

The Supreme Priorities



Zac Poonen

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by

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About the Book

CHAPTER 1

A Proper Sense of Values

The blind man throws away a cheque for one hundred rupees and clings on to a valueless piece of glazed paper, considering the latter more desirable because it is smoother to his touch. He lacks a proper sense of values because he is blind. Like him, the two-year old child also prefers a cheap toy to the cheque. He too is ignorant of real values, because he is immature.

However, multitudes of intelligent men and women throughout the world are doing exactly the same thing today. And they are doing it without even realizing it! Do you have a proper sense of values? A mistaken idea of true values can lead any one of us to a wasted life; and the greatest tragedy in the world today is wasted human lives. Nor is this wastage peculiar to the irreligious, one finds it among the religious as well.

Man is born spiritually blind. He is unable therefore to assess the relative values of the things of time when compared with the things of eternity. As a result, he spends his time and energies in seeking the wealth, the honour and the pleasures that this world can give him. Little does he realize that “the things that are seen are (all of them) temporal,” whereas

“the things that are not seen (and they alone) are eternal” (2 Corinthians 4:18). Jesus challenged the wrong sense of values held by even religious people of His day when He told them that a man would profit nothing who gained the whole world if in doing so he lost his soul. If a man is not rightly related to God through Jesus Christ then he will discover, in the day that he stands before his Creator, that all he has achieved and acquired on earth is utterly valueless.

There are multitudes of believers, too, whose “sins are all forgiven” and who are “on their way to heaven,” yet whose values are no less confused. In the day of judgment they will find to their surprise that, though their souls may have been saved, their lives have been wasted. They have sat as spectators on the side-lines, content with their salvation, happily singing choruses, watching others being used of God but unaware that He wants them on the field as well. Occasionally they may wonder why the power and joy and fruitfulness that mark the lives of other Christians are not their portion too. They may attend many Christian meetings to stimulate their spiritual life, but their inner man remains always weak and sickly. Once in a while they may have ambitions to attain a higher level of Christian living, but soon they fall back to where they started from – and sometimes even lower. What is the reason for this? Usually it is quite simple: *they have not got their priorities right.* Like the blind man and the child in the illustrations above, they have again and again in their ignorance thrown away the true spiritual riches and clung to what is worthless. Thus they have remained spiritual bankrupts, whereas God intended them to be rich.

Jesus was forever seeking to remove this blindness from the eyes of those who came to Him. He taught them what the supreme priorities of life really are. To Martha He said, “*One thing is needful.*” To a rich young man He said, “*One thing thou lackest.*” With these words He threw into emphasis the thing that should take first place in each of their lives. Or again in Old Testament times, of David alone was it said that he was “*a man after God’s own heart*” – and he certainly had his priorities right! “*One thing,*” he said, “*have I desired.*” Paul too, the greatest apostle of Christianity, succeeded in putting the right thing first. “*One thing I do,*” he cried; and with that as his theme he lived out the most effective life (from the standpoint of eternity) that this world has seen since Jesus of Nazareth ascended on high.

The atmosphere of the world today gives to all of us without exception a perverted sense of values. Under its influence we tend to get life’s priorities wrong. For that influence is immensely powerful. Faster than ever before in the history of mankind the world is sinking into the gutter of moral decay and corruption. The darkness deepens until the night is black around us. In such conditions Jesus wanted His church to be the salt of this earth and the light of this world. But the salt has largely lost its savour and the light its brightness. Corruption and darkness have found their way into the very household of faith. And because the Pharisaic leaven of hypocrisy has penetrated so deeply into the church it is neither aware of, nor willing to face its true condition. Only those who have quickened ears can hear the Spirit of

God speaking, calling even today for a re-evaluation of existing priorities.

In this great darkness the only light that you and I are offered is to be found in the Bible. Let us turn to it then, and seek to discover for ourselves what the prior claims upon the Christian really are. What we read there may at first hurt and even offend us, for the Bible penetrates behind our disguises. But let us take courage from the wise remarks of a twentieth century servant of God:

“The words of Jesus hurt and offend until there is nothing left to hurt or offend (cf. Matthew 11:6). If we have never been hurt by a statement of Jesus, it is questionable whether we have ever really heard Him speak. Jesus Christ has no tenderness whatever towards anything that is ultimately going to ruin a man for the service of God. If the Spirit of God brings to our mind a word of the Lord that hurts, we may be perfectly certain there is something He wants to hurt, even to death.”
(Oswald Chambers in *So Send I You*).

“Thou sayest ... I have need of nothing; but knowest not that thou art ... blind; I counsel thee ... to anoint thine eyes with eyesalve that thou mayest see ... He that hath an ear let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches”
(Revelation 3:17–22).

*“Open my ears that I may hear
Voices of truth Thou sendest clear;
And while the wave-notes fall on my ear,
Everything false will disappear.
Silently now I wait for Thee,
Ready my God, Thy will to see,
Open my eyes, illumine me,
Spirit Divine.”*

CHAPTER 2

One Thing is Needful

*“Now it came to pass, as they went, that he entered into a certain village: and a certain woman named Martha received him into her house. And she had a sister called Mary, which also sat at Jesus’ feet, and heard his word. But Martha was cumbered about much serving, and came to him, and said, Lord, dost thou not care that my sister hath left me to serve alone? Bid her therefore that she help me. And Jesus answered and said unto her, Martha, Martha, thou art careful and troubled about many things: But **one thing is needful:** and Mary hath chosen that good part, which shall not be taken away from her.”*
(Luke 10: 38–42).

How striking are Jesus’ words to Martha in *verse 42*: “*One thing is needful!*” There may be plenty of good things to be done and many indeed that may justly be considered essential. But, Jesus affirmed, one thing above all others was needful. What was that one thing?

Jesus and His disciples had just arrived at Bethany. As soon as Martha saw them, she joyfully received them into her house, made them sit down and straightway hurried into the kitchen to prepare some food. Meanwhile Jesus began to preach to

those present. When Martha discovered that her sister Mary had settled down to listen to His words instead of coming to her help, she rushed out of the kitchen with anger, and turning to Jesus, appealed to Him in words more or less as follows: "Lord, here I am toiling in the kitchen preparing a meal for you all, and my sister just sits here doing nothing. Tell her to get up and help me!" To her surprise, however, it was Martha herself whom Jesus rebuked. She and not Mary, He told her, was the one who was at fault.

Now let us note this, that it was not for anything sinful which Martha had one that she was thus addressed. She had joyfully received Jesus into her home. The work that she then did in the kitchen was not for herself, but for Him and for His disciples. She is a picture of a believer today, who has received the Lord into her heart and who is unselfishly seeking to serve the Lord and others. Yet despite her zeal she was rebuked by Jesus. What, we ask ourselves, is the point of this? What was wrong with her action? And the answer, surely, lies in those four words of Jesus: "One thing is needful." Martha was not rebuked for her service, but for not putting first things first.

Mary, the Lord said, had chosen the good part. What was that? She simply sat at Jesus' feet and heard His Word. Nothing more. But that is the good part. That is the one thing needful above all other things. How much place does listening have in our lives? How much time do we spend sitting at the feet of the Lord, reading His word and seeking to hear Him speak to us through it? Not very much perhaps. Other things crowd it out, so that we often find ourselves guilty of the same mistake that Martha

made. It may not be mundane affairs alone that keep us pre-occupied. It may be Christian service too. We may take active part in meetings for prayer or worship or witness, and yet find that the Lord is rebuking us as He did Martha.

"Mary hath chosen that good part." This is Jesus' own valuation of His words to her, and by inference, of all that today comes to us as God's Word of life. Our first theme, then, is that good thing – the Word of God as given to us in the Bible. We shall look at this from three standpoints. We shall consider first the authority of the Bible, then the importance of hearing God's Word, and finally, the effect that the Word of God can have upon our lives.

The Authority of the Bible

We have to consider first the Divine authority of the Bible because this is the foundation to all else. To proceed further without settling this point would be as disastrous as proceeding with the construction of a building without laying its foundation. Only as we are assured of the Bible's authority shall we value and appreciate it aright.

Many who are born and brought up in Christian homes have accepted the Bible without question as the Word of God, simply because they were taught to do so by their parents or by their church, but they have never cared to establish with certainty in their own minds the reason for doing so. Thus they carry on happily for a while, until one day some modernist gives them a dose of his so-called higher criticism. "The Scriptures," he claims, "are full of

inconsistencies. The authors are not the persons named but much later writers, often writing with motives that are not above suspicion. It is impossible therefore to know what Jesus or His disciples really taught. There is insufficient factual evidence even for the great saving events. Modern man cannot possibly believe such fables.” So he goes on, and very soon their whole faith begins to crumble. Why? Because it was never properly *founded* in the first place. God does not ask us to believe things blindly. Many Christians give that impression to others, but it is totally wrong. God intends that the eyes of our heart be enlightened that we may know.

What the Bible does teach is that our minds are blinded by Satan. As sinners, therefore, we cannot with our natural minds understand the things of God. We are thus completely dependent on Divine revelation – on God making known His message to us. (This He is ever ready to do for the sincere seeker.) Our minds are sinful, and therefore fallible. We are not perfect in knowledge. So we need not be surprised if, with our finite and fallible minds, we are unable to grasp some things in the Bible that are beyond our reason. This does not mean that the Bible is contrary to reason. It does mean however that, like little children, we are just on the threshold of Divine things. If our intellects were perfect and infallible, we would assuredly find ourselves in full agreement with the Bible. This is proved by the fact that a person who is born again, as he grows in likeness to Christ, finds himself growing correspondingly in his understanding of the Bible and agreement with it. But if instead of acknowledging our limitations we

give rein to our critical faculties, we shall stumble. If we found our faith only upon what appears reasonable to our fallible intellects, one day we shall find that we have built on sand.

Why do we believe the Bible to be the Word of God?

Firstly, because of the testimony of Jesus Christ. In the Gospels we find Him constantly quoting the Old Testament scriptures as an authority. At the outset of His ministry in *Luke chapter 4*, we find Him quoting the book of Deuteronomy in effective answer to Satan’s temptations. Jesus began His ministry with the words, “It is written,” a straight assertion of the authority of Scripture. After His resurrection, in *Luke chapter 24*, we once more find Him expounding the Scriptures, first to two disciples walking to Emmaus, then shortly afterwards to the eleven in the upper room. And again and again throughout the three-and-a-half years that lay between these incidents we hear Him quote the Hebrew Scriptures as the authoritative Word of God. And remember, these Jewish Scriptures are the very same Old Testament that we have with us today. In the brief record of the four Gospels, Jesus made at least fifty-seven quotations from and allusions to the Old Testament. Since this was evidently His custom, there must surely have been countless more such instances which the New Testament does not record in detail.

What is abundantly clear is that the Lord entertained no doubt at all about the authority of the Old Testament. It was, in fact, the only written authority that He accepted on earth. When answering the Pharisees and the Sadducees of His day, He always

quoted Scripture. “It is written” was His ground of appeal. Whereas many of today’s preachers quote theologians, philosophers, psychologists – and even secular writers, the Lord Jesus never cared to quote the opinions of others. His only authority was the Old Testament. If we accept His testimony at all, it necessitates our accepting the Bible as God’s Word also. Those who reject the Bible reject the testimony of Jesus Himself.

Secondly, we accept the Bible as God’s infallible Word because so large a number of detailed prophecies contained in it have been fulfilled. One-third of the Bible is prophecy. Prophecies concerning the birth, death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus were made in the Old Testament hundreds of years before He came to earth, and these were literally fulfilled when He came. Prophecies concerning many of the leading nations of Old Testament times, and especially concerning Israel, have been fulfilled to the very letter. In our own life-time the Jews have returned to their homeland in Palestine and taken possession of the city of Jerusalem. Yet these events were foretold 2,500 years ago.

Another proof of the Bible’s Divine inspiration is the remarkably unity that is found in its sixty-six books. They were written in three different languages over a period of 1,600 years by some forty different authors of varying standards of education and the widest range of social and cultural backgrounds – kings, shepherds, military leaders, seers, Pharisees and fishermen. Yet

even so there is a marvellous unity throughout this whole library of writings, and not a single fundamental contradiction. Apparent contradictions here and there are of a trivial nature, to be explained by errors in copying of the text. Fundamental moral and ethical contradictions there are none. Many of the historical statements in the Bible have been questioned, but have been confirmed on further research. It scientific statements (though few, because it is not a text-book of science) are all true to the established facts of the physical world. Though written at a time when man’s scientific knowledge was extremely faulty, it contains none of the crude fallacies that were believed by men in those and even much later times. Science is constantly changing its views and rewriting its books, but the Bible needs no such revision.

The fact that the Bible has stood through the centuries triumphant over every attack upon it by its foes is *yet another proof* of its Divine inspiration. There is no book in the world that has been attacked so vigorously as the Bible. Yet it has gloriously survived the criticism of its friends and the hostility of its enemies. The French infidel Voltaire once said that in a hundred years there would be no Bible. They were “famous last words” indeed, for ironically enough, after his death, the Bible Society opened its office in the very house in which he had lived! Thus has God vindicated His Word. Infidels may come and go, but the Bible goes on from strength to strength. No other book has been so loved and respected and treasured by men and women the world over. It remains the world’s best-seller.

Then again, we believe that the Bible is God's inspired Word because of the accepted fact that countless lives have been transformed by it, sometimes indeed by just one verse from its pages. Passages of Scripture which no one would imagine could have such an effect have been used by God to convert people and bring them to salvation. Wicked men and women have been transformed overnight into saints of God through the reading of some passage or other in this marvelous Book. This has happened even in vernacular versions where the translation has been so poor as to make such a result highly improbable. God does indeed speak through this Book to effect moral changes in human lives.

A *sixth proof* of the inspiration of the Bible is its inexhaustibility. Through the centuries many brilliant men with the keenest intellects have spent their lifetimes studying it. Yet even so its depths have not been fathomed. Like a bottomless mine, the Book continues to yield new treasures, speaking to men in ever fresh ways. Moreover, its message has such a sublime simplicity that even a child can grasp it. Time cannot out-date it; it is time-less. If only we have the humility to consult it, we will find the answer to all our problems in this wonderful Book. That could never have been possible were it merely a human writing; but being divinely inspired it contains the inexhaustible wisdom of the infinite God. Man therefore can ever draw from it according to his need.

Finally, the greatest proof of its inspiration is that, as we read it in humility before God, He speaks to us

through it. Hearing its words we become growingly convinced that they are the voice of God. Scripture's great themes, such as the doctrines of the Trinity and of the atonement, could never have been invented by men. They could only have been known through the Spirit's inspiration. They are in a true sense God-given. We discover, too, an amazing design in the content and message of every book in the Bible, especially when it is viewed as a mirror reflecting the Lord Jesus Himself. The title of an old commentary, *Christ in All the Scriptures*, aptly describes what students of the Bible have constantly found, that the entire Scriptures "hang together" in wonderful detail to form an ever more convincing pattern when He is the goal of their study.

We are living in days in which the authority of the Bible is being widely questioned. Paul warned the Corinthian believers of the possibility of Satan corrupting their minds in just the same way as he corrupted Eve's (*2 Corinthians 11:1-3*). When the Devil came to Eve, he began with the question, "Hath God said?" He has been asking men the same old question ever since, "Is this really God's Word?" This has been one of his most successful devices to turn men away from the faith. The Holy Spirit warns us emphatically that there will be an increase of deception in the last days, due to an influx of deceiving spirits into the world (*1 Timothy 4:1*). The statement that "some shall depart from the faith" seems to indicate that this verse is describing not pagans but Christians. The Lord Jesus referred to this possibility of deception three times in *Matthew 24* (verses 5, 11, 24) while speaking about the last days. The Apostle

Paul in *2 Thessalonians 2:3* also speaks of a “a falling away” prior to the day of the Lord. This defection is obviously due to Christians being lured away by some subtle deceit of Satan. These warnings are serious. If in spite of them we still remain unwatchful, we shall most certainly find ourselves deceived.

How does a man seek to deceive you? If he wants to cheat you of one hundred rupees by passing a counterfeit currency note, he will ensure that the counterfeit note is as close as possible in appearance to the real thing. Only so will he hope to trick you. And Satan is no less subtle. His most powerful tool with which to deceive the unsuspecting Christian will be a “Christian” preacher – one who preaches with the Bible supposedly as his basis but who has not bowed his knee to its authority. Watch him! On closer inspection the things he preaches either are not found in the Bible at all, or they give a slanted and unbalanced presentation of Biblical truth.

The safeguard against all such deception is the Bible itself. If we do not know our Bibles well, we shall surely fall a prey to such deception. Unless we make the Bible our final authority in all matters relating to our faith, we shall be tossed about hither and thither until that faith itself is lost.

The Lord Jesus condemned the Pharisees and scribes for rejecting the Old Testament and replacing it with their own traditions (*Mark 7:5–13*). Their long-standing rejection of the *written* Word of God led finally to their rejection of the *living* Word when He came into their midst. The spiritual descendants of those scribes and Pharisees are found in our own

generation. And many are being deceived by them. How watchful we need to be.

We are told by the psalmist that God has magnified His Word above all His Name (*Psalms 138:2*). To reject or ignore it therefore, or to treat it lightly, is to invite immeasurable loss. But to reverence it is to discover a door into untold riches.

The Importance of Hearing God’s Word

The overwhelming necessity of spending time each day with God’s Word is implied clearly in the words of Jesus to Martha, with which we opened this chapter. There are many other things which may help us and which may prove useful, but this one thing above all others is absolutely essential. We can no more do without it than our physical bodies can do without oxygen. It is quite indispensable. The supreme essential for our spirits is indeed just this – to sit at the Lord’s feet daily to hear His Word.

The Lord Jesus knew, better than anyone else, all the factors that affect a man’s life. He knew every possible situation that any man could ever find himself in. He knew the dangers that lay ahead of every man and He knew all the wiles of Satan. He knew what was necessary for man’s spiritual growth, for He alone knew the relative importance and unimportance of things. Knowing all this, He said that one thing was needful above all else. He used similar words in *Luke 4:4*. “Man shall not live by bread alone but by every word of God.” This is a quotation from *Deuteronomy 8:3*, where reference is made to the

manna with which God fed the Israelites for 40 years in the wilderness. The Israelites were told there that God's purpose in giving them the manna daily from heaven was that they might, in like manner, learn to receive God's Word. If they were to be strengthened for their wilderness journey those Israelites needed the manna *daily*. Even so does man require to receive the Word of God *daily*, if he is to be empowered to face the trials of life.

Jesus never made these statements lightly. He was seeking to impress upon His disciples the absolute necessity of *hearing His Word daily*. If that is true, then it follows that a life that is lived without time given to meditation on God's written Word is a wasted life, no matter what else it may have achieved.

In *Luke 17:26-30*, Jesus tells us that the last days will be like the days of Noah and of Lot, in which people ate, drank, bought, sold, planted, built, and so on. Have you noticed that none of these things are sinful in themselves? They are all legitimate activities. Why then did Jesus mention them as being peculiarly characteristic of those sinful days? Because the people of those days were so occupied with these legitimate activities as to have no time for God at all. The Devil succeeded in getting them to crowd God out of their lives altogether. This of course resulted, as it always will, in moral decay and corruption.

Compare this state of affairs with what we see in the world today and we shall find an exact similarity of attitude and of consequent result. Men and women are too busy to have any time to listen to God. Look into your own life and see if this is not true. The spirit of the world has crept into the very heart

of the believer. Even though science has invented many time-saving devices which our forefathers did not possess, yet man finds himself rushed for time. Today we can travel by car, train or aeroplane where they had to travel on animals or on their own two feet. Our ancestors had to spend much longer doing the daily household chores which today are done for us by gadgets and machines. Yet many of them found much more time for God than most people find today. Why? Because they had their priorities right. They put first things first.

If we are to be effective witnesses for our Lord, it is imperative that we spend time each day at His feet listening to His voice. There are many today who are ambitious to preach, who have never developed this habit of listening to God's voice daily. The result is a sad paucity of "*the word of the Lord*" and a sickening abundance of man's words. Of how very few of today's preachers can it be said that "*the word of the Lord is with him*" (*2 Kings 3:12*). Yet this was the distinguishing mark of every true servant of God in the Bible. No man has the right to speak to other men about God, who has not first spent time listening to what God Himself says – and this refers to private witnessing as well as to public preaching. It is written of Moses that he went in before the Lord and then "*came out and spake unto the children of Israel that which he was commanded*" (*Exodus 34:34*). Joshua was told that his life would be a success only if he meditated on God's Word daily (*Joshua 1:8*). Samuel is another classic example of one who patiently waited to hear God speak, and then spoke to the people. The result

was that the Lord “*allowed no single word of his to fall to the ground*” (1 Samuel 3:19).

In a prophetic reference to the Lord Jesus in *Isaiah 50:4*, it is said of Him that morning by morning God spoke to Him, for His ears were disciplined to hear His Father’s voice. The result was, as the same verse tells us, that Jesus had a ready word for all who came to Him, according to their need. He was truly the Father’s perfect mouthpiece. If this habit of listening to God’s voice daily was necessary for Jesus Himself, then how much more is it so for us. We shall never be able to minister adequately to those in need if we fail here. It is only when we learn to “*hear as a disciple*” that we shall have “*the tongue of a disciple.*” Unfortunately, many who should have been teaching others by now are still spiritual babes, because they have either ignored or neglected this “*one thing.*”

Listening to the Lord does not mean merely reading the Bible. There are many who read their Bibles purely as a matter of routine. Listening to the Lord means more than that. It means meditating on His Word until we receive, through it, His message for us. Thus alone can our minds be renewed and conformed growingly to the mind of Christ. But many who read their Bibles have never yet learned thus to meditate.

There are at least three spiritual truths to be learnt from Mary’s sitting at the feet of Jesus.

Sitting – unlike walking, running, or even standing – is primarily a picture of *rest*. This teaches us that our hearts must be at rest and our minds still, before we can hear God speaking to us. Unconfessed sin will preclude the former, while over-occupation with

the cares and riches of this world will stand in the way of the latter. With a conscience ill at ease or a mind filled with anxiety or fear, how can we hope to hear God’s “*still small voice?*” *Psalm 46:10* tells us that we must be still if we are to know God.

Sitting at a person’s feet is also a picture of *humility*. Mary was not sitting on a chair on the same level as Jesus, but on a lower level. God never speaks to a proud man, except in judgment. But He is ever ready to speak and to offer His grace to the humble soul who will be as a child before Him (*Matthew 11:25*).

Thirdly, sitting as Mary did is a picture of *subjection*. It is the attitude of a disciple in the presence of his Master. Our subjection is manifested in obedience to God’s Word. God has not spoken in his Word to satisfy our curiosity or to give us information. His Word is an expression of His heart’s desire. He speaks in order that we may *obey*. Jesus made it clear in *John 7:17* that it is only if we are willing to do God’s will that we shall receive an understanding of that will.

Many Christians go through months and years of reading the Bible without seeking to hear God speaking to them through it. Still they seem to be quite satisfied. I ask you, Do you hear the Lord’s voice each day? If not, what is the cause? He speaks to those who listen. What is it that is stopping your spirit’s ears? Is it lack of stillness before Him, lack of humility of spirit, or lack of obedience to what He has already said to you? Or is it perhaps a lack of desire itself? Whatever it be, God grant that it may be remedied at once and permanently. Pray Samuel’s prayer, “*Speak Lord, for thy servant heareth.*” Then open

your Bible and seek the face of the Lord earnestly, and you too shall hear His voice.

The Effect of the Word of God

We shall never fully appreciate the importance of sitting at the Lord's feet daily to listen to His Word, until we understand the effect that it will have upon our lives. A man who is given a medicine by a doctor, but who is sceptical or unsure of what that medicine will do for him, may not, as a result, care to take it regularly. He is not likely to feel that he has lost anything when he neglects to take it. But if, on the other hand, that man is made to understand what a marvellous cure the medicine will work in his body and the tremendous improvement that it will bring to his health, then whatever it costs him to take it regularly, it is very unlikely that he will forget to do so.

In very much the same way, we find thousands of Christians who never have a regular devotional time with God and His Word, yet who still do not feel that they have missed anything. Search your own life. If you miss a quiet time with God one day, do you feel a sense of regret at having lost something valuable, or do you feel that you have not lost much? How does it come about that so many children of God never have a quiet time with God daily and yet remain so complacent about it? It can only be because they have not fully appreciated the creative effect that God's Word has upon a person's life. For as we shall see, it is more than a medicine; it is food. They have not realized how much they are losing by not subjecting themselves to its transforming power.

In order to understanding something of the effect that the Word of God has upon a man, we shall consider *nine* Biblical symbols by which it describes itself or is described.

First of all, we shall look at *Psalm 119:105*, where the Word is likened to *light*. "*Thy Word is a lamp unto my feet and a light unto my path.*" When we walk through unknown terrain in the dark, we use a light in order to see our way. That is a picture of what the Bible does for us in a world that lies in the pitch darkness of sin. It shows us the path to God. We can know nothing of God's way of salvation apart from the Bible.

Further, the Bible gives light to the Christian on the pathway of right doctrine, showing up at the same time the pitfalls of false teaching alongside the road, so that he may not fall into them. Without that light, he would never know what was false and what was true. The Holy Spirit commended the believers at Berea, because they did not receive even what the apostle Paul preached in them until they had themselves checked it with the Scriptures (*Acts 17:11*). Only then did they accept his message. (Was it because of this attitude to the preachers who came to them that Paul had no need to send an epistle to the Bereans correcting false doctrine, as he did to so many of the other churches?) People who search the Scriptures diligently are not easily lured into false doctrine. They know the truth that has made them free.

Unfortunately, many thousands of Christians today are either too lazy or too pre-occupied to study the Bible for themselves. Their resultant ignorance of the Scriptures makes them an easy prey for the Devil's

deceptions. Alas, such things as eloquence, emotionalism and logical presentation of the message are in our day the criteria by which a preacher is judged. Whether he expounds the Word of God correctly or not seems to be only of secondary importance. Remember that true doctrine matters infinitely more than a man's personality or gift of speaking. The contents of a medicine bottle are more important than its size or shape or appearance! Do you look for the truth or for eloquent messages? And if it is indeed the truth you look for, how can you know what the truth is, unless you know the Bible first?

There is a story of a man who was told by his priest that the Bible could not be understood by laymen like him, but who happened to get hold of a New Testament and was saved as a result of reading it. One day while the book was open in front of him, the priest dropped in to visit him and asked what he was reading. On his replying that it was the Bible, the priest protested that he should not read it as it was not meant for uninstructed laymen.

"But," said the man, "I have been saved as a result of reading it. And besides, it tells me here in *1 Peter 2:2*, to desire the sincere milk of the Word that I may grow."

"Oh," said the priest, "but God has appointed us priests as the milkmen to give you the milk."

"Well, sir," the man replied, "I had a milkman once who used to bring me milk every day, but I soon discovered that he was mixing water with the milk.

Then I decided to buy a cow instead. Now the milk I get is pure milk."

Brothers and sisters, it is only as we study God's Word ourselves that we shall get the pure milk, the uncorrupted doctrine. For in this sin-darkened earth, the Word of God is the only light that we have, to walk by. It is also therefore the key to the problem of guidance. God has marked out a pathway for our lives, but many Christians complain that they are unable to find it. Often the reason is simply that they have not spent time regularly in meditation on God's Word. "Thy word .. is a light unto my path." It is God's provision to show us the road.

Secondly, the Word of God is likened in *James 1:22, 23* to a *mirror*. We need a mirror to see whether our faces are dirty or clean and whether our hair is disorderly or combed. Without one, we cannot tell how we look. If James had been writing his epistle in the twentieth century, he might perhaps have gone a step further and used a more modern symbol – *the X-ray* – to illustrate this effect of God's Word. An X-ray film shows me the conditions of the interior organs in my body, which I cannot know otherwise. The Bible does something similar in that it shows me the condition of my heart before God. It corrects me and reproves me so that I might be perfect and fully equipped to serve Him (*2 Timothy 3:16, 17*). Many people today are deceiving themselves about their spiritual condition, thinking that there is nothing wrong with them. Why? Because they have never subjected themselves to the X-ray of God's Word.

It is possible that, even as believers, we may be unaware of sins of which we are guilty before God. I have often found during times of meditation on the

Scriptures that the Holy Spirit has made me aware of some sin – some selfishness of motive, perhaps, in my actions – of which I was totally unaware until He made it known. We need to subject ourselves to a daily examination through the mirror (or X-ray) of God’s Word if we are to avoid spiritual stagnation and decay. Not a day goes by in our lives without our examining our faces in a mirror. May not a day go by either without our examining our hearts.

Then, in *Jeremiah 23:29*, the Word of God is likened to a *fire*. Fire, in the Bible, is used as a symbol of that which purifies or burns up. Gold put into the fire is purified, whereas wood is consumed. The Word of God, similarly, has a purifying effect upon our lives, eliminating from them what is un-Christlike. It not only shows us our faults, as we saw above, but it also makes us holy. No man can ever hope to be holy without spending time every day at the Lord’s feet, for that alone can purge away all the dross from his life. But it is also terribly true the same fire will burn up the one who rejects the Word (*John 12:48*). Our attitude towards God’s Word determines whether it will purify or destroy. If we submit to it, it will purify us. If we ignore or spurn it, then it will surely consume us.

In the same verse of *Jeremiah 23* we see, *fourthly*, the Word of God likened to a *hammer* – a hammer that breaks the rock into pieces. If you want to make a road on a mountainside, you have to break up rocks. In these days we use dynamite for that purpose, whereas in *Jeremiah’s* day they used hammers. The Word of God is His dynamite, capable of removing huge obstacles out of our way. We all face trials and problems in our lives – situations in

which the mountains have closed in upon us and it appears as though we have reached a dead-end. Often we have remained in such situations, discouraged and defeated, not knowing what to do or where in turn. Our ignorance at such times of the promises that God has given us in Scripture has prevented us from claiming them. Otherwise, like dynamite, they would have blasted away the obstacles in our path and taken us triumphantly through the mountain barrier to the other side. How much we have missed by not knowing the Word!

Fifthly, in *Luke 8:11*, we find the Word of God likened to *seed* which, when sown into the ground, produces fruit. *1 Peter 1:23* states that our new birth itself is a result of that seed sprouting in our hearts. Only as we are fruitful can God be glorified through our lives. Is there, in your life and service, fruit for the glory of God? Is it manifest, in your own life first of all, in terms of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness (meekness), and self-control? (*Galatians 5:22, 23*). And then, do you find fruit in your service, in the shape of sinners turning to the Lord and believers being drawn closer to Him? If not, perhaps the reason is that you are not regularly receiving the Word of God into your own heart as seed “having life in itself.” *Psalms 1:2, 3* tells us that it is the man who regularly meditates on God’s Word, who alone will be like the fruitful tree, prospering in all that he does.

The Word of God is also likened to *food* in *Psalms 119:103*. The same symbol occurs again in *Jeremiah*

15:16 and in *1 Peter 2:2*. The prophet Ezekiel and the apostle John are each shown too in Scripture as “eating” a book (*Ezekiel 3:1–3; Revelation 10:9, 10*). We have here a picture of men assimilating and digesting the Word of God. Food gives us strength. Our bodies cannot be built up without it. A person who is under-nourished will be skinny and weak in his constitution, and therefore unable to resist disease. He will also be unable to defend himself if physically assaulted by another. A small push will often be enough to knock him down. In exactly the same way, one who neglects the Word of God will be spiritually under-developed, and consequently unable to resist temptation and to withstand the Devil’s onslaughts. Only those who regularly meditate on God’s Word grow into strong virile Christians (*1 John 2:14*). Mere reading of the Bible will not make you strong, but meditation upon it allows the Word to penetrate into the very core of your being and thus to become a part of you, hidden in your heart (*Psalms 119:11*). Job said that he esteemed the words of God’s mouth more even than his necessary daily food (*Job 23:12*). By listening to God daily he built up a tremendous reserve of spiritual strength. This, no doubt, accounts for the man’s remarkable resilience in the face of Satan’s fierce assaults. He did not lose his faith in God, in spite of all the adversity he faced. His wife, who obviously did not have the same regard for God’s Word as her husband, was ready to curse God as soon as calamity struck. Not so Job. His example gives us an idea of the tremendous strength that God’s Word, if received daily, can give us to face every trial in life.

Seventhly, in *Deuteronomy 32:2*, the Word of God is likened to *dew*. Dew, in the Bible, is a figure of God’s blessing. When God blessed Israel, He gave them the dew and the rain. When Israel sinned God withheld them, as He did in *1 Kings 17:1*. This symbol teaches therefore that God’s blessing comes through His Word upon all who receive and obey it. *Proverbs 10:22* declares that that blessing can enrich us, making up for all our shortcomings. What an encouragement that is!

More than one instance in the gospels serves to illustrate this. One day the disciples of Jesus were confronted with the task of feeding over 5000 people and all the food they could amass was five loaves and two fishes, the gift of a boy. They protested that it was totally insufficient, as indeed it was. But then the Lord blessed that food. As a result, all the people were satisfied and a large amount remained over. On another occasion we find the disciples toiled all night at fishing, and caught nothing. Then in the morning they heard Jesus speaking to them. They obeyed His instructions, and within a few moments the net was full of fishes. These are two illustrations of the fact that the blessing of the Lord does indeed make rich. The blessing that comes to us through His Word makes up for all our lack. You may be lacking in talents and unable to preach or sing or pray like others, but when the dew of heaven falls on your life, notwithstanding all your natural limitations, God can still make you a channel of blessing to thousands. So, wait upon the Lord daily with His Word in front of you. Do not rush away from His presence until His dew falls upon your soul.

But dew is more than blessing. It is also a symbol of freshness. Here is another thing that the Bible gives us, namely, renewal. Listening to the voice of the Lord day by day keeps our Christian life continually fresh. It saves us from becoming stale, with all that that implies of corruption and decay. Mouldy bread will not make anyone's mouth water. Even so, the staleness displayed by many believers cannot be expected to draw anyone to Christ. Is your Christian life fresh every day? It can be so only if you feed daily upon the heavenly manna from beneath the dewfall (*Exodus 16:13-15*; compare *verse 20*).

The Word of God is further likened to *wealth* in *Psalms 119:162* – or to gold, as in other passages of Scripture. Money cannot make you truly wealthy. You may acquire qualifications which give you great earning power and thus may reach a position where you can earn plenty of money; but that will give you only a wealth which passes away. Nothing but the Word of God can make you really wealthy.

A truly wealthy man lacks nothing. He has enough and to spare. A poor man on the other hand, has to go around begging from those more fortunate than himself. The Word of God can make you so wealthy that you will never be at a loss. It will not only give you enough for your own needs, but will enable you to meet the needs of others too. There is not a single situation that you can ever face in life for which the solution is not found somewhere in the Bible. The answer will always be there in the experience of some Biblical character that parallels your own, or in some teaching of Scripture. If you know your

Bible, you will find in the time of crisis that the Holy Spirit brings to your remembrance the appropriate passage and from it gives you His answer.

I have found this to be true in more than one instance in my own life. When the Lord called me for His service on the 6th of May 1964, and I sent in my application requesting that I be permitted to resign my commission in the Indian Navy, the Naval Headquarters soon replied that they would not release me. I was really puzzled then, not knowing what to do next. The Lord then reminded me of the time when Moses had gone to Pharaoh and asked for the release of the Israelites that they might serve the Lord. Pharaoh rejected that request outright, but Moses did not give up. He kept going back to Pharaoh until the Israelites were released. There I had the answer to my problem! So I applied again for permission to resign, and my application was turned down again. I applied a third time, stating exactly the same reasons as before. For many months there was no reply. Finally I was released two years after I had first applied! This is an example of how God can make us wealthy enough to cope with every situation – and not only in our own life, but in the lives of others too who may come to us for help in their hour of need.

Finally, turning to *Ephesians 6:17* we find the Word of God is there called the *sword of the Spirit*. The Christian life is a constant battle with a cunning foe, whose method of attack is often to cast doubt upon God's love, God's justice, even God Himself. This sword can defeat his every move, provided we know how to use it. Discouragement is one of the

Devil's strongest weapons. With it he has knocked down many mighty men. Moses, Elijah and Jonah each trembled at its shock, but each one of these men overcame his own depression by listening to the Word of the Lord. You and I may be able temporarily to tide over our discouragement by occupying ourselves in some way that provides a diversion, but only by the Word of God itself can we ever overcome it completely. Jesus Himself overcame Satan in the wilderness solely through His use of this Sword.

I remember a time when I was in the Navy, and our ship had been for more than a month based at a small port. We had been going out to sea daily for exercises. The pressure of work on board was intense, and this coupled with the fact that for a considerable length of time I had no opportunity for Christian fellowship, brought me one day into a very depressed state of mind. The situation had got on top of me. As I was sitting alone in my cabin, suddenly this verse flashed into my mind: "The Lord shall make thee the head and not the tail; and thou shalt be above only and thou shalt not be beneath" (*Deuteronomy 28:13*). At once I saw that the Lord had promised to keep me "on top" in every situation. Immediately the joy of heaven came surging back into my heart and there was a song on my lips again. Such is the power of the Word of God to overcome every attack of the enemy.

The nine symbols that we have considered above give us a little idea of the effect that the Word of God can have upon a man. I wonder whether you have now begun to understand why Jesus said that this one thing was the greatest essential in a believer's life. Will you take His statement seriously? If so, then

settle it right now that, no matter how necessary and even essential other things may appear to be, henceforth nothing shall be allowed to rob you of your daily quiet time with the Lord and with His Word.

The Bible tells us of days that will come upon this world, in which there will be a famine of the Word of God (*Amos 8:11, 12*). There may be many counterfeits in that day – as we have seen, *1 Timothy 4:1, 2* suggests this – but a famine of the true. Those days, I believe, are almost upon us, and the famine of the true Word of God will only increase as the time goes by. Joseph in Egypt laid up corn during the years of plenty, so that when the famine came which God had predicted, there was no lack. If we are wise, we shall store up the Word of God in our hearts today against just such a need. May the Lord imprint this message deeply upon the hearts of us all.

"Blessed is the man that heareth me, watching daily at my gates, waiting at the posts of my doors." (Proverbs 8:34)

*"Sitting at the feet of Jesus,
O what words I hear Him say!
Happy place! So near, so precious!
May it find me there each day."*

*Sitting at the feet of Jesus,
There I love to weep and pray,
While I from His fullness gather,
Grace and comfort every day."*

CHAPTER 3

One Thing Have I Desired

*“The Lord is my light and my salvation:
whom shall I fear?
The Lord is the strength of my life;
of whom shall I be afraid?
When the wicked,
even mine enemies and my foes,
Came upon me to eat up my flesh,
they stumbled and fell.*

*Though an host should encamp against me,
my heart shall not fear:
Though wars should rise against me,
in this will I be confident.*

One thing have I desired of the Lord,
*that will I seek after;
That I may dwell in the house of the Lord
all the days of my life.*

*To behold the beauty of the Lord,
And to enquire in his temple.”*
(Psalm 27:1–4)

This splendid psalm was written by one who had attained to the throne of Israel. Yet David tells us in *verse 4* that there was only one thing in all the world that he desired from the Lord. Kings in those days had two desires chiefly: One was to extend their territory and the other was to accumulate riches. Israel was not yet a very big nation, neither was David himself a very wealthy king. Yet his prayer was not for extension in either of these realms. Even if he were hedged in by enemies, he states that his primary desire would be to dwell in the Lord's presence and to behold His beauty (*verses 3, 4*). And he further adds that he would seek after this all his life. It is the picture of a lover sitting in the presence of her beloved, beholding his beauty, and desiring nothing else in the whole world. There is no need even for conversion – so great is their love for one another. Those who have experienced such love will know how true a picture this is.

I believe that here we have one reason why David is referred to, in the Bible, as a man after God's own heart. He was not a perfect man. He fell very deeply into sin at one time in his life, committing both adultery and murder. Yet when he repented God forgave him, cleansed him and lifted him up from those depths of failure, and still called him a man after His own heart (*Acts 13:22*). One reason for this, as we have just said, was that, deep down in David's heart was an intense love for his Lord. In *1 Samuel 16:7* God clearly states that He looks at man's heart, and it is not without significance that these words were in fact spoken in reference to David. Love for

the Lord is thus another of the supreme priorities in the Christian life.

So love is our subject and again we shall consider it under three heads. Firstly, we shall see that Love is the basis of all of God's dealings with man. Then we shall see that Love is to be the motive of our consecration. Finally, we shall look at Love as the real test of our spirituality.

Love – The Basis of All God's Dealings with Man

Just as, in our first chapter, we started by considering the foundation of our faith, so here too it must be plain that we need a solid foundation for our love for the Lord. That foundation is, and can be nothing other than, His own unchanging love for us. "We love him, because he first loved us" (*1 John 4:19*). Many Christians experience difficulties later on in their lives, because they were never clear on this point initially. Right at the start of our Christian life we need to get this foundation strongly laid. Only so can we proceed further.

When God created this earth, and put man upon it, His intention was that everything in it should live and move in an atmosphere of love. Even the obedience that He sought from man was not the obedience of slavery but of love. Since there can be no love in the true sense of that word where there is no freedom of choice, God endowed Adam with a will that was free to choose, even though it involved the great risk of a wrong choice – of man disobeying Him. At any cost God would have a relationship with man that was

free. He never wanted slavish service from man. He did not want it then, and He does not want it today.

Right through the Bible we see this picture of love governing all God's dealings with mankind. In this connection, let us look at the first two references to the word "love" in the Bible. The first mention of any subject in the Bible is always a great help in studying that that subject, and we may expect therefore to find much profit as we look into these two passages.

The first mention of love is in *Genesis 22:2* where Isaac is called Abraham's only son whom he loves. The offering of Isaac on the altar that follows later on in the chapter is a clear picture of Calvary where God the Father gave His only Son as an offering for our sins. Accordingly the love referred to in *verse 2* is a picture of God the Father's love for Christ. The second mention of the word "love" in the Bible is in *Genesis 24:67* which tells of Isaac's love for Rebekah – a husband's love for his wife. Here we have a clear picture, as the rest of the chapter also beautifully shows, of the love of Christ for His church. In the New Testament these two concepts are brought together by the Lord in *John 15:9* – "As the Father hath loved me (with the love of a father for a son depicted in *Genesis 22:2*) so have I loved you" (with the love of Christ for the sinner that finds its parallel in the love of a bridegroom for a bride illustrated in *Genesis 24:67*). Thus even in the typology in the Old Testament, this thought of God's intense love for man is reflected.

Let us therefore look at *Genesis 24* and, in this faint picture provided by the relationship between Isaac and Rebekah, see some of the characteristics

of the Lord's great love for us. When God seeks to show us how greatly He loves us, it is very significant that He uses the husband-wife relationship as an example. The union between husband and wife is the most intimate of all earthly relationships. While it would be unwise to carry the parallel too far, the Divine choice of this illustration, confirmed as it is by such New Testament passages as *Ephesians 5:21–23*, serves clearly to underline the very personal intimacy that the Lord desires to have with each one of us, and that He desires that we should have with Him. In *Genesis 24*, we may see a kind of allegory of the Divine search for such a relationship with man. There Abraham may be seen as a figure or type of God the Father, Abraham's servant as a type of the Holy Spirit and Isaac as a type of God the Son, while Rebekah takes her place as a type of alien, unredeemed man in the far country whom the Holy Spirit seeks to win to Christ. In the attitude of Abraham's servant (who on this mission was representing both Abraham and Isaac) and the attitude of Isaac towards Rebekah, we may discern characteristics of the love of Christ for us.

First of all, we see in *verses 22 & 53* that Abraham's servant gives gifts to Rebekah out of the riches of his master. This gives us an insight into the heart of God. When He comes to us, He does not come demanding, but giving. As a good husband will want to share all he has with his wife, so does the Lord desire to share all He has with us. Many of us have the idea that if we surrender ourselves fully to the Lord, He will make so many demands upon us that our lives will become miserable. Even though we may not say

so in as many words, yet this is the reason why we shrink from an unconditional surrender to the Lord. Yet Jesus has clearly told us that the real thief who comes to take away what we have is the Devil (*John 10:10*). But how few believe this. If we really believed that the Lord Jesus has come to give us all that He has, there would be no reserve at all in the surrender of our lives to Him.

A story is told of a pastor who once went to visit a poor old lady in order to bring her a gift with which to pay her rent. He went to her house and knocked at the door, and waited, and knocked again. But there was no response, and so at length he went away. A few days later he met her on the street. "I called on you the other day with a present," he told her, "but found the door bolted and could get no answer." "Oh," said the old lady, "I am sorry. I was inside, but I thought it was the landlord who had come to collect the rent. So I didn't open the door." Brothers and sisters, *the Lord Jesus has not come to collect the rent!* He has come to give us all that He possesses. He wants to bring us wealth unimaginable. How foolish it is not to open the door to Him. How foolish it is not to surrender our lives to Him utterly.

Look again at Abraham's servant. Another feature of the story is that, even knowing she was God's choice for Isaac, this man did not compel Rebekah to go with him. He respected her free will, and only when she herself was willing did he take her (*verses 54-59*). That too is characteristic of the love of Christ for us, as we saw briefly at the outset of this chapter. God respects man's freedom of choice. The love of God is without compulsion. He will never force you

to do anything. Men in the world – yes, and even Christian leaders – may exert pressure upon you to do many things against your will, but God – never. (And in passing, may I say that any man who seeks to be like God will follow Him in this.) The Lord will never force you to read your Bible, or to pray, or to witness for Him. God never forces any sinner to turn to Him, neither will he force any believer to obey Him. In His instructions to Moses about the Tabernacle, God told him to receive offerings only from those who gave them willingly (*Exodus 25:2*), and this principle recurs in the New Testament (*2 Corinthians 9:7*). Indeed it runs through the entire Bible. God does command obedience to Him, but He never forces anyone to obey. He will always respect the free will that He Himself has given to man. What need is there, then, for you and me to be afraid of a love like this?

When Rebekah finally arrived at Isaac's home, Isaac himself was out in the fields praying (*verse 63 - margin*) The journey that Abraham's servant had made to fetch Rebekah had been a long one, about 600 miles each way, and he must have been away for around two months. As the time drew near for his return, Isaac would have been waiting with rising expectancy, wondering when his bride would arrive. Each day he would have looked eagerly out through the tent door for the awaited caravan; each day he would have gone out into the fields and prayed to God that she might come soon. Then one day he saw the camels coming. What joy must have filled his heart! Ah, but this is only a faint picture of the eagerness with which our beloved Lord now awaits us in

heaven. This is an amazing fact but a true one, that even though we are so sinful and defiled and often rebellious too, yet so great is the love of the Lord, that in heaven He is waiting for us with longing expectation. There may be eager desire in our hearts to meet Him, but far, far greater is His desire to receive us and to share with us His glory. Even though God is completely self-sufficient, yet His self-chosen longing to dwell with mankind is another theme that runs right through the Bible. How grieved He must be when men doubt His love, in spite of all the proofs He has given of its reality and its greatness.

Right through the history of the nation of Israel God sought to impress upon them the enduring nature of His love. He loved them with an everlasting love (*Jeremiah 31:3; Deuteronomy 4:37*). He told them that the response that He sought was their love in return (*Deuteronomy 6:5*). But they were just like us. They constantly doubted His love. And yet God kept on loving them. When they complained that He had forgotten them, He replied in those tender words of *Isaiah 49:15*: “Can a woman forget her sucking child that she should not have compassion on the son of her womb? Yea, they may forget yet will I not forget thee.” A mother may not think of her grown-up children all the time; but if she has a child on her breast, there is hardly a moment of her waking hours when her thoughts will not be upon that child. When she goes to sleep at night, her last thought is about that baby sleeping beside her. If she wakes in the middle of the night she looks at her child again, to see if all is well. When she finally wakes up in the morning, her first thought is again about her sucking child.

Such is a mother’s care for her little one. Even so, God says, does He care for His own.

The book of *Hosea* also stresses this. The painful experience that Hosea went through in his own personal life was a parable of God’s attitude to Israel. His love, it tells us, endures as does that of a faithful husband to an unfaithful wife. The Lord has also placed the *Song of Solomon* in the Bible to picture this great truth of the faithfulness of the divine Lover to His wayward bride.

Our faith needs to be founded firmly upon this fact – that all of God’s dealings with us are based upon His love. The words “He will rest in his love” in *Zephaniah 3:17*, have been translated: “*He is silently planning for you in love.*” Do we realize that every single thing that God allows to enter into our lives comes from a heart that is planning for us in love? Every trial and problem that has come into your life and mine has been planned for our ultimate good. When He ruins our plans, it is in order to save us from missing His best. We may not be able to understand it all fully on earth. But if we recognize that there are no second causes, and that everything comes from the hands of a loving God, it would take away all the worries and fears and hard thoughts that normally plague us. It is because believers are not firmly established upon this truth that these anxieties and cares arise in their minds, and they remain strangers to the “peace of God that passeth understanding” and the “joy unspeakable and full of glory” of which the Bible speaks.

The ministry of the Lord Jesus Christ was very often a corrective to the false conceptions that even religious people of His day, well read in the Old

Testament scriptures, nevertheless had about their God. Everything about Jesus, His healing the sick, His comforting words to the sorrowing, His loving invitation to those burdened with sin, His patience with His disciples and finally His death on the Cross, all showed the loving nature of the heart of God. How often He impressed upon His disciples that their heavenly Father loved them and cared for their every need. How often Jesus rebuked them for doubting their Father. If earthly fathers knew how to provide for their children, how much more would their loving heavenly Father provide for them (*Matthew 7:9–11*). The parable of the prodigal son was also intended to show them God's great forgiving love towards his wayward, rebellious children. By irresistible logic, by parable and by personal example Jesus sought to correct the erroneous views that His generation had about God. In His final prayer before He went to the cross, He prayed that the world may know of God's love (*John 17:23*). May God imprint deeply and eternally upon our hearts these assurances from His Word of the truth of His infinite and unchanging love for us, for faith in God can grow on no other soil but this.

Love – The Motive of Our Consecration

In all our service for the Lord it is the motive underlying that service that matters. At the judgement seat of Christ the important question will not be "What did you do?" so much as "Why did you do it?" It is not the number of hours that we spend in reading our Bibles or in prayer, or the number of tracts we distribute, or

the number of souls that we witness to, that are first in importance, but the motive with which all these are done. It is possible to be keenly engaged in all these spiritual activities and yet to do them all with a motive that is wholly selfish, or on the other hand that is merely legalistic. Examples of these two ways of serving the Lord can be seen in the parable of the prodigal son (*Luke 15:11–32*). The younger son had motives that were selfish; the elder son had a legalistic spirit. Let us consider them briefly.

One day the younger son came to his father and asked for his share of the property. And just as we have been seeing that God's nature is to give lavishly, even so the father in this parable readily gave to the son. But as soon as the younger son had received all that he wanted, he left his father and set out for a far country, thus clearly showing that he was motivated not by love for his father at all but solely by what he could get out of him. Many Christian believers are like that. They come to God only for what they can get. Personal gain and blessing are the driving motives of their religion. In heathen religions generally these are of course the motives. It does not surprise us that the heathen give alms, or go on long pilgrimages, in order to get some personal benefit from their god. But alas this attitude is found among Christians too. It is possibly true that ninety percent of all believers have accepted Christ, if no longer for material gain (as was once the case here in India), then from a desire to exchange the horrors of hell for the comforts of heaven. This may not be altogether a bad thing, but it suggests that from the very beginning of our Christian lives, we come to God impelled by *the selfish motive of*

personal profit. Search your own heart, my brother, my sister, and see if this is not true.

Now as I have said, this would not be so bad if only, in the process of maturing spiritually, we came to recognise our selfish motives in coming to the Lord, and corrected our attitude accordingly. But unfortunately this is not often so, and many believers live their entire lives on this plane of personal profit. It is because they are always seeking to *get* from God instead of seeking to *give* to Him, that they have so many problems in their lives and so little joy in their service. Why do we read our Bibles? Very often we do so solely in order to get a blessing for ourselves. Sometimes, perhaps to gain a reputation as a Bible scholar. How very seldom do we read it in order to know the will of God and to do it, so that God may be glorified through our lives. Why do we pray? So often, it is just to secure some special blessing for ourselves. How seldom do believers pray in order that the Lord's work may progress on earth for His glory. We may even fast and pray. But have we ever stopped to consider the motive with which we do it? Often it could be to obtain something that we desire greatly. Ah yes, it may be something spiritual that we desire – perhaps that we may be filled with the Holy Spirit. But the motive could still be selfish – that *we* may be greatly used of God, and not that His work may prosper, no matter whom He uses. Selfishness is still selfishness, even when it is a good thing that we are seeking.

Do you sing? There are musically gifted believers who perform solos. But how many of them can

honestly say that it is the Lord's glory alone that they seek, and not some glory for themselves as well.

Or, let us consider meetings where the Word of God is expounded. Have we not often heard believers saying, "We got a blessing there?" "*We*" – the emphasis is still on *their* having received something from God at that meeting. Whether God was glorified or not becomes of relatively lesser importance. By and large, most believers only go where *they* can receive something. Thus they remain spiritual babes, nay spiritual beggars, all their lives, for even what they consider to be their most spiritual activities are leavened by the sin of selfishness. The tragedy depicted in *1 Corinthians 3:12–15* of having all our work for God burnt up will be the direct consequence of having done that work with selfish motives. True repentance involves turning from a self-centred existence to a God-centred one.

The elder son in the parable is generally considered the better of the two. Examine his attitude however and we will find that he was just as much at fault as his brother. When the younger son returned, the father rejoiced along with his whole household. The elder son however proved unable, out of sheer jealousy, to share in that joy. He was so angry at such honour being bestowed on his wastrel brother that he would not even enter the house. His reply to his father's entreaties exposes the spirit in which he had been serving him hitherto. "All these years I have served you and not once have I disobeyed. Yet you have never given me anything like this." His service for his father, instead of being joyful and loving, was calculating and legalistic, like that of a servant who

serves his master for wages. Thus, as so many of us do, he compared his lot with that of others and discovered plenty of ground for complaint. They were being blessed more than they deserved, while he who deserved the blessings received none.

Do you serve the Lord like that? Do you read your Bible and pray as a legal duty imposed upon you and one that you dare not transgress? If it is just to satisfy your conscience that you have a daily quiet time with the Bible, then that quiet time is a ritual. No wonder so many believers experience no joy in their Bible reading or praying or witnessing! No wonder their service for the Lord soon becomes a strain and a burden, if having been saved through the grace of God they voluntarily put themselves under the law once again.

Through the death of Christ we are dead to the law, in order that we might be wedded to the risen Christ. This is the teaching of *Romans 7:1–6*. Paul's rather strange expression there simply means that instead of serving the Lord as a servant serves his master, legalistically, we are henceforth to serve Him "in newness of spirit" as a wife serves her husband, out of love. There is a vast difference between the two. Take a look at the servant first. He works under rules and regulations, having fixed hours of work and fixed wages. In the modern world he goes on strike if he considers himself over-worked or under-paid. Many a child of God unfortunately is serving the Lord like that today. He goes faithfully through his prescribed rituals. He has a brief daily quiet time, followed by "intercessions," when he mentions parrot-like before God the names of a few people

in need. In addition to this he attends one or two, or maybe even three, meetings or services a week. By these means he hopes to please God enough to ensure that no calamity befalls him or his home, that all his children pass their examinations and that he gets regular promotions in his job. He may go further and pride himself on his evangelical convictions as well. And when, contrary to his expectations, something unexpected befalls him, he is quick to spell out his complaints before God and men.

Oh, I agree, it is better to serve God out of fear than not to serve Him at all. But, brothers and sisters, there is a higher, a more excellent way – the way of love (*1 Corinthians 12:31; 13:1*). God does not want you and me to carry on our religious activities out of fear that He may punish us if we neglect them. God wants us to serve Him as a good wife serves her husband, out of love. She does not serve him for wages, or only during fixed hours. She does not work according to a code of rules, nor for reward at all. If her husband is a life-long invalid, she will still continue to serve and care for him joyfully, at tremendous sacrifice to herself and without recompense for her labour, just because she loves him. This is the service God wants from us, because that is the service He has given us in His Son. Service for God which is motivated by anything less than pure love for Him is valueless in His sight.

Moreover serving God for selfish ends or in a legalistic spirit is sheer drudgery. It is like driving a car with sand in the bearings. How it groans and complains, protesting vigorously at every least move forward! Yet that, unfortunately, is a fair description

of the lives and service of many of us. But clean out the sand and lubricate the machinery. How smoothly, noiselessly and quickly the car moves now! And God wants your Bible-reading and your times spent in prayer to be like that. He desires that your worship and your witnessing, and every Christian activity that you carry out, shall spring freely and joyously out of love for Him.

The attitude of that great Old Testament saint, Job, affords a striking contrast to that of the two sons that we have just been considering. In Job we are shown a picture of the type of service that is acceptable to God. Satan accused Job of serving God for what he got out of it. Had not God blessed Job and enriched him beyond measure? Would not any man work to obtain such rewards?

To establish the true facts therefore God allowed Satan to test Job, stripping him in one blow of all his material possessions, then of his children, and finally even of his health. Yet in the face of these catastrophes, Job continued to praise God. The pressure of the trials did make him doubt God's care at times. But let us recall some of his words:

“The Lord gave and the Lord hath taken away, blessed be the Name of the Lord... What? Shall we receive good at the hand of God and shall we not receive evil?... Though he slay me, yet will I trust in him ... he also shall be my salvation ... I know that my Redeemer liveth ... though worms destroy this body, yet in my flesh shall I see God ... When he hath tried me, I shall come forth as gold.”
(Job 1:21; 2:10; 13:15, 16; 19:25–27; 23:10).

Having proved that Job's motive in serving Him was a pure one, God finally blessed him with double what He had given him before. Those who manifest such a spirit of submission are the ones who get God's best. And remember, Job was an Old Testament saint. If he could rise to such heights, how much more should a New Testament one!

A little over 200 years ago, the Moravian missionary movement, a remarkable work of the Spirit of God, sprang up in what is now Czechoslovakia. It produced some of the finest Christian missionaries of all time, men of such exceptional devotion to the Lord as are rarely seen today. Some of these Moravian believers ventured into Africa with the gospel, and there they came upon a leper colony. They longed to preach the good news of Christ to those lepers, but were forbidden to go among them lest coming out they spread the contagion of the disease elsewhere. So great however was their desire to win those souls for their Lord, that they thereupon decided to enter the colony for life, willing for His sake to live and die there. In another instance Moravian brethren heard of an island in the West Indies which was occupied by a community composed entirely of slaves. Nobody but a slave was permitted to enter there. The burden to win these slaves for Christ was nevertheless intense. Casting away their freedom therefore, they offered themselves as slaves to the master of that island, in order that they might preach the glorious gospel to those slaves.

Why were these men willing to make such a sacrifice? Was it conceivably out of any selfish motive? Was it done to build up their reputation, as seems to

be the purpose of so much Christian work today? Or was it a legalistic service done to curry favour with God? No, not at all. Nothing but pure love for Christ led these men to forsake everything that this world hold dear, in order that from among those lepers and slaves, they might “*win for the Lamb that was slain the reward of His sufferings.*” Those who have accomplished anything of eternal value on earth are invariably those who served their Lord out of love. It was love alone that carried Jacob through the fourteen years of service to win Rachel (*Genesis 29:20*). His love for her made him forget the strain of toil. Love for Christ will take you and me also through the hardest service joyfully.

Love – The Real Test of Our Spirituality

For our final consideration in this chapter, we shall look at our Lord’s resurrection appearance in *John 21:15–17*. Before the crucifixion Peter had denied the Lord three times. This was the culmination of three and a half disappointing years that he had been with the Lord, during which he had proved himself proud, self-assertive and, prayerless. Yet the Lord, when about to entrust Peter with the feeding of His sheep, made no reference to any of these weaknesses. He did not even challenge him to be humble and prayerful in the future and to witness boldly, facing persecution if need be for the sake of his Lord. No, He did not ask any such questions, although these are indeed the qualifications we should look for in a spiritual man, and especially in one who is to be a leader among God’s people. The Lord Jesus

knew that one simple question would be sufficient. If that question found a true response, everything else would automatically follow. “Lovest thou Me more than everything and everyone else?” Love for Christ is the real test of any man’s spirituality. If a man has attained to high rank in the church, even maybe that of a bishop we naturally assume that he must be a spiritual man. It need not necessarily be so. It is the new birth and a consequent love for Christ that makes a man spiritual. It is possible today that a bishop of the church may not even have been born again. Possession of a theological degree – or several – is no guarantee of this either. No, not even passage through a soundly evangelical seminary will make a man spiritual! You may be a full-time Christian worker or the pastor of a congregation, but that does not make you a man of God. All too readily you and I can mistake regular attendance at meetings, or profound Bible-knowledge, or unabated zeal for evangelism as the marks of spirituality.

Distinctive dress and a pious look can deceive us too. But none of them is of any account. The test of genuine spirituality in God’s sight is one thing and one only: the extent of your love for Him. Ultimately that is something between you and your Lord alone. He puts the question: “Lovest thou me?” and it is for you to find the answer.

When Isaac loved Rebekah, what he looked for in return was not her service but her love. In just the same way, what the Lord is expecting from us primarily is not our service but our love. Where there is true love, service will flow spontaneously.

In company with Abraham's servant Rebekah made a 600 mile journey from Mesopotamia to Canaan. What do you suppose they talked about together during that journey? If she really loved Isaac, surely Rebekah would have been enquiring about him all along the way. She would have put endless questions concerning Isaac to her companion and guide. With just such a hunger a believer who really loves the Lord Jesus will read the Bible. Day by day he will invite the Holy Spirit to reveal to him more and yet more of the beauty of his Lord. This as we saw was the one thing desired by David (*Psalms 27:4*).

Down through the ages there have been men who have followed David in this. Samuel Rutherford, lying in a dungeon in Aberdeen, cried out, "Oh my Lord, if there were a broad Hell betwixt me and Thee, if I could not get at Thee except by wading through it, I would not think twice but I would plunge through it all, if I might embrace Thee and call Thee mine." Ah, but unfortunately, how few there are who have such hunger and thirst. May the Lord show us afresh that the measure of our love for Him is the real measure of our spirituality. And lest we deceive ourselves, let us remember the yardstick that He Himself provided. The proof of our love is simply our obedience (*John 14:15, 21, 23, 24*).

In the last book of Bible this solemn truth is confirmed. There the Lord rebukes the church at Ephesus because it had lost sight of the first things (*Revelation 2:1-5*). In other respects it was a remarkable church. The Christians there had laboured with patience, they had hated evil, they had exposed false apostles, they had persevered and endured for the

sake of the Name. Heart and soul they were in the Lord's work and nothing had made them give up. Yet, in spite of all this the Lord had something against them. It constituted so serious a lack as to threaten their very existence as a testimony for Him. They had fallen, He told them, and if they did not repent, He would withdraw from them His anointing, the sign of His approval of their testimony. What was this serious lack? It was just this, that they had grown cold in their love for their Lord. They had not *lost* their first love for Him, they had just *left* it behind and moved elsewhere. They had become so busy with their meetings and retreats and conventions (if we may so speak) and other forms of Christian activity that they had lost sight of the One for whom all these other things existed. Clearly this shows that the Lord cares more for the devotion of our hearts towards Him than for all our activity. The Devil, knowing this, will do his utmost to get us so involved in Christian engagement of one kind and another that we find no time to spend with our blessed Lord and thus let slip our personal devotedness to Him.

Jesus warned us that in the last days sin would so abound in the world that many would become cold in their love to Him (*Matthew 24:12*). We are living in those days now. Among the vast majority of the professed followers of the Lord the spiritual temperature is below freezing point. Unless we ourselves are constantly watchful, we shall find that frigid atmosphere penetrating inside us as well. My brothers and sisters in Christ, even if you lose everything else, do not let go this one thing – your love for your Lord. Like David, preserve it as the one thing that you

desire with all your hearts and that you will seek all the days of your life.

“The greatest...is love. Follow after love.”
(1 Corinthians 13:13, 14:1).

*“What language shall I borrow
To thank Thee dearest Friend,
For this Thy dying sorrow
Thy pity without end?
O make me Thine forever,
And should I fainting be,
Lord, let me never, never
Outlive my love for Thee.”*

CHAPTER 4

One Thing Thou Lackest

*“And when he was gone forth into the way, there came one running, and kneeled to him, and asked him, Good Master, what shall I do that I may inherit eternal life? And Jesus said unto him, Why callest thou me good? there is none good but one, that is, God. Thou knowest the commandments, Do not commit adultery, Do not kill, Do not steal, Do not bear false witness, Defraud not, Honour thy father and mother. And he answered and said unto him, All these have I observed from my youth. Then Jesus beholding him loved him, and said unto him, **One thing thou lackest:** go thy way, sell whatsoever thou hast, and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven: and come, take up thy cross, and follow me. And he was sad at that saying, and went away grieved: for he had great possessions.
(Mark 10:17-22).*

Here we read of a wealthy young man who came to the Lord with much eagerness but went away disappointed. He was an exceptional young man, for he came running to the Lord, thus showing his eagerness to know the truth, and he kneeled, so displaying his humility. Moreover his question revealed an interest in the things of eternity that is rare among young people, and perhaps rarest of all

among the youthful rich. Further, when Jesus spoke to him of the commandments, he could reply without hesitation that he had kept them all. He had never committed adultery, never killed, never stolen, never borne false witness, never defrauded anyone and never dishonoured his father or mother. Since Jesus did not challenge his statement, we must agree that he was a remarkable young man, honest, upright, moral, sincere and keen. But Jesus then put His finger on the one thing still lacking in his life, a thing so important that without it all his other qualifications were of no avail. He was unwilling, because of attachment to material possessions, to take up the cross and to follow the Lord.

We are told in *verse 21* that Jesus beholding him, loved him. Jesus looked at this man and saw the tremendous potential in his young life waiting to be used for the glory of God – or misused for self and the Devil. And He loved him. Today as the Lord looks at young people, He looks at them in just the same way. He sees the possibilities latent in every young life and he also knows how most of these lives are being wasted on things which will not last eternally. Very many young people today are dazzled by such things. Like this young man they go away sorrowful. They are unwilling to pay the price involved in following Jesus, and thus like him they miss the great privilege of fulfilling through their lives the purpose for which they were created and redeemed. The sorrow they choose is theirs for ever.

Many who are familiar with the invitation given by the Lord to heavy-laden sinners in *Matthew 11:28*, are ignorant of the very next words of Jesus on that

occasion. To those who heard His call “*Come unto Me,*” He went on to say, “*Take My yoke upon you and learn of Me*” (*verses 29*). This is really equivalent to Jesus’ words elsewhere: “*Let him take up his cross daily and follow Me.*” But the two statements of Jesus in *Matthew 11:28 & 29* were never meant by Him to be separated. He intended all who came to Him to take up their cross and follow Him, and He expected none to come to Him who was unwilling to follow. The Lord Jesus never presented men with two alternative levels of consecration, one for those who only wanted salvation and an entry to heaven, and another for those who were prepared to take up the cross and follow Him fully. He presented only one standard before men. All who came to Him for forgiveness of sins were to pursue His purpose to its fulfilment. Many Christian preachers present two separate standards, one involving the accepting of Christ as Saviour and the second the accepting of Him as Lord. But this is, in Paul’s words, “*another gospel,*” and not the gospel of Christ that the apostles preached (*Galatians 1:6–9*). Men have separated what God has joined together and this divorce of the two essential ingredients of the Christian message is the cause of so much lack of vitality in the Christian church today.

Perhaps few of us have clearly understood the real implications of bearing the cross. Many of us speak of the incidental burdens of life as our crosses. Others of us see crosses in our physical infirmities. Still others use the metaphor to describe our unruly wives or unloving husbands or disobedient children. I tell you, these are no more our crosses than are

the gold crosses people have around their necks or the stone crosses on church steeples. None of these is the cross that Jesus referred to in the words "Let him take up his cross." The Christian church today has so beautified the cross of Christ as a religious symbol that most people have a wrong impression of what Jesus really meant.

In the times when Jesus walked on earth, the cross was an instrument of death. It was a thing of shame. If you had been living in Jerusalem in those days, and one day you saw a man carrying a cross down the street, surrounded by Roman soldiers, you would have had no doubt at all in your mind as to where that man was going. He was going to the place of execution. He would have said goodbye to his relatives and friends and was now going along a pathway by which he would never return. He had said goodbye to the world and was now leaving that world for ever. Nothing that he possessed in it would he ever see again. And furthermore he was leaving the world by a most shameful and humiliating exit. The death of the cross was a death of ignominy. All this was involved in what Jesus meant when He called men such as this rich young ruler to take up the cross and follow Him. For to follow means to walk the same road and Jesus was on His way to Jerusalem to be crucified. Unless we get this picture of the cross in our minds, we shall never fully understand what Jesus meant when He spoke of the cross in the believer's life.

But there is one other thing that we must note here before we proceed further, and that is that Jesus never compels anyone to carry the cross. We saw in the last chapter that God always respects man's

free will. Jesus said, "**IF** any man will come after me, let him take up his cross" (*Luke 9:23*). There is no compulsion here at all. He desires our voluntary dedication to the whole purpose of God.

On another occasion the Lord Jesus spoke of a corn of wheat falling into the ground and dying and thus producing much fruit (*John 12:24*). There again He was alluding to His forthcoming death on the cross, but the principle of that verse applies to all who seek to live a spiritually fruitful life. A grain of wheat will remain a single grain as long as it stays with the other grains in the granary. If it is to bear fruit it must be separated from all the other grains, and fall into the ground alone, and there die. Then only will it spring forth in a triumphant fruitfulness. So our subject in this chapter is our death with Christ, and once again we shall consider it under three headings. First we shall see that the cross involves a separation; secondly, that the cross means death; and thirdly that the cross brings victory and fruitfulness.

The Cross Involves a Separation

On the hill of Calvary, in the hour when Jesus was crucified, two thieves, condemned with Him, hung on either side with Jesus in the middle. For the hour of their suffering they were thus separated, if only physically, by the cross of Jesus. In the outcome they were eternally separated, one to perdition and the other to be with Him for ever.

This is a picture of what the cross of Jesus always does. It separates men who choose the light from men who choose the darkness. Yes, it separates.

There are many sincere Christians today who feel that any attempt to separate mankind always has its source in the Devil, and that every movement towards unity always originates from God. This, however, is only because they are not familiar with the Bible. The Bible talks about separation in its very first paragraph. In *Genesis 1:3* we read about the creation of light, and in *verse 4* we read that God saw that this light was good. Thereupon He separated the light from the darkness. Had He allowed the two to mingle they might have produced some form of twilight; but this could scarcely have served the life-giving purpose for which God had created light. Thus we see that God was the first person to make a separation. He is a God of distinctiveness, and right through the Bible we find this principle clearly laid down. Moreover from a “separation of principle” it soon comes to involve a separation of people. God forbade Israel to mix in intermarriages with the other nations because they were themselves to be a light to the nations who sat in darkness. In the New Testament for the same reason the church is clearly told to be separate from the world (*2 Corinthians 6:14*). In fact, the very Greek word “*ekklesia*”, which is translated “*church*” in the English versions, itself means a “*a called-out company*.”

The church and the world thus have something in common with the two thieves who hung there at Calvary on either side of Jesus. Both men were originally wicked, but one was forgiven and justified because he repented. The other continued in his sin and died unforgiven. So their eternal destinies were different, just as are those of the church and the

world. For the spirit of the world is wholly contrary to the Spirit of God, loving the darkness and turning away from the light. It chooses its own destiny – and finds it.

Alas, this separation to God can at times mean a separation from the religious world also. When what passes as the Christian church lives according to the spirit of this world and not according to the Spirit of God, and is guided by the tradition of men instead of by the Word of God, a choice may be forced upon us. At the very hour when the Lord Jesus was being crucified outside the city of Jerusalem, the priests and religious leaders were worshipping God in the temple, inside the city. They had crucified the Son of God, but in their blindness were carrying on with their empty religious rituals, in the belief that God was pleased with them! Both in His life and in His death the Lord Jesus Himself was outside all religious formalism, and so will His true disciples be (*John 16:2*). There are many professing Christian churches today that, like the church in Laodicea, have placed themselves in the same position as those Jews. They are carrying on their activities, thinking that all is well with them, while in truth all the while the Lord Himself is outside their church door (*Revelation 3:14, 20*).

There is a story of an African-American in the early twentieth century, who had recently accepted the Lord, and who went to attend a church service in a certain city in the Southern United States. Not realizing that colour discrimination extended to the Christian church as well, and that this particular church was exclusively for whites, he was surprised when the ushers refused to let him enter the building.

He went away disappointed and told the Lord about the matter in prayer. The Lord replied (so the story goes): “Don’t worry, My son, I Myself have been trying to get inside that church ever since it came into existence, and have not yet succeeded; so don’t be surprised when you too are turned away.” When it is religious formalism or church tradition that rules rather than the Word of God social prejudice such as this easily gets a grip upon men’s hearts. The Christian who takes up his cross and follows Jesus will find himself separate in spirit from a Christianity that displays such worldly features. But to be thus separate is never an easy task.

Today all the talk is of ecumenical unity among Christian churches. Consequently many are afraid to preach separation, fearing lest their congregations regard them as uncharitable and un-Christlike. It is therefore good for us to bear in mind the words of Jesus in *Luke 12:51, 52*, lest we get an unbalanced picture of what true Christ-likeness is. Jesus emphatically stated there that He had come to bring division. Of course there is a unity which is wholly in accordance with Scripture. It is the unity which Jesus spoke of in *John 17*, which takes its character from the unity of the Godhead (“*in us*,” *verse 21*), and it is significant that in this same chapter Jesus spoke very strongly about separation also (*verse 16*). And equally it is the unity referred to in *Ephesians 4:3*, the unity brought about by the Holy Spirit. This is one thing. A man-made unity is quite another. The latter can have no better future than the unity manifested at the Tower of Babel (*Genesis 11:1–9*).

Separation from the world is in fact a leading theme of the New Testament. Before He went to the cross Jesus told His disciples that they did not belong to the world. Jesus was Himself one apart – “*not of this world*.” And He affirmed that His disciples were just as truly other-worldly. And because they did not belong to it, He told them, that they would find this world a difficult place to live in (*John 15:19; 17:16*). It is the disciple’s responsibility to keep himself unspotted from the world (*James 1:27*). For the church is Christ’s bride, loved, won and sanctified, by Him (*Ephesians 5:25–27*). This explains Paul’s “godly jealousy” over the Corinthian believers. He desired, he said, to present them as a pure virgin to Christ, and he feared lest the Devil corrupt them (*2 Corinthians 11:2, 3*). This explains too the extremely strong words, “*Ye adulterers and adulteresses*,” addressed by James to believers who showed themselves friendly with the spirit of the world (*4:4*). Yes, the Bible has much to say on separation.

But let us be clear in our minds that what the Bible speaks of is not a separation in terms of distance. It is not an *outward*, physical separation from the people of the world at all, but one of the *heart*. Many have thought that by dwelling as hermits in some lonely place where they have no contact with the people of the world, they could draw near to God. The monk who sequesters himself in a monastery, or the nun who retires within the walls of a convent, has not understood the meaning of separation as the Bible teaches it. Neither does this separation mean the wearing of white or saffron-coloured clothes, or any other uniform. Jesus Himself never preached or

practised any such means of outward distinction. What He taught and practised was a freedom from the spirit of this world, even while living in the midst of it.

We are beings in an alien element. A ship in mid-ocean is surrounded by water, and yet no sea-water penetrates inside the ship. When a believer lives like that, he is bound to face ridicule and opposition from the world sooner or later. The world will quickly become an uncomfortable place for him to live. Jesus warned His disciples in advance that this hostility would ensue as an inevitable consequence of following Him (*John 16:33*). If a Christian belongs to heaven, then earth is obviously not his natural sphere. He is a fish out of water, and need not be surprised if he finds it difficult to carry on his existence here. It would need a miracle to keep a fish alive on land, and it needs no less a miracle for the true church of Christ to exist on earth. But that is just what God intends the Christian life to be – a life of daily dependence on His miracle-working power.

God expects to see, between His people and the spirit of this world, a great gulf fixed, a gulf as deep and as wide as that which separates Paradise from Hell (*Luke 16:26*), a gulf never to be bridged or crossed. Freedom from the spirit of the world has always been God's desire for His own. Many a believer, unfortunately, has yet to learn this lesson, and until he does so remains powerless and frustrated.

It was such a freedom of spirit that, once learned, brought Abraham to the place of power and fruitfulness. This is clearly pictured for us in *Genesis 22*.

There the Lord told Abraham to offer up his only son. This was not because He wanted Isaac slain, (as is evident from *verse 12*) but to free Abraham from any inordinate love for the boy. Abraham's usefulness as a servant of God was here in view. God wanted him to be free of any selfish possessiveness in his attitude towards Isaac. He wanted him continually to hold Isaac as a Divine gift.

When the Lord either withholds or removes from us material possessions and other things that we hold dear, He is dealing with us as He dealt with Abraham. This was why He asked the rich young man to sell all that he had. He was too attached to his money. Material things are not sinful in themselves. It is when they become a hindrance to our following the Lord that they become sinful. This too is why the Lord allows trials to come within our family circle – in order to detach us from inordinate affection for our loved ones (cf. *Luke 14:26, 27*). True separation involves our holding everything that we have in trust, as belonging not to ourselves but to the Lord, and as given to us to use for His glory.

We may count ourselves to be the children of God, but unless we have accepted this aspect of the cross of Christ in all its costliness, we shall not enjoy the privileges of sonship that God intends for all His sons and daughters (*2 Corinthians 6:14–18*). Brothers and sisters, there is wealth undreamed of, that God intends us to have. We have not yet received it, and He is still unable to give it to us, because our hearts are distracted and our hands full with this world and its things.

The Cross Means Death

If we really accept the cross that Jesus spoke of to His followers, it must mean death for us. When the corn of wheat falls into the ground, is trampled under foot and finally has its shining outer shell cracked open, it is no longer beautiful. In exactly the same way, a believer who takes up his cross and follows Jesus ceases to be attractive to this world. The world despises him. There may have been many things that it admired in him formerly, but not now. Like his Lord, he is now despised and rejected by men.

Just as in Old Testament times the fire consumed the sacrifice that was placed upon the altar and reduced it to ashes, so the cross of Christ puts a man to death. Real consecration to the Lord always means that. The fire of God will so consume every life that is yielded to Him that that soul can no longer live for himself or for the world, but only for God. He will be dead to this world and this world will be dead to him (*Galatians 6:14*). There is a lot of superficial consecration among Christians today that fails to take this fact into account. But “let him take up his cross” is what the Saviour said, and this is the only consecration that is acceptable to God. No Old Testament sacrifice was accepted by God which was not consumed by fire upon the altar. We may have often given ourselves to God to receive His blessing, but have we ever yielded ourselves to Him to be put to death in this way? Have we allowed God to take away from us whatever He pleases and to shatter all the ambitions and plans we have made for ourselves, reducing them to ashes? That is what the cross means.

It is indeed surprising to see Christians professing to follow the Lord Jesus, yet seeking at the same time to be accepted and popular in a world which crucified and rejected Him. Theirs can scarcely be other than a counterfeit Christianity. Acceptance and popularity in the world, or even in Christian circles, for that matter, are no indications of God’s blessing. On the contrary they are something of which Jesus Himself warned us constantly to beware (*Luke 6:26*). To Him it did not matter in the least whether the world accepted Him or rejected Him, for in His spirit He had died to this world long before He went to the cross. He did not go out of His way to make Himself unpopular with the world, but on the other hand it did not disturb Him if doing the will of His Father had this effect.

That is to be the spirit of the disciple as well. That is why Paul called himself “a fool for Christ’s sake” (*1 Corinthians 4:10*) – F.F.C.S. – a degree we may well feel is far more to be coveted than an F.R.C.S. or any other worldly qualification! Everywhere Paul went there were those who despised him as a fool. But none of these things moved him. Like his Master he had died to this world.

In a certain town there was a man who used to witness for his Lord by walking through the streets wearing placards on his body with Bible verses written on them. (In the West they call them “sandwich boards.”) As a result he was the butt of ridicule on the part of many in the town. One day when he went out, on the front placard he had substituted these words: “I am a fool for Christ’s sake,” and on the back: “Whose fool are you?”

Do we understand this, brothers and sisters, that if we are not willing to be fools for Christ's sake, we shall be fools of the Devil, whether we realize it or not? Accepting the cross means accepting the position of death to this world, so that it no longer matters whether the world praises or criticises. This is often the "one thing lacking" in many young people, which considerably restricts and often totally hinders their effective service for the Lord. We may have many educational qualifications, and possess many gifts and talents, but all these will be of no avail in the Lord's service, if we lack this one thing.

The cross not only means death to this world. It also means death to our own wills. This is more difficult than what we have been considering so far, for it means that we no longer have our own way, but choose the Lord's way. It also means that we no longer stand up for our own rights. We no longer retaliate when other people hurt us. This is the standard of life that Jesus held up to His disciples in the sermon on the mount (*Matthew 5, 6 & 7*). How different this is from the type of life that we see around us every day – and not only in the unbeliever, but alas, in many believers too! Many have looked at the standard set by Jesus in those chapters and said that it is too difficult to live by. *It is not too difficult; it is impossible!* Unless we are willing to accept the cross in our daily life, such a life is an impossibility. But when our lives are yielded to the lordship of Christ, we can joyfully refuse to fight back and meekly submit to all that men may do to us, because we know that God has permitted them to treat us thus.

This was Jesus' attitude during His trial. He could have called 72,000 angels to His help with a word, yet He refused to do so. Meekly He submitted to being falsely accused, insulted, beaten and crucified, believing that His Father had allowed it all. At His trial Jesus was treated like a worm (*Psalms 22:6*), spurned and trodden under foot. The difference between a snake and a worm is that if you tread upon the former it will strike back, whereas with the latter, even if you trample it or crush it, it will never retaliate. In the one you have the spirit of the Devil, in the other of God's Son. When people harm us, or insult us or trample upon our rights, what we manifest in return will always be one of these spirits. Which has it been so far?

Have you been grossly and humiliatingly insulted? If you accept the cross, it means that you are willing to let the Holy Spirit tie your tongue so that you do not speak back in the same tone to your accuser, and chain your hand so that you do not write back a stinging reply, and melt your heart so that you return love for hatred, blessing for cursing and kindness for harshness. Your friends and your own injured self may tell you, in such a situation, not to accept the humiliation lying down, and not to let the other person get away with his insults. But the Holy Spirit will point you to the pathway of the cross and say, "No, do nothing, say nothing. Instead let Me love that person through you."

Which voice are you going to listen to? You are going to face situations like this every day, and often many times a day, as long as you live in this sinful world – and sometimes the provocation may come

even from believers! Remember on every such occasion you have only two courses open to you. You will either accept willingly death to yourself, or else you will crucify your Lord afresh. The world cannot crucify Christ again, but there is a sense in which believers can (*Hebrews 6:6*). We do so every time we refuse to accept the cross in our own lives. It is our refusal of the way of the cross in such situations that paralyzes our spiritual life. Accept the cross there, and we shall not only fill our heart with joy; we shall also pave the way for great fruitfulness.

Let me repeat here what I said earlier, that to accept the cross in this way means that we no longer want our own way in anything, but only the Lord's way. This was implied in the prayer of Jesus Himself in Gethsemane: "Not my will but Thine be done." It is implied too in the use Paul makes of the marriage relationship to illustrate our union with Christ: "As the church is subject to Christ, so let wives be to their own husbands in everything" (*Ephesians 5:24*). What does that submission mean? Surely it can only mean the crucifixion of our own wills, that henceforth we may do His will alone. This was the spirit of Christ when He went to the cross, and it was because of this spirit in Him that He could rout the forces of darkness there.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, have you so yielded yourselves to Him that you desire nothing but His will, even though it may mean saying No! to your own will again and again? There is always a cross in the pathway of those who seek to do the will of God.

Further, just as death transports a man from this world to another, even so the acceptance of the cross

transports the believer to the plane of the kingdom of Christ (*Colossians 1:13*). At once he begins to look at this world from a different standpoint and with an altogether new sense of values. Money, worldly goods, people, all are now looked at in the light of the cross, in the light of eternity, in the light of Christ's kingdom. People are no longer seen by him as rich and poor, or great and small, or on their different social levels. They are all seen as souls for whom Christ died (*2 Corinthians 5:16*).

To such a man, money and material things no longer have their old attractiveness. The things of eternity shine with greater lustre. He sees this whole world and everything in it as already condemned by God, and therefore assuredly going to pass away one day. Henceforth he lives only to do the will of God and to lay up treasure in heaven (*1 John 2:17; 1 Peter 4:1-3*). It is a grief to see children of God looking at people and material things in the same way as an unbeliever looks at them – through worldly eyes. Such a soul has never known the true meaning of the cross of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Would you care to test yourself? Are you concerned to know how far you come short? You only have to read through *Matthew chapters 5, 6 & 7*, and honestly ask yourself how many of those commands of Jesus you have never even thought it necessary to obey.

The Cross Brings Victory

Does all we have been saying seem rather gloomy? The message of the cross has a brighter side – a positive one. It is this, that the cross is not an end in itself.

It is a pathway to the resurrection life. There is a joy set before all who are willing to accept the working of the cross (*Hebrews 12:2*). The corn of wheat that falls into the ground and dies does not remain there forever; it springs forth into a triumphant fruitfulness. The believer who accepts the pathway of the cross, no matter how much he may be misunderstood by others, will ultimately be vindicated by God. Fruitfulness comes through death to Self. Some of this fruit we may see even while on earth, but all of it will be seen only at the judgment seat of Christ, when the Lord will reward His faithful ones.

The life of Joseph affords a wonderful example of this. It was a painful experience for him to be sold by his own brethren whom he loved, and to end up as a slave in a strange country. Nevertheless he made no complaints while in Potiphar's house, but faithfully carried out the work assigned to him; and when Potiphar's wife falsely accused him, he remained faithful to God. Flung in jail, he still did not complain, but accepted everything as permitted by God, and harboured no bitterness against anyone. Forgotten there by Pharaoh's ungrateful butler, Joseph still bore no grudge against God or man. The outcome of all this was that he finally became Prime Minister of Egypt. God honours those who honour Him (*1 Samuel 2:30*). He did so then, and He does so even today. It may not always be public honour in the world's eyes as in Joseph's case, but Divine honour nevertheless. How much we miss when we avoid the pathway of the cross!

But the story is not finished. Even after Joseph rose to supreme rank and had all power in Egypt,

he sought no revenge on Potiphar's wife nor on his brethren, but forgave them freely. Many a believer has initially walked as Joseph walked, submitting to the suffering of the cross at every step. But then success has come and he has been honoured and exalted by God. And tragically, with it has come pride and selfishness and the lust for revenge.

Joseph was not like that. He remained the same humble man, whether he was in the jail or on the throne. What a remarkable man he was! This attitude is what God appreciates and ever delights to honour. It is the spirit of His Son. When it is missing in us, He has to say that one essential thing is lacking in our lives. It was not through His miracles, nor yet through the messages that He preached that the Lord Jesus brought Satan to nought. *Hebrews 2:14* tells us that it was through His death that He rendered the Devil powerless. If the Lord Himself defeated Satan only through death, then surely His disciples cannot defeat him in any other way. Many have the idea that if only they could do a few miracles in the Name of Jesus, the Devil would be defeated. But the Devil has yielded to no other weapon than the Cross of Christ. When a believer refuses steadfastly to accept any other way than the way of the cross in his life, he will find that the Devil is powerless against him. It is only the man who submits joyfully and completely to all of God's dealings with him, whom the Bible commands to resist the Devil and who will find the Devil fleeing from him (*James 4:7*). It is folly to resist the Devil if we have not first submitted ourselves to God.

The way of the cross is the only way of victory. That is why Satan tried his best to prevent Jesus from going that way. That is also why Satan is constantly trying to prevent men and women from accepting that way for their lives. Peter sought, in well-meant love, to prevent Jesus from going through the suffering of the cross, but Jesus instantly recognized the voice of Satan there (*Matthew 16:21–23*). Our friends and relatives may give us similar advice too, when our pathway is hard. But remember that the voices we hear, whether inside our hearts or from others, that would divert us from the way of the cross are always the whisperings of the Devil. Do we always recognize them as such?

In the book of Revelation we see the Lord Jesus as the slain Lamb. There we have heaven's view of Calvary. In the eyes of man, Calvary was a defeat. We have no account of any unbeliever seeing Jesus after His resurrection, and Calvary is therefore still viewed as a defeat by man. But in heaven's eyes, Calvary was the greatest victory ever won on earth. On earth they crucified the Lamb of God, but in heaven they worship Him. When, in following Jesus, you surrender your rights, men on earth may say that you have no backbone, but in heaven there will be rejoicing over a child of God who has taken a position of victory. "They overcame him (Satan) ... they loved not their lives unto the death (of the cross) ... Therefore rejoice ye heavens" (*Revelation 12:11, 12*).

In *Psalms 124:7*, we have the Christian life pictured in the symbol of a bird that has escaped from a snare. A bird soaring in the sky is a perfect picture of the glorious liberty that God wants all His children

to experience. Mountains and rivers can hinder the onward course of earthbound creatures, but not of a bird. It soars high over them all. God created man in order that he might be like that bird, perfectly free, having dominion over everything and subduing everything under him (*Genesis 1:28*). But man's disobedience has made him like a bird trapped in a snare, unable to fly.

Only the cross can break that snare and set us free. There is no other way. Accept death to this world and to your own self, and you will therein die to the Devil's power as well. His hold upon you will be broken, and nothing can then prevent you from soaring upwards like that bird. That is true liberty – and that is what the Holy Spirit seeks to bring in our lives (*2 Corinthians 3:17*). But the way of the cross is the only pathway to that liberty.

As in the earlier chapters, this message too has a special application to the last days in which we are living. In *2 Timothy 3:1–8* these days are described. Men, we are told there, will primarily be lovers of themselves. Consequently they will manifest in their character all that is most contrary to the spirit of the cross. It is not surprising therefore that when persecution increases against Christians, many will be offended (*Matthew 24:9, 10*). Many Christians who have all their lives been satisfied with superficial Christian activity will turn away from the Lord at that time, because their Christianity had all along been regulated by their convenience and not by the demands of the cross of Christ. In *Mark 4:17* Jesus speaks of such Christians as those who do not have any root. Their Christianity was superficial. Whenever

God sought to strengthen its roots by giving them opportunities to accept the cross in their lives, they always avoided it.

There is only one pathway that can lead a man into the fullness of life that there is in Christ. We can walk along other paths if we like, but we shall never fulfil God's purpose along any other road. All our gifts and talents will only be wasted if we avoid the pathway of the cross in our lives. We can accept it or reject it – the choice is entirely ours.

Sadhu Sundar Singh used to say that, when we reach heaven, there will be no second chance to bear the cross for Jesus's sake. We may reject it now, but we shall have no opportunity in eternity to follow in the blood-stained path that Jesus walked in. When we meet our blessed Lord, He will yet have nail prints in His hands and feet. What will it be then to look back over our own earthly lives and find that we carefully avoided the cross at every step? God grant, rather, that at every step we may yield to it, and thus have no regrets in that day.

“Always delivered unto death ... always led in triumph.” (2 Corinthians 4:11; 2:14)

*“Jesus, I my cross have taken,
All to leave and follow Thee;
Destitute, despised, forsaken,
Thou from hence my all shalt be;
Perish every fond ambition
All I've sought and hoped and known;
Yet how rich is my condition,
God and heaven are still my own.”*

CHAPTER 5

One Thing I Do

*“But what things were gain to me, those I counted loss for Christ. Yea doubtless, and I count all things but loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord: for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and do count them but dung, that I may win Christ, and be found in him, not having mine own righteousness, which is of the law, but that which is through the faith of Christ, the righteousness which is of God by faith: that I may know him, and the power of his resurrection, and the fellowship of his sufferings, being made conformable unto his death; if by any means I might attain unto the resurrection of the dead. Not as though I had already attained, either were already perfect: but I follow after, if that I may apprehend that for which also I am apprehended of Christ Jesus. Brethren, I count not myself to have apprehended: but this **one thing I do**, forgetting those things which are behind, and reaching forth unto those things which are before, I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus.”*
Philippians 3:7-14.

Let us first of all remind ourselves that these words of the apostle were not written by a young enthusiast starting out on the Christian road. They are the testimony of a mature Christian towards the close

of a rich and full life. Thirty years had passed since Paul's conversion. During those years God had used him to establish many churches, mightily attesting his ministry with signs and miracles. From the first Paul had spent himself unstintingly in the work of the gospel, travelling constantly and undergoing great hardships. He had come to know the reality of victory over sin as he grew in likeness to his Lord. And among his many joys he had had one unique experience of being, as he put it, lifted up into the third heaven to receive remarkable revelations of spiritual truth.

Yet at the end of all this, he states that he still has not attained to all that God had purposed for his life. Here is one of the greatest Christians of all time saying towards the end of his life that he still needs to press on to the goal. To most believers, alas, salvation begins and ends with the new birth and its assured escape from Divine judgement. Not so for the apostle, nor indeed for anyone else who seeks like him to be a true disciple of Christ. Here in this passage he declares his firm belief that Christ had laid hold of him with a purpose. He, in return, was determined to lay hold of that purpose at any cost. This is a tremendous and solemn truth, that when the Lord lays hold of us at conversion, it is with a purpose extending far, far beyond just the saving of our souls out of hell fire and into heaven. If so mature a man as the apostle Paul had to say at the end of thirty years of untiring Christian service that he had not yet attained, but had still to strive to fulfil all of God's purpose for his life, what a vast thing that purpose must be.

Paul goes even further in this passage. To him everything that the world considers as precious is worthless rubbish, when compared to this supreme objective of grasping the purpose of God and fulfilling it. He considers this a prize worth the giving up of everything in the world (*verse 14*). When we look around us and see believers coveting worldly possessions and clinging to material things, giving these a greater place in their lives than the things of God, we are forced to conclude that their Christianity is very far removed from Paul's.

It is a mark of spiritual infancy to think of salvation only in terms of an insurance policy to escape the flames of Hell. When we mature spiritually, we realize that God has saved us in order that we might walk each day in the pathway that He has already planned for each one of us from eternity (*Ephesians 2:10*). That pathway was what Paul called God's purpose for his life. If we are satisfied with having received His grace, but are uncommitted to fulfilling His will for our lives, then no matter how thoroughly evangelical we may be, we shall go through life without accomplishing anything of lasting value to God. Of course the Devil's first aim is by one means or another to blind people to the grace of God in Christ Jesus, thus preventing them from being saved (*2 Corinthians 4:4*). But if he does not succeed there, then his next aim is to blind that new believer to the fact that God has a very definite plan for him. To a large extent he has succeeded here. There are thousands of true believers who never seek the will of God with any degree of earnestness, even in major decisions that they make in their lives.

The Christian life is depicted in this passage in Philippians as one in which we have to be continually pressing on. No degree of spiritual maturity attainable on earth will ever absolve us from this need of constant urgency. It is because many believers have neglected this lesson that they have no living testimony. Their only testimony relates to an experience in the distant past when on a blessed day they perhaps raised their hand or signed a decision-card in some evangelistic meeting. That was wonderful, but nothing has happened since! *Proverbs 24:30-34* with its picture of a garden gone to waste, describes the condition of the man who relaxes after his salvation. A garden requires *constant* weeding and caring, if it is to be guarded against weeds and nettles – and so does the human soul.

I think it was John Wesley who made it a rule in the early Methodist testimony meetings that no one was to give a testimony that was more than one week old. *Anyone who had no story to tell of the Lord's dealings with him during the previous seven days, was to consider himself a backslider.* How many of us can stand that test? Would we have to sit glumly silent in a meeting of that nature?

Notice Paul's words in *verses 13, 14*: "This one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind, and reaching forth unto those things which are before, I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus." Here we have one more of the priorities for the Christian. Understanding God's purpose and pressing on to attain it is not an *optional extra* for the spiritual elite. It should characterize the life of every true child of God.

Once more we shall consider our subject from three standpoints. First, we shall consider the things that can hinder us from pressing on to God's full purpose; secondly the power that can strengthen us to press on; and finally the attitude of mind that can keep us doing so to the end of our lives.

The Things that Can Hinder Us

When God delivered the Israelites out of Egypt. He had marked out a route for them to travel in the wilderness on their way to Canaan. They however could know it only as they followed the pillar of cloud and fire, day by day. For each of His redeemed children today, God has a pathway marked out too. But they can know it only as they walk with Him each day. If we are to fully lay hold of the purpose for which God has laid hold of us, we must learn to walk with God. And here is where we shall find resistance from Satan at every step. Even as thieves invade the homes of the rich more than of the poor, Satan aims his darts more at the believer who is spiritually minded than at the one who is carnally minded. We shall therefore find the battle getting thicker with every step of progress in spiritual maturity.

There are many forces that seek to hinder the believer who would press on to do all of God's will: the world with its varied attractions, the flesh with its unclean lusts, and the Devil with his subtle devices. If these are hindrances to the believer's spiritual growth, we may wonder why God does not eliminate them, or at least protect the believer from them. This has been a problem that has plagued many minds

down the centuries. Sufficient here for us to know that it is our heavenly Father, who is wiser than all of us, who has permitted these forces to exist. One good reason at least may be in order that our spiritual strength may be built up. Even in the physical realm, our muscles can be built up only as we subject them to resistance through exercise. Otherwise our muscles will be flabby and powerless. A wrestler who is training for a bout will need constant exercise, wrestling with others in order to fit himself for the event. In the same way our spiritual strength can never be developed if we are protected from the trials and temptations of the world, the flesh and the Devil.

It should bring us strong consolation to know however that the Lord Jesus was Himself tempted with every single temptation that comes to us (*Hebrews 4:15*). Luke tells us that Jesus went into the wilderness, “full of the Holy Spirit,” and that at the end of the temptation, He returned “in the power of the Spirit” (*4:1, 14*). Overcoming the temptations common to man had strengthened even Him, as a man. Can it not do the same for us? Let us never imagine that we can become spiritually strong just by reading Christian books and attending religious meetings. Such activities are the equivalent of taking food, but along with our food we need exercise too if we are to be strong. That is why those who cut themselves off from contact with the people of the world and live protected Christian lives never become spiritually robust.

Holiness is like health. To be fully healthy, we need to take regular exercise. Then only can we resist disease. Thus to be made perfect, we have to

go through temptation and overcome it. If we evade testing, we can never be made perfect. This suggests another reason why God placed the forbidden fruit in the Garden of Eden. It gave Adam the opportunity to overcome temptation and to become positively holy. There is no need for us to fear temptation. The Lord has assured us in *1 Corinthians 10:13* that He will never allow us to be tempted above our ability to bear it.

Psalm 66:10–12 is one of those wonderful Old Testament passages that suggest what tremendous benefits can come to us through trial and testing. The fire and the water make us not only spiritually wealthy but spiritually healthy too. The men of God in the Bible were all subject to the same temptations that plague us. *James 5:17* tells us that even Elijah had the same lusts and passions to overcome as we have. It was because these men of God overcame in their trials and testings, that they became strong, and thus usable in God’s hands. God permits temptation to come to us in order to test us. Everyone who would be used by God must be tested. The temptations that come to us when we are alone are meant to prove our fitness for more public service. Overcoming temptation is like learning to swim. You cannot learn to swim in one day. But if you are determined, you will sooner or later acquire the skill. Then you are no longer afraid of the water. In just the same way, if we are determined, we shall learn the secret in Christ of victory over temptation, and then of that too we shall no longer be afraid.

Let us consider briefly the three temptations that came to the Lord Jesus in *Matthew chapter 4*. We

shall find if we study them that it is along the same lines that the Devil comes to us too. The three temptations described here seem to have been the Devil's final attempt, at the end of forty days of temptation, to knock down the Lord. They were the three last weapons in his hand, but the Lord overcame them all.

The *first* temptation came along the line of *the natural appetites of the body*, in this case the desire for food (*verses 3, 4*). It is significant that both Eve and Esau were also tempted along this line (*Genesis 3:6; 25:34*), but where they failed Jesus conquered. To all men and women the Devil comes today with this same temptation to satisfy the natural appetites of the body outside the means appointed by God for their satisfaction. The desire for food, rest, sexual fulfilment and the like, are normal appetites that God Himself has endowed us with, and God has also prescribed the ways and means by which these appetites are legitimately to be satisfied. But when we seek to gratify these appetites outside God's appointed means for their satisfaction, or when we over-indulge these natural cravings of the body, then we sin. The Devil tempts us very subtly here. There will be no open appeal to sin - only a call to satisfy a legitimate craving of the body, but in an illegitimate way. Give way to over-indulgence in the matter of eating food, and we end up as gluttons, unable to go without food for even a single day. Thus our usefulness to God becomes seriously hampered. The same holds good if, like sluggards, we have not learnt the discipline of getting out of bed early in the morning to have a quiet time with God.

In the West today, the Devil has found a large following in those who subscribe to the so-called

"new morality." Unfortunately this philosophy is now creeping into the East also. It teaches that in the realm of sexual desire there is no need to exercise any self-control whatsoever. Vast multitudes are swallowing this philosophy of license wholesale. Their refusal to love the truth has ended in their believing a lie (*2 Thessalonians 2:10-12*).

Samson and David were lured by Satan through lust. David could conquer Goliath, but not his own lust. Many are the mighty men who have fallen here. The one who is careless or undisciplined in this area of life will be an easy target for Satan. Take for example modern fashions in women's clothes. They seem designed to uncover ever larger areas of the body which God intended to be covered, as *Genesis 3:21* makes clear. Fashion design, together with the exposure of naked flesh that is shown in the cinema and brazenly advertised on roadside posters and in newspapers and magazines, are together part of a carefully planned strategy of Satan to enslave men totally in their own lusts. If in these wicked days we are to subdue our lustful desires we shall have to discipline our eyes as Job did (*Job 31:1*). We must refuse to look at or to read anything that would enflame those desires. David sinned because he did not control his eyes (*2 Samuel 11:2*). Having learnt a bitter lesson thereby, he later prayed that God would help him to discipline his eyes (*Psalms 119:37*). We too would do well to make that our earnest prayer.

The Apostle Paul was very conscious of the fact that over-indulgence of the natural appetites of the body would disqualify him for the Lord's service. He therefore severely disciplined his body and kept it

in constant subjection to God (*1 Corinthians 9:27*). Thousands have disqualified themselves for the Lord's service through indiscipline in this realm.

The *second* temptation that came to Jesus was the temptation to *presumption*. He was asked by the Devil to cast Himself down from the pinnacle of the temple and to arrive spectacularly, unhurt, in the midst of the crowd in the temple court below. For protection He was to claim the promise in *Psalms 91:11, 12*. Here the enticement was to do something spectacular in order to display His trust in God: to jump when God had not asked Him to.

Today there is a great craze for the spectacular and some sections of the Christian church have succumbed to it. The Devil is constantly urging believers to do something adventurous and out-of-the-ordinary, that will display their faith in God. Many have gone completely astray from the pathway God planned for them by following these urgings of Satan.

There are many others who have rushed forward into some course of action without patiently waiting for God's time and God's leading, and have thereby made shipwreck of their lives. As one has said, "We must be in His path and move in it at His time and at His pace if we would have His protection and claim His promises." In the life of the Lord Jesus we have the perfect example of One who always moved forward under His Father's direction, governed only by His Father's will and time and never by the urgings of Satan or of men. He would say to those who urged Him, "My time has not yet come" (*John 7:6*); that is to say, "I can only move when my Father tells me to." King Saul lost his kingdom because

he rushed ahead without waiting for God's time (*1 Samuel 13:8-14*). Many believers have missed God's best in just the same way. Many, for example, have rushed into marriage without awaiting God's will in the matter. Having acted in haste they are now repenting at leisure! Brothers and sisters, learn to wait patiently for the Lord's time and then you will never need to regret. He will never disappoint those who wait for Him (*Isaiah 49:23*).

In the *third* temptation the Devil showed Jesus all *the kingdoms of the world and the glory of them*. All would be given to Jesus, he said, if only He would fall down and worship him. Here again is a temptation that comes to all of us. It is the temptation to compromise our Christian principles for the sake of some personal gain.

There are many things that we can obtain in the world if only we are prepared to compromise our principles and bow our knee to the Devil. One of them is money. It is one of the biggest attractions. Frequently believers are tempted to lower their standards for the sake of making a little more money. When we seek employment, are we not governed more by the salary that can be expected than by the will of God? Consequently it becomes very easy for the Devil to lead us out of the mainstream of God's purpose for our lives. This was the error of Balaam, and many are taking this road today (*2 Peter 2:15; Jude 11; cf. Numbers 22*). Do we realize that this is really bowing the knee to the Devil? Then there are Christians who adopt unscrupulous worldly methods to "collect money for the Lord's work," as they would say. No matter how good the end in view, God can never

sanction unrighteous means to reach it. God does not want us to win the world by bowing our knees to His usurper. If we would follow the Lord wholly, let us beware of the attractions of money. Jesus warned us to despise it if we would hold on to God (*Luke 16:13*).

Then there is the lure of status, the temptation to become famous or prominent. Many are the compromises that the soul seeking earthly fame must make. Even in Christian circles and in the work of the Lord, there is this very same temptation. There is something within all of us, that craves the limelight. We all like to be admired and respected by others. It gives us an inner satisfaction to be “the life and soul of the party,” the focus of all eyes, the one who stands out head and shoulders above all those around us. Even in the church, what a temptation it often is to display ourselves as better or more gifted than others in singing or in preaching, or even in praying! We are tempted to elevate ourselves in the esteem of men at the expense of our fellow believers. All this is totally contrary to the spirit of Christ.

Or take again the appeal to the Christian preacher. How often is he tempted to be more “broad-minded,” to avoid emphasizing Bible doctrines that are distasteful to his hearers, to refrain from denouncing sin or covetousness in his preaching! Let him avoid giving offense to the wealthy and influential and gain a wider hearing. But at what price? Essentially at the price of bowing his knee to the Devil, from whom all these suggestions originate. Every preacher is tempted along these lines at one time or the other. Many, alas,

have yielded, unaware of the ultimate complicity with Satan that underlies all such compromise.

An avenue along which temptation frequently comes to younger men and women is in the matter of marriage. We have spoken already of the danger of haste in this matter, where nothing can be lost through waiting for God’s time. But there are other, more serious temptations. Many believers have flagrantly disobeyed what they knew to be the clear teaching of God’s Word, and have married unbelievers. Tragically it is just at this critical point that so many who stood courageously for Christ in student days have fallen down later. Often a life which had begun to be of great use to God has had its entire usefulness nullified by compromise on this issue. This is the price of bowing the knee to Satan.

In India the pressures brought to bear upon young people at the time when they have to choose their life partners are very great. There are pressures from parents and relatives who may be neither converted nor sympathetic. There are financial pressures caused by sheer poverty, or by the iniquitous system of dowry. And the saddest of all, there are social pressures arising from the retention, even after conversion to Christianity, of this country’s heathenish caste system. Not surprisingly, many a young Christian has finally succumbed to these pressures brought upon him by the Devil, and consented to an unspiritual match.

Satan has countless plausible arguments to deceive us. “Do not,” he urges, “be too narrow-minded about *2 Corinthians 6:14* and its talk of the unequal yoke. After marriage you have only to persuade your

partner to believe the Gospel and all will be well. If you throw away this golden opportunity, you may never again get so commendable a match.” How many have been taken in by his suggestions! O, I know God has worked miracles, and has saved some unconverted husbands or wives in answer to much prayer. But this is no ground for our disobeying Him. This is no excuse for bowing to Satan.

Has such a time arrived in your life? I appeal to you: have the courage to stand by your convictions! Reject every diabolical proposal, no matter how great the pressures. Seek God’s help in prayer and wait on Him for His will. He will not fail you. Honour Him, and He will give you the partner of His choice; and if the choice is His, it can only be the best.

Many and subtle are the temptations to fall down and worship the enemy of souls. Brothers and sisters, if you do not want to miss God’s purpose for your life, then reject them all. Stick to the pathway of moral and spiritual integrity, even if it means worldly loss. Do not be led astray by other believers who may have lesser scruples, and who perhaps have sought to get the best of both worlds. What does it matter if they seem even to have a better time than you? Appearances may deceive. Much so-called “success” in this world may be adjudged as failure in the clearer light of eternity. Determine to have none of that. Refuse to accept any of the Devil’s short cuts to advantage or prosperity. Walk with God and seek His praise alone. Cling to Him, and you will have no regrets at the last.

So far, we have been considering only sinful things that can hinder us from pressing on to God’s full

purpose. There are, however, legitimate things also that can prove to be a hindrance to us. That is why we are exhorted in *Hebrews 12:1* to lay aside not only our sins but also every weight that will hinder us in running the race.

Take one example. Talking is not at all sinful in itself. But talking can easily degenerate into harmful gossip. Idle conversation can be indulged in, too, at the cost of Bible study and intercession. *Ecclesiastes 5:3* tells us that a man who speaks too much is a fool, and *Proverbs 10:19* warns us that no one can converse for long without falling into sin. Many a believer has forfeited the privilege of being God’s mouthpiece because of a lack of self-control in the matter of speech (*Jeremiah 15:19*). Excessive or careless talk invariably leads to leakage of spiritual power.

Or again, no one would question the value of music in Christian worship. But when countless hours are spent in training our voices, or developing our talents with musical instruments, and when such practice becomes more important to us than Bible study or prayer, then what is quite legitimate in itself can also become a hindrance to our spiritual progress. How many believers there are, who are more regular at the choir practice than in their daily quiet time!

The apostle Paul, being conscious of the many devices of Satan was not only careful to avoid sinful things; he was no less careful over even legitimate things that would prove to be a hindrance in fulfilling God’s purpose (*1 Corinthians 10:23*). He had his priorities right and decided that he must give up even some good things in order to attain the Lord’s goal. He saw that even in the Christian life, the good

can be the enemy of the best. When the Devil finds he cannot hinder us through sinful things, he will seek to reduce our effectiveness through legitimate things. This should drive us much to our knees, to ask God's help to distinguish what is edifying and profitable from what is not.

The Power that Can Strengthen Us

All that we have said so far may seem calculated only to dishearten us. The wiles of Satan may have appeared so subtle and so varied as to leave us without hope of any successful defence. It may be that we have tried sincerely for years to overcome some assault of his and have been foiled. But God has a message of hope for us. He has given us His Holy Spirit. His is the power that will strengthen us to fulfil all God's purpose. Without this gift of the Holy Spirit to indwell us, God would never have made such demands. He would never have expected us to carry out His will unaided. The distinctive mark of the age in which we live is this, that since the resurrection and ascension of Jesus to heaven, the Holy Spirit Himself indwells and fills any human life yielded to Him. God not only calls us to His high purpose; He also enables us to reach it.

Even the Lord Jesus, God's own Son, needed to be filled with the Holy Spirit before He could set out on His earthly ministry. This event took place at the time of His baptism, and it was through the power of the Spirit that Jesus passed triumphantly through the wilderness temptations that followed it. It was the same Holy Spirit's power that enabled Him to fulfil

His long earthly ministry and to tread the pathway to the cross.

The same held true in the lives of Paul and the other apostles. Paul testifies that his service for God was fulfilled only through the power of the Spirit of God (*Romans 15:18, 19*). Many today have neglected the command, "Be filled with the Spirit" (*Ephesians 5:18*). Many others are afraid to seek that fullness, lest in finding it they become fanatics. The Devil has used this fear of emotionalism to turn away a large portion of the church from seeking God earnestly for this. Others he has kept satisfied with some ecstatic experience in the past, which though it may have been from God, is valueless without the present enjoyment of a continuous filling with the Holy Spirit.

Many are confused regarding the fullness of the Spirit. They have the idea that God is very reluctant to give His Spirit to us. But the words of Jesus in *Luke 11:11-13* should for ever dispel such doubts from our minds. "How much more shall your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to them that ask him!" So if God had delayed in thus blessing us, we can be sure that the cause lies in us and not in Him. We have only to approach God and ask Him in simple faith for this filling. All He demands of us is an unreserved surrender of our lives to Him. Fulfil these conditions, maintain them day by day, and we shall remain continually filled with the Spirit.

The testimony of Dr. Walter L. Wilson has been a blessing to many in this respect. He states that the experience of surrender to the Holy Spirit brought about a greater transformation in his life than even the experience of salvation had brought about seventeen

years earlier. For some years after his salvation. Dr. Wilson remained dissatisfied with the fruitfulness of his own life and labours. He came at last to recognize that this was because he had not given enough place to the Holy Spirit in his life. At the same time he was full of fear lest seeking for the Spirit's fullness should make him fanatical. One day he heard a message from *Romans 12:1*, where the speaker emphasized that the presenting of our bodies, spoken of in that verse, must be to the Holy Spirit, for the Lord Jesus had a body of His own, and the Father remained upon His throne in heaven, whereas it was the Holy Spirit who at Pentecost had come to earth without a body. Dr. Wilson went back to his room after hearing the message, and falling prostrate upon the carpet before God, he addressed these words to the Holy Spirit: "My Lord, I have mistreated You all my Christian life, I have treated You like a servant. When I wanted You I called for You; when I was about to engage in some work I beckoned to You to come and help me perform my task. I have kept You in the place of a servant. I have sought to use You only as a willing servant to help me in my self-appointed and self-chosen work. I shall do so no more. Just now I give you this body of mine; from my head to my feet I give it to you. I give You my hands, my limbs, my eyes and lips, my brain; all that I am, without and within. I hand over to You, for You to live in it the life that You please. You may send this body to Africa, or lay it on a bed with cancer. You may blind the eyes, or send me with Your message to Tibet. You may take this body to the Eskimos, or send it to a hospital with pneumonia. It is Your body from this moment on. Help Yourself to

it. Thank you my Lord, I believe You have accepted it, for in Romans twelve and one. You said 'acceptable unto God.' Thank You again, my Lord, for taking me. We now belong to each other." Dr. Wilson testified to the remarkable fruitfulness that attended his labours, even from the very next morning after this act of surrender was made. (This incident is quoted in, "They Found the Secret" by V. Raymond Edman; Chapter 18).

I am not asking you to go and copy that. God does not ask us to imitate others. But there is a principle here that we do well to heed. It is this, that the Holy Spirit will possess us fully only when our surrender to Him is unconditional. Very often our surrender is with inward reservations. We are unwilling to go to a certain place, or to take up a certain type of employment. We have inward choices as to where and how we want to serve the Lord, and we want the power of the Holy Spirit for the sake of success in the task that we have in mind. That is the point. Our yieldedness to Him is conditional. We have made our own terms, and that is the reason why we so rarely experience the Holy Spirit's working. Maybe we feel that we can carry on well enough without His anointing for most of the time, but we do not know what we are missing. How foolish we are! Is not the Holy Spirit the One who can make the most use of our lives?

Brothers and sisters, unless our surrender to the Spirit of God is truly unconditional, how can He possess us completely? We must sincerely be willing to do all His will, even to the extent of taking up the lowliest duties. In marriage we must be willing to accept His choice of a partner, dark or fair, educated

or uneducated, rich or poor, who is one with us in the Lord.” In employment we must be prepared, at whatever cost to ourselves or our families, to be either constantly on the move or stuck in one place all our lives, if only we are with Him. Have we ever yielded ourselves to the Holy Spirit like that, without personal preference or reservations in any sphere? That is the only type of surrender that will bring into our lives the full measure of His power. And it is with that power alone that we shall fulfil God’s purpose.

The Attitude of Mind that Can Keep Us

In the passage we have been considering in Philippians, Paul described to us by example the attitude of mind that must be ours if we are to attain to God’s full purpose. Forgetting the things that are behind, he tells us, he keeps looking ahead to the things that lie before. In spite of every temptation to do so, he refuses to look back. Earlier, in *Acts 20:23, 24*, he had said that he was unmoved by the knowledge that persecutions awaited him. No fear of them could shake his determination to press forward to God’s goal. Again, in *Acts 26:19* he testified before King Agrippa that he had not disobeyed the heavenly vision received from the Lord nearly thirty years before. And in his very last letter he could claim to have fought the good fight and finished his course (*2 Timothy 4:7*). Here is a man who had doggedly pursued the pathway of God’s purpose right up to his very last day. Despite countless inducements to give up and turn aside, despite fierce persecutions, despite slander and calumny, and all the rest, he

held faithfully to his course, his eyes fixed on the goal. Blessed shall we be if at the end of our lives we can have such a testimony.

How often we are tempted to look back! The failures of the past have a way of discouraging us, and when that happens, sure enough the Devil arrives to whisper in our ears the lie that God has no more use for us. It has always been a great encouragement to me that it was said even of an ass that the Lord had need of it (*Matthew 21:2, 3*). If the Lord Jesus needed an ass to fulfil His Messianic programme, and if God could even on one occasion speak through an ass (*Numbers 22:28*), then there is hope for everyone of us. For whatever was written in the former days, and even therefore the story of Balaam’s ass, was written for our encouragement (*Romans 15:4*). You may feel yourself to be as stupid as an ass, and you may make ten thousand mistakes; yet your Lord has need of you, and when He so chooses He can even speak through you.

The same Bible that tells us not to worry about tomorrow tells us with equal urgency not to look back over the past. We need to finish with all our yesterdays and to face today and the future trusting in the Lord. If tomorrow you fail, do not let that cast you into despair. Go and confess your failure to the Lord and have your sin cleansed in His blood. Then press on again. And if you fail once more, go and do the same thing yet again. Never abandon yourself to despair. Resolutely refuse the futile backward look of regret over the past, for there is only loss in crying over spilt milk.

But refuse also to look back in pride that destroys the soul. So if God uses you in some wonderful way tomorrow, seek grace to forget that as well. Do not indulge in self-congratulation. Press on. Discouragement on the one hand and pride on the other are equally means that Satan uses to stay us on our course and rob us of our effectiveness.

We are told in *Ephesians 5:15, 16* that, if we would walk wisely in these evil days, we must constantly redeem the time. That means that we are to buy up every opportunity that comes our way and turn it to the glory of the Lord (*1 Corinthians 15:58*). Each of us has only one brief life, and every day of that life should be made to count for God. But that will only happen as we persistently look ahead to Him. No matter how heavy the odds that we are called upon to face, let us maintain this attitude of mind. But let us also refuse to look aside at other believers and compare our lot or measure our successes against theirs, for that too can lead to discouragement or to pride (cf. *John 21:20–22; 2 Corinthians 10:12*). We are to look straight ahead and in no other direction (*Proverbs 4:25*).

Even before his conversion the apostle Paul was wholehearted about his religion (*Acts 22:3, 4*). His was no feeble, faint-hearted faith such as we see too often today. When he was converted, he was equally wholehearted in his devotion to Christ. The only difference was that now he had set his mind on things above and not on things on the earth. Our risen Lord Jesus tells us clearly that He has absolutely no appreciation for lukewarmness (*Revelation 3:16*). God seeks utterness in His people, for only people utterly committed to Him can fulfil His purpose on earth. If many of

us were as half-hearted in our studies as we are in our Christianity, we would never even have passed the elementary school grade. Or again, if a man were as half-hearted in his job as many believers are in the service of God, he would have been sacked long ago. Wholeheartedness is plentiful in the mundane activities of many Christians, but alas, how seldom is it found in their religious activities! We are told that when king Hezekiah worked with all his heart, he prospered (*2 Chronicles 31:21*). But the day came when, forgetting “the things that are before,” he relaxed. That day he tragically failed the Lord.

By word and example Jesus urged those who would follow Him to keep their eyes on the goal. He warned one would-be follower that any man who had put his hand to the plough and then looked back was unfit for the kingdom of God (*Luke 9:62*). A little earlier we read that Jesus Himself had “steadfastly set His face” to go in the direction indicated by His Father (*verse 51*). “I must be about my Father’s business” was His unceasing attitude, and he desired no followers who were unwilling to look in the same direction and walk the same road.

The disciple of Jesus Christ must have only one aim in life, namely, to do God’s will and thus to glorify Him. Everything in life – money, position, marriage, employment and all the rest – must be made to serve this one end. All must be relaxed to the purpose of God. It is only when we adopt such an attitude of mind that we can claim the promise in *Romans 8:28* for ourselves. For it is only to those who love God and who are aligned to His purpose that all things work together for good.

We do well also to remember that in eternity it is those who have done the will of God on earth whose works abide for ever (*1 John 2:17*). All else will be destroyed. So let doing God's will be our one aim. As it was for Jesus, let it be our very meat and drink (*John 4:34*). The man after God's own heart is the one who desires to fulfil all His will. Only such a one can effectively serve his generation in God's eyes (*Acts 13:22, 36*). God is seeking for such men and women in the world today.

As in the last three chapters, let us notice here also the relevance of this theme to the days in which we live. In speaking of the last days Jesus warned his disciples once more in *Luke 17* of the danger of looking back. To point out the lesson He quoted the grim example of Lot's wife. What was her weakness? Unlike the others in Sodom, she had believed the message of God. Not only that, she had obeyed it and set out from the city. But then she had second thoughts – and looked back. The moment she did so judgment overtook her: she became a pillar of salt. Her backward look resulted in her becoming fixed – a stationary pillar. From that moment she could not move forward one single inch.

Today, unfortunately, many believers are as stationary as Lot's wife became. She has her twentieth century counterparts in those who many who, though saved years ago, have made no progress at all in the things of God since then. Here and now in their lives there is no more holiness or peace or patience than when they began; there is no advance in repentance for sins, or joy in the Lord, or victory over the world, or understanding of God's purposes, than there was on the

day when they were saved. The sins which plagued them then still plague them. The same desires for wealth and position and comfort that existed at the time of their conversion characterize their lives even today. The reason has invariably been that they have looked back instead of forward. Jesus makes it plain that this will be a special danger of the last days.

Do you want to live a life over which you will have no regrets when you arrive in His presence? Then set yourself to do all the will of God. Seek day by day to discover and understand His purpose for your life. What that purpose is, the Holy Spirit can show you. You can never learn it theoretically from books, but only in experience as you walk with God. "Lord, what wilt thou have me to do?" was Paul's question from the very moment of his conversion. What better attitude than that could you and I choose as our own?

Let your aim not be to live a long life, but one satisfying to God. Heaven and eternity will be sweeter to you if you arrive there having fulfilled God's will on earth.

Will you come in sincerity to the Lord as you read these words, and say to Him in faith,

"Lord I do want to fulfil all Thy purpose for my life. I do not have the wisdom to discover that will, nor the strength to act on it. Nevertheless Lord, I do desire with all my heart to press on through sweat and blood and tears to the prize of Thy high calling. Grant that when I enter Thy presence it may be without any regret at all, but only with the joy of having finished my course

and glorified Thee on earth. To this end fill me,
Lord, with Thy Holy Spirit.”

Do this, and you will find life full of meaning and hope in the coming days. The eyes of the Lord seek through the whole earth for such men and women. God grant that you and I in our generation be ready to pay the price necessary to fulfil all the will of God.

“Hold that fast which thou hast, that no man take thy crown” (Revelation 3:11)

*‘I’m pressing on the upward way
New heights I’m gaining every day.
Still praying as I onward bound
‘Lord, plant my feet on higher ground.
Lord, lift me up and let me stand
By faith on heaven’s tableland
A higher plane than I have found,
Lord, plant my feet on higher ground.’*

CHAPTER 6

He Pleased God

In just three words the Holy Spirit records the testimony of Enoch’s life: “He pleased God” (*Hebrews 11:5*). There is no mention of wealth amassed or of earthly honours obtained. There is no record of sermons preached or of good deeds done, nor even of the souls led to God through his witness. Neither are we told how popular or famous he became. No, instead of all this his life is summed up in that one tense sentence, “He pleased God.” That is all, and that is enough.

For that, my brothers and sisters, is what matters supremely. It is indeed the only thing that will have value in eternity. The Bible tells us that God created all things “for his pleasure” (*Revelation 4:11*). It follows therefore that the measure in which we please God is the true measure of the effectiveness of our lives. In no other way is the cost of our redemption justified. Our very existence on earth is meaningless if God is not thereby glorified.

In these pages God has, we trust, put His finger on some of the true priorities of life. It is not merely to supply us with correct information that He does this. He expects that we shall act on what He shows us. He looks for us to amend our lives accordingly. The

Spirit's challenge, if it comes to us through this book, demands from us a response. To fail to respond is to invite only spiritual stagnation and death.

How subtle is the self-life, how deceitful the human heart! How readily does it lead us captive to this world's treasures! "Oh," it exclaims, "such wealth and pleasure are too precious by far to be given up for the doubtful satisfaction of following the Lord utterly. Surely this Christian race can be run on easier terms! Public opinion is against extremes. Let us take it easy. Let us live for God in moderation!"

God would deliver us from such faithless thinking. He would have us lay aside every weight and go for the prize. He desires that we should turn from the world's base standards and be satisfied with nothing less than His highest. What matters the honour of men to the man whom God would honour? Of what value is this world's wealth when heaven's wealth is at stake?

Do you seek earthly security for your life? Do you hope somehow to insure it against the risks of faith? Then, believe me, you will most certainly lose it. You will have nothing to show at the end.

Change you mind! Be prepared to throw away your life for Jesus' sake. Suffer hardship for His gospel. You will never regret the decision. You will find there is no waste, no true loss at all. On the contrary you will discover that eternal fruits spring from the seed you have planted. The heavenly rewards will far outweigh the offering you lay at His feet. For "the world passeth away, and the lust thereof: but he that doeth the will of God abideth for ever" (*1 John 2:17*). In the day when Christ returns in glory and the present order of things is no more, they who have

followed Him wholly will forget all the costliness in the unspeakable joys before them.

I remember, as a young boy, being taken to watch the Indian Republic Day celebrations in New Delhi on the 26th of January each year. It is on that day that the nation's highest awards for gallantry are given away by the President. Often, as I watched, the man who came forward to receive his award was some unknown junior soldier, maybe with an arm amputated, or limping on an artificial leg, or disfigured in some other way from wounds received on the battlefield. Then the citation would be read explaining what he had done to merit the award. And then finally, in the presence of the highest dignitaries of the nation, the President of India would pin the medal on the recipient's breast, and the whole audience of thousands of men and women would cheer the soldier who had risked his life in the defence of his country.

I have often felt that this was a picture (though how faint a one!) of the day that is coming when we shall be caught up to the portals of heaven's glory to stand before our Lord. Then, in the presence of the highest dignitaries of heaven, redeemed men and women who on earth have been faithful to their trust will be rewarded by the King of kings Himself. I can imagine, in that day, Enoch walking forward when his name is called, and the citation being read: "He pleased God." Yes, he may have been mocked and ridiculed on earth for three hundred years and more but now amidst deafening angelic applause he is decorated with heaven's highest award for gallantry in battle. I see, too, the apostle Paul step forward when his turn comes to receive a similar recognition.

On earth he was a considered a fanatic and a fool; here there is laid up for him a crown of life. All the years of suffering are forgotten in that moment of time. The joy that takes its place springs from the knowledge that God has been pleased, and this is a joy that abides for all eternity.

And then your turn will come, and mine. What will the citation read, dear brother, dear sister? When we stand there stripped of all the religious veneer, all the outward sham and pretence that covered our lives on earth, what will be left? Will you know only sorrow at your emptiness in that day? Will you bitterly regret the worthless choices made, the opportunities lightly thrown away? Or will you take your place there alongside Enoch and Paul? These are urgent questions, for they relate not to something I have imagined up, but to stark reality. Something like the scene I have crudely depicted above will take place in actuality when Christ Jesus returns, and many, we are warned, will be ashamed before Him at His coming.

Let us, then, give earnest heed to His Word. Let us take serious account of these priorities of life, for eternal values hang upon them. And let us determine from this day to give the supreme place to our Lord Jesus in all things. There is a life to be lived on earth, and a race to be run, that will call for everything we have to give. But the race has a goal, and the life has a prize, alongside which all that earth has to offer will seem but the vilest refuse. For when we enter the presence of the King, no music will compare with His welcoming words: "Well done, good and faithful servant! Enter thou into the joy of thy Lord."

"Behold, I come quickly; and my reward is with me, to give to every man according as his work shall be." (Revelation 22:12)

About the Book

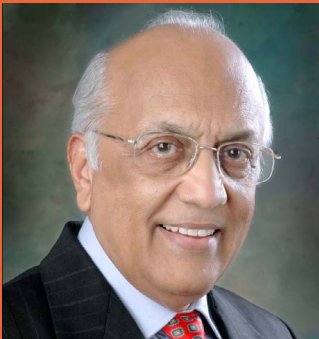
This world has given us all a wrong sense of values. Most Christians have been so influenced by those values that they have got life's priorities all wrong. This is the main cause for their depression, frustration and defeated lives.

Jesus wants His church to be the salt of this earth and the light of this world. But the salt has largely lost its savour and the light its brightness.

Superficiality and unreality however have become so commonplace in the church that most believers are not even aware of their backslidden state.

The Spirit of God is calling all of God's children now to a re-evaluation of their priorities. And many are responding to that call, everywhere.

This book is about those spiritual priorities...



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