop

Introduction

It is my prayer that the Lord Jesus will be pleased to use this publication to spiritually refresh the hearts of those who seek intimacy with Him. No man possesses full knowledge as a teacher or a student; it is simply my desire to share the revelation of an all-sufficient Savior according to the degree with which my heart has been graciously opened by His Spirit to His written Word. May the Lord be praised!

- Tom Wontrop

Christ Alone

*The world, I thought, belonged to me,
Goods, gold and people, land and sea.
Where'er I walked beneath God's sky
In those old days my word was "I."*

*Years passed; there flashed on my pathway near
The fragment of a vision dear.
My former word no more sufficed,
And what I said was, "I and Christ."*

*But, O, the more I looked on Him,
His glory grew, while mine grew dim,
I shrank so small, He towered so high,
All I dared say was, "Christ and I."*

*Years more the vision held its place
And looked me steadily in the face;
I speak now in a humbler tone,
All I can say is, "Christ alone."*

- Author Unknown

1 Obeying God

Dear Christian, do the commandments of God seem out of reach to you? Do you find yourself striving to please God with little success? Do you desire a life of genuine obedience to God, but do not know the way to such a life?

In the Gospel of Matthew, the Lord Jesus said, “*Come unto Me all who are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest.*” Our Lord has intended that the Christian life be a life of rest. Yet for many of God’s dear children it has become a life full of strain and struggle as they labor to live in obedience to God’s Word.

Year after year, many make more promises to God, hoping that with each new act of dedication they may finally be able to live lives pleasing to Him. But sadly, even with genuine sincerity, they fall short. Sin seems to make a fool of them, as the vows they have made end up broken at the Lord’s feet.

Some become just too discouraged and walk away. Others seem to find new hope to carry on in the struggle, even though in their hearts they are extremely frustrated. Still others become more involved in Christian service, hoping that increased activity will one day free them from sin’s grip and allow them to please the Lord with a life of obedience.

Dear Christian, is this what God has planned for His people? A life that genuinely desires obedience to Him but never has it in reality? A life of constant struggle and failure with

the world, the flesh, and the devil? Surely, this cannot be the life of rest Jesus promised to all who come to Him.

Would it be a surprise for you to learn, dear Christian, that God has not given us His commandments in order that we might obey them? Rather, He has given us His commandments in order that we might see our inability to obey them, and trust Him for the enablement to obey. Or, to state it another way, God has never intended that His people muster up some level of ability or commitment in order to live a holy life. He knows we are helpless to do so. Rather, through His indwelling life, He desires to enable us to live as He commands. Do you see the difference?

The Christian life is not summarized with the word, try; it is summarized with the word, trust. For just as you and I could not lift a finger to help God out in our salvation, we cannot lift a finger to help God out in living the Christian life. Just as no amount of effort on our part could save us from hell, no amount of effort on our part can help us live in obedience to Christ.

In the Book of Philippians chapter two we read, *"For it is God who is at work within you both the willing and the doing of His will."* God has promised that if we trust Him, not only will He work in us the enablement to do His will, He will also work in us the desire to do His will. Oh, what a blessed promise! All that God commands of us He is willing to work in us!

Jesus said, *"I will give you rest."* Suppose one day I came to your home and found you, on a hot summer day, digging a deep hole in your back yard. If I said to you, "Let me give you rest," what would you expect me to do? Would you expect

me to get you a glass of cold lemonade? Would you expect me to get you a lighter shovel? I don't think so! If I said, "Let me give you rest," you would expect me to climb in the hole, take the shovel from your hand, help you out of the hole and then start digging.

Many Christians have come to the Lord Jesus from the heavy burden of sin, but since their conversion, they have picked up the heavy burden of self-effort. They struggle in their attempt to obey the Lord, while He stands ready to bring them into rest.

May I encourage you, dear Christian, if you are in that hole digging, look now to Jesus to lift you out, and end that Christ-less struggle once and for all! As the Lord stood ready to lift you out of the awful pit of hell, He now stands ready to lift you out of the awful pit of self-trust. In Psalms chapter 46, the Lord states His invitation this way: "*Cease striving and know that I am God!*"

Many times in the Gospels, the Lord Jesus commanded people to do impossible things. On one occasion, to a man who could not walk, He said, "*Arise, take up your bed and go home.*" Now if you or I would say that very thing to a man who could not walk, many would accuse us of being cruel. They might say, "How insensitive! What a mean thing to say to a man who cannot walk!" But when Jesus said it, it was not cruel. Why not? Because when Jesus told the man to rise and walk, He also gave him the enablement to rise and walk. In order for that man to obey the command to walk, Jesus had to work a mighty miracle in him.

Today, the Lord Jesus comes to us and commands us to do that which is humanly impossible. He commands us to

love our enemies, turn the other cheek, forgive our brothers and sisters seventy times seven. He tells husbands to love their wives as He loved the church and gave Himself for her. He commands us to be thankful in and for all things. He tells us to love God with all of our heart, mind, soul, and body.

Anyone who has seriously tried to obey these commandments has quickly come to see that no one has the strength on his own to keep them. We have about as much hope of obeying anything God commands of us on our own, as that man who could not walk had of obeying the Lord on his own.

Our only hope for obedience to God lies in the fact that Jesus is willing to live His life through us and by a miracle enable us to obey Him. The responsibility to obey God is ours, but the power to obey God is not ours. God must be the power in us to obey Him, or the Christian life will be just a hopeless dream.

Please learn early, dear Christian, that the path of obedience is the path of trusting, not trying. All that God commands He will provide. It is a wonderful truth that every command in the Bible is actually a promise of what Jesus will work in us as we trust in Him. There is a great rest of heart that comes to Christians who learn that only Jesus can live the Christian life, and He wants to live it through them.

While many continually fail in a Christ-less struggle to obey God, I pray you will resist the temptation to look to the flesh, come to the end of your effort, and trust in Christ alone! He is an all-sufficient Savior able to meet the deepest needs of our hearts; able to do in us and for us all we cannot do on our own.

2 *The Object of Faith*

Dear Christian, do you often pray for stronger faith? Do you love the Lord with all your heart but find it difficult sometimes to trust Him? Do you often wonder how your faith in God might increase?

It sometimes surprises Christians when they learn from the Bible that the most important thing about faith is not faith at all, but the object of faith. On one occasion in the Gospels, the Lord's disciples asked Him to increase their faith, and to that the Lord replied, "*If you had faith like a mustard seed, you would say to this mulberry tree, 'Be uprooted and be planted in the sea'; and it would obey you*" (Luke 17:6).

The Lord's point is that little faith, even the small size of a mustard seed, is all the faith we need when our faith is placed in Him. And that is because it is not the amount of faith that makes faith great, it is the object of faith that makes faith great.

I could have all the faith in the world that by wearing red shoes, God would let me into heaven when I die. In fact, I could have more faith in my red shoes than some Christians have in Jesus, but would faith in my shoes get me into heaven? Of course not! Why not? Because again, the most important thing about faith is not the amount we have but the object of our faith and the only true object of faith is the Lord Jesus.

In the Book of First John we read, "*And this is the con-*

fidence we have in Him, that if we ask anything according to His will, He will hear us" (I John 5:14). It does not say, "This is the confidence we have in faith." Jesus is the only legitimate object of faith. What this means, dear Christian, is that there is no power in faith. There is only power in the God we trust. In other words, we are never to put faith in our faith. We are never to trust our trust. We are to trust the Lord!

This is one of those things in the Christian life that we often get wrong. We worry about how much faith we have, and we ask, "Do I have enough faith?" And then if we get past that hurdle, we worry about the strength of our faith, and we ask, "Is my faith strong enough to withstand the storms of life?" And then, if we get over that, still centering on faith and not the object of faith, we will worry about the soundness of our faith, and we will ask, "Is my faith active enough?"

But those things, dear Christian, are never to be our concern. All of that attention to faith is actually a distraction in our Christian lives. There is a little hymn I love to sing titled, *Trusting Jesus*. Here is one stanza from that hymn:

*Simply trusting every day,
Trusting through a stormy way.
Even when my faith is small,
Trusting Jesus that is all.*

- Edgar Page Stites, 1836-1921

One night in the Gospel record, our Lord with His disciples, ended up in a boat on a storm-tossed sea. The disciples, thinking they were going to drown, in panic woke the Lord out of His sleep. After calming the storm, He asked them the ques-

tion, "*Where is your faith?*" (Luke 8:25). This is always the right question. The question is not how much faith we have, or is our faith strong enough, but where is it? In what or in whom are we placing our trust?

In light of this, dear Christian, our need is never more faith, or stronger faith; our need is always a greater vision of Jesus! Whenever we have a problem with faith, it is not really faith that is the problem. The problem is that we have a small view of Christ, and a greater view of Christ is always the cure.

This was the Lord's cure for the disciples on that stormy sea. Their faith was misplaced. Their faith was not in Him. So what did Jesus do? He stood up in the boat and miraculously revealed Himself to them as the One in absolute control of the wind and the waves. He showed Himself as the One who is Lord of All. What a tremendous revelation of Christ!

A greater view of Himself is always the Lord's remedy for the misplaced faith of His disciples, even today! The apostle Paul did not say, "I know what I have believed and am persuaded." He said, "*I know whom I have believed and am persuaded that He is able.*" True faith really only concerns itself with one thing, and that is knowing Christ!

In the Book of Psalms chapter nine, we see this indispensable key to faith stated in such a clear way. "*Those who know Thy name will put their trust in Thee.*" In other words, to know the Lord is to trust the Lord. That is how wonderful Jesus is! As we come to know Him we can not help but trust Him.

Sometimes Christians will say something like, "I am trying to trust Jesus, but I am finding it hard to do so." They may not realize it, but those words are actually an insult to our dear Lord. If I came to you and said, "I am trying to trust you, but

it is so hard; it is not easy trusting you,” those words would imply that for some reason you are not worthy of my trust. But dear fellow believer, is it hard to trust Jesus? The answer is no, not when you know Him. Knowing Jesus is the key to trusting Jesus. Jesus is surely worthy of all our trust!

If a stranger knocked on your door and asked if he could take your children to the park for a few hours, you would say, “No way!” You would not be able to trust a stranger with your children. Why not? Because he is a stranger; you do not know him. But if your best friend knocked on your door and asked to take your children to the park, you would not have any trouble granting that request. Why not? Because although it may be hard to trust a stranger, it is easy to trust a friend; in fact, we can only trust people as well as we know them.

So dear Christian, if you find it hard to trust Jesus, the solution is not to work on your faith. The solution is just get to know Jesus more. Ask the Lord to reveal more of Himself to your heart through your study of the Bible. And as He does, you will come to trust Him freely without effort or strain. Our trust in the Lord is always in direct proportion to how intimately we know Him. And since trust is never an issue among friends, let us cast our helpless souls upon the One who longs to progressively bring us into a greater friendship with Himself.

The real issue in the Christian life is never obtaining more faith, or acquiring stronger faith. That faith-centered emphasis is entirely off-centered. May God get our focus off our faith and on to the Lord Jesus! Our solitary, perpetual need is always to grow in the heart- knowledge of Christ.

All the faith we will ever need the Lord will supply. The Bible calls our dear Savior, “*The Author and Finisher of our*

faith” (Hebrews 12:2). Dear Christian, Jesus will take care of our faith, our part is just to pursue Him. Trusting Jesus is that which spontaneously springs forth from the hearts of those who are knowing Him!

In the Book of Romans the Holy Spirit tells us that, “*Faith comes by hearing the word concerning Christ*” (Romans 10:17). You need not pursue faith dear believer, it will come to you! And it will come to you as you pursue the Lord through His Word.

May God deliver us from the hindrance of going after faith that we may be free to go after Jesus alone!

*Show me Thy face – my faith and love
Shall henceforth fixed be,
And nothing here have power to move
My soul’s serenity.
My life shall seem a trance, a dream,
And all I feel and see,
Illusive, visionary – Thou
The one reality!*

- Author Unknown

3 *Accepted in the Beloved*

Dear Christian, does God fully accept you? Is He pleased with you as His child? Do you enjoy the Lord's unconditional blessing and favor upon your life?

Every Christian must settle two questions in their hearts if they are to truly enjoy friendship with the Lord Jesus. The first is: Does God fully accept me? The second is: Upon what basis does God fully accept me? To have the Bible's answers to these questions ringing in your heart is to hold the key to daily fellowship with the Savior.

In the Book of Ephesians chapter 1, verse 6, we read, "*To the praise of the glory of His grace, wherein He hath made us accepted in the Beloved.*" Herein is the basis of our acceptance by God. We are accepted, "*in the Beloved.*" That is, only through union with God's Beloved Son do we acquire God's approval. It is as if the Lord is saying, "If you want Me to receive you, if you want to enjoy relationship with Me, you must be *in* Jesus Christ, because only in Him will I accept you."

Now if God's approval is entirely based upon us being *in Christ*, then we should know what it means. You may recognize the phrase because it is one of the most repeated in all the New Testament. We read that Christians are "*chosen in Christ*" "*seated in Christ*" "*sealed in Christ*" "*rooted in Christ*" "*reconciled in Christ*" "*complete in Christ*" blessed with "*all*

spiritual blessings in the heavenly places in Christ.”

To understand this wonderful phrase, let me refer to the Book of Genesis. In the Garden of Eden, Adam, the first man, sinned. Looking back at that event, I Corinthians 15:22 states, *“in Adam all died.”* and Romans 5:18 also explains, *“Through one transgression there resulted condemnation to all men.”* In these verses, God is declaring that on the day Adam sinned, the entire human race fell into sin with him, because on that day Adam represented the entire human race.

Now some might say, “That’s not fair! Why should I be blamed for what Adam did? Adam sinned, I didn’t! I wasn’t even there!” Yet, according to how the Lord looks upon Adam’s fall, you and I, and the whole human race, were there with Adam in the garden. We were there in him, in his loins, in his seed as his descendants.

I have heard it explained in this way, dear Christian; if your grandfather had died at the age of three, where would you be? You would never have existed. Well, Adam, the first man, the father of us all, sinned. And when he sinned, although he continued to live physically, he died spiritually; therefore, since *“in Adam all died”* all of us are born spiritually dead.

Now I would never pretend to understand the fullness of this truth, but this is what God says, and it is to the benefit of our eternal souls to believe it. God does not accept the argument that says, “It is not fair, I was not in the garden.” God says we were there. All mankind was there in Adam. And when God says it, it is true whether we believe Him or not.

I mention Adam’s record, not to dwell on Adam, but rather, to explain God’s concept of union. We sinned when Adam sinned because God sees us all in Adam, in union with him. But

do not be discouraged, dear Christian, because in I Corinthians 15:45, the Lord Jesus is called the last Adam. And by that, God is saying: As in Adam - So also in Christ. In I Corinthians 15:22 we read, *"For as in Adam all died, so also in Christ all shall be made alive."* This is an amazing statement!

When God saves a person from sin, they leave the headship of Adam and are placed, by the Holy Spirit, under the headship of Christ. We do not feel it, or sense it, because it happens spiritually in the mind and heart of God and this is where our union with Christ gets very exciting! As God once saw us in Adam, before He saved us, He now sees us in Christ!

What do these words mean for us? To explain it, in Ephesians 1:22,23, the Lord directs us to His wonderful illustration of the human body. *"And He put all things in subjection under His feet, and gave Him as head over all things to the church, which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all."*

According to Ephesians, Christ is the head, and we, the church, are His body. And as with any human body, the head and the body are one. In other words, wherever my head goes, my body goes. Therefore, when God, the Father, looks at the church (you and me) He always views us as joined to Christ. He never views us as separate from Christ. When God, the Father, sees His Son and the church, He sees us as one, just like the human body is one.

Just as you and I, before salvation, were joined to and identified with Adam, now through God's grace, we are joined to and identified with Christ. So when Jesus died, there were really two bodies on the cross. There was His own physical body, made up of skin and bone, and there was Christ's mysti-

cal body, made up of the church. When Jesus died, according to God the Father, the church died with Him. This is why the apostle Paul writes, *"I am crucified with Christ."*

And when Jesus rose from the dead, the church also rose from the dead with Him, as His mystical body. And when Jesus was seated at the right hand of God in heaven, far above all rule and authority, the church, you and I, were seated with Him, as His body. Dear fellow believer, this is what it means to be in Christ.

Here is an earthly illustration of it: If I place a dollar bill in a book, that dollar becomes so identified with the book, that if I then throw the book in the water, the dollar goes in the water as well. And if I burn the book, the dollar also burns. Whatever happens to the book happens to the dollar because the dollar is in the book.

Just so, God has placed every believer in Christ, and whatever becomes true of Him, becomes true of us all. While we were in Adam, we were guilty of all of which Adam was guilty. Now through Christ's finished work at the cross, God has moved us from Adam and placed us in Christ. And being in Christ, we share in all that He is and all that He has.

Today, God the Son stands before God the Father, holy and righteous, and since we are in Christ, we stand before God the Father, as holy and as righteous as Jesus. Today, God the Father fully accepts God the Son, and since we are in Christ, we are fully accepted by God the Father as Jesus. Because we are in Christ, and fully identified with Him, whatever is true of Christ before the Father is true of us! To be in Christ simply means that we share in all that Jesus is and all that Jesus has before the Father.

Now one very important point here is this, dear Christian: This is all according to God's point of view. God does not say we have to understand it in order for it to become true in our lives. It is true in our lives! It is a fact. This is how God sees every one of His children. Sadly, some may not know it. Some may not be enjoying it. Some may not even believe it, but that does not change the fact that it is true. Believing it does not make it truer; it is true!

We look at ourselves and see what sin had made us, but when the Father looks at us, He sees us in His Son, as His work on the cross has remade us. Every Christian is completely accepted by God the Father in Christ. And although our unbelief will not make it untrue, our unbelief will cause us to live very frustrated Christian lives, full of doubt and fear, feeling dirty all the time before God.

But when we believe, and rest in Christ, we then begin to enjoy a renewed fellowship with Him void of all pretenses. There is a tremendous freedom abiding in a relationship with Jesus where we can be ourselves before Him, while trusting in Him to be our righteousness!

Sometimes we think that when God said "salvation", He really meant "probation." But He did not mean probation, dear Christian. The Christian life is not laboring to make God pleased with you. Sometimes we think that God will only accept us if we, by His power, live obedient Christian lives. Although it is true that the Lord desires we live obedient Christian lives through His enabling power; the basis for our acceptance is not what we do or do not do. The basis for our acceptance is what Jesus has done for us at the cross, and therefore His acceptance of us remains ever constant. By the grace of God we are

in Christ, dear Christian, and being in Christ we are declared as righteous as He. In ourselves, we are not righteous, but in Christ we are and ever will be!

May the Lord open the eyes of our hearts to this tremendous Bible truth that we may increasingly live in an unhindered friendship with Christ as we press on to know Him more! This is the key, dear believer, to enjoying abundant life with our God - our blessed union with Jesus Christ.

*So near, so very near to God,
I cannot nearer be;
For in the person of His Son,
I am as near as He.
So dear, so very dear to God,
More dear I cannot be;
The love wherewith He loves the Son,
Such is His love to me.*

- Catesby Paget

4 *The Essence of Prayer*

Dear Christian, are you satisfied with your prayer life? Do you wonder why you do not devote more time to prayer? Are you aware of a profound, yet simple Bible truth that can effortlessly revolutionize your prayer life?

Prayer is one of those topics that God's people seem to know a lot about. There are many books that have been written on prayer. Many sermons have gone forth on the subject of prayer. So much so, that prayer is perhaps one of the most written about, read about, talked about subjects in God's Word. And yet, if you ask the average Christian if they are they 100% satisfied with their prayer life, or if they know of anyone who is 100% satisfied with their prayer life, they will generally respond in the negative. Why is that?

On a subject that is so talked about and studied, why is it that very few Christians, if any, are 100% happy with their prayer life?

We often hear that God wants us to be men and women of prayer, and yet when you ask those who say that, if *they* are a man or a woman of prayer, they will generally say, "No, but I should be, we all should be!" Why, when it comes to prayer, is it always what we should be and never what we are? Why in the Body of Christ does everyone seem to be falling short when it comes to prayer?

Could it be that all Christians are hypocrites, preaching

the importance of prayer but not living it? Could we all just be lazy when it comes to prayer? Or maybe, dear Christian, something else is happening.

Perhaps we are not missing the boat at all when it comes to prayer, but are just holding on to some terrible misconceptions about prayer. Maybe the problem is not with our prayer lives as much as it is with what we have believed about prayer. Maybe we have been embracing man-made views on prayer that are not in tune with God's Word.

I have been taught a wonderful truth about prayer that has revolutionized my entire prayer life! At its heart is the conclusion that God includes a lot more as prayer than His people generally do. In other words, it seems God's people have placed limits on prayer that God has never intended, and dear believer, it may surprise you to learn, as it did me, that you may be praying a lot more than you recognize.

What is prayer according to God's Word? In Hosea chapter 14, the prophet said, "*Take with you words and return to the Lord.*" Prayer is communicating to God through words. Prayer is talking to God as a child would talk to a father in sweet conversation. Prayer is saying words; but is it more than that?

In the Gospel of Matthew chapter 6, Jesus taught us that the mere repeating of words is not acceptable prayer. He said, "*When you are praying, do not use meaningless repetition as the Gentiles do, for they suppose that they will be heard for their many words.*" Words themselves do not constitute prayer. In Luke 18, Jesus spoke of a man who was "*praying to himself.*"

Prayer is deeper than words. Prayer is addressing God with *sincere* words. In the book of James chapter 4 we read,

"You ask and you do not receive because you ask with wrong motives." Prayer is more than just mouthing words; it involves the motives behind the words. We can come to the Lord with all the right words, but if our hearts are not in those words it is not legitimate prayer. Our words in prayer must be driven by pure intentions. But is that prayer?

Prayer has got to be more than speaking words, even sincere words from the heart, because there are times in all of our lives when we cannot communicate rightly or clearly what is in our hearts. Sometimes we just cannot put our feelings into words.

Asaph referred to this experience in Psalm 77 when he wrote, *"I am so troubled that I cannot speak."* If prayer were just words, even sincere words, would prayer be unachievable when we were too distressed to voice our thoughts? Is it possible, dear Christian, to pray without words? Indeed it is!

In Exodus chapter 2, we read that God heard the groanings of His people in Egyptian captivity. In Psalm 107 we read that the Lord looked down from heaven and heard the groaning of a prisoner. Sometimes our hearts just groan under the weight of our sin or the burdens of this life, and when they do, God hears those groanings and regards them as prayer.

In Psalm 6, we see another form of prayer in addition to voicing words. David wrote, *"The Lord has heard the voice of my weeping."* What a wonderful truth to learn that our tears have a language God understands! There is a voice in our weeping, dear Christian. We cry and God hears, and from our tears the Lord discerns a message, and regards that message as a prayer unto Him.

Prayer is sincere words, but the Lord also regards groan-

ing and crying as prayers, and there is more. In Isaiah 45, the Lord says, "*Look to Me and be saved.*" I once thought that to be saved we had to literally voice a prayer, but God says if we look to Him and that look communicates our heart's response to His invitation for salvation, we have prayed.

Somewhere along the way, the Lord's people have acquired some very narrow views concerning prayer. Prayer is not just something we do when we bow our heads and say words. It is that, but it is bigger than that! Prayer is a matter of the heart, and if it does not come out in sincere words, it will come out in tears, or in groanings, or even in a look up to the Lord.

Also consider Psalm 10:17, "*Lord Thou hast heard the desire of the humble, Thou wilt strengthen their heart, Thou wilt incline Thine ear.*" What an amazing verse! Even our desires rise up as prayers to God! The Lord hears our longings. He listens to our hopes and our dreams.

Many Christians carry guilt concerning their prayer life that God never intended. Bowing our heads, closing our eyes and voicing words is prayer, but that is only a small part of prayer. Prayer can also be groaning. It can also be crying and looking and even desiring!

Dear Christian, you may think you have a lousy prayer life, and that may be true, but do you ever cry in the will of God? Does your heart ever groan under life's sorrows? Do you harbor any desires in your heart for your loved ones that they might come to Christ or grow in their knowledge of the Lord? Did you know that you were praying when you had such thoughts?

Prayer is more than something we do at Christian gatherings, or before we eat, or go to bed. It has to be; otherwise we

could never obey I Thessalonians 5:17 where God instructs us to, "*Pray without ceasing.*" If prayer were only words, we could never obey that command. (We have to sleep!) How can we pray without ceasing? Easy, if prayer includes the desires of the heart!

A desire is something we have with us all the time, whether we are aware of it or not! Heart desires never leave us; they become part of who we are. In reality, dear fellow believer, prayer is not some mechanical thing that we can turn on and off like a light switch. It is an attitude of the heart, and it is bigger than we could ever dream! What God considers as prayer transcends all the limits we may have placed upon it.

But not only does the Lord regard sincere words and groans and tears and holy desires as acceptable prayer, He also may regard our entire person as prayer. In Psalm 104:4 the psalmist wrote, "*In return for my love they act as my accusers but I am [in] prayer.*"

In an attempt to clarify, the translators added the word "in." But in the original language the word does not appear. The psalmist learned a wonderful truth, that God not only hears what comes out of our mouths and our hearts, He also hears what we are! "*I am prayer,*" David wrote.

In other words, our very lives lived in union with Christ, pursuing a greater knowledge of Him, rises up to the Lord as a sweet aroma of prayer. We communicate to God with our words, our groans, our tears and our desires; but we also communicate to Him with our very lives! If the general direction of our life is toward Christ; if we are saying "yes" to His Lordship, then our lives become prayer to Him.

There are the times when our whole person speaks vol-

umes to the Lord. Babies are a wonderful earthly example of this. Babies, by virtue of their person alone, communicate to all around them. The presence of a baby tells us things about them, such as their helplessness, and their needs. And as their presence discloses these things to us, we act accordingly. We hold them carefully. We speak softly to them.

In like manner, God responds to us just because of what we are. When we live before Him in childlike dependence we communicate to Him, and He hears and responds to our helplessness. When the desire to know God characterizes our lives, then our very being becomes a prayer to Him.

Many Christians live in frustration thinking they are not praying enough. But if, to all you are in union with Christ, God hears, if everything you think and dream and wish and desire about the Lord, He regards as prayer, then the question is not, do you pray enough? The question is, do you ever *not* pray?

Dear Christian, do not measure your prayer life by how many times a day you bow your head and close your eyes and utter words to God. That is a certainly a part of prayer, but only a small part.

How foolish to think that God only hears us when we speak to Him with our words. He is bigger than that! His ear is sharper than that! His union with us in Christ is sweeter than that!

In reality, prayer is not prayer just because we say something to God. Prayer is prayer because God listens! And God listens to all that flows out of our lives directed toward Him.

May the Lord deliver us from all our anxiety over prayer, that we may be free to enjoy our union with Him unhindered!

Prayer is the Soul's Sincere Desire

*Prayer is the soul's sincere desire,
Unuttered or expressed,
The motion of a hidden fire
That trembles in the breast.*

*Prayer is the burden of a sigh,
The falling of a tear,
The upward glancing of an eye
When none but God is near.*

*O Thou, by whom we come to God,
The Life, the Truth, the Way,
The path of prayer Thyself hast trod;
Lord, teach us how to pray.*

- James Montgomery, 1771-1854

5 *One Thing Necessary*

Dear Christian, do you love the Lord with all your heart, yet it is not like it was when the Lord first drew you to His side? In your experienced Christian life, do you fear you may have left your first love?

In II Corinthians 11:3, the Apostle Paul wrote, “*But I am afraid, lest as the serpent deceived Eve by his craftiness, your minds should be led astray from the simplicity and purity of devotion to Christ.*” One of the devil’s main assaults in the life of believers is to lead us away from the simplicity of devotion to Christ. The Christian life is not complicated. It is we who often complicate it and when we do it leads to much frustration.

The Christian life actually includes a glorious single-hearted focus. That focus may be expressed in these words: In the Christian life there are many by-products, but there is only one goal. In other words, as Christians, there are not many things we need to pursue, just one.

Now, you might be thinking, “How can that be? I have always heard that in order to please God there are many things I need to pursue, and there are many things I need to work on.” Well, remember, dear Christian, the words of our precious Savior to Martha, one of His beloved followers. In the tenth chapter of Luke’s gospel, we read that while she was, “*distracted, with all her preparations*” Jesus said to her, “*Martha,*

Martha, you are worried and bothered about so many things; but only a few things are necessary, really only one, for Mary has chosen the good part." These are amazing words! Jesus said that in life, there is only one thing necessary.

In the same chapter, we learn that Martha's sister, Mary, was pursuing this one necessary thing. She was, *"moreover listening to the Lord's words, seated at His feet."* On that day, Mary was intent on just one thing; growing in a greater knowledge of Christ. Dear Christian, this is the one thing necessary in the Christian life: Knowing the Lord Jesus.

We see this identical truth expressed by Paul in Philippians 3:8. *"This one thing I do, I count all things as loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord."* King David, in poetic form, also wrote of it in Psalm 27:4. *"One thing I have asked from the Lord and that I shall seek; that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life to behold the beauty of the Lord."*

Moses, too, mentioned this truth as he prayed in Exodus 33:13 *"Show me Thy ways that I may know Thee."* And after Paul had walked with the Lord for about thirty years, in Philippians 3:10, he prayed *"that I may know Him."* One would think that after thirty years of being a Christian, Paul would have already known the Lord. He was referring however, to a progressive union with Christ.

The word *"know"* in Scripture means a lot more than a gathering of facts. In the book of Genesis we read, *"Adam knew his wife and she bore a son."* The word *"know"* used in the Old Testament when speaking of the physical intimacies of the marriage bond, is the same word used in the New Testament when referring to a believer's spiritual union with

the Lord Jesus. Dear Christian, this is the one thing necessary in the Christian life. This is the one goal: Pursing an intimate knowledge of the person of Christ as revealed in the Bible.

In John's gospel, the Lord Jesus said, "*This is eternal life, that they may know Thee, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom Thou has sent*" (John 17:3). How may we describe life that is eternal? What is this life? Its solitary theme is knowing the Lord!

In the Christian life, dear believer, there are not many things to work on; there are not many things to seek after, just one - God Himself! To pursue anything else as a goal is to be, in the words of Christ to Martha, "*distracted and bothered about so many things.*"

Now one might ask, "Well if there is only one thing I have to do as a Christian, what about everything else in the Christian life? What about bearing the fruit of the Spirit, or witnessing to the lost, or my responsibilities to my spouse and my family and my friends and my job? What about prayer, and stewardship, and living in obedience to God? How do these things (plus a lot more) fit in to the Christian life?"

Here is how, dear believer; they are by-products. They are the outworkings that spontaneously flow out of our lives as we pursue the one necessary thing. All of these wonderful Christian responsibilities are not the goal; they are what the Holy Spirit produces in us as we pursue the one goal. These by-products of the Christian life come to us not as a result of our seeking after them; they come simply as effortless results of knowing the Lord.

The Christian life is not seeking Jesus *and* the fruit of the Spirit, or seeking Jesus *and* obedience, or seeking Jesus *and*

soul winning. The Christian life is seeking Jesus alone! And when we seek Jesus alone, obedience, soul winning, and the fruit of the Spirit will come about in our lives as a by-product of knowing Him.

In the Christian life, the moment we turn our heart's focus away from Jesus and start going after love, or joy, or peace, or patience, or holiness, or ministry, we lose these things. The moment we stop pursuing Jesus alone and start going after being a better parent, or being a better neighbor or being a better spouse, we lose these things.

Charles Spurgeon, the great English preacher, put it this way; he said, "I looked to Jesus and the dove of peace flew into my heart. I looked to the dove of peace and it flew away." Keeping our heart-eyes on Jesus, going after Him alone, is the key to genuine Christian living.

In Psalm One, the Holy Spirit compares the man who trusts the Lord to a tree. He says, "*He will be like a tree firmly planted by rivers of water, which yields fruit in its season.*" What a tremendous illustration! How does a tree produce fruit? It produces fruit when its roots enjoy relationship with the soil. Only as a tree draws from the soil the nutrients it needs will it produce fruit.

One thing you will never see is an apple tree straining to produce fruit. And yet, this is how Christians often try to bear fruit unto God. We toil and struggle, hoping that by concentrating on fruit-bearing, we will bear fruit. But apple trees, dear Christian, produce fruit spontaneously when their roots stay firmly planted in the soil. We need to learn the lesson of the apple tree! In our spiritual life, as in nature, fruit is an organic by-product of life. Only as we draw life from our Savior, and

center our lives solely in Him, to know Him more, will we bear fruit unto God.

There is what one might call apple-tree righteousness, where fruit is the unforced result of knowing Jesus, but there is also what one might call Christmas-tree righteousness. This is where everything in our lives looks good but it is not real. Christmas trees have beautiful lights, bulbs and tinsel, but it is just attached decoration; there is no life. The best we believers can do through our own effort is produce artificial fruit. This fruit at times, may look very much like the real thing, others may see it and applaud, but as soon as a strong wind of adversity begins to blow over our lives the fruit will be exposed for the counterfeit it is.

Dear Christian, fruit is only real in our lives when it is produced by the Spirit of God. That is why it is called "*the fruit of the Spirit*." It is established by the Spirit in us as we sink the roots of our hearts deeper into the Lord Jesus. As we set our hearts to know Him, fruit will be produced in our lives, not by the work of our own hands but by the work of the indwelling Christ.

Dear Christian, may I encourage you, be a Mary not a Martha. By God's grace, resist the temptation of a divided heart. Refuse to listen to the many voices in our day encouraging us to run in a thousand different directions by going after many things. There are many worthwhile Christian activities and ministries in which we may serve the Lord, but as wonderful as they all may be, do not allow them to take the place of the one thing necessary.

Jesus wants to be preeminent in our lives, not prominent; not one among many on the throne of our heart's affections, but

our One and only! As believers, we do not have many things to seek after, only one.

Set your heart, dear believer, to know the Lord as the only goal of your Christian life and bring pleasure to His heart!

*For me, O Lord, the world is all too small,
For I have seen Thy face,
Where Thine eternal love irradiates all
Within Thy secret place.
And therefore from all others, from all else,
Draw Thou my soul to Thee,
Yea, Thou hast broken the enchanter's spells,
And I am free.*

- Gerhard Tersteegen, 1697-1769

6 *The Goal of Bible Study*

Dear Christian, has your reading of God's Word turned from a delight into a chore? Is Bible study somewhat dry and tedious for you? Do you long to study the Bible as you did when you first met the Lord?

Many of God's dear children have faced this dilemma. Their study of God's Word, which was once vibrant, exciting, and anticipated, has become listless, humdrum, and just not very enjoyable. They may still read the Scriptures. They may still maintain daily devotions and even participate in local study groups, but for many, Bible study, for no apparent reason, has become cold and dry.

In an attempt to rectify the situation, some have turned to long-established study methods. When that remedy failed, they utilized planned reading schedules. That failing, they sought out the latest study guides, which also proved ineffective. Some have considered their disinterest as a sign of an even greater predicament. They fear their cold heart toward the Bible is an indication that their love for the Lord Himself has grown cold. This causes them tremendous trepidation.

Dear Christian, I know that many are quick to place the blame on you for this condition. Sunday after Sunday believers are chastised for their half-hearted interest in Bible study. They are told it is due to the sins of laziness or the lack of surrender to the Lord. They are constantly challenged to rededicate

themselves to greater discipline and increase their efforts.

There is no doubt that some of God's people are lazy when it comes to Bible study, and there are some who have allowed the enjoyments of the world to occupy the throne of their heart's affection, which is reserved only for the Lord. Not knowing *your* heart, this may be your situation, but dear Christian, there may also be another explanation.

In the Gospel of John, chapter 5, when addressing a group of Jewish leaders, the Lord Jesus made an amazing comment. He said, "*You search the Scriptures, because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is these that bear witness of Me; and you are unwilling to come to Me, so that you might have life.*"

In this statement, the Lord Jesus is making a distinction between a knowledge of the Bible, and a knowledge of Himself. Even though His hearers knew the Scriptures which speak of Him, still they would not come to Him. The point is this: to know the Lord we need the Bible, and yet it is very possible to know the Bible and not know union with the Lord.

Jesus said, "*You search the Scriptures.*" The Jewish leaders of New Testament times were scholars in the Scriptures. Historians tell us that when a boy was set apart to become a Pharisee, by the age of twelve he would have memorized half the Old Testament.

I suspect many in the Lord's audience that day possessed a comprehensive knowledge of some wonderful Bible doctrines, such as the oneness of God and the eternity of God and the holiness of God. I suppose, from the Old Testament, they could have discussed truths such as guidance and surrender and faith and obedience and prayer.

I picture them publicly lecturing on suffering from the Book of Job, victory from the Book of Joshua, and worship from the Psalms of David. They knew the Scriptures. They even knew the original languages, and yet how sad it is to read, that with all that Bible knowledge they did not know the Lord.

You see, dear Christian, there is one kind of Bible study which centers on a knowledge of the Bible, and there is *God's* method of Bible study which centers on a knowledge of Jesus. One is cold, lifeless, and fills the head with lots of facts but does nothing for the heart. The other learns the facts of God's Word quite well, but for one purpose – to enjoy fellowship with a living Christ. Would it surprise you to learn that God did not give us the Bible in order that we would know the Bible? He gave us the Bible in order that we would know Him!

In Ephesians 1:17, the apostle Paul prayed that God would give the saints, *"a spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of Him."* We read in I John 5:20, *"The Son of God has come, and has given us understanding, in order that we might know Him."* It does not say that the Son of God has come and given us understanding, in order that we might know the Bible. It is the Lord Jesus alone we must seek in the Scriptures, or else our Bible study will become as dry as dust to our souls.

I truly believe, dear Christian, that many of God's people today are seeing a decline in their interest for Bible study not because their love for the Lord is in jeopardy, or because they lack heart surrender, or because they are just too plain lazy. I fear they may have settled for a study of God's Word that does not purposefully and directly center on the person of Jesus Christ, and because of this their hearts are suffering a spiritual

famine.

On the day you were saved you did not receive a doctrine, or a plan of salvation, or even a Bible, not primarily so. When you came to the Lord, you received a Person. On that day, the Holy Spirit revealed the Lord Jesus to your heart as, "*the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.*" Seeing Jesus in that light your heart in faith cried out to Him. All Christians, although they may not express it as I have, begin their new life this way. It is the only way to begin, by touching the person of Christ through faith as the Holy Spirit reveals Him from the Scriptures.

Remember how it was, dear Christian, when you first came to the Lord? Jesus was everything! Your heart eyes were set on Him alone! He became your sole passion and your only goal in opening the Scriptures. Well, the goal has not changed. The goal is still Jesus. In Philippians 3, the apostle Paul wrote, "*I count all things but loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord.*" In Hebrews 12 we are told to "*fix our eyes on Jesus.*"

All Christians begin well. All Christians have seen the revelation of Christ from the Scriptures at least once resulting in their salvation, but many have been sidetracked and have stopped seeing Jesus. Their sole purpose in coming to the Bible is no longer to know the Lord. Many now come to the Bible to learn doctrine; or they come to the Bible to see prophecy, or the church, or the devil, or faith, or service, or gifts, or the marriage relationship, or Paul, or Moses.

Dear Christian, our Heavenly Father gave the Bible to reveal the Lord Jesus. This is its only purpose. Everything the Bible says about doctrine, or prophecy, or the church, or the

devil, or faith, etc. is designed to reveal Jesus. Everything the Bible says about anything is intended that we might grow in the grace and knowledge of Christ.

Dear fellow believer, may I encourage you. Do not settle for seeing the Lord in the Bible only once. If you know Him as Savior, press on to a fuller heart-knowledge of Him. Come to the Bible just to know Him. And as the Holy Spirit prepares you through life's circumstances, He will reveal more of Jesus to your heart.

I am not implying that we receive Jesus little by little. No. When we receive Jesus at salvation by faith, we receive all of Him, and now it is through developing faith whereby we grow in the knowledge of all He is.

The revelation of Christ in the Scriptures is endless. To know Him as Savior is just the beginning of a fulfilled life, now come to know Him as Friend, and as Provider, and as the Mediator of the New Covenant, and as the Lover of your soul, and as the One who comforts in sorrow, and as your Keeper, and as your Life, and as your Peace, and as your Joy, and as your All in All. On and on it goes! And the more you know Jesus, the more you will trust Him, and the more your relationship with Him will deepen.

How sad it is to become an expert on a vast array of Bible truth and yet in our heart be a stranger to God. We should not want to merely know *about* God. We should want to know God. How it must grieve the heart of our Heavenly Father to see many of His people so full of Bible truth yet missing sweet union with the One who is Truth!

It is no great mystery why Bible study has become boring to many. If we come to the Bible and center on anything but

Jesus, the Bible remains a closed book to us. But if we come to the Bible to see Jesus alone, our lives will echo the experience of the two disciples on the road to Emmaus as they were met by the resurrected Christ. In Luke 24:27 we read, "*Beginning with Moses and with all the prophets, He explained to them the things concerning Himself in all the Scriptures.*" What an amazing Bible study!

Jesus did not give those disciples eight reasons why evolution is ridiculous. He did not give them a time line concerning future events. He did not even give them a four point statement of doctrine on the truth of resurrection. He explained to them the things in the Scriptures concerning *Himself*! And later on, as these disciples testified of the event, they said, "*Were not our hearts burning within us while He was speaking to us on the road, while He was explaining the Scriptures to us?*"

Dear Christian, do not despair. Your heart can again become zealous beyond measure for the study of God's Word. Apply the key. Trust your Heavenly Father to make it your heart's only goal to know His dear Son. Place yourself in those environments where the knowledge of Christ is the supreme goal of Bible study. As you do, with the Spirit of God faithfully drawing, your heart will ignite once again in sweet devotion to a living Savior as He reveals more of Himself to you through His Word.

*O send Thy Spirit, Lord, now unto me,
That He may touch my eyes, and make me see;
Show me the truth concealed within Thy Word,
And in Thy Book revealed I see the Lord.*

- Mary A. Lathbury, 1841-1913

7 *All Things in Christ*

Dear Christian, is your life filled with all the blessings of God? Do you often pray for peace, or wisdom, or strength, and sometimes wonder how God might actually answer such prayers? Do you frequently feel that your Christian life is lacking something?

Many of God's dear children have these concerns. We often feel that in some way, our Christian lives are deficient of the blessings we read about in the Bible. We see verses such as Colossians 2:10, "*In Him you have been made complete.*" and when we do not feel complete, not wanting to question God's Word, we wonder what exactly is meant by such inspired statements.

For years I lived thinking that maybe I did not have enough faith to be fully blest of God, or that perhaps I did not know enough, or that possibly I was just not surrendered enough to experience God's fullness. All that has changed however, since the Lord has graciously opened my heart to one foundational truth from His Word, which may be expressed in these words: In Christ are all spiritual things.

In Psalm 28:7, King David wrote, "*The Lord is my strength.*" Notice, he did not write, the Lord gives me strength. The Lord does not give us strength, He is our strength! We see the same point in I Timothy 1:1, where the apostle Paul wrote, "*Jesus Christ, who is our hope.*" Hope, dear Christian, is not

something Jesus gives. Hope is who Jesus is.

In the Gospel of John, chapter 14, our Lord said, "*I am the way, the truth, and the life.*" He did not say, I provide the way, or I teach the truth, or I give life. The way, the truth, and the life are not things Jesus gives, they are who He is!

Now, although I could site many more verses, here is just one more. At the end of I Corinthians chapter one, we read, "*By His doing you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, and righteousness, and sanctification, and redemption.*" The Holy Spirit does not say that Jesus gives us wisdom and righteousness and sanctification and redemption, but that Jesus has become all of these things to us.

Now you might be thinking, "Wait a second, are there not verses in the Bible that also state that God gives us strength, and hope, and life, and all these things?" Yes there are! But the point the Holy Spirit is making is this: When God gives us spiritual things, He never gives them apart from His Son, rather He gives them by giving us His Son. I do not mean to confuse you, and may the Lord grace me to explain it clearly.

When God gives us life, for example, He gives us His Son, and having His Son we have life. And when God gives us salvation, He gives us His Son, and having His Son we have salvation. God does not give us His Son and then give us life and salvation in addition to His Son. He gives us His Son, and in having His Son, we have life and salvation.

It is the same with love, or joy, or peace, or hope, or strength, or any spiritual thing. These are not given by God apart from, or in addition to, His Son. They are things God gives by giving us His Son.

Romans 8:32 is a great summation of this truth. "*He who*

did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, how will He not also with Him freely give us all things?" God, the Father, has freely given us all things with Jesus! Colossians 1:19 and 3:11 reveal this truth as well. *"It was the Father's good pleasure for all the fullness to dwell in Him."* and *"Christ is all."*

In other words, Christ is God's everything. Everything God is and has is in Jesus. Everything that comes to us from God, comes to us in the person of Jesus Christ. In true Christianity, therefore, there are no spiritual things, there is only Jesus.

Dear Christian, do you see the wonder of such a truth? Since Jesus Christ is God's everything and we have Him, then we have all God longs to give us. And since we have Jesus, we have all spiritual things, because all spiritual things are in Him.

May the Holy Spirit open our eyes to this! Jesus is not the first of many gifts that God, the Father, gives us. He is the *only* gift that God, the Father, gives us; and with Jesus comes everything!

Ephesians 1:3 has greatly aided me in entering into all this. *"Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ who has blest us with all spiritual blessings in the heavenly places in Christ."* Notice, the Holy Spirit does not say that God *will* bless us with all spiritual blessings in Christ. He says that God *has* blessed us with all spiritual blessings in Christ. It is already done!

And He does not say that God has blessed us with *some* spiritual blessings in Christ. You and I and every Christian have been blessed with *all* spiritual blessings in Christ. One can not receive any more than all!

Dear believer, this fullness of blessing is not something that will become true for us if we pray more, or trust more, or become more committed to serving God. This is already true. It became true for you and I and every Christian on the day Jesus saved us. On that day, Jesus applied to our individual lives all the spiritual blessings He secured through His work at the cross. And being fully blessed in Christ will not become truer if we believe it. It is true whether we believe it or not. It is a fact!

At the moment we received Jesus, we received everything we will ever receive from God, except one thing - eyes to see it all! And it was this spiritual eyesight for which Paul prayed in his letter to the Ephesian Christians. *"I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened, so that you may know what is the hope of His calling, what are the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints, and what is the surpassing greatness of His power toward us who believe"* (Ephesians 1:18&19).

May the Holy Spirit open the eyes of our hearts to see the fullness that is ours in the person of Christ. If we have Jesus, dear Christian, we need not pray, or hope, or wish for more things from God, but simply appropriate by faith what He has already given.

Now why is this truth so important? It is because it reveals that true Christian living is not all wrapped up in acquiring spiritual things like peace, rest, love, strength and holiness; rather it is all wrapped up in a Person, and enjoying union with that Person. Christianity is relationship to Jesus, not relationship to things!

Too often we miss this. As Christians we have the Lord Jesus, and yet we ask the Father to give us more spiritual

things, as if Jesus is not enough. But, dear Christian, Jesus is more than enough!

May I therefore encourage you, do not ask for God to bless you as if you are lacking blessing. Rather, ask Him to open the eyes of your heart to see that you have been blessed with every spiritual blessing in Christ.

And do not ask God to provide for you as if you lack provision. In Philippians 4:19, did not our Lord say He would, "*supply all of your needs in Christ Jesus?*" That promise is for you, dear believer!

And do not ask God to guide you, as if He is not. Instead, ask Him to reveal to your heart the revelation of Christ as your Faithful Shepherd guiding you, "*in paths of righteousness for His name's sake*" as He promises in Psalm 23:3.

And do not ask the Father to keep you as if somehow the Lord's Prayer, "*Holy Father, keep them*" in John 17:11 is not enough. As a Christian, God the Father, in answer to His Son's prayer, *is* keeping you. Ask God to awaken your heart to live in the "keeping" assurance of such a precious reality!

Some may tell you that you need to secure the blessings of God by meeting certain conditions and requirements. Some may say that God will bless you only after you pray or give or serve, or surrender. Yes, we are to pray and give and serve and surrender, but God's blessing in our lives is not based upon our doing spiritual things. God's blessing is entirely based upon what Jesus did for us at the cross.

The Christian life, dear believer, is not a pursuit of spiritual blessings; it is a pursuit of Christ. May the Holy Spirit work within our hearts that we may come to see that all we need we have in our Savior.

And as our gracious Heavenly Father does this for His Son and we who are in His Son, it will increasingly become a delight for our hearts, as we behold our prayers of requests turn into prayers of thanksgiving!

*Thou, Lord, alone, art all Thy children need,
And there is none beside;
From Thee the streams of blessedness proceed
In Thee the blest abide,
Fountain of life, and all-abounding grace,
Our source, our center, and our dwelling-place.*

- Jeanne Marie Motte-Guyon, 1648-1717

8 *Knowing the Will of God*

Dear Christian, are you living in the center of God's perfect will? If you are not sure, maybe the problem is not you, but what you believe about knowing God's will.

There are exceptions of course, but nearly all true believers want to obey God and follow His will, but many of God's children often struggle in their attempt to discern God's will.

There is an approach to learning the will of God that has become quite common among Christians. Simply stated, this approach encourages Christians to embark on a quest to find God's will. "Do you want to know God's will for your life?" it asks. "Are you faced with some important decision in life and you want to know God's will in the matter? Then here is what you need to do."

First, (they say) "Pray! Ask God to guide you." Second, "Surrender to God, because God will not reveal His will to you unless you are willing to obey it." Third, "Study the Bible to see if God has anything to say in it concerning your particular situation." Fourth, "Look for circumstances to fall into place." (This point usually comes with a warning, because some say the devil can use circumstances to deceive you.) Fifth, "Look for the peace that passes all understanding." (It is said that if something is God's will, you will have peace about your decision.)

Dear Christian, does any of this sound familiar? Is this not

the common approach to finding God's will that is proclaimed in our day?

Now depending on your background, or the group with which you fellowship, there are two more ideas usually brought into this discussion. One is referred to as "The still small voice." Some say that God directs His people with an inner voice; a voice that is not heard with your ears, but rather, heard from within.

Also, some bring in what they call, "Laying out a fleece before God." This is taken from the Old Testament story of Gideon. Gideon wanted to know if it was God's will for his army to attack the enemy. He took the skin of a lamb, put in on the ground, and in so many words, said to the Lord, "If You want me to attack the enemy, overnight make the ground dry and the fleece wet with dew." The next night, he reversed it and said, "Lord, make the ground wet with dew and let the fleece remain dry."

God honored Gideon's requests, and each morning it was as Gideon asked. Basically the fleece is a sign. Those who lay out a fleece are looking for a sign from God. For example: "Lord, if you want me to marry this person, have her bring it up tonight over dinner, then I will know You want me to marry her." That is a fleece before God.

Give or take a few ideas, this is basically the modern day approach to finding God's will, and perhaps you have used some of these ideas, perhaps you have used them all! But a constant concern many believers have with these ideas is that, in the end, even though they believed God may have led them through these methods, they were still not certain. Even though they may have stepped out in confidence in certain situations,

still deep down in their hearts they were not totally sure about God's will. For many, these methods seem to be just too indefinite and vague. They read Gideon's entire story and learn that even after God gave him those signs, he was still unsure concerning God's will. The fleece may have fulfilled other needs, but it really did not help Gideon to be sure about the will of God.

And when it comes to the "still small voice" many ask questions like: "How do I know the difference between the Holy Spirit's voice, the devil's voice, and my own voice? How can I really be sure?" They question what it means to sense the peace that passes all understanding, and how this peace is different from just regular good feelings. They question how to know when favorable circumstances are coming from the Lord to guide them, or from the devil to trip them up.

Dear Christian, have you ever asked these questions? Do you sense the uncertainty and doubt that is often caused by following this common approach to finding God's will? Is there anything clear in God's Word concerning how to know God's will for your life?

There is in Romans 8:28, 29. *"And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose. For whom He foreknew, He also, predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the first-born among many brethren."* In these amazing verses, the Lord is saying that He is using all things that come into our lives to make us more Christ-like. That is the goal toward which all things are working in our lives - to conform us to the image of Jesus Christ.

This is God's will for every Christian. God wants each of His children changed; transformed into the image of His dear Son, as Jesus lives in them and through them.

Add that to what we read in the verses that come just before it. Romans 8:26, 27 states, *"And in the same way the Spirit also helps our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we should, but the Spirit Himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words; and He who searches the hearts knows what the mind of the Spirit is, because He intercedes for the saints according to the will of God."*

Now, although it is true, that because we do not fully know the mind of God, we do not know how to pray as we should about anything, but there is one specific thing in these verses that God has in mind. There is something, He says, which we really miss when it comes to prayer, and that is the will of God. When it comes to the will of God, God says, "Christians, do not know how to pray as they should." So, we read in this verse, that the Holy Spirit is praying for us, and He is praying in regard to the will of God, that the will of God will be done in our lives.

Put it all together, and this is what the passage is teaching: In Romans 8:26, 27, we see that the Holy Spirit is praying for us, and the content of His prayer is that the will of God may be done in our lives. In Romans 8:28, 29 we find the Father's answer to the Holy Spirit's prayer. And the Father's answer is a resounding, "Yes!" He says, "All things will work together for good to those who love Me, to those who are called according to My purpose, which is to be conformed to the image of My Son."

In my own words, here is our Father's answer to the Holy

Spirit's prayer: "Holy Spirit, you have prayed for them to have My will done in their lives, and I promise you that My will, will be done in their lives. My will is to make them like Jesus, and I will see to it that everything in their lives work together to accomplish this for them."

What a tremendous truth this is! It is a truth that can revolutionize your entire Christian life! The truth is this: As God's children, we never have to hunt for the will of God. If you are in love with Jesus, and in your heart you want what God wants for your life, God's will is guaranteed in your life! And as a result, all things are working together in your life that the will of God will be done, which is, that you be conformed to the image of Jesus! Therefore, Christians never have to seek the will of God as a goal, not as long as God is working all things together to make them more like Jesus.

This is the truth of the Bible: that if we have the Guide, we will surely have His guidance. Nowhere in the Bible do we ever see the encouragement to find God's will as if it is hidden from us. God does not play a little game of hide and seek with His children concerning His will. The fact is, the Lord wants us to live in His will more than we want to live in His will!

But no Christian ever ends up in God's will by hunting for it. We end up in God's will by centering our heart on the Lord, and as we do, He guides us in His will. The secret of knowing God's will, is knowing God! This is the Bible's emphasis.

In Proverbs 3:5, 6, we read, "*Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge Him and He will make your paths straight.*" In Psalm 32:8, God said, "*I will guide you with My eye upon you.*"

The Lord does not say that to have Him guide us, we must first pray, and then fast, and then listen for a still small voice, and then look for special peace in our hearts, and then ask Him for a sign. No! God's guidance is unconditional in a Christian's life. It is part of the blessing of being His child. It is a portion of the wonderful salvation we have in Christ.

What joy and rest comes to the believer when he or she takes their eyes off the will of God and puts them on the God whose will it is! There is a sweet release of the soul when we stop seeking after guidance and simply begin to trust in the Guide who has promised to lead us. As Christians, we really do not need more guidance from God, what we need is our eyes opened to the truth that God is guiding us all the time even though we may not always see Him guiding us.

Some might say, "Well, this is all well and good, but is it practical? When I am faced with an important decision that is going to affect my life for years to come, what do I do? How can I make those decisions in the will of God?" Well, God has never said that we could not *use* our own understanding; He has just said not to *lean* upon our own understanding.

We can use our understanding. And as we go through life pursuing a greater heart union with Jesus, it is His will that we make intelligent decisions; that we study the pros and cons in things and then make sensible choices. And as we do, we can know for certain that behind the scenes, God is at work guiding us, and using all of life to conform us to the image of His Son.

In Psalm 37:4 the Holy Spirit addressed this issue, He said, "*Delight yourself in the Lord and He will give you the desires of your heart.*" That does not mean if you delight in the Lord

He will give you whatever you want. It means as you seek the Lord and delight in Him, you can be assured that the desires you have in your heart have been placed there by God Himself. Not sinful desires; they do not come from the Lord, but if, for example, in your relationship to Jesus, you desire to move to a different residence. Once you have worked out all the details; once you have done all the research, if that is still your desire, then move! And move trusting in the fact that God is guiding you, like He said He would. God guides us through our heart desires. As believers, we can make decisions in life based on our desires, knowing that our desires come from the Lord.

Christians always seem to place much emphasis on location and vocation. They often ask, "Where does God want me to live, and what does God want me to do for a living?" Understand dear believer, that those things do not affect the will of God for your life, which is to make you like Jesus. Whether we decide to become farmers, or bakers, or teachers; whether we decide to live in Chicago, or Madrid, or London, as long as we are doing honest work, as long as we are progressing in the heart knowledge of God through the study of His Word, God's will (to make us like Jesus) will not be affected.

The Lord can conform us to His image whether we are farmers, or bakers, or teachers; living in Chicago, Madrid, or London. We need not hassle ourselves over these decisions. All we need to do is use our brain, and make the best decisions we can, and do what we want to do and live where we want to live, and love God in all things, knowing that He is leading us because He has promised to.

Many times, as we are in the process of making these decisions, it will seem like we are all alone. It will seem like the

decisions we make have been all up to us, but we know better! We know God is behind the scenes of our lives, guiding, overruling, and rearranging our likes and dislikes. In reality, God only has one will for our lives, not two or three or four, only one: to conform us to His image. And when our heart is set on Him, we never need fear missing His will.

If you were God and one of your children said, "Lord, with all my heart I want to do what You want me to do." Would you let your child fall into a hole? Never! Let's say one day a little boy came up to his father and said, "Daddy, I want to do your will, and then went into his bedroom and cleaned it up. The father might then say, "That is great son! That is what I want you to do. I am happy when you keep your room clean. That is my will!"

But what if this same child walked into the room where his father was, opened a window and started to crawl out. The father would not allow his son to fall out the window, be hurt and then say, "No, my son that was not my will." Any responsible father would run to the son and stop him from falling. Well, God loves you, dear Christian. He will not let you get hurt in your attempt to please Him in all you do.

Now, in the Bible, we have many general principles given to us concerning God's will, and as believers we ought to learn and follow those principles by the enabling grace of God. We know, for example, that the unequal yoke does not please God. We know about a Christian's responsibility to support his or her family. From God's Word, we know not to be lazy and not to steal. We know not to ask God if it is His will to cheat on our income tax. God's Word teaches us it is never His will for us to cheat or lie. From the Bible, we know to avoid every appear-

ance of evil.

In the Bible, we have general things as to the will of God for our lives. God, for example, is not going to lead us to rob a bank. That is sin, and God will never lead us to sin.

But when it comes to those things that the Bible does not say anything about; when it comes to those things that are not in themselves sinful, like: which car to buy, or what house to own, or what college to attend, or what job to take; as we seek the Lord, He will guide us.

And in most cases, we will never see the Lord's guidance as He guides us through our likes and dislikes, and the engineering of our circumstances. But we can know for sure, that if we are Christians desiring to please the Lord, He is guiding us. He is working to conform us to the image of His Son, (His ultimate will for our lives.) And He will use all the decisions in our lives to accomplish this, even (Praise God!) our wrong and stupid decisions. Now of course, we would be fools to seek after wrong decisions, but our God is faithful, and He can be trusted in all things.

But dear Christian, please do not be like those who will not believe God is guiding them unless they see it or sense it. God has called us to life by faith, not sight.

In conclusion, a Christian who is seeking the face of Christ, to know Him more through His Word, is never in any danger of missing God's will. Not because Christians are so wonderful, but because God is so faithful!

So may I encourage you, dear Christian; do not seek the will of God, as if it is in some way hidden from you. Do not pray for God's will to be done in your life as if it is not being done. Simply seek a greater heart knowledge of Christ through

His Word. The Bible is clear on this: guidance is promised to all of God's children simply because they are His children.

May the Lord give us eyes to see this wonderful truth, and come to know Him as our Faithful Guide!

*Let Him lead thee blindfold onwards,
Love needs not to know;
Children whom the Father leadeth
Ask not where they go.
Though the path be all unknown,
Over moors and mountains lone.*

*Give no ear to reason's questions;
Let the blind man hold
That the sun is but a fable
Men believed of old.
At the breast the babe will grow;
Whence the milk he need not know.*

- Gerhard Tersteegen, 1697-1769

9 *God's Purpose for Faith*

Dear Christian, if I have faith, will God calm all the storms of my life? Did God give me faith that I might trust Him for things like a better job, or improved health, or safety in dangerous situations? What exactly is God's purpose for faith in my life?

If you are confused when it comes to faith, you are not alone! Many of God's people ask these same questions. They have heard that blessings from God can be purchased by using faith as heaven's money and they wonder how this faith works in prayer when they see God heal some and not others.

They have come before the Lord truly believing that He would grant a specific request, and when He did not, the experience left them bewildered and discouraged. Faith has become a very confusing thing for many.

But dear Christian, it need not be this way. Faith is not as mysterious as some think. In the Bible, God has given us many clear principles as to how faith functions, and the Holy Spirit longs to teach us these principles, that we might come to truly enjoy life in union with Christ.

From Scripture we learn that faith is a gift from God. Romans 12:3 states, "*God has allotted to each a measure of faith.*" Ephesians 6:23 adds, "*Peace be to the brethren and love with faith from God the Father.*" Faith is nothing we have to create within us; it comes to us as a wonderful gift from a

gracious God! This gift of faith is the vehicle whereby God links physical beings, you and I, with His spiritual world; so that with faith we might come to embrace things eternal.

In order for mankind to relate to the physical world, God has given five senses: sight, smell, hearing, taste, and touch. And although these senses work well for life on earth, they fall short when it comes to relating to the world of spiritual things.

For our spiritual life we need another sense, and this is what the Bible calls faith. By faith we lay hold of God. We cannot do that with our hands. By faith, we understand eternal truth. We cannot do that with our minds alone. It is God's gift of faith that opens up to us the whole world of heavenly things. Some think faith is blind, but the opposite is true. Faith sees better than 20/20. With faith we see what our physical eyes cannot. Faith is actually an advancement on sight because with the eyes of faith, we can even see God!

In the eleventh chapter of the book of Hebrews this truth is developed in a wonderful way. Many times in that great passage on faith, we see the phrase, *"things not seen."* In verse one we read, *"Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen."*

In verse seven we learn that by faith dear Noah was, *"warned by God about things not yet seen."* Verse eight tells us that our father Abraham went out by faith, not knowing where he was going, *"looking for the city whose builder is God."* He went out when his destination was not yet seen. Verse twenty-seven refers to Moses, *"as seeing Him who is unseen."*

This is God's purpose for faith, dear believer. God has given us faith that with it we might relate to *"things not seen"* that

is, spiritual things. This is faith's realm, not things visible or earthly, but things invisible and heavenly!

Whenever we stray from the Bible we end up in trouble. This is particularly true when it comes to faith. And confusion comes into our lives whenever we try to use faith as a means of gaining earthly, visible things, because that is not why God has given us faith.

Let me illustrate. Bible faith is not as much concerned about God providing a better job, as it is about doing the job I now have unto the glory of Christ. Real faith is not so much interested in having more money, as it is in living content with what God is presently providing. What is important to faith is not, "Will God heal my affliction?" but, "Will I love God with all my heart regardless of my health?"

Heavenly concerns occupy faith's interest, not worldly concerns. What is important to faith are things like pursuing a greater heart knowledge of Christ through Bible study, and trusting God for a holy, thankful life, and living in a spirit of service to the Lord in all things. These are the things, dear Christian, that are important to faith.

Now some, often for selfish gain, twist the words of God, declaring that with faith we can obtain physical things from Him. They teach that in Hebrews chapter eleven, the words, "*things not seen*" and "*things hoped for*" refer to physical things that we do not presently have but can gain with faith.

But dear Christian, the context of the chapter clearly does not allow that interpretation. In this chapter, the Holy Spirit is referring to specific subjects, namely future rewards after death, (see vss.13 & 16) and present relationship with Christ (see vs. 27). When we read about, "*the assurance of things*

hoped for and the conviction of things not seen" it is referring to union with Christ. This is why God has given us faith, that we might enjoy an intimate and constant relationship with Jesus in life and in death!

Dear Christian, do not be deceived. It is not faith to trust God for a better job, or improved health, or deliverance from this world's dangers. These are not the concerns that matter to Bible faith. Trusting God for earthly things may sound spiritual, but it is presuming upon the faithfulness of God. Spiritual things matter to faith, not earthly, visible things.

In the book of Colossians chapter three, we see the real heart outworkings of faith. *"If then you have been raised up with Christ, keep seeking the things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. Set your mind on things above, not on the things that are on the earth."*

Our Heavenly Father graciously provides for our needs, but know for sure dear believer, that God's provision in our lives is never the result of our faith. It is always the result of His faithfulness. In other words, God does not provide because we have faith; He provides because He is our loving Father.

I am so glad that our Lord has clarified the proper use of faith in the Christian life. Faith, according to the Bible, goes after spiritual things, namely God Himself, and eternal life with God.

All throughout Hebrews eleven we read of amazing things that God's people did by faith. It says by faith they *"conquered kingdoms, performed acts of righteousness, obtained promises, shut the mouths of lions, quenched the power of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, became mighty in war"* (vs. 33-34).

But we also read, in the same chapter, that the people

of God *“were tortured not accepting their release, in order that they might receive a better resurrection; and others experienced mockings and scourgings, yes, also chains and imprisonment. They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were tempted, they were put to death with the sword; they went about in sheepskins and goatskins, being destitute, afflicted, ill-treated, wandering in deserts and mountains and caves and holes in the ground”* (vs. 35-38).

By faith they did those things! By faith they were murdered and tortured! By faith they were destitute! By faith they were enabled to love God even when He did not deliver them from the sword. Some might say “If they had faith God would have rescued them from those afflictions and trials.” But the Scripture says they did trust God! They did live by faith!

Dear Christian, faith does not guarantee that our lives are going to be free from tribulation. Living by faith does not mean trusting God for earthly comforts, because that is not what faith is for! Faith is for our pursuit of heavenly things. Faith actually pursues only *one* thing, and that is an intimate, progressive union with The Lord Jesus.

The Bible is full of people who trusted in the Lord. For some that meant they saw mighty miracles; for others that meant they saw no miracles. But all, because they lived by faith, had only one concern on their heart: the pursuit of God!

In Hebrews chapter ten we see this wonderful statement, *“They accepted joyfully the seizure of their property.”* Someone stole from them and their attitude was, “So what!” How could this be? How could they accept the taking of their property with joy? They could because they lived by faith. By faith they knew that all physical earthly things are only tempo-

ral and passing away, and therefore not worthy of their heart's devotion. They knew the real treasures in life are heavenly, not earthly.

It is not that a Christian living by faith will ignore earthly responsibilities or seek to separate himself from all that is material. No! Christians living by faith will use their five senses to relate to this world, but they will use their faith as God has designed, to relate to things unseen.

Dear Christian, God wants us to live by faith, but faith is not designed by God to get all the earthly comforts and deliverances we think we need. Faith enjoys the deliverances of God, but it also loves Him when He does not deliver, because a Christian living by faith will always put God's will above his own will. Perhaps, the greatest declaration of faith is found in the words of our Savior - "*Not my will, but Thine be done.*"

True faith, dear believer, does not try to twist God's arm into getting what it wants. Faith never dictates to God as to what He should do and when He should do it. Surely, faith claims all the promises of God, but it leaves the fulfillment of those promises to Him alone, trusting in His love and His wisdom.

Live by faith, dear Christian, trust God in all things, but use faith as God has intended, not for earthly interests, or the pursuit of things seen, but for the pursuit of Christ alone!

Once it was the blessing, now it is the Lord;

Once it was the feeling, now it is His Word;

Once His gifts I wanted, now the Giver own;

Once I sought for healing, now Himself alone.

- A.B. Simpson, 1843-1919

10 Fellowship with God

Dear Christian, are you living in fellowship with God? Does your sin seem to take you out of fellowship with Him on a daily basis? Is there a longing in your heart to live in continual communion with the Lord?

For years my Christian life was adversely affected by a popular misconception concerning fellowship with God. I was taught that every time I sinned, it put me out of fellowship with the Lord. This belief brought tremendous uncertainty into my life. It caused me to doubt from day to day, even from hour to hour, whether I was in fellowship or out of fellowship with the Savior.

Eventually, I began to ask questions such as: If sin puts me out of fellowship with God, what happens when I am unaware of my transgressions? And am I doomed to remain out of fellowship with the Lord until the time I discover and confess my sin?

Also, it seemed as if there was never a moment in my life when I could look into my heart and not find sin. There always seemed to be in me some thought, motive, attitude, or action that was displeasing to God. The apostle Paul confirmed this in Romans 7:18, when he wrote, "*For I know that nothing good dwells in me.*"

God commands us to love Him, not with most of our heart, mind, soul, and body, or with the overwhelming majority of

our heart, mind, soul, and body, but with *all* of our heart, mind, soul, and body. Can anyone love God that way? Well, if we are not obeying that command - to love God with all our being, all the time - is that not sin? And if sin takes us out of fellowship, then are we not always out of fellowship with God?

There is no end to the sin within us simply because we are not perfect. We are either lazy, or impatient, or proud, or lustful, or self-centered. At any moment in our lives, if we look into our hearts we will find sin.

So, trace it out logically with me, dear believer. Since we can always find sin in our hearts, and if sin always takes us out of fellowship, than are we not always out of fellowship with our God? And if we needed to confess every time we sinned in order to get back in fellowship with God, then all we would be doing in our lives is confessing sin. There would never be a time when we could enjoy fellowship with the Savior.

I have found that many of God's dear children are living before the Lord as if they are walking on eggshells, fearful that if they do not remember a sin or fail to confess a sin, they could be living in broken fellowship with God and not even be aware of it. For many, their union with God is in constant suspect.

They sin, and according to this thinking, they go out of fellowship; they confess and they get back in fellowship. They sin again and get out; they confess again and get back in. Is this the life for which God has saved us, continually going in and out of fellowship with Him? The Bible must teach something else, dear Christian, and I believe it does.

As I understand God's Word, it is not sin, but *rebellion* that takes God's people out of fellowship with Him. I am not

playing with words. The difference between sin and rebellion is clearly marked in the Bible. In the Book of First John, the Holy Spirit explains this difference with two expressions. The first is: "*walking in the light*" and the second is: "*walking in the darkness*." It is in these expressions and the truths they communicate, that we find the answers to the questions I have raised.

I John 1:6, 7 states, "*If we say that we have fellowship with Him and yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth; but if we walk in the light as He Himself is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus His Son cleanses us from all sin.*" I once thought that walking in the light meant we do not sin, but it can not mean that. If walking in the light meant to walk perfectly, then we would not need the cleansing I John 1:7 mentions.

In these verses, God is saying, "Walk in the light, dear Christian, and you will have fellowship with Me. And as you walk in the light, the blood of My Son will cleanse you from your sin; that is, the sin you commit as you walk in the light." Walking in the light does not mean living a sinless life. It actually means to walk *imperfectly* in the light. And walking imperfectly in the light is the best any Christian can experience this side of heaven.

Now, what does it mean to walk in the light as Jesus is in the light? Based on the entire first chapter of I John, it simply means to live according to the personal knowledge of the Savior we have been given. For example: when, from the Scriptures, and based upon the wisdom of God according to our need, the Holy Spirit illumines our hearts to the revelation of Jesus as our Faithful Guide, and we see Jesus in that light,

we will be free to fully trust Him as our guide, casting down all fear regarding our future path.

Or, when, from the Bible, and based on the wisdom of God according to our need, the Spirit reveals Jesus to our hearts as the Shepherd, we will be free to live in the confidence that Jesus will provide for all of our needs, setting us free from worry and anxiety. This is walking in the light as Jesus is in the light. It simply means to grow in the transforming Spirit-revelation of Christ through our study of the Bible.

I am not implying that we receive Jesus little by little. No. When we receive Jesus, we receive all of Him. But because Jesus is so glorious and our capacities so limited, the Holy Spirit must *progressively* open our heart-eyes to the fullness of our Savior. And as He does, and we walk according to our knowledge of Him, the blood of Jesus cleanses us from all sin. And this cleansing is automatic!

We do not have to confess our sin to enjoy this cleansing. I John 1:7 does not say, "If we confess, the blood of Jesus cleanses us from all sin." It says, "*If we walk in the light as He is in the light, the blood of Jesus cleanses us from all sin.*"

When do we need to confess our sin according to I John 1:9? We need to confess our sin when we rebel against the light, that is, when we say, "no" to what we have been shown of Jesus. We enter darkness and lose fellowship with God when we deliberately turn our backs on His clear will, as revealed in the Scriptures. This is when we need to confess our sin, so that we may again walk in the light where our sin is dealt with automatically.

Now, how often in our lives will we leave the light, walk in darkness, and need to confess our sin? I hope not too often. I

pray you do not make a habit of deliberately rejecting what you clearly know about Jesus and His revealed will in the Bible.

In II Samuel, when Nathan the prophet spoke to King David in regard to his sin with Bathsheba, Nathan said, "*You have despised the word of the Lord.*" This is walking in darkness, and it is not characteristic of Christian behavior. It may happen, of course, when and if we take our eyes off the Savior, but it is not the norm for the Christian. The Christian norm is desiring God's will, not despising it.

Today, if the main direction of your life is toward the Lord; that is, to the best of your understanding and knowledge of the Savior, you are saying, "yes" to God's will, you are walking in the light as Jesus is in the light.

Rejoice, dear Christian, for it is the Lord, in grace, who has brought you to such a glorious condition! And in that condition rejoice that the blood of Jesus is continually cleansing you from all sin, even apart from your awareness, enabling you to enjoy life-sustaining fellowship with Him, every moment of every day.

I am not making light of sin. I am making much of the blood of Jesus! Though we deserve to spend eternity in hell because of our sin, through the Lord's sacrifice at Calvary, we may enjoy a cleansed life; a life removed from all condemnation in unbroken union with Jesus, separated from our sins even as far as the east is from the west.

May I encourage you, dear Christian, be Christ-centered not sin-centered. If it were up to us to find and confess our sin in order to stay in fellowship with God, we would never live a moment in fellowship with Him. What keeps us in fellowship is not our up-to-the-moment confession, but the precious blood

of Jesus Christ! Hebrews 10:19 says, "*We have confidence to enter the holy place by the blood of Jesus.*" Place your confidence, fellow believer, in Christ's blood, not your confession of sin.

You do not need to confess every time you sin, fearful that with each sin you will go out of fellowship with God. But you do need the blood of Jesus every time you sin.

And if you should sin while walking in the light, bow your heart in boundless thanksgiving for the deliverance from sin that God has granted you, remembering that you have, "*an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous, who is the satisfaction for our sins*" (I John 2:1,2).

*The value of His Blood cannot be counted;
The praises for His Blood, can but begin;
Eternity alone, will be the measure;
Of what it cost to cleanse the stain of sin!*

- Edward P. Miller

11 *Serving God*

Dear Christian, are you growing weary in your service to the Lord? Do you view personal evangelism as a dreaded, but necessary chore? Do you wonder if your service to the Lord is truly fruitful?

Desiring to be the kind of laborers in the Lord's vineyard that will glorify Christ and bring honor to His name, many of God's people have considered these questions. A constant prayer on our hearts is that the Lord may use us through which to bring others into His kingdom, as well as foster spiritual maturity in His body, the Church.

But sometimes, in our desire to be profitable servants, our hearts are plagued with concerns such as: Is my Christian service truly born of the Holy Spirit, which leads to enduring fruit unto God, or is my service self-produced from the flesh, which cannot yield anything of spiritual worth?

In my life, it was the study of John chapter 15 that prompted these concerns. In verse 5, our Lord said, "*Apart from Me you can do nothing.*" In this verse, the Lord is not implying that His people can do absolutely nothing apart from Him. His point is: all we do apart from Him, He counts as nothing; spiritually, that is, it has no worth.

The saints at Ephesus in Revelation chapter 2 were engaged in many acts of service, yet at the same time, they were, in the words of our Savior, in a "*fallen*" condition having "*left their*

first love."

These are sobering statements for the believer who seeks to serve the Lord without reservation. As Christians, we can build large ministries. We can work with constant zeal and devotion, sacrificing everything, but if it all stems from us and not the Lord, if it all can be traced back to our efforts and not His, if it is based on what we want and not God's will, then according to Christ, it will have no spiritual value. How do we truly know, dear believer, how can we know, if our service to Christ is genuine, or if our labor is all in vain?

There are two foundational principles from II Corinthians 2:14-16 which the Lord has used to settle my heart on this matter. *"But thanks be to God, who always leads us in His triumph in Christ, and manifests through us the sweet aroma of the knowledge of Him in every place. For we are a fragrance of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing; to the one an aroma from death to death, to the other an aroma from life to life. And who is adequate for these things? For we are not like many peddling the word of God, but as from sincerity, but as from the Lord, we speak in Christ in the sight of God."*

In the Bible, we see wonderful depictions of the Lord's people. In the Gospels, believers are pictured as salt. In Psalm One, they are pictured as trees planted beside rivers of water. In the Book of Revelation, they are represented in the New Jerusalem.

Here in II Corinthians, believers are pictured as perfume dispensers. Notice in the passage that there is a sweet aroma emanating from the lives of those trusting in Christ. But also notice that believers are not the source of the aroma. The words,

"through us" indicate that believers are only the vessels that hold the fragrance. The aroma being released from the lives of those who trust Him is the knowledge of Christ, Himself.

The first foundational principle revealed in this passage concerning service to the Lord is this: When believers fill their hearts with the knowledge of Jesus, a testimony of Him spontaneously issues forth from their lives. In other words, cherished union with the Savior always creates a spiritual aroma of Him that radiates through us. This truly takes all the fleshly strain and struggle out of ministry.

Is it possible, dear believer, that to become a faithful witness of the Gospel of Christ to a lost and dying world and serve those who already know the Savior, we need only to focus on just one thing: growing in the grace and knowledge of our Lord? Yes, it is amazingly true! This is God's method of evangelism, as well as all ministry! As we saturate our lives with Jesus, enjoying union with Him, He reveals Himself through us to others.

I love the words, *"in every place"* in verse 14. When the only goal of our Christian lives is to enjoy an intimate, progressive union with Jesus, we never have to question how God is using us or if God is using us. When we are pursuing Christ, (O blessed truth!) there is never a moment when we are not a testimony unto Him. Continually, everywhere we go, whether we are aware of it or not, the Lord causes others to spiritually perceive His presence in our lives.

Some sense His presence and respond positively, resulting in life. Others respond negatively, resulting in death. But in either case, the Lord presents Himself through us, not because we are faithful to serve Him, (although we should be faithful),

but because *He* is faithful to be the Author and Finisher of Faith in the lives of all who turn to Him.

The second foundational principle from II Corinthians chapter 2 is this: True service is directed toward God, not man. Notice, in the passage, that the aroma of Christ coming from our lives is not first noticed by those around us. One would think that would be the case, but this is a secondary effect. The first to recognize and enjoy the aroma of Christ in our lives is the Father Himself. "*We are a fragrance of Christ to God among men.*" The order - to God among men - is the Holy Spirit's divine order of Christian service.

This stands in stark contrast to what we often hear today. Many direct their efforts toward meeting the spiritual needs of others in their attempt to serve God. How this frustrates the purposes of God in our lives! There is no doubt that when we fill our hearts with Christ, the fragrance of Him in our lives will minister to others, but our service ought not to be for the purpose of ministering to others, but to bring pleasure to the heart of Christ. The aroma of Christ in our lives is not primarily for people, but for our Heavenly Father, that His heart might be satisfied. This Christ-centered direction of ministry lies at the heart of all true Christian service.

A wonderful example in the Scriptures is Mary, the woman who poured that very costly perfume on the Lord Jesus. Some were calling what Mary did a waste. They thought the perfume should have been sold and the money given to meet needs. But in Mark chapter 14, our Lord said, "*Let her alone; why do you bother her? She has done a good deed to Me.*"

Service, if it is to be genuine and fruitful, must be solely directed toward the Lord. The world, and those who live by the

principles of the world, may call it a waste, but if the Lord is pleased, if it is done unto Him, it is precious in His eyes, and He will use it to minister unto the needs of others. Of Mary, our Lord said, *"Wherever the gospel is preached in the whole world, that also which this woman has done shall be spoken in memory of her."*

Countless numbers of God's people down through the years have been ministered unto by what Mary did, but it was not Mary's intention to make it into the pages of our Bibles and have her story minister to others. Her goal was not to reach as many people as possible with her story. Nor did she seek to become known as a great servant of the Lord. Her goal was simply to minister to the heart of Jesus. Her service was directed toward Him, for His eyes only, to please Him. This is what true Christian service is all about.

In Acts 17, through the apostle Paul, the Holy Spirit wrote, *"The God who made the world and all things in it, since He is Lord of heaven and earth, does not dwell in temples made with hands; neither is He served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since He Himself gives to all life and breath and all things."*

In this tremendous passage we learn that serving God is not ministering to a need we think He has, because He has no needs; He is self-sufficient. Serving God is ministering to His heart, simply to please Him. God, in grace, may use us to minister to others, but He does not need us.

Mary was a true servant of the Lord, but she did not become a servant by serving. According to Luke chapter 10, she was *transformed* into a servant. In that chapter we see Mary's sister, Martha having a terrible time serving Christ. She was, as

Jesus said, "*Worried and bothered about so many things.*" She was distracted, critical of Mary, and even critical of the Lord, having charged Him with being uncaring. Martha had a hard time serving the Lord because she had not yet been made into a servant by the Lord. Nothing is more frustrating to the Christian than trying to become a servant by serving. No one truly serves the Lord by trying to serve Him.

Mary, however, had learned the secret of service. In the same chapter we read: "*Mary, who moreover was listening to the Lord's word, seated at His feet.*" Martha struggled with service, but it was no struggle for Mary when she anointed Jesus with her perfume. It was Mary's joy to serve the Lord in that way because Jesus had transformed her into a servant while she sat at His feet growing in her knowledge of Him. This is the place where God's people truly become servants.

May I encourage you, dear believer, serving Jesus is never a struggle for those who have been transformed by the Lord into servants. Rather than seeking after ministry, let us seek after the Heavenly Minister, and rest in Him to minister to others through us.

The Lord rejoices over us when our service is directed solely unto Him and springs forth from His life within. May we rejoice in the truth, that there is one thing necessary in becoming true servants of the Lord, and that is filling our lives with the heart knowledge of Him.

Ministry, at its core, including evangelism, is not our outreach; it is the Lord's overflow. May we learn to take our place as perfume dispensers and fill up our lives with the aroma of the knowledge of the Lord, that all the ends of the earth may know Him.

12 The Foundation of Marriage

Dear Christian husbands and wives, do you find yourselves struggling unsuccessfully to make your marriage work? Are you frustrated having listened to much counsel on marriage only to find it shallow and lacking any real long-term solutions? Are you aware of the Bible's one indispensable key to a marriage that honors the Lord?

Generally, when the Bible's teaching on marriage is considered, God's people will turn to the Book of Ephesians, and starting in chapter five, verse twenty-two, they will list from that wonderful passage characteristics of a godly husband and a godly wife.

Then exploring as many present day applications as possible, Christians will often be admonished to become more like the husband and wife of which they read. Central to the church's present day understanding of marriage is this approach to Ephesians chapter five.

But dear Christians, would it surprise you to learn that although the husband and wife relationship is indeed a part of Ephesians chapter five, it is not the Holy Spirit's main point in the passage? In fact, by centering on marriage, many often miss the Holy Spirit's primary reason for giving this wonderful passage.

I know it may sound odd to consider that something else other than marriage is the main message of Ephesians chapter

five, but in this passage the Holy Spirit is using marriage only as an illustration in order to teach a spiritual truth. Marriage is not the main point; it is the illustration of the main point.

Just like in the Gospel parable when Jesus said, "*Behold, a sower went out to sow*" no one would say that the main point of that parable is sowing seed. Sowing seed is the illustration. The main point has to do with something spiritual, which is the sowing of God's Word.

It is the same kind of thing in Ephesians chapter five. Marriage is not the main point of the passage, but only that which the Holy Spirit uses to picture the main point.

What then is the main point? Verse thirty-two of chapter five reveals it; and it presents the Lord's key to all successful marriage relationships. Paul, by the Holy Spirit, writes, "*This mystery is great; but I am speaking with reference to Christ and the church.*" In context, the mystery mentioned is God's miraculous joining of a man and a woman; how two can become one. That union is a glorious mystery, but it is not, according to Paul's own words, what the passage is all about.

Rather than speaking with reference to the union between a man and a woman, he clearly states that in this passage, he is speaking about the union between Christ and the church. The whole point of this passage centers not on marriage, but on the believer's relationship with Christ.

Now in the last verse of Ephesians chapter five Paul writes, "*Nevertheless let each individual among you love his own wife even as himself; and let the wife see to it that she respect her husband.*" As if to say, "Yes, there is application in this passage to marriage and we can learn about marriage from this passage, but marriage is not the main point."

Now why is that? Why is the goal of this passage to teach us about our union with Christ and not marriage? In other words, why have a passage in the Bible refer so much to marriage and yet have union with Christ, not marriage as the main focus?

Is it because when the Lord inspired this passage, He did not know that in today's world so many Christians would be experiencing conflicts in their marriages? Of course not! But do you not think that perhaps it would have been a good idea if the Lord had given us a Bible passage on marriage where marriage is the main point? Why in a Bible passage, where the Holy Spirit speaks more about marriage than any other, does He say, "But I am not speaking about marriage, I am speaking about relationship to Jesus?"

Here is why! The amazing truth taught in this passage is this: Relationship to Christ is the foundation of marriage! In other words, the only way to enjoy marriage as God intended marriage to be is to enjoy a vital, progressive, intimate union with Christ. This is the indispensable key to marriage relationships.

Dear Christians, may the Lord give us eyes to see that we do not experience marriage, as God intended marriage to be, by working on our marriage. We experience marriage as God intended, through the enjoyment of our union with Him.

Ephesians chapter five does not have marriage as its main point because God knows we can only have marriage as He has designed when it comes into our lives as a Spirit-produced out-working of our relationship with Him. Centering our lives on Jesus; knowing Him, is the one key to successful marriage.

In Psalm 127, we read, "*Unless the Lord builds the house, they labor in vain who build it.*" Only Jesus can build the mar-

riage that brings Him glory and honor. You and I will only be as close to our marriage partners, as we are devotionally close to the Lord. Our relationship to Jesus always determines our relationship to others, including our spouses.

That is why in a Bible passage that speaks more about marriage than any other, the main point is union with Christ. The Lord knows that in reality, we do not need six, or ten, or twelve keys to a successful marriage. We need only one key. We need to cultivate friendship with Christ. We need to seek after Him and come to know Him more through the Holy Spirit's revelation of Him in the Bible. Only then will our marriages be transformed into what God originally planned for them to be.

When two people are not enjoying marriage according to God's design; if they cannot get along, or if their love for each other wanes, it is always because one or both are out of joint with God. And the solution is not a horizontal one, but a vertical one. The solution is to get right with God; only then will they be right with their marriage partners. And as Christians get to know the Lord more intimately they will by a miracle of God, progressively enjoy a more intimate union with their spouses.

We see the same glorious truth illustrated in the Gospel of John chapter two, in the record of the wedding at Cana. At this wedding you will notice that the Holy Spirit does not mention a word about who the groom is, or who the bride is, or the dress the bride wore, or any details as to the wedding party, or the bride and groom's parents. Generally, when a wedding ceremony is recorded those are the kinds of things we learn.

But here at this wedding (which is the only recorded mortal wedding in the Scriptures) the Holy Spirit's spotlight falls not

on anyone in the wedding party, but on a guest at the wedding, and it is this guest who receives all the attention. Everything we read about this wedding centers on the Lord Jesus Himself!

Dear fellow believers, this is not an accident! The Holy Spirit never records anything in His Word unintentionally. Jesus receives all the attention in the record of Cana's wedding in order to illustrate the wonderful principle that relationship to Christ is the foundation of marriage. If our marriage is to be what God desires, our focus must be centered on Him, not on our marriage. The only way two people can truly enjoy union with each other is when they each individually enjoy union with Christ!

Therefore, dear Christian husbands and wives, may I encourage you. Do not listen to the many voices in our day that say the way to solve marriage problems is to focus on them. This message of self trust is actually destroying marriages, as it turns attention to ourselves and away from the Lord.

Transformation in the Christian life never comes by trusting in our ability and desire to change. It only comes through the pursuit of a greater heart vision of Christ through the study of the Scriptures in dependence upon His Holy Spirit.

Second Corinthians chapter three gives us the key to all Christian growth. It says that when we behold the glory of the Lord, we are transformed into the Lord's likeness. In the Christian life, we are not changed by working harder to change; we are changed by a miracle of God. We are changed by perpetually coming to the Son in the Scriptures and beholding Him. And what holds true for Christian maturity holds true in the marriage relationship as well.

You can become the husband or the wife God desires you to be. Through His life within you, God will surely transform you, as from the Bible your heart vision of Christ increases. At the wedding of Cana there was a transformation. The wine, a symbol of earthly joy, had run out. All earthly solutions fall short, and what is needed if joy departs from a marriage is not an earthly solution, but a heavenly one. Only the Lord Jesus can restore marriage back to His original intention, and He will as we turn our heart eyes to Him alone.

Seek the Lord, dear believers! Focus all your heart's attention on Him. Look not upon yourselves, and increasingly your marriage will mirror the Spirit-produced marriage portrayed in Ephesians chapter five.

Pursuing the Lord Jesus with all your heart is the best thing you can ever do for your marriage. To pursue a good marriage is to lose a good marriage. If you desire a successful marriage, go after the foundation of marriage. Go after the Lord!

*I love my God, but with no love of mine,
For I have none to give;
I love Thee, Lord; but all the love is Thine,
For by Thy life I live.
I am as nothing, and rejoice to be
Emptied, and lost, and swallowed up in Thee.*

- Jeanne Marie Motte-Guyon, 1648-1717

13 Christ's Victory Over satan

Dear Christian, are you ever afraid of the devil? Is he someone you should fight, or ridicule, or run from? Just what should be a Christian's attitude toward satan?

In our day, there are many differing points of view among God's people concerning the devil. Years ago, I was taught that because of his awesome power, believers should show the devil some respect and never ridicule him, lest he be provoked. In some Christian circles, I have heard believers speak of waging war against the devil and the necessity of binding him in the name of Jesus.

Still others seem to mock and make fun of him. The main concern of believers, however, regarding the devil, seems to be in terms of temptation. And the question many ask is this: When I am tempted by the devil, what can I do that I may not fall into sin?

Some look for the answer to that question in the Gospel accounts of our Lord's own temptation. They say to secure victory over temptation, believers simply need to learn how Jesus did it and then copy Him. And since Jesus quoted Scripture when He was tempted, when we are tempted we should also do the same.

For example, when we are tempted to lie we should quote from Exodus 20, "*Thou shalt not lie.*" And by doing this, many say, we will be victorious over temptation and not lie. Many

believers embrace this idea. Yet, others seem to have serious questions concerning it. Perhaps you do as well.

We know that in the Book of Ephesians, God's Word is called the Sword of the Spirit. And clearly in His temptation, our Savior used the Word of God in a wonderful way as a weapon against the devil. But when you and I are tempted, even if we could quote the right Bible verse, and if we could quote the right Bible verse in context, and if we could quote the right Bible verse in context knowing the full meaning of the spiritual principle taught in the verse, would this method guarantee victory for us?

Clearly, this is how our Savior did it. He battled the devil with Scripture and won! But dear Christian, you and I are no match for the devil. Is it possible that the attitude that says, "I can defeat the devil like Christ did." could very well be an expression of pride and self-confidence? But why would it not just be an expression of courage and trust?

Here is why: The Lord Jesus did not overcome the devil at His temptation as an example for us to follow; He overcame as our substitute. This is the key to victory over the devil's temptation in a believer's life. Christ did not overcome the devil first, so that we could copy Him and do it second. He overcame the devil in our place, so that we would not have to.

In many things pertaining to the Christian life, the Lord Jesus is our example. He is our example in the way He did not retaliate when He was unjustly treated. The Book of First Peter is built upon that glorious truth. And the Lord Jesus is our example in the way He longed to do His Father's will.

There are many ways Christ is presented in Scripture as our example in which the Holy Spirit encourages us to follow

by trusting Jesus to live His life in and through us. But in the Lord's redemptive work - that is, in His dealings with sin and evil - the Lord Jesus is not our example, He is our representative. All of His actions against sin and evil were in our place, as our substitute.

We do not look at Calvary and say, "I'm going to see how Jesus paid the sin debt on the cross, so I can copy Him and die as He did to pay for sin." No! We look at the cross and say, "Jesus paid the sin debt so that I do not have to." On the cross, Christ did not die for sin as an example that we might imitate Him, but that we may lay hold of Him, as our substitute, by faith.

Just so, if you and I are going to enjoy victory over the devil in temptation, we must understand that Jesus faced the devil representing us. He battled that dragon in the wilderness as our representative, so that you and I do not have to battle him.

This is the good news of the Gospel of God's grace. The work of Christ against the devil, culminating at the cross, is a finished work. Jesus has won the victory. And if He has won the victory, you and I do not have to try to win it again. It is a horrible thing when Christians think they have to win the victory over the devil that Jesus has already won. This approach leads to miserable failure brought about through the sin of self-trust.

In the history of mankind, there is only one person who fought and won victory over sin, death, hell - the Lord Jesus. And He paid a high price for that victory - His life's blood. Victory belongs to Him and to Him alone! And here is good news, dear Christian: when Jesus won that victory, He did not

just win it for Himself; He won it for us also. And since Jesus is victorious, and is willing to be victorious for us, we do not have to try to secure a victory for ourselves.

In Colossians 2:15, we read, *"When He had disarmed the rulers and authorities, He made a public display of them, having triumphed over them through Him."* Through the Lord's work at the cross the devil has been *"disarmed!"* That's victory! In Hebrews 2:14, we read this amazing verse, *"Since then the children share in flesh and blood, He Himself likewise also partook of the same, that through death He might render powerless him who had the power of death, that is, the devil."*

Now what does it mean practically, that the Lord has won victory for us as our substitute over the devil and temptation? When we are tempted to sin, how may we in that moment enter into the Lord's victory? Let me direct your attention to two more passages from God's Word.

The first is James 4:7. *"Submit therefore to God, resist the devil and he will flee from you."* Christians enter into the Lord's victory not by fighting the devil but by submitting to God. In other words, we prevail against temptation and the evil one, not by prevailing against temptation and the evil one, but by casting our helpless souls upon our Savior.

The key to enjoying Christ's victory over the devil is not by seeking after our own victory, but by seeking after God. It's a matter of direction, dear believer. Rather than fight the devil in the hour of temptation, look to Jesus and let Him uphold you. Then, if in that moment, the Lord reminds you of a Bible verse, quote it! Shout it! But resist evil by running to the Lord in childlike dependence.

The other passage that has helped me greatly in this regard

is Ephesians 6:10, 11. *“Finally, be strong in the Lord, and in the strength of His might. Put on the full armor of God, that you may be able to stand firm against the schemes of the devil.”*

There was a time when I misinterpreted this passage, turning what God had intended for encouragement into an occasion for anxiety.

I thought that, just as a soldier had to carefully equip himself with all the individual pieces of an armor or face injury or death in battle, Christians must also be careful to equip themselves with all the individual pieces of their spiritual armor or face even greater consequences.

I thought that my Christian life was a battlefield and being safe from the tactics of the evil one depended upon me making sure that all six pieces of my armor were always on and ready to be used appropriately. My Christian life became a constant struggle as I tried but failed to correctly wield all the pieces of my armor against the devil’s attacks, trying to protect myself from *“the rulers and forces of darkness”* (v. 12), with all of their experience, wisdom, and battle-hardened strategies.

It was a great day in my life when I learned that, by God’s graciousness, my safekeeping was not something I had to work or fight for, or even a “thing” at all, but a person - the Lord Jesus Himself!

Since the Apostle Paul wrote his letter to the Ephesian believers while in prison, it may have been there where the Lord first uncovered this illustration of a soldier’s armor to his heart. For years, Paul had been chained to a Roman soldier clothed in his armor. What a wonderful picture of a Christian clothed in God! The armor is not a reminder of the struggle between good and evil in a believer’s life. It is a picture of

the Lord Himself! The armor is not something God gives; it is something God is. To be strong in the Lord is synonymous with putting on God as our armor.

When we read "*helmet of salvation*," we know the Spirit is picturing salvation as a helmet. When we read "*breastplate of righteousness*," we know the Spirit is picturing righteousness as a breastplate. So when He writes "*armor of God*," He is picturing God as a suit of armor.

His point is this: all Christians are clothed in God as a soldier is clothed in armor. In Ephesians six, God is not encouraging Christians to fight. His word is "*stand firm*."

If our struggle were against flesh and blood, then we might be called upon to fight, because we are flesh and blood. But as verse twelve states, our struggle is not with flesh and blood, it is a spiritual struggle; therefore God, who is spirit, is the only One who can shield us from what we cannot see, much less fight.

It is a tragedy to see many dear believers in our day living with anxiety, afraid of the world, the flesh, and the devil. With this enlightening illustration, dear Christian, God is instructing us in the truth that since we are clothed in Him we never have to be afraid of the devil and his evil, and that there is no battle to fight. There is no ground to win. The Holy Spirit does not tell us to attack or combat. He encourages us to stand in the victory that the Lord Jesus has won through His finished work at the cross.

May God give His people eyes to behold where we are. We are in God. He surrounds us and we are safe in Him. He alone is the One who can and will protect us against the fiery darts of the evil one as we trust Him.

According to Ephesians 6:13, our responsibility is to “*take up the full armor of God.*” This is the Spirit’s invitation to faith, dear believer, and faith is simply receiving from the Lord. Victory in the Lord Jesus, as our all-sufficient armor, belongs to every saint and it will be enjoyed by every saint who will believe!

*Did we in our own strength confide,
Our striving would be losing,
Were not the right Man on our side,
The Man of God’s own choosing.
Dost ask who that may be?
Christ Jesus, it is He;
Lord Sabaoth His name,
From age to age the same,
And He must will the battle.*

- Martin Luther, 1483-1546

14 *The Unity of the Spirit*

Dear Christian, what is it that makes all Christians one? Is it doctrinal agreement? Is it a common purpose? Is it cherished fellowship? Why is discord among believers such a plague upon the Body of Christ in our day?

How it must deeply grieve the heart of our Savior to see His children so willing to clash over the most nonessential things, when on the eve of His crucifixion He prayed, “*that they may be one even as We are one*” (John 17:11). Since the Son and the Father abide in perfect union, we must conclude that His request for oneness has been granted. Why then does the church seem so splintered in our day?

In the fourth chapter of the Book of Ephesians, the Spirit of Christ has disclosed many precious principles concerning the unity of His Church. In Ephesians 4:15, 16 we read, “*But speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in all aspects into Him who is the head, even Christ, from whom the whole body, being fitted and held together by that which every joint supplies, according to the proper working of each individual part, causes the growth of the body, for the building up of itself in love.*”

In this passage, the Lord illustrates the unity of His people with the human body. His point is this: just as our physical bodies are one, even though they are made up of many individual members; the Lord’s Body, the church, is one, even though

it is made up of many individual members. And just as the individual parts of our physical bodies all share the life of our head, unifying our individual parts; all Christians share the life of Christ who is our head, unifying all Christians.

Every Christian, according to the Spirit, is one with every other Christian because of each believer's union with the Head. Therefore, it is a wonderful truth that Christian unity is not something believers need to create; it is something believers need to enjoy!

This is why in Ephesians 4:3; the Spirit does not tell us to *create* unity, but to *preserve* it. He writes, "*Preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.*" In other words, we are to guard that which Christ has already created through His finished work on the cross.

If the church of Christ is ever going to begin to fully enjoy unity, we are going to have to stop trying to create it, because every time we try to create it, we end up working against it.

Many, in their endeavor to create unity, often confuse unity with uniformity. Some think that Bible unity results when all Christians are identical. But it is not the desire of the Holy Spirit to make clones, where we all look alike, talk alike, serve alike, and gather alike.

This is the best that man can do in his attempt at unity because man's unity is based on conformity. Either you conform to the norm or you are not welcome. But that is not Bible unity, dear Christian. Bible unity is oneness in the midst of diversity. It is having different functions and styles and appearances yet all enjoying the same life coming from the same head - the Lord Jesus.

It is amazing how the Holy Spirit develops this truth. And

when it was first unveiled to my heart I was surprised. I did not expect it. I am referring to what the Holy Spirit identifies as the source of unity among His people. In other words, what makes all Christians one? To answer that question, let me (for emphasis only) separate Ephesians 4:3 and Ephesians 4:13 from the parenthetical section of Ephesians 4:4-12.

If we combine verses 3 and 13 this results: *"Being diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace... until we all attain to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man, to the measure and stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ."*

In these verses, the Spirit of God is declaring that one day in heaven all Christians will come to maturity, and when they do they will possess the unity of the faith. The word faith is not used here in the sense of a personal trust in the Lord but more in the way of doctrine or truth as in Jude 3 where we read: *"Contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints."*

One day in heaven, the Spirit says, all Christians will agree on every point of doctrine and this will lead to a unity of creed among believers. But on earth we are not there yet.

Yes, it is true that all genuine believers hold to the essentials of the faith. (To be true Christians, we must lay hold of the great foundations.) But when it comes to those things that are not essential to salvation in Christ, genuine Christians disagree because we have not yet reached full maturity in Christ.

Now, the Lord knew this would happen. He knew that on this side of heaven, true Christians would disagree on the perimeter issues of His Word. He knew that we would not all agree on matters of faith and doctrine, so He commanded that

we “*preserve the unity of Spirit in the bond of peace.*” Until all believers attain to the unity of the faith, we are to keep the unity of the Spirit.

What is the unity of the Spirit? According to Ephesians 4 it involves mutual headship. In other words, If Jesus is my head and Jesus is your head, we share the same life - His life, and therefore we are one. According to God’s Word, the source of Christian unity is not doctrinal agreement. The source of Christian unity is the life of Christ within each Christian.

When most believers think of unity, they generally think of the unity of the faith (vs 13). Many Christian fellowships base their oneness on the unity of the faith. But the Lord bases the oneness of His church on His shared life in every believer. Christians are one not because of common doctrine; they are one because of common life - the life of Christ! May the Lord open our hearts to this glorious truth in our Savior!

Now, when it comes to the foundational truths essential to salvation in Christ, light has no fellowship with darkness. But many of God’s people today base their unity with others on doctrinal things far beyond the essentials. The Lord never does!

He knows that on earth Christians will not agree on all doctrinal issues and therefore, until all Christians do agree on all things in heaven, God commands us to recognize our oneness with all other Christians regardless of whatever weird peripheral ideas they may hold. As long as they hold to the essentials, and desire to follow the Lord in righteousness, they are one with all who belong to Christ.

Dear Christian, it is okay for Christians to disagree on secondary issues. It is okay for believers to discuss and debate all

things. But may the Lord deliver us from attacking each other's character and questioning each other's love for the Lord because we disagree on peripheral things. And by God's grace, may we learn to hold all of our beliefs in such a way that it promotes unity not discord in the Lord's Body.

In Proverbs 6:16-19 we read: *"There are six things that the Lord hates, yes, seven which are an abomination to Him: Haughty eyes, a lying tongue, hands that shed innocent blood, a heart that devises wicked plans, feet that run rapidly to evil, a false witness who utters lies, and one who spreads strife among brothers."*

In this passage, we see a style of writing used quite often for emphasis in the Old Testament. In this case a list of six things is quickly changed to seven things. This method is used to draw the reader's attention to the seventh thing. It is the seventh thing in this passage that the Lord is emphasizing.

And His point is this: There are many things the Lord hates, but one stands out at the top of His list and that is spreading strife among brothers. The Lord regards it a very evil thing when Christians choose to fight and hold fellowship from each other over teachings that are not essential to salvation in Christ. How evil?

Consider the things that did not make it to the top of the list: *"hands that shed innocent blood, a lying tongue, feet that run rapidly to evil, pride."* God hates those things, but not as much as He hates those who spread strife among His people.

This is the heart of our Lord, dear believer. We are commanded by our Savior to recognize our oneness in Him with every believer, and in all we do and say seek to preserve the unity of the Spirit in peace.

In Jn 13:35 Jesus said, *"By this shall all men know that you are My disciples if you have love one to another."* The church speaks often in our day about evangelism. This is Bible evangelism: love for the brethren! May I encourage you, dear Christian, to trust the Lord to enable you to disagree in love with all in His Body.

There is a story about a Bible teacher named Harry A. Ironside, who one day was riding on a train sharing thoughts from God's Word with a small group of fellow passengers. As he reached his destination, someone asked him his denominational affiliation to which He replied, "I am of the denomination of Psalm 119:63, *'I am a companion of all those who fear Thee and of those who keep Thy precepts.'*"

Dear believer, please do not misunderstand. In no way am I encouraging compromise. I am not saying that in order to keep peace we must throw out what we believe or make room in our hearts for false teaching. (God forbid!) By His grace, may we stand firm in what the Lord teaches us from His Word. I am simply echoing the Lord's mandate not to fight or withdraw fellowship from others in the church over things not essential to salvation in Christ.

May we find this responsibility not a bondage but a delight as we trust the Lord to live it in and through us by His Spirit that He may increasingly, through His church, have His testimony upon this earth.

15 God's Forgiveness and Sin's Consequences

Dear Christian, do you find it confusing that there can be consequences for sin in our lives after God has forgiven us from sin? Do you question why we must reap what we sow when Christ, by His sacrificial death, has separated us from our sin as far as the east is from the west?

The Biblical truths of God's forgiveness and sin's consequences extend throughout God's Word like two golden threads. Viewed separately these truths are easy to comprehend and appreciate by God's illumination. It is when they are observed functioning together that confusion sometimes results in the hearts of those seeking intimacy with Christ.

In the Old Testament account of David's sin with Bathsheba, the Spirit of God has placed these two truths side by side. It is not necessary for me to mention the details of David's sin to draw my intended conclusions, except to say that at a dreadful time in the psalmist's life, he succumbed to the sins of adultery and murder. We read about these sorrowful events in the Book of 2 Samuel, chapters 11 and 12.

It was through Nathan the prophet that the Lord restored our brother. Having seen the guilt of his sin, and expressing true repentance, David cried out, "*I have sinned against the Lord*" (2 Samuel 12:13). In the next moment, Nathan com-

municated God's faithfulness to forgive sins, saying to David, "*The Lord has taken away your sin; you shall not die.*"

Having repented, David then experienced the Lord's forgiveness and was completely restored to fellowship with God. This is the first truth I wish to bring to your attention from this Bible record: the glorious truth of God's forgiveness.

What happens next in the historical account brings in the second truth. In 2 Samuel 12:14, Nathan then said to David, "*However, because by this deed you have given occasion to the enemies of God to blaspheme, the child also that is born to you shall surely die.*"

Not only does the Lord tell David that the baby conceived in adultery will die, but He also lists a whole host of very difficult consequences that were going to come into David's life for the following twenty years because of his sin.

The first truth revealed in this record is the truth of God's grace in forgiving David's sin. The second truth revealed is summed up in the New Testament words, "*Whatever a man sows this will he also reap*" (Galatians 6:7). This second truth involves the consequences of sin.

Some, in considering these two truths, have honestly asked, "What kind of forgiveness is it that says you are forgiven but now you must experience suffering and pain because of your sin? Is this not a contradiction? Should we not expect that, along with forgiveness from the penalty of sin, the Lord, as part of that forgiveness, would deliver His people from the consequences of sin?"

In the Book of Romans we read, "*There is therefore now no condemnation for those in Christ Jesus*" (Romans 8:1). How does "no condemnation" tie in with "God is not mocked;

whatever a man sows, this will he also reap.”? Are we destined to remain victims of our sinful past even after we repent and come to enjoy the Lord’s forgiveness of that past?”

Adam and Eve sin and we see God initiate their restoration. He seeks after them. He finds them. He clothes them in animal skins representing the sacrifice of our Savior. That is grace! But then God kicks Adam and Eve out of the garden and He speaks of thorns and thistles and the pains of childbirth. That is the consequence of sin. Is there a contradiction in that narrative?

The answer is no! The truths of forgiveness from sin and the consequences of sin do not invalidate each another, nor do they create any difficulty for the Lord. Rather, they are simply Bible descriptions of the glorious work the Lord desires to accomplish in the lives of His people. May He give us eyes to behold it!

In understanding this work of the Lord, I believe it helps to make this important distinction: The consequences of sin are not God’s punishment for sin.

What happened in David’s life after he sinned was not punishment. When God said to David, “Your sin is taken away,” He meant just that. David was wholly forgiven and freed from the guilt and punishment of his sin. And the death of his child along with twenty years of suffering was not punishment; it was the consequence of sin working in his life.

As believers in Jesus, we can be assured that God will never punish us for our sins. He will chastise us. He will discipline us in order to train us. But, dear believer, He will never punish us for our sins. Why? Because He has already punished us for our sins in the person of Christ our substitute when He died

upon the cross.

When Adam and Eve were driven out of the garden they left with their sins fully forgiven. They left in fellowship with their Creator. And as Adam toiled with thorns and thistles, and Eve experienced the pains of labor; in their hearts God was their best friend. And, even as they lived with the consequences of their sin, they enjoyed sweet communion with the Lord.

God is not mocked. It is His inflexible, eternal decree that whatever a man sows, that will he reap. Yet after restoration, Adam, Eve, and David, were fully forgiven and enjoyed sweet fellowship with God as they then lived in the sorrows caused by their sin.

Dear Christian, those who trust in the Lord Jesus are never victims of their past. No matter what we have done, we never have to live with the shame of it. At any moment in our lives we can be free from our past and enter into unclouded union with Jesus. And even as we go through the consequences of our sin, as David did, we can live in the full assurance that God fully accepts us in Jesus Christ.

Let us not be confused regarding these two truths. God has not promised to wipe away the consequences of our sin, but He has promised to forgive our sin when we turn to Him in repentance. And He has promised to love us and bring us into a greater union with Himself in order that we may thankfully and victoriously endure the consequences of our sin. Our God is wise beyond comprehension and, therefore, we may trust Him to use the consequences of our sin for good purposes in our lives.

May God increasingly place in our hearts a hatred for sin, but if we should sin and suffer the consequences, may we take

comfort in knowing that our God can work all things together for good in our lives to conform us to the image of Christ (Romans 8:28). All things are not good and God does not change our sin into something good. No, sin is always evil. But all things work together for good in the will of God unto a spiritual purpose in the lives of those who trust Him.

This does not mean that God is the author of sin. We are! But God in His infinite wisdom and grace can take something as wretched and as horrible as our rebellion against Him, and use it for our spiritual good. For this we praise Him!

Only eternity will reveal how many believers have been spiritually refreshed by the psalms David wrote expressing his sweet union with the Lord even during those twenty sorrowful years of suffering the consequences of his sin.

God has never promised to deliver us from the harvest of our sin, dear believer, but He can and will turn the curse into a blessing as we, in grace, repent of our sin. At any moment in our lives, through God's ministry of restoration in our hearts, we can be all He wants us to be and by faith live in His perfect will in sweet union with Him. Rejoice!

*Show me Thy face – I shall forget
The weary days of yore,
The fretting ghosts of vain regret
Shall haunt my soul no more.
All doubts and fears for future years
In quite trust subside,
And naught but blest content and calm
Within my breast abide.*

- Author Unknown

16 The Enemy is the Lord's

Dear Christian, do you sometimes wonder what you should be doing about evil in our society? As a child of God, should you aggressively attack the world's wicked influences seeking to destroy your family and your community?

For years, I questioned what my role ought to be in resisting evil influences that appear to have an ever-increasing impact on our society. Should I march or boycott? Should I become a political activist? Should I be prepared to take up arms against nefarious forces that threaten my religious freedom? Just what is my responsibility in the Lord in terms of combating evil?

These are questions the people of God have faced for generations and in no way would I pretend to have all the answers, but I believe the Lord has given a clear word in His Bible on some points concerning this issue.

It is not my intention here to discuss self-defense or a government's duty to protect its citizens from crime or hostile nations by way of an army or police force. It is my goal in this discussion to consider the responsibility of believers, individually and corporately. In other words, what is God's will for Christians and the church regarding the world's corrupting influence upon society?

I believe there are some wonderful principles concerning this subject revealed in the Lord's parable about wheat and

the tares located in the Gospel of Matthew, chapter 13. In that parable, a landowner instructed his servants to sow wheat in a field, the very same field in which, that night, an enemy came and sowed tares (weeds). When the servants discovered the tares growing among the wheat, they proposed a solution. They suggested to the landowner that the tares be immediately extracted from the field; to which he replied, *"No; lest while you are gathering up the tares, you may root up the wheat with them"* (Matthew 13: 29).

The landowner's answer was a wise one. He knew that to go into the field at that time to destroy tares would also destroy much of the wheat. His instruction was to wait until the harvest, at which time the tares could be successfully separated from the wheat without harming the good crop.

In order that we would not miss the spiritual lessons taught in the parable, the Lord gave us His inspired interpretation in Matthew 13:36-43. In the Lord's interpretation, the landowner is the Lord Jesus, the field is the world, and the enemy is the devil. The main point of the parable has to do with sowing people.

The landowner's seed, Jesus said, are the sons of the kingdom and the enemy's seed are the sons of the evil one. The seed which the Lord sows picture those who trust in Him; the seed which the devil sows picture those who reject the Lord. From that main point (the sowing of people) allow me to draw your attention to this spiritual principle: The gathering of the tares is the work of God, not the work of God's people.

There is a conflict in the parable that involves a mixture. In the world (field), the sons of the kingdom (wheat) are growing right alongside the sons of the evil one (tares). In the world in

which we live, we see this mixture all around us. The wheat and the tares live in the same neighborhoods, they shop in the same stores, they go to the same schools, and in some cases they live under the same roof. But notice that the solution to this mixture does not involve any action on the part of the sons of the kingdom or the servants.

In the parable, the enemy is not called *an* enemy or even *the* enemy. The enemy is referred to specifically as the Lord's enemy—"*his enemy*" (v. 25). The enemy is neither the enemy of the servants nor the sons of the kingdom. The enemy is the Lord's and therefore, the conflict with the enemy is the Lord's conflict. Also notice that when the tares are gathered at the end, the Lord does not allow His servants to even touch the tares. The Lord Himself sends out His reapers, the angels, who destroy the tares.

According to the parable and the Lord's interpretation, it is never the responsibility of the wheat (the sons of the kingdom) to pull up tares (the sons of the evil one). The responsibility for dealing with the tares rests entirely with the Lord, not His children. The servants wanted to pull out the tares, but the landowner said, "No!" His words were emphatic! His instruction was clear. The servants were to leave the tares alone and let them grow right alongside the wheat.

The truth being proclaimed in this parable may at first sound strange, but it is crystal clear. As Christians, we are to keep our hands off the tares! Church history is filled with blood all the times the church decided it was going to rid the world of tares in the name of God. It may sound spiritual and brave to say, "Lord, Your enemy in this world is advancing its evil, but we, as Your children, are going to commit ourselves to destroy

it.” But it is not spiritual! It is in direct violation of what our Savior is teaching so plainly!

You may remember when the apostle Peter tried to remove tares. On the night of the Lord’s arrest he pulled out a sword. And what did he hope to accomplish with that sword against a hundred Roman soldiers? It may have been a brave act but it was foolish. The best he could do was cut off a man’s ear. And after mending the damage, Jesus told Peter to put the sword away.

At the heart of Peter’s action was the attitude that he should come to the Lord’s defense. Yet, in reality, Peter ended up fighting against the very thing that God would use to put His Son on the cross whereby He would accomplish His greatest work! Dear Christian, whenever the church rises up to fight evil it is not only doomed to fail because it does not know what it is doing, but it often finds itself working against the purposes of God.

Another word from the Lord on this issue is found in the Gospel of John, chapter 18. When Pilate asked the Lord why His servants were not fighting on His behalf, here was His response: *“Jesus answered, ‘My kingdom is not of this world. If My kingdom were of this world then My servants would be fighting, that I might not be delivered up to the Jews; but as it is, My kingdom is not of this realm’”* (John 18:36).

Dear Christian, this is a neglected truth in our day. Many of God’s people see it as their mission to rid the world of tares when the Lord Jesus said, “Leave them alone!” The reason given is a very wise one. While pulling up the tares, we may root up the wheat with them. As mere mortals, God’s people do not always have the insight to judge wheat from the tares.

We cannot see the motives and intentions of the heart. It is always true that when the church goes after tares some wheat gets bruised in the process. May the Lord teach us that the tares are His enemies and therefore His responsibility.

In the Scriptures, the apostle Paul is one of the greatest examples of this principle. If ever in history anyone had a reason to rise up and fight against tares it would have been the apostle Paul. In his day, the Roman Empire made Christianity illegal and the punishment was death. They literally fed Christians to lions. History tells us that they would put animal skins on believers and throw them to packs of wild dogs just to watch them get torn to shreds. Nero used to dip Christians in tar and light them on fire to light up his patio parties.

Yet, we do not see Paul encouraging Christians to rise up and fight against an evil government. Rather, to the Roman believers, our brother wrote: *"Let every person be in subjection to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except from God and those which exist are established by God"* (Romans 13:1). How could Paul write such words? He could because the Lord Jesus said, "Let the tares alone."

Now, the Holy Spirit through Paul did teach us about obeying God rather than man when man commands the practice of evil. And in many cases throughout church history that obedience has led to martyrdom. But Paul never spoke of fighting an evil government. Why not? Because the tares are the Lord's enemy, not ours!

Come the harvest, Jesus will send out reapers. But for now, God has His reasons for allowing tares. If He did not, you can be sure He would not allow tares to grow alongside wheat. In fact, in the Lord's overall design, it is actually good that the

tares grow alongside wheat. Only eternity will reveal how God has used the tares in the lives of His children.

Most believers would not think of the sons of the evil one as blessings of God in their lives. We look upon them as hindrances. But according to God's plan, evil King Saul made David a better believer, and Joseph's treacherous brothers were perhaps some of the greatest teachers he ever had, and Job was far better off after the devil's attack than before in terms of his heart-knowledge of the Lord.

When all the records are in, dear Christian, I think we will be praising God for the tares which He has allowed to grow beside us. If we keep our eyes on the Lord Jesus, the tares in this world can be seen as tremendous blessings from Him. I know it is a radical and somewhat paradoxical remedy to not fight the world's evil, but that is the teaching of our Savior.

So as God's people what are we to do? In the words of the parable we are simply to grow. The landowner (the Lord Jesus) said, *"Allow both to grow together until the harvest"* (v. 30). May God give us a single heart-focus to grow in the knowledge of our Savior. We become an influence for good in this world, not by fighting evil but by trusting the Lord to live His life in and through us that He might be manifested to this lost and dying world.

Those inhabiting the Old Testament city of Nineveh became infamous for sacrificing babies to false gods. And when the Lord sent Jonah to Nineveh He did not tell him to lobby for laws against child sacrifice. Jonah was sent by the Lord to proclaim a message—God's message—a message of repentance. And we praise the Lord that the inhabitants of Nineveh received that message and turned their hearts to Christ. This

has become known as one of the greatest revivals of all time, as more than 300 thousand people were saved in one day.

And how many child sacrifices do you suppose took place the day after the entire city turned to God? The answer is none! The wickedness stopped not because of a political fight against it, but simply by proclaiming the Lord's message and the people responding to that message.

God's message for the world today, dear Christian, is a spiritual message just like in Jonah's day. It is the message of salvation in Christ through repentance. Let us not trade it for another.

The world does not need our efforts to dig up tares. It needs Jesus! He is our message. The best thing we can ever do for our community, our families, and our fellowships under attack by evil forces is to actively pursue a more intimate relationship with the Lord through the study of His Word. This will always result in the Lord Jesus establishing His testimony through the church in this world!

Fighting tares may sound responsible but it is a distraction from the proclamation of the Gospel of Christ. May the Lord deliver us from such distractions to pursue a union with Christ unhindered, that He may bring others into the kingdom through us!

17 The Significance of Christ's Miracles

Dear Christian, did the Holy Spirit record the miracles of Christ that we might trust Him to work the very same miracles in our lives today? Why did the Lord Jesus perform miracles?

To answer these questions it might be helpful to first consider that in the New Testament the Spirit of God chose three Greek words to describe miracles. We find these three words used in one verse in the Book of Acts. “*Men of Israel, listen to these words: Jesus the Nazarene, a man attested to you by God with miracles and wonders and signs which God performed through Him in your midst, just as you yourselves know*” (Acts 2:22).

The three Greek words the Holy Spirit used to describe the miracles of Christ are translated here as “miracles, wonders, and signs.”

The first word “miracles” is sometimes translated in other Bible passages as “mighty works.” This draws attention to the fact that miracles come from God alone. No man can do them. And this highlights the truth that miracles are a regular part of God’s existence. It is as natural for God to do miracles as it is for us to breathe. So what are miracles? They are mighty works of God.

The second word the Lord's Spirit used to describe miracles is translated as "wonders." Miracles are wonders because when God works miracles they produce amazement and wonder in the heart of man. Putting these first two words together, some have defined a miracle as a mighty work of God that causes wonder in the hearts of men.

Now, that is a good definition as far as it goes, but it does not go far enough because it leaves out the third word the Holy Spirit used to describe miracles. And if we are to truly understand the Lord's purpose for working miracles in the Bible we must bring this third word into the discussion.

The third word is translated as "signs." A miracle, according to the Spirit of God, is a sign. Now, a sign points to something beyond itself. If you are traveling to New York City on Route 95, you will see a sign that says something like "New York City - 80 miles." That sign is not New York City. That sign points you to New York City.

Miracles are signs in the sense that they point to something other than themselves. And, for me, this is where the discussion of the miracles of the Bible takes on a whole new aspect.

In the word "sign" we learn that the goal of the Lord's miracles is all about something beyond the miracles themselves. In other words, when Lord Jesus performed a miracle, He did not do it just to do a miracle; He performed a miracle as a sign to point to something else.

For example, Jesus never healed a blind man just so a blind man could see. Healing a blind man was a sign; it pointed to something other than itself. It is the same with calming storms or walking on water or multiplying loaves or raising the dead. These miracles were all signs which did not point to them-

selves but to something beyond themselves. The miracles of the Lord were credentials of His authority and power, but they were more than that. The Lord performed them to give instruction. And what is that instruction? What was the goal of the Lord's miracles in the Bible?

They were signs in the sense that they taught spiritual truths about the Lord and relationship to the Lord. Every miracle Jesus worked in the Bible, He worked to teach spiritual truth. He healed the blind man in order to teach a spiritual principle. He raised the dead in order to teach a spiritual principle. He calmed the storm in order to teach a spiritual principle. Every miracle has spiritual significance.

This should not take us by surprise, because the Bible is filled with this. The Bible, for the most part, is a book of history. It records something God did in time that His people might, years later, read about those historical events, and by the Spirit's illumination, go forward in the heart-knowledge of who God is.

The physical miracles Jesus performed are also part of this history. They are events that have come and gone. The blind Jesus healed are dead, but the record of their healing lives on in the Bible. And in that record we can glean spiritual truths about the Lord and union with Him.

The historical events of Jesus healing the blind happened once in time, but the spiritual truths taught in those events remain forever. This is God's purpose for miracles: to communicate who He is and what relationship with Him is all about.

And so, it is not surprising to read in the Bible of lepers being "cleansed" not healed. You would expect that since leprosy is a disease, the word healed should be used. But although

it is a disease, in the Bible it is one of God's illustrations of sin. And so Jesus "cleansed" lepers as sin is cleansed in order to show all mankind that He was willing and able to cleanse men from sin. The miracle of the Lord cleansing a leper was a sign that pointed to the spiritual truth of God's forgiveness from sin. With the cleansing of a leper Jesus was saying, "I am willing and able to cleanse from sin all who come to Me."

Also, it is not surprising to hear Jesus say to a man who could not walk, "*Take courage my son your sins are forgiven*" (Matthew 9:2). One might think that although it was wonderful for Jesus to forgive that man's sin, his problem was his legs. He could not walk. Did our Lord misdiagnose the man's problem when He said, "Your sins are forgiven?"

No. The Lord was simply illustrating the man's true problem of sin with the fact that he could not walk. As with all of the Lord's miracles, along with the miracle, the Lord was dealing in the spiritual realm. He was not just doing physical miracles. In those physical miracles, He was teaching spiritual truth. And with His miracles of healing, He was declaring His willingness to heal human hearts.

When the Lord healed a blind man in the Gospel of John chapter 9, notice what He said directly after the healing. "*For judgment I came into this world, that those who do not see may see; and that those who see may become blind*" (John 9:39).

Certainly, Jesus was not out to make men who could see blind. He was talking about spiritual blindness. He worked a physical miracle on a blind man to teach us that He can work in the hearts of all who come to Him and give them spiritual eyesight that they might understand the things of God. He did a physical thing to illustrate a spiritual thing.

The Pharisees understood this, because after the miracle they came to Jesus and said, “*‘We are not blind too, are we?’*” *Jesus said to them, ‘If you were blind, you would have no sin; but now you say, ‘We see’; your sin remains.’*” (John 9:40-41). The miracle was physical for the blind man, but it was spiritual for the Pharisees and all who might gain spiritual insight from the miracle. Throughout the Lord’s ministry, His physical acts illustrated spiritual principles!

You remember on one occasion when Jesus was eating with those whom the religious leaders called sinners, they questioned His disciples about it saying, “*Why does your Teacher eat with the tax-gatherers and sinners?*” (Matthew 9:10). Overhearing, Jesus responded with the words, “*It is not those who are healthy who need a physician, but those who are ill*” (Matthew 9:12).

At first, His response does not seem to fit. The question was in regard to sinners; His response was in regard to the sick needing a doctor. Did Jesus misunderstand their question? No! Because in His mind sinners are sick, they have a disease of the soul, and He is the doctor who can make them well.

In all of these examples, do you see what Jesus was doing? His miracles always pointed to spiritual counterparts; they were never an end in themselves. Jesus healed the blind man not just so a blind man could be healed, but that you and I might know forever that Jesus can heal us from our spiritual blindness. Jesus healed the lame not just so the lame could walk, but that generations to come might know that those who turn to Jesus can be healed of their spiritual lameness that they may walk before God in a life of holiness. Jesus healed the man with a withered hand to teach us how He can make us

useful in His service.

Every miracle in the Bible teaches the story of abundant life in union with Jesus Christ. All of the Lord's miracles were illustrations, physical acts that we can read about in His Word in order to understand spiritual truth. We will never understand the miracles of Christ in the Bible if we look at them as an end in themselves. They are not an end in themselves. As Jesus performed miracles, He was writing a Bible. He was teaching through His miracles.

Therefore, it is not surprising to come to the Gospel of Matthew and read, "*And as Jesus passed on from there, He saw a man called Matthew sitting in the tax office and He said to him, 'Follow Me.' And he arose and followed Him*" (Matthew 9:9).

Some might think it strange for Matthew, to put his testimony in the middle of his two chapters on miracles. But it is not strange. Matthew knew, by the Holy Spirit, that salvation is the greatest miracle of all, and that all ten miracles in these two chapters are really about God's work in the heart of man.

Dear Christian, from these observations we may glean many principles, but one that has brought me into a greater enjoyment of my union with Christ is this truth: the emphasis of God's working in our lives is always on the spiritual not the physical. Let me explain.

There is no doubt that our God is a miracle-working God and there is nothing the Lord cannot do. He can and often does heal those who are physically ill in this life. There is great comfort knowing that the Lord does not delight in the needless affliction of His people, but that He is compassionate and merciful to all who trust in Him! In the light of the Lord's com-

passion, however, some of God's people have been terribly confused when they have asked the Lord for physical healing and were not healed. It is to this confusion I address the following words.

Man was created in the image of God and part of being created in His image is the fact that God made us to be eternal creatures who will exist forever. Some will exist forever to eternal damnation and some will exist forever to eternal life, but we are all eternal creatures who will exist forever. (Of course, we are only eternal on one end; God is eternal on both ends.) And since we are eternal creatures who only live in a physical shell for seventy years on average, what is more important, our physical well-being or our spiritual well-being?

Many people in our day are teaching that God lives for our physical well-being. He does not. God lives for our spiritual well-being. And God may even sacrifice our physical well-being in order to keep us spiritually healthy. Yes, God may or may not heal us from physical ailments, but that is not what is important. What is important to eternal creatures who will live forever is not physical health but spiritual health.

In reality, it matters very little to eternal creatures if we can see with physical eyes; but it matters a whole lot if we can see spiritual truth with the eyes of our hearts. What good is it to go through life with physical sight for seventy years, and then, having lived all of life on earth in spiritual blindness, end up in hell forever? What good would it be for us to walk on earth for seventy years and then spend eternity in everlasting torment because we lived on earth crippled from sin? And what good would it do to have physical hearing and yet hinder our time on earth as believers because we never learned to hear the word of

God with the ears of our hearts?

How we praise the Lord that He faithfully provides for the needs of His children! Sometimes that involves our physical welfare, but all the time it involves our spiritual welfare. May I encourage you, dear believer, to trust in a God who is much more concerned with your spiritual life than your physical life. On this earth, God may heal physically, and praise His name when He does. But more important to Him (and may it be more important to us) is the healing and health of our souls.

"In this you greatly rejoice, even though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been distressed by various trials, that the proof of your faith, being more precious than gold which is perishable, even though tested by fire, may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ" (I Peter 1:6-7).

May the Lord open the eyes of our hearts to see clearly that He controls all He allows, in order to minister grace to us, that we may progressively enjoy our union with Him.

John 11:6

*He waits; to manifest His grace,
To help His dying friend, delays,
The sickness lingers to remove,
But not through want of power or love.
Thus our Physician from the sky
Lets a beloved patient die,
And then exerts His power to save
And lifts the sinner from the grave.*

- Charles Wesley, 1707-1767

18 *The Spirit of Prophecy*

Dear Christian, is Christ's second coming near? Are the earthquakes, wars, and famines in our day signs of the Lord's soon return? Are you confused as to how to interpret world events in light of Bible prophecy?

Quite often when Christians refer to the second coming of Christ they turn to the words of our Savior often referred to as the Olivet Discourse. The discourse is recorded in three of the four Gospels and is generally considered to contain signs of the Lord's return. In Matthew's Gospel, this discourse is located in chapters 24 and 25.

Some read Matthew 24:7, where Jesus says, "*For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom and in various places there will be famines and earthquakes,*" and conclude that wars, famines, and earthquakes are signs of the Lord's return.

They also read verse 9 of the same chapter concerning the persecution of Christians, and verse 12 concerning the rise of wickedness, and verse 24 concerning the great apostasy, and call these events signs of Christ's second coming.

But dear Christian, would it surprise you to learn that the Olivet Discourse does not contain signs of the Lord's return? Rather, it contains the *sign* of the Lord's return. There is only one sign that our Lord gave in His conversation with the disciples concerning His return.

A careful reading of the text indicates that the Lord spoke these words in response to this question asked by the disciples: *"Tell us, when will these things take place, and what will be the sign of Your coming and the end of the age?"* (Matthew 24:3). Notice that they did not ask Jesus about the *signs* of His coming; they asked Him about the *sign* of His coming. And in response to their question, Jesus spoke about the one sign of His coming.

Now, you might be thinking, "If there is only one sign of the Lord's coming, why did Jesus mention wars and earthquakes and famines and persecution and wickedness and apostasy?" Why did He speak about all of these things when they asked for the sign of His coming? Matthew 24:4 gives the answer. *"And Jesus answered and said to them, 'See to it that no one misleads you.'"*

Our Lord mentioned wars, earthquakes, famines, etc., in addition to the one sign of His coming, as a warning to His disciples. He said people would come and try to mislead us; and then He mentioned two ways in which people would try to mislead us.

The first way is in Matthew 24:5 and it is in reference to the rise of false prophets claiming to be Christ. The second way is in verses 23-26 and it is reference to those who will say that based on present world events Jesus has already come or will come soon.

In Luke 21:8, these two ways are stated in one sentence. *"Take heed that you not be misled; for many will come in My name, saying, 'I am He', and, 'The time is at hand'; do not go after them."* Here we see a serious warning from our Savior not to pay attention to two things: to those who say they are

Jesus, and to those who say the time of the Lord's return is at hand, or His return is soon.

Dear Christian, have you heard anything like that lately? Jesus tells us to beware of those who say that wars and earthquakes and famines etc., signify that He is coming back soon. According to the Lord Jesus, calling these things signs of His return mislead the people of God because in reality, there are no signs of the Lord's coming; there is only one sign.

Now, if Jesus meant that wars and earthquakes and famines and persecution and wickedness are signs of His coming, that would be quite confusing would it not, because every age and generation has experienced these things. In earth's history, when has there *not* been the existence of wars, earthquakes, famines, persecution, or wickedness?

It would not have been a good sign for Jesus to say, "I will come when you see wars, earthquakes, famines, persecution and wickedness." because mankind has always had these things! These things are not signs of His coming, and Jesus has warned us not to listen to those who say they are.

In Luke 17:20 we read, "*Having been questioned by the Pharisees as to when the kingdom of God was coming, He answered and said, 'The kingdom of God is not coming with signs to be observed.'*" Dear Christian, God has clearly told us that He will not give any signs whereby man might prepare for His coming. His kingdom will not come with signs to be observed.

Will there be wars, earthquakes, famines, persecution and wickedness upon this earth? Of course! Are they indications that the Lord's coming is near? No! What are they? Are not wars the expressions of the sinful heart of man? James 4:1

states, *"What is the source of quarrels and conflicts among you? Is not the source your pleasures that wage war in your members?"* People fight, wars ensue, because people are selfish and greedy. Wars are not a sign of the Lord's coming but a common result of man's sin.

And why are there earthquakes? The answer may not sound spiritual, but it is true. Earthquakes are the result of the earth's crust constantly shifting and settling. It may seem like earthquakes are on the increase, but it is more likely that with modern technology more earthquakes are being recorded.

And you know why there are famines. Famines are the result of droughts, conflicts, and political corruption. Jesus said there are going to be wars, earthquakes and famines, etc., some are going to call them signs of His coming, but do not believe them.

Signs act as signals that cause us to expect something. When driving down the road, we often see signs. And these signs prepare us in advance for what we are approaching, such as a town or an intersection or a curve in the road. In the Olivet Discourse, over and over again Jesus makes it clear that trying to determine in advance when He will return by observing signs is out of the question.

In Matthew 24:43, 44, He said He would come like a thief in the night, that is, at a time when no one will be expecting Him. Jesus is not going to give the world signs that people may prepare for His soon return. Rather, His message is this: Live at all times prepared for His coming! In verse 13, He said, *"Be on the alert, for you do not know the day nor the hour."*

The main message of the Olivet Discourse is live prepared! How do we live prepared for the Lord's coming? In the par-

able of the ten virgins, (Matthew 25:1-13) we learn that being prepared means availing ourselves of every opportunity God gives to continually grow in the heart-knowledge of Christ before He returns, illustrated by the lamps which need oil to constantly feed their flames.

In the parable of the ten talents, (Matthew 25:14-30) we learn that being prepared means continually living according to the heart-knowledge of God that is given to us, illustrated by the Lord's pleasure over the servants who invested the money given to them.

Dear Christian, do not be misled! In John 12, our Lord said, *"It is an evil and adulterous generation that seeks after a sign."* Do not be a sign seeker! The Bible is clear that Jesus will return one day, but no one knows if His return is soon. He may return tonight, or He may not return for a thousand years. No one knows! And all the events taking place in our world today are not signs of His return. Yes, our Heavenly Father is behind them and allowing them to fulfill His purposes, but these events are not signs of His soon coming.

What is the one sign of the Lord's second coming? That one sign is actually a miracle. The word *"sign"* is not referring to some natural or man-made disturbance, but a miracle of God.

Matthew 24:29, 30 states, *"But immediately after the tribulation of those days the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will fall from the sky, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken, and then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky with power and great glory."*

Jesus says when He comes; He will come so suddenly, no one will have time to prepare. He will come as verse 27 says, as quickly as lightning flashes across the sky. The event will be in an instant! And as to the sign of His coming, in so many words Jesus says, "When you see Me you will know I am here!" The one sign or miracle of the Lord's coming is the Lord's coming itself - His appearing is the sign!

Dear Christian, there seems to be much confusion today among God's people, not only concerning the Lord's return but also concerning prophecy in general. And perhaps it is because many seem to be missing the Holy Spirit's emphasis concerning Bible prophecy.

In Revelation 19:10, we read this all-encompassing verse: "*The testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy.*" In other words, Jesus is the heart, the core, the gist of prophecy. All Bible prophecy finds its meaning and significance in the person of Christ!

The Bible's emphasis when it comes to future prophecy, including the Olivet Discourse, is not on an event called the second coming. The Bible's emphasis is on a person, the Lord Himself; not *what* is coming, but *who* is coming!

Many study Bible prophecy in order to formulate charts and come up with a sequence of events. But the Bible never tells us about the future in order that we might know the future. It tells us about the future in order that we might know Christ and enjoy an intimate union with Him now in the present!

All that the Spirit writes in the Scriptures about the future is designed to turn the eyes of our hearts to Jesus now! Jesus is the spirit of prophecy. All prophecy centers in Him! It is all designed to reveal Christ! In our study of Bible prophecy, if

our goal is not to know Jesus, then we are frustrating God's purpose for prophecy in the Bible and in our lives.

Dear Christian, may I encourage you, in your study of those Bible passages that lend themselves to the future, be Christ-centered, not prophecy-centered. Something is very wrong if, when we think of the second coming, our minds do not immediately register *Jesus*, the One who is coming!

Study Bible prophecy, dear believer, but study it for one purpose: to grow in the grace and knowledge of Christ. Much confusion, pride and even anxiety may result when our eyes are focused on the future, but only joy, rest, and faith results when our eyes are focused on the God of the future.

*I wait; and while I wait, I greet my ever coming King
Who rises daily, as the sun, with healing in His wing.
I do not fret and wring my hands, or mourn His long delay
How can I think Him absent when I see Him every day?*

*He ever shows Himself afresh to those who seek His face;
He makes a grand appearance to the heart that trusts His grace.
Someday the King, arrayed in light, no doubt, the sky will part
But until then I now enjoy His advent in my heart!*

- Edward P. Miller