

A serene sunset over the ocean with a wooden bench in the foreground. The sky is filled with soft, colorful clouds in shades of purple, pink, and orange, transitioning into a deep blue at the top. The sun is low on the horizon, casting a warm glow over the water. In the foreground, a wooden bench sits on a sandy path, surrounded by tall grasses and a simple wooden fence. The overall mood is peaceful and contemplative.

THINK ON THESE THINGS

A 31-DAY DEVOTIONAL TO
ENCOURAGE YOU IN YOUR CHRISTIAN WALK

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Philippians 4:8 NIV

Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things.



THE LIGHTS IN THE DARKNESS

One of the most beautiful sights that I have ever seen is that of a star-filled night sky. There is something glorious about, not only the sight, but also the immensity of it all. Yet, as someone once observed, the stars are only visible during the darkness. They are the lights in the darkness. An obvious truth, but a truth that can nevertheless stand as a reminder of how we often do not see all the beauty and value of life until dark times.

It happens every day. Somewhere, someone is coming to the realization of how blessed that he is because of some tragedy or heartbreak that he has observed in another's life. Maybe he has just been spared of bad news, got an undeserved break or blessing or for some other reason just realized how fortunate that he was. Whatever the cause, he is now awake to the blessings of his life.

Oddly enough, the blessing were there all the time—just like the stars. We know the stars are present during the day as well as during the night, but because of the brightness of the sun they only become visible once the sun has ceased to shine. Likewise, too often the blessings of our lives are overlooked because of the easiness and blessedness of our life. To put it bluntly, most Americans do not realize how good we have it in this land of freedom that we call home. Blessings and good things are all around us and yet we pass them by without even noticing. We have our reasons for our blindness, but they are in most cases only pitiful excuses.

Not too long ago I was leaving my parent's house at night. They live in a rural area, far from the glare of streetlights. When I looked up, I was amazed at the brightness and number of stars that I saw. I told my wife that I could not see the stars from our home in the city and that I had forgotten how beautiful they were. After we returned home, I was unloading the van and busy getting everything inside, when my wife, who was standing in the drive looking up, said to me, "You can see the stars from here. You just have not been looking." And you know what? She was right. I could see them clearly. I just had not been looking.

That brings me to my point. First, we need to open our eyes and behold all of our blessings. Once we see the blessings in our lives we should then recognize them for what they are—evidence of God's unmerited goodness in our lives. Therefore, every time we see or recognize a blessing in our lives we should give glory and praise to God.

If we think about it, those same stars in the night sky are speaking to us and reminding of God's wonderful goodness in our lives. King David said it this way, "The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands. Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they display knowledge. There is no speech or language where their voice is not heard." Psalms 19:1-3 NIV

What a beautiful way of remembering to be thankful for God's goodness. Each time we see the stars, the lights in the darkness, they should serve to remind us to praise God even in adversity.



WHAT DOES GOD REQUIRE?

On the Statue of Liberty are written the words, “Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free, The wretched refuse of your teeming shore. Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me, I lift my lamp beside the golden door!” These were the sentiments of a country that, some would say, has long since passed. Yet it was an idea and an invitation that saved many immigrants. Ironically, it seems that the country of immigrants wants to put an end to immigration—except for a certain few. Today I suppose that the plaque on the Statue should read, “Give us your young, your educated, your talented yearning to breathe free...” But somehow it does not have the same ring to it. Things have changed and it is not just with the country.

Notice the words of Luke 4:18 and 19. Jesus said, “The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” This was the mission of Christ and at one time the mission of the church. But that was a church that many could rightly say is a church long past.

Nevertheless, at one time it was a message that brought hope and salvation to multitudes. When we look at what the organized church has become in many instances in America, it would appear that the church has turned its back on the very people that Jesus cared about. Too many churches have stopped looking for the crowd Jesus sought out. They have to have “the right sort of people” you know. The message from these churches is that there is “good news” for those who want to be rich but not much hope for those who want freedom and relief from oppression.

I realize that some would reduce the church to simply a welfare organization with no spiritual message and others would want to spiritualize everything to the point that human contact is barely necessary. We humans are creatures of extremes. We seem to find the middle ground hard to tolerate.

I realize that there are many good churches and many genuine Christian people. I realize that there are many churches and church-oriented organizations that would and could do more if people would just give to charity a tenth of what they spend on fast food.

But honestly, the problem of unethical religion can only be solved by each of us looking into what God requires of us. The prophet Micah dealt with this same problem many years ago. He wrote, “He has showed you, O man, what is good. And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.” Micah 6:8 NIV

His message is simple. God’s people should set the standard for ethical behavior—both personally and socially. Kindness should define our character and humility before God should be our trademark. It is what God requires of us.



GOD'S VALUE SYSTEM

Have you ever been afraid that God would not accept you as you are? Wait before you answer. Really think about it for a moment. Too often we turn away from an encounter with God because we are afraid that He will not respond to us favorably. We know the innermost thoughts of our hearts as well as God does—those thoughts that no one else knows we have.

To add to our discomfort in the presence of God, we also know our failures all too well. Somehow when we try to pray, it all comes before our eyes. We find that it is easier to go on with business as usual rather than to risk being rejected. And yet we hear the voice of God calling us. We know what God wants. He wants us. But why?

He wants us because we were meant to be His. And whether we choose Him or not, He still says that we are valuable. In addition, He offers us something that He sees as extremely valuable—a relationship with Jesus Christ. But we must believe that if we come to Him, He will in no wise turn us away. The scripture reveals the depth of God's willingness to reach out to man in spite of his condition.

Paul said it this way, “You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” Romans 5:6-8 NIV

These verses contain several undeniable assurances of God's unconditional and accepting love. God's Word says that Jesus deemed us worthy to die for—in spite of the fact that we were not His servants or friends. That is God's value system. He values what some say is without value.

Yet we often have a problem with the truth of our own worth because we have a problem with our value system. The fact that mankind has never been able to merit redemption offends our value system. We see ourselves as the "righteous man" and the "good man" in verse 7 that someone should die for. What we must understand is God's value system. It's not that man is incapable of doing good, it is that the scripture says that man is incapable of being truly good apart from God.

Christ died for us because He loved us, not because we were worthy; it is called grace. Unmerited favor. He loved us without us giving Him cause or reason.

In the earlier verses Paul seems to be emphasizing the apparent incompatibility of human and divine values. Man values those who are right, whole, and lovely because of what they are. God values those who are sinful, powerless, and ungodly because of what they can become.

I wonder how many of us see the value of another human being like God does? Even more, I wonder how many understand the value of a relationship with a God that values us so much?



I STILL BELIEVE

Early in my ministry, I served as an assistant pastor to a man who died of cancer. I still remember the last sermon that he preached just a few weeks before his death. His sermon title was “I Believe in Miracles.” I suppose that seems something of a contradiction to some, but not to me. This was a man who really did have faith—who really did believe in miracles. Why he did not receive his miracle of healing I do not know.

He was told by one individual that if he really had faith in God that he would be healed. If that man had only understood the kind of faith that was truly in the life and heart of my pastor he would have walked away in shame for saying such a thing. It is amazing how some armchair theologians who have never faced what others are facing can give such an analysis of another man’s faith. The fact is that it does not take much faith to believe in God when everything is turning out the way we want. Sometimes we have to believe with everything going against us—and that is where real faith begins.

My pastor was a good man. He was a godly man. And yes, he was a man of faith who believed in and saw many miraculous things in his life. But the one thing we all wanted and prayed for never happened. But you know what? I am going to follow his example and continue to believe in the miraculous. Why? Because I still believe in an all-powerful and loving God.

In spite of circumstances I still believe that there is a God in heaven that is concerned about our needs. He is not impersonal and aloof. He knows us by name and He cares. If He can call all the stars of heaven by name, how much more does He know your name? (Isaiah 40:26-31) If He clothed the flowers of the field and cares for the little sparrow, how much more does He care for you? (Luke 12:24-29) We are His creation and the “sheep of His pasture.” This is why I believe that He cares about us.

I still believe that there is a God in heaven who intervenes in the lives of His people. In other words, I believe that God hears and answers our prayers. No, I do not understand why God does not do some things. Even with years of theological training, at times the ways of God remain a complete mystery. All I do know is this: the here and now is not all there is. But even as mysterious as God seems at times, I have chosen to trust Him. If I do not understand, I will wait. My inability to understand some things will not and cannot destroy His ability to do all things.

Therefore, I still believe that there is a God in heaven that has not lost His ability to do the miraculous. Simply put, I still believe in miracles and healings and divine acts of good done by Him on our behalf. “Why?” some would say. “How can you?” others would ask. I believe because I have experienced that which the Bible talks about. And by His grace I will see it again in my life. And as someone said, “A man with an experience is never at the mercy of a man with an argument.” (see Romans 8:33-39)

I know that some may not believe and that is their business. I realize that some may have given up and lost hope. Some may even want to explain away the truth of the scripture. But as for me—I still believe.



IS YOUR CONSCIENCE YOUR GUIDE?

Have you ever heard someone advise another person on the making of a particular decision, “Let your conscience be your guide”? Is that really good advice? Is that even biblically sound? Let us consider the wisdom of that well used piece of advice.

If we are to put our confidence in our conscience to guide us in all matters, then we must consider several important facts. First, although many have a well-defined sense of right and wrong, each person’s conscience may differ widely. For instance, some people see nothing wrong with lying or stealing if it will benefit them. Although it is extreme, some people have even committed murder without ever feeling the least twinge of a guilty conscience. Regardless of the extent to which the line of right and wrong is moved by some people, there are enough examples of people following their own individual set of morals to remind us that the human conscience can vary depending on certain factors.

Another problem with using our conscience as our guide is that in general our conscience tends to only be affected after we have done something questionable or wrong. Mostly its influence is felt later when we feel bad about what we did. If our conscience is going to be our guide, should we not be able to count on it every time to keep us from the errors of life before we commit them?

The problems presented by one depending on his or her conscience for guidance are obvious. So what am I suggesting? We must find a higher and more reliable standard or guide on which we can depend.

Some would point to our civic laws as a guide, but the government does not have rules for everything—it only seems that way. Well, what about the Ten Commandments? I certainly think that they should be obeyed. But it is amazing how many people try to reduce them to ten rules or ten suggestions and then work on “bending” or bypassing as many of them as possible.

My solution is to take the whole of scripture as our guide for our actions—in light of the relationship that we are supposed to have with its author. I know some will say, “You can make the Bible say anything you want it to.” To which I must respond, “No you cannot, not unless you take it out of context!” And when it comes to scripture regarding human behavior it is often difficult or impossible to misconstrue what is said. Besides, we also have an example to follow not just scripture to read. We can always ask ourselves, “What would Jesus do?”

As long as the human conscience is the final authority on what is proper, the results will vary. But when we take God’s standards and His influence as our guide we will see a consistency develop in our behavior that will change our lives for the better.



WHAT IT MEANS TO BE COMMITTED

When an airline pilot begins his takeoff down the runway, he continues to accelerate the airplane until he reaches takeoff speed. At that same moment he is approaching the end of the runway. The point of "no return" is reached when he no longer has enough runway to safely bring the aircraft to a stop. At that moment he is "committed" to a takeoff.

When a heart surgeon opens the chest of a heart transplant patient, puts the patient on the heart and lung machine, and takes the diseased heart from the chest of the patient, he is "committed" to the completion of the operation.

When a military general equips his troops for battle, gives them a battle plan, places them in the theater of battle and gives the command to attack, at that point he is "committed" to the battle.

Most importantly, when a person gives his life to Christ by putting his faith and trust in Him and by turning his back on his old life, he is depending on Christ to see him through to the end. At this point we can say that He is "committed."

In each case there is the opportunity to stop all action prior to commitment. In each case there is the danger of disaster if the "commitment" is forsaken. Therefore, when we talk about what it means to be "committed," we are making several clear distinctions.

First, we are engaged in something that we have chosen to do. Commitment cannot be forced on anyone. People can be forced against their will to serve, give or participate in an activity—but their commitment is their choice. God will force no one to serve Him. If we live our lives for Jesus Christ, it is because we have chosen to do so. So we must decide if we will be committed or if we will turn back—just do not overlook what is being forfeited. Jesus said, "No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God." Luke 9:62 NIV

If we choose to go on from this point, then we have chosen to do something that must be completed. We must now consider the eternal consequences of our decision. If we believe in eternal life, as the Bible speaks of it, then we must remember that what we decide today could determine our eternal destiny. Therefore, the call to genuine commitment grows stronger. (Hebrews 3:12-14)

Finally, true commitment means that we have gone past the point of no return. We no longer have a place to which we can return. We have made our choice. We have decided that we must complete our task. And we have passed the point where we could turn back without losing everything. The bridges have been burned. We have sold out to our choice. No matter how many may second-guess us, no matter how our feelings rise and fall, we will press on. This is what it means to be committed.



TRUTH OR CONSEQUENCES

If you could do anything that you wanted to do today and there would be absolutely no consequences to your actions, what would you do? What temptation would you face? Think about it for a moment. What you decide will say a great deal about your integrity, character and heart.

First, allow me establish the fact that being tempted, according to the scripture, is not a sin nor does it mean that a person has failed morally. Even the purest of hearts have had improper thoughts or ideas to come to mind. However, it is when we dwell on and act on those things that we go wrong. And that is what we are dealing with. You know yourself. What would you do? What action would you take?

I believe that a great many would live their lives no different than they are right now. For instance, some would not change because they are committed to doing what is right—regardless of who is watching or keeping record. Still others mistakenly think that they are already getting away with what they are doing—so they would not change. But then there are those who would run amuck given the opportunity. They are like the man who consulted a psychiatrist. He complained, "I've been misbehaving, Doc, and my conscience is troubling me." The doctor asked, "And you want something that will strengthen your willpower?" The fellow replied, "Well, no, I was thinking of something that would weaken my conscience."

But still a greater question than, "What would we do?" is "Why do we do what we do?" Do we do the right things because we know that it is expected or because we are right in our hearts? Whatever the motivation of others, the Christian man or woman must consider his/her commitment to Christ.

Proverbs 11:3 tells us that, "The integrity of the upright guides them, but the unfaithful are destroyed by their duplicity." NIV Throughout the scripture the "upright" and "unfaithful" are contrasted—those who are righteous and those who are, literally in this verse, "crooked."

Notice also that the verse says that the "unfaithful" will be destroyed by their crooked ways. Not guided by a sense of integrity, their own actions will bring destruction on them. Yet consider the hope of those committed to the Lord and a life of integrity. The psalmist wrote, "May integrity and uprightness protect me, because my hope is in you." Psalms 25:21NIV

We must choose to trust in the Lord and live a life of integrity and uprightness—not just because of the natural benefits—but because the Lord will honor and bless such a person. The possible consequences or lack of them should not affect our behavior. Only our integrity should determine that. The final analysis is that we can live a life of truth and be blessed or pay the consequences of living an unprincipled life.



KNOWING GOD'S WILL

Have you ever struggled with trying to find God's divine will for your life? For the Christian, the will of God must be considered at all times. But at times it is not easy to know God's will. In fact, it is safe to say that anyone who has ever sought God's will concerning a life decision has probably been left feeling a little unsure about what to do—at least for a time. Of course it is not supposed to be that way, but it is.

In order to get past this problem, let us first look at what we know God's will is NOT. The following applies no matter what the decision may be. We know that it is not God's will for anyone to do anything that is sinful or unethical or anything that would go, in principle, against the teaching of scripture. This eliminates many possible options with which people are faced.

In addition to knowing what God does not want us to do; we can know what He does want. It is God's will that we prosper as our soul prospers (3 John 1:2). It is God's will that we pray, be joyful and thankful (I Th. 5:16-18). It is God's will that we love one another. (I Jn. 3:23) It is God's will that we live holy (I Th. 4:3-5). We could go on and on finding things in the scripture of which the Lord approves. And that is the right place to start. A right relationship with God is the basis for finding any further guidance that we may need. It is the basis for knowing what to ask for as well as the assurance that God will hear us when we pray.

Paul wrote, "This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us. And if we know that he hears us—whatever we ask—we know that we have what we asked of him." I John 5:14-15 NIV If we are committed to living for Christ and are asking for His help in continuing on the right path—we are more than likely praying according to His will.

Furthermore, we have the assurance that if we are willing to follow Him wherever and do whatever He may ask of us, He will make it possible for us to succeed. The writer of Hebrews said, "May the God of peace... that great Shepherd of the sheep, equip you with everything good for doing his will, and may he work in us what is pleasing to him, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen." Hebrews 13:21 NIV

I know that most want someone to be able to specifically tell them what decision is right. With God, I cannot guarantee you that you will have a "burning bush" experience. But the assurance is there that if seek to do His will; He will guide us. As someone wrote,

Before us is a future all unknown, a path untrod;

Beside us a friend well-loved and known-- that friend is God.



GOD'S DISCIPLINE

Why is it that we tend to think that everything that happens to us of a negative or difficult nature is always to our detriment? Even we have missed the mark, sinned, or erred in our lives we seem to feel that there should be no negative results to our actions. After all, we repented and missed a blessing. Is that not enough?

I suppose that our mindset has something to do with the society in which we live. Many Americans have come to believe that everything in their lives is supposed to be good and, if it is not, then it is either the fault of someone else or God has failed them. After all, if no one else is working to please them at least God is supposed to be.

The fact is that our relationship with our heavenly father is much like that of a natural relationship between a good parent and child. Just as a good parent sets guidelines and metes out discipline and correction for the good of the child, so our Heavenly Father does the same—but with absolute perfection.

Hebrews 12:5-11 asks us to consider the importance of God's discipline. "And you have forgotten that word of encouragement that addresses you as sons: 'My son, do not make light of the Lord's discipline, and do not lose heart when he rebukes you, because the Lord disciplines those he loves...'" NIV

Being disciplined spiritually should actually encourage us. I can say this because God's discipline is not abusive, but rather instructive. Therefore, the Lord's discipline should never be rejected. Instead we should rejoice that we are accepted as His children.

The writer of Hebrews goes on to say in verses 7 and 8, "Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as sons. For what son is not disciplined by his father? If you are not disciplined (and everyone undergoes discipline), then you are illegitimate children and not true sons." NIV

Again, we see the evidence of God's love in the manner in which He deals with us. It is good to remember that the heir will always receive the necessary instruction.

Finally, in verses 9-11 he says, "Moreover, we have all had human fathers who disciplined us and we respected them for it. How much more should we submit to the Father of our spirits and live! Our fathers disciplined us for a little while as they thought best; but God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in his holiness. No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it." NIV

Regardless of how other may have led us, we can always count on our Heavenly Father to lead us to a deeper spiritual life. Even with the best intentions earthly parents make mistakes. However, God's discipline is "good" and always produces a blessing.

The desire to "feel good" spiritually is natural. But when we attempt to achieve a good feeling while ignoring the prodding of the Holy Spirit, we only do damage to our spiritual life. Instead of focusing only on our feelings, we should be focusing on the results of God's work in our lives.



SHOULD GOD ANSWER ALL PRAYERS?

I heard someone pose the question, “What if we lived in a world where all prayers were answered, what kind of a world would it be?” I had never thought of that possibility before. But let us consider it for just a moment. At first it might appear that it would be a great world in which to live. But upon further examination of that idea we might find that our supposed “great world” has some flaws.

Let us begin with a look at God. What kind of god would we have if He were a god who answered ALL prayers? Stop right there for a moment. You and I both know that there have been some selfish, foolish and even evil prayers uttered by humanity. What kind of a god would answer those types of prayers? It could be argued that God would be reduced to a cosmic errand boy at best, and humanity’s servant at worse. He certainly would no longer be sovereign. He really would not even be just or fair. He would only be what we made Him—our slave.

But wait. What if He only answered good or “right” prayers, would it be a bad world then? No? Well, who is going to determine which prayers are good or right? Who knows what is best in all situations? Who can know the future? Who can know the heart? Sure God does. But remember, God doing what He has thought best is what started people questioning and criticizing Him in the first place. If we let Him decide, then we may not get what we ask for. Then what? Will we accuse Him also? Will we be angry with Him?

Most would probably respond, “How could we accuse Him, He is the only One who knows what is right and wrong in every situation? He is the only One who knows the future. If we are going to believe that prayer works, we must leave it all in God’s hands.” So, on second thought, having a god that would answer all prayers does not sound so good.

At this point let me say that I do not have any idea why God does not answer some prayers. I just have to recognize that He knows all and I must leave it all in His hands. In all my times of confusion and wondering I must rely on what I do know.

Note what David wrote, “For the LORD is righteous, he loves justice; upright men will see his face.” Psalms 11:7 NIV We need to be reminded that not only is God righteous, both upright in character and in actions, He also loves to do what is right.

So when I pray I realize that I am depending on a God who knows all things, loves all people, who is perfect in character and loves to do what is right. This is why I can trust Him to answer my prayers as He sees fit.



GOD HAS PLANS FOR YOU

How many times have we fallen short of receiving God's best in our lives because we were not convinced of His good intentions or else His ability to do what was needed? Or was it because we did not feel deserving of God's help or blessing? We sometimes tell ourselves that we were not meant to have certain things or to accomplish certain goals, and we do so without ever consulting God on the matter. Yes we pray, but do we listen?

In his book, *My Utmost for His Highest*, Oswald Chambers asks the question, "Have we ever let God tell us any of His joys, or are we telling God our secrets so continually that we leave no room for Him to talk to us?" What are His joys? Are they not His plans for our lives?

In Jeremiah 29:11 God reveals His heart and mind to humanity. As He had before and would so many times again, He said, "I know the plans I have for you," declares the LORD, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future." NIV

Do not run past the implications of the first part of that passage. The wonderful truth revealed here is that the God of all creation, the Eternal One, is thinking about us. We are flattered when we receive a card in the mail from someone who has thought of us. And yet right here, God is thinking about us and we run right past it.

"But God knows everything. Of course He is conscious of us." Some would say. Still others ignore the fact that God is thinking about them and just want to know what judgment or blessing awaits them. While God does warn us of the consequences of sin and sends blessings to those who love Him, there is more going on here than that.

What I want you to see is that God is not merely aware of us, He is not out to get us and He is certainly not just a source of blessings. I want you to listen to what He is saying, "I know the plans I have for you," declares the LORD, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future." Allow me to paraphrase. "You know what? I have been thinking about you and what you can become and I want to do something for you. I want you to prosper. I want to give something to look forward to in life. I want you to have a good life."

Note that the tone of His words is that of a benevolent father who is offering the child that he loves a once in a lifetime opportunity. I realize that everyone cannot relate to the "good parent" metaphor, but if we could have a perfect parent or father—it would be God. And you know what? We can.

He is waiting on us to believe in His pure intentions. We do not have to deserve it. Besides who could? We just have to accept it. God has been thinking about you for a long time. Why not listen to what He has planned for you?



ARE WE NO LONGER IN AWE OF GOD?

Do we really believe in the greatness of God? It would seem, at times, in our gospel saturated society that we have either lost or abandoned our understanding of God's greatness. In our desire to make God acceptable and understandable to everyone I think that we have, in a sense, degraded Him and done a great injustice to His character and person.

In the arrogance of humanity, we see the idea promoted that, through the study of theology, we can come to a place that there is nothing about God that we cannot understand. However, I do not believe this to be true. If anything, the study of theology has revealed to us a God that is beyond our understanding.

Note what God said about Himself, "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways," declares the LORD. "As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts." Isa.55:8-9 NIV

One of the first truths that we must remember about God is that He is not like us. As humans we try to make Him as much like us as possible, but it will never work. He is altogether righteous and perfect, which in itself, places Him beyond our understanding. But why should this frustrate us; do we have to know or be able to explain everything? Why can we not just stand in awe of His person?

Note the words of the psalmist as he marvels at the glory and power of the creator. He writes, "Praise the LORD, O my soul. O LORD my God, you are very great; you are clothed with splendor and majesty. He wraps himself in light as with a garment; he stretches out the heavens like a tent and lays the beams of his upper chambers on their waters. He makes the clouds his chariot and rides on the wings of the wind." Psalm 104:1-3 NIV With a God like that, how could we understand everything about Him? We know no one like Him. We must be content with the fact that He chooses to reveal Himself to us in various ways and in varying degrees, but never fully because our minds cannot comprehend the divine.

Sometimes I think the reason that we have such a problem with not being able to understand God, is that we wonder if He is really at work for our good. After all, if He were working for our good why would we not understand His actions as such? We will leave the mysteries of the universe to God if He will only answer a few basic questions. Standing in awe of God is fine; just let me know the answers to a few of the concerns on my mind. That sounds reasonable, does it not?

Reasonable or not, we are simply left to stand in wonder and awe of a God who is, at times, mysterious and incomprehensible. Many of our questions will be answered when we step into eternity. But for now we must rest in the fact that the God of eternity loves and cares for us. That in itself is wondrous.



FAITHFULNESS PRECEDES SUCCESS

Success is not a word that you will find very often in the scriptures. And when it is used, it is never used as we in America have often come to define it. As Americans we tend to interpret scripture from the perspective of a modern day prosperous society, with our goals and values inserted. We have even “Americanized” the gospel to the point that it has almost been reduced entirely from the gospel of Christ to a success strategy that will lead us to ultimate happiness and great wealth.

Every year, many graduate from high schools and colleges around the country. And in keeping with the American dream, they are generally hoping to go out into the world and be successful, happy and wealthy. This is as natural as it is common. And none of these things are necessarily wrong. Some will pursue their dream by adding more education, some by going straight into the workforce, and some by seeking out new life experiences. Each one, no doubt, wanting to be successful at something. But will seeking success above all else really make them happy?

When it comes purely to the pursuit of success, I really do not think that even if we dress it up and send it to church that it will fit into God’s plan for our lives. We could even go so far as to say that “success” is not a Biblical concept that the scripture promotes. Am I saying that God does not want us to be successful? No. I am just saying that it is not a life-goal that is ever promoted by the Word of God.

Then what does the Bible promote? It promotes faithfulness. Faithfulness always comes before any godly successes in life. Perhaps faithfulness is the goal God wants us to strive for because “success” is entirely subjective. What one considers to be success, another may care nothing for at all. Perhaps it is because success in this world rarely seems to satisfy or maybe it is because the pursuit of success usually makes one more focused on one’s self.

What we do know is that the characteristic of faithfulness in a person’s life will often lead them to personal satisfaction. It will affect others in a positive way and bless them because faithfulness is relationship oriented. Whether we are faithful to our spouse, our family, ourselves, our integrity or to our God, we are building relationships and character and forging a life that will often find itself caught up in many successes.

It goes against the grain of our society to focus on our character rather than our careers or to consider God’s will rather than our wants, but that is exactly what God wants us to do—go against the grain. Paul said, “Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.” Romans 12:2 NIV

For those seeking to find happiness and true success in life, Paul’s advice was good then and it is still good now.



WHAT HAS LOVE GOT TO DO WITH IT?

I preached a message a couple of weeks ago in which I questioned the actions and attitude of the prophet Jonah. In particular, I questioned whether or not Jonah was unloving and maybe even held bigoted views toward the Ninevites. I went on to point out that Jonah certainly did not deserve to be viewed as the hero of the story. My comments raised more than one eyebrow. So let me be clear, I do not have a bad attitude toward Jonah.

But it is my desire to point out something that many Christians refuse to see about a man who has been used as a role model in some cases. Therefore, let us look at the facts. His bringing the message of God to them saved One hundred twenty thousand people. This was good. But should we overlook the fact that he only brought the message because he believed that God would kill him if he did not? Should we overlook the fact that he was a hate-filled man, just because he saw results? Understand, he did not have a bad attitude—he wanted 120,000 people to die. It certainly was not his compassion or concern for the Ninevites that touched their hearts.

One of the biggest problems with the church in America is that we justify our "attitudes" and even our hatred of certain people by pointing to our grand church building, our bank accounts, what we do for missions, our handouts to the poor and we go home at night and rock ourselves to sleep at night believing that everything is fine with our hearts because we did a few good works. Yet our attitudes and our hearts remain unchanged and unmoved. The truth is that if we hate people, we are no more conformed to the image of Christ than was Jonah.

What about what Paul said in I Corinthians 13:1-3? "If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing." NIV

Without love we accomplish nothing of any eternal value. We are nothing no matter what the church reports say. Such behavior cannot be tolerated or whitewashed—much less accepted—no matter what the results. As the book of Jonah closes out, God is trying to get something across to Jonah. It was like God was saying, "You still don't get it, do you? The value of all humanity, the lesson, my love, my character—you have missed the whole point of it all."

If you have not read the book of Jonah—read it. You might just see something about Jonah, and even yourself, that you have never seen before. And by the way, the hero of the story is God.



COINCIDENCE OR PROVIDENCE

A friend of mine recently went on a missions trip to Uganda. He was visiting a group of churches that he had been to many times before. They were glad to see him and welcomed him as usual. Although it was not unusual for him to take gifts with him when he went, when he opened a suitcase filled with basic medical supplies, they began to cry. Obviously they were thankful, but there was something more behind their gratitude.

A few weeks before he was to return to Uganda, he had mentioned the various needs and progress of the churches. One particular situation that he mentioned caught my attention. I remembered him saying that everyday items that we take for granted, like Tylenol, were kept under lock and key—if the people could secure any. I did not think much about it until one day when I felt impressed that I should have my church collect basic over-the-counter medical supplies and give them to my friend to take with him on his upcoming trip. Another church joined with us and we were able to send all types of medical supplies in a large quantity.

We sent the supplies and thought nothing more about it until my friend returned and he told the story about how the people had cried when they saw the supplies. That in itself was not unusual; people often cry when happy or thankful. But the something more was this. About the same week that we felt that we should send medical supplies to Uganda, the church in Uganda was praying and felt God was impressing them to start a hospital for the local people who had no one to care for them.

Now you must understand that a hospital in rural Uganda is much different than a hospital here in America. It would be a difficult task for the people even though their hospital would consist of not much more than a structure with a roof and some beds. Nevertheless, they found a small vacant building and a few beds, but as they told God, they had no medicine and no way to get any. Yet they would not give up; they would do what they could.

Then their old friend from America came to see them and what do you think that he had for them? It was the medicine, of course. And that is why they began to cry when they saw the large suitcase of medical supplies. God had sent the much-needed medicine from the other side of the world because they were willing to do what He had led them to do.

I know that some would say that it was all just a coincidence. Out of all the trips that he and others had made, no one had ever felt that they should take medical supplies. And never before had the church ever felt that they should start a hospital. Coincidence? I think it was providence. This should serve to remind us that when we feel as if we should do something good for someone, we do not always have to stop and ask why or how. We can just do it. Who knows? We might have a part in someone's miracle.



WHY DO GOOD THINGS HAPPEN TO BAD PEOPLE?

It is an age-old resentment. Someone who is viewed as a bad person has something good happen or prosper greatly in life. Instantly, those who have done what was right all their lives, but who have had less prosperity, question why. Why, God, would you allow a person like that to have all those good things happen?

Listen to the psalmist in Psalm 73:1-5. “Surely God is good to Israel, to those who are pure in heart. But as for me, my feet had almost slipped; I had nearly lost my foothold. For I envied the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked. They have no struggles; their bodies are healthy and strong. They are free from the burdens common to man; they are not plagued by human ills.” NIV

The psalmist had looked at life and said, “I know God is good to His people, but I struggle with why evil people prosper so much in spite of their evil ways.” Sound familiar? The psalmist had lost his perspective. I can tell this because he was beginning to believe things that simply were not true. He was believing things such as all wicked people prosper; they have no struggles; they are all healthy and strong; and they do not have any burdens or problems. Of course this was not true—but it seemed that way to him at the time.

Read on through the psalm and you will hear more familiar complaints. But as you do, you will also receive the same revelation, as the psalmist did. Note just this one excerpt: “When I tried to understand all this, (how the wicked seemed to prosper) it was oppressive to me till I entered the sanctuary of God; then I understood their final destiny.” Psalm 73:16-17 NIV

Allow me to point out an obvious fact from this passage. If a person is truly evil and is prospering that person does not have it as good as you think because that person must still face God. The fact is that no one who fails to repent will get away with doing anything evil—not even the most religious person.

Now, let me ask you. Should God limit or prevent people from having anything good in their lives just because they are perceived by us to be bad? Who knows, God may just be at work in their lives. Who knows, they might not be as bad as we think in some cases. Paul, in Romans 2:4, tells us that the goodness or kindness of God leads men to repentance. We have already seen that God will punish evil. But God will try every way possible to avoid it, just like a loving parent would. He has no pleasure in judgment.

Allow me to conclude with a couple of questions rather than answers. If we feel like the psalmist or have had the same thoughts, why is it that we have our eyes on others? Why have we allowed ourselves to become envious of others? And even if someone is evil, what makes some people want to see others suffer?



NO REASON TO ENVY WRONGDOERS

I would like us to consider further the questions of why and how it seems that some people who ignore God and do evil seem to prosper or at least seemingly face no consequences for their actions and why it seems that people who do good suffer adversity. In doing so we need to consider some facts that perhaps have been overlooked.

First, God has not been deceived by anyone. Not only is He the only one who can judge the heart of another, He is also qualified to do so. Paul tells us, “Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows. The one who sows to please his sinful nature, from that nature will reap destruction; the one who sows to please the Spirit, from the Spirit will reap eternal life.” Galatians 6:7-8 NIV Simply put, no one fools God.

There is an immutable law of God at work in this world in spite of what some may think. The way we live our lives matters. It will matter to us one day if it does not already and it certainly matters to God right now. In the Old Testament He phrased it this way, “I am setting before you today a blessing and a curse...” Dt.11: 26-28 NIV We have a choice in life in what we receive out of life. We can have a blessed life.

A second fact to consider comes in two parts. First is that when we see evil go unpunished we could in reality be seeing the judgment of God at work. According to the scripture the absence of punishment is evidence of the judgment of God in a person’s life. There are people who God no longer warns. Consider Romans 1:28, “Furthermore, since they did not think it worthwhile to retain the knowledge of God, he gave them over to a depraved mind, to do what ought not to be done.”

When the day comes that a man no longer regrets his evil actions and seems to no longer suffer any consequences for wrong doing, it is a day to fear—not a day to celebrate.

Now we come to the second part of this truth. When we see people pay for doing evil it is actually the mercy of God. I know that may sound odd to some. We always tend to feel that if God does not forgive, forget and make it all better that He does not love us. In reality, the fact that He allows us to suffer when we do wrong could be one of the greatest signs of His love. Why? “Because the Lord disciplines those he loves, and he punishes everyone he accepts as a son.” Hebrews 12:6 NIV

There is much more to consider, but for now let those who are doing right NOT be envious of those doing wrong—for any reason. Neither allow yourself to feel that God does not care about you because all your problems do not vanish. And finally, to those who are doing what is morally or spiritually wrong and feel no negative effect—you will reap what you sow.



HOW TO FIND CONTENTMENT

When we were in Florida a number of years ago, I stood on the beach watching my two-year-old play at the edge of the ocean. It was a wide beach, late in the evening and very few people were around. She was occupied with throwing sand back into the ocean when she saw several large birds nearby at the water's edge. For some reason she decided to go after them. I do not know if she wanted to catch them or if she just wanted to chase them. But she was in pursuit.

Immediately they saw her coming and quickly rose into the air but landed only a few yards further down the beach just out of her reach. She paused, as if to consider the situation, and then continued her pursuit of the birds. As I followed close by—but behind her and out of her sight—the scene was played out over and over again. The pursuit had become a game and, if the birds were not enjoying it, at least the tiny pursuer certainly was.

As I followed her, the words of the Apostle Paul came to mind and I was reminded of how few of us seem to ever mature to the point that he and many others had in regard to material possessions and earthly situations. His words, “I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do everything through him who gives me strength” (Phil. 4:12-13 NIV) seemed to shine a light upon our childlike ways and feelings of discontent.

I followed my daughter as she made her way down the beach in pursuit of her elusive prey. It did not take long before we all were a long way from where we started, and at no time did she ever realize that I was near—but I was. I stayed close because although she thought that she was in complete control and had the situation well in hand she was still a very little girl on a very large beach at the edge of a very deep ocean.

Suddenly, she stopped her pursuit and turned to the ocean. Looking up, she saw no one—only an endless empty horizon. She then did what came natural: she called out for her parents and began to cry. I was there in an instant because I had never left her alone as she had thought.

With her in my arms, I walked back to where we had started and to where her mother and family were. I thought of how as Christians we, too, often remain as children. We are constantly pursuing that which is beyond our reach in hopes that it will make us happy. It would seem that there is a fine line between striving to have our needs met and becoming obsessed with our natural desires.

But Paul had learned his lessons well and knew that no matter what he had or did not have he could be happy and content as long as Jesus Christ was central in his life. What lessons about contentment have we yet to learn today?



BAKE ME A CAKE FIRST

That day was a day I will always remember. We were at the Village of Hope Orphanage in Da Nang and had been doing some construction work on the grounds, followed by games with the children. Once finished with the work and the festivities, one by one, the children took us by the hand and led us into the dining hall. The oscillating fans did little to alleviate the heat and humidity and the little dogs running in and out of the hall did little to inspire my appetite, but I would rather have been there than in the courts of Queen Elizabeth.

The children began to serve us our meal as if they had waited for us to visit them for their whole lives. Broad smiles came along with each bowl of soup, ear of steamed corn and loaf of French bread. Each team member was surrounded by at least five children who, in between bites of food, doted on us and saw to our every need and perceived desire, as if they were the proud grandparents of a new grandchild.

In the midst of all this activity one of the other team members looked at me and said, “You know this is a treat for them, they only get rice and a little milk each day.” The truth of their situation was driven home even more when, after the meal, I saw them collecting every crumb of leftover food. This would supplement their diet in the days to come. They had given us their best and saved the leftover food for themselves. This is the graciousness of the Vietnamese people.

Nevertheless, as a well-fed American, I could not help but feel humbled by their sacrifice as I walked among the children. And although this was not a Christian run orphanage, they had behaved in a way that even Christ would commend. It reminds me of the passage in 1 Kings 17 where the prophet

Elijah told the widow to bake him a cake/loaf of bread before she made one for her son and herself. It was a challenge for the woman. The country was suffering from a famine and the meal and the oil she had was all she had left in the world. What caused her to obey his words? I think the widow knew something very important.

First of all, even in a time of famine, she knew God calls us to honor His work—even if it means sacrifice.

Secondly, she knew God takes care of those who put Him first.

Of course, when we realized that the leftover food would be given to the children we made sure to eat very little. The more we left, the more they would have. Imagine the joy of the little girl, pictured to the left, when she was able to gather up this armload of bread that would feed her and her friends for days to come. Being deaf and mute, she could not hear our words or speak to us, but she could enjoy the provisions left behind.

If we, with our imperfect hearts, would seek to bless those who we love and have need, how much more will our Father in heaven take care of us (Matthew 7:11)?

Even the children at the orphanage knew the wisdom of honoring those who were able and willing to help them. How much more should we hold true to these same truths? How much more should we honor the One who is able and willing to take care of us?



SMALL DOUBTS DESTROY BIG PRAYERS

Do you believe that you must beg God for an answer to your prayer? Do you believe that you must earn His action on your behalf? If you said yes to either, then you have misunderstood the nature of prayer.

There are two necessary actions for us to take if we are to see our prayers answered. These actions are found in James 1:6-8. James writes concerning the man who prays, “But when he asks, he must believe and not doubt...” NIV

From this passage we see that it is necessary for us to ask for God’s help. Do not waste time hoping that God will do something or that “the good Lord will meet your need” when you have never asked Him to do so. People like that are usually the ones who get angry at God for not doing something for people as “good” as they are.

If you have a need, simply ask God to meet that need. Prayer is the basis for making all of our requests known to God. If we doubt the value of bringing our petitions to God, then we are stopped before we ever start. If you ask something of God, then expect generosity from Him. It is the nature of God to be generous to those in need.

Next, it is necessary for us to believe that God will help us. In general, it has appeared to me in my encounters with people in hospitals and funeral homes and other difficult and tragic places that people want to hear me express only three basic truths in the words that I say. First of all, people want to hear the truth that “God loves them”; not that He has a love for them but that He loves them personally. Second, they want to hear that God cares about them—again not in a vague way—but He cares about what they are presently going through. And third, they want to know that God is going to help them. He is going to somehow intervene in their situation and make a difference.

In times of need, the human heart often reaches out to God and desires desperately to believe. It is not a desire that God takes lightly. He wants us to believe and He wants to answer even if our prayers and faith are not perfect. Ideally, we are not to entertain any doubts whatsoever. But every prayer is not the ideal prayer. Take for example the father in Mark 9:24-27. The man brings his afflicted son to Jesus, asks Jesus to heal his son and is then questioned by Jesus if he believes. He states, “I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!” NIV He knew that he had to overcome his unbelief in order to receive. Jesus worked with him where he was—a struggling soul—and healed his son.

If you and I doubt and do not attempt to overcome our doubt, there is no reason to believe that you and I will receive anything from God. In short, a person who doubts does not have a made up mind. Our minds must be set on asking and receiving—even if we know we are weak in that area. Those small doubts are what threaten to destroy our prayers.



DANGEROUS SUPERSTITIONS

I have noticed something over the last year or so that has me concerned. Although it is nothing new, throughout the history of Christianity there have always been periods of time when people within the church have mixed superstitious ideas with faith in Christ. It would seem that either faith in the Word of God and prayer are not enough for some or else they insist on inserting certain “extra ideas” about the supernatural realm into what the scripture has already told us.

In particular, are two instances that point to this fact. First there is the electronic chain letter that usually tells the recipient to “read this prayer out loud three times and forward it to seven people in the next five minutes and God will bless you” or answer your prayer or whatever. Do people really think that this is the way prayer works? If so allow me to offer these two passages, first from 1 Timothy 2:5-6 which reads, “For there is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all men...” NIV

A “mediator” is a go between. Jesus is the one who makes it possible for us to speak to God about our needs. We receive from God because of Jesus not because of sending or receiving a letter or an e-mail. Hebrews 4:15-16 tells us, “For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet was without sin. Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.” NIV

The second idea is closely related to the first and that is that some think that the scripture can be used as an incantation. Case in point, the way some have used the prayer of Jabez. A good book was written on the subject but evidently some missed the point. Jabez had a relationship with God and that is why the prayer worked. However, some have the idea that if one just repeats it or “prays” it over and over that he or she will be blessed—even if there is no relationship. Still others think that it is the magic prayer that brings wealth when prayed.

Maybe they are like the people Jesus dealt with in John 6:26. These were people with no interest in encountering God, but rather in having their belly filled. “Jesus answered, ‘I tell you the truth, you are looking for me, not because you saw miraculous signs but because you ate the loaves and had your fill.’” NIV In another place Jesus had this to say to those who were preoccupied with material things, “But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.” Mt 6:33 NIV

Let me be clear. For a Christian, it is through Jesus Christ that our assurance and peace is secured—not through chain letters or e-mails or through repeating a “magic” prayer over and over. It is through knowing God and having a personal relationship with Him that we find all that we need.



JESUS CAN JUGGLE

The other night as my wife was trying to get my five-year-old to sleep my daughter was telling her that she had been having bad dreams at night. My wife told her that she should ask Jesus to help her have good dreams. “Can He do that,” she asked? “Of course He can,” her mother replied. “He can do anything.” “Really,” my daughter asked in questioning amazement, “Can He juggle?” “Yes,” came the response, “He can even juggle!”

My wife and I had a good laugh over that one. But obviously being able to juggle is impressive to a five-year-old. The understanding of a child is often complicated and sometimes amusing. Right now their questions and responses make us laugh as well as make us think. But as parents we know that one day their understanding will mature and their thinking will become clear about most things in life.

I wonder if God is waiting on the same thing to take place in our lives. No doubt most of us have been reassured about God’s ability to help us in our time of need and have heard about how powerful that He is. Yet, as if in the same questioning amazement of a five-year-old, we respond, “Yes, but can He or will He do this?”

What is it that we find impressive about God? What can He do that will convince us that He will take care of us or help us in our time of need? It is not that God does not want to be put to the test. (Mal. 3:10) But why must we always need to take a wait-and-see attitude about depending on God? Has He not ever helped us? “But you do not understand! If I could just see God do something, then I would and could believe.” Would we?

Take note of the story of Israel’s deliverance from bondage and their subsequent attitude. “He divided the sea and led them through; he made the water stand firm like a wall. He guided them with the cloud by day and with light from the fire all night. He split the rocks in the desert and gave them water as abundant as the seas; he brought streams out of a rocky crag and made water flow down like rivers. But they continued to sin against him, rebelling in the desert against the Most High. They willfully put God to the test by demanding the food they craved. They spoke against God, saying, “Can God spread a table in the desert? When he struck the rock, water gushed out, and streams flowed abundantly. But can he also give us food? Can he supply meat for his people?” When the LORD heard them, he was very angry; his fire broke out against Jacob, and his wrath rose against Israel, for they did not believe in God or trust in his deliverance.” Psalms 78:13-22 NIV

All of these supernatural feats performed by God in the past should be enough to convince us, at the very least, that He is surely able to “juggle” the difficulties and problems we face in our lives—and make them work out in our favor to boot! The only question that remains to be settled is when our faith in Him will reach its maturity.



GROWING OLDER

I noticed something the other day when I got out of my recliner. My body sounded like a bowl of Rice Crispies. Snap. Crackle. Pop. I am not very old but at times my body feels it. Which made me think of what life would be like for me and for this body of mine when I really am a senior citizen.

Many say that life has never been better for seniors in our society. There are more advantages for senior adults than ever before. If you have read Tom Brokaw's book The Greatest Generation, it is possible to see that maybe there is even a new respect for those who are in our oldest generation. And it seems that even Wall Street is after the lucrative senior dollar.

Yet everything does not seem to be getting easier for those who are aging. In fact, some seniors are unhappier than ever before. I realize that some may have made their life what it is and there is not much that anyone can do to change it—much less make them happy. But I think some have legitimate complaints.

This is not reality for everyone, but it is easy to see how some feel that it is their reality. Put yourself in the place of a senior adult in their “declining years and declining health.” Everybody seems to think that you are on your way out. Consequently, your opinion may not be considered. People now speak to you as if you do not have good sense. You were a part of the rat race and mainstream society and now others just want you off the road and in a home.

With this in mind, to senior adults I say take heart. Not everyone feels the way some appear to. You are valuable and have much to offer. Get involved in life. The abundant life that Jesus promised to those who trust in Him does not have an expiration date on it. Become involved with young people as much as possible. It will keep you young and, besides, you have a great deal in common—middle-aged people do not think that either of you have good sense.

Remember the words of Paul, “Teach the older men to be temperate, worthy of respect, self-controlled, and sound in faith, in love and in endurance. Likewise, teach the older women to be reverent in the way they live, not to be slanderers or addicted to much wine, but to teach what is good.” Titus 2:2-3 NIV

To the younger generation, especially in the church, wake up! You really do not know everything. How would you like to be told to give your offering but keep your opinions to yourself? Do you want to know what Jesus would do (WWJD)? He would show respect.

Remember what Paul wrote to the young minister Timothy, “Do not rebuke an older man harshly, but exhort him as if he were your father. Treat younger men as brothers, older women as mothers, and younger women as sisters, with absolute purity.” I Timothy 5:1-2 NIV

In short, I think God's Word teaches us that age should not matter where our behavior is concerned. And it certainly teaches that our value is not diminished by our age.



WHY WE RECEIVE FROM GOD

I heard something the other day on a television program that concerned me. The person speaking was promoting the idea of “sowing a financial seed” in order for one to receive a miracle. Now I believe in giving financially to the church or to God’s work in various forms. I believe in tithing from one’s income to support the church. I believe in miracles. However, when one starts connecting the giving of money with receiving healing for his or her children or spouse—I get concerned.

The reason for my concern is that it is likely that people will begin to feel as if they have to buy the blessings of God. Maybe they will believe that their financial gift to God somehow influences God’s decision to help them. Even worse is the possibility that some will feel that God owes them a miracle because they “paid Him off.” The connecting of miracles of healing with gifts of money somehow seems to tarnish the character of God and call into question His holy character. The very idea that we need to, or can, persuade God to help us by giving something is a complete misunderstanding of who He is.

What the Bible does teach about money is that when we honor God with the “first fruits” of our money that He will provide a way of being even more blessed in the future. (ex: Malachi 3:10 & Lk.6:38) There are also many other passages that speak of God providing for His people if they will put Him first in their finances.

What the Bible teaches about having the other needs of our lives met is also clear. First, if one knows Christ as Savior and Lord then he or she can come to Him and ask what he or she will because of their relationship—not because of his or her bank account. Jesus taught, “Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks, the door will be opened.” “Which of you, if his son asks for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a snake? If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him!” Matt. 7:7-11 NIV

There can be a fine line between teaching that many blessings come out of obedience to Christ as opposed to the idea that what we do persuades God to help us. The fine line is blurred when we emphasize our desire to receive over our relationship with Christ or when we think that God can or needs to be bought. What gives us our balance is in knowing the true nature and character of God in a personal relationship. Therefore, we should set our minds on keeping our relationship with Christ as it should be and not on trying to determine what we must do to merit God’s intervention in our lives.



THE PROBLEM WITH GRACE

Nothing seems to cause some Christian people more problems than the grace of God. Some want to preach an intolerant God, which demands holiness to the point of complete personal perfection. Still others want to preach a God so tolerant of sin that no one is ultimately held accountable for his or her actions.

The problem is that when we decide that a person has been forgiven enough and, therefore, deserves no more forgiveness, we are drawing lines that only God can draw. We have misunderstood the nature of the grace of God. God forgives those who are repentant, not those who achieve a certain perceived level of personal perfection and not those who are better Christians or even those who seem to have an easier time obeying God.

I realize that it is very easy at this point to preach a God that ignores sin or winks at our transgression. I am not doing that because it is not the truth. Neither am I promoting the idea that God becomes intolerant of us because of our failures and our sins. The truth is somewhere in the middle where God judges each according to his or her heart, actions and behavior. It is simply our willingness to repent and ask God for forgiveness that makes the difference between those who find the favor of God and those who do not. Some are willing to repent, and do so genuinely, and some do not. God knows the difference.

Our challenge is not to declare boundaries but to present a balanced God. Too many times we present a God that is like a human being—intolerant. In addition, we sometimes present a God who ignores sin like we often do. Sadly, humanity not only makes excuses for itself without limit but also condemns itself without mercy. Thankfully, God is not like humanity. God is perfect, righteous and holy. Sometimes that goes against everything that we feel is right. But the person in error is always you and me—not God.

Our bias, our upbringing and our philosophy of life will influence so many things about us. But God is not influenced by society, by parents or by peers. Therefore, the question that should be asked most often is, “Why does it seem that some want to condemn people and see them cut off?” Do they feel that they are members of the spiritually elite or do they really have a zeal for God? Do they feel as if God is hard and unbending toward them and thus toward everybody? As well we could ask, “Why do some want to excuse sin and overlook error?” Could it be that they have too many sins that they want to whitewash, overlook and ignore and, therefore, they are willing to do that in the lives of others. Even the very questions we ask cause us to draw conclusions that we are unqualified to make.

The duty of judging or forgiving is not ours but God’s alone. Our calling is to proclaim the truth of God’s Word and of His character. Every person will give an account of his or her life. Still one question remains, “What damage will we do in the process, or what good will we do, of leading people to God?”

Day 26



THE HEALER OF BROKEN HEARTS

Has your heart ever been broken? Was it due to a tragedy, a relationship, unkind words or disappointment? Broken hearts are often the result of many different causes, but they are broken nonetheless. One of the most memorable words on this subject comes from the movie classic, The Wizard of Oz. Remember when the Wizard says to the Tin Man, “Hearts will never be practical until they are made unbreakable”? Practical or not, we have them and they do break.

The good news is that there is a Healer of broken hearts who can work wonders with the fragile pieces. The psalmist wrote of the Healer, “He heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds.” Ps. 147:3 NIV David wrote, “The LORD is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit.” Ps. 34:18 NIV Of course, Jesus is the healer of whom I speak. And I just want to remind the broken hearted of some very important truths born out in scripture.

First, He is near. “The LORD is close to the brokenhearted,” not metaphorically or symbolically, He is there. I experienced His presence first hand at the graveside of my brother on the day we buried him. I remember sitting there feeling overcome with grief when the words of the scripture came to me. Although I did not hear a voice, it was as if God was standing there saying to me, “I will not leave you without comfort, I will come to you,” (John 14:18) and I felt as if I could make it. Something happened in me, because He was there.

Next, He wants you to know that His purpose is to heal. That is why He is there. Isaiah foretold that Jesus would be sent to “bind up the broken hearted.” Isa. 61:1 I cannot promise that you will have all your questions answered—I wish you could—but sometimes healing is more important than knowing. How He can take the broken pieces and put them all back together again I do not know. But, as for me, I have learned that He can do it when no one else can.

Thirdly, He is able to save those who have been crushed. Remember the words of David, “The LORD is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit.” A broken heart can leave a “crushed spirit,” but Jesus will never leave a heart halfway restored. I do not know how that I can explain this other than to say He will put life back into your heart.

Contrary to the hopes and even beliefs of some, good and godly people do not always escape heartache. Broken hearts are as common among those who believe in Jesus Christ and do what is right as there are among those who do not. But for those who will believe, there is a Healer of broken hearts that is always near, ready to help and can put the pieces of our hearts back together again.

Day 27



WHEN GOD FELT HUMAN

Have you ever felt forsaken by God? If not, perhaps you have felt that at times there was a distance or a separation between God and yourself that left you feeling alone when you were experiencing difficult times. I have felt that way before. Of course, I do not believe that God will forsake us. But it is certainly an emotional sensation that many have experienced and that can be very real. It is all part of the human experience that not even being a Christian can prevent.

To illustrate, allow me to direct our attention to Jesus and His earthly life. Jesus was God incarnate, which means that He was both completely God and completely man—something beyond our comprehension but true. However, what we do understand is that He lived a life much like ours. He slept or rested when He was tired, He ate when He was hungry, He laughed, cried, became angry, made friends and made enemies—just like any other human. But what we overlook is that He felt the burden of being human even in His interaction with God the Father.

Listen to His words prior to the crucifixion as He prayed in the garden, "My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will." Matt. 26:39 NIV This simple statement tells me that the burden of being in a human body was weighing heavy. Now listen to His words as He hung on the cross. "About the ninth hour Jesus cried out in a loud voice... 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?'" Matt. 27:46 NIV He was not merely quoting the words of David in Psalm 22:1, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from saving me, so far from the words of my groaning?" NIV

He was feeling what David and you and me and other human beings have felt throughout history. He was feeling human and it was not the first time. For thirty-three years He had felt human in every way that we do. The writer of Hebrews said it this way, "For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet was without sin." 4:15

The beauty and power of this truth becomes evident in the next verse. "Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need." 4:16 NIV When you and I wonder, "Why God?" or, "Where are you God?" or even, "Lord, must I go through this?" there is One seated beside God the Father who knows those questions and knows those feelings and is ready to offer sufficient grace and mercy to help us in our time of need.

Day 28



SURVIVING IN THE RACE OF LIFE

Nascar fans are a devoted lot. They seem to be fascinated with the race and all that is involved. Their hope is that their favorite driver will cross the finish line first and their biggest fear is that he will hit the wall. If the driver hits the wall it could mean the end of the race for him or, at worse, the end of life.

I have heard people speak of “hitting the wall” before but usually they are not talking stock car racing. I have heard that expression used as another way of saying that one has “come to the end of his rope.” In other words, it is used to describe the feeling of being emotionally exhausted or devastated. When one “hits the wall” emotionally, the person has in essence been hit hard by life.

Using the imagery of a race, allow me to make several observations about the race in which we are all involved—the race of life. I have noticed, in car races as well as in life, that there is usually an obvious reason that one hits the wall. Sometimes it is due to a bad decision by the individual, but sometimes it is due to another’s decision. At times it is due to trying too hard or getting careless. Whatever the reason, a person can find himself in trouble quickly when life goes out of control.

Secondly, not everyone who hits the wall survives. What a tragedy it is to see a life destroyed by a mistake or a wrong turn. In a car race it can happen in an instant. But in life it usually happens more slowly. That is why we must be observant of those around us. When we see that someone has “hit the wall” emotionally, we must not take it lightly. Without encouragement and help and prayer they may not make it. Simply put, suicide or a breakdown is often the result of “hitting the wall” emotionally.

But the good news is that it is possible to “hit the wall” and walk away. I have seen many horrible accidents on the track where the car was destroyed yet the driver walked away to race another day. For those who have “hit the wall” or may do so in the future, the Bible offers hope in Christ.

Paul wrote, “For God, who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness,’ made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ. We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed.” 2 Cor. 4:6-9 NIV

No one is exempt from the hard knocks of life, as Paul clearly points out, but we can survive with God’s help. We are not crushed, in despair, abandoned or destroyed. God will see us through.

Always remember the encouraging words of Paul, “Being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.” Phil. 1:6 NIV

Day 29



GOD REMEMBERS YOU

Few things can be as disheartening as being overlooked by someone you hope or expect will notice you. To speak and not be heard, to hurt and not be cared for, to labor and not find rest—this can break a person’s spirit.

Perhaps this is why the words of Exodus 3:7 had such an effect on one Vietnamese woman. Read with me, “And the LORD said, I have surely seen the affliction of my people which are in Egypt, and have heard their cry by reason of their taskmasters; for I know their sorrows...” KJV.

These words spoken by God to Moses about the Israelites in Egyptian bondage were the topic of my devotion one morning in Vietnam. In an abbreviated form this is the essence of this passage: God says, “I have seen, I have heard, I know.” Powerful words for someone who felt forgotten.

This simple message had a powerful effect on the woman sitting before me. She had just returned to Vietnam with us for the first time since the fall of Saigon at the end of the Vietnam War. As she would later tell us, for years the Vietnamese people who lost their country have sung a song that says in essence, “Where are you God? Can you not see? Can you not hear?”

Riding down the roads of Vietnam with memories washing over her, sadness, and questions from the past of “why” filling her mind, it was like the finger of God tapped her on the shoulder and a voice whispered, “I have seen, I have heard, I know.” But He had more to say.

When it comes to great needs in the world people often ask, “Why doesn’t God do something about that?” “Doesn’t God see?” “Doesn’t God know?” “Doesn’t God care?” You may have even asked some of these same questions about situations or great needs you have also observed. Well? What does God have to say for Himself?

In verse 8 God also goes on to say that he had come to help His people—and He had—but in verse 10, He says to Moses, “I am sending you.”

If you are feeling forgotten—God remembers you. He has not forgotten. You have not been abandoned.

If you see the needs of the hurting and the forgotten—He is sending you.

Day 30



ATTITUDE COUNTS

I have two daughters. They are as different as daylight and dark. One is like me and the other is like my wife. The other day I asked my five-year-old if she had had a good day. She replied, in a voice that made me know she thought my question was silly, “I always have a good day!” Are people like that annoying or what? She is like her mother. They are the kind of people who awake and say, “Good morning Lord!” Whereas, my two-year-old and I awake and say, “Good lord, it’s morning!” Needless to say, we have to work harder on our attitude than do they.

But you know, I do not think that my youngest and I are alone in our struggle. In fact, it is probably due to the fact that everyone experiences times when his or her attitude is not the best that the Bible addresses this very situation. The scripture helps us out not only by telling us that we all need to work on our attitudes but also by telling us what the Christian’s attitude should be.

First, Paul wrote in Ephesians 4:22-24 that our attitude should be different than it was before our conversion. “You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; to be made new in the attitude of your minds; and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness.” NIV

He speaks of having a servant’s attitude in Philippians 2:3-5. “Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others. Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus...” NIV

He speaks of having a positive attitude in Philippians 4:8. “Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things.” NIV

He even speaks of having a triumphant attitude in Romans 8: 35-39. “Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? ...No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.” NIV

Obviously our attitude is important to God. But His reason is not that He simply wants us conform to His will and way of thinking, but that our everyday lives be enriched and made more profitable. At this point, it is simply up to us to begin the process of change that will result in a good attitude. So, here we go everybody. “Good morning, Lord!”

Day 31



IT'S TOO LATE TO HIDE

I first noticed him as he shuffled past me while making his way through the crowd of excited children swarming around the room at the school for deaf and blind children outside Saigon, Vietnam. He moved slow, but steady. His arms and legs were twisted and drawn in such a way that made it impossible for him to maneuver quickly through all the activity. As he passed by me I noticed a single golden-brown teddy bear dangled limply from the tight clutch of one hand—flopping up and down with each movement he made.

He was different among those who were different. He did not fit among those who did not fit with others. Seeing he had only one gift and the other children embracing many, I remembered a nearby bag of toys, and with the intent of getting the boy more toys to enjoy, I turned from him and made my way through the crowd. Filling my hands with gifts I turned back only to find that the boy was gone.

I knew I had seen him. He was just there. So, I began to search the room for him. He was nowhere to be found. Outside in the courtyard I searched. He was not there. Where had he gone? “He could not have moved that quickly,” I thought. But he had. Doing my best to communicate with people who spoke another language or with those who spoke not at all, I tried to ask where the boy had gone. Nothing but confused stares were given. Finally, in desperation, I mimed the way in which he walked and the way in which his arms were bent and pointed to a boy nearby. Some of the deaf children, watching my poor attempt to communicate, suddenly responded with wide-eyed enthusiasm and smiles and motioned for me to stay there and wait. Then, running from the room in different directions they set off in search of the boy, only to return empty-handed and apparently bewildered about his whereabouts.

The message was quickly relayed to other children and to the teachers, each responding as if they knew where to find him. Finally, a rapid tapping on my arm and a pointed finger directed my attention down the sidewalk to the boy I sought being led arm-in-arm by one of the teachers. He shuffled as quickly as he could, apparently excited by the prospect that someone was looking for him.

“Why had he left and returned to his doom room with only one gift when so many were available?” I questioned in my mind. Later, I thought about how his physical limitation—coupled with his other limitations—perhaps had been a deciding factor in choosing to take what he could and go. Perhaps he had been overwhelmed by the excitement and quick movements of the other children as they ran from place to place with hands and arms filled with gifts and indulged themselves in the Christmas-morning-like atmosphere? Maybe he thought no one would miss him, or worse, that no one would care if he stayed.

In contrast to the other children, he had one hand that he could control enough to grasp a single stuffed bear. With that he would have to be content. Maybe, in his mind, having received anything at all is better than possessing nothing at all. Better to take what little he could hold and slip silently away. Better to assume what was for others was not for him than to lose what little he had been given. Even in the act of receiving gifts he must have felt out of place.

Alone in his dorm room he had no idea that someone was looking for him and wanting to give him more. But, as I filled his pocket with toy cars and gave more to others to be carried for him, he knew there was more for him.

This human condition is seen more often than one might think. Lost among the masses ready to receive and hoping to receive so much are those who live their lives

expecting to be overlooked—expecting to be left out. Their “infirmity” is that they feel different and inadequate. They do not fit or at least they feel as if they do not fit. For them, it is easier to fade away, to slip out of the room, to assume that the happiness and gifts of life are for others—not for us.

But there is One who searches for us. It is too late to hide ourselves. It is needless to hide our weaknesses. He has seen us in all our frailty. He knows us for what we are and it does not matter to him. We cannot escape Him. We can only fail to respond to His call. With Him, our receiving is only about our response to Him and what is being offered—not about others response to us.