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“Towards a Closer Walk with God”

by

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About the Author



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TUESDAY, OCTOBER 1

PSALM 119:1-16

2 TIMOTHY 2:22

“Flee also youthful lusts.”

HOW SHALL A YOUNG MAN CLEANSE HIS WAY? (1)

Two oft-quoted verses from Psalm 119 — verses 9 and 11 — are full of instruction. Today, we will consider verse 9:

“Wherewithal shall a young man cleanse his way? by taking heed thereto according to thy word.”

Peculiar temptations assail the young on their journey of life. Many are the dangers and snares that encompass their path. The apostle Paul warned his young charge, Timothy, to *“flee also youthful lusts”* (2 Tim 2:22). Even when awakened by divine grace, their hearts are inclined to their old nature, to wander from God, and to gratify their fleshly lusts. How their hearts are prone to rush into forbidden indulgences, and to fall into sin!

But there is a sure way of escape from the waves of peril. In this psalm, the psalmist pondered: “How shall a young man cleanse his way? How shall a young man make the course of his life pure and upright? How shall he keep himself from being defiled by the ungodly influences of the world? What must he do to gain victory over every temptation?” Even as he considered these important questions (v 9a), the psalmist had a ready answer (v 9b): Let him take *“heed thereto according to thy word.”* Thus did young Daniel and his godly companions. They cleansed their way and kept themselves pure from the defilement of a heathen atmosphere. Thus did the faithful slave Joseph *“cleanse his way”* when he boldly rejected the advances of Potiphar’s wife: *“How then can I do this great wickedness, and sin against God?”* (Gen 39:9). How precious, therefore, is the Word of God, as the means of this cleansing operation in the hearts of the young! It is also the best shield against the darts of the devil.

THOUGHT: *“My son, keep my words, and lay up my commandments with thee.”* (Prov 7:1)

PRAYER: Lord, help me take heed to Thy Word.

WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 2

PSALM 119:1-16

PSALM 37:23-31

God's Word will guide
us safely Home.

HOW SHALL A YOUNG MAN CLEANSE HIS WAY? (2)

“Thy word have I hid in mine heart, that I might not sin against thee”
(Ps 119:11).

This verse shows that the psalmist treasured the Word of God as the most valuable thing in his heart. Though unseen, it is there. It “constituted the secret power by which he was governed; it was permanently deposited there, as the most valuable of his treasures” (Barnes). Indeed, God’s Word hidden deep in our heart will keep our ways safe. Here it “*dwel(l)s . . . richly in all wisdom*” (Col 3:16), guiding us to do His blessed will.

In Psalm 37:31, the psalmist reiterated this comforting truth: *“The law of his God is in his heart; none of his steps shall slide.”* The course of the Christian who loves God’s Word and makes it the inward rule of his conduct will be steadfast and firm. God will preserve his steps in safety.

How do we keep God’s Word in our heart? By prayerful meditation and study daily. “Holy Scripture requires searching – much of it can only be learned by careful study. There is milk for babes, but also meat for strong men. . . . No man who merely skims the Book of God can profit thereby; we must dig and mine until we obtain the hid treasure. The door of the Word only opens to the key of diligence” (Spurgeon).

God’s Word stands as an antidote to sin. If it is kept in the heart, it stands as a guard against every trial and temptation. Let us cherish this incomparable Guidebook and live by its light daily. May the Lord help us to keep His Word in our heart that we might not sin against Him.

THOUGHT: God’s Word is a safeguard against sin.

PRAYER: May Thy Word, O Lord, be a lamp unto my feet and a light unto my path always.

THURSDAY, OCTOBER 3

MARK 6:16-28

HEBREWS 3:12-19

*“But exhort one another daily...
lest any of you be hardened
through the deceitfulness of sin.”*

THE DECEITFULNESS OF SIN

John the Baptist had boldly reproved Herod Antipas over his adultery with Herodias, his brother's wife: *“For John had said unto Herod, It is not lawful for thee to have thy brother's wife”* (Mark 6:18). However, Herod continued in his sinful indulgence.

Though *“Herod feared John, knowing that he was a just man and an holy”* (v 20), that fear was overruled by the fear of the adverse opinions of others. Charmed by the dancing of Salome, the daughter of Herodias, he rashly promised her whatever she asked *“unto the half of my kingdom”* (v 22-23). When she asked for the head of John the Baptist in a charger (v 25), *“the king was exceeding sorry; yet for his oath's sake, and for their sakes which sat with him, he would not reject her”* (v 26). More concerned about “losing face” than doing right, the king immediately sent an executioner to behead John in the prison and commanded the head to be brought forth in a charger (v 27).

This incident shows us how one can easily slide down the slippery slope of sin. Herod had ignored the divine warning and ended up killing an innocent man. Sin is always deceitful. It blinds the victim by its allurements of pleasure, happiness or gain. One who commits sin is under a delusion because sin leads its victim downward until the heart becomes hardened and the conscience seared. That was why the apostle Paul reminded the Hebrew Christians to *“exhort one another daily, while it is called To day; lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin”* (Heb 3:13).

Have we also been warned against continuing in sin? What is our response? Are we harbouring secret sins in our hearts? Let us determine to heed God's warnings and forsake our sins.

THOUGHT: *“... Let every one that nameth the name of Christ depart from iniquity.”* (2 Tim 2:19)

PRAYER: Lord, help me turn from my wicked ways.

ENOCH – WALKING WITH GOD (1)

Several biblical passages tell us about Enoch's life and testimony (Gen 5:18-24; Luke 3:37; Heb 11:5; Jude 14-15).

"The seventh (generation) from Adam" (Jude 14), Enoch lived 365 years. In the first sixty-five years of his life, nothing significant was recorded, but we are told that for the last 300 years, *"Enoch walked with God: and he was not; for God took him"* (Gen 5:24).

This faithful patriarch stands out from the other lives mentioned in Genesis 5 in that while they died, Enoch did not. After the monotonous repetition of the record of patriarchs – their lifespan, their sons and daughters, and their death (*"lived ... begat ... died"*), "... the account of Enoch's walk with God and translation without death stands forth in brighter relief. His years, 365 (the number of days in one year), were fewer than his predecessors'; but in his fewer years, ... he ... found family ties no hindrance to his walking with God as a family man. Nay, it was not until *"after he begat Methuselah"* (Gen 5:22) that it is written, *"Enoch walked with God"* (Gen 5:24). God's gift of children awakened in him a new love to God and a deeper sense of responsibility" (Fausset's Bible Dictionary).

One Christian writer elaborated: "His son, Methuselah, was born that year. Perhaps the responsibility of bringing up a family weighed on Enoch, and he realised that he needed God's help for the task. Whatever the reason, there was a significant change in his life."

Indeed, the change was a positive one – towards a closer walk with the Lord, as we will see in our study over the next two days.

THOUGHT: Is my life pleasing to God?

PRAYER: Lord, let my life stand out as a beacon for Thee in this dark and sinful world.

ENOCH – WALKING WITH GOD (2)

What does it mean to walk with God? Generally, the expression is used in the Bible to describe one's conduct or manner of life. What characterised Enoch's walk with God?

1. Unwavering faith

Enoch is listed in the roll of faith in Hebrews 11. Like all who possess genuine faith, Enoch believed that God not only exists, but that He rewards those who diligently seek Him (Heb 11:6). Enoch's extraordinary piety over such a long period of time (300 years) earned him the ultimate reward – *"God had translated him"* (Heb 11:5) as He later did Elijah the prophet, and suffered him not to see death.

Faith rests on the promises of God. *"Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen"* (Heb 11:1). Thus faith might be looked upon as the "title deed" of things hoped for.

One may ask, "Enoch lived thousands of years before Christ. What kind of faith did he have?" Old Testament saints had essentially the same faith as ours – they looked forward to Christ the promised Messiah, whereas we look back to the cross of Christ at Calvary. When our first parents fell into sin, God promised to send a Redeemer through the seed of the woman: *"And I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed; it shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise his heel"* (Gen 3:15). Thus did the faithful patriarch look forward to the promised Saviour.

How appropriately did the writer of Hebrews describe the unwavering faith of these Old Testament saints: *"These all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off, and were persuaded of them, and embraced them, and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth"* (Heb 11:13).

THOUGHT: Walking with God yields eternal benefits.

PRAYER: Lord, help me not to waver but to trust Thy promises.

ENOCH – WALKING WITH GOD (3)

2. Uncompromising witness

The apostle Jude tells us more about Enoch's faithful witness: *"And Enoch also, the seventh from Adam, prophesied of these, saying, Behold, the Lord cometh with ten thousands of his saints, To execute judgment upon all, and to convince all that are ungodly among them of all their ungodly deeds which they have ungodly committed, and of all their hard speeches which ungodly sinners have spoken against him"* (Jude 14-15). In these two verses, the word "ungodly" is repeated no fewer than four times. In the following verse, the apostle enlarged on the character of these evil men and seducers: *"These are murmurers, complainers, walking after their own lusts; and their mouth speaketh great swelling words, having men's persons in admiration because of advantage"* (v 16). Though he lived in such a godless society, Enoch stood firm in his witness. He also warned the ungodly to flee from the wrath to come.

The end of Enoch's walk:

Enoch's walk ended when *"God took him"*: *"And Enoch walked with God: and he was not; for God took him"* (Gen 5:24). The expression *"walked with God"* denotes a devout life, lived in close communion with God. In Hebrews 11:5, we are told that *"God had translated him."* We learn further that *"before his translation he had this testimony, that he pleased God"* (Heb 11:5).

"Enoch was removed to a better world. As he did not live like the rest of mankind, so he did not leave the world by death as they did" (Matthew Henry). Like Elijah the prophet, he left the world without dying. It pleased the Lord to literally "take him home." What a wonderful end to a life of walking with God!

THOUGHT: How is my walk with the Lord?

PRAYER: Lord, help me to walk as Enoch walked, without wavering or compromise.

MONDAY, OCTOBER 7

1 CORINTHIANS 15:50-58

1 THESSALONIANS 4:13-18

"We shall all be changed."

OUR BLESSED HOPE

Enoch was commended as one whose life pleased God: "... *before his translation he had this testimony, that he pleased God*" (Heb 11:5).

One Christian writer commented: "It (Enoch's translation) was also a picture of what will happen to every believer when Christ returns."

"We shall not all sleep" (1 Cor 15:51). The apostle Paul revealed that those who are alive at the Lord's coming will be caught up into the clouds, without dying.

This glorious event is commonly referred to as the Rapture (1 Thess 4:15-17). The Rapture will happen suddenly, *"in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trump"* (1 Cor 15:52). In a split second, the time needed for an eye's twinkle, Jesus will come and all believers will be "raptured" or *"caught up"* in the air to meet Him. Our bodies will be miraculously transformed into incorruptible bodies which will last forever. What a blessed hope!

As believers, we all look forward to the Rapture. How wonderful if we could, like Enoch, leave this world without dying! But are we ready for the Lord's return? Are we walking in close communion with the Lord? Have we sought to love and obey Him? If He should return tonight, are we prepared to meet Him?

Dr Horatius Bonar, having served the Lord for some sixty years, had this wonderful habit: As he drew the curtains at night, he would say to himself: "Perhaps tonight, Lord!" When he awoke each morning, he would say, looking up into the sky: "Perhaps today, Lord!" This faithful aged saint was waiting for the Lord to return at any moment. What about us? Are we eagerly waiting too?

THOUGHT: "Maybe today, my Lord will come for me."

PRAYER: Lord, help me to be ready to meet Thee.

TUESDAY, OCTOBER 8

ROMANS 9:14-23

GENESIS 18:16-33

“...who worketh all things
after the counsel
of his own will.”

GOD’S SOVEREIGNTY IN ADVERSITY (1)

The Bible speaks much on the sovereignty of God over every event in our lives. Practically every page of Holy Scripture tells the believer of His divine providence and control.

Our newspapers carry daily reports of tumultuous events in almost every part of the world: natural disasters, terrorist attacks, political strife, pestilences, mass murders, economic instability, etc. In such troubled days when major crises have become regular news features, even the Christian is tempted to ask, “Where is God? Why is God allowing these atrocities and upheavals that are so prevalent today? Is He still in control?”

On a personal level, an unexpected crisis may come in the death of a loved one, a terminal disease, job loss, or failure in an important examination. These sudden afflictions not only cause heartache, anxiety and trauma, but also rob us of our peace of mind.

In the midst of our grief, we may find it hard to believe that God is in control. In the preface of his book, *Trusting God: Even When Life Hurts*, author Jerry Bridges spoke of his deep grief at the sudden death of his mother: “When I was fourteen years old, my mother died suddenly, without warning. I was in the adjoining room and rushed in just in time to see her gasp her last breath. I was stunned and devastated. My older brother was away at school, and my dad was too stricken with grief himself to be able to help me. Worst of all, I did not know how to turn to God in times of trouble. I was alone in my adversity. That was not the first time adversity had struck in my life, and it was certainly not to be the last ... Learning to trust God in adversity has been a slow and difficult process for me.”

The storms of life may descend upon us at any time. When we face adversities, what is our response? Do we think that God is unfair?

THOUGHT: Does God find pleasure in afflicting us?

PRAYER: Lord, help me to trust in Thee, in good times and bad.

GOD’S SOVEREIGNTY IN ADVERSITY (2)

When we meet with sudden hardships that appear unfair or irrational, we may feel perplexed, and wonder if God truly cares about our plight. Before long, we begin to question His goodness: “If God is a God of love, how could He allow this calamity to happen? What have I done to deserve this?” When we respond in this negative way, we are no better than Job’s wife who instigated him to give up his faith, to “*curse God, and die*” (Job 2:9). The suffering patriarch stood loyally by his God and rebuked her, saying: “*Thou speakest as one of the foolish women speaketh. What? shall we receive good at the hand of God, and shall we not receive evil?*” The Bible records that even in his hour of deepest suffering, Job did not “*sin with his lips*” (Job 2:10).

Adversity is hard to endure. In a crisis, our first concern is to seek immediate relief. Even the apostle Paul “*besought the Lord thrice*” for deliverance from the “*thorn in the flesh*” before he finally found God’s grace to be sufficient (2 Cor 12:7-9).

Every affliction is within the realm of God’s sovereignty. How this truth comforts the hearts of His suffering saints! Whatever our particular affliction, we can be assured that our gracious Heavenly Father has a loving purpose in allowing it in our lives (Rom 8:28).

God exercises His sovereignty, not randomly, but according as His infinite love and wisdom deem best. “Every trouble, however light, comes fragrant with blessing. Shall we then overlook it or thrust it away? It is a new opportunity of getting nearer God, and learning more of His love” (Horatius Bonar).

THOUGHT: Do we find it easy to trust God in times of trouble?

PRAYER: Lord, grant me grace to submit to Thy sovereign will.

GOD'S SOVEREIGNTY IN ADVERSITY (3)

God is sovereign. Time and events are under His infinite control. None can thwart God's plans or hinder His purposes.

Let us look at some aspects of God's sovereignty. May this comforting doctrine encourage our hearts to trust Him at all times.

1. God's ways may sometimes be incomprehensible to us.

Sometimes God may reveal the reason behind our affliction. But in many instances, He does not explain what He is doing, or why. Our finite mind simply cannot understand God's divine purposes beyond what He has expressly shown to us. Hence, some things about God will always remain a mystery (Isa 55:8-9).

The Bible tells us that God did not explain to Job why He had so grievously afflicted him. As readers, we have the privilege of observing the dialogue between God and Satan (Job 1:6-12; 2:1-7), but as far as we know from Scripture, God never gave his suffering servant Job the reasons for trying him so severely.

2. God exercises protective care over His people.

In exercising His sovereignty, God acts by restraining people from doing what is contrary to His will. An incident in Abraham's life clearly illustrates this truth. When the patriarch was in Gerar, he lied about his wife, Sarah, saying she was his sister because he feared for his life. Abimelech the king, therefore, *"sent, and took Sarah"* (Gen 20:2). God, however, suffered Abimelech *"not to touch her"* (v 6). In this way, the Lord intervened to preserve the purity of Sarah and the Messianic line.

THOUGHT: "God moves in a mysterious way, His wonders to perform."
(William Cowper)

PRAYER: Lord, help me never to question Thy way or Thy will.

GOD'S SOVEREIGNTY IN ADVERSITY (4)

3. God promises to be with us in our afflictions.

God will not spare us from life's adversities, but He will go through them with us (Isa 43:2).

In his struggle with *"a thorn in the flesh,"* the apostle Paul found God's grace sufficient: *"And he said unto me, My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness. Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me"* (2 Cor 12:9).

4. God uses adversities to mould our lives.

Every adversity allowed by God, whether big or small, is intended to help us mature in our faith: *"Knowing this, that the trying of your faith worketh patience"* (James 1:3). Sorely tried, the patriarch Job responded: *"But he knoweth the way that I take: when he hath tried me, I shall come forth as gold"* (Job 23:10).

God has lessons for us to learn in every affliction. It may be our need for patience or humility; it may be our need to deal with our sins, loosen our grip on the things we love, or wholly depend upon Him. God works through adversity to sanctify us and make us more *"conformed to the image of his Son"* (Rom 8:29).

In moulding our lives through adversities, God makes no mistakes. *"He knows infallibly with infinite wisdom what combination of good and bad circumstances will bring us more and more into sharing His holiness"* (Jerry Bridges). Like an expert physician, the Lord dispenses the exact dose of affliction according to our needs.

THOUGHT: God allows afflictions for our profit.

PRAYER: *"It is good for me that I have been afflicted; that I might learn thy statutes."* (Ps 119:71)

GOD’S SOVEREIGNTY IN ADVERSITY (5)

5. Submit humbly to God’s will.

Acknowledge God’s sovereignty and bow to His will (Dan 4:35). Do not be bitter or discouraged, but see the gracious purpose of God. Though we may not fully understand it, seek to learn the lessons He has for us. May we say with Job: “*The LORD gave, and the LORD hath taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD*” (Job 1:21). In the words of Arthur Pink, “The one who bows to the pleasure of the Almighty will acknowledge His absolute right to do with us as seemeth Him good. If He chooses to send poverty, sickness, domestic bereavements, even while the heart is bleeding at every pore, it will say, Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right!”

6. See the higher hand of God.

God sometimes allows others to treat us unjustly. We see this truth clearly in the life of Joseph.

Jealous of their young brother because of their father’s affection for him, Joseph’s brothers tried to get rid of him. But God had planned to use their wicked scheme to send Joseph ahead to “*save much people alive*” during the seven years of famine in Egypt.

When his brothers later sought his forgiveness, Joseph responded without a trace of bitterness or resentment: “*But as for you, ye thought evil against me; but God meant it unto good, to bring to pass, as it is this day, to save much people alive*” (Gen 50:20). His response reflected a meek spirit that willingly accepted God’s sovereign purpose, even if it meant going through much pain and suffering. Joseph saw the higher hand of God working out His divine purposes through the evil acts of the wicked.

THOUGHT: What does a bitter spirit reveal about me?

PRAYER: Lord, may I see Thy higher hand in all my trials.

GOD'S SOVEREIGNTY IN ADVERSITY (6)

Adversity often comes to us through the actions of others. Our tendency is to harbour bitterness, and to retaliate. However, we are to look beyond the person, who is merely the instrument, and look to our God who has ordained that specific affliction for us. Like Joseph, may we appreciate the divine purpose, and forgive those who have hurt us or “brought about” our sufferings.

7. Commit our cares to God.

Commit ourselves to God who knows best how to help, strengthen and sustain us in our afflictions. Peter's exhortation to cast “*all your care upon him; for he careth for you*” (1 Pet 5:7) is specially for the afflicted saint. God's grace is sufficient to meet our every need.

How can we trust God in the midst of pain and grief? If God is in control, why does He allow afflictions in our lives? Remember that God is sovereign, perfect in love, and infinite in wisdom. He has a purpose for all that He allows to come into our lives. No creature, ruler or nation can thwart His purposes or act beyond the boundaries of His will. In the face of adversity and tragedy, let us cling to this truth, trusting God to work all things together for our good.

“God never wastes pain. He always uses it to accomplish His purpose. And His purpose is for His glory and our good. Therefore, we can trust Him when our hearts are aching and our bodies are racked with pain” (Jerry Bridges).

Like Job, let us affirm our faith in the Lord: “*Though he slay me, yet will I trust in him*” (Job 13:15). May we learn, through it all, to seek His grace that is ever sufficient for us.

THOUGHT: When afflicted, let me commit myself to “*him that judgeth righteously.*” (1 Pet 2:23)

PRAYER: Lord, help me to trust in Thy infinite wisdom and will.

MONDAY, OCTOBER 14

MATTHEW 5:33-37

MARK 14:66-72

“Swear not at all.”

“LET YOUR YEA BE YEA; AND YOUR NAY, NAY” (1)

The tongue is an unruly member, full of deadly poison (James 3:8). No member of the body brings more dishonour to God than the tongue. This is so in the way it is used for cursing and swearing.

Profane swearing has become a common practice in our world today. Very often, we hear people invoking the name of God in order to lend weight to their words, or to express their anger or disgust. This shows how little they respect or fear God.

Using God’s name lightly or thoughtlessly in idle discourse is to take God’s name in vain (Exod 20:7). Even Christians take God’s name in vain (knowingly or unknowingly) by using it as an exclamation. We insult God when we swear using His name.

What lessons can we learn from Scripture about this insidious habit?

Jesus condemned rash swearing in ordinary conversations: *“Again, ye have heard that it hath been said by them of old time, Thou shalt not forswear thyself, but shalt perform unto the Lord thine oaths: But I say unto you, Swear not at all; neither by heaven; for it is God’s throne: Nor by the earth; for it is his footstool: neither by Jerusalem; for it is the city of the great King. Neither shalt thou swear by thy head, because thou canst not make one hair white or black. But let your communication be, Yea, yea; Nay, nay: for whatsoever is more than these cometh of evil”* (Matt 5:33-37).

The context of His words here concerns the verity of a person’s speech. Jesus taught His disciples and those around Him to speak plainly and truthfully. Instead of swearing and calling upon the name of the Lord, a short “*yea*” or “*nay*” is enough.

THOUGHT: “A man that is truly a Christian, and leads a Christian life, does not need oaths and profaneness to make him believed.” (Barnes)

PRAYER: Lord, may I speak plainly and truthfully at all times.

TUESDAY, OCTOBER 15

EXODUS 20:7

JAMES 5:12-20

“...whatsoever is more than
these cometh of evil.”

“LET YOUR YEA BE YEA; AND YOUR NAY, NAY” (2)

Profane swearing reflects a sinful heart. To trifle with the name of God, or with any of His attributes, is evidence of depravity. One who swears profanely degrades himself to the very lowest level of pollution and shame. “It is disgusting to the refined; abominable to the good; insulting to those with whom we associate; degrading to the mind; unprofitable, needless, and injurious in society; and awful in the sight of God” (Barnes).

A righteous man’s yea is yea, and his nay is nay; his one word is sufficient. Whatever is more than simple affirmations and denials proceeds from a corrupt heart and purpose.

The third commandment forbids the careless use of God’s name: “*Thou shalt not take the name of the LORD thy God in vain*” (Exod 20:7a). This prohibition comes with a strong warning: “... *the LORD will not hold him guiltless that taketh his name in vain*” (v 7b).

The apostle James issued a similar warning: “*But above all things, my brethren, swear not, neither by heaven, neither by the earth, neither by any other oath: but let your yea be yea; and your nay, nay; lest ye fall into condemnation*” (James 5:12).

God Himself will be the avenger of those that take His name in vain; the guilty will find it “*a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God*” (Heb 10:31). Why this severe punishment? Any insolent or careless use of God’s name betrays our irreverent attitude towards God Himself. It clearly reflects that we think lightly of Him.

Let us not use God’s name lightly or frivolously. Honour God in all our conversations. “*Let your yea be yea; and your nay, nay.*”

THOUGHT: Do I trifle with the Name of God?

PRAYER: Lord, help me to reverence Thy holy Name.

“LET YOUR YEA BE YEA; AND YOUR NAY, NAY” (3)

In his epistle to the Corinthians, the apostle Paul used the words “yea” and “nay” numerous times (2 Cor 1:16-20). He concluded with the undeniable fact that God is true to His word (v 20). God’s faithfulness was another reason why Paul felt bound to emulate the Lord, and to maintain a character of the highest integrity. What practical lessons can we glean from Paul’s exhortation?

1. Promises

Verity and truth are the Christian’s distinct virtues. We must be truthful in every aspect of our lives; and maintain a good witness by honouring our word. We shame God’s name when we fail to fulfil our promises. Let us do our best to keep our promises.

2. Punctuality

One of the ways we fail to keep our word is by being habitually late. Consistent lateness gives us a bad name and dishonours the Lord; and “He/she is always late” will be how people will remember us.

Sadly, many Christians are not too concerned about punctuality. Habitual lateness reflects a slack attitude, and a lack of respect for others. When we are late, we “steal” someone’s time. It violates the golden rule of treating others as we would want to be treated (Matt 7:12). This tardy spirit is even worse when it comes to the services of the church. Habitual lateness manifests a lack of reverence for God and His sanctuary; it also reveals a heart that has no interest in the things of God.

If we are consistently late, let us examine our attitude towards the Lord and others. Seek to honour the Lord. Plan to be punctual for all our appointments.

THOUGHT: “Punctuality is the politeness of kings.” (Louis XVIII)

PRAYER: Lord, may I keep my word at all times.

“LET YOUR YEA BE YEA; AND YOUR NAY, NAY” (4)

3. Profession

Some of Jesus’ sharpest words are found in Matthew 7. Here, at the end of His sermon on the mount, Jesus strongly denounces those who falsely confess His name (Matt 7:21-23).

The Lord had many followers who honoured Him only with their lips, but not with their hearts. Among them were the false prophets and teachers who claimed to prophesy, and work miracles, signs and wonders in God’s name. The Lord rejected their pleas with these dreadful words: *“Depart from me, ye that work iniquity.”* Those terse words of Christ showed them up for what they really were: hypocrites! Sadly, the end of these false professors and miracle workers was a most tragic one!

Jesus’ parable about the two builders drives home this solemn truth. When completed, the two houses looked alike on the outside: good and strong. But looks can deceive. One was built on solid rock while the other was built on shifting sand. The test came with the violent storm and rain. One stood firm while the other fell flat.

A false profession cannot save us. We may be found in church each Lord’s Day, but do we really know the Lord? Does our faith permeate our lives?

The one sure evidence of our faith is obedience. *“... he that doeth the will of my Father which is in heaven”* shall enter into God’s kingdom. May our words and works reflect our faith in the Lord.

THOUGHT: Do I have true saving faith?

PRAYER: Lord, help me to be a doer of Thy Word.

FRIDAY, OCTOBER 18

1 PETER 2:1-10

ROMANS 1:7-12

*“And he is the head
of the body, the church...”*

IS THE CHURCH MERELY A BUILDING?

What comes to mind when we think of a church? Quite naturally, we picture a building where one goes to worship on the Lord’s Day. The English word “church” is derived from the Greek adjective, “*kyriakon*,” meaning “the Lord’s” (*Theology For Every Christian* by Timothy Tow and Jeffrey Khoo). It may refer to (1) the Lord’s people in general, (2) any particular group of the Lord’s people, or (3) the building in which the Lord’s people worship (1 Cor 11:20; Rev 1:11). The Greek word for “church” is “*ekklesia*” meaning “called out, summoned out or gathered.” So Christians are “the called-out ones,” an assembly separated unto God.

Interestingly, the church is sometimes referred to without the use of the word itself. We see this in 1 Peter 2:9-10: *“But ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation, a peculiar people; that ye should shew forth the praises of him who hath called you out of darkness into his marvellous light: Which in time past were not a people, but are now the people of God: which had not obtained mercy, but now have obtained mercy.”*

However, in most instances, the word “church” refers to a particular local church: *“Greet the church that is in their house”* (Rom 16:5). When writing to the churches, the apostles assumed that they were addressing regenerate church members: *“To all that be in Rome, beloved of God, called to be saints: Grace to you and peace from God our Father, and the Lord Jesus Christ”* (Rom 1:7); *“Unto the church of God which is at Corinth, to them that are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints...”* (1 Cor 1:2).

Thank God for calling us out of darkness into His marvellous light. What a privilege to know Him and His saving grace. Let us treasure the blessings of belonging to the church of God.

THOUGHT: Do I belong to a church?

PRAYER: Lord, may I be a faithful member of my church.

MEMBERS ONE OF ANOTHER (1)

In his letter to the Corinthians, the apostle Paul compared the church of Christ to a human body. This analogy is reflected in the unity of believers in the following ways:

1. We have been bought with the same price.

Our Lord Jesus Christ paid the ultimate price for our redemption: *“Forasmuch as ye know that ye were not redeemed with corruptible things, as silver and gold, from your vain conversation received by tradition from your fathers; But with the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot”* (1 Pet 1:18-19).

In his address to the Ephesian elders, the apostle Paul spoke of the *“church of God, which he hath purchased with his own blood”* (Acts 20:28). Thank God for our Saviour who has *“obtained eternal redemption for us”* (Heb 9:12). Precious indeed is our blood-bought bond and the blessed fellowship we can have with one another through Christ our Saviour!

2. We are heirs of the same inheritance.

What a happy privilege to be the sons and daughters of the Living and True God! As joint heirs with Christ, we will partake with Him of the magnificent glories of our heavenly home: *“Let not your heart be troubled: ye believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father’s house are many mansions: if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you unto myself; that where I am, there ye may be also”* (John 14:1-3). O what joy will fill our hearts when our Lord returns in His glory to take us back to dwell with Him forevermore!

THOUGHT: While on earth, let us treasure our blood-bought bond and sweet fellowship with our fellow saints.

PRAYER: I thank Thee, Lord, for Thy redeeming grace.

MEMBERS ONE OF ANOTHER (2)

3. We have been endowed by the same Holy Spirit.

In His wisdom, God has designed unity as well as diversity in His church. Writing to the Corinthians, the apostle Paul was mindful that he was addressing a diverse group of people. Their differences stemmed from their race (Jew or Gentile), their social status (slave or free), and their spiritual gifts.

However, it is the same Holy Spirit who quickens and ministers to each member of the Body of Christ (1 Cor 12:4; 7-13). Throughout the whole chapter, the apostle emphasized that despite the diverse spiritual gifts, “all have the same Spirit for their author, and all conspiring for the same common end, the glory of God in the edification of the church” (*Family Bible Notes*).

This teaches us that none in the church are to be despised or treated with contempt. The Spirit of God is involved with us in the building up of His church. We see His interest and influence as He confers gifts upon each member, according to His wise counsel. This means that the Lord does it as a sovereign act of grace. God distributes these gifts and favours as He deems fit and good for the strengthening of the Body of Christ. These gifts are not to be used for private honour or advantage but to edify the church, and to advance the Gospel.

Let us not envy or resent others if their gifts seem better than ours. Rather, let us submit to God's sovereign will with a thankful and humble heart. May each member use his or her gifts for “*the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ*” (Eph 4:12). Let us endeavour “*to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace*” (Eph 4:3).

THOUGHT: Do I envy others who have seemingly better gifts?

PRAYER: Lord, help me to use my gifts for Thy service and glory.

MONDAY, OCTOBER 21

1 CORINTHIANS 12:14-31

ROMANS 12:3-13

“...all members have not
the same office.”

MEMBERS ONE OF ANOTHER (3)

4. We are members of the same Body

The apostle Paul illustrated the unity of Christians by a beautiful similitude taken from the mutual dependence of the various parts of the human body. Paul reminded the Corinthian Christians that although they were individual members of the church, they were one in the Body of Christ: *“For as the body is one, and hath many members, and all the members of that one body, being many, are one body: so also is Christ”* (1 Cor 12:12).

The Lord, the Head of the Church, has given every believer a place in the Body life. Every limb and part is alive and active, ever ready to serve God according to its ability. Imagine if one member of our body has to do the work designed for another. Think of the absurdity of using our nose to feel, our knees to see, or our feet to eat. Like parts of the body, we must each function according to our respective design for the benefit of the whole.

With this metaphor in view, it is important that believers be of one mind and heart in the service of the Lord. No one should say: “I do not see the need to relate to my brethren, or serve in the church.” A church is never meant to be a place where we keep to ourselves; we all need one another in the Body life. Use our talents, tithes and time to serve God and to extend the work of the Gospel.

Remember the Lord’s commandment to love one another. Let those outside the church be drawn to Christ by our sincere love for our brethren: *“A new commandment I give unto you, That ye love one another; as I have loved you, that ye also love one another. By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another”* (John 13:34-35).

THOUGHT: What are my responsibilities as a church member?

PRAYER: Lord, grant me grace to love my brethren.

TUESDAY, OCTOBER 22

ACTS 9:1-2

PHILIPPIANS 3:4-14

Zeal without knowledge
is dangerous.

SAUL – THE SELF-RIGHTEOUS PHARISEE

Looking at the life of the apostle Paul, one cannot help but note the whole-hearted devotion of this great servant of God.

Few, if any, can match the apostle in his total dedication to his Saviour and the cause of the Gospel. His was a life that was wholly yielded for the Master's use. His one consuming passion in life was to preach Christ and Him crucified, *"that in nothing I shall be ashamed, but that with all boldness, as always, so now also Christ shall be magnified in my body, whether it be by life, or by death"* (Phil 1:20). He wrote often of his great desire *"to depart, and to be with Christ; which is far better"* (Phil 1:23b). To better understand Paul, it is pertinent to look at his life before and after conversion.

Before his conversion on the road to Damascus, Saul (as he was then called) was a proud persecutor of Christians, a self-righteous Pharisee full of zeal and fervour for God. His was a righteousness borne out of the works of the Law. He described himself as one *"circumcised the eighth day, of the stock of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, an Hebrew of the Hebrews; as touching the law, a Pharisee"* (Phil 3:5). With such a distinguished heritage, Saul considered himself pure in the eyes of God: *"Concerning zeal, persecuting the church; touching the righteousness which is in the law, blameless"* (Phil 3:6).

Despite his strict observances of the Law, Saul found no freedom in his religion. Though he revelled in his pedigree and self-righteousness, it did not bring him true joy. In fact, he was in utter bondage under the slavish demands of the Law. He strove to adhere rigidly to the dictates of the Mosaic rights and rituals which could not bring him salvation.

THOUGHT: Do I have zeal without knowledge?

PRAYER: Lord, direct my zeal to do Thy will.

WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 23

GALATIANS 1:10-17

ACTS 9:1-18

*“...yield yourselves...as instruments
of righteousness unto God.”*

PAUL – A TRANSFORMED LIFE

So zealous was Saul in the keeping of the Law that he was wholly opposed to the Gospel. In his epistles, he spoke of his previous hatred for Christ and His Church: *“For ye have heard of my conversation in time past in the Jews’ religion, how that beyond measure I persecuted the church of God, and wasted it”* (Gal 1:13).

Why was he so hostile to the Gospel of Christ? Probably, Saul, along with his fellow Jews, viewed the preaching of the Gospel as blasphemy. To them, Christ was a lowly man who suffered a criminal’s death on the cross. How could these Christians regard Him as the Messiah? With this misguided conviction, Saul began in earnest to persecute the Church of Christ. Given official authority to arrest Christians, he went on his wicked errands and relentlessly pursued the early believers *“... yet breathing out threatenings and slaughter against the disciples of the Lord...”* (Acts 9:1).

But when the Lord providentially called him to salvation and service, the apostle (now renamed Paul) found unspeakable joy and liberty in Christ. Life for Paul would never be the same again. He could say triumphantly: *“But what things were gain to me, those I counted loss for Christ. Yea doubtless, and I count all things but loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord: for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and do count them but dung, that I may win Christ”* (Phil 3:7-8).

That self-righteous Pharisaic spirit had given way to a life of humility and sacrificial service. His life was submitted to the directive of His Lord and Saviour. No more would the apostle bow to the dictates of his own human understanding, nor would he labour ceaselessly to gain his salvation. The glorious Gospel of grace had administered mercy upon this ruthless persecutor and turned him into the great preacher and writer of Holy Scriptures, and a lover of God’s people.

THOUGHT: How has the Gospel transformed my life?

PRAYER: Lord, may I be a vessel that is wholly yielded for Thy use.

PAUL – MOTIVATED BY THE LOVE OF CHRIST (1)

It is no small wonder that throughout Paul’s epistles, he spoke of his all-consuming passion: to preach the Lord Jesus Christ and Him crucified. Nothing else mattered – his own comfort, his physical well-being, the praise of men, not even his life: *“But none of these things move me, neither count I my life dear unto myself, so that I might finish my course with joy, and the ministry, which I have received of the Lord Jesus, to testify the gospel of the grace of God”* (Acts 20:24). Everything else paled in significance when compared to Christ, his Saviour. He was determined to let nothing deter him in the work of the ministry.

What was it that so motivated the great apostle in this all-consuming way? What was it that drove him to wholly consecrate his life to his Master’s service? The answer is found in 2 Corinthians 5:14: *“For the love of Christ constraineth us; because we thus judge, that if one died for all, then were all dead.”*

Yes, it was the love of Christ that called Paul the “chief of sinners” to be “the Apostle to the Gentiles.” The word “*constraineth*” means “to hold together, to press together, to shut up; then to press on, urge, impel, or excite.” Here it means that the impelling or exciting motive in the labours and self-denials of Paul was the love of Christ.

“The love of Christ had such a constraining power, and obliging force and efficacy upon the soul, that it inclines it to a willing performance of all duties, though attended with the greatest difficulties and dangers. Love is the spring of action, ‘tis forcible and compelling, ‘tis an invincible, unconquerable affection: and it has such an influence from the consideration of what Christ is in Himself, and of what He has done for us, and designed for us” (William Burkitt).

THOUGHT: Am I willing to suffer and die for Christ?

PRAYER: Lord, let nothing deter me in my service for Thee.

PAUL – MOTIVATED BY THE LOVE OF CHRIST (2)

What kind of love was it that so impelled this servant of God to be so completely transformed from a hater and relentless persecutor of Christians to a zealous, dynamic preacher of the Gospel? What had so moved the hardened heart of this “chief of sinners,” and convicted him so that he was willing to give up his all for his Saviour’s sake? What had motivated Paul so much that he was willing to suffer and even die for the Lord? It was the wonderful, supreme and unconditional love which Jesus Christ manifested on the cross at Calvary.

Our Saviour loves us with a deep and everlasting love. So great is that love that He forsook Heaven’s glory and humbled Himself, taking on the form of a servant. He suffered at the hands of sinful men who scornfully humiliated Him (Phil 2:6-8). The love of Christ took Him through all the shame, revilings and jeerings of His persecutors. Truly, God “*hath made him to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in him*” (2 Cor 5:21).

Having loved His own, He loved them till the very end. That was the heart of our Saviour. There was no turning back even when faced with the shameful and painful prospect of the cross. At Gethsemane, He bowed to the Father’s will: “*O my Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me: nevertheless not as I will, but as thou wilt*” (Matt 26:39). On Calvary’s cross, He gave His life for the sins of the world.

*The love of God is greater far than tongue or pen can ever tell;
It goes beyond the highest star, and reaches to the lowest hell;
The guilty pair, bowed down with care, God gave His Son to win;
His erring child He reconciled, and pardoned from his sin.*

THOUGHT: “*But God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.*” (Rom 5:8)

PRAYER: Lord, I thank Thee for Thy redeeming love for me.

PAUL – MOTIVATED BY THE LOVE OF CHRIST (3)

Few servants of God had suffered for their faith as much as the apostle did. Paul had to face persecution, rejection, reproaches, shipwreck, whippings, and other physical abuses because of His love for the Saviour (2 Cor 6:4-5; 11:23-30). But the faithful apostle allowed nothing to deter him from the path of holy service. In his afflictions, he rejoiced in the Lord. In fact, in the epistles he wrote from prison, he encouraged the believers to trust in God.

All through Paul's life, he kept a clear perspective of the love of Christ. He considered his many afflictions light when compared with the eternal glory that awaited him: *"For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, worketh for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory; While we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen: for the things which are seen are temporal; but the things which are not seen are eternal"* (2 Cor 4:17-18). He considered it a high privilege to suffer for his Saviour who loved him and gave Himself for him.

"We should not make ourselves, but Christ, the end of our living and actions: and it was one end of Christ's death to cure us of this self-love, and to excite us always to act under the commanding influence of his love. A Christian's life should be consecrated to Christ; and then do we live as we ought to live when we live to Christ, who died for us" (Matthew Henry).

Indeed, *"the love of Christ constraineth us."* How should we respond to such a sacrificial love? Having experienced His gracious love, should we not love others in the same way? Should we not live only for Him, and wholly consecrate ourselves to serve Him?

THOUGHT: In what ways has the love of Christ influenced my life?

PRAYER: Lord, may I love and serve Thee with all my heart.

THE FEAR OF THE LORD (1)

Many today scoff at the way the Bible presents God as a God of judgment and wrath. To them, God is a God of love, always gracious and kind. While this understanding may be true, it is a lop-sided view.

The Bible tells us that our God is a God of justice who will by no means acquit the guilty (Exod 34:7). King Solomon issued this warning: *"For God shall bring every work into judgment, with every secret thing, whether it be good, or whether it be evil"* (Eccles 12:14).

"The fear of the LORD" is a major theme in the book of Proverbs. The theme verse is found in Proverbs 1:7: *"The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge..."* This means that *"the fear of the LORD"* is the first and controlling principle of wisdom. One writer elaborates: *"Until we understand who God is, and develop a reverential fear of Him, we cannot have true wisdom."*

The fear of the Lord is our basis for living wisely. In the book of Leviticus, the phrase is used five times to remind the Israelites to relate to their brethren in the fear of the Lord:

"Thou shalt not curse the deaf, nor put a stumblingblock before the blind, but shalt fear thy God: I am the LORD" (Lev 19:14).

"Thou shalt rise up before the hoary head, and honour the face of the old man, and fear thy God: I am the LORD" (Lev 19:32).

"Ye shall not therefore oppress one another; but thou shalt fear thy God: for I am the LORD your God" (Lev 25:17).

"Take thou no usury of him, or increase: but fear thy God; that thy brother may live with thee" (Lev 25:36).

"Thou shalt not rule over him with rigour; but shalt fear thy God" (Lev 25:43).

THOUGHT: "It is not only reasonable that we should fear God, ...but it is advantageous to us." (Matthew Henry)

PRAYER: Lord, teach me to fear Thee and not man.

MONDAY, OCTOBER 28

1 CHRONICLES 16:23-30

GENESIS 39:7-12

*“Blessed is every one that
feareth the LORD...”*

THE FEAR OF THE LORD (2)

What is the “*fear of the LORD*”? It is a reverential awe of God; a reverence that is based on a revelation of His nature, His glory, His majesty, His power and purposes.

It arises from a great sense of God’s greatness and majesty. When God’s faithful servants, Moses and Isaiah, beheld visions of the Lord, they fell before His awesome majesty. Similarly, John the beloved disciple fell at the feet of Christ as a dead man when he beheld the vision of the ascended Christ at the isle of Patmos (Rev 1:10-18).

To fear God is also to have a proper regard for His wrath: “*For great is the LORD, and greatly to be praised: he also is to be feared above all gods*” (1 Chron 16:25). “*Thou, even thou, art to be feared: and who may stand in thy sight when once thou art angry?*” (Ps 76:7). It includes an understanding of how much God hates sin, and a fear of His judgment upon us.

The fear of the Lord drives one to humbly seek and obey the Lord’s will. He who fears God has a deep love and reverence for Him, and will not sin against Him lightly or habitually. Such a one is conscious that God is watching his every action, weighing his every motive, and aware of his every thought. Such godly fear was in the heart of Joseph when he fled from the seductive attempt of Potiphar’s wife (Gen 39:12).

“This fear is not that of a slave; it is not mere dread ... It is consistent with love, and springs from it. It is consistent with calmness of mind, and promotes it. It does not produce terror, but rather delivers from it, and preserves the mind from alarms” (Barnes).

THOUGHT: “We fear men so much, because we fear God so little.”
(William Gurnall)

PRAYER: Lord, may my fear of Thee govern all my actions and reactions.

THE FEAR OF THE LORD (3)

The fear of the Lord brings with it many blessings and benefits. These rich rewards are reflected in many passages of the Bible:

1. A good understanding

The fear of the Lord gives us wisdom; it will direct us to speak and act according to our faith, for our own benefit and the blessing of others: *“The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom: a good understanding have all they that do his commandments: his praise endureth for ever”* (Ps 111:10). This verse means that where the fear of the Lord rules in the heart, there will be a constant, conscientious care to keep His commandments, and not merely to talk of them. One who fears God understands well biblical precepts, and is ready to obey them (Prov 3:5-6).

2. A strong confidence

“In the fear of the LORD is strong confidence: and his children shall have a place of refuge” (Prov 14:26). Fear torments the unbeliever (Dan 5:5-6), but the fear of the Lord brings comfort and joy to the believer even in the most trying circumstances.

Confidence and faith issue out of such a godly fear. Abraham sacrificed his only son in godly fear, trusting *“that God was able to raise him up, even from the dead...”* (Gen 22:12, cf Heb 11:17-19). Charles Bridges aptly comments: “Yes – if heaven and earth shake, God hath ordained and secured, that His children shall have ‘a place of refuge’ such as they need, and when they need; when the enemy is most strongly assaulting; at the last extremity when every other refuge shall have been swept away.”

THOUGHT: “No man can ever become truly wise, who does not begin with God, the fountain of knowledge.” (Adam Clarke)

PRAYER: Lord, let the fear of Thee rule in my heart.

WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 30

PSALM 111

PROVERBS 3:1-10

*The fear of the Lord brings
sunshine to the soul.*

THE FEAR OF THE LORD (4)

3. Riches, honour and life

“By humility and the fear of the LORD are riches, and honour, and life” (Prov 22:4).

Where the fear of God is, there will be humility. A right understanding of God will always lay us in the lowest dust before Him.

Because a person fears God, his life is enriched and blessed (Prov 10:27). He receives rich spiritual blessings of divine comfort, peace and joy. He *“shall go in and out, and find pasture”* (John 10:9).

The fear of the Lord *“is an over-flowing, ever-flowing spring of comfort and joy; it is a fountain of life, yielding constant pleasure and satisfaction to the soul”* (Matthew Henry).

“The fear of the LORD tendeth to life: and he that hath it shall abide satisfied; he shall not be visited with evil” (Prov 19:23). Herein is fullness of life. Through Christ Jesus our Saviour, we have life and life abundantly. John 10:10: *“I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly.”*

There is another dimension to this comforting promise: *“he shall not be visited with evil.”* Life holds no terror for one who fears God. Though he may be visited by sickness or other afflictions, they will work for his good. Indeed, how blessed are those who love and fear the Lord!

THOUGHT: “How glorious is the end of this lowly path of humility and godly fear!” (Charles Bridges)

PRAYER: Lord, may the fear of God be my satisfaction and joy.

THE FEAR OF THE LORD (5)

4. Protection from the snares of sin

The only effectual safeguard from the ways of sin and ruin is the knowledge and fear of God (Prov 2:10-12). It is an antidote against sin and temptation.

The Word of God describes the fear of the Lord as a powerful force which sanctifies the heart and preserves the soul from sinful thoughts and deeds: *“The fear of the LORD is clean, enduring for ever: the judgments of the LORD are true and righteous altogether”* (Ps 19:9). It is by the fear of the Lord, and the influence of that very fear, that men depart from evil: *“By the fear of the LORD men depart from evil”* (Prov 16:6b).

“The fear of the Lord is at once a bridle to sin, and a spur to holiness. It changes a slave into a child. Filial confidence ... cowers from sin. Sin’s very touch is hateful; and all its ways are abhorred and forsaken” (Charles Bridges).

Do we have the fear of the Lord in our hearts? Do we hate sin? Do we experience God’s rich spiritual blessings, honour and life?

We end with the wise counsel from King Solomon for our meditation and application: *“Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God, and keep his commandments: for this is the whole duty of man. For God shall bring every work into judgment, with every secret thing, whether it be good, or whether it be evil”* (Eccles 12:13-14).

THOUGHT: *“The fear of the LORD is a fountain of life, to depart from the snares of death.”* (Prov 14:27)

PRAYER: Lord, may the fear of God guard and guide me through life.

INVEST IN THE HEAVENLY TREASURY

The question that arose out of Jesus’ statements in Matthew 6:19-24 was a simple and direct one: “Where is your heart?” The crux of the matter is found in verse 21: *“For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.”* Whether we are rich or poor, our true spirituality is reflected in the way we regard our worldly treasures. What we value reveals our heart.

The Lord warned against the love and hoarding of earthly treasures. Our worldly possessions can be lost or stolen. They are also subjected to the ravages of time and decay. Other uncertainties – a debilitating illness, retrenchment, natural disasters – may also threaten to “steal” our treasure.

Our earthly treasures can be taken away from us at any time. A friend of mine died of cancer some years ago. He was a fine lawyer who had built up a sizeable fortune for himself. Aiming to retire at the age of forty in Australia, he had dreams of living in a sprawling bungalow with an eighteen-hole golf course on his front lawn. But when cancer suddenly struck, he spent almost his entire fortune on medical treatment in a Singapore hospital.

Let us invest in the Heavenly Treasury *“where neither moth nor rust doth corrupt, and where thieves do not break through nor steal.”* What we have received is *“an inheritance incorruptible, and undefiled, and that fadeth not away, reserved in heaven for you”* (1 Pet 1:4). These heavenly treasures are imperishable. Why? Because God Himself is reserving them for us. Thank God we can look forward to enjoying the eternal glories of Heaven.

THOUGHT: “Where riches hold the dominion of the heart, God has lost His authority.” (John Calvin)

PRAYER: Lord, teach me to lay up treasures in heaven, not upon earth.

THE FOLLY OF PURSUING WEALTH

Money and possessions in themselves are not evil (James 1:17). However, when they become all-important to us, they become a snare to our souls.

The Bible warns us that he who loves money will be ensnared and enslaved by it: *“But they that will be rich fall into temptation and a snare, and into many foolish and hurtful lusts, which drown men in destruction and perdition. For the love of money is the root of all evil: which while some coveted after, they have erred from the faith, and pierced themselves through with many sorrows”* (1 Tim 6:9-10). What sobering words!

Covetousness has led many to their downfall. My uncle retired from his job as a shipping clerk more than twenty years ago. He withdrew his CPF savings of S\$150,000. This tidy sum should have seen him comfortably through the rest of his life. However, a friend introduced him to the stock market. Soon, my uncle was deeply involved in speculating on stocks and shares. Within a year, he became heavily indebted after losing all his CPF savings. To settle his debts, he sold his flat and moved in to live with his son, while his wife went to stay with their daughter. He ended up selling newspapers to make ends meet. He died a sorrowful and derelict old man, ruined by his insatiable desire for money.

“Poverty shall come upon them, and the riches which they made wings for, that they might fly to them, will make themselves wings to fly from them; but they are secure and improvident, and do not consider this, that while they are making haste to be rich, they are really making haste to be poor, else they would not trust to uncertain riches” (Matthew Henry).

THOUGHT: Does God’s Word denounce wealth?

PRAYER: *“Incline my heart unto thy testimonies, and not to covetousness.”* (Ps 119:36)

COMMUNION WITH GOD (1)

Our gracious Lord invites His children to fellowship with Him. He is pleased when we seek His presence. King David in Psalm 27 marvelled at God's desire for fellowship with him: *"When thou saidst, Seek ye my face; my heart said unto thee, Thy face, LORD, will I seek"* (v 8).

Indeed, the mercy-seat is the Christian's safe haven where nothing earthly can assail. Here, the child of God can enjoy quietness and calm. Before the Father's throne, "troubles would not find him, for he should be hid in secret; there troubles would not reach him, for he should be set on high" (Matthew Henry). Deep truths from God's Word are brought to mind to comfort and edify the soul, and to sustain the believer in the perplexities of life.

"Communion with the Lord is the cure for every ill" (Spurgeon). What a precious truth! In this world of strife and sorrow, fear and distress, there is only one way to quieten our hearts. The secret of peace or strength is found only in the presence of God: *"He that dwelleth in the secret place of the most High shall abide under the shadow of the Almighty"* (Ps 91:1). Indeed, when we spend time with the Lord, He lightens our weight of sorrows and shields us from worldly snares and temptations.

What a high honour and blessing to be admitted into the holy chamber of the King of kings to commune with Him. May we echo the words of the hymnwriter, Fanny J Crosby:

*"O the pure delight of a single hour,
That before Thy throne I spend,
When I kneel in pray'r and with Thee, my God,
I commune as friend with friend."*

THOUGHT: *"How precious also are thy thoughts unto me, O God! how great is the sum of them!"* (Ps 139:17)

PRAYER: Lord, may I delight in Thy presence.

COMMUNION WITH GOD (2)

What lessons can we learn about this important sacred duty?

1. Communion with God – a means of grace

While our body will one day perish, the soul – that “inner man” – can be sustained only by prayer and the Word of God. Neglect these means of grace, and we become spiritually weak and lean. No wonder there are so many in our churches who are spiritually impoverished! Many are so ensnared with the demands of everyday life that they forget these divine providences of grace which are so freely available to us.

It is vital, therefore, that we commune daily in secret with the Lord. We need Him to refresh our soul and revive our weary spirit.

2. Communion with God – can be “seen” by others

In Acts 4, we read about the healing of the lame beggar by Peter and John. Some of those present (the high priest, rulers and scribes) were hostile to Christianity. They realised that the disciples were not ordinary people but the followers of Christ: *“Now when they saw the boldness of Peter and John, and perceived that they were unlearned and ignorant men, they marvelled; and they took knowledge of them, that they had been with Jesus. And beholding the man which was healed standing with them, they could say nothing against it”* (Acts 4:13-14). These enemies “*could say nothing*” but acknowledged that “*they (the disciples) had been with Jesus.*” These statements are significant as they reiterate the importance of spending time with the Lord. Though “*unlearned and ignorant,*” they were taught by the best of teachers for three years – Christ Himself.

THOUGHT: Can others tell that I have been with Jesus?

PRAYER: Lord, may I partake of this divine means of grace daily.

COMMUNION WITH GOD (3)

3. Communion with God – a non-negotiable duty

Time with God is non-negotiable. We must keep our daily appointment with Him. Do not allow the day's activities to crowd Him out. Remember, there is enough time in each day for everything that is in the will of God.

4. Jesus – our perfect Example

Let us learn lessons of communion with God from our Lord Jesus Christ. Whilst on earth, Jesus faced pressures much greater than ours. Imagine the whole city gathering around Him for healing. At one time, more than 5,000 people thronged around Him to hear His discourse.

Though very busy, the Lord took time to visit Martha, Mary and Lazarus. He went out of His way to minister to the Samaritan woman. He reached out to the despised tax collector, Zacchaeus, and attended to Nicodemus, a religious leader, who came to Him by night with a seeking heart. The Lord not only had time for little children, but encouraged them to come unto Him (Matt 19:14).

Despite the heavy demands upon His time, our Saviour often withdrew from the eager crowds, not just to rest, but also to pray. The Bible tells us that after an exhausting day of ministering to the people, Jesus awoke early to pray: *“And in the morning, rising up a great while before day, he went out, and departed into a solitary place, and there prayed”* (Mark 1:35). Though fully occupied with the ministry, our Saviour knew His priorities. Though He is the Lord of heaven and earth, He found it necessary to draw nigh to God. What about us? Do we seek the Lord's face each day?

THOUGHT: It is a great blessing to begin the day with God.

PRAYER: *“My voice shalt thou hear in the morning, O LORD...”* (Ps 5:3)

COMMUNION WITH GOD (4)

The greatest servants of God are those who are committed to prayer. Like our Lord, they are busy with their ministries, but they take time from things that are pressing and important to seek God in secret. Learn from the fine example of the Methodist evangelist, George Whitefield. An early riser, he would retire punctually at ten in the evening. If guests were present, he would politely end the meeting, saying, “Come gentlemen! It is time for all good folks to be home.” Whitefield wanted to be sure of his morning appointment with God.

Many things battle for our time – television, internet, newspaper, and the demands of another busy day. We often give the excuse that we have no time. If we truly believe that God is our Sufficiency, and that we must depend on Him and Him alone, we will seek Him with all our heart. No matter how busy we are, determine to keep that daily appointment before the Throne of Grace. Let nothing distract us or draw us away from that all-important time of communion with our Lord.

Be disciplined. Establish a regular time. Choose a time of the day when we can wholly focus our attention on the Lord. The morning hour is best. It is good to seek God’s blessings and guidance before we set out to fulfil our roles and responsibilities.

Starting the day with the Lord keeps us close to Him. We carry what we learn in our Quiet Time with us throughout the day. Review what we have read of God’s Word in the morning; maintain a spirit of prayer. We do not know what perplexing situations we may meet each day. Commit each concern to the Lord and pray for a right response in every situation.

THOUGHT: “Sitting at the feet of Jesus, Where can mortal be more blest?”

PRAYER: Gracious Lord, may Thou fill me with joy as I draw nigh to Thee each day.

THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 7

PROVERBS 12:24-28

HEBREWS 6:1-12

*“Not slothful in business; fervent
in spirit; serving the Lord.”*

OBSTACLES AND EXCUSES

The book of Proverbs is replete with warnings against slothfulness. A slothful life is a wasted life. Indolent and indulgent habits lead to a slow death: *“The desire of the slothful killeth him; for his hands refuse to labour”* (Prov 21:25).

The slothful man’s path is beset by all kinds of obstacles – thorns, fences, briars – some exaggerated, others imaginary (Prov 15:19). Giving excuses, he continues in his world of idleness and day-dreaming. Fearing *“a lion without”* (Prov 22:13), he stays home to while away his time.

Slothfulness and the love of ease keep him from even the necessary work of ploughing and sowing. He has ground to till, but he will not: *“The sluggard will not plow by reason of the cold; therefore shall he beg in harvest, and have nothing”* (Prov 20:4). To him, work is burdensome. His excuse is the cold weather. He is not willing to endure any kind of hardship. Come harvest time, he has nothing to reap, and must therefore beg for bread. What folly he brings upon himself!

“Those that will not labour cannot expect to eat, but must suffer hunger: An idle soul, one that is idle in the affairs of his soul, that takes no care or pains to work out his salvation, shall perish for want of that which is necessary to the life and happiness of the soul” (Matthew Henry).

The apostle Paul has sharp words for the slothful idler: *“...if any would not work, neither should he eat”* (2 Thess 3:10). Let us check our lives. Is any among us slothful? Let us not waste our lives away. There is so much to be done for the Lord and His Kingdom. May we be good stewards of the time and talents God has entrusted to us.

THOUGHT: Is it my habit to give excuses?

PRAYER: Lord, help me to cultivate diligence and discipline.

THE “REWARDS” OF THE SLOTHFUL

Work is ordained of God. It is every man's duty to be diligent, not so much that he may be rich as that he may not be a burden to others. However, this is not the attitude of the slothful. Instead of waking up and working hard, he sleeps excessively (Prov 24:33-34). Poverty and want shall be his reward (Prov 19:15).

Looking over a broken-down wall one day, Solomon saw a neglected garden. Instead of flowers and fruit, thorns and thistles covered the ground. Sadly, we see this graphic picture of the slothful man's field manifested everywhere: – in homes, schools, work places, and most of all in our very own souls. Many are hindered in their service for God by their indolence.

A sluggard is his own enemy. He desires to partake of the abundant life of the godly. But his noble desire is not carried out because he procrastinates. The result is stagnation and spiritual slumber.

The Hebrew idiom for “*slothful*” is “lacking heart.” The slothful carries this heartless attitude into his religion. He knows that prayer and Bible study benefit the soul, and fellowship is profitable for building up the Body life. Alas, his assent is merely verbal; he is not willing to help himself grow spiritually.

Spiritual inertia is symptomatic of an unregenerate heart. Let us be warned. There may not even be a work of grace in a soul that continues to indulge self. Let us “*awake out of sleep: for now is our salvation nearer than when we believed*” (Rom 13:11).

THOUGHT: “If a neglected field is a melancholic sight, what is a neglected soul?” (Charles Bridges)

PRAYER: “If nothing else will do to sever me from my sins, Lord, send me more trying calamities as shall awake me from my earthly slumbers.” (Murray M'Cheyne)

THE HOLY SPIRIT AND REGENERATION (1)

Scripture uses many terms to describe the Holy Spirit: “*Holy Ghost*,” “*Spirit of God*,” “*Spirit of the Lord*,” “*Spirit of Christ*,” “*Comforter*,” “*Spirit of Truth*,” and “*Advocate*.”

The Greek word, “*pneuma*,” used for the Spirit means either “wind,” “breath,” or “spirit.” This gives the idea of an invisible force or life energy which cannot be readily observed but whose effects are obvious and powerful.

The Spirit's work in regeneration is a mystery. This truth was reiterated by the Lord Jesus Christ when He spoke to Nicodemus about the necessity of the “new birth.” In response to Nicodemus' question – “How can one be born when he is old?” – Jesus used the mystery of the wind's movement to describe the Holy Spirit's unseen operations in the “new birth.” He wanted this “*master of Israel*” (John 3:10) to understand that to be born of the Holy Spirit involved invisible forces beyond human understanding: “*That which is born of the flesh is flesh; and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Marvel not that I said unto thee, Ye must be born again. The wind bloweth where it listeth, and thou hearest the sound thereof, but canst not tell whence it cometh, and whither it goeth: so is every one that is born of the Spirit*” (John 3:6-8).

No man can tell whence the wind comes or where it goes. Like the wind, which moves about unseen, the Spirit invisibly imparts saving faith. The effects of His irresistible, convicting power are clearly seen and felt.

To Nicodemus, and every seeking soul, the Lord says: “*Ye must be born again!*” To enter God's Kingdom, one must be regenerated by the Holy Spirit.

THOUGHT: Have I been born again?

PRAYER: Holy Spirit, I thank Thee for drawing me to Thy saving grace.

THE HOLY SPIRIT AND REGENERATION (2)

None will ever be drawn to Christ except there be the working of the Holy Spirit to open the sinner's heart to the Gospel. The unregenerate man is "*dead in trespasses and sins*" – lost in sin, utterly without hope or life (Eph 2:1). The Gospel may have been preached many times to him, but to no avail. He cannot understand the simple message of God's grace, nor see his need for salvation. Spiritually dead, he is unable to respond to the Gospel or understand the things of God.

As wretched sinners, we deserve nothing but God's wrath and eternal damnation. We can do nothing to merit our salvation. But when God, in His mercy, "quickens" or "makes alive" the lifeless soul by His Holy Spirit, the soul awakens to his sinfulness and flees to the Saviour for salvation. How we thank God for His grace that "*hath called (us) out of darkness into his marvellous light*" (1 Pet 2:9; Eph 2:4-10).

Thus enlightened, the born-again believer becomes a new creature in Christ. Old things are become new (2 Cor 5:17). With new spiritual understanding, the believer's values and perspectives are changed. The heart is filled with a new appetite for the things of God.

Under the Spirit's sanctifying influence, the new Christian is enabled to put away past sinful habits and to put on Christ and His righteousness: "*That ye put off concerning the former conversation the old man, which is corrupt according to the deceitful lusts; And be renewed in the spirit of your mind; And that ye put on the new man, which after God is created in righteousness and true holiness*" (Eph 4:22-24).

The transformed life of the new believer is a clear token of the Holy Spirit's regenerative work. Does your life manifest the marks of God's transforming power?

THOUGHT: "I once was lost but now am found, was blind but now I see."

PRAYER: Lord, may I yield to Thy Spirit's sanctifying influence.

MONDAY, NOVEMBER 11

EPHESIANS 1:1-14

2 CORINTHIANS 1:21-22

*“Ye were sealed with that
holy Spirit of promise.”*

SEALED WITH THE HOLY SPIRIT

Now that we have been reconciled to God by the blood of Christ, we are no longer strangers but fellow citizens with the saints, and of the household of God; we are heirs and joint heirs with Christ (Eph 2:12, 13, 19). What a blessed privilege to be called the children of the Living and True God!

Our adoption into the family of God entitles us to an everlasting inheritance. This means that we will spend eternity, and enjoy fellowship, with believers and with our glorious Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ. The full weight of our eternal glory can never be fathomed or grasped by our finite minds (1 Cor 2:9).

How can we be sure that in the end we shall receive God’s promised inheritance? The answer is found in Ephesians 1:13-14: *“In whom ye also trusted, after that ye heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation: in whom also after that ye believed, ye were sealed with that holy Spirit of promise, Which is the earnest of our inheritance until the redemption of the purchased possession, unto the praise of his glory.”* This simply means that after our conversion, God seals us with the Holy Spirit – He is our “down payment.” In order to “guarantee” our heavenly inheritance, God sends His Spirit to indwell our hearts.

Sealing implies that the property is precious. “Who seals up dung and pebbles in a bag? Believers are God’s jewels, His treasure, therefore sealed. Sealing also is for safety and security, for discrimination, and for confirmation. The Holy Spirit, by sanctifying of us, doth discriminate and distinguish us from the rest of the world, doth secure and preserve us from the fatal danger of a ruinous apostasy, and doth also confirm our hopes of the glorious inheritance” (William Burkitt).

THOUGHT: *“Hereby know we that we dwell in him, and he in us, because he hath given us of his Spirit.”* (1 John 4:13)

PRAYER: Lord, I thank Thee for Thy indwelling Holy Spirit.

TUESDAY, NOVEMBER 12

JOHN 14:16-17

ROMANS 8:12-30

*“The Spirit also helpeth
our infirmities.”*

OUR HEAVENLY GUIDE

Not only is the Holy Spirit our guarantee of salvation, He is also our Heavenly Guide throughout our earthly sojourn.

Just as Jesus had promised, the Holy Spirit or Comforter comes and takes up residence in a believer. It is the Spirit who helps us in our spiritual battles when a soul is saved by the grace of God.

The Spirit knows that our earthly pathway is fraught with dangers, obstacles and difficult struggles. He leads us along the way of safety and peace. He strengthens us in our weakness, comforts us when we are cast down, and grants us grace for every need. He guides us gently, lovingly and safely until we reach our heavenly Home.

The Holy Spirit stirs up our spiritual affections and holy desires. He attunes our minds to things above so that we learn to live soberly and righteously in this present world (Titus 2:12). He subdues the will and moulds the heart so that with each day, the believer becomes more and more like Christ (Rom 8:29).

As we yield to the Spirit, we learn to fear God, to abhor our sins and to *“delight in the law of God after the inward man”* (Rom 7:22). And when we leave this world, we *“are changed into the same image from glory to glory, even as by the Spirit of the Lord”* (2 Cor 3:18).

These are some of the blessed privileges enjoyed by God’s children through the Spirit’s gracious ministry. Let us daily yield to His leading and respond to His every prompting as we walk with the Lord.

THOUGHT: My Heavenly Guide will see me safely Home.

PRAYER: Lord, help me to faithfully follow Thee, my Heavenly Guide.

GRIEVE NOT THE HOLY SPIRIT (1)

In his epistle to the Ephesians, the apostle Paul exhorted them to walk worthy of their vocation (Eph 4:1-6); to be sound in faith (Eph 4:7-16); to manifest a clear witness; to put away their former corruptions and to be wholly conformed to the principles of the new man (Eph 4:17-24). In verses 25 to 32, he specifically named the sins they had to deal with: lying, anger, theft, corrupt conversation, bitterness, evil-speaking, malice. And he entreated them to manifest a spirit of kindness and forgiveness toward the brethren.

In the midst of his call to purity and piety, the apostle admonished the believers not to grieve “*the holy Spirit of God, whereby ye are sealed unto the day of redemption*” (Eph 4:30).

What are some ways in which we grieve the Holy Spirit?

1. By catering to the flesh

Though the Lord has saved us and made us new creatures in Christ, our sinful self is still very much a part of us. The Bible calls this “*the flesh*.”

Each of us has our own sinful weaknesses, which may continue in our lives despite our conversion. These are the besetting sins which have been so much a part of us that we tend to take them lightly. Some of these frailties of the flesh are: anger, pride, an unforgiving spirit, envy, sullenness, evil surmising, corrupt thoughts, self-love, self-will.

These habitual sins grieve the Holy Spirit. We are warned not to yield to the flesh for “*... they that are in the flesh cannot please God*” (Rom 8:8).

THOUGHT: Does my life manifest the fruit of the Spirit?

PRAYER: Lord, grant me grace to walk in the Spirit and not fulfil the lusts of the flesh.

GRIEVE NOT THE HOLY SPIRIT (2)

2. By corrupt speech

As Christians, we must not grieve the Spirit with our lips. We defile ourselves by our unkind words. Our speech must always encourage our brethren and build up their faith: *“Let no corrupt communication proceed out of your mouth, but that which is good to the use of edifying, that it may minister grace unto the hearers”* (Eph 4:29).

Take heed that we do not alienate the affections of God’s people by speaking offensive or careless words which may cause discord in the Body of Christ. It is the Spirit’s purpose *“that they may be one”* (John 17:22-23). To hinder this unity is to grieve the Spirit by marring the oneness of the Body, which He is so mindful to maintain.

3. By setting His promptings aside

Often, the Holy Spirit prompts us to pray, to read God’s Word and to draw nigh to God. He stirs us to pursue the things that are profitable for our souls. But, alas, in our busyness, we heed not His promptings and lose those blessed seasons of communion with God.

Our spiritual inertia and our sinful and worldly indulgences are all clear indications of neglecting the Spirit’s graces.

The Holy Spirit is ever seeking to sanctify us and to make us fit instruments for His glory. However, we often choose to disregard God’s Word and the Spirit’s prompting when we want our own will. We reject the leading of the Spirit to our own detriment.

THOUGHT: Am I walking after the Spirit or after the flesh?

PRAYER: O Holy Spirit, purge my mind and heart of every fleshly desire.

BEWARE OF SELF DELUSION

“Every way of a man is right in his own eyes; but the LORD pondereth the hearts” (Prov 21:2). This weighty proverb reveals the true nature of the depraved heart. So universal is self-pride and so fearful is the danger of self-delusion that Scripture repeats this solemn warning: *“All the ways of a man are clean in his own eyes; but the LORD weigheth the spirits”* (Prov 16:2). Let us consider some characteristics of self-delusion:

1. Self is always “right”

In any dispute, it is hard to persuade a person that he is in the wrong. Often we see only our side of the issue and convince ourselves of the rightness of our conduct. It is the other party who is always in the wrong. With a heart blinded by self-love, we hide facts and circumstances to make ourselves look right. But is it right in the eyes of the Lord who *“pondereth the hearts”*? Let us check our lives.

2. Justifying self

Beware of a self-justifying spirit (Prov 18:17). This sinful tendency is also reflected in the way we regard ourselves. It is sad but true that we are all prone to think favourably of our own character and downgrade those of others. All too often, we vehemently defend ourselves and jealously guard our name. We justify the same action that we condemn in others.

Note the Lord’s sharp rebuke of the Pharisees for their hypocrisy: *“Ye are they which justify yourselves before men; but God knoweth your hearts: for that which is highly esteemed among men is abomination in the sight of God”* (Luke 16:15).

THOUGHT: “There are no persons in the world, about whom we make so many mistakes as ourselves.” (Charles Bridges)

PRAYER: “Search me, O God, and know my heart: try me, and know my thoughts.” (Ps 139:23)

BIBLICAL EXAMPLES OF SELF-DELUSION

At times, self-delusion can be very subtle. King Saul made himself appear just in his own cause. He tried to convince himself and Samuel the prophet that he had “*obeyed the voice of the LORD*” (1 Sam 15:20). Upon further interrogation, he vindicated himself by putting the blame on the people (1 Sam 15:21). Nevertheless, the “all-searching Eye” uncovered Saul’s wicked sins of pride, covetousness, rebellion and rejection of God. Samuel reproved the erring king with these sharp words: “*Hath the LORD as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, as in obeying the voice of the LORD? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to hearken than the fat of rams. For rebellion is as the sin of witchcraft, and stubbornness is as iniquity and idolatry. Because thou hast rejected the word of the LORD, he hath also rejected thee from being king*” (1 Sam 15:22-23).

When the hostile Samaritans refused to receive Jesus, His disciples, James and John, in their misguided zeal wanted to call down fire from heaven to consume them. They covered their own contentious spirit under the pretence of vehement zeal for their Master (Luke 9:52-55).

At the trial of Jesus, Pontius Pilate washed his hands before the people with the hope of clearing himself from the blood of his condemned prisoner (Matt 27:24). He was “*clean in his own eyes*” (Prov 16:2). But did the mere washing of hands free him from the guilt of innocent blood? Did Pilate absolve himself of perverting justice before the all-knowing Judge?

Nothing can be hidden from our all-knowing, all-seeing God. He weighs the spirit and searches the heart. Let us see ourselves the way God sees us. View ourselves in the mirror of His Word (James 1:22-25).

THOUGHT: When I am weighed in the Lord’s unerring balances, how will I stand before Him?

PRAYER: Lord, help me to maintain a pure heart before Thee.

DO WE PROCLAIM OUR OWN GOODNESS?

How true it is that we often boast of our own goodness! With an inflated view of self, our conversations with others are centred on ourselves: our strengths, our abilities, our good deeds. Few, if ever, will mention their faults or weaknesses. Such is the blindness of a self-deceptive heart.

“Most men will talk a great deal of their charity, generosity, hospitality, and piety, will sound a trumpet to themselves, as the Pharisees, and what little goodness they have will proclaim it and make a mighty matter of it” (Matthew Henry).

In Matthew 6:1-8, the Lord rebuked the Pharisees for the ostentatious displays of their goodness and piety. When giving alms or praying, they stood in prominent places to be “*seen of men*” (v 5). Before we condemn these religious leaders for their hypocrisy, let us look within our own hearts. Have we not been guilty also of seeking accolades for ourselves?

To boast of one's goodness is to proclaim one's folly and hypocrisy. Let us heed the apostle Paul's exhortation not to think of ourselves more highly than we ought to think (Rom 12:3).

“*But a faithful man who can find?*” Indeed, fidelity and integrity are rare qualities in our sinful world. It is hard to find a man who is “without guile,” who is as good as his word and remains true to his friends in times of adversity.

Are we known for our integrity? A Christian's steadfast faith in God is his safest guide through life. May we seek only the Lord's commendation: “*Well done, thou good and faithful servant...*” (Matt 25:21).

THOUGHT: Do my friends or neighbours find me faithful?

PRAYER: Lord, help me to see myself as Thou seest me.

MONDAY, NOVEMBER 18

JOHN 14:15-24

GENESIS 22:1-14

*“...let us not love in word,
...but in deed...”*

DO WE REALLY LOVE GOD? (1)

If we were to ask ourselves this direct question: “Do I really love God?” how would we answer? It is easy to profess with our lips that we love someone. But words of love are not enough.

The Lord Jesus Christ told His disciples that loving Him means obeying His Word: *“If ye love me, keep my commandments. He that hath my commandments, and keepeth them, he it is that loveth me: and he that loveth me shall be loved of my Father, and I will love him, and will manifest myself to him”* (John 14:15, 21).

We cannot say we love God when we live in disobedience. We are all familiar with the account of God’s call to Abraham to offer up his only son, Isaac, as a sacrifice to Him. This was the ultimate test of Abraham’s love for God, as Isaac was his long-awaited son and rightful heir. Would Abraham withhold from the Lord this son, *“whom thou lovest”* (Gen 22:2)? The decision must have been a painful one for him, but the faithful patriarch had his mind firmly set on obeying God. He placed Isaac on the altar and was prepared to kill him. Thus, the “father of faith” passed this test of love and obedience.

We cannot say we love God when we hate our fellow men: *“If a man say, I love God, and hateth his brother, he is a liar: for he that loveth not his brother whom he hath seen, how can he love God whom he hath not seen? And this commandment have we from him, That he who loveth God love his brother also. By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God, and keep his commandments”* (1 John 4:20-21; 5:2).

Our love for the Lord should also be the basis of our relationships with others. Love is the fulfilling of the law, and manifests itself in the way we treat our neighbours. May others see the love of Christ in our lives.

THOUGHT: Can I say I love God and hate my brethren?

PRAYER: Lord, help me to love Thee by obeying Thee.

DO WE REALLY LOVE GOD? (2)

Our love for God is best reflected through a life of obedience to Him. To help us examine our love for the Lord, ask ourselves the following questions (gleaned from the writings of Puritan writer, Thomas Watson):

1. Do we love the presence of God?

People deeply in love with one another long to spend time together. They cannot bear to be apart. In the same way, one who loves God desires to be with Him: to feed on His Word, to commune with Him in prayer and to partake of the sacraments.

King David, the man after God’s own heart, yearned for the presence of God (Ps 84:2). Do we daily seek God’s sweet reassuring presence? Is He our exceeding joy, source of grace, wisdom, comfort and strength?

A related question is: Can we live without God? Do we, like the psalmist, plead with the Lord to *“hide not thy face from me, lest I be like unto them that go down into the pit”*? (Ps 143:7). We show we do not love God if we feel we can do well enough without Him.

2. Do we continue in our sin?

Our holy God hates sin. He who loves God cannot continue in his sin. The closer we are to the Lord, the more we will see our own corruptions. Job had boasted, and contended with God; but as soon as God drew nigh to him, he cried out in deep contrition: *“I have heard of thee by the hearing of the ear: but now mine eye seeth thee. Wherefore I abhor myself, and repent in dust and ashes”* (Job 42:5-6). May we draw nigh to our Almighty God and be weaned from our fleshly desires. Let us love God and hate sin.

THOUGHT: Does my life reflect my love for the Lord?

PRAYER: Lord, may I love to draw nigh to Thee.

DO WE REALLY LOVE GOD? (3)

3. Are we fearful of dishonouring God?

A child who loves his father will not want to displease him. When Peter denied Christ, he *“went out, and wept bitterly”* (Matt 26:75). The erring disciple realised that his Master had loved him dearly. That he should deny his loving Lord and Master broke his heart and he wept bitter tears of regret.

Our love for God will cause us to have that godly fear in our heart lest we sin against Him. Our conscience is tender, and any known sin will trouble us. Our constant prayer will be: *“Search me, O God, and know my heart: try me, and know my thoughts: And see if there be any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting”* (Ps 139:23-24).

4. Do we seek after the Lord with all our heart?

A total devotion to our Saviour means that we will not love the world and all that it can offer us. Paul said that he was crucified to the world, and the world was crucified to him (Gal 6:14). In this faithful apostle, we see both the picture and pattern of a mortified man. *“The world engages him but God delights and satisfies him”* (Thomas Watson).

He who loves God will do any thing to gain Him. We are reminded of the love of Jacob for Rachel. His love for her was so strong that he did not mind enduring the heat by day and the frost by night that he might have her: *“And Jacob served seven years for Rachel; and they seemed unto him but a few days, for the love he had to her”* (Gen 29: 20).

THOUGHT: What am I willing to give up in order to gain Christ?

PRAYER: Lord, may my love for Thee keep me from sin.

DO WE REALLY LOVE GOD? (4)

5. Do we love the people of God?

If we love God, we will love those who are “*of the household of faith*” (Gal 6:10). God loves His children – all who have been elected, and washed in the precious blood of His only Begotten Son. They are precious in His sight. So must they also be in our eyes: “*Whosoever believeth that Jesus is the Christ is born of God: and every one that loveth him that begat loveth him also that is begotten of him. By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God, and keep his commandments*” (1 John 5:1-2). We will delight in their company: “*I am a companion of all them that fear thee...*” (Ps 119:63).

Some additional questions we can ask ourselves are:

Do we love the communion of saints? Do we look forward to gathering with God’s people because we belong to the same family, whose Head is Christ Jesus, our Saviour? Do we love to be at the meetings planned by the church (eg: the worship service, the prayer meeting, Bible study, fellowship meetings) where God’s people congregate to praise His name, to seek His face and be instructed in His Word?

Do we truly love God? As we go through these questions, examine our own heart. May we love God who has given us the gift of eternal life through Jesus Christ, His only begotten Son. Let us learn to fear Him and to seek Him with our whole heart. Learn also to love the brethren. May the love of God be clearly reflected through our lives.

THOUGHT: “*Hatred stirreth up strifes: but love covereth all sins.*”
(Prov 10:12)

PRAYER: Lord, teach me to love my brethren.

THE DESTRUCTIVE POWER OF THE TONGUE

God’s Word tells us that words can be vicious and destructive. With our lips, we can provoke anger, tear down relationships, destroy reputations, ruin lives and even kill: “... *grievous words stir up anger*” (Prov 15:1); “*An hypocrite with his mouth destroyeth his neighbour...*” (Prov 11:9); “*Death and life are in the power of the tongue*” (Prov 18:21).

“A man may do a great deal of good, or a great deal of hurt, both to others and to himself, according to the use he makes of his tongue. Many a one has been his own death by a foul tongue, or the death of others by a false tongue; and, on the contrary, many a one has saved his own life, or procured the comfort of it, by a prudent gentle tongue, and saved the lives of others by a seasonable testimony or intercession for them. And, if by our words we must be justified or condemned, death and life are, no doubt, in the power of the tongue” (Matthew Henry).

Rightly has the apostle James warned us of the destructive power of the tongue. Though a little member, it “*boasteth great things.*” It is “*a fire, a world of iniquity...an unruly evil, full of deadly poison.*” Though small, it has the power to control the body like the bridle of a horse or the helm of a ship (James 3:3-8).

Words are powerful. They can build up or tear down. Knowing this, let us watch our lips. Like King David, let us pray: “*Thou hast proved mine heart; thou hast visited me in the night; thou hast tried me, and shalt find nothing; I am purposed that my mouth shall not transgress*” (Ps 17:3).

THOUGHT: “Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me.” Do I agree with this popular proverb?

PRAYER: “*Set a watch, O LORD, before my mouth; keep the door of my lips.*” (Ps 141:3)

SATURDAY, NOVEMBER 23

PSALM 39

PROVERBS 10:11-32

*“Keep thy tongue from evil,
and thy lips from speaking guile.”*

WHOLESOME SPEECH

God has given us the gift of speech which He expects us to use for His glory. We are to use this gift to comfort, to cheer, to express our gratitude, to make friends, to encourage the weary, to support the weak, and to promote peace.

The apostle Paul emphasized the fruitful use of the tongue for the edification of others: *“Let no corrupt communication proceed out of your mouth, but that which is good to the use of edifying, that it may minister grace unto the hearers”* (Eph 4:29).

Let us consider the following verses from Proverbs that speak of the edifying effects of wholesome speech:

“The mouth of a righteous man is a well of life ...” (Prov 10:11)

“The lips of the righteous feed many ...” (Prov 10:21)

“The mouth of the just bringeth forth wisdom ...” (Prov 10:31)

“... the tongue of the wise is health” (Prov 12:18)

God wants us to use the gift of speech for the blessing of others. In describing the model wife, the Bible tells us that *“she openeth her mouth with wisdom; and in her tongue is the law of kindness”* (Prov 31:26). Her wise and kind words communicated love and grace, and promoted harmony in the family.

As Christians, we must be mindful of the words that proceed out of our mouth. Our words must glorify the Lord and minister to our hearers. Ask ourselves: Do we speak out of a loving and gracious heart? Do we seek to edify others by our words? May God help us. Amen.

THOUGHT: *“Is there iniquity in my tongue ...?”* (Job 6:30)

PRAYER: Lord, teach me to speak graciously and peaceably.

CORRUPT COMMUNICATION

In the original Greek, “*corrupt*” means decayed or rotten, and is applied to putrid vegetables or animal substances (Eph 4:29). In this context, it denotes anything that is obscene, offensive and infectious. The Septuagint (Greek translation of the Old Testament) uses this word to describe the disease that caused Job’s flesh to waste away (Job 33:21).

Corrupt or unwholesome speech is vicious and destructive. One form of corrupt communication is gossip or tale-bearing.

A gossip or tale-bearer complains about others behind their back and disparages them. Instead of building up, a gossip, by his slanderous words, sows ill will and alienates the best of friends – “*a whisperer separateth chief friends*” (Prov 16:28); “*The words of a talebearer are as wounds, and they go down into the innermost parts of the belly*” (Prov 18:8); “*He that goeth about as a talebearer revealeth secrets: therefore meddle not with him that flattereth with his lips*” (Prov 20:19); “*Where no wood is, there the fire goeth out: so where there is no talebearer, the strife ceaseth*” (Prov 26:20).

Sadly, this urge to gossip is common even among Christians. “Gossips are undoubtedly backsliders, however consistent they may be in attending meetings, and however vocal in claiming spiritual blessing ... Persistent gossips appoint themselves as judge and jury of all other members of the human race, but in reality they are among the weakest and most pathetic members of society” (Peter Masters).

Tale-bearing reflects an unthankful, discontented and unhappy spirit. It encourages others to “add fuel” to further mar the victim’s character. Let us turn from this wicked sin.

THOUGHT: What does my speech reveal about my spiritual condition?

PRAYER: Lord, help me to speak well of others at all times.

DO WE PRAY? (1)

Prayer is the special privilege of every born-again, blood-bought believer in Christ. In prayer, we acknowledge God’s sovereignty and our total dependence upon Him: *“For in him we live, and move, and have our being”* (Acts 17:28a).

God’s Word tells us the importance of prayer: *“men ought always to pray...”* (Luke 18:1); *“Praying always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit, and watching thereunto with all perseverance and supplication for all saints”* (Eph 6:18); *“Be careful for nothing; but in every thing by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known unto God. And the peace of God, which passeth all understanding, shall keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus”* (Phil 4:6-7).

The patriarchs – Noah, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob – built altars where they offered prayers unto God (Gen 8:20; 12:7-8; 13:4, 18; 22:9; 26: 25; 33:20; 35:1, 3, 7). Our Lord Jesus Christ, whilst on earth, prayed often. It was not uncommon for Him to pray right through the night (Luke 6:12). He warned His disciples to *“watch and pray, that ye enter not into temptation”* (Matt 26:41).

No great work for God can be accomplished without prayer. Spurgeon preached powerfully to a congregation of 5,000 for thirty years. His “pulpit power” came from the faithful prayer support of 300 members who knelt to pray in the church vestry.

We all give mental assent to the value of prayer. But have we considered our own prayer life? Do we pray? Is prayer an essential part of our daily lives?

THOUGHT: God delights in our prayers. Do I pray?

PRAYER: Lord, I thank Thee for the privilege and blessing of prayer.

DO WE PRAY? (2)

The following thoughts may be helpful as we consider the issue of the neglect of prayer:

1. “Am I truly converted?”

This crucial question addresses the heart of the matter. The Lord Himself singled out prayer as one of the marks of conversion. When He sent Ananias to Saul in Damascus, He gave him no evidence of the latter’s change of heart other than this, *“Behold he (Saul) prayeth”* (Acts 9:11).

If we continually neglect praying, it could be an indication that we are not truly “born again.” We may speak confidently of our faith, but if we do not pray, it is all empty talk. Perhaps our response to the Gospel call was a superficial one (Matt 13:20-21). Check ourselves, *“whether ye be in the faith”* (2 Cor 13:5).

2. “Does God hear?”

When we talk to people, it is natural to expect a response. But with God there is seemingly no response. “I often feel like I am talking to the wall. Does God actually hear when I pray?”

How do we know if God really hears our prayers? The answer is found in the psalmist’s cry to God: *“Because he hath inclined his ear unto me, therefore will I call upon him as long as I live”* (Ps 116: 2); *“LORD, thou hast heard the desire of the humble: thou wilt prepare their heart, thou wilt cause thine ear to hear”* (Ps 10:17); *“The eyes of the LORD are upon the righteous, and his ears are open unto their cry”* (Ps 34:15). God hears our every heart cry. Take God at His Word. Let us approach the Lord with childlike faith.

THOUGHT: Do I find prayer a burdensome duty?

PRAYER: *“Lord, teach us to pray...”* (Luke 11:1)

DO WE PRAY? (3)

3. “I have no time.”

How true it is that we have time for everything but prayer. All too often, we allow the things we enjoy (television, newspapers, chats, internet, recreation, and all kinds of worldly things) to interfere with our communion with God.

We are quick to stifle the Holy Spirit’s prompting. We say, “As soon as I can find time, I will seek the Lord.” Such thoughts reveal our true values. Our real problem lies in our priorities more than in the time available to us. There is enough time in each day for everything that is in the will of God. If we have no time for prayer, we need to re-order our priorities.

4. “Life goes on just as well.”

“Things carry on as usual even when I fail to pray. God still provides the sunshine and the rain; I enjoy good health; there is always food on the table. Life goes on just as well. God did not strike me dead when I neglected to pray. So why pray?”

If this is our attitude, then our motive for prayer is a selfish one – we pray because we want to “use” God; we have demeaned Him as our servant to be at our beck and call. Our idea of prayer is somewhat like the hospital’s Accident and Emergency Department. We pray only when we run into a crisis - when a loved one becomes critically ill, when our job is at stake, or when we face a life-and-death situation. Let us not be complacent. It is tragic to let trouble turn us to God. Come daily before His throne of grace and acknowledge our total dependence upon Him: *“Let us therefore come boldly unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need”* (Heb 4:16).

THOUGHT: Will God hear me if I pray only in a crisis?

PRAYER: Lord, may I come regularly before Thy throne of grace.

DO WE PRAY? (4)

5. “I have my doubts.”

James warns against the kind of doubting that renders prayer ineffective (James 1:6-8). We may neglect prayer because of a doubting heart. We wonder whether God has heard our prayers, especially when we have prayed long and hard.

Do we waver in prayer? Confess our weak faith and ask God for help to fully trust Him. In His own good time, He will answer our doubts directly through His Word or through a change in circumstances.

6. “I am filled with bitterness.”

Sin and prayer cannot go together: “*If I regard iniquity in my heart, the Lord will not hear me*” (Ps 66:18). Are we harbouring an unforgiving spirit? Are we proud and contentious? God will not hear us when we continue in our sin. “Nothing hinders prayer like iniquity harboured in the breast” (*The Treasury of David*). As with Cain, so with us, sin lieth at the door, waiting to overcome us (Gen 4:7). Let us forsake our sins and draw nigh to the Lord.

7. “No one sees.”

Closet prayer is one private area between God and our souls. Because no other eye sees, we are tempted to neglect this duty. It is easy to forsake our time with God to pursue a duty that can be seen by men (Matt 6:5-6).

It is sad that despite the blessings and privileges of prayer, many find it a burdensome duty, and neglect this means of grace. May we find it a joy and blessing to have consistent prayer.

THOUGHT: “We must do God’s will in our lives if we would have God’s ear in the closet.” (E. M. Bounds)

PRAYER: “*Lord, I believe; help thou mine unbelief.*” (Mark 9:24)

BEWARE OF COVETOUSNESS (1)

What is covetousness? It is a lusting after what God has forbidden or withheld from us, or for things that belong to others. It can also be an excessive desire for material gain.

Because it is such a subtle evil, many do not see it as a threat to their souls: “In one of his sermons, C.H. Spurgeon told the story of a prominent man who had a great many people come to him to make confession. This man observed that while different ones acknowledged all sorts of outrageous crimes, he never had one who confessed to covetousness. Few fail to recognise this sin as one of the prevailing iniquities of the heart” (*An Exposition of Hebrews* by Arthur Pink).

Many see covetousness as a trivial sin. But the Bible strictly forbids it in the Tenth Commandment: “*Thou shalt not covet thy neighbour’s house, thou shalt not covet thy neighbour’s wife, nor his manservant, nor his maidservant, nor his ox, nor his ass, nor any thing that is thy neighbour’s*” (Exod 20:17).

A devouring sin, covetousness generates discontent. The heart is never satisfied: “*He that loveth silver shall not be satisfied with silver; nor he that loveth abundance with increase: this is also vanity*” (Eccles 5:10). Once covetousness grips the heart, it will not let it go.

Covetousness is an enslaving evil that leads to “*many foolish and hurtful lusts*” (1 Tim 6:9). Rightly did the apostle Paul equate this grievous sin with idolatry: “*...covetousness, which is idolatry*” (Col 3:5). “They who are ruled by this insatiable lust adore their gold and make a god out of it” (Arthur Pink).

THOUGHT: “If your desires be endless, your cares and fears will be so, too.” (Thomas Fuller)

PRAYER: “*Incline my heart unto thy testimonies, and not to covetousness.*” (Ps 119:36)

BEWARE OF COVETOUSNESS (2)

Covetousness is a devouring and ensnaring sin. How can we overcome this grievous sin?

1. Cultivate a thankful heart

Learn from the conduct of the children of Israel in the wilderness. Despising the manna that God had provided (Num 11:4), they murmured, and lusted after evil things (1 Cor 10:6). They yearned to return to Egypt. Let us not despise the blessings of the Lord. Rather, let us rejoice in the privileges we enjoy as God's people. Thank Him for His grace and salvation, His love, guidance and care.

2. Be content with what we have

Do not covet the gifts or possessions of others. Let our prayer be: *“Remove far from me vanity and lies; give me neither poverty nor riches; feed me with food convenient for me: Lest I be full, and deny thee, and say, Who is the LORD? or lest I be poor, and steal, and take the name of my God in vain”* (Prov 30:8-9).

3. Put off covetous desires

Christians are commanded to *“put off... the old man, which is corrupt according to the deceitful lusts”* (Eph 4:22). Are there any worldly things that captivate our heart? Look to the Lord. Acknowledge our weaknesses. Resist the drawings of our fleshly appetite.

4. Watch our thought life

What do we normally think about? Are our thoughts constantly centred on making more money or realising our ambitions? Away with the “get and garner” mentality! Check our dreams and aspirations and ensure that they are in line with the Lord's will.

THOUGHT: *“Labour not to be rich...”* (Prov 23:4)

PRAYER: Lord, help me to cultivate a thankful and contented spirit.

THE ANTIDOTE FOR WORRY (1)

We are now living in the perilous end times, in a troubled and turbulent world (2 Tim 3:1). Daily, we receive disturbing news of global upheavals – natural disasters, pestilences, weather changes, wars, wanton killings, civil unrest, economic instability, etc.

How do we respond to the crises of these last days? What about our personal struggles concerning our families, jobs, health, finances, relationships and future? Our natural response is to worry.

While concern over legitimate matters is natural, excessive care is sinful. Fretting over our problems reflects a faithless, doubting heart. We may think that God has either forsaken us or is unwilling to help us. By questioning God's loving kindness, our hearts toward Him may grow cold and become hardened by unbelief.

Worry also robs us of our joy and peace. It saps our energy so that we are not able to accomplish anything worthwhile. It is unhealthy and unproductive. Worry hinders our walk as well as our service for the Lord.

"Now this disobedience to His plain precept, this unbelief in His Word, this presumption in intruding upon His province, is all sinful. Yet more than this, anxious care often leads to acts of sin. He who cannot calmly leave his affairs in God's hand, but will carry his own burden, is very likely to be tempted to use wrong means to help himself. This sin leads to the forsaking of God as our Counsellor, and resorting instead to human wisdom" (Spurgeon).

Let us be mindful of the negative effects of worry, and be determined to free our lives from disquieting fears.

THOUGHT: What does my habitual worrying reveal about me?

PRAYER: Lord, may I learn to commit my cares to Thee.

THE ANTIDOTE FOR WORRY (2)

Worrying affects us in many negative ways. How then do we overcome this sinful tendency?

1. Focusing on the Lord

The mind that trusts God completely will not be perturbed by life's adversities – illness, poverty, bereavement (Isa 26:3). Such a trustful soul enjoys peace because his mind is stayed on God.

Let us learn from the example of our Saviour “*who, when he was reviled, reviled not again; when he suffered, he threatened not; but committed himself to him that judgeth righteously*” (1 Pet 2:23). And so it had been with thousands of martyrs, and God's afflicted people, who had been enabled to commit their cause to Him. Amidst the storms of persecution, whether in prison or at the stake, these suffering saints had been kept in perfect peace.

When we face unexpected storms and difficulties, we tend to focus on our troubles. Apprehensions plague our minds and an overwhelming spirit of gloom takes over as our problems assume immense proportions and God seems so small. But when we focus on God, our problems diminish.

2. Trusting in God's providence

In His earthly ministry, our Saviour took time to earnestly inculcate the doctrine of God's gracious care as an antidote against disquieting fears. Divine providence reaches to the minutest of creatures and even extends to the very hairs of our head. If the Lord cares for the little sparrows, will He not also care for the least of His children?

THOUGHT: When in difficulty, do I trust in God's gracious providence?

PRAYER: Lord, help me to trust Thee in every situation.

THE ANTIDOTE FOR WORRY (3)

3. Prayer with thanksgiving

The biblical remedy for anxious care is fervent prayer (Phil 4:6-7). As God’s children, we have recourse to Him at all times. No matter is too small to bring before our Heavenly Father in prayer.

We are to come before God with a thankful heart. “When afflicted, we are to be thankful for the expected benefit of afflictions; when tempted, to be thankful that God will not leave us to be tempted above what we are able; when we fall into sin, there is cause for thankfulness that we are not left to run into all sin, that we were not cut off in the very act of sin, and did not die in our sins: thus are we in everything to give thanks” (William Burkitt). When we pray with thanksgiving, God promises us His peace that will fill our hearts despite our troubles.

4. Casting our cares upon Him

Is any among us struggling with life’s difficulties? Is any in danger of being crushed by burdens and cares? Commit our concerns to the Lord (1 Pet 5:7). He will lighten our burdens and grant rest unto our souls (Matt 11:28-30).

Thank God that He condescends to regard the needs of His children. How comforting to know that as we face the storms of life, we are not forgotten by our Heavenly Father.

While it is natural to worry, it is futile, foolish and sinful. Let us remember our blessed position as God’s children. May we free our minds of all perplexing cares. Trust the Lord to see to all our needs.

THOUGHT: With God’s love and care, what cause have we for worry or fear?

PRAYER: Lord, may I learn to pray with a thankful heart.

THE LORD’S DELIGHT IN HIS PEOPLE (1)

1. The Lord is pleased with “*them that fear him*” and “*hope in his mercy*” (Ps 147:11).

“*The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom*” (Prov 9:10). This fear of the Lord is not slavish fear which causes us to cower and cringe before Him. On the contrary, it is a fear borne out of our love for God. It is like the fear of a tender child who would not on any account grieve a kind and loving parent. Such a fear makes us cautious and watchful lest we grieve the Lord God whom we love. This fear keeps us from sin. Happy is the man who, in fearing God, maintains a tender conscience, a humble disposition, and a godly life. With such a one, God is well pleased.

Moreover, the psalmist tells us that the Lord is pleased when we trust in His merciful hand. God, in His mercy, receives sinners, restores the wayward and keeps us in the path of righteousness. Our gracious Heavenly Father is ever mindful of His children. Even in His chidings, He remembers that we are but dust; He knows our frail frame; in wrath, He remembers mercy (Ps 103:13-14).

“They fear, for they are sinners; they hope; for God is merciful. They fear Him, for He is great; they hope in Him, for He is good. Their fear sobers their hope; their hope brightens their fear: God takes pleasure in them both in their trembling and in their rejoicing” (*The Treasury of David*).

THOUGHT: “He looks to the inner man, and smiles on faith and fear.” (Henry Law)

PRAYER: Lord, help me to please Thee in the way I fear Thee and hope in Thy mercy.

THE LORD’S DELIGHT IN HIS PEOPLE (2)

2. The Lord is pleased with *“the prayer of the upright”* (Prov 15:8). God is pleased when His children draw nigh to Him with a pure heart – a heart that is humble, faithful and true to the Lord.

Would a father turn a deaf ear to the cry of His child? The answer is obvious. The Lord pitieth us who are His children. He is always within call. His ear is never heavy that it cannot hear; His arm is not too short that it cannot save. Even the weakest cry will be heard before the throne of grace. May we come before God with an upright heart.

3. The Lord is pleased with them that deal in integrity (Prov 11:1).

As *“the sacrifice of the wicked is an abomination to the LORD”* (Prov 15:8), so is a *“false balance”* (Prov 11:1). A *“false balance”* includes all manner of unjust and fraudulent practices. It is a form of deception. Men may make light of such frauds, and think there is no sin as long as it is not found out. But how will we answer before the omniscient God one day? *“I the LORD search the heart, I try the reins, even to give every man according to his ways, and according to the fruit of his doings”* (Jer 17:10).

Our God Himself is just, and demands that His children deal fairly and honestly. *“For the righteous LORD loveth righteousness; his countenance doth behold the upright”* (Ps 11:7). He delights in those who deal in integrity.

THOUGHT: “Is it not a solemn thought, that the eye of God marks all our common dealings of life, either as an abomination or a delight?” (Charles Bridges)

PRAYER: Lord, help me to be fair and honest in all my dealings.

"HOW AMIABLE ARE THY TABERNACLES" (1)

How do we view our worship of God each Lord's Day? What does going to church mean to us? Come the Lord's Day, what thoughts cross our minds as we approach God in worship in the sanctuary?

Psalm 84, written by David, is a beautiful expression of love for the courts of God. Overwhelmed by his great desire for God's house, King David fell to wondering as reflected in this heart cry: *"How amiable are thy tabernacles, O LORD of hosts!"* (Ps 84:1). How lovely is the holy sanctuary in the eyes of all who love God.

Why the plural *"tabernacles"*? The Tabernacle had been pitched in several places. Moreover, it was divided into several courts. In their wilderness journeys, the Israelites had to carry the tents of the Tabernacle with them. To the Jews, the Tabernacle was a provisional meeting place where God met with His people. It signified God's presence, and relationship with them. Later, King Solomon laid up the Tabernacle in the Temple which he built in Jerusalem (1 Kings 8:4). In the dedication ceremony, God's glorious presence filled the Temple which subsequently became the centre of Jewish worship.

What was there in *"thy tabernacles"* that was so *"amiable"* to the psalmist? It could be what was within – the golden vessels, the priests going about their sacred duties, the high priest in his beautiful priestly robes, or the slain sacrifices. But more than all these was the holy presence of God, *"so that 'this is none other but the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven' (Gen 28:17); the provisions that are here made, and the company that is here enjoyed"* (John Gill).

David longed with all his heart to stand again in the sanctuary. If we truly love the Lord, we too will desire to be in the Lord's house.

THOUGHT: Do I treasure the privilege of worshipping the Lord in His sanctuary?

PRAYER: Lord, may I love to gather with Thy people in worship.

“HOW AMIABLE ARE THY TABERNACLES” (2)

To once again stand in the courts of the Lord was the soul-longing of the psalmist. It is evident from Psalm 84 that David was deprived, for some cause, of the privileges of the sanctuary. Quite likely, he was in exile (possibly fleeing as a fugitive from his son Absalom) and was absent from the place of worship. Absalom had not only usurped David's throne, but had sought to kill him as well.

So deep and insatiable was David's pining that he could not be silent; he cried out for God and His house: *“My soul longeth, yea, even fainteth for the courts of the LORD: my heart and my flesh crieth out for the living God”* (Ps 84:2). His longing was so intense that it made him faint. The word *“fainteth”* has the idea of “pining away” or “being exhausted with desire.”

The psalmist longed so much for the courts of God that he begrudged the little birds their privilege of setting up their nests by God's altar (v 3). He also envied the ministers of God whose blessed privilege it was to be constantly engaged in divine worship and service (v 4). The reference was to the priests and Levites. In his eyes, they were highly privileged who had their permanent abode near the tabernacle and the temple, and who were wholly devoted to the sacred duties of worship.

Are we like the psalmist in his holy yearnings? Do we wish with all our heart to be in God's house? Or are our hearts centred on the things of this world when we come before Him in worship on the Lord's Day?

THOUGHT: “Some need to be whipped to church, while here is David crying for it.” (Spurgeon)

PRAYER: Lord, give me a love for Thy house.

"HOW AMIABLE ARE THY TABERNACLES" (3)

Having spoken of the blessedness of the servants of God, the psalmist now turned his attention to those who had the privilege to visit the courts of God (Ps 84:5).

The joys of traversing the heavenly road made the pilgrims forget the hardships along the way. As these weary travellers neared Jerusalem, the desired city of worship, they were invigorated, revived and comforted by the encouragement, songs, counsels and testimonies of fellow pilgrims (vv 6-7).

What a beautiful illustration of the life of Christian pilgrims as they advance toward their heavenly home! Viewing the glitter of their celestial city from afar, "they overcome difficulties more easily, they walk more firmly, they tread their way more cheerfully and triumphantly" (Barnes). Duties that were otherwise difficult and dreary were made easy and delightful.

How David loved the Lord and His sanctuary! "*I had rather be a doorkeeper*" can be translated "I would choose rather to sit at the threshold" – a position of deep humility. The psalmist would have gladly exchanged that long period of a thousand days (about three years) for that one day just to be in the Lord's presence (v 10)!

Should any think himself unworthy of the heavenly kingdom, the psalmist here gave words of encouragement: "... *the LORD will give grace and glory: no good thing will he withhold from them that walk uprightly*" (v 11b). The lot of the believer is a happy one. At the end of the psalm, the psalmist joyfully declared: "*O LORD of hosts, blessed is the man that trusteth in thee*" (v 12).

THOUGHT: "We grow as we advance if Heaven be our goal."
(Spurgeon)

PRAYER: Lord, may I keep close to Thee along the heavenly way.

THE SIN OF PRIDE

Pride is found in every human heart. Since the fall of Adam, pride has been an integral part of our depraved nature.

“If there is a sin that is universal, it is this. Where is it not to be found? Hunt among the highest and loftiest in the world, and you shall find it there; and then go and search amongst the poorest and the most miserable, and you shall find it there. ... Pride is a strange creature; it never objects to its lodgings. It will live comfortably enough in a palace, and it will live equally at its ease in a hovel” (Spurgeon).

This evil sin is manifested when we overrate or speak highly of ourselves, despise others, or set ourselves up as judges of others. Augustine defined it as “the love of one’s own excellence.”

Pride holds an inflated view of self. One who is proud displays his folly both in speech and conduct. An enemy to peace, pride is often the cause of conflicts, broken families and interpersonal relationships.

In Proverbs 8:13, we read that with pride follows three other evils: “...arrogancy, and the evil way, and the froward mouth.”

This hateful spirit comes in many forms. Some are proud of their wealth, some of their good looks, some of their position, some of their achievements, some of their independence. Not a few boast of their “goodness” while others take pride in their spiritual knowledge and maturity.

THOUGHT: What am I most proud of?

PRAYER: Lord, help me to see the pride in my own heart.

TUESDAY, DECEMBER 10

PROVERBS 6:16-19

JAMES 4:1-12

*“For God resisteth the proud,
and giveth grace to the humble.”*

GOD OPPOSES THE PROUD

Commonly known as the “master” sin, pride is the root that feeds all the rest of our sins – strife, anger, rebelliousness, stubbornness, envy, hatred, bitterness, malice, evil speaking.

Pride is an affront to the Lord. God hates pride and will bring down every manifestation of it: *“And the loftiness of man shall be bowed down, and the haughtiness of men shall be made low: and the LORD alone shall be exalted in that day”* (Isa 2:17).

“Sins of the flesh are revolting and bring their own social consequences, but against none of those does God speak with such vehemence as He does of pride” (J Oswald Sanders). God will not tolerate a lofty spirit for it is an attack upon His undivided glory: *“...my glory will I not give to another...”* (Isa 42:8).

In the list of “seven deadly sins” that God abhors, pride is named first (Prov 6:16-19). God is the enemy of the haughty who exalt themselves and despise others. He sets Himself against them; He scatters *“the proud in the imagination of their hearts”* and puts *“down the mighty from their seats”* (Luke 1:51-52). God is against one who is proud, but He exalts the humble and preserves them by His grace: *“Though the LORD be high, yet hath he respect unto the lowly: but the proud he knoweth afar off”* (Ps 138:6). *“Surely he scorneth the scorers: but he giveth grace unto the lowly* (Prov 3:34).

If we long for more grace from the Lord, let us put away all lofty thoughts of self and learn to be humble. May the Lord help us.

THOUGHT: If I say I am humble, I have already committed the sin of pride.

PRAYER: Lord, help me cultivate a spirit of humility.

THE NEGATIVE EFFECTS OF PRIDE (1)

1. Strife

“Only by pride cometh contention...” (Prov 13:10). *“He that is of a proud heart stirreth up strife...”* (Prov 28:25).

A contentious spirit, generated by pride, often divides churches, families and friends. Ruled by his pride and fuming passions, a conceited person will soon show himself for what he really is. He rebels against authority and causes discord wherever he goes. Such a one cannot bear contradiction or competition, is wrathful and revengeful, and always at variance with others.

In the Bible, we read of the Ephraimites who wanted to share in the glory of Gideon’s victory. Puffed up with a conceit of their numbers and strength, they chided him because *“thou calledst us not, when thou wentest to fight with the Midianites”* (Judg 8:1). We also read of John writing of Diotrophes who *“receiveth us not”* because he *“loveth to have the preeminence among them”* (3 John 1:9).

2. Folly

“He that trusteth in his own heart is a fool...” (Prov 28:26).

Trusting in his own judgment and understanding, a proud person is unteachable. He ends up a fool because he cannot accept any criticism or instruction. He believes that his view is always right and none should question him. This is folly. This was the case with the Syrian general, Naaman who almost missed the opportunity of God’s healing because of his pride. Had it not been for his servants who persuaded him to heed the instruction of the prophet Elisha, he would have remained a leper all of his life (2 Kings 5:9-14).

THOUGHT: Can I see my proud and contentious spirit?

PRAYER: Lord, guard my heart against this wicked sin of pride.

THE NEGATIVE EFFECTS OF PRIDE (2)

3. Shame

“When pride cometh, then cometh shame...” (Prov 11:2).

The word “*shame*” in the original means a lowering of one’s present state. Because the proud person thinks highly of himself, he expects to be held in high esteem. But whenever others fail to acknowledge his supposed worth, he is angry and ashamed. The lowly, on the other hand, are kept from wicked and foolish actions.

Sadly, when pride reigns in the heart, one is not able to accept any form of rejection or resistance. One who suffered shame because his counsel was rejected was Ahithophel. When Absalom took the advice of Hushai instead of Ahithophel his trusted counsellor, the shame was too great for the latter’s proud heart, and he committed suicide (2 Sam 17:23).

Some years ago, a famous chef considered himself a failure and took his own life because he could not face the shame of not winning a cooking competition. Such is the tragic effect of this grievous sin.

4. Destruction

“Pride goeth before destruction, and an haughty spirit before a fall” (Prov 16:18).

A proud person tends to be rash and careless in his judgments. Because he trusts so much in himself, he will suffer failures and setbacks in life. One who carries his head high, and walks with his nose up in the air, is not able to see where he is going and will soon stumble and fall. The higher his position, the greater the fall.

THOUGHT: *“...every one that exalteth himself shall be abased...”* (Luke 18:14)

PRAYER: Lord, help me be mindful of the negative effects of pride.

BIBLICAL EXAMPLES OF PRIDE (1)

The Bible lists many instances of God’s wrath against the grievous sin of pride. Because of pride, Sennacherib lost his army (2 Kings 19:20-37) and King Herod, his life (Acts 12:21-23). God’s judgment fell upon Korah, Dathan and Abiram because of their pride and subsequent rebellion against the God-ordained authority of Moses and Aaron (Num 16).

In Daniel 4, we see how pride caused Nebuchadnezzar’s downfall. It is a classic example of a man who fell because he basked in the glory of his own achievements. Instead of giving glory to God, Nebuchadnezzar boasted : *“Is not this great Babylon, that I have built for the house of the kingdom by the might of my power, and for the honour of my majesty?”* (Dan 4:30).

God’s judgment fell upon him instantly. *“While the word was in the king’s mouth, there fell a voice from heaven, saying, O king Nebuchadnezzar, to thee it is spoken; The kingdom is departed from thee”* (Dan 4:31). Immediately, the king was turned into a beast *“and did eat grass as oxen, and his body was wet with the dew of heaven, till his hairs were grown like eagles’ feathers, and his nails like birds’ claws”* (Dan 4:33).

However, this account ended on a happy note when the king repented, and acknowledged Jehovah God as the Lord God Sovereign. God graciously restored the king as the supreme ruler of his empire. The great king learnt humility the painful way (Dan 4:37). Truly, *“God resisteth the proud, and giveth grace to the humble”* (1 Pet 5:5).

Brethren, let us not fear the pride of others. Rather, let us greatly fear pride in ourselves, for it is an affront to both God and man. May the Lord grant us the grace to maintain a humble spirit at all times.

THOUGHT: “I have had more trouble with myself than any other man.”
(Moody)

PRAYER: Lord, help me not to steal Thy glory from Thee.

BIBLICAL EXAMPLES OF PRIDE (2)

Pride also caused the downfall of Haman. King Ahasuerus had promoted Haman and *“set his seat above all the princes that were with him”* (Esther 3:1). What a high honour for Haman! All the king’s servants bowed, and revered him. *“But Mordecai bowed not, nor did him reverence”* (v 2b) because *“the religion of a Jew forbade him to give honours to any mortal man which savoured of idolatry, especially to so wicked a man as Haman”* (Matthew Henry). Mordecai’s defiance incurred Haman’s wrath. Thus infuriated, he plotted not only to *“lay hands on Mordecai”* but also *“to destroy all the Jews that were throughout the whole kingdom of Ahasuerus, even the people of Mordecai”* (vv 5-6).

Eaten up by pride and murderous hatred, Haman was not satisfied with merely getting at the man who had offended him; he went all out to plot the destruction of his people, the Jews, as well. What horrendous evil a proud heart can breed!

By God’s intervention, Haman’s wicked plot to destroy the Jews failed, and he was hanged on the very gallows which he had erected for his adversary, Mordecai (Esther 7:10).

God sets Himself against the proud and abases them (Prov 29:23; James 4:6). *“Those that think to gain respect by lifting up themselves above their rank, by looking high, talking big, appearing fine, and applauding themselves, will on the contrary expose themselves to contempt, lose their reputation, and provoke God by humbling providences to bring them down and lay them low”* (Matthew Henry). Let us humble ourselves before the Lord and our fellow men for the Lord *“giveth grace unto the humble”* (James 4:6).

THOUGHT: “Pride is a barrier to all spiritual progress.” (Harry Ironside)

PRAYER: Lord, forgive my pride and grant me grace to be humble.

THE SHEPHERD'S PSALM (1)

Commonly known as “the Psalm of psalms,” Psalm 23 is one of the most read and beloved of the psalms. It is often read to comfort sick or afflicted souls to revive their faith and confidence in God.

Under a metaphor borrowed from scenes of pastoral life, with which he was familiar, the psalmist David described God's providential care in leading, refreshing, guiding, protecting and preserving his life.

The following meditations are gleaned from *A Shepherd Looks At Psalm 23* by Phillip Keller who shares his rich pastoral experiences as a shepherd.

“The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.” (Ps 23:1)

The psalmist commenced with a happy affirmation: “Look at who my Shepherd is – the LORD!” It expresses the utter contentment of a sheep with its owner and its lot in life. Here, David was not speaking as the shepherd, though he was one, but as a sheep in the flock of God. He knew from firsthand experience that the happiness of any sheep depended much on the owner's character.

Looking at David's life, and the hardships he suffered as a hunted fugitive by his enemy Saul and later by his estranged son Absalom, one may wonder how he could boast of his Master's care. How do we explain this paradox? David had put his trust in the Good Shepherd who delights in His flock.

This thought of God being the Shepherd of His people, is confirmed by Christ in the New Testament: “*I am the good shepherd: the good shepherd giveth his life for the sheep*” (John 10:11). To our selfless Shepherd, no trouble is too great as He cares for His flock.

THOUGHT: “*I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly.*” (John 10:10)

PRAYER: Lord, may I rest content in Thy loving care.

THE SHEPHERD’S PSALM (2)

“He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters.” (Ps 23:2)

The words “*green pastures*” paint a picture of lush verdant grass which carpets portions of the hills and vales of Israel. In this conducive environment, the flock of sheep can safely rest and feed. However, green pastures do not just happen by chance. For the flock to enjoy green pastures amid the brown sun-burned wasteland, the caring shepherd has to clear rough, rocky land, tear out roots and stumps, and plough and prepare the soil. He also needs to check out beforehand the route to take and the places where his sheep can rest.

A good shepherd is sensitive to the needs of the flock. To the sheep, nothing is more reassuring than the physical presence of their attentive shepherd. In the Christian’s life, there is nothing like Christ’s presence to dispel the fear of the unknown. Life is full of uncertainties; any moment can bring danger and disaster. But God’s people can lie down in quiet contentment, finding rest in the presence of their Good Shepherd.

Sheep love drinking from “*still waters*.” Sheep are kept both for their meat as well as for their wool. Should a sheep accidentally fall into the water, it will drown as its wet fleece will weigh it down. Thus, sheep instinctively avoid “troubled waters” – they will never be comfortable drinking from rushing streams or gushing rapids.

When sheep are thirsty, they become restless. If not led to clean, pure water, they will seek their own and often end up drinking from polluted pot holes, where they pick up parasites and germs. This is often the case with us as we often try, in our own strength, to sort out our problems. Small wonder then that we always end up disappointed, disillusioned, and often in despair. Let us turn to the Lord who is our Rest and Refuge.

THOUGHT: Do I, as the Lord’s sheep, follow His leading?

PRAYER: Lord, I thank Thee that there is rest and safety in Thee.

THE SHEPHERD'S PSALM (3)

"He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake." (Ps 23:3)

Life's hardships can often take a toll on us. Added to these trials is the daily struggle to keep our depraved nature in check. The psalmist too had his own personal struggles. He had tasted the bitterness of grave sin in his adultery with Bathsheba and the murder of her husband Uriah. In deep anguish of his soul, he had cried out to the Lord (Ps 42:11).

We can see a parallel in the care of sheep. A "cast" sheep is one that has turned over on its back and cannot get up again by itself. It is a pathetic sight. "Lying on its back, its feet in the air, it flays away frantically struggling to stand up, without success. Sometimes, it will bleat a little for help, but generally it lies there lashing about in frightened frustration. If the owner does not arrive on the scene within a reasonably short time, the sheep will die. ... It is not only the shepherd who keeps a sharp eye for cast sheep, but also the predators. Buzzards, vultures, dogs, coyotes and cougars all know that a cast sheep is easy prey and death is not far off" (Phillip Keller).

The parable of the lost sheep depicts for us the heart-warming account of the shepherd's deep concern for his one lost sheep. Knowing that every minute was critical, he left his other ninety-nine and spent the night looking for the missing one, and when he *"hath found it, he layeth it on his shoulders, rejoicing."* In the same way, our loving Lord tenderly picks up and restores His "cast" sheep.

Christ the Good Shepherd does not permit His sheep to wander in ways that would lead to their ruin. He leads them in the way of uprightness and truth. He rescues and guides them safely to their heavenly home for the glory of His name.

THOUGHT: "He leadeth me! O blessed thought!"

PRAYER: Lord, let my life show forth Thy good name.

THE SHEPHERD’S PSALM (4)

“Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.” (Ps 23:4)

Though exposed to pit falls, precipices and wild beasts in the dark valleys, the sheep has nothing to fear. Because the shepherd is present, all is well; the sheep feels comforted and secure and can confidently declare: *“I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.”*

The shepherd carries with him a rod and a staff. These are the hallmarks of his vocation, particularly in the Middle East. By these “tools of his trade,” he guides, protects, corrects and comforts the sheep. The shepherd uses the rod to drive off preying beasts like wolves, cougars or stray dogs. It is often used to beat the bush, discouraging snakes and other creatures from disturbing the flock.

This verse is often used to comfort dying saints. Death is a stark reality; it is an appointment that all must keep. But even here, death is not an end but merely the door to a blessed eternity with the Saviour. Death is a king of terrors, but not to the flock of Christ. Death cannot separate us from the love of God, and therefore it cannot really harm us. It kills the body, but cannot touch the soul (Rom 8:38-39; Matt 10:28).

“The shadow of a serpent will not sting nor the shadow of a sword kill. It is the valley of the shadow, deep indeed, and dark, and dirty; but the valleys are fruitful, and so is death itself fruitful of comforts to God’s people” (Matthew Henry).

THOUGHT: Even in that dark and gloomy valley of the shadow of death, I will not be alarmed for my gracious Shepherd will be there to guide me safely to my heavenly Home.

PRAYER: Lord, I thank Thee that Thou wilt be with me in my darkest and most trying hour.

THE SHEPHERD’S PSALM (5)

“Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over.” (Ps 23:5)

Sharing his shepherding insights, Phillip Keller describes the arduous tasks the shepherd undertakes to prepare “*a table*” – grazing grounds – for his herd. He first chooses the best pastures. He painstakingly checks for poisonous weeds, as well as for twigs and small stones that will affect the water sources.

“It is not always apparent to us what tremendous personal cost it has been for Christ to prepare ‘*a table*’ for His own. Just as the lonely, personal privation of the sheepman who prepares the summer range for his stock entails a sacrifice, so the lonely agony of Gethsemane, of Pilate’s hall, of Calvary, have cost my Master much” (Phillip Keller).

During the warm summer months, hordes of insects – especially flies – target the sheep. When attacked, the poor sheep panics and bashes its head against tree trunks, rocks or scrub bushes, thus resulting in injury, blindness or even death. Only the closest attention to the behaviour of the flock by the alert shepherd can save the afflicted sheep. At the very first sign of flies, he will apply an antidote of oil to the sheep’s head which has the immediate effect of calming the sheep.

Similarly, the Christian can rest in his Good Shepherd who knows every wicked wile and every treacherous trick of our Enemy. He has gone before us into every situation and every extremity that we might encounter in life. Hence, the Lord understands our infirmities and ministers to us in our troubles (Heb 4:15).

THOUGHT: Think of what it costs the Lord to prepare “*a table*” for me.

PRAYER: Lord, I thank Thee that Thou art my kind and tender Shepherd.

THE SHEPHERD’S PSALM (6)

*“Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life:
and I will dwell in the house of the LORD for ever.” (Ps 23:6)*

Happy and contented, the psalmist concludes his meditations by affirming his complete confidence in the One who owns and controls his life: *“Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life.”*

It is easy for us to make this statement when things are going well – when we have a job, good health, and our family and friends. But when we face adversities and our world is falling apart, how do we respond? Can we honestly say, *“Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life”*?

“This to me is the supreme portrait of my Shepherd. Continually there flows out to me His goodness and His mercy, which, even though I do not deserve them, come unremittingly from their source of supply – His own great heart of love ... All the care, all the work, all the alert watchfulness, all the skill, all the concern, all the self-sacrifice are borne of His love – the One who loves His sheep, loves His work, loves His role as a Shepherd” (Phillip Keller).

Thank God that despite our doubts and failures, our gracious Shepherd does not give up on us; He continues to bestow upon us His goodness and mercy.

Goodness and mercy had followed the psalmist’s flock. What about us? We have received bountiful blessings from our Shepherd. Let us honour Him by loving Him in return, and seeking to be a blessing to others, especially to those in the household of faith (Gal 6:10).

THOUGHT: *“What shall I render unto the LORD for all his benefits toward me?” (Ps 116:12)*

PRAYER: Lord, I thank Thee for the blessed hope of dwelling in Thy house forever.

LESSONS FROM GOD’S DEALINGS WITH ISRAEL IN THE WILDERNESS (1)

We can learn many lessons from biblical history, in particular the Old Testament accounts. The apostle Paul reiterated this truth in the book of Romans: *“For whatsoever things were written aforetime were written for our learning, that we through patience and comfort of the scriptures might have hope”* (Rom 15:4).

Writing to the Corinthians, the apostle used ancient Israel as *“our examples, to the intent we should not lust after evil things, as they also lusted”* (1 Cor 10:6). As God’s people, Israel enjoyed great privileges and blessings even whilst they were in the wilderness. Yet they rebelled against Him (1 Cor 10:5). God destroyed them because of their wilful disobedience and idolatries. Thus, Paul warned the Corinthian Christians to take heed, *“lest any man fall after the same example of unbelief”* (Heb 4:11).

Let us also take heed to these warnings from Holy Scriptures. May the Lord instruct us as we consider His dealings with the Israelites after they had surveyed the Promised Land.

1. Doubt

“We be not able to go up...” (Num 13:31).

Our reading from Numbers refers to the time when Moses sent the Israelite spies to survey the Promised Land. Out of the twelve, only Joshua and Caleb confidently urged the people to enter in to possess the Land (Num 13:30). The other ten spies gave an *“evil report”* (vv 31-33). Choosing to trust the ten spies rather than God, the people fretted: *“And all the congregation lifted up their voice, and cried; and the people wept that night”* (Num 14:1). They manifested a spirit of unbelief, and murmured against Moses and Aaron (Num 14:2-3).

THOUGHT: What happens when I trust myself rather than God?

PRAYER: Lord, help me to take Thee at Thy Word.

LESSONS FROM GOD'S DEALINGS WITH ISRAEL IN THE WILDERNESS (2)

2. Discontent

"Would God that we had died in the land of Egypt..." (Num 14:2)

Like wildfire, discouragement and discontent spread throughout the camp and the people murmured against Moses and Aaron: *"Would God that we had died in the land of Egypt! or would God we had died in this wilderness!"* (Num 14:2). They even wanted to nominate a leader to bring them back to Egypt (v 4).

In response to their provocations, God intervened and passed judgment according to the desire of their unbelieving hearts – they would perish in the wilderness, as they had wished: *"But your little ones, which ye said should be a prey, them will I bring in, and they shall know the land which ye have despised. But as for you, your carcasses, they shall fall in this wilderness. And your children shall wander in the wilderness forty years, and bear your whoredoms, until your carcasses be wasted in the wilderness. After the number of the days in which ye searched the land, even forty days, each day for a year, shall ye bear your iniquities, even forty years, and ye shall know my breach of promise"* (vv 31-34). As for the ten faithless spies, God slew them – they *"died by the plague before the LORD"* (v 37).

Murmuring reflects a discontented and rebellious spirit. It is a grave sin that God does not take lightly. By murmuring, we are expressing our dissatisfaction with God's sovereign will for our lives. When we question God or complain, we are actually challenging the Lord's wisdom, goodness and love. Moreover, this spirit of dissatisfaction reflects an ungrateful heart. May we cultivate a thankful and contented spirit in our daily lives.

THOUGHT: If I were in the Israelites' shoes, would I also murmur?

PRAYER: Lord, may I rest content in Thy will.

LESSONS FROM GOD’S DEALINGS WITH ISRAEL IN THE WILDERNESS (3)

3. Death

“Even those men that did bring up the evil report upon the land, died by the plague before the LORD.” (Num 14:37)

The ten spies who provoked God and caused the people to sin by their faithlessness died immediately before the Lord. Indeed, *“it is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God”* (Heb 10:31). Let us heed the warning from the writer of Hebrews: *“Take heed, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief, in departing from the living God”* (Heb 3:12).

4. Defiance

“Lo, we...will go up...” (Num 14:40b)

Early the next day, the people decided to *“go up unto the place which the LORD hath promised”* (Num 14:40). Why this rash decision? Foolish and presumptuous, they perhaps hoped that by doing so, they might render vain God’s severe sentence upon them. They even confessed their sin: *“...we have sinned”* (v 40c), “probably supposing that the temporary sorrow they felt for their late rebellion would be accepted as a sufficient atonement for their crimes” (*Adam Clarke’s Commentary*). Sadly, these words of supposed repentance came a little too late.

God, through Moses, graciously warned the people against going up because He would not be with them (vv 41-43). By choosing to go up without God’s presence, they reflected a presumptuous spirit that trusted in their own strength, and not in the almighty power of God.

THOUGHT: Rash decisions are usually unwise, and rarely right.

PRAYER: Lord, *“keep back thy servant also from presumptuous sins.”* (Ps 19:13)

LESSONS FROM GOD’S DEALINGS WITH ISRAEL IN THE WILDERNESS (4)

5. Defeat

“Then the Amalekites came down, and the Canaanites which dwelt in that hill, and smote them, and discomfited them, even unto Hormah.”
(Num 14:45)

God’s warnings through His servant Moses were loud and clear (Num 14:41-43). However, they fell on deaf ears as the Israelites wilfully entered the Promised Land without the Lord: *“But they presumed to go up unto the hill top: nevertheless the ark of the covenant of the LORD, and Moses, departed not out of the camp”* (Num 14:44). Their disobedience brought disaster and disgrace as the enemies soundly defeated them.

How vain is the counsel of man against the wisdom of God! Remember: without the Lord, we can do nothing (John 15:5). We will surely fail if we lean upon our own strength by wilfully going our own way. May we learn to submit to God’s will and depend wholly upon Him.

The Israelites started by doubting God. This led to a spirit of discontent and murmuring against God and His servants. The ten faithless spies died before the Lord. Taking no heed, the people continued to sin by defying God and disobeying His Word. Their wilful and rash act of going up *“unto the place which the LORD hath promised”* (v 40b) ended in defeat and disgrace. Their wilfulness had cost them that precious opportunity to enter the Promised Land.

Let us not doubt the Lord. Check our hearts for a presumptuous spirit lest we despise the power and presence of God. May the Lord help us to trust Him to lead us in our daily lives.

THOUGHT: *“Be not wise in thine own eyes...”* (Prov 3:7)

PRAYER: Lord, help me to wait upon Thee and Thy perfect will.

JOY TO THE WORLD (1)

"Joy to the world" is one of the favourite carols we sing at Christmas. Our hearts rejoice as we remember the gracious condescension of our Saviour who came to earth as a lowly babe in a Bethlehem manger. As the Lord's redeemed people, we look forward to a time of rejoicing and sweet contemplation of our Saviour's love in bestowing grace and salvation upon us, a sinful people. What a blessing to receive our King and to prepare Him room! What a joy to sing praises to His great and glorious name!

Our response, as God's people, to the advent of Christ is a joyful one. What does Scripture tell us about others who rejoiced at the birth of Christ, the Saviour of the world?

Consider the account recorded in Luke 2:8-20 where the angel appeared unto the shepherds with the glorious proclamation: *"Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord"* (Luke 2:10-11).

This is joyous news: the Lord Himself has come; Christ the Saviour is born! He, the long-awaited Messiah, will break the curse of sin. Christ, the Prince of Peace (Isa 9:6), came to make peace between God and man, and to extend goodwill to all men: *"And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying, Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men"* (Luke 2:13-14).

"Although the birth of our blessed Saviour was published by one angel, yet is it celebrated by a host of angels; a whole choir of angels sang forth the praises of Almighty God, upon this great and joyful occasion" (William Burkitt).

THOUGHT: "My heart shall rejoice, Lord Jesus, When Thou comest and callest for me!"

PRAYER: Lord, I thank Thee for the gracious gift of Thy Son.

JOY TO THE WORLD (2)

Luke the evangelist records the joyous response of the shepherds at the angel’s proclamation of the Saviour’s birth. Although they were initially frightened by the sudden appearance of the angels, the shepherds reacted quickly. Joyfully, they ran to find the Messiah in the city of David. And when they had found Him, they went around proclaiming the “good news” of the Saviour’s birth.

The evangelist also records an incident at the Temple when two aged saints – Simeon and Anna the prophetess – rejoiced at the sight of the infant Jesus (Luke 2:27-38).

God had revealed to Simeon through the Holy Spirit that, as a result of his faith and in response to his prayers, he would live to see Christ. The same Spirit led him to the temple at that very moment when Joseph and Mary brought Jesus in, to present Him before God according to the law. Simeon, who was *“waiting for the consolation of Israel”* (Luke 2:25), took the Child up in his arms and blessed God for fulfilling his life ambition and hope: *“Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace, according to thy word: For mine eyes have seen thy salvation”* (Luke 2:29-30).

While Simeon was blessing the infant Jesus, Anna the prophetess came into the temple and *“gave thanks likewise unto the Lord, and spake of him to all them that looked for redemption in Jerusalem”* (Luke 2:38).

As we remember the first advent of our Lord, let us rejoice over God’s gift of His only begotten Son who came and dwelt amongst men. Let us joyfully receive our King, let us gladly prepare Him room, and sing with all Heaven and nature to the glory of our great God and Saviour, Jesus Christ.

THOUGHT: May I joyfully proclaim the Gospel through my lips and my life.

PRAYER: Lord, I thank Thee for the joy of my salvation.

“AWAKE, THOU THAT SLEEPEST” (1)

Some years ago, we attended the wedding of a Christian couple. The minister who solemnized the marriage gave the exhortation based on Psalm 127. He started his message by congratulating the bride and groom, and thanking God for the good weather – “No rain, and no earthquakes!” He continued: “But we cannot be complacent. An earthquake may shake Singapore any time!” What a sobering thought! The Bible tells us that one of the signs of the end-times is “*earthquakes, in divers places*” (Matt 24:7).

The minister’s warning about earthquakes set me thinking about our troubled and sinful world. In Noah’s day, “*the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually*” (Gen 6:5). God’s global judgment was by “*a flood of waters upon the earth*” which destroyed “*all flesh, wherein is the breath of life*” (Gen 6:17).

The world today is becoming increasingly wicked and morally corrupt: “*But evil men and seducers shall wax worse and worse, deceiving, and being deceived*” (2 Tim 3:13). Signs are pointing to the Lord’s soon return.

Our gracious God is exercising restraint and patiently waiting for sinful men to repent and be saved: “*The Lord is not slack concerning his promise, as some men count slackness; but is longsuffering to us-ward, not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance*” (2 Pet 3:9).

Let us not linger. Seek the LORD while He may be found, and call upon Him while He is near (Isa 55:6). May we enter the door of grace while it is still open.

THOUGHT: God’s first global judgment was by water; the final judgment will be by fire.

PRAYER: Lord, help me to redeem the time, for the days are evil.

“AWAKE, THOU THAT SLEEPEST” (2)

The world is concerned about global warming. Almost every country is experiencing dramatic weather changes. Let us take these signs as a divine warning! God’s Word warns of a coming universal destruction by fire from which none can escape (2 Pet 3:3-7).

Ominous signs are pointing to the Lord’s imminent return. Jesus’ coming is described in 2 Peter 3:10 *“as a thief in the night”* – unexpectedly and unannounced. Are we ready to meet the Lord?

Jesus told the parable of a rich man who learnt too late that he had been living carelessly and indulgently with no concern for the things of God (Luke 16:19-31). The rich man *“fared sumptuously every day.”* Sitting outside his gate was a beggar named Lazarus – *“desiring to be fed with the crumbs which fell from the rich man’s table.”* He *“laid at his gate, full of sores.”* Every day the rich man passed by the hungry beggar without sparing a thought of meeting his need.

Both the poor beggar and the rich man died. Lazarus was carried by the angels into the comfort of Abraham’s bosom. But the rich man woke up in hell to the torment of everlasting fire. Looking up and seeing Lazarus in Abraham’s bosom, he requested that Lazarus dip his finger in water and cool his burning tongue. In turning down his request, Abraham reminded the rich man how he had enjoyed good things on earth while Lazarus had nothing. His second request was that Lazarus be sent to warn his five brothers about hell. This was also rejected. For the rich man, the “wake-up” call came too late.

Is the Lord sounding a “wake-up” call to us? God’s grace bids us repent. Let us believe and be saved. Live soberly and righteously. Flee from the wrath to come (Matt 3:7; Luke 3:7).

THOUGHT: *“... now it is high time to awake out of sleep: for now is our salvation nearer than when we believed.”* (Rom 13:11)

PRAYER: Lord, may I turn to Thee while it is day.

TRUE PEACE (1)

God, our Heavenly Father, does not promise His children a trouble-free life. Every believer has, at one time or another, been put through trials such as rejection, failure, difficult relationships, losses, family problems, even the death of a loved one.

Jesus warned His disciples to expect tribulation: *"In the world ye shall have tribulation"* (John 16:33). Many of God's servants also had to face life's adversities. Those specially called of God to serve Him (eg: Moses, Elijah and Jeremiah) struggled with seemingly insurmountable odds.

The cares of our daily lives can sometimes try us sore and threaten to overwhelm us. Where then can we find rest and peace?

True rest cannot be found in the world or its religions. Earthly friends, entertainment, or our pursuit of knowledge and ambition, may distract us for a while, but they will never bring us lasting comfort or peace. Commenting on the great work of the world's eminent scientists, one writer said: "During the last fifteen years I have read many of their books. I honour them, and the service they have wrought; but I have missed one note in them all – the note of comfort." How true it is that the world's wisdom can teach us many things, but it can never point the way to a quiet and restful heart. It offers no help in the day of affliction when our spirits are sorely tried and our hearts are troubled beyond measure.

Many in the world are willing to pay a high price for peace in their hearts but they can never find true peace. As God's children, we have divine resources that the world cannot use or even understand. Quiet rest, especially in the midst of life's struggles and testings, can only be found in our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

THOUGHT: Do I have true peace?

PRAYER: Lord, help me to trust in Jesus, the Prince of Peace.

TRUE PEACE (2)

Look at the invitation of our blessed Saviour in John 14:1: *“Let not your heart be troubled: ye believe in God, believe also in me.”* Jesus was comforting His despondent disciples over His impending death. The word *“troubled”* used here by Jesus does not mean any kind of sadness or sorrow. It means “to be agitated, perplexed, and thrown into confusion.” It describes a life thrown as it were off course, and tossed about by the force of perplexing and adverse circumstances.

“In the case of the disciples there was much to trouble them. They were about to part with their beloved, tender Friend. They were to be left alone to meet with persecutions and trials. They were without wealth, without friends, without honours. And it is not improbable that they felt that His death would demolish all their schemes, for they had not yet fully learned the doctrine that the Messiah must suffer and die” (William Burkitt).

Consider Jesus’ comforting words: *“Ye believe in God, believe also in me.”* We will have true peace only when we commit all our cares to the Lord, trusting Him to work out His perfect plan and purpose for our lives. Trust in the wisdom and sovereignty of our Almighty God. Do not weary ourselves with our burdens once we have brought them to our Saviour (1 Pet 5:7). Learn to wait upon Him.

Are we going through a difficult time? Take comfort in these very words of Jesus in John 14:27: *“Peace I leave with you, my peace I give unto you: not as the world giveth, give I unto you. Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid.”* Remember: when we put our trust in Jesus, nothing earthly, no matter how trying, can disturb this peace which only the blessed Lord can give.

THOUGHT: “Thou hast made us for Thyself; and our heart can have no rest, till it rests in Thee.” (Augustine)

PRAYER: Lord, I thank Thee for the peace that nothing earthly can disturb.

IS IT WELL WITH MY SOUL?

As the dying moments of the old year slip away, what are our thoughts? Can we say that we have done what is required of us? Have we fulfilled our work and family responsibilities? What have we achieved?

Whatever our thoughts may be, we as believers must not overlook the spiritual aspect of our lives. How is our walk with the Lord? Have we been faithful in our spiritual duties? Have we stood firm in our faith and witness? How have we ministered to others? Can we truthfully say: “It is well with my soul”?

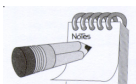
Why should we be concerned about our soul? Life is unpredictable and transient. As the years pass, there will come a day when our time in this world will be no more. Death is no respecter of persons. It takes all – the young and the old, the rich and the poor.

The psalmist reminds us that our time on earth is like a vapour that vanishes away: *“...they are like grass which groweth up. In the morning it flourisheth, and groweth up; in the evening it is cut down, and withereth”* (Ps 90:5-6). Our earthly life is brief – seventy years, *“and if by reason of strength”* eighty (Ps 90:10). If we cannot be sure of tomorrow, how can we be sure of next year?

Let us therefore approach the year end with a deep concern for our soul. Take stock of our sinful tendencies – pride, self-love, bitterness, rebelliousness, slothfulness, addictions, etc. Look into ways of dealing with them. Determine not to repeat our shortcomings. Resolve to set the Lord first in all that we do (Matt 6:33). Every year lived for the Lord must be better than the year before!

THOUGHT: Can I say that “it is well with my soul”?

PRAYER: Lord, as the year closes, help me get right with Thee.



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