



RUNNING THE RACE

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Introduction

I met Jesus Christ in 1982, about thirty years ago. That experience changed my life so dramatically that the man I was back then seems like a total stranger now. During the past three decades I've encountered thousands of professing Christians who struggle with what it means to run the race of faith in Christ. Some live in constant doubts about their salvation, some in fear of eternal punishment, living their lives on a performance trip, whilst others inspire and challenge me.

The Apostle Paul often wrote of the Christian life as a race. He was fond of using analogies which were connected to the life of the Gentiles (non-Jews) to whom he ministered. His readers were familiar with the Greek Games. Only a Greek citizen could compete, and strict rules of discipline applied. Anyone who broke those rules would be disqualified from running, and would therefore have no opportunity to win a prize, a reward. The athlete never lost his citizenship and could always apply to run again.

So how do we 'run the race'? In 1st Corinthians 9:26-27, Paul speaks about this race. He tells us that not all who run the race receive the prize, and that even he could be disqualified from the prize. Paul was never speaking about losing his salvation here, but rather about completing the individual race which Christ has chosen for each of us to run, the 'good works prepared for us from before the creation of the world'. He tells us we cannot accomplish these works, cannot win the prize, without training; therefore, like all athletes who prepare, we will need to deny ourselves certain things, train ourselves in righteousness, and go through the blood, sweat and tears of Christian service and maturity. Christ promised no less.

In the age in which we live, there are a multitude of churches who define running the race in very different ways. Perhaps that is a 'sign of the times'. Many believe that the return of Jesus Christ is in the not too distant future, that these days are the 'end times'. The Apostle Paul wrote that 'the time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear' (2nd Timothy 4:3). Paul also wrote that in the latter times, 'some will abandon the faith and follow deceiving spirits and things taught by demons' (1st Timothy 4:1). There is little doubt that we are living in such times.

The 21st Century Church is more splintered and diverse than perhaps at any other time in the Church's 2000 year history. On the one hand we have young people going on weekend camps to get 'drunk in the Spirit', convinced that God has provided a spiritual alternative to the drunkenness of the world, and on the other hand some of the 'New Reformed Churches' are trying to revive the more extreme Calvinist days of the Reformation. Surely there must be some kind of balance between these two extremes? One group seeks satisfaction in some pseudo drunken experience and calls it the Holy Spirit (just do an internet search for 'Sloshfest' for example), whilst the extremists, on the other hand, have such a narrow interpretation of Scripture that they debate whether or not those who believe we have a free will are saved or not.

I have no interest in spending a weekend rolling around the floor, or falling down under some spiritual drunken stupor; I would seriously consider such a thing a 'doctrine of demons'. Likewise, I believe that the Scriptures teach that human beings have a responsibility to choose, seek and respond – as only those who have a free will can – so I reject the narrow double-predestination theology that has been resurrected lately.

Added to this are those who teach 'prosperity doctrine' - a basic denial of a life which may include hardship, poverty and persecution, a theology which puts wealth as a symbol of spirituality. Whatever happened to some good, Biblical, balanced Christianity, and what about common sense? Jesus Christ didn't give His life on the cross in order that we might have an alternative to pagan hedonism, and neither would He have made such a sacrifice if His Father had already predetermined who was saved or lost – what would be the point? And as for wealth, I can't remember ever reading a positive word from Jesus about earthly riches, but more on that later.

We are all called to run the race, but don't be discouraged. Paul considered his race 'pure joy'. There is reward for our efforts, not salvation, for that is already given as a gift, but rather confirmation that we have genuine faith and love for Christ and the joy which only those who are in their Father's will and service can know.

Chapter One: Beginning the Race

Before we talk about running the race we need to know with certainty that we've even started the race. This book isn't going to give you 'twelve recipes for a prosperous Christian life', or tell you how to 'know and acquire the blessings of God'. You can buy those books everywhere and line the pockets of the mega church leaders who sell them to swell their bulging bank accounts. My reason for writing this is simple. I want you to know without a doubt that you are 'in Christ', that you are an adopted child of God, that this world is not your home, and that you live with your feet on the soil of this broken sinful world, whilst your heart is already in heaven.

To begin, I would like to ask you two questions. Do you have faith in Christ, and is your faith producing fruit? There are no two questions more important than these. Hebrews 11:6 says that 'without faith it is impossible to please God', and James 2:26 tells us that 'faith without deeds is dead'. Only a true faith in Christ that produces spiritual fruit, and deeds of faith, is a saving faith, is a real faith.

Jesus told a well known parable about a farmer who sowed seeds in a field (Matthew 13). This is one of the few parables to which He gave us an explanation. He speaks of three kinds of people. The seed is the message of the gospel which is sown in our hearts (v 19). The first group of people heard the message and received it with joy. This was the seed on the rocky path. This little plant of faith sprouted, but when trouble and persecution came, the person fell away and the plant never bore fruit. This person had never truly 'understood' the cost of being a Christian. He wanted to be saved, was even joyful at the prospect, but didn't want the suffering and troubles which come with being a Christian.

The second group also heard the gospel with joy, but when the 'worries of the world and deceitfulness of wealth' came along, they choked the young plant to death, 'making it unfruitful' (v 22). This person was still in love with the world and what it could offer. Producing the fruits of faith was at the bottom of his list of priorities. He was more concerned with his wealth and 'worldly worries' than loving Christ.

The final group heard the word and 'understood it'. The message went into fertile soil where it produced a crop from thirty to a hundred times what was sown. Jesus uses the word 'understood' for this group. This group made their commitment after understanding that persecution and troubles

were part of the package, and that the world and wealth must never be in first place. They 'counted the cost' of salvation, a topic we will explore in more depth, and made an informed decision.

If you are in one of the first two groups, then you are in serious trouble. Jesus once cursed a fig tree, the only miracle He ever did to destroy something. His reason? It had no fruit. I believe that this miracle was a warning to people. If, when we stand before Him on Judgment Day, our faith is fruitless, then our faith is useless and we will be destroyed, cast into 'The Lake of Fire'.

Those who hear the message, understand the message and receive it with joy, will begin to produce two kinds of fruit. Firstly, the fruits of the Holy Spirit, fruits which are listed in Galatians 5. It is these fruits which can only be produced by the indwelling Spirit of God, and they change our character, transforming us into the likeness of Christ.

Secondly, that transformation brings with it a desire to do good deeds, good works for the Lord. These deeds are not done to earn salvation, for salvation can never be earned, but rather, they are a natural consequence of us becoming like the Lord. Jesus' warning about the sheep and goats in Matthew 25 is another example of how real faith acts in love, as God acts towards us.

Which of the three groups of people are you and I? We will know if our faith is genuine by looking to see if the tree is bearing fruit. Perhaps, even after reading this far, you realize that you are one of the groups of hard rocky ground. Don't be dismayed; the Bible also teaches that the ground can be prepared, broken up and made ready to receive the seed.

Jesus gave us a simple recipe for a successful Christian life. It's called 'taking up the cross', both initially and daily. In this chapter we will explore what He meant by that, but firstly we will look at what he didn't mean.

Versions of 'Salvation'

For most Roman Catholics throughout the world, and Orthodox Church believers within Ukraine where I serve the Lord, faith is merely believing in God (from an intellectual perspective) and that Jesus died on a cross. Coupled with that is the necessity for infant baptism, visiting a church on various occasions, and trying to live a reasonably good life. Traditions, many of which are tied to pagan ceremonies, are observed in total ignorance of their meanings, and assurance of salvation is practically

non-existent. Indeed, the priests of these denominations categorically state that no one can have certainty of salvation.

The majority of adherents to these denominations have no *real* relationship with God, are usually quite ignorant of who Christ is, and have the idea that their token gesture of fruitless religion will be enough to get them into heaven. Many place their hopes in icons, statues, superstitions and erroneous promises, praying to dead people, fingering beads, and yet never knowing the Christ who reaches out to them. Most simply hope that they've done enough to escape hell.

For many Protestant denominations the opposite delusion is predominant. Within denominations which use Calvinism - or perhaps hyper-Calvinism - as a foundation, predestination and election are tied to the idea of being chosen from the masses at God's secret will, so human decision is virtually thrown aside. Many forms of Calvinism take the entire responsibility for salvation out of the realm of the individual, and place it solely in God's hands. There are some good arguments for this view within Scripture, but also as many which demand human responsibility to respond to God.

When all the rhetoric and Biblical gymnastics are taken away, some forms of Calvinism (but not all) end up as an absolute denial of God's will in giving freedom to choose or reject Him, and, in my opinion, form a theology completely contradictory to the very Scriptures it claims to uphold. It was a form of hyper-Calvinism which drove me straight into Satanism, for the God portrayed in double predestination theology is a tyrant, and dictator, a God who gave us no choice to love or hate Him, accept or reject Him, a God who decided that He would choose (predestine) about ten percent of people to worship Him in eternity, and reject the others, condemning them to eternal torment forever.

I have the greatest respect for much of Calvin's work; however, the natural consequences of his theology, as witnessed in those who followed his teachings such as Theodore Beza, can defame the character of Christ in the extreme and delude followers into believing that as long as you're 'predestined' there's nothing to worry about. Sadly, many people who claim to be Christian Calvinists spend more time and energy attacking Christians of different views, quoting their favorite verses and authors, condemning those who enjoy modern forms of Christian praise, and judging anyone who

would dare to dance before God, rather than simply praising the Lord Jesus Christ for His mercy, forgiveness and grace.

I have known many such people who worship their Bible, who have no desire, joy or freedom to express love to Christ in praise and adoration, and I wonder if they know Him at all. If passion for theology takes precedence over passion for Christ, then it is religion, not a loving relationship with Jesus that drives such a person.

And what of those who teach a form of Unitarianism, that everyone will eventually be saved, that all roads lead to heaven. Various forms of this have found their way into churches today and there are some who teach that, because God is a loving Father, He would never condemn any person to hell or a 'second death'. In order to teach this, it is necessary to rip great chunks of the Bible out and disregard them. Jesus came to bring light and truth; He often spoke of our eternal destinies, warning people of judgment. Jesus died for all sin, but He never suggested that everyone would live with Him forever, that hell was some form of rehabilitation to prepare people for paradise. God is gracious in the extreme, and also just; He allows us to reject Him in this life, but holds us to our decision in the next.

Charismatics, Pentecostals, and the like often use experiences backed up by sometimes dubious interpretations of Scripture to give degrees of certainty of salvation, and the Holy Spirit (supposedly) often receives more worship and attention than Christ Himself. Many Charismatics live from one experience to the next, suffering is seen as punishment, disease as a consequence of individual sin, salvation can be lost through repeated sinful acts, and the entire life of such people ends up as a works-based performance trip.

The images of services conducted during some of the so-called 'moves of the Spirit' such as the Toronto Blessing, remind me of the satanic meetings I once attended. 'Speaking in tongues' was a common experience of the people I associated with before I met Christ. I heard the exact same phrases in churches from the mouths of pastors and so-called prophets. People being thrown to the floor, convulsions and uncontrolled shaking, false healings, power mongering and prophecies which are never realized are not in any way Christian.

I *do* believe that the gifts of the Holy Spirit are genuine and available to every generation, but strictly within the will of God, and solely for the body of Christ to bring glory to Him and make disciples (1st Corinthians

12:1-7). Satan has a deep foothold in many churches that place spiritual experiences and ecstatic utterances as proof of salvation. Counterfeit spiritual gifts - and yes there are genuine ones also - are received, not in solace kneeling before a generous Lord one desires to serve, but standing before the congregation after hearing that 'you'll be a world changer one day'. Spiritual pride abounds, demonic deceptions are numerous, and theology is often seen as spiritless intellectualism.

Modern evangelicals are perhaps the most balanced of Protestant denominations and usually closest to Biblical truth, yet confusion reigns, especially concerning what it means to be saved, and what is required for salvation, especially in first world countries. Evangelicals have the 'four spiritual rules' which many use for what I call 'car park evangelism'. Some evangelicals will go up to a guy whose changing his flat tire and, armed with a copy of this tract, proceed to tell him that if he believes Jesus died on the cross, and says a sinner's prayer, then he's saved and has assurance that he's going to heaven.

Don't misunderstand me, you may meet someone in the car park who the Lord has been preparing for salvation, months, even years before you speak to them, but if your encounter is the first time this person has considered becoming a Christian, then slow down or you may be simply producing the two kinds of 'faith' which never bear fruit. Making disciples is not about putting a notch on your belt; it's about being used by God to help people make an informed decision to surrender their life to Him and run their race in His grace.

God spent about 1500 years preparing the world before He came to dwell with us. Yes, Peter preached one sermon on the Day of Pentecost and 3000 were saved, but those Jewish people, who are labeled 'devout' in Acts 2, knew the Scriptures better than most mature Christians, they understood sacrifice, atonement and substitution, and were in Jerusalem for that very purpose. They 'understood' and made an informed decision prompted by the Holy Spirit. God had prepared these people's hearts for the gospel of Christ which Peter preached. What's the hurry? What about 'counting the cost' and how can someone surrender their life to a God they don't know?

Then, of course, we have this modern phenomena loosely defined as the 'Prosperity Doctrine', a counterfeit of Christianity which thrives in Western Countries with good economies, and sinks in the third world. Has any form of Christianity done more since the Inquisition to defame the

character of God as the TV evangelists and wealth promoters who have blossomed in the past few decades? 'Just reach out and touch that TV screen...feel the healing power of Jesus...send a small donation, a sign of your faith...give away \$100 and tomorrow you'll find \$1000 in your bank account'. Yes, I've heard exactly these things said, as have you, and watched as the leaders of such groups buy private jets, drive around in limousines and live on multi-million dollar ranches or in palatial palaces while trying to evade taxes. In churches which adhere to these unBiblical teachings, verses like 'blessed are the poor' are not popular. Have their converts considered the 'deceitfulness of wealth'? Christian leaders? Not by any Biblical definition that I know. Wolves in the clothing of sheep? More likely.

All of the above criticisms may sound harsh and too general. I am not suggesting that there are not genuine born again Christians within all of these denominations; my point is simply to show the deficiencies and areas which contradict Biblical definitions of salvation and to ensure we are not producing 'fruitless' faith which has no eternal value.

Salvation! What is it really?

Jesus was asked that question once by a really rich guy. Jesus asked him what the commandments said about it. This was a time when Jews believed that keeping the Law of Moses saved you from hell. The rich guy said he had kept the commandments, and Jesus told him to sell *everything* and give it to the poor (Matthew 10). Everything!

Nicodemus was told he must be 'born again' to see the kingdom of heaven (John 3:3). Now there's an expression that has come to mean almost anything, especially in America since the 1950's. Jesus was speaking of rebirth, death and resurrection, co-crucifixion, death to self and ego, becoming a new creation, all Biblical terms for what theologians call 'regeneration'. When Jesus said 'everything', He meant exactly what He said, but His words must always be interpreted against all other Scriptures which speak of salvation or they too will be misunderstood. If you've ever had the Holy Spirit show you the ugliness of the sinful, selfish, lustful human heart, looked in the mirror and seen that your 'righteousness is like a filthy rag', then you will understand the desire to be made new and clean. When we see sin as our holy God sees it, we want nothing more than for

Him to take this filthy life away and give us a new one; we 'understand' that the seed has to die in order to be reborn.

Jesus also said we must 'take up our cross' (Mark 8:34) and be willing to lose everything (Luke 14: 25-33); He told parables about selling everything to buy a field, and a pearl of great price. All of these parables are about the person who has seen his sin in all its disgusting reality, and the opportunity to be made clean and whole. Such people surrender 'everything', and receive something of infinite value - forgiveness, grace and eternal life.

On one occasion He said that the road to hell is wide, the road to heaven narrow, and that there were only a few people who find that road. What did he mean by 'only a few'? I was looking at statistics for 2012. There are about one billion people who say they are Protestant Christians, and 1.4 billion others, including Catholic, Orthodox, etc. Is that a few? That's more than a quarter of the people in the world, over two billion people. I wonder then, how many of these people are going to be with the Lord in heaven. Remember the parable of the ten virgins (Matthew 25)? All ten of them were waiting for Jesus to return, but only five of them were saved - only five were born again and filled with the Holy Spirit. Five went to heaven and five went to hell. Jesus' warning about sheep and goats has a similar theme, and outcome.

Maybe it's easy to be a Christian...maybe salvation is just a matter of *what* you believe, as some people preach. Should there be a difference between how a Christian and atheist conduct their lives? Can one be called 'Christian' who prays to God on Sunday, and preys on the world the rest of the week? Jesus never ever suggested it was easy to be His disciples.

But then, maybe you think there is a difference between being a disciple and being a believer. Some people also teach such things, but the Bible doesn't. Jesus told us to 'make disciples', but the church is full of weak 'converts' who have the idea that Jesus is their Savior, whilst denying Him as Lord. Such people want to be the rulers of their own lives; God must sit in the waiting room until He is called for an appointment.

My personal view is that Christ must be Lord right from the start of our race, and that a seeking person must be given time to understand what new birth entails. After all, Jesus never said to anyone 'ask me into your heart', but rather gave a command, 'come and follow me'. The commandment is there at the outset, but perhaps we are afraid we will frighten people away if

we tell them the full implications of discipleship at the beginning? If we stand up and preach to the masses that Jesus will heal all our diseases, fill our bank accounts, take away all our sufferings and problems, and even give our teenagers drunken weekends without alcohol or drugs, then yeah, we will have masses of 'converts', but they will not be Christian disciples until they hear Biblical truth and submit to it. Jesus predicted that many false teachers would come in His name.

The gospel hasn't changed, the message and the requirements are the same now as with the very first disciples; however, cultures have changed dramatically, especially when comparing modern Western cultures with the first century church. The gospel message transcends culture, for one thing has never changed, the human heart is as sinful as ever.

Steps to Regeneration

The people that Peter preached to on the Day of Pentecost, the first sermon from a Christian preacher, were believing Jews; the Bible calls them 'godly/devout/God-fearing' (Acts 2:5). They knew their history, they knew the Old Testament Law, they knew about sacrifice, sin and atonement. Actually, the reason they were in Jerusalem was to attend the Passover and make a sacrifice for their sins. Those people took a lamb to the temple, they put their hand on its head while it was slaughtered, they knew that it died in their place. God had spent 1500 years preparing the Jews for the coming of Christ. When Peter explained about why Jesus was crucified, they understood and responded, they understood that He was 'the lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world' and that only faith in Him could save.

But most unchurched people today know nothing about these things; therefore, we have to start at the beginning. God thought it was important to educate people on what salvation is, and so should we.

1. Repentance. The first step of salvation is to repent. Repentance simply means to turn around and face God instead of walking away from Him. It means to change your mind. Repentance is not salvation; it's only the first baby step towards salvation. The Holy Spirit convicts us that we are sinners, that we need salvation (John 16:8). He calls us to turn around and seek God.

2. Seeking. The second step is to seek God, and again, it is the Holy Spirit who motivates us to seek, but we must obey His command, and this step comes with a condition. We will only find God if we seek with “all our heart” (Hebrews 11:6, Jeremiah 29:13). How do we seek? We put ourselves in a place where we can learn what salvation is. We go to a Bible study, we go to Church, and we start praying. Unfortunately, when seekers start doing this, some people tell them that they are already born again. They are wrong. During the seeking period the Lord teaches us to begin trusting Him and to start getting to know Him; He is preparing the ground for the seed. You can’t give your life to someone you don’t know or trust.

For 25 years I have brought seekers to my home and taken them through the history of the Jews, showing them how God prepared the world for the coming of Christ. I use my own book ([Time for Truth: A Challenge to Skeptics](#)), but there are now seekers' studies very similar to my own such as the Alpha Program. During these weeks the seeking person's eyes are opened, they begin to understand God's holiness, our sinfulness, the need of a sacrifice, the offer of grace, the work of Jesus on the cross. This person is being prepared to make an informed decision.

The Lord is calling this seeker into an eternal relationship with Him. Most people spend months dating someone when considering a lifetime relationship. They want to get to know the person they will become one with until death. You would be unwise to marry someone you don't know, but becoming a disciple is also a kind of marriage. Indeed Jesus refers to the Church as His bride. Give people time to get to know the one that will command them to trust Him with their lives.

The Lord never commanded the Jews to trust Him without first learning about Him. Read the story of the Exodus. God sent Moses to Egypt where the Jews were slaves. They saw incredible miracles for months; they experienced the Passover and saw the Egyptian’s firstborn die. They walked through the Red Sea on dry ground; God fed them in the desert with manna from heaven. He gave them water and fresh meat. He brought them to Mount Sinai and gave them the Ten Commandments, He gave them angels to guard them, and then He brought them to the land He had promised them- the Promised Land, their inheritance.

There were over one million adult Jews who saw all of that, but only two men, Joshua and Caleb, were willing to trust Him. All the others refused. 'Few there are that find it', Jesus said. The Lord promises that those

who seek with all their hearts will be rewarded. It is His promise to the diligent seeker. The seeking may be very difficult. God makes it so, and for a very good reason. Consider this. Jesus spoke of a treasure hidden in a field and a pearl of great price (Matthew 13:44-45). Jesus is both the hidden treasure and the pearl, for Jesus Christ is the reward. In both parables the seeker must give everything in order to receive.

Mediocre seeking never finds Christ, for God is the all and everything God. Mediocrity, being neither hot nor cold, makes Him want to vomit (Revelation 3:16). The reward is not a field or a pearl, it is eternal life with Him, an eternal life which begins now and is guaranteed to those who belong to Him.

3. The third step is called 'counting the cost'. When the Jews saw the giants in the land of Canaan they were afraid to trust God. That was their cost. They were afraid that they would die; they were afraid to put their lives completely into the Lord's hands. They turned away, and God swore an oath in His anger. He swore that none of those 20 years old and over would ever enter the Promised Land. Every person 20 and over died in the desert, and then God brought their children back to the same place and offered them the same opportunity.

He was so angry that He was going to destroy that unbelieving generation immediately, but Moses changed His mind (Numbers 13). Those adults who refused to trust Him remained alive, but none of them ever entered the Promised Land, only their children. Only two men from that original one million - only Joshua and Caleb - entered the Promised Land; the rest died in the desert. Only two were willing to trust God with their lives. The whole story is both real history and an analogy of salvation. 'Few there are that find it'.

Counting the cost is always a matter of trust and submission of our autonomy. It is the Spirit of God who led us to repent, the Spirit who motivated us to seek. In fact, without God we wouldn't even begin the process; however, there comes a point at which we must step forward and trust. God does not force His will upon us; there must be a decision to trust, for that is the essence of faith. God calls us to trust in His Lordship, His authority over every area of our future lives. For many, this demand is simply too much and too scary.

Every year in the middle of summer the student church in which I co-pastor runs a camp for university-aged students. I work in a secular university which has several Biblical courses, some of which are compulsory. This means I get to challenge many young adults about Christianity, evolution and the purpose of life. Students also have to go through a course on both New and Old Testaments and, by the end of these courses, have a deep intellectual understanding of salvation and its requirements. The camps are especially for seekers rather than Christians. Many students give their lives to Christ and start new and dedicated lives as born again people.

But there are others who 'taste the word of God' (Hebrews 6), who even repent of their pasts, yet stop short of putting their lives in the Lord's hands entirely. Two of my former students, who came to one such camp, are fighting God on counting the cost. Both had deeply emotional experiences at camp, both felt Christ's love in powerful ways, but both refuse to surrender to Christ as Lord. The problem? Both have long-standing boyfriends/lovers who are atheists. The Holy Spirit has convicted both that they must come to the cross with empty hands, but both are still clutching their boyfriends' hands firmly and afraid to let go. Christ will not force that decision on either of them. Both of these girls have also received advice contrary to the Spirit's leading; both have been told by Christians that they are already born again and just need to stop having sex with their atheist boyfriends at some stage.

Jesus is commanding 'take up your cross and follow me'. The boyfriend doesn't want to follow; he's heading in the opposite direction. Following Christ means walking away from our old life, leaving those who refuse to follow, leaving whatever form of sin to which we are enslaved. Hebrews chapter six gives extremely serious warnings to those who have tasted God's goodness, heard His call to follow, and then turned away. This book was first written to Jews who wanted to tack Jesus onto their old way of life. The threat of excommunication from the temple, the threat of being separated from the Law of Moses and the Old Covenant, was too much for many. They tasted, but refused to swallow. The writer goes on to use an analogy about fruit from the land. Some refused to count the cost and fell away, never again hearing the call of Jesus to follow, others left all behind and reaped a harvest of righteousness.

Beside the cross of Christ a coffin waits. It waits to bury us. The Lord bids us to leave everything behind and step into that coffin. But there's no room for mother, father, child, boyfriend/lover (Luke 14: 26), or even our bank accounts (Matthew 6:24). If we step into the coffin we will be buried and resurrected as new creations, brand new (Romans 6:5-11). Yes, this is only an analogy, but it is absolutely accurate to the existential reality of being born again.

What is the cost of salvation? Everything! We can do nothing to earn our salvation because we have *nothing* worth giving to pay for it, but salvation can never be tacked on to your own life. In order to be born again, a person has to first die, not in a physical sense, but in leaving their dead life behind. For many, that means emotional and even physical suffering. Jesus foresaw this and warned us. He told us that we would be persecuted and warned that the world would hate us. Paul understood counting the cost so clearly that he wrote these words in Romans 8:17. He had just finished writing of what it meant to become adopted children of God and co-heirs with Christ and adds, 'if indeed we share in His sufferings in order that we may also share in His glory'. Sadly, there are few evangelists that teach this vital doctrine, and then wonder why their 'converts' are weak, powerless, and still living in sinful relationships.

We can only be born again if we 'count the cost', are ready to walk away from our old life and trust in Christ as our Lord and Savior. Paul called it 'crucified with Christ' (Galatians 2:20), Jesus called it 'taking up your cross'. Paul also said, 'if we have died with Christ we will live with Him' (Romans 6:8), and 'you died and your life is hidden in Christ' (Colossians 3:3).

It's very simple. The first time we were born we were naked...with nothing...the new birth must be the same...naked and with nothing. God is the all and everything God. If we are willing to trust Him, He will give us the strength and will to obey His command. The step of counting the cost is the point at which we surrender our life, our autonomy to Jesus Christ. At that moment we are joined with Him, His death and resurrection become ours, His sacrifice for our sins becomes the means by which God's grace is experienced as a reality in our hearts.

Counting the cost may frighten us, just as the Jews were frightened to enter Canaan when they saw the fierce inhabitants of that land. God is holding out His hands, asking us to take them and trust Him for our future.

Hopefully, during the process of seeking, we have come to realize how trustworthy He is, and like Joshua and Caleb, we are ready to put our lives in His hands.

4. Step four is confession (Romans 10:9-10). After you've given your life to Christ you need to confess this. No one can be a secret Christian. This may mean losing your friends and family support - at least temporarily. Jesus promised us suffering and persecution; He said the world will hate us. Jesus commanded that we confess our surrender to Him as Lord and Savior, both through word of mouth and water baptism. The latter is both confession and a symbol of that spiritual coffin we stepped into, a symbol of our death and resurrection as adopted sons and daughters of God, citizens of heaven and strangers in this world. What has happened to us in the spiritual realm is demonstrated in the material realm.

5. Sanctification. The final step is the producing of spiritual fruit (Galatians 5:22-24). If you have been born again your life will change, dramatically. Your new Lord will start making you whole, because salvation means wholeness. Old habits will begin to fall away and new habits will grow. If there is no fruit, then there was no salvation. Sanctification is the action of running the race. It will often be difficult and just as often wonderful, and it will require effort on our part, yet God promises that the Divine Nature, who now dwells within us permanently, will accomplish His will as the 'author and perfecter of our salvation'. God intends to make us holy.

In general terms, being born again comes with the following changes.

1. Newborn Christians always have a hunger for God's word (1st Peter 2:2). When the Holy Spirit enters a person He puts this hunger in them. That hunger may change as Scripture becomes a part of us, but it is always there at the beginning.

2. The newborn falls in love with Christ; He becomes their 'first love', the One they love more than all those listed in Luke 14 (father, mother, brothers, sisters, wives, children, etc.). If neglected, this love may fade over time, but can be renewed through 'daily taking up our cross'.

3. The newborn begins to produce the fruits of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22-24). These fruits cannot be produced without the Holy Spirit. A person who is not born again may try and live a better life, and even have a limited

success for a while, but without their old nature being crucified (v 24) they will always fail, as they are still captive to sin.

The Shepherd's Voice

Finally, I believe that no man has the right to tell someone they are born again simply because the person 'repented' of something or prayed a 'sinner's prayer'. We do not know the hearts of people. We do not know if they are surrendering all, and more importantly, we never have the authority to order the Holy Spirit to enter a person's body and soul. The Holy Spirit is not some divine energy, He is the third person of the Trinity, He is the Sovereign Lord. He will not enter until the person is ready to die, ready to be crucified with Christ. He will convict them to repent, He will motivate them to seek with all their hearts, He will open their eyes to the love, grace, faithfulness and trustworthiness of The Father, and help them understand why Jesus was sacrificed for sin, and He will wait until they count the cost and surrender all. When He enters and takes up residence, they *will* know.

It is Jesus Christ who must tell the person they are born again. His sheep know His voice. If a person has been born again it will be obvious. You will not have to drag them to church, you will not have to order them to read Scripture and pray; rather, they will be filled with joy and a desire to serve the one who lives within them. I believe that all who are born again hear the voice of their Lord. If the voice is absent, then the Lord is not dwelling within. I understand that sin and difficult circumstances in life deaden our ability to hear our Shepherd's voice, but He leads us through such times and, as we shall see in the following chapters, the solution to our problem is not complicated.

But before I close this chapter, I understand that some readers may have deeper questions, especially regarding people who have never heard a Biblical definition of salvation or had the opportunity to know Jesus Christ in the way I have described. Is it possible for a person to be saved but not born again? If this topic interests you, read the next few pages, if not, just go on to chapter two.

Saved or Born Again

It is generally believed, correctly so, that the New Covenant began on the Day of Pentecost. In John 14 Jesus tells His disciples about the role of the Holy Spirit in the New Covenant, and in verse 17 that the Spirit is '*with* them and will be *in* them'. Before Pentecost the Holy Spirit did not reside within the human soul; that soul had first to be made perfect by a perfect sacrifice. Had the Holy Spirit entered an uncleansed soul, the soul would be destroyed, in the same way as the unfortunate Uzzah who reached out and touched the Ark of the Covenant and died instantly (2nd Samuel 6:6). When the Holy Spirit enters a soul which has been 'crucified with Christ' (Galatians 2:20), the person is reborn and becomes a 'new creation' (2nd Corinthians 5:17), metaphors for a spiritual reality many have experienced.

But what of those mentioned in Hebrews chapter 11? Surely Abraham was 'saved', surely Moses, Rahab, the prophets and men like David were all 'saved'. Indeed they were, yet none of these people could be born again, for Jesus Christ had not been offered for sin. Hebrews 11:39-40 says that 'These were all commended for their faith, yet none of them received what had been promised. God had planned something better for us so that only together with us would they be made perfect'. These great people of faith looked forward to the promise, yet none of them experienced becoming the 'temple of the Holy Spirit' (1st Corinthians 6:19), none of them had the Divine Nature of God living within them (1st Peter 1: 4). The Spirit was often *upon* them, but what we who are born again have received is so much more wonderful. The born again person has the entire Triune Nature of God living *within* them (Romans 8: 9-11.) Were the people of Hebrews 11 saved? Yes, of course they were; saved, but not born again.

I am convinced that there are both categories of people who profess to be Christians in Churches today. My wife's grandmother, Vera, was raised in Ukraine during the days of the Soviet Union, a time when professing Christianity had dangerous consequences. Vera was Orthodox. She'd never been told to read her Bible; she was taught that such a practice was the province of priests. She was taught to wear a cross, to observe holy days, to venerate icons, to cross herself with her hands, to pray daily, to baptize her child and grandchild, and to keep the church's traditions.

All of these she did religiously, such was her faith, yet she never had a personal or intimate relationship with Jesus Christ in the same way that those who've been born again do. She secretly obeyed the church's rules on infant baptism, knowing that being caught would have dire consequences;

she exercised the 'faith' she'd been taught by those she believed were God's representatives and shepherds.

She'd never heard the words 'born again' until she met me. She was in her late 70's then, and passed away quietly in hospital at 83. I doubt that Vera ever had absolute assurance of salvation. She'd been taught all her life that such a thing was impossible, and those 'protestants' who spoke of being born again, filled with the Spirit and knowing Christ personally, were nothing but a cult or sect, all of whom were bound for hell. It's difficult to shake off a form of Christianity you've lived all your life, especially when married to an atheist, yet she took great risks to honor God in the way she believed was right. I sometimes prayed with Vera, but I never pushed her. I know she loved God in a similar way to the Old Testament saints, and although she didn't really understand why, believed that Jesus was essential for her to be saved.

There are a great number of people like Vera who've been deprived of solid Biblical theology, yet who, under different circumstances, would have had a quite different relationship with God. I have no doubts that Vera was saved, indeed her last words were a prayer, but I also feel certain that, during her life, she never experienced the freedom, joy, peace and love for Jesus Christ which comes through being born again and filled with the Holy Spirit. God, and only God, knows the human heart, and He will judge with righteousness.

Yet for every Vera, there are many others who offer prayers, kiss icons, bow down to statues, and go through the motions, whose hearts are absolutely complacent towards God. They do just enough to convince themselves that they can go to heaven to be with a God they really don't want interfering with their lives. He knows *their* hearts as well. They want a Savior, but not a Lord. Christ is not someone they desire to have a relationship with, just a fire escape.

Being born again was never about practicing forms of Christianity; it is about becoming a disciple of Jesus Christ. When Jesus spoke to Nicodemus (John 3) He told the seeking Pharisee that 'unless a man is born again he cannot enter the kingdom of heaven'. The word translated as 'enter' is better translated 'experience'. Why? Because in the original language the entire passage is in a tense which means now and forever - a completed thing. Jesus was saying that unless we are born again we cannot experience the kingdom of heaven *now*, while we are here in this world. In chapter 14 of

John's gospel Christ expounds this doctrine, telling the disciples that the Holy Spirit will be in them, that both He and The Father will 'make their home with us', that the Holy Spirit will teach them all things.

The New Testament letters are full of affirmations of Jesus' teaching. Being born again is a radical life-changing experience, not a religious decision to follow church guidelines and traditions. It is accompanied by proofs, not spiritual gifts, but spiritual fruits (love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, etc., Galatians 5) which are to be seen in ever increasing demonstration. The person who has experienced being born again will understand themselves to be 'aliens and strangers' in this world, and citizens of heaven.

At the risk of oversimplifying this, we could ask this question; was Vera a person who wanted Jesus Christ only as Savior but not as Lord? No, on the contrary, she risked everything to do what she believed was His will, disobeying her atheist government, risking a great deal. Vera 'counted the cost' and trusted the Lord. The merely religious person rejects Christ as Lord, demanding their own autonomy, and in this they demonstrate their heart, and unwillingness to trust God.

I'm often asked by my students if I can give them an easy answer to the question of whether or not they are truly saved. My answer is always the same. No person who has been 'crucified with Christ' can continually say the words 'no Lord'. What is salvation? The answer is really pretty simple if we're looking for a quick test. It's all about ownership. If you are still able to say 'no Lord', then *He* isn't Lord, you are. And, if *He* isn't Lord, He isn't Savior either. Scripture speaks about ownership (Romans 8:9), about 'being God's own possession' (Ephesians 1:14), about 'belonging to Christ'. The evidence of that as a reality, in practical terms, is in if we can always say 'yes Lord' to whatever His will is for our lives.

As Jesus taught, it is not even those who say 'Lord, Lord' who enter the kingdom of heaven, but those who do the will of the Father (Matthew 7). Only those people who have died to self understand that Christ is Lord. The New Testament is full of this teaching, a teaching that the early church understood well, a teaching which was a living reality for those who said 'yes Lord' whilst being dragged into the arenas of Rome, crucified on crosses, and burned alive for their faith.

Each of us can evaluate our own relationship with God, but we can never deceive Him. He knows our hearts and motivations; He knows

whether or not we have seen ourselves as sinners who long to be made clean, or if we are still in love with sin and merely want Him as a fire escape.

Chapter Two: First Steps

I was working as a photographer at the time I was born again in 1982. Most photographers see things around them that others may miss. That first morning after you're born again, when you step outside, is somewhat like being a nature photographer. Creation looks different; everything seems somehow fresh and vibrant, alive. Those first days and weeks of a newborn Christian's life are sometimes referred to as the honeymoon period. And why not, after all, being born again is becoming part of the bride of Christ, and that feeling of being in love dominates our perspectives. For the first time, we have this overpowering sense of freedom - of being clean, made new - and it feels like it will be this way forever.

Spiritual Food: God's Word

When a child is newborn it suckles close to its mother's heart, and so it is with us when we are born again. We feel as if we are literally being cuddled in the arms of our Lord and Savior. I think the Apostle Peter understood this feeling when he wrote, 'like newborn babes, crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation, now that you have tasted that the Lord is good' (1st Peter 2:2). Like love-sick teenagers we want to read our bridegroom's letters to us. Before, when we read the Bible, the gospels spoke to our hearts, but the letters of the apostles were like a foreign language. Now, when we begin to read Colossians, Ephesians, Romans, and the letters of Peter and John, the verses leap off the page.

This is another of those proofs that we are born of God. The letters of the New Testament are written specifically to those who are filled with the Holy Spirit. If the Spirit has taken up residence in our hearts, then as we read, He translates and we sense His presence and approval. We may not know words like 'justification, redemption' and the like, but the Spirit still brings understanding which nourishes our souls as nothing else can.

God's Word is meat and drink for Christians; therefore, as with our physical bodies, it is essential to have a daily habit of feeding our spirit. The problems, joys, encouragements and failures of Christians are not something new - disciples have been experiencing them since the Day of Pentecost when the Church began. Reading the Scriptures helps us to

understand that we have become part of an eternal community of believers who have been through what we will go through.

It is important to develop a daily habit of reading the Bible. A simple Biblical study guide can be a great place to start, or even a devotional. These tools help us to begin to understand more deeply God's plan of salvation through the Old Testament and its fulfillment in the New Testament. A daily devotional, read at the start of your day, will also set your mind on Christ and help you to form the habit of recognizing His presence with you throughout the day.

As well as private Bible reading, being in a place where you can learn from good Biblical scholars is important. How can you tell if someone is a good Biblical teacher? In general terms there are a few basic tests you can apply.

Firstly, does this teacher only do topical studies or do they offer exegetical (to bring out the meaning rather than put in our own) teaching of entire books such as the New Testament (NT) letters? False teachers almost never take their hearers through entire NT books, rather, they take a verse from here and there (usually out of context) to support their views. Exegetical teaching requires study, and its goal is to bring out the true meaning of verses, passages, chapters and entire books in their true context.

Secondly, Scripture must always interpret Scripture! God's Word will never contradict itself, therefore, if there is any verse in the Bible which contradicts the interpretation you have received or decided on, that interpretation is wrong.

Thirdly, listen to a range of teachers, use discernment, and check what you're being taught against what other scholars have written. There are many free online commentaries by highly respected and proven Biblical scholars. Take the time to read what they have to say and form your conclusions based on the first two points I have made.

Fourthly, beware of those teachers who claim that, if you don't accept their particular interpretation of Scripture, you are not saved. We live in an age where false teachers abound. Such teachers often make claims of having exclusive knowledge and that God is 'doing a new thing'. A wise man once said regarding Biblical interpretation; 'if it's new, it probably isn't true'.

That First Test

For some, the honeymoon period lasts several weeks, even months, until our Heavenly Father decides that it's time to stand us on our wobbly legs and allow us to try our first steps. It's as though the Lord stands us at the end of the room and calls us to walk towards Him. We take a tentative step, wobble, and fall. He encourages us to get up and try another. In reality, these steps may be our first rejection from family and friends, our first small taste of the hatred that so many have for the Lord we love.

When the Lord decides that we are strong enough, He allows us to be exposed to our first spiritual attacks. Waiting like a ravenous lion on a chain, our enemy longs to rip us to shreds. Satan is less than happy about the fact that we have been born again. He knows that we are lost to his slavery forever, but his desire to destroy all who are made in God's image is only more ferocious because we have gained what he lost forever, the keys to our new eternal home.

Satan and his minions have no real power over any adopted child of God, but the young are inexperienced at fighting off his attacks, and the first time the Lord allows him to test us can be difficult (we will examine this area of our Christian life more fully in chapter 7). It can come as something of a shock, and a grave disappointment, when we give in to some temptation - especially if it was some habitual thing connected to our past life. Maybe we hoped that our old sinful nature was gone forever; after all, it seemed to have disappeared since we were born again. It is often at this time that our spiritual enemy gives us our first solid dose of condemnation and tries to plant seeds of doubt in our minds. 'How could we betray the One we confessed to love, the One who died in our place'? 'How could we momentarily enjoy the same sin that we had come to hate so much'? 'Surely we cannot call ourselves a changed person; surely we have forfeited God's grace'?

If we happen to be in a church which teaches that Christians can lose their salvation, we can be devastated by the kinds of questions and doubts that assail us as newborns. I still remember what happened to me at this time. By coincidence, or divine providence, I happened to be reading 1st John. I don't remember the sinful thought or act, but I surely remember my reaction when I read in chapter 3:6 these words. 'No one who lives in Him keeps on sinning. No one who continues to sin has either seen Him or known Him'. As I read on, my condemnation grew a hundredfold. 'No one

who is born of God will continue to sin, because God's seed remains in him; he cannot go on sinning because he is born of God'.

That was it! I was convinced. Satan must be right, must be telling the truth for a change. I felt so ashamed and depressed that I couldn't read anything else, couldn't pray or even listen to the new Christian music which had replaced my Black Sabbath and other heavy metal albums. That was my first experience of satanic oppression. It was as though a black cloud had descended on me, a cloud so dense that it blotted out the sun, and the Son. In my heart I loved my Lord no less, but guilt made me want to hide from Him, in the same way that Adam and Eve hid from His sight. The next day I visited my father and, on the pretence of needing an explanation of the passage, asked him to explain the verses in 1st John 3.

My father was a very good scholar and teacher, and a man who knew and taught New Testament Greek. We opened our Bibles and he took me back to chapter one of the same book. I read 1st John 1:5-10. It was verses 8-10 which really struck me. 'If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. If we claim we have not sinned, we make him out to be a liar and his word has no place in our lives'. Now I was really confused.

My father explained that this letter was written to Christians. On the surface, the two passages seemed to contradict each other. I liked the first chapter, it gave me hope, but chapter three was like a sentence of condemnation all over again. By the time my father finished explaining, my heart was literally jumping with joy.

1st John 3: 4-10 is just another of the many proofs by which we can know we are truly in Christ. John is speaking of the principle of sin, that which he calls 'lawlessness'. The lawlessness he refers to is the refusal of unbelievers to submit to the will of God, to bow their knees in submission. Such is his reason for mentioning Satan in the passage. This is the root of all sin, the autonomous human spirit which declares 'I will rule my own life'. Those who are born again have given the Lord permission to destroy this root, to pull it out. The proof that it is gone is in the fact that when the Holy Spirit convicts us of a sinful act or thought, we fall to our knees and ask forgiveness.

The unregenerate spirit shakes its fist at God; it sees no need to repent. John was never suggesting that born again Christians cannot commit *sins*,

but rather, that they cannot commit *the act of autonomous rebellion*. In other words, when the Lord convicts and calls us to repent, we say 'yes Lord', but the unbeliever refuses to bow his knee.

All Christians fight against sin, and it is in the fight that we demonstrate our love for Christ. He has not taken our sinful nature away; rather, He has destroyed the root principle of rebellion from which it fed. We will always be tempted to sin, and sometimes we may lose the fight, but the proof that we love Him and belong to Him is in the act of repentance. John tells us that Christ will always forgive us; indeed, He reaches out His hand and helps us get back on our feet.

Assurance of Salvation

In chapter one I outlined the importance of educating seekers so that they are able to make an informed decision to completely surrender their lives into the Lord's control. It should come as no surprise to us that those who rush people into pseudo-born again experiences also have large numbers of people who walk away from God and never set foot in a church again. The two go hand in hand. Many Protestant churches have adopted a marketplace mentality when it comes to new converts. Missionaries, especially those who are financially supported, come under great pressure to perform. It saddens me greatly when I see pastors resorting to baptizing children and very young teenagers in order to get their convert tallies up. It is equally heartbreaking to see people being water baptized who still have no assurance of their salvation.

Some years ago I attended a baptism in a local charismatic church. The pastor was asking each person a question before they were baptized. The question was simply, 'why do you want to be baptized'? Three of the eight or nine people answered, 'because I want to be born again'. Why on earth were these people allowed to be baptized if they didn't understand or hadn't yet experienced new birth? That was almost ten years ago. The tragedy is that half of those baptized that day have 'fallen away', have left and never returned. I wonder if the story would be different if they had been taken for a walk through the Bible, encouraged to seek, been given the time to count the cost, and made a decision to surrender all to Christ as Lord and Savior. We shall never know.

There are perhaps three verses in the New Testament which, when read out of context, could be interpreted as Biblical proof that salvation can be lost. There are hundreds which affirm that salvation is guaranteed forever. Those who can understand the original language of the Bible will testify to what I am writing here. I am not going to give long lists of proof texts here, as I believe the problem has already been well stated. However, consider the following thoughts.

Scripture says that our old self has died, is buried with Christ, and crucified with Christ, etc. If one actually believes this, then there is no 'old self' to walk away. Furthermore, it comes down to a matter of possession. I *gave* my life to Christ. Now I *belong* to Christ; I am His possession. I did this freely and never have I regretted it for thirty years. If I, through some form of insanity, decided to walk away from my Lord and Savior, I would have to somehow convince Him to resurrect my old self that died, and to give my old life back to me. Of course, if we teach that 'born again' is simply 'inviting Jesus into our hearts', then we can just as easily invite Him to leave.

But these objections are not the real issue. The issue is grace and the insult which is thrown at our Lord. The Bible teaches that salvation is by grace alone, not by works or anything we have done (Ephesians 2:8). Everything about salvation, from our call to our regeneration, is attributed to Jesus Christ. Our part is only in our surrender to trust. To say that one can lose their salvation is to say that Christ is both a liar, and that His ultimate sacrifice on the cross at Calvary was not enough. Such people are calling Christ a liar because He *guaranteed* our salvation if we trusted Him with our lives (Ephesians 1:14, 2nd Corinthians 5:3), and it is an insult because it suggests that we are the ones who, through our performance, keep our salvation.

Those who teach this erroneous doctrine always have works-based theology. Christ may have died on the cross to offer them salvation, but by their own works they perform well enough to get to heaven. When the performance drops, salvation disappears. This doctrine is not Christian, indeed it is closer to forms of Eastern religion, Scientology and Christian Science, to name a few, and is practiced by all of the major cults which claim to be Christian such as the Jehovah's Witnesses and Mormons.

It is almost a certainty that a Christian may have doubts on occasions. I would encourage you to understand that the difficulties which produced

those doubts were allowed by your Lord to test you. God always tests us, not to see us fail, but to strengthen the faith that He cherishes so much. Remember this - perseverance is one of the fruits of the Spirit, and those who 'persevere to the end of the race', prove through their tests and trials that they are the adopted children of God, that their faith 'may be proved genuine' (1st Peter 1:7).

Those who walk away and refuse to repent contradict John's words in 1st John 3, for they return to the very same sin of lawlessness which John claimed no born again Christian can commit. In short, they were never born again, and sadly, the reason for that may well be the ambition and lack of wise teaching from the very person who claims they are now lost, the one who rushed them into believing that salvation was something less than completely belonging to Christ.

Chapter Three: Transformed by the Holy Spirit

Sideshows and Secrets

If you've ever watched some of the sideshow/circus tele-evangelists who stamp up and down the stage in pristine white suits muttering Jesus' name and knocking people to the ground, you may have decided that these guys are demonstrating the mysterious power of the Holy Spirit, a power you don't have. Don't be envious; feel relieved. Jesus warned us that in the Last Days many would come in His name and deceive. He also spoke of 'wolves in the clothing of sheep', describing leaders who perform miracles, drive out demons, and prophesy in His name, but on the Day of Judgment He commands them away from His presence with the words 'I never knew you' (Matthew 7:22-23).

Way back in the 1st century the early Church faced a great heretical threat called Gnosticism. One of the main claims of Gnostics was that spiritual power and knowledge was only given to a select few. This select few used demonstrations of power, claimed to speak with angels, and taught that their words were prophetic Scripture. Keep in mind that there were no printed Bibles at the time, just a few gospels and letters from the apostles circulating around the churches. Gnosticism used mystery and power to deceive, teaching people that there were specific secrets to being transformed by the Spirit. Sound familiar? Just browse through a Christian bookshop and count how many times you see the word 'secret' in the titles of Christian self-help books.

The Holy Spirit is not some mysterious energy which can be tapped into; rather, He is the third person of the Trinity who resides in every born again Christian. He doesn't need to be 'ushered into the Church' on Sunday mornings, because He arrived when the Christians arrived; He doesn't need to be told to 'come to us' because He's already living within us. In John 14:16ff, Jesus tells the disciples that the Father will send another Counselor, the Spirit of Truth, to be with them forever. He also tells them that 'he lives *with* you and will be *in* you'. After the day of Pentecost the Holy Spirit came to live within them and within you and me when we were born again. Maybe you were expecting tongues of fire on your head, mighty winds and other demonstrations, and maybe you were told that the proof of the Spirit's

presence was that you would start speaking a new language you'd never learned,

If you happen to have opened your Bible at John 14, then you'll notice that Jesus began by speaking about love in verse 15 and goes back to the same topic in verse 21. He tells His disciples that if they love Him they will obey His commands, and that both He and the Father will 'make their home with them'. Jesus wasn't teaching some esoteric form of Gnosticism, some secret mystery for the few; rather, He was making a promise to all who are born again.

The proof that we are born again is not found in miracles and demonstrations of power; on the contrary, false prophets and people who don't know Him can have such things and be heading for eternal destruction. The proof that we are born again is in our increasing love for Jesus Christ and the steady transforming of our minds through the work of the Holy Spirit within us.

On the day that Christ commanded me to trust Him with my life, one of my greatest fears was that I would not be able to live for Him. If I confessed to people that I'd given my life to Christ, and then through my own weakness couldn't change into a decent person, I'd have forfeited my last chance and made a fool of myself and the gospel. I knew I was a miserable failure, a hopeless and habitual sinner, and had no doubts that in my own strength I'd simply fail again. I never realized back then that, when I gave my life to Him, my Lord took full responsibility for making me like Him.

Keeping it Simple: Romans 12:1-2

The transforming of our minds is not something we are responsible for, although we do play a role. In Romans 12:1-2 Paul writes about being transformed. He begins the passage with the word 'therefore', meaning, 'because of everything I've just written to you'. Paul has spent eleven chapters talking about God's mercy, about our having two natures and the fact that nothing can 'separate us from the love of God in Christ'. He's already told us that we have no obligation to obey our sinful natures (8:12ff) and that 'by the Spirit we put to death the misdeeds of the body'. Notice he never said by the 'Twelve Secrets of a Successful Life', or by keeping the rules, or demonstrations of power. The role of a Christian is to

allow the Holy Spirit to remove those sinful habits which have dominated our minds and found expression in our bodies.

When we are born again, God takes a filthy, habitual sinner and begins a process of transforming that person into someone Christ-like. He gives a declaration and covering of perfection and then gets to work on us (Hebrews 10:14). What's our role in all this?

The answer to that is so incredibly simple that many Christians miss it. Metaphorically speaking, where were you and I the moment we were born again? Were we not kneeling at the foot of the cross, looking up at the mutilated form of our Savior? Were we not falling in love with the One who gave His life so that we could be declared perfect in His eyes? Did we not make a promise to 'take up our cross' and follow Him?

We came to the cross of Christ with empty hands; we opened our hearts and surrendered to Him as Lord. He gave us a new life, filled us with His Spirit, and started us on our journey. The problem for many Christians is that they are trying to follow Him but have left the cross back where they started. In Mark's gospel (8:34) Jesus told us to initially take up our cross, but in Luke's gospel (9:23) we are told to do this *daily*. On the day we were born again we said 'yes Lord'. We wanted to obey His command because we loved Him. The simple key to being transformed is to do this daily, every day.

Like you, I've been through some really tough times in my Christian life. I've also taken my eyes off the cross and followed false teachings, looking for power, miracles, etc. But, living a successful Christian life is no mysterious thing; it is simply running the race the same way we began. We know how to run this race because we were taught at the start, taught to surrender *our* wills to *His* will. Somehow, we were convinced that we had to do something different and we dropped our cross along the way. That first day we began the race we began a process of transformation. It was real, life-changing, and incredible. The daily walk isn't about trying to find the same feelings of our initial transformation; rather, it is the mature habit of taking up our cross.

That first day we were initially filled with the Holy Spirit, and every day that we kneel before the cross, during this race, we are again filled with the Spirit. We will always need to 'count the cost', to die to that old nature within that wants to dominate. This is the daily dying to self. The Lord must be Lord, every day. He entered our souls because we knelt there with empty

hands, naked and ready to be 'crucified with Christ'. We run the race the exact same way - coming to the cross with empty hands, submitting to His Lordship, giving Him the unrestricted right to take away those old habits and fill the empty spaces with His Spirit.

It's a process, a daily process, and there are no quick fixes or shortcuts. If you take up your cross every day there *will* be changes. As we submit to Him as Lord, our love for Him deepens as Savior, for we are reminded every day of why we knelt in His presence, why we trusted Him with our lives, why He became our 'first love'.

In Romans 12:1-2 Paul tells us to 'offer our bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God'. Jesus offered Himself as a living sacrifice, died and rose again. Taking up our cross daily is this principal in practice. Paul once wrote that he 'died daily'. He understood this basic principal and his gospel message was that he preached Christ crucified. We are called to come to the cross every day and offer ourselves as we did in the beginning. As we do this, our old habits fall away through the work that the Holy Spirit does in us.

Paul says in this passage that we should 'no longer conform to the pattern of this world'. The pattern of the world is to refuse to submit to God's will, to demand our autonomy. We gave up that autonomy when we began the race, but our old sinful natures, and the habits we have accumulated, must be replaced by godly habits. The place that happens is in the place where death to self and life for Christ began, at the foot of the cross. Paul calls it the 'renewing of our mind'. It isn't an instant fix. The Lord knew when He called us that running the race was a lifelong process of submission to Him as Lord.

I live my life in a simple way. Every day I thank my Lord for His salvation, reminding myself that He was willing to take on a hopeless sinner and the responsibility of changing me to be like Him. If you've left the cross behind somewhere, then go and pick it up again. The amazing thing about our cross is that we expect it to be heavy, but the moment we bend down and pick it up, submitting ourselves to His Lordship again, we discover that the weight we were carrying was another sack of accumulated rubbish that we can leave for Him to destroy. When we kneel with open hands, He takes the weight of failure away and replaces it with the freedom of being a child of God, filled afresh with His Spirit and ready to walk with Him. You started this race by giving Jesus Christ your burden. Give it to Him every

day and know the freedom He promised. He said His burden is light; He wasn't lying.

Don't be impatient about your transformation; it's something which will never be completed this side of the grave. Make loving Jesus Christ your first priority and transformation will take care of itself. There will be times when you fall and hate yourself. Contrary to popular opinion, a little self hate won't kill you, but don't wallow in it. Christ allows our failures, rewards our successes, and strives to transform us for one reason. Love. He loves you and me more than we can ever imagine, and He wants us to walk every moment of every day with Him.

It's all about Christ

The Holy Spirit does not *seek* our attention; on the contrary, He will never *receive* our attention if our focus is on *Him* rather than Jesus Christ. He has sometimes been referred to as the 'shy' person of the Trinity. The truth is that He lives in us to glorify Jesus Christ (John 16:13-14). Why? The answer is simple enough. God the Son became the Son of God. Jesus lived as us and for us. It was the second person of the Trinity who died for us. The Holy Spirit never seeks worship for Himself, and in terms of Church History, it is only in the recent past that people have started praying and writing songs directly to Him. He does not seek our prayers, our songs, or our attention; rather, He is there to be our Counselor and to always point us to our Savior.

Be warned friend. If you circumnavigate Jesus Christ in search of spiritual experiences, through what you think is the Holy Spirit, you *will* be deceived. Satan is all too willing to provide entertainment for 'a wicked and adulterous generation who seek a sign'. Don't misunderstand me, I am not in the camp of those who claim that the gifts of the Spirit are long gone and redundant. On the contrary, I believe that the Lord uses miracles today, especially in countries where Scripture is unavailable. However, I have an absolute abhorrence for the horrific scenes which are displayed by some tele-evangelists who claim to be acting under the 'anointing' of the Spirit of God. I have witnessed such things in the meetings of Satanists and am certain that the same demonic spirits provide the power behind both.

Run your race with your eyes firmly fixed on the cross. If you do this, the Holy Spirit will work powerfully in you to transform your mind more

and more into the mind of the One who is the focus of your attention. If you take your eyes off the cross, you take your eyes off the only bridge between sinful humanity and the Divine, and risk the very real possibility of opening the door of deception.

Chapter Four: Prayer

As a young Christian I often wished I'd avoided sermons about prayer, as I usually left Church with a guilt complex or having made another mental commitment to do my 'duty' more frequently. When one hears sermons about great prayer warriors who fight the spiritual war on their knees for hours every day, it's easy to get weighed down with feelings of guilt, laziness, and disappointment. Over the years I've learned that prayer is not just about duty or commitment, even though many pastors tend to make it seem that way, whether intentionally or not.

I've always been a night owl. When those in my time zone are snoring peacefully, I'm writing books, sermons, or Bible studies, checking students' essays and the like. I often heard sermons that stated that a true man of God is one who goes to bed early and gets up at 4:00 or 5:00 am in order to spend an hour on his knees before God, and I disciplined myself to do this for quite a while. My body clock never re-adjusted so I ended up walking round like a zombie most of the day, and worse still, started to get an opinion about myself as a 'man of God'. Don't get me wrong, I do believe that spiritual discipline is an important part of growing as a disciple, but human nature being what it is, many of us unintentionally fall into the trap of thinking that the Lord is handing out reward points for those who get up the earliest and pray the longest.

Finding a balance is about understanding your relationship with the Lord and applying it to your life. The way we view the Lord at any given time, and the topic of our prayers, often determines, at least for me, the way we pray, extent or earnestness of our prayers, and nature of our prayer life. When I was a university student it was much easier to have a set schedule in life than at other times. I went to university as an adult student after years of being a professional photographer, builder, and raising kids. Every day I was attending lectures on theology and Church history, reading theological books and preparing assignments and essays on Christian topics, so I found myself pretty much in a bubble of Christian thinking. I didn't need to worry about building permits, employee problems, meetings, etc. - my mind was focused on God.

Every day I drove past a very secluded and lonely piece of beach. I would drive down this little lane and park my car, take off my shoes and walk for two hours talking to the Lord as He walked along beside me. I'd

discuss everything I was learning, talk about the weather, creation, people, world events and everything in between. These were two-hour conversations with my best friend. This was also a really difficult emotional time in my life which witnessed me sitting on a rock with face in hands pouring out my heart. The thing that I learned through those years is that prayer, like worship, is not a function or duty for Christians, although we can make it into that, but rather the ongoing development and natural consequence of a loving, intimate relationship built on gratitude, trust and God's promises.

The whole of Scripture has been given to us in order to help us be in a right relationship with our Creator, and to be effective stewards of the works He has prepared for us; therefore, a right understanding of the dynamics of that relationship is where we need to begin.

Creator and Creature

The way we perceive God at any given time will have an enormous effect on our prayer life. When the Lord led the Israelites to the foot of Mount Sinai he ordered Moses to set boundary stones to stop the people getting too close to Him. They heard thunder, saw lightning and felt the earth shake beneath their feet (Exodus 19). They were afraid and told Moses that he could go and talk to God on their behalf.

In this historical account it seems to me that God specifically wanted to instill into these people a fear of His holiness and wrath before they made a covenant with Him. The Bible also tells us that at that time Moses spoke to God as no one else - face to face. The first time Moses met God he was afraid, but the more he got to know his Creator, the less afraid he was. In fact, he was even willing to give the Lord a lecture about what other nations would say about Him when, in His anger, the Lord was about to wipe out every adult who refused to go into Canaan and claim the Promised land (Numbers 14: 10-19). God listened to him.

This story tells us a lot about the character of God and, when projected onto who we are as Christians, should encourage us in our relationship with Him regarding prayer. Firstly, we must always be aware of who it is that we are addressing. God is holy; He is the Creator and we the creatures. As Christians we have the incredible privilege of being invited into His

presence. We have no reason to fear; this privilege has been granted to us solely because Jesus Christ suffered, died and resurrected for us.

We must always be mindful of this when we come to our Lord in prayer. I tend to begin every prayer with the words 'Lord, thank you for your love'. For me, these words remind me of my previous life as a rebellious sinner, His grace in forgiving me, and His love in sacrificing Himself in order to make our relationship possible.

I am not afraid of God and I am certain that He doesn't desire that I fear Him. In fact, John tells us that if we still fear God then we have not been 'perfected in love' (1st John 4:18); however, John goes on to say that 'we love because He first loved us'. Thanking Him for His love is my offering of respect, my statement of gratitude, and reminder that without Him I am absolutely nothing. God doesn't desire that we grovel at His feet; however, if we ever forget that we are still weak humans, who often give in to our sin natures, we will be approaching Him with a wrong attitude. We approach our holy Creator, figuratively covered in the blood of His precious Son, our sin hidden in Christ, and with this in mind we can enjoy a right relationship with Him in and through prayer.

Gratitude

Throughout his letters, Paul tells us to 'give thanks in prayer'. Gratitude expresses humility and humility is the key to the heart of God. So many Christians get so immersed in the busyness of their lives that they take their eyes off the inheritance we have been given as 'co-heirs with Christ'. The world drags our gaze downwards, but God's purpose is to prepare us for the heavenly kingdom of which we have been given a taste.

In Colossians 1: 10-13 Paul tells us that he prays that 'you may live a life worthy of the Lord and may please Him in every way: bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God, being strengthened with all power according to His glorious might so that you may have great endurance and patience, and joyfully giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the kingdom of light'.

In regards to relationships, there are few things more distasteful than an ungrateful child, yet how often do we forget about the inheritance we have been 'qualified for' and get upset about what we don't have here and now.

Having children of our own often helps us to understand why gratitude is so essential to our relationship with the Lord. As parents we do our best to give our children much more than just what they need to survive, and if we are wise, we don't give them everything they want.

Even in our fallen state we understand the need to instill in our children the principle that we as parents are not slaves who must grant them all they think they deserve. Sadly, some Churches are teaching that God is almost exactly that, a Father who wants to satisfy their every material desire. We might ask the obvious question of why we need to pray in the first place; after all, Jesus said that 'our Father knows what we need before we ask'. As parents, we also know what our children need, but we teach them to ask rather than take, and expect gratitude.

Our Lord is infinitely wiser than the wisest human parent. He knows how natural it is for us to seek satisfaction in the material world, how quickly we substitute finding joy in Him for the latest attraction the world offers. God will not participate in giving ungrateful children another toy; His desire is that we put down our toys and look to Him as the source of our satisfaction and joy.

Take time to meditate on all that you've been given in Christ. Take time to think about what it cost God to 'qualify us to share in the inheritance of the saints in the kingdom of light'. If you have difficulty in being grateful, I suggest you sit down and make a list of all that the Lord has given you, not just in this life, but all that He is preparing for you in the next. Start your prayers with gratitude, be the child you desire your own children to be, and always 'give thanks with a grateful heart'. Make it your goal to give joy to your Lord, to 'please Him in every way'. Giving thanks is a great place to start.

Pray without Ceasing

In 1st Thessalonians 5:17 Paul tells us to 'pray continually'. This verse has sometimes been translated as 'pray without ceasing' and has been often misunderstood. What was Paul's intention in writing this command to us? I've heard messages from the sublime to the ridiculous as explanations of this verse. Some suggest we 'live in an attitude of prayer', whatever that means, whilst others say that all of life is prayer.

Many years ago I heard a message on this topic by a pastor of the Salvation Army. He quoted A.W. Tozer and made mention of Brother Andrew, both men who spoke of 'practicing the presence of God'. This idea has been a great blessing to me over the years. Both Tozer and Brother Andrew were referring to the fact that Christ is always with us, both within and without - the presence of the Holy Spirit within us, and the fact that Christ walks with us every moment of the day.

Fundamentally, prayer is communication with God, but communication doesn't necessarily mean that I must stop what I'm doing, get on my knees, and make petitions about everything. For about 30 years I have practiced the presence of God, meaning simply that I go through my day knowing I am never alone. Often I speak out loud and have been accused by many - in both amusing and mocking tones - that I have 'an imaginary friend'. I have an *invisible* friend, but He is certainly not imaginary. I talk to my Lord all day. I try to be wise about when I speak out loud as some would be calling those 'nice young men in long white coats to come and take me away'. My wife is used to it.

There are many times when I get on my knees and make petitions and requests or simply give adoration and homage to my Holy Lord, and for me, singing songs is also a form of prayer. But living the Christian life in the knowledge that Jesus Christ is always beside me has been the greatest help to me for sanctification, of which prayer is an enormous part. Too many Christians get the idea that when they finish praying, it's as though they have walked out of God's room and closed the door. It's too easy to give in to temptation if we fool ourselves into believing that the Lord's head is turned the other way, but when we live constantly in the knowledge that He is always with us, it is as though we have a chaperone helping us in every situation.

Praying in God's Will

Within the gospels Jesus made many statements about asking for things in prayer. No doubt, like me, you've heard many sermons which have brought disappointment, delusion and even condemnation in this area. Take, for example, Matthew 7: 7-11. This passage contrasts human fathers with God as our Father. It begins with telling us to ask, seek and knock and gives promises, concluding with; 'If you, then, though you are evil, know how to

give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him'.

I once heard a pastor preach on the above verses, claiming that there will be a huge park full of new, red Ferrari cars waiting in heaven because people were too afraid to ask for one. The pastor used another verse to back up his interpretation from Mark 11:24. 'Therefore, I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours'.

Wow! All I have to do is completely delete doubt and I can have whatever I want? If I don't get what I want, it's only because I couldn't stop myself from doubting. According to some, it's just a matter of 'faith'; in fact, the passage in Mark begins with the words 'have faith in God'. Well, I don't know about you, but I just don't have that much 'faith'. In fact, I don't believe that it has anything to do with faith, if we understand faith from a purely Biblical context.

Hebrews 11 gives us the Biblical definition of, and examples of, faith. Faith always has two components: knowledge, or better still, revelation, and action. The revelation comes from God, and the action of believing from us. Noah was told to build a boat and he did. Abraham was called to leave his home and he did. Some would argue that the revelation has already been given to us if we take, especially the last example verse (Mark 11:24), literally.

But let's go back to the first example for a moment, the one about asking, seeking, and knocking. If you go to Luke 11: 9-13 you will see the same quote from Jesus; however, Luke adds the words, 'how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him'. It was never about a red Ferrari - it was always about salvation and *only* about salvation. Remember that Christ is speaking prior to the day of Pentecost, preparing for the day when the Holy Spirit would inaugurate the new covenant. He was never giving us a mandate or secret formula to have whatever we desire, for such would be against the will of God.

So how do we understand the second text? The context of the passage is about when Jesus cursed a tree and it withered completely. The disciples were amazed. Why did Jesus curse this fig tree? This is the only miracle in the gospels where Jesus used His power and authority to destroy. His message was simple. The tree had no fruit, although at that time of year it should have had spring figs. The tree represents our lives, lives which are called to be born again and produce the fruits of the Holy Spirit. If those

fruits do not exist, then we never belonged to Christ. This is a warning about eternal judgment, not a license to ask for a Ferrari or any other thing.

Faith in Christ is essential for salvation, but faith is also a gift from God, a conviction to trust with all our hearts. You cannot stop yourself from doubt; however, if the Holy Spirit reveals His perfect will, and grants you the faith to believe, and you act on that belief in prayer and in life, you will receive what He has willed for you to have. If Christ is my Lord and Savior, why would I ever pray for Him to give me anything that might be outside of His will, and why as a loving Father would He ever give it? Those who believe that they can use a verse out of context to fulfill their worldly, material desires, are either very deceived or do not know Christ as Lord and Savior at all.

John 14:13 is another example of a passage taken out of context. Jesus says, 'and I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Son may bring glory to the Father. You may ask me for anything in my name, and I will do it'. If you go back to verse 8 you will see that Jesus is answering Philip's request. He asks Jesus to show them the Father. Jesus explains that 'anyone who has seen me has seen the Father' and goes on to say that 'the words I say to you are not just my own. Rather, it is the Father, living in me, who is doing his work'.

Jesus never acted outside of His Father's will, and as we shall see in our chapter on worship, He always imitated the Father perfectly. In the next verse He goes on to tell the disciples that He will send the Counselor, the Holy Spirit, so that they too can live in God's will. Again, this passage is about preparing His disciples for the new covenant, not offering some formula whereby we can have whatever we want.

Accepting God's Will

There are many times when it is extremely difficult to accept God's will because it seems to make no sense to our human perceptions. The area of physical healing is a good example.

Some teach that healing must be 'claimed and believed'. They teach that it is always God's will to heal, and that the fault lies with our lack of faith and use of spiritual authority. When we read of the early days of the Church in passages such as Acts 5:12-16, we see the words 'and all of them were healed'. Then we begin to read of persecution, of Stephen being

murdered, of Paul being stoned and left outside the city for dead, and of others who were forced out of Christian service because of illness. Do we have the right to demand that someone be healed, to presume that we have a greater authority than say Peter or Paul? If we teach such a thing, then essentially we are saying that we now have sovereignty over God's will - that He should bend to our purposes.

Within a few short months of the beginning of the Church, James - one of the original twelve disciples and the brother of John - had been beheaded (Acts 12:2), and Stephen stoned to death. James had spent three years with Jesus, and his ministry lasted only a few months. Why, Lord? Stephen was a man 'full of the Holy Spirit' and died at the hands of a crazed mob. Why, Lord?

The greatest test of our faith is not in demanding healing or that God should intervene where we see fit; it is in accepting that He has a plan which we must accept.

But let me tell you another story. Throughout my Christian life I have been to many so-called healing meetings. I well remember an American evangelist who visited Dunedin city in New Zealand when I was an adult student there. A group of theological students, including myself, went to hear this man who had been a missionary in some hostile country, claimed to have raised people from the dead, and even had bullets pass through his body without harm. This meeting was advertised throughout the city and about 450 people attended, many of them sick, some in wheel chairs, several blind and deaf, and others with terminal cancers. This man appeared on stage with a dark-skinned boy of ten who was there to testify that he had been raised from death by the evangelist. We listened to about thirty minutes of his miraculous exploits.

The meeting continued with this man's claim that 'everyone who came forward for healing would be healed completely'. The 'spirit' had just told him this. There was clapping and jubilation as people moved to the front. My friends and I stayed there for another hour watching. Not one person left healed, none. Yet the next day after a lecture at university, one of my Pentecostal fellow students was heard to say that 'it was a great meeting'. I challenged him about the evangelist's claim, and he just shrugged his shoulders.

A year after this, I stayed with a family whose mother was dying of cancer. Biopsies and ultrasound showed four enormous tumors in her

abdomen which eventually crushed her bowel completely. Her weight dropped from about 60 kilograms to just 29. For months we prayed for her, but a few days before her surgery, and after her latest ultrasound, I felt compelled by God to place my hands on her abdomen and pray for her healing. I had no faith in the act; indeed, I thought the urging of the Spirit was just my wishful thinking or imagination. Faithless and full of doubt, I obeyed, and she said that my hands felt hot and that something moved inside her abdomen.

When they opened her to extract the tumors, they found they were gone - completely gone. Her atheist surgeon/doctor wrote a report on the procedure, a report which ended with the words; 'my only explanation is Divine intervention'.

This incident is the only time in my Christian life that I have witnessed what could only be described as a New Testament healing. Yes, I have seen many occasions when headaches, sprains, and even toothache have disappeared after prayer, but one could also put these healings down to the medications the petitioners were taking. I am not suggesting that the Lord doesn't answer such prayers in a positive way, but rather, in my friend's case, God was the only hope she had.

Why does the Lord answer some prayers for healing and not others? Frankly, I have no answer to that question, only theological speculation. What I *do* know is this. As a redeemed child of Almighty God whose future with Him is guaranteed, whose inheritance with the saints and Christ is promised, I accept His Sovereign Will, for my life belongs to Him to steer and guide as He wills. I do this in the knowledge that His love for me is boundless, and I am sure of this one thing; nothing outside of His will can happen to me, and I will not die one second before the time He has ordained to take me to the heavenly home I long to see.

The Lord will never willingly give us anything outside of His will. In the case of material things, we can circumvent His will and take what we want, and even try to convince ourselves that, because we got that thing, He wanted us to have it. Is that not contrary to 'taking up our cross daily', coming to Him with open hands and trusting Him to 'give and take away'?

Whenever you hear a sermon which appeals to your base nature and sounds too good to be true, stop and listen to the Spirit, the Counselor, and have the attitude of Job. Jesus Christ loves us more than we can ever comprehend. He has promised to give us all we need, but even in times of

suffering and trials, even when we ask for something which seems as though it *should* be in His will, we must always accept His answer, if the answer is 'no'. He has the right to say 'no', no matter how disappointing that may be for us. One day we will have answers to all of our questions, but for now, rest in His peace and keep your eyes heavenward.

Chapter Five: Living in Grace

The late C.S Lewis once entered a discussion where he was asked to define the difference between Christianity and all other religions. 'That's easy,' he said. 'The answer is grace.'

Grace: What is it?

Apart from Christianity, every religion in the world requires a person to earn their salvation by one means or other. The gospel has a different message. It's not what *we* do, but what has been done *for* us. God is perfectly holy, and to dwell in His presence requires perfection. Such a standard is impossible for imperfect creatures. Our imperfection is a chosen thing, for every human being, apart from Jesus Christ, has willfully chosen to sin (Romans 5:12). God's holiness requires justice for a willful crime. The act of sin produces death, and only the act of death can erase the effect of sin. But not just any death; in order for perfection to be gained, a perfect life must be given to pay the debt against the holiness of God.

Jesus Christ paid that debt. God the Son became the Son of God, submitting His will entirely to the will of His Father, submitting even to death. When we surrender our sinful lives into His control, His sacrifice becomes ours, a perfect sacrifice for sin, and we are declared perfect. The Bible says that 'by one sacrifice He has made perfect forever those who are being made holy' (Hebrews 10:14). This is the essence of grace, a declaration that we have been made something impossible for us to make of ourselves.

Grace is undeserved; it is a gift from a loving Father who watched His beloved Son die a horrific death as a substitute for fallen creatures. No human being can earn salvation by their own works. Yes, we can do good things for others, but only perfection can allow us to enter into the presence of God when our souls depart from this world. Jesus, as Savior and Lord, offers every person the free gift of *His* perfection, a declaration that we have 'forever' - a gift of grace, of eternal life.

When we understand what grace is we can begin to understand why humility is the key to God's favor, and why He hates pride so intensely. Pride comes from self-evaluation. We compare ourselves to others. Usually, of course, we choose to compare ourselves with people like Hitler or Stalin,

rather than, say, Mother Teresa. But God's standard is Himself; God's standard is Jesus Christ. Pride fails to see the evil which lingers in its own heart; rather, it looks down on those it perceives as evil and pats itself on the back. God sees our evil and our potential for evil.

Our choices in life are always influenced by our station in life. If we've never experienced starvation, never watched while someone we loved was tortured and killed, never been raped and beaten, then in truth we cannot know how we would react. When we see a beggar on the streets, or watch TV reports about heinous crimes, what goes through our minds? Compassion and disgust, or do we dare to say 'there, but for the grace of God go I'?

The humble person can accept God's grace because humility recognizes not only our *present* sin, but our *potential* for sin. The man who considers himself righteous compares himself with those he considers less holy than himself. Jesus, and only Jesus, is the standard for all humanity. 'It is by grace you have been saved, through faith - and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God', the Bible declares (Ephesians 2:8). The key to receiving grace is in humble and honest recognition of the evil which dwells in every human heart.

Grace! A License to Sin?

As we have previously said, God's declaration of perfection is forever. For those who have been born again the perfection of Jesus Christ covers their sin - past, present and future. If this were not the case, we would be starting by grace, and continuing the race solely by our own efforts. The moment we failed, salvation would be forfeit. We start the race having been given the power and motivation to finish it. Before we were born again we had just our sinful nature dominating every thought and action, but after salvation the Divine Nature lives within us. It is *His* nature which gives us the energy, the motivation and the power to live for Him. Our part is merely to continually 'take up our cross' and rely on Him, submitting daily as we did at the beginning. The Christian comes to the source of his/her changed life every day and simply admits, 'Lord, without you I can do nothing; I would fall back into what I was before'.

Those who teach that we can lose salvation argue that grace may be abused as a license to sin. 'If all our future sins are forgiven, then we can do

whatever we like', they suggest. When I hear such claims I can't help but wonder if these people have ever met Jesus Christ. St Augustine once said that 'if you truly love God, you can do whatever you are inclined to do'. He was right, because we will be inclined to do whatever pleases the Lord we love. Jesus said that if we love Him we will obey His commandments, and His commandment is to love. It is all about our hearts. Yes, we will sin after we are saved, but we will feel ashamed and sad that we acted against our Lord, and be quick to repent. Anyone who plans to sin and to ask forgiveness later, the person who thinks he can abuse God's grace, is in dire need of true repentance.

Two natures dwell within the soul of the saved; one nature still desires to sin, whilst the other hates sin. When a Christian sins the Holy Spirit within is grieved. We feel His grief, His disappointment and loathing for the sin. A Christian who doesn't repent is the most miserable and depressed person around. If a person claims to be a Christian and can happily live in sin, they are simply deceiving themselves. The truth is they are not a Christian, but a hypocrite. The unrepentant Christian is urged by the Spirit to repent, then commanded to repent, and haunted by feelings of shame until they obey John's words to 'confess their sins and be cleansed from all unrighteousness' (1st John 1:8-10). Living in and with sin is not an option for those who have Christ as Lord, not if they want to have any peace or joy in their lives.

Culture of Merit

Understanding grace is difficult enough, but living in it is contrary to almost everything we are used to. We live in a world which promotes reward for good behavior, and discipline or punishment for wrong action. This system is drummed into us from the earliest years of our childhood. Our parents promise little rewards like candies if we behave well and, if we misbehave, forms of disciplinary action. When we get to school it becomes about grades. We are rewarded with good grades for diligence and we get an 'F' for 'fail' if we're lazy or complacent. The world tells us that we get what we deserve. Human effort is the key to self-discipline and success.

The problem is that we naturally transfer this system onto God. As previously stated, all religions, apart from Christianity, teach a form of works and merit, but sadly these forms have also become a part of mainline

Christianity as well. We throw around verses like 'you reap what you sow' and these become something akin to a Buddhist idea of karma. New Testament Scripture has many warnings about judgment in verses which say that God will give to each according to what we have done. Yet these verses are never speaking of even the remote possibility that through our own actions we may be rewarded with eternal life. Salvation *does* require a response on our part, but that response is not to make ourselves good enough for God through righteous actions.

God calls us to firstly recognize our status as creatures, to then recognize our sinfulness, to seek Him with all our hearts, count the cost, and finally submit our lives to Him. Hebrews 11:6 says that God 'rewards those who diligently seek Him'. When we begin to seek we may still have the idea that God is going to reward us in a similar way that our parents did, but when we finally understand that the bloody, mutilated body of God's holy Son was the price paid for our reward, all thought of our good behavior disappears as our pride is reduced in honest humility. Yes, the reward is eternal life, but all of the merit goes to Jesus Christ, and He alone.

Legalism: The Absence of Grace

Someone once said that living by grace is like having a highway with a ditch on either side. On the left is the idea of having a license to sin, whilst on the other is the ditch of legalism. The Old Testament contains the Covenant of the Law given to Moses about 1300BC. There are approximately 613 laws covering every topic pertaining to living a god-centered life and having a functioning community. The law was given shortly after the Jews were brought out of their slavery in Egypt. It served several purposes other than and including those stated.

Firstly, the law made us aware of sin. Paul refers to the law as a tutor, a kind of schoolmaster who teaches us about the evil which lingers in our hearts. Secondly, the law teaches us about the holiness of God. Within the law are a multitude of ceremonial rules and regulations for purity, sacrifice and atonement. These laws taught us that approaching a holy God was impossible without the shedding of blood. Thirdly, the law taught us how impossible it was to be holy, for the sin nature in all humanity drives the unregenerate person into sin.

Without the indwelling Holy Spirit, without regeneration, it is impossible to even begin to obey God's law in its entirety. John, in the opening chapter of his gospel says that 'the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ'. Christians are not under the old covenant, for God has made a new covenant (Hebrews 8:13, Colossians 2:14). Yet, despite this, Churches make lists of rules, both written and unwritten. This is simply legalism, and the unspoken idea behind legalism is, again, about seeking and gaining God's approval. The length of a girl's skirt, not wearing baseball caps in church, not smoking, not drinking alcohol, not wearing excessive jewelry, standing up for prayer, wearing a head covering if you're a woman, and always preaching in a suit and tie if you're a man. All of these things and many more are often used to measure a person's level of spirituality and approval before God.

Before I was born again I played in various bands, including entertaining in public bars. The town I lived in was quite small so most people knew me. After I was saved I quit playing in bands, but after my work was over, about 9:00 pm, I'd often stop at the local pub and spend some time talking to people who were really curious about why I'd stopped working part-time as an entertainer. I'd usually buy orange juice as I didn't want people to think I was there to get drunk. One of the deacons of the little Baptist Church I attended passed the pub on a Friday night at about 10:00 pm and saw me sitting with a group of guys. There were several empty jugs of beer on the table. I was called to a disciplinary meeting of deacons. This Church had many folk who were members of the Temperance Society, a group who considered all alcohol to be 'of the devil'.

I explained that I was witnessing and was told that such a place was inappropriate for a Christian. Several deacons informed me that they had never stepped inside a public bar, and the minister at the time was fond of telling the congregation that 'strong drink has never passed my lips'. In truth, I never touched alcohol before I was saved. The martial art I'd been practicing since thirteen forbade it, so the first time I had a glass of wine was after I was born again.

The Church I attended was full of legalism. I was a smoker at the time I was saved. I was also divorced and had nineteen demons living within me until the moment Christ entered my soul, so the Lord had a lot of heavy issues to deal with in beginning my process of living a changed life. I tried everything to give up smoking. I wanted to look like a good witness. I tried

and tried and failed repeatedly. I'd heard of people who'd miraculously stopped smoking when born again and pleaded with the Lord for this experience, but His reply was always the same; 'my grace is sufficient for you'.

Our little church had no home groups, no worship team, and no program for evangelism. It had a fortress mentality, a foolish idea that it was an island of righteousness in a sea of iniquity. All of my friends were non-Christians and my desire was to see them saved. I would invite them to my home for discussions on spirituality. Many of them smoked and used more alcohol than was wise, but over time some of them came to know the Lord. This started a pattern of non-Christian or 'seekers meetings' in my home which the church fundamentally disapproved of because I allowed people to bring cans of beer and smoke cigarettes.

Within about two years the Lord had established a kind of house church in my home. Fortunately for me my father was a retired Baptist pastor. He threw me into part-time Bible study, learning Greek and church history, and I fumbled my way through discipling myself and others. These people didn't want to join the Baptist church; they felt like unwanted aliens whenever they attended.

Then something funny happened. The Baptist Union in the USA used to send teams out to New Zealand to teach the latest evangelism project they'd come up with. This particular program was called 'Total Involvement Evangelism', or TIE. The idea was to have seekers' groups, to create an environment in one's home which would make non-Christians feel comfortable and give an opportunity to present the gospel. My home group had been going for about five years at this stage. During that time I'd given my testimony in dozens of churches around New Zealand, but never been allowed to speak in my home church because I still smoked, although I smoked much less than earlier. Suddenly, I was mister popular. In order to look good, and to add some baptisms to the head count, my group was invited to be on the official church register and advertised in the newsletter. It seemed amusing at the time, but looking back, perhaps it was rather sad.

I went to university as an adult student. I'd already done correspondence courses with the New Zealand Bible College, but had a passion to study theology full-time. I'd pretty much given up on giving up as far as smoking was concerned. Maybe the Lord has a sense of humor, or maybe He wanted to ensure that I never became an arrogant legalist. Being

a smoking Christian was always a great source of shame for me and a reminder of how pathetically weak I was. While at university I would often find myself standing outside shivering in the frost with the other social rejects, huddling around an ashtray, as smoking within buildings was banned in NZ years ago. Otago University had about 16,000 students at the time, so complete strangers often met while feeding their addiction. For me, the conversation often went something like this.

'Man, it's cold. I've got to give this up.'

'Yeah, me too.'

'What's your name and what're you studying?'

'Steve, and I'm studying theology. What about you?'

'John. Good to meet you. I'm doing economics. Theology...that's religious stuff right? Why would you want to study about God in this day and age?'

'Because of something that happened to me in 1982.'

'What happened?'

'I was a Satanist, rock musician and arrogant jerk, but I met someone I thought was long gone and dead.'

'Yeah, wow, who did you meet?'

'I met Jesus Christ and He changed my life.'

'Sounds like you've got quite a story, Steve.'

And these conversations led to more seekers' groups. I never met Christians standing outside having a smoke. The Lord used my weakness to introduce me to many people as weak as I, and gave opportunities to share my testimony and the gospel.

Is smoking a sin? If your Lord has commanded you to quit and you don't, then yes, it's a sin. Is it a form of slavery? Yes, it is. My prayer was often 'Lord, just tell me to quit and I will, because I know you'll give me the strength to stop'. One day He answered that prayer and provided me with the strength to quit, but during the years that I skulked around in the shadows hiding from judgmental Christians, He used my weakness to introduce the gospel to many.

Legalism is the ingrained idea that we must somehow earn God's approval. We know we are not good enough for God, and we presume, through all that we have been taught as we live in a world of reward by merit, that our own works will help us to be accepted by God, and others. In religions other than Christianity legalism is rampant. In some Muslim

countries morals police patrol the streets with clubs in order to beat women whose clothing offends them or who dare to drive a car. Legalism makes rules which are supposed to make us practice holiness and keep us away from sin. The problem is that legalism never brings anyone closer to God; rather, it makes us judgmental and proud. I have come to believe that the Lord hates our pride far more than our weaknesses.

Ungrace

Philip Yancey, in his book *'What's So Amazing About Grace'*, uses the terms 'grace' and 'ungrace'. Ungrace is that form of legalism which is judgmental. Jesus told a story about a Pharisee and a sinner who went to the temple to pray (Luke 18:9-14). The Pharisee thanked God that he was different to other men; he wasn't a robber, adulterer or evildoer. He stood there and prayed about himself. The tax collector stood away from the holy place, his hand on his chest, staring down at his feet and muttered, 'God, have mercy on me, a sinner'.

We are brought up in a world of ungrace which teaches us to be judgmental and to believe that we can get nothing without earning it. When we get good grades it's human to see ourselves as better than those who failed. When we are financially successful we pat ourselves on the back and look down on those we consider unsuccessful. Secular culture tells a person that they must look good, dress well, work hard and be successful or they are not acceptable. The homeless person is despised, hated and rejected because they do not measure up to the standards demanded by our cultures. We don't bother to inquire what circumstances made this person into a homeless, smelly beggar; we simply judge him as a lesser person than us, a failure, a bludger and scavenger, and in doing so, we epitomize all that God hates about ungrace. The beggar *may* be too lazy to work, too lazy to wash, and God knows this as well, but to God this person is a lost child, a precious soul. Jesus loved this person so much He allowed Himself to be crucified, and when we judge this person we do several things which God hates.

We place ourselves above them as if we are righteous and they are not.
We refuse to love them.

We devalue someone who is precious in God's eyes.

Ungrace is rampant in Churches. There is a notion that the saints are inside worshipping God while the sinners are outside doing what sinners do best, sinning. In part, this may well be true, but it fails to be honest about what and who we are. Those who believe they are righteous are correct, if they attribute their righteousness solely to the declaration of perfection we have through the righteousness of Christ. However, if they believe that because of their actions they are righteous, they insult the one they claim as Lord, for without Him, their righteousness would be 'as a filthy rag'.

'There but for the grace of God go I' is the pattern of thought we must maintain if Christ is to be the center of our lives. We are only able to demonstrate grace because of the grace demonstrated and gifted to us. If we ever forget that, we will fall into forms of legalism and ungrace which put walls of pride between ourselves and those we are called to serve. The reality is simple. Inside the church are forgiven sinners who continually seek forgiveness when they fall, and outside are unrepentant sinners.

I have met many godly people in my life, mostly Christians who've been in the Lord for many years. I have noticed something profound about such people. The closer to Christ and more holy their lives have become, the more acutely aware of their sin they are. Holiness comes through our relationship with Christ, and the closer we get to Him, the more His glory and our sinfulness are displayed. The positive thing is simply this: The more we see our sinfulness, the more our love for Him deepens, for we have an enlarged vision of His incredible grace in loving us in spite of what we are.

Chapter Six: Living in 'The World'

Aliens and Strangers

The Bible tells us to 'be *in* the world but not *of* the world'. These words are referring to the system of the world which stands in opposition to the will of God. Scripture tells us that Satan is the 'god of this age/world' (2nd Corinthians 4:4), in as much as the vast majority of people have chosen to live a life independent of their Creator and His plan for their lives.

To be *of* the world is to live by the world's standards and under the influence of its false promises. C. S Lewis once wrote that 'If we find ourselves with a desire that nothing in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that we were made for another world'. The world we live in is fallen and temporary, a place where death, disease, greed, vanity, hatred, war and selfish ambition rule. It is a world of gross disparity between the rich and poor. In third world countries people struggle to survive, whilst in first world Western cultures billions are spent on diet programs to combat obesity.

When a person is born again they become a citizen of heaven; in fact, the Kingdom of Heaven comes to live within us. In a very real sense we are aliens and strangers in this world; our real home is being prepared for us in heaven. Jesus told us to store up treasure in heaven rather than here, and for many Christians this is a difficult balancing act. What the Scriptures call us to do is to keep our feet on earth, where we can serve the Lord as we are increasingly transformed into His likeness, while at the same time keep looking up to the home we are moving towards. Our old nature still exists, a nature that wants to hoard money in order to feel secure, to gratify our cravings and desires and to submit to the system which has rules and standards of success which are completely contrary to God. There's an old hymn which goes something like this. 'Turn your eyes upon Jesus, look full in His wonderful face, and the things of earth will grow strangely dim, in the light of His glory and grace' (Helen H. Lemmel). The words of that hymn are the key to being *in* the world, but not *of* the world.

In his first letter to the church (1st John 2:15ff), the apostle John has some strong words to say about the world. He commands us to 'not love the world or anything in the world'. He goes on to say that 'if anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him'. Serious words indeed.

John expounds his command with a brief description of the things of the world. He mentions the cravings of sinful man, the lust of our eyes, and boasting of what we have and do. These three sum up the things we will struggle with all of our Christian lives. Our old sinful nature is still alive and well and, if we allow it to, it will continually pull us in a direction contrary to the will of God. Our sin nature is predominately selfish; it seeks to gratify our sinful desires. Our new nature, God's nature, continually encourages us to 'put to death' those desires. We can do that by simply surrendering our hearts to Him daily and 'practicing the presence of God'. Let's look at John's categories.

Cravings of Sinful Man

Craving is a strong word which denotes a form of slavery to something. Peter tells us that a man is a slave to whatever has mastered him (2nd Peter 2:19). Throughout our lives, before we are born again, we yield to the things we desire and crave until we become slaves to sin. Many people become addicted, both emotionally and physically, to various things which we perceive as necessary from a sinful and even natural perspective. We are complex creatures. Our parents are often people who are struggling with habits and cravings which have manifested themselves because of their own upbringings, for both nature and nurture play an important role in our development.

For example, the person who grows up with little or no physical or verbal demonstrations of love may develop an emotional addiction to pornography, replacing through fantasy the love he craves. Rejection, bitterness, loneliness, sickness and a multitude of other things can shape the way we process information and ultimately determine how we relate and react to others. In essence, we form habits through craving for what we are convinced we lack.

The world has its own standards for beauty, focusing almost entirely on our physical bodies. All of us crave to be loved for who we are, but the world demands that we must be a certain shape and size in order to receive attention and love. The world tells us that success is measured by material wealth, that poverty is failure, so many people neglect those things that money can't buy in their craving to be accepted. The world conditions us; its principals and standards are drummed into us through advertising, peer

pressure and the like. We easily become slaves to whatever we crave and, if we continue to look to the world for satisfaction, we will never be free.

So many people become slaves to what they desire. 'If I never find and marry the right person, I will never be happy', 'if I cannot have children I will never be happy', 'if I never find a good job or get out of this little town, I will never be happy'. Whatever we believe is the source of our satisfaction and happiness, that thing or person is our idol and we its slave. For the Christian, only Christ can be in that place, for only He and His plan for our lives can fully satisfy.

Paul encourages us that our minds can and will be renewed as we yield to our Lord (Romans 12:1-2). We began our walk with Christ by surrendering to His will, but for some reason or other we start taking back control of different areas of our lives, areas which He is still transforming and healing. We came to Him as broken vessels, but in a world of instant everything, we want to be completely whole immediately. Salvation means wholeness, but being transformed takes a lifetime.

Remember that we have a 'sympathetic high priest', a Lord and Savior who was 'tempted in all things, but without sin' (Hebrews 4:15). Jesus understands what we struggle with. The important thing is to find a balance between fighting against our cravings, whilst at the same time resting in His love and strength, and trusting Him for His timing. Ultimately, without Him we can do nothing to really change. We are called to exercise self-control, but we must always be careful that our spiritual successes don't lead to pride, for 'pride comes before a fall'. Galatians 5:16 says 'live by the Spirit and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature'. If you have a constant struggle in a particular area, then seek a godly counselor or friend, someone who can help you understand your struggle and point you to answers in Christ.

The Lust of our Eyes

The lust of the eyes is as old as temptation itself. Eve looked on the fruit that was forbidden and saw that it was 'pleasing to the eye'. The word 'lust' means to earnestly desire something, usually in order to satisfy a longing. One of the Ten Commandments basically sums this up as 'do not covet'. Coveting is utterly opposed to God's will because it desires what we are forbidden to have. Like the cravings of sinful man, the lust of the eyes

looks at the material world for answers to dissatisfaction, and therefore, turns away from the Lord who promises to provide all we need.

The lust of the eyes is a far wider problem than the obvious ties to improper sexuality with which we often associate it. Many Christians seek temporary satisfaction in clothing, jewelry, the latest gadget, constantly renovating their home, gluttony, an excessive amount of vacations - the list goes on and on. The Scriptures warn about this problem because we are called to live in freedom from what this world promises. God wants us to know the joy of being satisfied. Paul wrote that 'godliness with contentment is great gain' (1st Timothy 6:6).

Can you be content; are you content with what the Lord has given you? That is the essential question that every Christian must ask. The book of Job tells the story of a wealthy man who lost everything he cherished in this world. His wife advised him to curse God and die, but he chose to remain faithful saying 'the Lord gives and the Lord takes away; blessed be the name of the Lord'.

Like almost every aspect of our Christian life, it is a matter of trust. Can you come to God every day with open hands? That is the heart of 'taking up our cross'. Are we willing to trust Him to place in our hands what He knows is best, and to take out what He no longer wants us to have. If we can, we will live a life free of coveting, content to let Christ be Lord.

Boasting of what we Have and Do

In Christians, boasting of what we *do* is often tied to our need for acceptance and worldly notions of success. We are brought up in a world of competition. In public schools we are engaged in tests, exams, sports and popularity contests daily. The world teaches us to measure our success against other people and to strive to get awards and recognition for the highest grade, for being a sports star, for being the prettiest girl, smartest guy, etc. Competition becomes ingrained into all that we do, and we carry this habit into our new Christian life.

I well remember having a strong case of culture shock during my first visit to America in the early eighties. I come from a post-English/Scottish culture which cherishes the idea of being a good sportsman. The idea of booing anyone during a game, except perhaps for being a poor loser, was considered disgusting behavior. I was taken to a baseball game in Kansas

where the local team was playing a Canadian team. In the corner of the stadium was a huge electronic scoreboard and, for a guy from a town of 10,000, the whole atmosphere was impressive. The scoreboard told the crowd how to react. When the Americans scored, the scoreboard told us to cheer and clap, but when the Canadian player hit a home run the scoreboard showed a finger against a pair of lips for silence, and then the word 'boo'. I was shocked, and angered. I was sitting almost directly behind the batter and started clapping when the booing stopped.

America was nearing the final decade of the cold war in those days. I'd never been exposed to propaganda and was amused at the amount of TV ads suggesting that there were communists lurking behind every tree, but the thing that hit me the most was the idea that if you weren't the best, you were nothing, a loser. Maybe New Zealanders suffer from small country syndrome, maybe we struggle to be the best at anything more than rugby, but to be brought up in a culture where you are constantly told you're the best in the world must be a trial when it comes to boasting and comparing ourselves with others. Paul tells us that we should test our own actions and not to compare ourselves with others (Galatians 6:4). Pride is one worldly vice which God hates; in fact, the Scriptures tell us in several places that God 'actively opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble'.

Be aware that the world tells you what it wants you to believe and, often, what it thinks you want to believe. When my family learned I was going to live in Ukraine they were concerned about how I would handle the extreme cold, believing that there was no real summer here. Imagine their surprise to learn that Ukraine has a long and hot summer. Many New Zealanders, like Americans, bought into the way Hollywood portrayed the Soviet Union. Have you ever seen an American-made movie which portrays Russia in summer? Russia and Ukraine are always portrayed as under a blanket of snow, people dressed in camouflage clothes, never smiling, the women built like body-builders and carrying AK47 assault rifles, and the children dirty and half-starved. During the cold war, soviet citizens were told similar stories about America and they believed it. My wife is Ukrainian. She grew up seeing film clips of American slums and hearing horrific stories about American culture. She was incredibly thankful that she wasn't born in the U.S.

Paul tells us to boast in the Lord. He doesn't mean to boast about our service to God, but to boast about what God has done for us as pathetic

sinners. 'If anyone thinks he is something when he is nothing, he deceives himself', Paul says. We mustn't compare ourselves with others. Be aware that we have been conditioned by the cultures in which we grew up. Be aware of our habit to compete, and be aware of the fundamental problem of human pride.

Managing Money

Boasting of what we *have* is also about measuring ourselves by worldly standards of success. In Kiev, many people will take credit they can't afford and buy an expensive European car in order to look and feel successful. For Christians in any culture, boasting in what we have is ungodly, unless our boast is that Christ in His mercy and grace has made us His heirs. In the last few decades the mega church culture has blossomed in America and made its way to other countries. The wealth and prosperity doctrine, which I believe is absolutely contrary to Scripture, tries to give Christians a Biblical mandate for greed. Not surprisingly then, the largest church congregation in the U.S. teaches that God wants you to have an abundant life, a term meaning that God wants you to be wealthy and prosperous in material things. I doubt that the leaders of such churches ever spend much time preaching 'blessed are the poor'.

Take the time to study your Bible and see if you can find a single verse where Jesus praises the idea of material wealth. Read 1st Timothy 6:3-10, stand back and take another look at prosperity theology. Jesus never had two coins to rub together. He taught a basic and incredibly important principal. Those who have everything in the material world will find it almost impossible to feel that they need God. When Jesus sent out the disciples into the world He ordered them to take nothing with them. His purpose was to teach them two things. Firstly, to understand that we are aliens in this world; citizens of another place, and secondly, to live in this attitude and rely on God for all we need. This doesn't mean it is wrong to own a house, a car and to have enough for an annual vacation. It means that our hearts should always be focused on our true inheritance which is in Christ, and not on this world.

When you have extra money, what do you do with it? It's okay to save a little for a rainy day, but do you need a better house, a bigger pool, a more expensive car? Does the Lord want you to give that money to your fellow

Christians who live in poverty with no means to have the things that perhaps you take for granted, or to help support pastors and evangelists who live as paupers whilst being persecuted? Make your money mean something that has eternal value. This is what Jesus meant when He said to store up treasure in heaven. Give to a mission you trust and be satisfied with what you have. If your house is sufficient, then let it be sufficient and be thankful. Have the courage to put yourself in a position where you need to rely on the Lord. If you never do this, you'll never know the joy of seeing Him provide where you couldn't provide for yourself.

At the time I was almost finished with preparations to come to Ukraine as a missionary, I was offered a monthly salary from a church which wanted to support me. Years earlier I'd read the story of the missionary to China, Hudson Taylor, and his story inspired me. Taylor had been supported for the first years of his seedling ministry in China and been absolutely unsuccessful in winning people to Christ. It was only after the Lord commanded him to put aside his prim and proper English culture and live as a Chinese man that the natives listened to his message.

After prayer, I declined the offer of financial support. I was incredibly tempted to accept it, and found many ways to justify the money, but the Spirit of God convicted me so strongly that I said 'no thanks'. When I arrived here I was forced to live like a Ukrainian to a large extent. For six years I had no car, so I understood what it was like to be crammed into the metro, standing with my face a few inches away from drunk people, one hand on my wallet and the other on my phone after having both stolen.

God opened doors to teach English, and later, to teach Biblical studies in a secular university. Through having to earn a living I was exposed to hundreds of people I would otherwise never have met, and in His grace have seen many of them come to know Him as Lord and Savior. When we obey the Lord and make ourselves vulnerable, we are forced to rely on Him. He loves putting us in this position because it gives Him the opportunity to show us daily just how real and loving He is. Being a self-supported missionary is not for everyone, but each of us must find our own calling for service. It's a partnership with Christ. I support myself through His provision, but in this I can boast in Him and know the joy of seeing Him opening doors and directing my life.

Sadly, many Christians who have bought into the prosperity doctrine of self indulgent greed have isolated themselves from Christ. Their worship is

shallow and pathetic, for it doesn't come from the heart of dependent children. Often, it takes a tragedy in their lives to bring them back to the reality of how much they should rely on Christ rather than the world. A family member gets ill. Suddenly, they can't buy their way out of a problem; it is outside of their control. God allows such things in the lives of His children in order to show them that this world is so incredibly temporary; indeed, this world will one day be totally destroyed (2nd Peter 3:10).

God doesn't intend for us to be poor. In Romans 8:17 Paul tells us that if we are children of God we are also God's heirs and co-heirs with Christ. Everything that belongs to Jesus Christ belongs to us. But Paul adds a condition: 'if indeed we share in His sufferings in order that we might also share in His glory'. Are you willing to let God make you vulnerable? That doesn't mean taking the food out of your children's mouths, or placing them at unnecessary risk; the Lord never calls us to be irresponsible parents.

Do you know the story of Peter's call (Luke 5)? Peter lived on the shores of Galilee. He fished at night and Jesus met him as he was returning empty handed after his night's work. Jesus told him to go out again, and Peter caught so many fish he couldn't get them all into one boat. Jesus called four fishermen to follow him that day, but only after providing enough for all of their families to live on while they were in His service.

God knows what you need; He knows your responsibilities and stands beside you *taking* responsibility. He wants each one of us to be able to boast in His provision for us. That means being in partnership with Him and exercising wisdom and generosity without being foolish or presumptuous. Don't make rules about giving that could leave you in a financial crisis that God never intends. Walk with Him. Give when He says to give, but test that you have heard Him correctly, for although He calls us to allow a measure of vulnerability in our lives, He also understands the responsibilities He places on us such as caring for children.

If you never have to rely on God you'll only ever have yourself to boast about, and sadly, you may place yourself in a position where the world has become your idol. If you are truly a born again child of God, then He may decide to take away everything that you have placed between yourself and Him. You gave Him that right when you gave your life to Him. Don't force the Lord to bring you back to a place of dependence on Him. He would have you boast in Him and what He has achieved through you, not in what you have in material terms.

The Bible reminds us that we are aliens and strangers in this world, but a part of us feels as though we must be friends with the world. Be in the world and make an eternal difference, storing up treasure in heaven through saying 'no' to yourself and being satisfied with what you have. The Lord delights in those who rely on Him, working in partnership through trust and wisdom. Learn the joy of seeing His provision, learn the joy of being a part of mission, of supporting those who the Lord calls you to support.

Chapter Seven: Spiritual Warfare and Evangelism

Authority and Promise

The last words of Jesus, which Matthew records in his gospel, can be summed up as follows. 'All authority in heaven and earth has been given to me, therefore go and make disciples of all nations, and I will be with you until the end of the age'. For the disciples who first heard these words they were both command and promise. Why did Jesus declare His authority? He was assuring them that, as His disciples, His authority covered the work He was sending them to do. His words *begin* with Him and *end* with Him. His authority sends them, and His presence goes with them. This command and promise was and is for every generation of Christians.

As members of the body of Christ, all of us have a responsibility to use our spiritual gifts and talents to make disciples. We do this under the authority of Christ, and under the leaders the Lord has appointed within our Church. Each of us has a responsibility to discover our spiritual gifts and to use them in Christ's commission to make disciples. We will discuss these gifts in the next chapter.

Whether we recognize it or not, evangelism is about spiritual warfare, and those who would win spiritual battles need to understand a chain of command, need to be trained for combat, and even be prepared to be wounded on occasion. When a young man goes to boot camp, preparing to be deployed, he isn't so naive to imagine that the enemy will not shoot back. The spiritual war is no different and a wise person will be prepared. Hopefully, the evangelists, pastors and teachers will be seasoned warriors who can inspire faith in Christ and recognize when the enemy is attacking.

In general, spiritual warfare is about two main areas; one is directed towards *us* and the other towards the enemy. Let me be very clear from the outset. Unbelievers are not the enemy. We should view them as captives, prisoners of a war they may not even recognize, slaves to sin and death, and ultimately still under the authority of the 'god of this world', Satan.

Satan and his minions are the enemy. For Christians who never take Jesus' command seriously and get involved in evangelism, the fact of spiritual warfare may never become a reality. However, I would seriously question the person who claims to be born again and never feels Christ's

love for the lost or a motivation to get involved. Having said that, let's talk about the area of spiritual attack towards us.

Preparation for War

The most comprehensive and succinct passage of Scripture about spiritual attack is in Ephesians 6:10-19. Paul tells us to 'put on the full armor of God in order to take a stand against the devil's schemes'. In verse 12 he reminds us that 'our struggle is not against flesh and blood (the unsaved), but against the rulers, against the authorities, powers of this dark world and spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms'. It often feels as though our war is with anti-Christian rulers and authorities, but Paul wants us to recognize that behind and above such people is a highly organized demonic army. We are commanded to obey the government, pray for authorities, and love our enemies. The spiritual war is not against flesh and blood.

Paul begins this passage with 'be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power'. Warfare requires strength and courage. For the Christian, these are found 'in the Lord'. Christ is our Captain, the one who has personally stood against Satan's temptations and defeated him. He has the authority and promises to be with us, leading the charge and holding the line against attack.

Paul's second command is to 'put on the full armor of God'. There are two things to notice here. We must *put on* the armor and *all* of the armor. This requires some effort on our part, but notice that this armor is of God, not of ourselves. The natural man has no defense against demonic attack. In countries where shamans and witchdoctors rule communities, these demonic agents are feared for their power to curse and even kill, and this has been the case throughout all human history. Only Jesus Christ can provide the armor necessary to defend ourselves against demonic attack and temptation.

Having put on God's armor we can stand against the schemes of the enemy. Every part of the armor that Paul describes is to protect the front of a soldier; there is nothing for our back. We never turn our back; we stand forwards, head on, behind our Captain, and rely on the body of Christ, those standing behind us to watch our backs through prayer and counsel.

Paul describes the belt of truth, breastplate of righteousness, and sandals, all parts of a Roman soldier's armor. Truth and righteousness are about living for Christ. It is His truth and His righteousness imparted to us which makes us soldiers of the army of light. Satan is the 'father of lies' and through various lies he tempts us into sin. The sinful Christian soldier is weak; the enemy has already found a hole in his armor and wounded him. All of us may fall to temptation, but this does not mean that we are no longer fit to serve; it means that we need to confess our sins and be cleansed from all unrighteousness, and then be aware of our weakness in that particular area.

Roman soldiers also had specific protection for their feet and legs. Sandals had small metal nails driven through them to offer purchase against being pushed backwards, and shin guards protected against falling onto spikes in the ground, placed there to wound the legs and stop the soldier moving forwards. One is there to stop us 'backsliding' and the other to ensure that we can press forward.

Paul then speaks about the 'shield of faith with which we can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one'. Some versions render the verse 'above all, take up the shield of faith'. Faith in Christ is the ultimate defense. We must *know* who we are in Christ and stand on that knowledge. Hebrews 11:1 tells us that 'faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see'. It is only by faith in Christ that we have become aliens and foreigners in occupied territory. If you are still unsure of your salvation, then you need to go back to the very first chapter of this book and make sure you truly know the Lord.

The last part of the armor that Paul mentions is the helmet of salvation. Without this helmet you are still not a part of the army of Christ. The breastplate covers our heart. We may have heartfelt feelings for Christ and still be unsaved, we may know the truth (the belt) and still have never surrendered our lives to Christ as Lord; we may even have a degree of faith (the shield), but not the faith that has brought about regeneration. The helmet covers our head, and represents Jesus Christ who must be our head, our authority and our Lord. If Christ is not the head of your life, then you are still your own authority. The 'helmet of salvation' is an analogy portraying the fact that salvation requires Christ as Savior and Lord.

The last part of Paul's armor mentions the 'sword of the Spirit' and prayer. The sword is God's Word, the Scriptures, and alongside prayer,

constitutes the two offensive weapons that Christians have to fight with in the spiritual war.

Spiritual Attack

There are several ways in which the enemy attacks us. The most common is through various temptations. His goal in this is that we fall and come under condemnation which makes us want to run from the battle, or just give up the fight. One of the ways that we prove our love for Christ is in our willingness to recognize our sins and be cleansed again (1st John 1:8-9). Perseverance is learned through such times.

The other form of attack is often more subtle but just as debilitating. We refer to this attack as spiritual oppression. For me, spiritual oppression is like a black cloud, a heaviness which brings depression and feelings of hopelessness, and confusion. In severe cases, this form of darkness can even bring about thoughts of suicide. Oppression can also have physical manifestations, headaches and nausea for example. I still remember vividly my first experience of demonic oppression.

When I was born again many demons came out of me. The Lord put on my heart to write my testimony down, all of the details. When I was sitting writing all of the demonic techniques used for levitation, etc., I would get these incredibly strong headaches. I had never had them before. I felt like a black bag had been placed over my head and I couldn't get it off. I had been warned by Satanists to never publish my testimony or tell it in public, and I received death threats from people involved in the New Age movement. Also, 180 Siddhas, people who were possessed, were ordered to meditate against me. When I walked out of my office and did other work, the headaches left almost immediately. Eventually I realized what was happening, but I didn't know how to deal with it. Then I read this verse:

2 Corinthians 10:3-4 'For though we live in the world, we do not wage war as the world does. The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds'.

The two spiritual weapons mentioned in Ephesians 6 are the Sword of the Spirit, our Bible, and prayer. I got on my knees in my office and prayed. I prayed to the Lord, but I also spoke out loud to the demons I knew were there. I told the demons that I was covered by the blood of Christ; I told

them that they had been defeated at the cross, I told them that I belonged to Jesus Christ, and I asked the Lord to put an angel on top of my office to protect me. The headaches disappeared immediately, and the oppression left.

Another common form of satanic attack is when Satan tries to bring disunity in the body of Christ. Married couples who are involved in ministry together will be very aware of this demonic strategy. Insignificant disagreements suddenly become huge - the molehill becomes a mountain. Also, those theological differences we have with other members of the body of Christ, usually leaders, suddenly become issues with which we just can't come to a compromise. Understand that demonic forces can plant ideas and disunity within our minds. Satan's goal is to convince us that we can't work together, to divide and conquer. At such times humility, acceptance, love and prayer are essential in bringing unity under Christ back to the fore. Be aware of Satan's tactics and guard the 'unity of the Spirit' with great diligence.

On the Attack

Understanding the condition of those we are seeking to bring to Christ, and the authority we have in Him, are essential in evangelism. From the very beginning of creation humanity was endowed with authority in this world. In Genesis 1:28 we were given authority to rule over the physical world, a call to stewardship of the planet. Our sin affected everything under our authority and, on a spiritual level, transferred power to Satan as the world became subject to death. Romans 8:20 speaks of the whole creation groaning under the bondage of decay as it waits expectantly for liberation and the glorious freedom of the children of God. We who know Christ have been liberated - the creation and the unsaved have not.

Jesus Christ destroyed Satan's power over death and opened the way for humanity to be united with Him in resurrection to immortality. We cannot save the planet; it is doomed to destruction (2nd Peter 3:7,10). However, as members of Christ's body we have His authority to be co-workers with Him in liberating those still under Satan's authority. How do we do that? Some people have the idea that the church has to look like the world. God forbid!

Many churches try a myriad of programs designed to get unsaved people into churches. Making seekers comfortable within the church community has gone to such extremes that often it's difficult to tell the difference between the world and the church. There is a time and place to interact with seekers, but changing the Church to make it 'seeker friendly' is not, in my opinion, the answer. I have had home groups for non-Christians for over 30 years. Anyone can come to my home or apartment, bring a beer, have a cigarette on my balcony, and share a conversation over a meal. The purpose of such a meeting is to do as Jesus did when He went to Levi's house and ate with tax collectors and those perceived as the dregs of society. It is to meet people where they are. However, when the saints meet to celebrate their liberation through songs, Bible teaching, prayer and communion, then being 'seeker friendly' is absolutely unimportant. When unsaved people finally decide to go to a worship meeting, they expect to see and feel the difference between the world and the Church.

I am all for meeting non-Christians where they are at, but the thing which is so incredibly neglected is spiritual warfare. I've been to hundreds of evangelical prayer meetings and am shocked at the ignorance most Christians have about spiritual warfare. We pray 'Lord open their eyes', and 'Lord, may they feel your presence', be 'convicted of sin', and even 'feel comfortable in our church'. There's nothing wrong with most of that, although their feeling comfortable may be more of a hindrance than a help, but what about war, what about the enemy, what about the one who has blinded their eyes? Why are we so ignorant of how to fight demonic forces?

Is there someone you want to see saved, a friend or family member for example? You tell them about Christ, you give your testimony, you use every great intellectual argument you can find and pray for them, but nothing changes, they never hear you? Do you know why? In 1st Corinthians chapter 2, Paul explains that without the Spirit no one can know the mysteries of the gospel. In verse 14 he writes, 'The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, because they are spiritually discerned'. You may be preaching the most powerful spiritual message, but some people understand nothing; it is like they have this black bag over their heads which prevents them from understanding - their minds are blinded.

Here is one of the most important passages on understanding the spiritual war from 2nd Corinthians 4:1-3:

'Therefore, since through God's mercy we have this ministry, we do not lose heart. Rather, we have renounced secret and shameful ways; we do not use deception, nor do we distort the word of God. On the contrary, by setting forth the truth plainly we commend ourselves to every man's conscience in the sight of God. And even if our gospel is veiled (hidden), it is veiled to those who are perishing. The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God'.

The Bible tells us that the minds of unbelievers are covered by a veil, blinding them from seeing the light of the gospel. Paul tells us, a few verses earlier, that if an unbeliever will just turn towards the Lord, then the veil will be lifted. The question is how to get people to turn. Turning towards God is actually an act of repentance, the beginning of seeking. For me, seekers' home groups are the place where this veil is lifted, but as an ex-Satanist, I am extremely aware that it is Satan who 'blinds the minds of unbelievers'. How can I do anything about that? How can I even get them to turn and begin to seek?

Jesus gave us the answer; he told us about 'spiritual strongholds'.

Binding the 'Strongman'

In verse 17 of 2nd Corinthians chapter 3, Paul tells us that 'the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom'. So here is the situation. Satan is blinding the minds of unbelievers. They cannot discern the Spirit because they have no freedom, they are bound by Satan, they cannot see the light of the gospel. BUT, if they will turn towards God, He will lift the veil so that they can begin to understand. What we have to do is get them to turn around and look. These people cannot hear His Spirit because they are bound and blinded by the enemy. But we have the power to free them and lift the veil, at least for the time we want to speak to them in the Spirit.

In Matthew 12 Jesus was being accused of driving out demons using demonic power. He uses an analogy of Satan as a strongman who has bound people in his house so they cannot escape. Then in verse 29 he asks. 'How can anyone enter a strong man's house and carry off his possessions unless he first ties up the strong man? Then he can rob his house'.

In Matthew 16:19, Jesus told Peter that he had the spiritual authority to bind and loose. He has given every Christian this authority. Remember 2nd

Corinthians 10:3-4. 'For though we live in the world, we do not wage war as the world does. The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to *demolish* strongholds'.

If a person's mind is blinded under a demonic veil, they will not turn towards God unless we first bind the strong man, or He lifts it of His own will and grace. We have this authority in Him. Paul said the Spirit of the Lord is freedom. He told us in Ephesians 6:18 to 'pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests.' This is the weapon we use to bind the strong man, to bind demons.

We are in a war, and we have special weapons to fight that war because it is a spiritual war. When I was a lecturer, and traveling to university to teach students the gospel, I would pray something like this: 'Lord, in the authority I have in you, I bind every demonic power which is blinding the minds of the unbelievers I am going to speak to until the lecture is over. Turn their hearts towards you so that the veil will be removed. Help me to speak in the power of your Spirit, because your Spirit brings freedom, and they can only understand the truth by the Spirit.'

I believe, that for the time I am preaching the gospel, those students hear the gospel - the veil is lifted for that specific time. If those students choose to turn towards God, the veil remains lifted, but if they choose to ignore the Spirit who is calling them to turn, then, when the lecture is over, the veil falls back over their minds. Before you try to speak to your unsaved friends, family or strangers, use the authority you have in Christ to bind the strongman. Seeking requires a person to turn around. It is an intellectual decision prompted by the Spirit of God. By binding the enemy, that person's mind is temporarily unveiled so that the words you speak through the Spirit are uninhibited.

Chapter Eight: Spiritual Gifts and Serving

Until the past few decades the majority of Churches in my homeland of New Zealand had a 'one man ministry' model. The pastor had his parish or flock which he tended. His job was to visit members of his congregation, encourage them to go to Church on Sunday, and conduct weddings and funerals. If someone had asked members of these Anglican, Baptist and Presbyterian Churches what their role in the body of Christ was, their reply would be 'we pay the pastor for that'. There were basically no mega Churches in those days, and often pastors looked after several small country parishes. Nowadays, many of those little Churches are empty, closed and forgotten - just quaint buildings which amateur photographers use to create postcard pictures.

Why did these Church communities die? Probably for several reasons. Firstly, that the people who attended them were never expected to be more than Sunday attendees, people who were under the understanding that being 'christened' made them 'Christian'. In short, they were never born again, and for many, the term would have been new.

Secondly, if people are not born again, they seldom have any motivation or passion to find and help the lost. This fact is explained in Jesus' teaching on the sheep and the goats in Matthew 25. The sheep are out in the world serving, whilst the goats haven't even begun to see the need. The sheep are born again and serving their Lord; the goats are unsaved and headed for eternal destruction.

And thirdly, the men who went to seminaries to train came out with the idea that it was solely their job as paid ministers to do the work of God. These Churches would often have a few people using gifts such as administration - a Church secretary, a couple of deacons and others who mowed the lawns and did odd jobs. On top of that were Sunday school teachers, ushers and the organist. That was it, and that was exactly the kind of Church I was taken to as a child.

On a particular night during the week there was usually a prayer meeting, attended by three or four dedicated members who prayed earnestly that God might somehow bring some unsuspecting person off the street or farm and into a meeting. Thankfully, this mentality has mostly died, along with the one-man ministry model, for it is certainly not a Biblical model of 'Church'.

If you are a Christian, then you have at least one spiritual gift and more than likely several. The first question I want to ask you is this. Are you attending a Church which is actively teaching you about spiritual gifts, encouraging you to use those gifts, and providing ministry opportunities for you? If not, then either your Church needs to change, or you need to change your Church. Sadly, there are still many pastors out there who are happy to be the center of attention, the sole preacher/teacher and autocratic leader. I have been in such congregations and felt the incredible frustration of not being allowed to use my spiritual gifts.

The gifts of the Holy Spirit are primarily about serving; therefore, they fulfill several essential functions in the life of believers. Firstly, we learn the principal of serving God through serving others. The root of the sinful nature is self-centeredness, and through serving, self is put to the side. In this sense, using our gifts to serve is an important part of our transformation as children of God. Secondly, those who serve God find themselves in the reality of the spiritual battle we have against the demonic forces of this world. Having to battle with the attacks of the enemy, through temptation and oppression, forces us to develop the fruits of the Holy Spirit and become spiritually mature.

Called to Service

Philippians 2:1-7 makes both of the above points about putting others first, and tells us that our 'attitude should be the same as that of Jesus Christ: Who, in being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made Himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness'. Jesus said that He came to serve, not to be served, and John tells us that if we claim to be Christians we must 'walk as Jesus walked' (1st John 2:6).

Jesus understood only too well the self-centered nature that we possess, and often reinforced to His disciples the importance of service. In Matthew 20:25-28 He contrasts the rulers and high officials of this world and how they exercise their authority. These men were considered great in the eyes of the world, but Christian greatness comes through being servants, even voluntary slaves to others. It was Jesus Himself who set the example that we must follow.

In the early Church we witness both the fruits and gifts of the Holy Spirit working together in a beautiful harmony of service. In Acts 2 we read of people selling their possessions, having 'everything in common', sharing their homes, their food, devoting themselves to prayer, and others performing miraculous signs and wonders. As the Church grew so did its responsibilities to its members and the community. In Acts 6 we read about the daily distribution of food to widows. The apostles soon recognized that new leaders were necessary, people with different gifts to their own. Stephen and a group of others were chosen to handle the administration and distribution issues.

Stephen became the chief administrator, a man said to be 'full of God's grace and power' who did 'great wonders and miraculous signs among the people' (Acts 6:8). I wonder how many today, who claim to do great signs and wonders, would accept the role of administering food to widows. Stephen's attitude was to be a slave to others and, true to His word, Christ exalted him to a place as one of the greatest and most famous Christians in history. We don't know if he had the gift of preaching, but we do know that he had a great understanding of Israel's history, as most Jewish people of his time. In the course of his duties as an administrator, God used him to perform miracles, and no doubt both activities afforded him ample opportunities to share the gospel.

Then came the spiritual attack. Stephen was falsely accused, arrested and dragged before the Sanhedrin, (part of the ruling Jewish council) to explain himself. He gave them a history lesson which ended with him accusing them of murdering the promised Messiah. In their fury and self-indignation, the Sanhedrin had him dragged beyond the city walls and stoned him to death. We might conclude that if Stephen had never got involved in Christian service, he may have lived to a ripe old age. Perhaps that is true, however, he would never have fulfilled God's unique plan for his life. His life may have been cut short, in human terms, but he experienced the profound joy of living in the Spirit, of the Spirit working through him, and even in his physical death he knew a rapturous joy and excitement that few experience.

As the Sanhedrin were staring at him with unveiled hatred, he looked up and told them 'Look, I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God'. Stephen saw Jesus waiting to receive him into the eternal home no doubt he longed to experience. As they were stoning him

he prayed 'Lord Jesus, receive my spirit' and his last words were 'Lord, do not hold this sin against them' (Acts 7: 54-60).

If Stephen had known the future at the time he accepted the task of administrator, if he knew the road that his service to God was setting him on, do you think he would have declined? I don't know if he was married and had children. If he was, then his own wife became one of the widows who he was called to serve with the distribution of food.

We could easily find many human arguments against God's plan for this man's life, but we would be thinking from an earthly perspective rather than an eternal one. Those of us who are born again are all called into part of a great, and sometimes mysterious, eternal plan. We are not pawns in a divine chess game, but soldiers in a spiritual war for the souls of men and women worldwide. Stephen's physical death ushered him into eternal joy beside the Lord he loved, and it was the catalyst that sent the Church out of Jerusalem to begin the commission of 'going into all the world'.

Ephesians 2:10 tells us that 'we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do'. Most Churches have ministries which need helpers - servants who desire to put other's needs and wants before their own. In the student Church in which I serve as assistant pastor, we are especially involved with orphanages and Romani (gypsy) people, two groups who are extremely disadvantaged in Ukraine. A team of servants visits these people regularly. Some of them teach, some offer medical assistance, some help to dig wells and erect buildings, others teach crafts, hygiene, cooking, reading and writing, and all pour out the love of Christ to people who have a dire need for love.

Gypsies are a despised minority in Ukraine, just as homeless people may be in your own country. You may be blatantly honest and admit that you feel no real love for such people. But let me share a mystery with you. We learn to love by acting in love. Loving feelings come through loving actions. If you want to know the joy of being filled with love for people, then go and love them by serving them. Your attitude will be transformed into that of Jesus, the greatest servant and 'lover of our souls'.

Specific Gifts

God will never call you to a particular service without giving you the means to accomplish it. This statement is incredibly important in understanding the way God distributes spiritual gifts. Coupled with this are our reasons for wanting a specific gift. Take, for example, the gift of 'speaking in tongues'. This gift has been the subject of an enormous amount of controversy over the past decades. Some Churches wrongly teach that it is a sure sign that a person is born again, and that those who can't speak in tongues are not filled with the Holy Spirit. Such Churches also tend to teach that salvation can be lost, and their memberships are like revolving doors - people come and people go.

I am often asked if I speak in tongues and my answer is that I don't have this gift. I am usually then asked if I believe that 'tongues are for today'. I've been in Churches which teach that the gifts of prophecy, tongues, interpretation, miracles and others have all ceased since we now have Bibles. I've also been in Churches where I've heard so-called prophets tell gullible people that the Lord has revealed their future, that they will be great missionaries and apostles, etc. I've never witnessed one of these prophecies coming true, but have certainly witnessed the opposite. I stand in neither of these camps of Christians.

For me, the statement has already been made. Whatever we are called to do, God will provide the means. If we need miraculous gifts, they will be available. I do not have the gift of tongues, yet I have spoken in a language not my own three times. On all of these occasions I had been praying earnestly for someone for quite some time in my own language, someone who was at the crossroads of surrendering all to Christ, or rejecting Him. Every time, the language (tongue) has simply happened, and every time I have absolutely clear thoughts (in English) of what I am praying, but hear my voice speaking a different language - three times in about thirty years. I cannot explain why God requires me to pray; that in itself is a mystery. But the greater mystery is in when *He* uses *my* mouth to pray for someone.

On another occasion, as already written, I have seen a person healed of terminal cancer, yet I do not have a 'gift of healing' and I have never met anyone who has, certainly not in the way the apostles did. When the Lord wills to do something, and to use us in that service, His power and gifts will be present; even if only for that particular occasion.

It is fascinating to hear the testimonies of fledging Churches in countries where Christianity is illegal. I have a friend who smuggles Bibles

into such countries. He has some amazing stories of small groups of 'underground' Churches who had no access to a single copy of God's Word. In such churches the gifts which were predominate in the early Church are commonplace. A person will stand under the guidance of the Holy Spirit and give a short message in a human language they never learned (the gift of tongues), and then others who have never learned that language will stand and interpret it. What is so amazing about this is that when Christians like my friend arrive with Bibles, they discover that these persecuted congregations already know many passages verbatim from the Scriptures. The messages given were directly from the gospels and letters of the apostles, not 'new revelations'. When these people eventually get Bibles, these particular gifts cease.

There is none of this 'thus sayeth the Lord' rubbish which I've heard in various Charismatic circles, so-called prophecies spoken in 16th century English which never come to pass. Such fraudulent, or simply self-deceived people, think that King James English sounds more holy and authoritative, and thousands believe it, at least temporarily.

Understand this. Unlike the writings of other religions, the Bible is a closed revelation; it is complete and cannot be added to. This does not mean that gifts of knowledge, when the Lord discloses something about a person to help them surrender to him, or a 'word of wisdom', have also ceased, but these are the Holy Spirit prompting us for a specific purpose and never a 'new revelation'. God speaks to His people, Jesus' sheep hear His voice, but we are not suppose to write these promptings down and paste them into the Bible as if they were Scripture.

Be very careful of your motivation for wanting a spiritual gift, especially one which has a supernatural manifestation. Counterfeit gifts are handed out by demonic forces to those who seek their own glory or desire gifts with self-centered motivations. Shamans and witchdoctors have been healing and cursing people for thousands of years. Satan can provide temporary healing to those who worship him, and bring disaster on the same people when they disobey him. Such is the reason that through the ages Shamans have wielded incredible power and authority over people who do not know God.

Recognize also that having a spiritual gift is no measure of your holiness. Paul's first letter to the Corinthians is written to a Church which was overflowing with spiritual gifts, and at the same time, the most carnal,

quarrelling and spiritually immature of any Church he had cause to rebuke. God had provided this Gentile Church with gifts to help it grow in maturity, but those with especially the more supernatural gifts allowed themselves to become proud, arrogant and immoral.

Find your gifts through your desire to serve, but start with the service and the Lord will provide the gifts. This is why the apostle Paul told us in 1st Corinthians 13 that having gifts without love is useless in service to God. Serve the Lord through acts of loving service, making love your motivation, and whatever gifts you need to complete His plan for you will be provided by Him.

A Word of Warning

Never forget that we still have that old sinful nature which desires attention and recognition. You may find yourself in a role of leadership, playing an instrument in a worship team, leading a Bible Study, involved in drama, preaching or another field of Christian service. It is basic to our human natures to desire glory for ourselves, but in essence, when we do this we are stealing God's glory. Instead of serving Him, we can easily find ourselves serving our old natures. As a Christian musician I am well aware of the constant temptation to want to perform for the audience, to unconsciously take my eyes off the object of service and worship, and turn adoration to the Lord into a performance. This can happen to anyone involved in ministry, so be honest and be aware. We are called to offer pure service to our Heavenly Father and to always point to Christ. If our egos get involved, then our service and worship has been towards ourselves and we have robbed the Lord of what He alone is due.

Chapter Nine: Worship

The word 'worship' is another which seems to have been redefined over the years. For many churches it is considered to be a *part* of the Christian life, a particular area. Many Christians in protestant denominations associate worship with music, and rightly so, for singing songs of praise and adoration to God is one important aspect of the meaning of this word. But worship is much more than songs and hymns, yet it's a good place to start.

Adoration as Worship

One of the best places in Scripture to find examples of adoration worship is the Psalms. Through the creative and inspired spirit of adoration, the Psalms explore the depths of why human creatures should adore their Creator. The Psalms portray the character and creativity of God and our response to how we understand Him. God is spoken of as the one who 'does not treat us as our sins deserve', who is 'clothed with splendor and majesty', who 'makes the clouds His chariot and rides on the wings of the wind'. His 'love is everlasting' and 'His mercy never fails', He 'laid the foundations of the earth' and 'the heavens are the work of His hands'. These few examples portray various aspects of our relationship with Him, but understanding adoration can be problematic for many.

Why does God desire to be worshipped?

For many people, including Christians, the fact that God desires to be worshipped and adored raises the question about ego. We associate the desire for adoration with egoism. In most cultures, parents teach their children not to be egotistical. In my own culture we use expressions like 'showing off', and in others, words and expressions like 'bragging' and 'ego-tripper' convey our repulsion towards those who seek such attention. From a purely human perspective it's easy for us to transfer such ideas onto God, but in truth, such a perspective is an earthbound view which hasn't begun to understand the 'otherness' of who God is.

Jesus told a woman He met beside a well that God requires people to worship in 'Spirit and in truth'. Jesus' words are the key to understanding, and going beyond understanding, why God desires our worship. In Romans 1:20, Paul tells us that God's 'invisible qualities, eternal power and divine

nature have been clearly seen and understood from what He has created'. Paul points us to the creation itself as the starting point of adoration and gratitude. For those of us who have the opportunity to live in or visit places of extreme natural beauty, the sight of snow-covered mountains, waves crashing onto rocks, and waterfalls cascading through tree-lined valleys bring thoughts of adoration for our Creator. But there are many people who live in slums, or vast cities which blot out natural beauty, and instead portray the reality of concrete jungles, polluted air, continuous noise, and the depravation of humanity.

In a previous chapter I mentioned a favorite beach of mine near Dunedin city in New Zealand. Walking for hours alone on a beautiful beach, sometimes at night with silver moonlight drawing a shining path out to sea, it was easy to adore God and His creation. At present I live in a city where there are 10,000 people within a 150 meter radius of my small apartment. At night, wild dogs roam the street barking and howling, and drunk people yell and argue till the early hours. For a guy who was raised on a large secluded farm where nights were as still and silent as the forest, it is difficult to see 'creation' as a source of adoration in the way it was before. If we rely on visual stimuli or our emotional state to induce adoration, we can easily fall into the trap of seeking material or emotional experiences as catalysts to worship.

Spirit and truth! True adoration can only begin with a right understanding, with having a handle on Truth. Back to our question about why God desires adoration. The simple answer to that lies in understanding the truth about who God is and how He feels about Himself. If I state that 'God loves all that He is', on the surface, it may seem that I'm suggesting that God is egotistical. However, if we understand 'all that He is', or even a little of who He is, we may start writing similar lines to the Psalmists.

Imagine this. God is perfectly holy. That's a statement which is basically impossible for a human being to understand, for none of us have ever experienced on a realistic level what it is like to be perfectly holy. We may have experienced flashes of this, such as when we have confessed our sins and known the joy of forgiveness, but this is only a taste of *being made holy*, it is a gift from the one who is holiness itself. The truth about God can only begin to be perceived through the Spirit of God. For example, when we sincerely confess our sins and receive forgiveness, we experience the truth of being made holy through the Spirit, providing our repentance was

sincere. Suddenly we feel clean, suddenly the weight of sin has gone and freedom fills our hearts. Holiness is a gift from God and, when we experience it, it is never associated with ego, rather, it only comes through absolute humility.

There is no ego in holiness; therefore, if God loves that He is perfectly holy, this love exists in His passion for holiness. The same can be said of all of God's character, His love, mercy and so forth. He is the essence of all of these; they exist because He exists. We may get a glimpse of these in the material world, but they can only be experienced through being filled with the Holy Spirit. This is why Jesus said we must worship in Spirit and in Truth. It is the Holy Spirit Himself who illuminates our feeble understanding beyond mere intellect. He lifts us from the visual to the spiritual, giving insight which begins to glimpse the true nature of the One who calls us to adore what He adores.

Without the Spirit's help, true worship is impossible, for the human intellect cannot grasp perfect holiness, perfect love, unfailing mercy and grace. Keep in mind also that Paul tells us in 1st Corinthians 13:12 that 'now we see but a poor reflection; then we shall see face to face'. When finally we see God as He is, our only desire will be to adore Him.

If you struggle with adoration, I would suggest that you need to ask God to reveal His nature, His essence, His true character to you. He will not do this if we stand in arrogant and ignorant judgment of Him, but if we humbly seek to know who He is, He will open our natural and spiritual eyes. Such has been the experience of millions. Once our eyes are opened, praise and adoration overflow into our souls and find expression in our bodies through song, poetry, dance and praise. Adoration is a spiritual experience, a natural out-flowing of recognizing the truth about our Creator.

Worship as Imitating

I believe that worship is far more than an 'aspect' or 'area' of being a Christian. True worship is impossible for those who are merely religious - those who have not experienced new birth - for the simple reason that worship is a whole lifestyle of imitating Jesus Christ. We can see a clear illustration of this in Matthew 4 about the temptation of Jesus by Satan. Satan offered Jesus 'all the kingdoms of the world', but on condition that He 'bow down and worship him'. Jesus refused to worship Satan stating,

'Worship the Lord your God and serve Him only'. Satan wanted Jesus to imitate him, to follow his example and rebel against our Creator. Jesus refused.

Throughout His earthly life Jesus gave us an example of imitating His Father. In John 5:19-20 Jesus says, 'I tell you the truth, the Son can do nothing by Himself; He can only do what He sees His Father doing, because whatever the Father does the Son does also'. Jesus imitated His Heavenly Father; He only did what He saw His Father doing. Jesus' life is a perfect example of how we as human beings should imitate God.

In Romans 12:1 Paul tells us to offer our bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God. He calls this our 'spiritual worship'. If we are children of God we will imitate Jesus' life, for this is real worship. In 1st Corinthians 11:1 Paul says, 'imitate me, just as I imitate Christ'. If we imitate Christ, our entire lives will be 'offering our bodies to God as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to Him'.

The entire New Testament is a call to worship, a call to be like Christ. When we have been made 'new creations', that lifestyle begins and continues until we see Him face to face. Our tests and trials, sufferings and victories, depression and joy, tears and laughter are all worship when they are faced, endured or celebrated in the lives of those who trust in Him to be the 'author and perfecter of our salvation'. When we 'lean not on our own understanding', but trust in Him, holding His hand through every situation, we are worshipping in Spirit and in Truth.

Chapter Ten: Surviving the Storm

Suffering, Trials and Loss

No matter who we are, or to which religion or world-view we adhere, for most people there are times of suffering, trials and loss. The question is not about whether or not we will experience suffering, but how we will get through it. None of us know what is around the corner, what the future holds for us. If we did, perhaps life would be almost unbearable.

Over the past five years a dear friend of mine has lost two of his closest siblings to terminal cancer. Both of his sisters were mothers, one with eight children and the other with nine. His eldest sister was married to a man who was serving in Church as a leader. This man left his family, divorcing my friend's sister, and married another woman. Shortly after this trauma, she developed cancer. Her children and siblings watched powerlessly as her life ebbed away, praying for her recovery. A few years later, another of my friend's sisters developed cancer. She had nine children and a loving, supporting husband, but like the first, she lost the battle.

At such times we have a myriad of questions. These were committed Christian women who loved the Lord and lived for Him. Why are such people taken? Surely they were both needed by their families? If ever there was a time when a miracle of healing was needed, this was it. What would be the lasting effects of losing their mother upon these children? Would their faith be shattered, their love and trust in God destroyed? My friend shared his own loss in tears, telling my wife and me of how, at the death bed of one of his sisters, the entire family sang for two hours. The last sounds that his sister heard, in this life, were songs sung to the Lord. These families' hearts were broken.

No doubt, down the corridor in other rooms of that hospital, other families were going through the same thing, people who had no faith. Perhaps they would have mocked the faith of the Christian families, or perhaps they would have marveled at the peace which surpassed the tragic events taking place. Each of my friend's sisters spent their last weeks and days encouraging their children and wider families to hold onto their faith in God; each of them faced physical death with peace and courage, trusting in a conviction that this was not the end.

Jesus once told a story about two men. One built his house upon a rock and the other upon sand. When the storms of life came, one house stood whilst the other crashed to the ground, broken and destroyed. We often place our emphasis only on the two houses, but the one thing they both had in common was the storm. No one gets through life without encountering storms, and for many, those storms are of such ferocity that without spiritual, supernatural help, the storm would utterly destroy. My friend has been through two such storms in the past five years, and on top of these, he was diagnosed with bladder cancer himself only weeks after the second sister's funeral. He and his wife are doing their best to help care for and support his sister's children. For his eldest sister's children, who are of various ages, it must have seemed as though the last support they had was also going to be taken away when their uncle was diagnosed with cancer.

Fortunately, his cancer was found early and he has had a full recovery, at least physically. Like his nieces and nephews, he is standing against the storm. He has felt firsthand the temptation to accuse God of not caring for His children, the temptation to allow anger and rebellion to destroy his faith, yet while, in the short-term he remains an emotionally drained and broken man, he is strong in Christ, holding the hand of his Savior whilst the waves have bashed against the house. His strength to endure what he has been through is simply not human. Inside, within his human heart, is a heartbroken brother, a loving and responsible uncle who is using every resource he has to support his sister's children.

My wife and I sat and listened in reverent silence as he spoke of the losses, tears streaming down his face - a man emotionally exhausted beyond human endurance. But we also saw a gentle, uncompromising strength, an unseen power holding him up. He spoke with hope for the future, he mentioned his conviction that this life is such a short span of time when compared to eternity, and smiled through his tears as he confessed his certainty of seeing his sisters again.

Crutch or Rock

Some people criticize Christianity as a crutch to help them through the storms of life; they presume that believing in an imaginary being is enough to get Christians through such times. They are wrong, at least for the most part. There may be a tiny percentage of people who are strong enough to get

through severe storms without genuine faith, but the greater percentage are devastated and destroyed, their belief dissolving like mist in the sun, for their house is built on sand. The Rock that is Jesus Christ is real, not a belief system without substance. Those who stand on *this* Rock experience a strength which is not their own, holding and sustaining them, sharing the burden so that, with His help, it is bearable.

Much of the New Testament was written during a time of severe, sustained and terrifying persecution. In his first letter to the Church, Peter, who was called 'The Rock', writes to encourage Christians in times of suffering, trials, tests and persecution. Peter was not 'The Rock' upon which Christ built His Church, for Peter was just a man like you and I. Peter had just received a revelation about Jesus Christ (Matthew 16:17-18), and it is to that revelation that Jesus refers. Christ is the Rock; the revelation and reality of Christ in our lives is the Rock on which we stand.

Open your Bible at 1st Peter, the first chapter. Peter begins by stating his position as an apostle of Jesus Christ, and then he addresses his readers. He calls us 'God's elect, strangers in the world'. These words are crucial in understanding our place in this world. We have been called by God; we are strangers in this world. Peter is preparing to write about trials, tests and persecution, so he begins by telling us to look beyond flesh and blood and understand that this world is a temporary dwelling place for us.

In verse 3 Peter begins with praise. His praise is tied to the two statements he has just made, but here he gives us details. We have 'new birth into a living hope', a hope which is alive and affirmed by our new birth experience. Then he reminds us of our real home, our eternal home. This home and inheritance 'can never perish (be destroyed), spoil or fade' and it is 'kept in heaven for us'. The word translated 'kept' is from a Greek word meaning 'garrisoned' and it refers to the fortress stronghold which is guarded by the best soldiers. In this case, it is Jesus Christ who guards our inheritance. It can only be lost if Christ is overcome by Satan, and that battle has already been won.

Peter goes on to tell us that we are shielded by God's power. Peter was never promising that our physical bodies are shielded, but rather the soul which is housed within, the essence of who we are. Beyond this world, the world in which we are strangers, waits an inheritance beyond our imaginations. He tells us that 'in this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have to suffer grief in all kinds of trials'. Sometimes

that 'little while' seems like it will never end, but Peter is comparing this one life with eternity. Our lives are one grain of sand on a beach. When we die, we begin to live the rest of the beach, and all the beaches ever created. Peter wants us to hang on to this eternal perspective, looking upwards.

In verse 7 Peter gives a short explanation of why these various forms of grief are allowed in our short human lives. 'These have come so that your faith - of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire - may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed'.

We have almost no idea of the joy which awaits us. Is the depth of that joy measured by the purity of our faith? Is it a true faith which has never been tested? Do we want to know that our faith is genuine, is real, is built on the Rock who garrisons our inheritance? True faith, tested faith, results in praise, glory and honor, but faith which is not genuine results in eternal separation from God.

Peter then tells us about the faith that we have in verses 8-9. Although we have never seen Jesus Christ, we love Him and believe in Him, and are filled with inexpressible and glorious joy, for we are receiving the goal of our faith, the salvation of our souls. Peter understands that feelings of happiness and the foundation of joy are two different things. Happiness may be the waves on the surface of the ocean, tossed and churned by the storm, but joy is the peace on the ocean floor, unmoved and unaffected by what is happening on the surface.

Joy is much more than an emotion; it is an imperishable conviction, a foundation built on the Rock that is Christ. In John 15 and 16 Jesus speaks a lot about joy and grief. He knew from where He had come and to where He was going. He knew the means by which His body would die, but knowing this never robbed Him of joy. Yes, He was tormented in Gethsemane, He sweated blood in His trial against temptation, but His joy in giving joy to us was never daunted.

James tells us; 'Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance' (James 1:2). The Scriptures tell us that those who persevere will be saved, for perseverance is a proof of genuine faith. James' words were not empty rhetoric from a man who never suffered. Like Peter, and thousands of others, he persevered to the end; he was murdered for his faith.

Church history is full of testimonies of suffering Christians. Some suffered for years, chained to walls in dark, rat-infested prisons, others were tortured, many were drowned, slain by the sword, crucified or ripped apart by wild beasts. In the days of the Soviet Union, thousands were imprisoned for years in diabolical conditions and tortured to death in a bid to break them. Today, in various countries where Islamic Law is used, there are Christian pastors and their families suffering terrible forms of persecution and punishment for preaching the gospel. They are 'aliens and strangers' in this world, men and women whose inheritance is garrisoned by Jesus Christ, who know the ever-present strength of the Holy Spirit within them, Christians who have proven the genuine nature of their faith which is the most precious thing to their Heavenly Father.

Another Perspective

Many Christians could testify to feeling abandoned by God in times of suffering. These feelings are not uncommon. In the book of Esther, we read of a situation which must have been desperately terrifying. An edict had been passed by King Xerxes of Persia to allow the wholesale slaughter of every Jewish person. Esther and her Uncle Mordecai fasted, and presumably prayed, yet God remained silent. Why? Surely, with the threat of the total annihilation of Jewish people at stake God could spare an angel for a few minutes; give a vision or comforting dream?

The story of Job has a similar theme. Here was a man who was considered by God to be 'blameless and upright'. Satan was allowed to cause him terrible loss and suffering, and as he sat in sackcloth and ashes, covered in boils lamenting the deaths of his children, God remained silent. Job's so-called 'friends' had much to say, each in turn claimed to be speaking for God, yet only after Job had gone through this long and arduous test, did the Lord speak to the servant He loved.

Satan despised Job and mocked God. He accused God of putting a hedge around Job, and told the Lord that if He took away all Job had, then 'he will surely curse you to your face'. Job's wife even encouraged him to 'curse God and die', but Job remained faithful. How can we begin to understand why God seems to be silent in the face of such suffering? The story of Job seems to some like a divine chess game with Job as one of the pieces, but this perspective is entirely wrong.

I believe that God was proud of Job, proud of this child of His who loved to live for his Lord. The idea that God could be proud of us may be strange to your ears, but God is a Father, and what father isn't proud of an obedient child who is 'blameless and upright'. It was the Lord who said 'consider my servant Job'. I understand these words as God expressing His joy in Job's faith.

Satan's desire was to destroy this relationship of trust and love, and he believed that Job's faith was simply the result of material possessions and comforts. However, instead of cursing God, Job metaphorically spat in the face of Satan and remained true to trusting his Heavenly Father, no doubt bringing joy to the Lord. There are three important things to grasp here.

1. God delights in the faith of His children. Neither Job nor Esther received any 'new revelation' of comfort about the future. Both of them decided to stand on what they *already knew* about God's character. In Esther's case, Satan was using the Amalekite official Haman to try and destroy the entire Jewish nation, thereby destroying the possibility of the Messiah being born. In Job's case, Satan was claiming that only those who have received abundantly from God will still trust Him in terrible circumstances. In both cases, Satan's plans were thwarted and God delighted in the faith of His children, a faith which stood on their belief in His goodness.

2. If the Lord had given either Job or Esther a revelation, vision, or dream, then where would be the possibility to reward their faith, either in this life or the next. Faith is based on concrete knowledge, in what we *know* about God, His character, His love and commitment to us. Suffering tests that conviction, and brings a reward from a loving Father who, although grieving for the suffering inflicted by disease, death, or Satanic persecution, delighted in the opportunity to reward His faithful child.

3. Our perseverance through suffering vindicates and proves God's plan to be the right plan. Before He created this world the Lord knew that, if He allowed humanity to have freedom to choose, such freedom would result in sin and all the terrible consequences of sin. Yet He also foresaw the millions who would recognize their sin, humble themselves to His Lordship, be redeemed by the blood of Jesus, and be prepared to 'share His sufferings in order to share His glory' (Romans 8:17).

Paul often wrote of his crown and reward in heaven and connected these to his sufferings. When 'all kinds of trials and grief' come, we must

not allow them to rob us of our crown and reward through rebellion and bitterness. Look up and forward, use an eternal perspective, allow suffering to 'prove your faith genuine', and know that 'inexpressible joy' which is unique to suffering Christians. In short, know that you are in a race and never take your eyes off the goal.

Chapter Eleven: Loved and Loving

'God loves us.'

If we really understood those three words, as God understands them, our lives would never be the same. There are two themes which dominate the Scriptures; God's holiness and His love. Other major themes such as grace, forgiveness, justice, etc., are always connected to the first two. If we fail to understand God's holiness, we will fail to even begin to contemplate his love.

God in His holiness hates sin in a terrifying way. The Jewish people who stood trembling at the base of Mount Sinai, after being freed from Egypt, could testify to that. Can we really understand God's hatred for sin? When we hear, for example, of heinous crimes against children, our righteous anger can explode in our hearts. The rape, beating and murder of an innocent young girl on a bus in India in 2013 is a case in point. Thousands of furious, angry, and disgusted people marched in protest, demanding the death penalty for the men who committed this act. In those moments of righteous anger we can get a glimpse of God's hatred and wrath towards sin, a wrath which is rooted in His holiness. We want justice for that little girl, we want to see those who turned on her like demented, demonic monsters, suffer as she suffered.

Now take a pause. What if we were commanded to love those criminals so much, that we would allow our own child to be brutally crucified in order to make it possible to give them complete forgiveness, rather than the death we believe they deserve? This illustration should begin to give us some idea of what the Scriptures mean when they speak of the love of God (John 3:16).

We can never even begin to understand God's love until we begin to understand His holiness and hatred for sin. One flows from the other. The mutilated body of Jesus on the cross is a scene which portrays both. Mel Gibson, in his movie *The Passion of Christ*, came close, I believe, to portraying the accuracy of Jesus' torture and crucifixion. Many people could barely keep their eyes on the screen. This was not some fictional horror movie to entertain those who enjoy blood and gore; rather, we were watching a portrayal of history, and we knew that our own personal love of sin was the catalyst of those horrific images.

God's wrath against sin was poured out and onto Jesus when Jesus took our sins upon Himself. We can only speculate as to the feelings of our Heavenly Father at that moment. When He looked at Jesus covered in our sins, did He see the rapist, the murderer, the adulterer, the rebellious, ungrateful child, the thief, the cheat, and the liar? Was righteous anger against His holiness finally satisfied after witnessing the sins of humanity since the Garden of Eden? Here was an event taking place that had been planned since the foundation of the world. God - Father, Son and Holy Spirit - knew, planned and approved Christ's death before Christ created the world. That's how much God loves us.

God's love is measured by His holiness. His love is so immeasurably powerful and pure that He was determined to punish Himself for the sins of the creatures to whom He gave the freedom to choose. His love was so consuming that it found a way to satisfy His demand for perfect justice, and the only way was to crucify His beloved Son. Words are almost hopeless to convey the character of our Creator, for none of us have yet experienced perfect holiness or love. Many Christians have doubts about how much the Lord loves them. My advice to them is to spend some time contemplating the question, 'why would Jesus die for me?'

It is extremely important to know how much we are loved by God, for if we don't, we will never respond with the love He deserves from us. I believe that the Apostle John understood this concept. In his gospel, (21:20) John refers to himself as 'the disciple whom Jesus loved'. We know which disciple he meant, because he refers to him as the one who was sitting beside the Lord at the Last Supper. Was John suggesting that Jesus loved him more than the others? No, he wasn't, rather, he was writing from the perspective of a man who really knew and believed how much he was loved by the Lord.

In his first letter to the church, John uses the word 'love' 36 times. Peter, in his two letters, uses it just nine times, and James only three. John's letters were amongst the last ever written by the apostles, perhaps 40-50 years after the death and resurrection of Christ. John had spent that time realizing the depth of the love Jesus had for him and for all of us. His letters are a response to his revelation of Christ's love and are an important lesson for Christians. We can never respond with love for the Lord until we understand and accept His love for us.

Philip Yancey, in his book *What's so Amazing about Grace* says, 'there is nothing we can do to make God love us more, and nothing we can do to make God love us less'. We cannot earn God's love. He loved us before we even began to try to earn His love (Romans 5:8). If your Christian life is like a performance, if you are trying to earn the love of God, then stop. Such a thing is an insult to Him. He loved you before He created the world; that was His commitment and motivation to create. He loved you before He planned to come and be crucified for you. Do you expect your children or parents to earn your love, or is it freely given? Can you imagine that God loves His children less than you love yours? He is the source of all love, and without Him, there would be no love, no children, and no relationship in which to express our love.

If you struggle with accepting that you are loved by God, there are probably complicated reasons for that which are connected to the life you have lived. However, no matter who you are, the upbringing you have had, or the life you have led, none of these needs to be a barrier to knowing, experiencing and expressing love for Jesus Christ.

Allow me to offer some advice from a man who once hated the very Lord he now loves. As a man who was once involved in forms of Satanism, I had a hatred for all things Christian. It was extremely difficult for me to accept God's forgiveness, especially after the Holy Spirit revealed my sin as He sees it. I understood that God loved me, but unconsciously, I was afraid to ever take my eyes off the mutilated body of Jesus on the cross for fear that I was taking His sacrifice for granted. In one sense, I was trying to punish myself. It was difficult to ever celebrate the freedom I had in Christ because I knew, and continue to know, that I do not deserve freedom, forgiveness, grace or love.

Over the last 30 years the Lord has gently led me to concentrate on knowing the joy He has given, rather than believing I must continue to wallow in self-hate for my past. He has taught me that I was depriving Him of the very thing that drove Him to the cross - love. While I was still a hopeless sinner, Christ loved me; His love was not conditional and never is. God loves those who hate Him, those who reject His offer of grace and forgiveness, and even those who do not even testify to His existence. His love can never compromise His holiness, and those who reject His offer of forgiveness will suffer their own destruction, but for those of us who have become His adopted sons and daughters, He desires our response.

I invite you to do the very thing you desire your own children to do, namely, open your mouth and tell Him you love Him. If that is too difficult a starting place, then start by thanking Him for *His* love to you. The Bible clearly tells us that God loves us (1st John 4:10) and if you believe this, then confess it. I begin almost every prayer with the words 'Lord, thank you for your love'. These words always remind me of why I love Him and they spur and motivate me to say 'Lord, I love you'.

And also remember that loving feelings are generated through loving actions. As we act in love, love acts in us. It is simple. Loving feelings come from loving actions. If you want to feel love for Christ, then do loving things for Him and to Him. Tell Him you love Him; demonstrate your love in worship. The more you practice loving actions, the more love you will feel, the more you will fall in love.

I tell Him I love Him in order to give Him joy. He died so that I might one day accept His grace and forgiveness, and then spend eternity loving Him. If you are truly grateful for His grace and forgiveness, truly grateful for the inheritance He is keeping for you, truly grateful for His sacrifice on the cross, truly grateful for His love, then tell Him. God does not *need* our love; no, He is self sufficient. But I believe that He delights in it. Perhaps it was His foreknowledge of our loving response which motivated Him to create us. Whatever the case, there are few things that we can give Him other than our love.

Let love be the motivation for everything you do. Read 1st Corinthians 13 and recognize that without love, everything we do is useless, even our obedience to Him is worthless if not motivated by love. Paul wrote these beautiful words in Ephesians 3:16-21.

'I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge - that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God'.

It is my prayer that this book has been an encouragement to you as you run the race of faith. I pray that each one of us who have been bought with a price and brought into His kingdom will come to the end of this life, this race, with similar words to those of Paul in 2nd Timothy 4:7-8. 'I have

fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day - and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing'.

Also by [Steve Copland](#)

Mary Magdalene: A Woman Who Loved

1st Century Trilogy - Book One

Throughout history there has been much written about Mary of Magdala, most of it legend and speculation, some of it derogatory. The Bible, however, gives us many clues as to the character, personality and contributions this first century woman made to the ministry of Christ and the early church. This book is, in many ways, a tribute to a woman whose life was dramatically changed by the one she came to love more than life itself.

Mary Magdalene was a woman whose life circumstances led her from demonic possession and prostitution to being the first witness of the greatest event in world history. In an attempt to reconstruct her life, this book demonstrates her struggle as she confronts the patriarchal traditions embedded in first century culture, the hypocritical practice of condemning only one gender in adultery, her transformation as she finds grace, freedom and real love in her encounter with Christ, and her being chosen as 'the apostle to the apostles'.

This novel takes the reader into the first century. It delves into the personal lives of lepers, cripples and the sight impaired; it goes on a journey from the battlefields of ancient Germania to Jerusalem with two Roman soldiers who end up initiated into the cult of Mithraism; it explores the fears, prejudices and arrogance of the religious rulers of Israel, and the ambitions of Judas Iscariot; it portrays the everyday struggles of first century people in an occupied land; it looks behind the scenes at a woman

who is seduced into committing adultery and used to test Jesus, and brings them all together beneath the cross of Jesus Christ.

Simon and Simon: Passion and Power

Simon and Simon is the second novel of the 1st century trilogy. It features two men born just a few miles apart whose lives are dramatically different, Simon Peter and Simon Magus. Simon Peter's life weaves through the story and is contrasted with Magus, the one known as 'Simon the Sorcerer'. The latter travels to Kashmir and studies the Rig Veda in search of individual power. He returns to Israel where he meets Simon Peter. Both end up in Rome: one levitates for Nero, the other is crucified. Triarius is a Roman soldier married for only a few months and sent to the Northern frontier. His wife is pregnant when he leaves and believed to be carrying a son, if the witch was correct. He sends orders to dispose of the child if the hag is mistaken. His wife gives birth to a daughter, 'Triaria', and secretly raises the child while her husband is away, not knowing if he will return. He does, and discovers the child's existence, and...well that would be telling the story.

Religion: History and Mystery

War, Power, Greed, Jihad, Inquisition, Crusades and Extremists, all words we associate with religion. Shamans, priests, prophets and magicians, servants of the gods, mediums of power, or frauds? 22 religions, examined, exposed and deciphered.

Religion: History and Mystery explores the ancient and modern religions which have dominated the world for 6000 years, exposes the contradictions, uncovers the mysteries, and reveals the truth of who and what we are. This book also points out why Judaism and Christianity are so incredibly distinct from every other religion. Is there a Divine Mystery contained in the Bible which is absent in all other religious texts?

Perfection

Within the human soul a voice calls us to reach for perfection. In every area of our lives we demonstrate a desire to know, experience and create

that which is perfect. The clothes we wear, the flowers we choose, religions we practice and love we seek, all testify to our instinct to reject that which we perceive as flawed, and strive for beauty, contentment and fulfillment. Is it possible for us to know and experience perfection? The answer is 'yes'.

Slug: The Reluctant Butterfly

Slug wants to fly, but he doesn't want to die. Slug is a beautiful story about our reluctance to allow God to transform us into what He wants us to become. Slug learns through his mistakes that many will lead us down wrong paths, but obedience to our Creator brings complete joy and fulfillment. Grunt, a crow and central character in the story, discovers the pitfalls of peer pressure, the power of forgiveness, and eventual self acceptance in his new life. (Children ages 7-11)

Time for Truth: A Challenge to Skeptics

Time for truth challenges skeptics to take a fresh look at the supernatural qualities of the Bible. Issues such as the existence of God, creation/evolution, evil and suffering are discussed, and the reader is taken on a logical, scientific and inspiring walk through world history as a story of God's plan for humanity. This book has been used in various forms since 1985 when it was first written for a man dying of cancer. He refused to speak of God. He was an ardent atheist; however, he had a spiritual transformation just three days before he died and witnessed of his faith in Christ.

Just Because: The Story of Salvation for Children

Just Because takes children on an exciting and inspirational journey through the Bible. It gives them an exciting bird's-eye-view of God's plan unfolding as He prepares the world for the coming of Jesus Christ. Throughout the story Satan is watching out for the child who will "crush his head," (Genesis 3) and he endeavors to stop God's plan from unfolding. The reader knows who that special child is, and the story especially opens up the insights that point to Jesus throughout the Old Testament. Each chapter

takes about twenty minutes to read and ends with a short Biblical lesson. Children love it.

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