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CHRISTIAN LIFESTYLE

issue 26



LET YOUR LIGHT SO SHINE
BEFORE MEN, THAT THEY MAY SEE
YOUR GOOD WORKS AND GIVE
GLORY TO YOUR FATHER WHO
IS IN HEAVEN

MATTHEW 5:16

Sometime ago, a minister was teaching the subject of eschatology at a youth theological course in Singapore. The minister asked the class "What is the time now?" Looking at the clock on the wall, one student replied, "It is twelve noon. Time for lunch". When the minister explained that he did not mean the literal hour but the remaining time left before the Lord comes again, the class burst into laughter. Indeed, we may not be watchful enough about the Second Coming of the Lord because our minds are preoccupied with many things. We tend to forget the commission of preaching the gospel entrusted to us by our Lord, despite repeated reminders from our ministers.

The Bible warns that in the last days perilous times shall come, "For men will be lovers of their own selves, covetous, boasters, proud, blasphemers, disobedient to parents, unthankful, unholy, without natural affection, truce breakers, false accusers, incontinent, fierce, despisers of those that are good, traitors, heady, highminded, lovers of pleasure more than lovers of God, having the form of godliness but denying the power thereof" (2 Tim 3:2-5). This is happening around us everyday. The morality of the world is deteriorating into a shocking state. Countries that used to be conservative, providing good newspapers for reading have given in to

pornographic culture. If we switch on the TV, we will see commercials with scanty attired models totally irrelevant to the commodity advertised. Cinemas and movies that used to provide healthy programmes for entertainment are now filled with violence and obscenity.

We, as Christians, must be very careful, lest we fall prey to Satan and conform to the world. Let us remember the words of Jesus to His disciples, saying, "Behold, I send you out as sheep in the midst of wolves; so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves" (Mt 10:16). We also have to enter into the world as indicated in the Lord's prayer to the heavenly Father, "As thou didst send me into the world, so I have sent them into the world" (Jn 17:18). Jesus sent us into the world to preach the gospel of salvation to those who are under the dominion of the evil one so that they may open their eyes, turn themselves from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God. The Bible also calls us to come out of the City of Babylon, lest we take part in her sin (Rev 18:4). Babylon symbolizes city of sin. Paul also quoted Prophet Isaiah, saying, "Therefore come out from them, and be separate from them, says the Lord, and touch nothing unclean; then I will welcome you" (2 Cor 6:17). In short, the life of a Christian is to enter into the world in order to save the

world, but at the same time taking precautions to stay out of the world's entertainment. Although we live in this world, we do not belong to it. And we ought to ask God to protect us from the evil one.

In this issue's feature article, *Christian Lifestyle*, the author reminds us that we are the Israelites of the New Testament, Abraham's seed and heirs according to promise. We are a chosen people, a special treasure and above all the other people on the face of the earth. As such, we should not do what others are doing, but to identify ourselves as a people not of the world. The Bible Study's topic, *Dedication of Paul*, relates to us the life of Paul; although he had started as a persecutor of Christians, he later became a dedicated servant of the Lord. Under Exhortation, the writer presents the story of *Hannah* with a different perspective. Don't miss reading it. Still in Exhortation, we have, *Misconception About Being Christian*, where the writer listed out the common excuses given by some who reject Christianity. Under Practical Living, we have *And Jesus Called A Little Child To Him*. Here, the author shares his personal experience as well as provides an insight on Christian suffering. So, when things do not come your way, remember that God gives us the grace to suffer but He also gives us the grace to grow.

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contents

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FEATURE ARTICLE

3 CHRISTIAN LIFESTYLE

EXHORTATION

8 MISCONCEPTIONS ABOUT
BEING CHRISTIAN

11 AN OLD STORY OF
INTERCESSION

13 ROOM TO GROW

16 SELF-LOVE

PRACTICAL CHRISTIAN LIVING

19 FAITH, TODAY, AND THE
FOUNDATION OF
SPIRITUAL REVIVAL

23 BE STILL

24 HANNAH

27 AND JESUS CALLED A
LITTLE CHILD TO HIM

34 THE UGLY OLD "I"

BIBLE STUDY

36 DEDICATION OF PAUL

DEVOTIONAL

40 THOUGHTS ON
ECCLESIASTES

POEM

44 THE WELL

RESPONDENTS ON FULL-TIME MINISTRY

45 ELD LIN FENG LAI
PR JOSEPH CHONG
PR JONATHAN CHOU

TESTIMONIES

47 HOLY WORK IN CALGARY

48 HE SPOKE TO ME

49 HE SANG WITH US!

CHRISTIAN

The Israelites were the chosen people of God. While they were still in Egypt, God showed them their special status. From the fourth plague onwards, they were untouched. When the rest of Egypt was plagued, the territory of Goshen, where the Israelites dwelled, was miraculously spared. After the Israelites were brought out of Egypt, God told them specifically that they were to be consecrated to Him: "... if you will obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my own possession among all peoples..." (Ex 19:5; ref Deut 7:6, 14:2).



LIFESTYLE



Such a message is not merely knowledge to the Israelites. Their lifestyle is an enactment of this special position given by God. Admittedly, the Old Testament Bible can be read as a series of the Israelites' defiance and disobedience followed by God's chastisement and mercy. Nevertheless, the unchangeable truth is that the Israelite nation lived apart from other nations. They had their own set of laws personally given by God to govern their daily affairs, standards of hygiene, offerings and moral conduct. They are of their own: "a people dwelling alone, and not reckoning itself among the nations" (Num 23:9).

We are the Israelites of the New Testament; we are of Abraham's seed and heirs according to promise (Gal 3:27-29). There is a necessity to realise our special status as God's chosen people, a special treasure apart and above all the other people on the face of the earth. We must come face to face with our special status. That we are a church not reckoned among the churches must not remain a dormant kind of knowledge often taken for granted. That we are a special treasure

LIM SIOH HONG
[SINGAPORE]

The idea that all religions should reconcile is gaining more popularity each day

of God must be manifested in our lifestyle, in our dreams and plans, in every single aspect of our lives.

Today, more and more people in the world are talking about conformity and unification. With the advancement in transport technology, man has a mobility that transcends physical boundaries. The satellite technology developed in the later half of this century brought men closer to one another with multi-media communication systems such as video-conferencing and the Internet. Globalisation is the talk of the day and the world is said to be evolving into a global village, where differences are being eliminated and people share more and more similarities.

In the religious realm, there are also attempts at unification. The idea that all religions should reconcile is gaining more popularity each day. Hence, we see the emergence of groups preaching the universality of their religion, proclaiming that their beliefs are a smooth and peaceable unification of the main religious beliefs in the world. These people preach of one same god to

worship and the magnanimity to accept other's mode of worship. Within the Christian world, there is no scarcity of such "goodwill" either. Ecumenical efforts can be summarised in a slogan that present-day Christians like to echo: "In things not essential, let there be unity." So we see different denominations joining hands to have combined choir-presentations and world-wide or nation-wide prayer campaigns. To them, it is no big matter that they are different in the doctrinal underpinnings of their faith and that they are essentially still different. In the name of peace and unity, they deem doctrinal issues as things not essential.

While churches join in fellowship, we need not feel embarrassed that we are not among them. We do not partake of such ecumenical activities because we know that we cannot be yoked with unbelievers. By not doing what others are doing, we identify ourselves as people not of the world. The apostles were not ashamed to profess their beliefs which essentially were radical and not of the accepted norm in their society then. The early believers of the apostolic days identified themselves as a distinct group of people. The term "Christians" was even coined to refer to them and this name came to be used on all future generations of believers (Acts 11:26). We are in the light and the rest of the world is in darkness. Our every word and action is conspicuous. Hence, we have to consciously manifest the difference, reminding ourselves at the same time not to slip into darkness. If we have the determination to do God's will and obey His every teaching without compromise, He will surely help us.

Ecumenical efforts can be summarised in a slogan that present-day Christians like to echo: "In things not essential, let there be unity"

We must not bow down to social pressure and conform. This applies in every aspect of our life as a member of the society we live in. We do not participate in certain festivals even if it means we are the only odd ones out amongst our colleagues. We do not join certain activities though that may mean our school-mates thinking we are being anti-social or mere kill-joys. There is an oft-cited excuse that we must not be seen as “weirdos”. That should not be a problem if our general, everyday conduct says otherwise. It all comes down to one fundamental choice actually, whether we choose to please God or please men.

“To be different” smacks of prejudice and discrimination. That obviously is not what God has intended, for there is nothing good that we have done to merit, over others, this special salvation grace. Do we ask ourselves why we are chosen? Why, of the millions of families, am I born into a believing family? Why, of all his friends and acquaintances, did my friend pick me and preach to me? Why, of the billions, why me? We cannot find a rationalistic, well-analysed answer. But we can seek to know the direction we have to go, from this point on. When Abraham was called, God told him that in him, “all the families of the earth shall bless themselves” (Gen 12:3). We cannot have been chosen to sit on God’s bountiful grace. We are called to a purpose. Our living should make a difference. God has set us as a light that we should be for salvation to the ends of the earth (cf Acts 13:47).

What is happening in the modern world today reflects the desperation to create a facade of peace and calm.

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Negotiations of peace, claims of being enlightened, pre-occupations with outward exhibitions of friendliness and unitedness ... all these are but false assurance in the face of chaos in the physical surrounding as well as the hearts of man. The world, in actuality, is sinking deeper and deeper into darkness. It is necessary that we, the true believers, are wary of this trend.

The Bible records, “Do not be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewal of your mind...” (Rom 12:2). The world today is swept by a craze for material luxuries. In this country, young people speak of one common goal — to own the five Cs, namely, career, cash, credit card, condominium and car. To the majority, such goals have taken precedence over all else in life. Similar goals are very likely

shared by people in the other parts of the world. But we have to be different; we should not do what others do. It is one thing to try to improve our lives. But it is another thing altogether if we hoard our God-given wealth or lavish it on ourselves by going on a never-ending spree to drive status-boosting cars or to be clad in branded and trendiest apparel from head to toe just to look “cool” or “chic”. Those who do not know God, do not have God, have only this vain life and their immediate physical conditions to look to. So, they become slaves of fashion, going after the newest models of cars, pop songs or branded apparel. But we who have been blessed with affluence must ask ourselves what it is that God wants us to do with our wealth. While the people of the world seek riches to assuage their spiritual and

emotional insecurity, or to pamper their fragile physical frames, we should ask ourselves what our minds are concerned with.

We have the light of life if we are true followers of Jesus (Jn 8:12). We are also the light of the world (Mt 5:14). Those who do not want to be in darkness anymore will want to join us. Look around us today. Think of the end of the multitudes of people, church-goers, temple devotees, cynics of religion, blind followers of religious sects ... right before us is a great task to fulfil. Are our lights bright enough to guide them out of their darkness? Are our behaviour and way of life indicative of our belonging to Christ?

**We have the light of
life if we are true
followers of Jesus**

Being a church-goer is not enough to prove to the people of the world that they can come to Christ through us. It does not help very much either even if we proclaim loudly that we belong to Christ. We can put up compelling arguments over doctrinal issues, as we often do, but it does not mean a person will surely come to believe. It is always more effective when we also preach by example. We cannot preach only a theoretical set of doctrinal truths. That irrefutably is the cornerstone of one's faith. But that has to be further coupled

**We must be a blessing
to all who come
our way**

with love, sincerity, morality and issues of daily living which really edify. Also, our love and concern must move beyond the superficiality of verbose protestations and flamboyant exhibitions which is so commonplace today.

Everywhere we go, whoever we are with, we must diffuse the fragrance of Christ (2 Cor 2:14). This is what we are called to be. We must be a blessing to all who come our way. It need not be regions beyond, in the far-away lands. It does not have to be in the form of great heroic acts. All around us, in the school, at the work place, anywhere, there are people in darkness. They are with us everyday. All it takes is just this reminder, that we should strive to do good, of any form, to everyone we come into contact with. For a start, we can offer a sincere smile, a little deed of kindness, a heartening word — they can be uplifting and go a long way. This world has been described as suffering from a famine of love. Surely God puts us where we are so that we can diffuse little droplets of love in our allocated corners, to do our little bit to alleviate this famine.

That may need some kind of effort for with our hectic lifestyles, it is always so easy to slip into our own little worlds of personal problems and pre-occupations.

We can get so caught up with our own lives that we forget to take time to be sensitive to people around us. Sometimes, there are people who are not as nice as we wish them to be and it just seems so difficult to be the exemplary Christians we strive to be. Still, we have to try and constantly look to God for help. At times, we may fail but we must consciously try again. We can be assured of His help as we are more than conquerors because of His salvation and will succeed in our endeavour to be vessels of righteousness.

Some years ago, a religious education teacher posed this question to the Intermediate Youth Class during a lesson, "Is Christ a part of your life and all that you do?" Many students raised their hands indicating "yes" while the rest pondered and searched their hearts. The anti-climax of that session came when the teacher said that Christ should not be a part of our lives but the whole of our lives. Our special status as God's chosen people mean that Christ should be the pivot of our all. That is how we can distinguish ourselves in the world and shed forth light. If Christ is the centre of all our activities, we will naturally be different from the rest of the world for our Lord is not of the world. If Christ is the centre of our lives, we will always seek His will lest we close the avenues for Him to work in our lives because of hasty decisions made. If we cherish our position as His special treasure, we will focus our sight on Him, face to face with Him and draw goodness from Him. It would then only be natural that we shine and spread His love, for we are His very likeness! ■

misconceptions

ABOUT BEING CHRISTIAN



So many people misunderstand what being a Christian is all about. Sadly, this includes many Christians. As a result, many non-Christians and luke-warm Christians miss out on the wonderful relationship they could have with our Father in heaven. They are keen to dissociate from such labels as “blind faith,” “over-restrained,” “brainwashed,” “narrow-minded,” “boring,” “religious”... ▶

Exhortation

“RELIGIOUS”

The term “religious” is often used with a negative connotation. Also you get called “religious” even by simply going to church every week. What do people mean by “religious”? It ranges from blind engrossment to total dedication. If so, then everyone is religious, whether in following a television episode, making money, or getting into medical school; as long as you earnestly pursue your heart’s desires.

When you love someone, it is only natural to try your best to please that person with your actions and your words. It is even easier to do so when you know that the other party also loves you. As for Christians, we know and feel how much God loves us. We also know how much our brothers and sisters-in-Christ

“RESTRICTIVE”

Another reason why many people are turned off by Christianity is that they think it is too restrictive. This, for the most part, is due to the way they look at the so-called restrictions that Christians observe. In the first place, they have no idea what the meaning of true freedom is. As the apostle Paul says, “‘All things are lawful for me’ but not all things are helpful. ‘All things are lawful for me’ but I will not be enslaved by anything” (1 Cor 6:12). God does not tell us that we cannot go to dances, that we cannot watch movies, or that we cannot listen to secular music. What He does tell us is this:

“...‘love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.’ The second is this: ‘You shall love your neighbour as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these”

(Mk 12:30-31).

Thus, if you drink, go dancing, etc..., perhaps nobody might stop you, but think of the following questions: How do all these things facilitate you in loving God and people? Are you in control or are the things you do controlling you? Will your actions adversely affect you in the future? Would you be

able to bear the responsibility that comes with your actions and to face the consequences? love us. Therefore, it is only natural for us to observe the Sabbath, which is in keeping with God’s commandment, and by doing so, we not only please Him, but also receive some bodily and mental rest. We are able to listen to His wonderful Word, to put what we learn into practice, and to spend time with our brethren. So, what is so strange about being “religious” and observing the Sabbath every week? Furthermore, attending church does not necessarily mean that you are a true Christian or are fulfilling all your duties as a Christian — far from it! People may do it purely out of habit or for some ulterior motive like flaunting their wealth and status, showing how “good” they are, establishing business contacts, or searching for a spouse. Are any of these things truly religious? No one would fight shy of being called “religious” if we return to the true sense of the word.

able to bear the responsibility that comes with your actions and to face the consequences?

With regard to the Ten Commandments, which always seem to loom so ominously, they have been established for our benefit. If you break any of them, you can be certain that God will still exist. But if you obey them, it is you that will gain freedom and peace in your heart. What is freedom, as defined by our Lord Jesus? It is holding to His teachings, because then “you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free” from the slavery of sin (Jn 8:31-34).

It is just that people do not realise how much God has given them and how His commandments can help them live a more happy, healthy and meaningful life.

“BORING”

Yet another deterrent is that we are “boring” and have “no life.” You do not have to be Christian to be “boring.”

There are many non-Christians in this world who are “boring” and have “no life”. You can easily witness this simply by looking around you. Furthermore, just because you are a Christian, it does not mean that you just sit at home, read the Bible, pray and sing hymns all day. Besides pursuing their spiritual life, school and work, Christians do go out to relax and have fun. They can ski, do aerobics, lift weights, go bowling, ice skating, roller blading, play tennis, basketball, etc... Christians who aren't athletically inclined can visit museums, go shopping, read, pursue their hobbies, learn a foreign language, cultivate a skill like singing, drawing, playing a musical instrument, etc... Now, if these things are boring, then what isn't?!

“JUST BEING GOOD”

And lastly, another major misunderstanding that people have is that being a Christian is simply to “be a good person.” You don't have to be a Christian to be a good person. There are many non-Christians who seem like really good people. In fact, there are other religions that teach people how to “be a good person.” Everyone agrees that murder is wrong and theft is wrong. Everyone also agrees that it is good to have compassion on those less fortunate than we. These things are just common sense. What really differentiates Christians from everyone else? First and foremost, we worship the one true God and trust in Jesus as the only Saviour who saves us from sin. Second, by faith we believe that the prophecies recorded in scripture regarding our Lord's virgin birth, suffering and wanderings, crucifixion, burial, resurrection and ascension to heaven were all fulfilled. Third, we believe that everything that has been done under the sun, whether good or bad, have been recorded

“NARROW-MINDED”

Besides being accused of being “boring,” Christians are also prone to hear of people who are afraid of being “narrow-minded,” “having “blind faith,” or being “brainwashed.” Admittedly, many Christians and non-Christians alike can be guilty of these. However, Christians are taught in the Bible to listen to what other people have to say before they speak (Jas 1:19; Prov 18:13). It also warns us to “judge nothing before the appointed time; wait till the Lord comes” and to “not go beyond what is written” (1 Cor 4:5-6)(NIV). These teachings are not compatible with “narrow-mindedness”. The same is true about religious fanaticism, for the Bible instructs: “it is fine to be zealous, provided the purpose is good” (Gal 4:18)(NIV). Planting bombs in subways and mass suicide have no place in Christianity. For Christians who truly have the correct attitude and understanding of God's commands, how are they “narrow-minded,” “blind in their faith,” or “brainwashed”?

Non-Christians can be quite “narrow-minded,” “blind” and “brainwashed”. Take, for example, people who are couch potatoes and are constantly glued to a TV or movie screen. A person's values and decision-making processes can be greatly or subtly influenced by what they see on the screen. You can witness this by observing the decisions they make in what they wear, what they say, what they watch, what they eat, etc... But the most obvious and devastating effect can be seen in how desensitised these people are towards sex, violence, and the sufferings and deaths of other people outside their immediate sphere.

and remembered by our Lord Jesus Christ and that at the end of time, everyone will be judged accordingly. Fourth, our two main objectives in life are to love God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength and to love others as ourselves.

“CONCLUSION”

There will always be misconceptions about Christians. Prejudice will also exist. But what we can do as Christians is not to be hypocrites. Rather, we ought to be true Christians with the help of the precious Holy Spirit bestowed upon us. We will thus be:

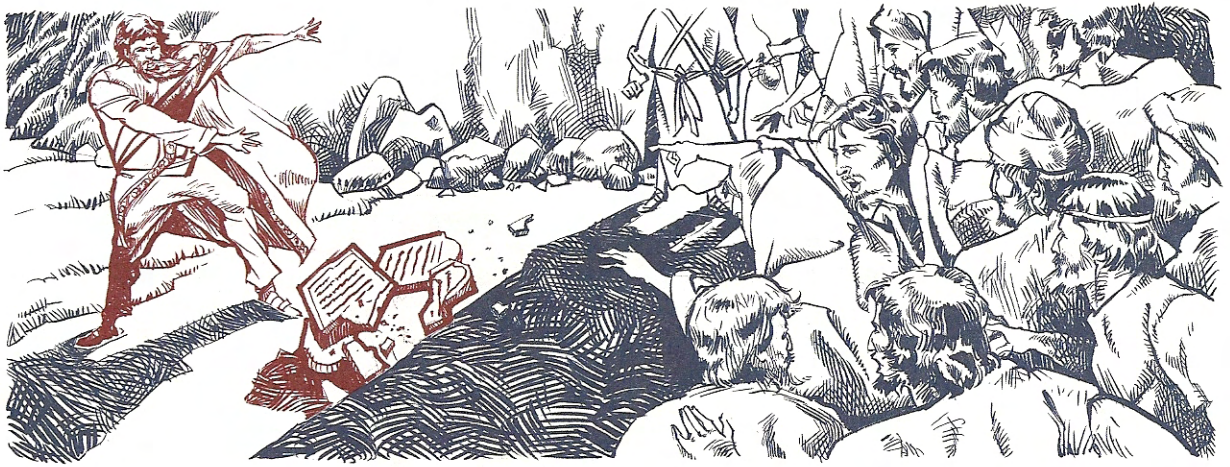
Always be prepared to make a defence to anyone who calls us to account for the hope that is in us, yet do it with gentleness and reverence; and keep our conscience clear, so that, when we are abused, those who revile our good behaviour in Christ may be put to shame (1 Pet 3:15-16).

AN OLD STORY OF INTERCESSION



The Holy Bible records that when Moses went to Mount Sinai to receive the tablets of the Law written by the very finger of God, he conversed with God for forty days and forty nights. When the people of Israel saw that he did not return after a long wait, they requested Aaron to make a golden calf, of which they said, "These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt." God saw it all but Moses was yet unaware. So God told Moses, "Go down; for your people, whom you brought up out of the land of Egypt, have corrupted themselves; they have turned aside quickly out of the way which I commanded them; they have made for themselves a molten calf, and have worshipped it and sacrificed to it, ... 'I have seen this people, and behold, it is a stiff-necked people; now

YANG YUH-MING
[PARIS, FRANCE]
TRANSLATED FROM CHINESE



therefore let me alone, that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them; but of you I will make a great nation” (Ex 32:7-10).

To Moses, it could have been a wonderful opportunity: Yes, the people have transgressed against God and deserve to die. Now God says that He wants to consume the sinful Israelites and only his descendants will He make a great nation. This will mean God’s promise and blessing to Abraham become exclusive to his household. But Moses did not grab hold this rare opportunity. Instead with a heavy heart, he pleaded with YHWH, his Lord, “O LORD, why does thy wrath burn hot against thy people, whom thou hast brought forth out of the land of Egypt with great power and with a mighty hand? Why should the Egyptians say, ‘With evil intent did He bring them forth, to slay them in the mountains, and to consume them from the face of the earth?’ Turn from thy fierce wrath, and repent of this evil against thy people. Remember Abraham, Isaac and Israel, thy servants to whom thou didst swear by thine own self, and didst say to them, ‘I will multiply your descendants as the stars of heaven, and all this land that I have promised I will give to your descendants, and they shall inherit it forever’” (Ex 32:11-13).

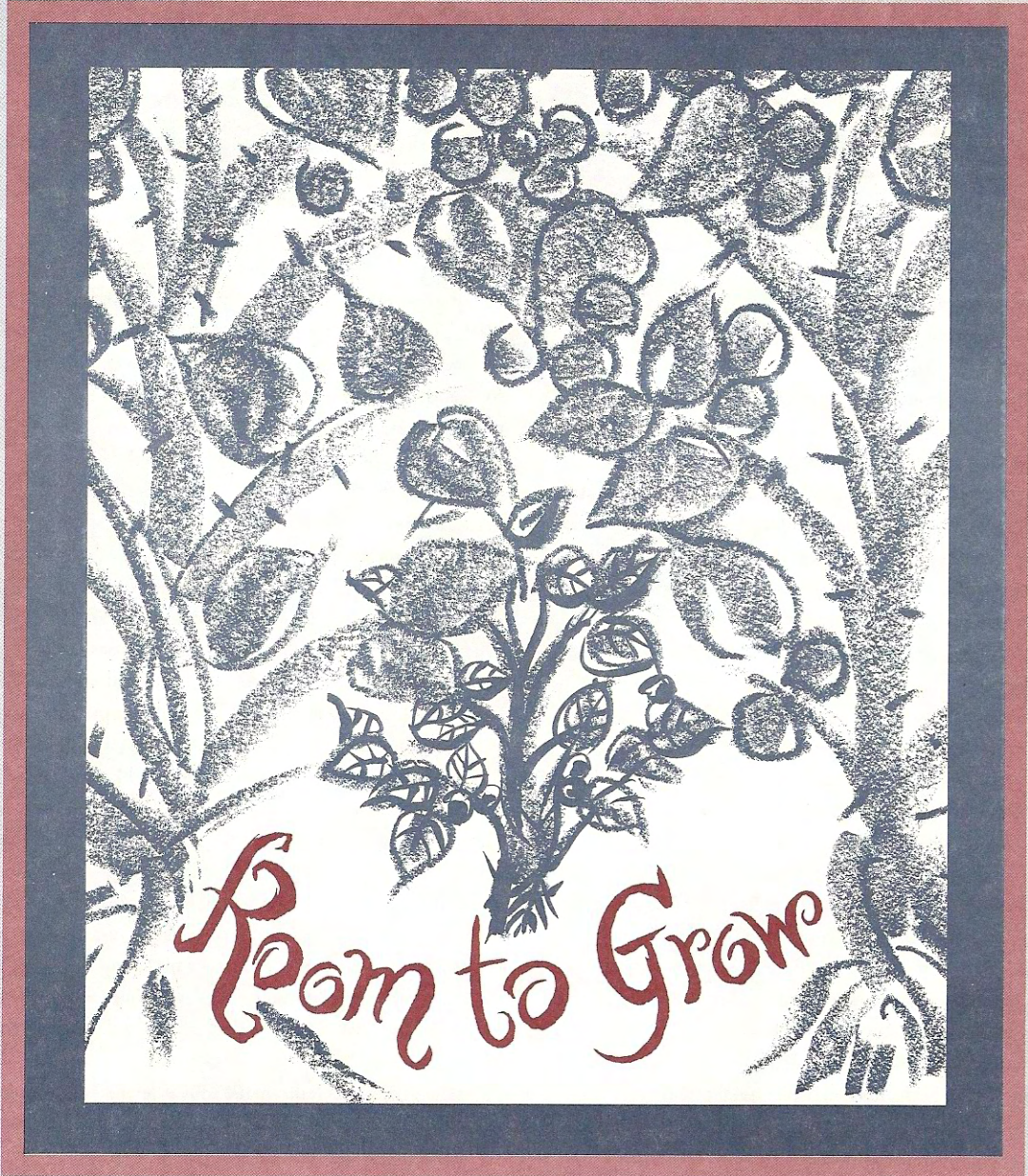
Then turning and descending from the smouldering heights, with the tablets of the testimony in his hands, Moses saw the people worshipping the golden calf. With indignation, he threw the tablets out of his hands and broke them at the foot of the mountain before the people. After giving Aaron and the people a strong rebuke, Moses summoned the sons of Levi and commanded them to slay the three thousand who could not be spared.

The next day Moses told the multitudes to consecrate themselves while he took the staff of God and treaded, with

heavy steps, up the slopes of Mount Sinai again to kneel before God. Forty days and forty nights without food nor drink, to intercede for the people. Forty days and forty nights without food and drink! Not for his own welfare, but for the iniquities of his kindred, who faced the prospect of destruction. He could not be sure if God would forgive His people. Therefore with a painful heart he prayed, saying, “Alas, this people have sinned a great sin; they have made for themselves gods of gold. But now, if thou wilt forgive their sin — and if not, blot me, I pray thee, out of thy book which thou hast written” (Ex 32:31-32).

The first day passed. God did not answer. Then the second, third, and fourth ... for thirty-nine days, Moses fasted, only to meet with the indifference of God. But remaining prostrate before God, he pleaded again, “Alas, this people have sinned a great sin, they have made for themselves gods of gold. But now, if thou wilt forgive their sin — and if not, blot me I pray thee, out of the book which thou hast written.” Deep in his heart, he knew that God was more sorrowful than he over the great sin of the Israelites. He knew that God was more merciful than he, and that He would not bear to let His people perish en masse. So Moses prayed on. On the fortieth day, God could no longer remain silent. The love of Moses for his brethren greatly moved God. To pray forty days and nights without food and drink on behalf of others would require a love that is deep and strong. Moses had never loved himself that much.

At the garden of Gethsemane, our grieving Lord similarly struggled for our sakes. His only distress was our lack of love for one another and for God. Even now, His eyes survey us, a group of people who cannot spare the time to linger before the throne of grace, to plead for the weaknesses of others (Is 59:16). We only point our accusing fingers and open our dissenting mouths. ■



One of my hobbies is gardening. I like it because it gives me a chance to be in solitude to meditate on Jesus' words. It is always a learning experience for me. One of the lessons I have learnt is that plants need room to grow. As a parent, I find this is an important lesson to remember — children need room to grow in the Lord so that they can develop a deep-rooted faith and bear fruits for Him.



Should parents give their children room to grow?

In Mt 19:14, Jesus says, "Let the children come to me, and do not hinder them; for to such belongs the kingdom of heaven." How can parents hinder their children? Paul tells us, "do not provoke your children to anger" and he adds, "but bring them up in discipline and instruction of the Lord" (Eph 6:4).



How do parents give their children room to grow?

In other words, how do we bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord? One such instruction is written in Prov 22:6, "Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not depart from it." Now when we train a child in a new skill, we let him or her

practise it until he or she can do it naturally. But sometimes, he or she may not practise it in the way we want. For example, I am training my children, Felicia, 13 and Sarah, 10, to make time for a personal prayer at least once a day. I would like them to get down on their knees to thank the Lord for a good night's sleep as soon as they wake up in the morning. This prayer would also include a request for the Lord to help them with their Christian walk during the day. Unfortunately, Felicia and Sarah find it difficult to kneel down at this time and close their eyes to pray without falling asleep again. Instead, they find it easier to pray quietly by themselves after they have eaten their breakfast and are dressed for school. Since they do not always leave the house at the same time, they are able to decide for themselves during which part of the morning they want to communicate with the Lord.



How do parents exercise flexibility in giving their children room to grow?

It helps to remember that the children God has given us come with different personalities for His purpose. Some grow better when they are given more room. Others need less room. Felicia needs a lot of room to grow. For example, the first time Felicia was invited to a youth fellowship sponsored by a church that was different from ours, I asked her to decline the invitation. Last year, Felicia's

friend Kathy*, invited her again. This time, however, I gave Felicia permission to attend.

"Mom," she said before she got into our white Dodge Caravan, "This church shares some of our beliefs. Don't they?"

I did not know and I told her we would need to find out. Then before I dropped her off she turned to ask, "Do I pray with them?"

This was a good question but I did not have a good answer. So I said, "Pray in your heart. God will let you know what to do."

When Felicia came home, she said, "I found the way they prayed to be okay. But I told Kathy, 'Don't get me wrong. But I'm not coming back.'" She explained she did not think it was appropriate for the youths to be playing hide-and-seek inside the sanctuary. She also noticed a young couple kissing passionately on church premises, and she thought it was at the wrong place and at the wrong time.

This incident taught me that if we believe our children are given to us by God, then we must learn to trust our children's faith in their Creator. We need to keep calm when our children seem to be challenging us. Children's minds are always thinking. If we have been teaching them about the ways of the Lord as naturally as we have been teaching them how to read and write, Jesus will remain in their thoughts, in the same way they will remember their ABCs. When parents give their children room to grow in their thinking and practising skills, their children will understand God's words better. They will be able to add to their knowledge

about God and relate it to what they say, see, hear and do.

Sarah, my younger daughter, on the other hand, offers a different challenge. For example, when Sarah learned her older sister was going to accept Kathy's invitation, she asked, "Why can't I go, Mom? I want to go too!"

"Of course you can go. But wait till your friends invite you. Let's do a Bible crossword puzzle."

"I don't want to do a crossword puzzle. It's hard."

"It's good for you."

"I don't want to, Mom."

"What would you like to do?"

"I don't know."

"Shall we look through this magazine and see what we can find?"

"You do it."

I flipped through the pages, and tried to look interested. Suddenly a page caught Sarah's attention. "I can pick a verse and draw a picture to explain it."

"What a good idea!"



How do parents know it's a good idea to give children room to grow?

When I do not know the answer to my children's questions, or when I am unsure about my response, or when I am losing my patience, I am tempted to shut them up by saying, "Don't think. Just do as I tell you." Usually, I try to catch myself before I become a stumbling block in my children's faith. When children are

encouraged to think about the answers to their own questions, they are given a chance to train themselves to think about what is right or wrong. This kind of training also gives them a chance to speak up for the Lord. For example, there is a law in the United States that helps people of certain races or gender to get a better education or better job opportunities. One day, as I was listening to a radio talk show, a woman called in to say that she got better job opportunities because her married name helped her to qualify. "I can do that," I spoke my thoughts out loud.

My children quickly chorused, "That's wrong, Mom!"



How do we know all this work is worth our time and effort?

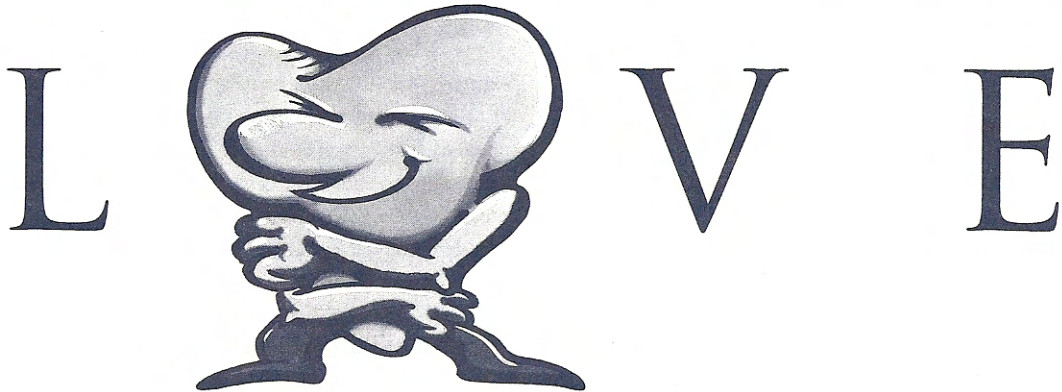
Children are full of surprises. Usually they do better than we expect. Felicia is outspoken about her religious beliefs. She began in Kindergarten by telling her teacher she would not participate in Halloween and Christmas activities. As she got older and more opportunities arose, she shared a little more about her faith. When she got into junior high, she wrote about her Christian values in classroom assignments, and talked about them during open discussions. For example, several months ago, Felicia and her classmates were asked to write whether they thought they would grow up in a more peaceful world. Some of

her classmates were hopeful that the world would become more peaceful. Felicia did not think so, and she wrote that the troubles we see and hear are just signs of the end times. She supported her essay with quotes from Mt 24:5-6, 8, 14 and Lk 21:10-11. Felicia concluded, "Optimism sometimes gives a sense of false hopes ... It's not fair to put people into a 'neighbourhood of make-believe'. We must face reality."

Before Jesus went up to heaven, He left these instructions with His disciples, "Go into all the world and preach the gospel to the whole creation" (Mk 16:15). This is our mission today. We must also remember that while Jesus was teaching on earth, He also said, "The harvest is plentiful, but the labourers are few" (Mt 9:37). Christian parents everywhere must therefore respond to this urgent need. One way is to train our children to be a part of this workforce. We can get started now by giving them room to grow in their faith. Their faith, like ours, will be tested over and over again. But in God's time, this faith will grow to be deep-rooted as the Lord has designed it to be, and we shall see it bear fruit for the sake of Jesus and the glory of His church. ■

SUSAN ESTRADA
[PITTSBURG, USA]

SELF



a The Biblical Basis of Self-Love

The command to love your neighbours as yourself is mentioned five times in the Bible (Lev 19:18; Mt 19:19; Mk 12:31; Lk 10:27; Rom 13:9) but nowhere in the Bible is found a positive command to love yourself. In all the five passages, loving yourself is assumed as a normal human condition and the thrust of the exhortation is that just as you naturally love yourself, you should love others in the same way and just as much as you love yourself. The same assumption is made in Ephesians 5:28-29 where Paul persuades Christian husbands to love their wives as they do their own bodies.

It appears that self-love is a facet of the instinct implanted by God for the preservation of the species. It is not deprecated in the Bible but acknowledged as natural. Thus the concept of self-love has a biblical basis.

However, it cannot be over emphasised that it has no priority whatsoever in the Christian life inasmuch as none is accorded to eating or drinking (though essential for survival). It is not a Christian pursuit.

Thus self-love is less a topic for public discourse than for private counselling to those who suffer from an abnormal lack of self-love (or self-esteem as the psychologists call it).

b Meaning of Self-Love

Self-love has two aspects, namely, acceptance of self and care for self.

1. Acceptance of Self

You cannot even begin to love yourself if you do not accept your true self. If you always wish secretly to be somebody else or in somebody else's shoes, then you will be constantly loving somebody else and not your true self. Accepting yourself implies accepting (i) who you are; and (ii) what you can do.

Accepting who you are is only possible if you see yourself from a higher plane. Is it possible for an orphan boy without limbs and abandoned since birth in the streets of New York to be happy about who he is and to accept himself? This is an extreme example but the point is that it is always easy to speak of self-acceptance if you are in fortuitous circumstances. But such fortune is not shared by everyone on earth. Can there be self-acceptance and self-esteem in adverse situations so that self-esteem is an objective reality?

The answer is "YES" if you see yourself as God sees you, if you realise the following :

- (a) You are important enough to God for Him to die for (1 Cor 6:20; 1 Pet 1:18-19; Eph 1:18);
- (b) You are a child of God (Jn 1:12-13);
- (c) God loves you (Jn 3:16);
- (d) God has prepared a secured future for you (Jn 14:1-3); and
- (e) God takes care of your daily needs (Mt 6:25-34).

You can then declare with Paul: "By the grace of God I am what I am" (1 Cor 15:10).

When you begin to see yourself as God sees you then you can accept yourself and acquire a deep sense of confidence. Because your concern is the way God sees you, you have no desire to compare yourself with others (Gal 6:4). And as you look at yourself differently, your personality changes accordingly. The wise King Solomon astutely observes: "As a man thinks, so he is" (Prov 23:7 KJV). And as you see yourself in a different perspective, others will also see you as you see yourself (Num 13:33). Way back thousands of years ago, this principle is already laid down in the Bible. Twelve spies were sent to the land of Canaan. Ten of them returned to report that they were like grasshoppers before the Canaanites. And what did the Bible say? That was what the Canaanites thought of them as well! If you see yourself as a grasshopper, the enemy also sees you as a grasshopper. Caleb and Joshua saw themselves differently. They didn't see themselves as grasshoppers. They saw themselves as conquerors, who would "eat up" the Canaanites.

Accepting what you can do (and what you cannot do) is necessary for a healthy self-image. Not fully acknowledging your strengths leads to under-achievement and makes you unfaithful stewards of God's gifts. You have the makings of a preacher but you are afraid that your family may not be well-off, or that the church organisation is too complicated for you and you don't like to work in this kind of environment. You are afraid for various reasons. This shows that you do not accept yourself and have under-achieved. You have not done what God wants you to do.

On the other hand, you must know your weaknesses and limitations. For example, if you tell us that you want to build a

house, you must make sure you have the ability to complete it (Lk 14:28). You must know your limitations. No matter what you do, measure yourself against what you can do and what you cannot do. And that is self-acceptance.

2. Self-Acceptance and Pride

Some may say that self-acceptance is equivalent to pride, but it is not. Self-acceptance is knowing who you are and what you can do by the grace of God. Pride is thinking that you are more than what you really are (Rom 12:3) — in other words, not actually knowing who you really are.

Pride is not being content to see yourself as God sees you but seeing yourself as being better than others (Gal 6:4; Rom 12:16; Phil 2:3-5). A Christian with a proper self-love accepts himself as being under the grace of God. That is everything to him and he sees no need to compare himself with others. Pride, on the other hand, will want to compare yourself with someone else, to show that you are better than that person.

And lastly pride is dreaming that who you are and what you have done is accomplished by yourself. Nebuchadnezzar saw an amazing kingdom, which is one of the seven wonders of the ancient world, as created by his own ability. He walked up to the top of the tower, saw everything and said, "I have done it." From that time the Lord struck him down and he was insane for a long period, until he realised that it was the LORD GOD that put him where he was. Herod made a great speech and received praises from his audience. The next moment he was eaten by worms because he did not give glory to God (Dan 4:28-37; Acts 12:20-23). A realistic Christian who accepts his achievements says: "I can do all things in Him who strengthens me" (Phil 4:13), and "by the grace of God, I am what I am" (1 Cor 15:10).

Thus self-acceptance is distinguishable from pride. Pride is condemned by God (1 Pet 5:5; Jas 4:6-10; Prov 16:18). Self-acceptance is biblical.

3. Care for Self

Self-love also implies taking care of yourself. The dynamics of living consist of the heart (emotional), soul (spiritual), mind (mental) and strength (body) (Mk 12:30). A Christian with a healthy love for himself takes care of all these aspects.

- (a) You develop your emotions by first realising and accepting what they are. If you feel sad, accept your emotions and you may cry. If you are in love, do not pretend you are not; again accept your emotions. And as you develop your emotion, you have to not only learn how to accept them but also control them. That is the height of spiritual cultivation.
- (b) You also take care of your spiritual life, which involves moral values and good Christian living: performing good deeds, working for God, practising charity, Bible reading, church fellowship and prayer.
- (c) If you care for yourself, you must also take care of your mind. There are people who after leaving secondary school, will no longer strive to improve their minds — when they read the newspaper, they only focus on the sensational and the scandalous. Anything else is considered “too deep.” But even as Christians, we ought to develop our mind to know about the world and its people. After all, we have the commission to preach to them.
- (d) Finally, even though you are a Christian, you still have to take care of your body, by having a proper diet, a proper life-style, constant exercise to keep fit and adequate rest. We must have proper hygiene and grooming. We have to take care of our body because this body does not belong to us. I Corinthians 6:19 says that the body belongs to God and is the temple of the Holy Spirit. A sick body often limits God’s use of it.

In summary, emotional, spiritual, mental and physical development must not be neglected.

4. Self-Care and Selfishness

Self-care does not mean being selfish. There is a difference, as distinguished by their respective foci (Phil 2:3-5). In self-care, the all round development of the emotion, spirit, physique and mind is only a means and not an end in itself. The purpose of such development is to equip the person for God’s use in the service of human kind. A sickly Christian or one with an unbalanced emotion does not make a good soldier of Christ. The focus is outward.

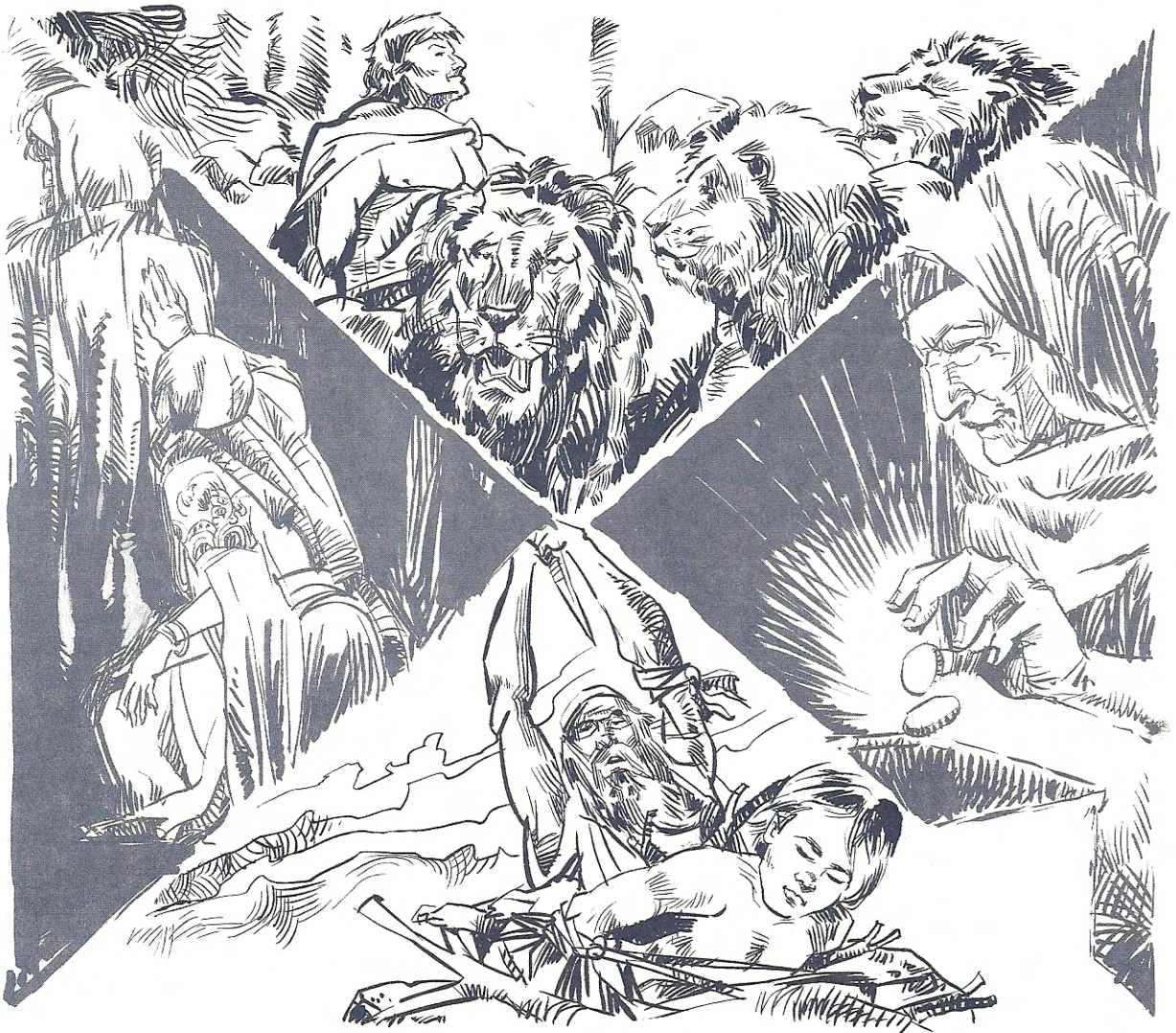
A selfish individual seeks the improvement of his mind, emotion, spirit and body as an end in itself and for his own purposes. He is therefore self-centred and egoistic. The focus is inward.

Conclusion

We have seen that when practised correctly, self-love does have a place in the will of God. It is the basis of our love for others (loving others as yourself). It is the means to equip ourselves to love others (self-care). And very importantly, it recognises the love of God for us (self acceptance), for we are eternally the object of His love (Jer 31:3). ■

VINCENT YEOH
[SINGAPORE]

faith, today, and the foundation of spiritual revival



As Christians, we all have our notions of faith; yet faith itself is a very elusive concept. We sometimes hear Christians say, "You need to have some faith." But what is faith? And what do we mean when we talk about faith? This is an important question we must consider in our spiritual journey. Also, most Christians hope for revival and for betterment. We understand the critical situation of "losing our faith". We have just not found the way to rekindle this divine quality. The question that always plagues us is how we can regain or revive our faith once we have lost it. This serious problem is what I call the crisis of faith.

Before considering the crisis of faith, we must understand the nature of faith. Faith, like love, is a dynamic but abstract reality. We know there is faith somewhere, but we do not intrinsically know where faith comes from or, as the case may be, where it goes. And similar to love, we cannot see faith except through the corporeal evidence we experience through our everyday lives.

Looking at Matthew 14:28-31 and James 1:6-8, we find that a common characteristic of the crisis of faith is doubt. Paul once said, "... I know whom I have believed ..." (2 Tim 1:12). But many Christians today cannot exhibit this same degree of confidence.

The question that often faces us is: do I really believe what I think I believe?

Jesus once said, "...where your treasure is, there will your heart be also" (Mt 6:21). This is a simple statement that provides the clue to how we can truly find revival of faith. The message is this: we have to examine where we stand in

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relation to our heart's treasure (see Col 3:1-4). In other words, we have to re-assess our priorities and goals. If our heart is set on the heavenly kingdom and its principles, this will be reflected in our actions. For instance, if I were to tell you about a secret gold mine but you doubt me, you lose out on the opportunity. Similarly, if I tell you there is a heavenly kingdom waiting, yet you disbelieve, your disbelief will be reflected in your actions. The questions to ask ourselves are: where is our treasure? where does our heart lie?

The heart is central to our life of faith. The superficial failures we often reflect upon in our church, such as the lack of a beautiful chapel, money, or workers can be traced to a fundamental problem of the heart, the ultimate source of the crisis of faith. The heart is vital in ensuring a generation of growing believers. In this sense, we understand the importance of the Shema (see Deut 6:4-9) of Jewish liturgy and of Jesus' words: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind" (Mt 22:37).

As stated, faith is abstract yet dynamic. While we never see faith per se, faith, like dynamite, impels people to give up their lives for their beliefs, to travel to

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BE STILL

In the daily living of a Christian, dawn is surely the most beautiful moment to behold the face of God. In the silent awakening of one's mind, spirit and soul, one pauses for a moment in quiet communion with God before coming into contact with others. As the first light of dawn breaks through the silent darkness, one offers the best time of the day to be alone with God, to be still before the Lord Jesus Christ.

As the earth awakes, the almighty power of God manifested in His immaculate creation of this magnificent natural world fills one with complete awe. One lays down one's true inner self before God, and the Holy Spirit helps one to realise all the sins within oneself that need to be purged by the blood of Jesus. With repentance and prayers of thanksgiving, one submits and entrusts the day into the hand of God for His guidance.

In life, one often encounters many problems comparable to huge tidal waves that roar through the surface of waters within one's inner world. Such waves are the many selfish and tangible pursuits in this material world, including the pursuits for more wealth, greater status, better career or higher education. They can easily overcome one's heart and cause one to forget God. In order for one to resolve these problems, it is necessary to restore a quiet spirit within oneself. Long and deep prayer, meditation upon the Word of God, listening and singing hymns, and bearing witness for Jesus allow one to focus solely on God and to live a life for Him.

When one beholds a lake, the water surface has to be completely still before one can see a gentle breeze causing a stir

across its surface. Similarly, one's spirit has to be as still as the tranquil lake before one can hear the soft whisper of the spiritual wind, that is the Holy Spirit. Moreover, just as the water surface needs to be completely still before it can reflect the blue sky and the heavens above, one's spiritual state has to rest completely in the mighty arms of God before one can manifest the image of Christ. This great peace in God can only come through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Indeed, spiritual quietude is a virtue to be cultivated. When one gives up one's struggles and surrenders one's entire spirit unto God, He will grant peace over one's heart. It is only when one's inner state of mind, spirit and soul reaches a perfect harmony with the Spirit of God can one understand His divine will. The more one spends time in one's inner chamber to seek God, the more one will be filled with His strength and joy.

Stillness before God is a source of spiritual strength. It requires endurance to entrust all things unto God while waiting for His time to reveal His divine plan. God is faithful; no one can search nor understand His great wisdom as He is omniscient, omnipresent and omnipotent. As man, one cannot forget that one is but mere dust, a minute grain of sand on the seashore under the great mercy of God. "Be still, and know that I am God; I am exalted among the nations, I am exalted in the earth!" (Ps 46:10). Praise the Lord! ■

CONSTANCE LIN
[LOS ANGELES, USA]



hannah

Hannah, the mother of Samuel, makes an excellent biographical study. She exemplifies a person of great character, someone who exhibits great faith and trust in God in the midst of sufferings. Despite living in a time of religious instability (1 Sam 2:22) and limited prophetic guidance (1 Sam 3:1), she remained steadfast in her faith, and resolute in her reliance on God. In times of need, she realised that He alone was her refuge. And most moving of all, once she had received the answer she sought, she did not fail to show her gratitude. Indeed, the events surrounding the birth of Samuel, one of the greatest Old Testament figures since Moses, clearly bring out the virtues of Hannah.

The story of Hannah, documented in 1 Samuel chapters one and two, took place around 1100 BC, during the time of the Judges. She was married to Elkanah, a devout Levite residing at the hill country of Ephraim. Hannah's barrenness probably led to Elkanah taking another wife, Peninnah. This bigamous matrimony created jealousy and strife within the family with Peninnah constantly provoking Hannah and mocking at her inability to have a child.

One year, during the family's annual pilgrimage to Shiloh, the religious centre at that time, the mockings again occurred. Yet unlike many who remain submerged in their sorrow, Hannah did not let her emotions hinder her from taking positive action. At the Tabernacle, she quietly poured out her heart to God. The essence of her prayer was her petition, "Remember me" (1 Sam 1:11). ▶

In her prayer, she vowed that should God grant her a son, the child would be dedicated to life-long Levitical service (Num 4:3; 8:24-26) and become a Nazarite (Num 6:3-6).

Hannah's vow was probably tied in her concern for the declining faith of the nation. During that time, Israel was spiritually weak. Even the priesthood was corrupt (1 Sam 2:12-17). Hannah and her family represented a remnant within Israel who still faithfully worshipped and sacrificed to God at Shiloh, where the Ark of Covenant was housed. It was indeed a noble gesture that, despite her personal sorrow, Hannah could still remember the spiritual welfare of her people. Her willingness to dedicate her child showed that her concern for their faith was not subordinate to her own yearning for a child. She realised Israel's need for effective leadership to revive the nation's faith, and to return them to God.

At this point, it is pertinent to ask whether we too can show the same degree of concern for the spiritual well-being of our fellow humans. We live in a decadent world. It is generally the case that Christian moral values no longer play a part in people's lives. Satan now rules their hearts and minds. The Lord has commissioned us to set them free from the bondage of the evil one, to bring to them the gospel of salvation, and to take care of those who are already in the fold (Mk 16:15; Jn 21:15-17). The success of our task depends greatly on our willingness to sacrifice our own interest for those of God's and to take up the cross to follow in the footsteps of Jesus. Hannah could place the needs of

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the nation before her own. Can we?

1 Samuel 1:18 tells us that having bared her heart before God, Hannah experienced peace. Now her burden rested with God. She left the Tabernacle, ate some food and regained her composure. Her actions showed that she had a heart of trust towards the Lord; do we possess this same faith in Him? When troubled, perhaps we, like Hannah, may turn to our Father in Heaven. We recall His promise of peace (Jn 14:27), and the invitation to unload our cares to Him (Mt 11:28). Yet, unlike Hannah, we are often reluctant to let go of our anxieties. We pray but we fail to entrust. Consequently, our petitions cannot bring us the peace that Hannah received.

God remembered Hannah, and according to her request, she conceived and gave birth to a son whom she named Samuel (1 Sam 1:19). His name means "asked of the Lord", a testimony to the faithfulness of God. Following Samuel's

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birth, yet another of Hannah's virtues was revealed. She recognised the importance of keeping her vow. She was determined to fulfil her commitment to the Lord willingly and unselfishly. Once Samuel had been weaned, she brought him to Shiloh where Eli the priest was ministering. After making the appropriate offering, she presented him to the Lord.

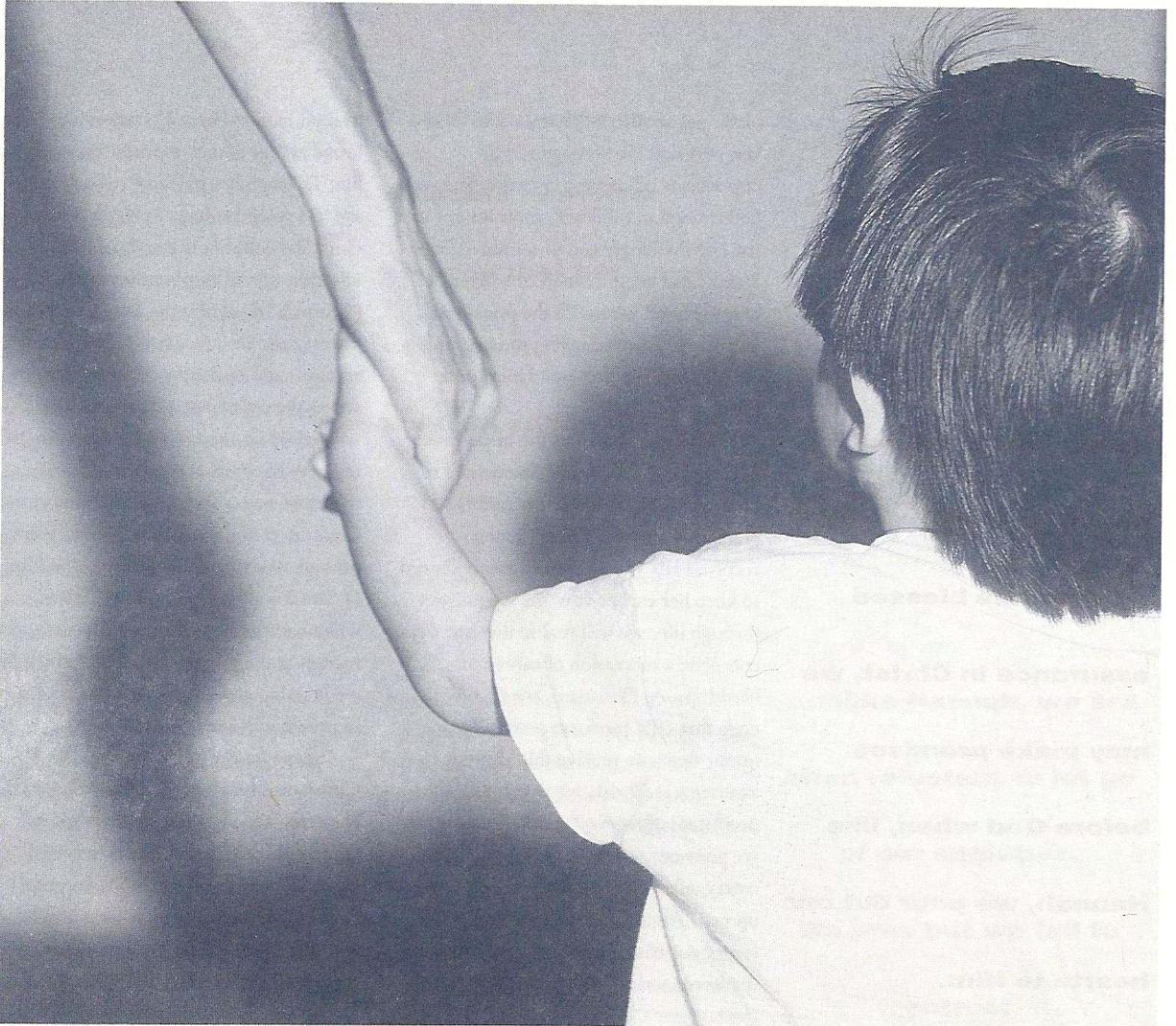
Hannah has shown us the importance of repaying God's grace. She turned to Him when she needed help, and He graciously answered her. Having received His grace, Hannah remembered to keep her earlier vow. As we journey through life, we will realise that our days comprise a succession of cares and hardships. As Christians, we acknowledge that only Jesus can grant us peace. In our desire to receive this blessed assurance in Christ, we may make promises before God when, like Hannah, we pour out our hearts to Him. Unfortunately, after He has bestowed His grace upon us, we may ignore our vows. We forget our earlier commitment towards the Lord, and fail to live up to Jesus' instructions that freely we have received from Him, therefore, freely we should give (Mt 10:8).

Having paid her vow to God, Hannah returned to the Tabernacle, the place where she had first made her petition to God. This time, her circumstance was in marked contrast to the last visit. Now she rejoiced and praised God (1 Sam 2:1-2). Her song of thanksgiving reflected her great confidence in His sovereignty. Hannah acknowledged Yahweh as her "horn" which signified invincible strength (cf Dan 7:21; Zech 1:18-21). She also

praised Him as her rock, where she had found refuge amidst the adversities of life. Through her personal experience, she had gained a deeper insight of her God. She could now testify of His wisdom, of His intervention in her life (1 Sam 2:3-8). He is the One who sends poverty and installs wealth, lowers the arrogant and exalts the humble, preserves the righteous and punishes the wicked. He is the One who determines the very life span of a person. Hannah therefore had complete trust in her Creator, confident that He would grant providential care to those who love Him (1 Sam 2:9-11). Where do we stand, when compared to Hannah? Do we truly recognise the greatness of the God whom we worship and are we able to sing songs of praise with such conviction?

The biography of Hannah has filled Christians everywhere with admiration. She remained steadfast in devotion to God while others around her were falling away. Moreover, she exhibited a pure faith in God in her request for a child. And when her prayer was answered, she repaid her vow and presented her son Samuel, to God, praising the Almighty who provided. Indeed, Hannah has a lot to offer to Christians of the end time. ■

FIRST PUBLISHED IN SHOWERS
OF BLESSING



“AND JESUS CALLED A LITTLE CHILD TO HIM”

JASON HSU
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When we were children, we probably had no clue what we were to do in life. But as we grew older and wiser, we began to choose a path on which to walk down the road of life. While some have a sense of direction on this journey, others may feel as if they are hopelessly lost. Nevertheless, we must all journey onward in as much as we all have somewhere to go. The greatest failure for a person is to live and have nowhere to go. We all have to have somewhere to go, someone to meet, something to do. The question has always been, "Where? Who? What?"

In life, some people seem to have a knack of getting on that path of success, but pitifully, many others feel that they are thrown upon the pathway of life. Have we ever asked, "Why?" I wouldn't be surprised if we have, for as humans, "whys" have echoed through the halls of human history, as well as through the depths of human suffering. And as humans, we have a need to respond to the "whys" of this world. This is the wisdom of this world — there is an answer to everything. For every situation, for every problem, the world seems to have an answer, a theory, a postulate, a hypothesis.

When we were children, we often took things at face value. And why shouldn't we? As children we had no need to look any further. Babies come from Mom's belly. The sun is just there. Mom doesn't want us to have a certain toy "just because." And a small child cries in a starving poverty-stricken third-world nation because "this is the way things are." When we were children, we didn't need all the answers. But now we

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at face value**

are no longer children, and we do need answers. But more often than not a harsh reality greets us, and we must suddenly acknowledge we don't have all the answers. And the theories we may have learned in school, the philosophy courses we may have taken just don't satisfy us anymore. So we curse at something seemingly bigger than ourselves; we curse at life itself. "That's life," we hear people say; yet inwardly, we are screaming, "That's my life! It's easy for you to say, 'That's life.'" And so humanity often puts on an ugly mask. We look for someone or something to blame. Some focus their anger on God, some on their spouse; and some just choose to exit.

But does humanity have to wear this ugly mask? It is not what we really are. Few people wish to wear this face of despair and frustration. It is foreign to us, yet it is also so intricate a part of our lives. So exactly what relationship does a Christian possess with suffering? Is it a special relationship? Or a non-existent

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one? In as much as Christians are supposed to be under the umbrella of God's blessing, many Christians undergoing trials and tribulations ask, "Where's God when I need Him most?" The Lord's reply from the famous story "Footprints" rarely registers.

I believe we often fail to understand our suffering as Christians because we fail to understand our relationship with God. The Lord never said that our life here on earth would be free of suffering; rather, "I will not fail you or forsake you" (Josh 1:5; Deut 31:6, 8; Heb 13:5). Though spoken to those who sought the promised land, this word still applies to us today. It is only when we decide to follow the path of God and strive to dwell in His grace that we can begin to taste God's promises. But we need to first ask ourselves, "Where am I heading for? My dream of God's promise land or the promised land of God?"

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It never crossed my mind that I would one day write an article on human suffering, for I am not really qualified to do so. But I felt compelled to write this article for the Lord Jesus in light of a recent experience with human suffering. While in my mind I have always known the Lord guides and directs my life, in my heart, I have often forgotten. Too many times I have felt that God's guidance was insignificant to my life, for I often thought, "I never really see God doing anything, so what does the Lord of the Universe really care about?" Sadly, I held this view because I believed, as people nowadays often do, that events are ordered more by human will than divine will. But there are often moments in our life when we feel the Lord's guiding hand

more strongly, and during these moments we can no longer question God's care. And so I would like to share with you about a time when my blind eyes were just a little more receptive to God's smiling face.

Not too long ago I faced a low point in my life a point when I felt hopeless and depressed in the face of all my problems. Moreover, I knew that my faith was weak. God was someone who lived a million miles away. Most likely, there was a point in your life when you too felt hopeless, a point when you were too weak to stay awake and face reality. Perhaps there was a time when God lived a million miles away. I have seen enough faces to know that loneliness, depression and scars mar the lives of many brothers and sisters. Well, this particular point in my life was not much different than those many faces of humanity we can often see, if we choose to look. We have our low points in life as part and parcel of the human experience. We have our personal demons to face. And as Christians, we know, or ought to know, that God never said we wouldn't suffer. Yet during times of hardship, we often point the finger at God. We ask, "Why, God? Why me?!" And at that particular period of my life, I too joined the chorus of an embittered humanity; I too wanted to point the finger at God in my suffering.

The realm of suffering is a unique

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world in which we feel isolated from the community and yet reach out for sympathy. I remember I was sitting alone at my desk one night thinking about my problems and becoming more and more depressed by the minute; problems have a way of circulating in your head if you let them. So reaching out, I decided to turn to the Bible. I wanted to read the Shema (i.e., "hear" in Hebrew), recorded in Deuteronomy 6:4-9. I turned to these verses and read them staring at the page, but the message didn't seem to register with my head. I was still wallowing in my problems. I was thinking, "Why doesn't God speak to me anymore? Why doesn't God tell me what to do?" Just as I was thinking, I turned the page and started to read Deuteronomy Chapter 8.

As I started, tears began to stream down my face. And at that moment, I learned something about my relationship with the Lord Jesus. It suddenly struck me that God does play a significant role in

our lives, though we often forget. Our Lord does see us and speak to us (Jn 9:37). I realised that our Lord Jesus never abandons us, but He often teaches us by our life experiences and through His spirit. Jesus was always there and He is there; I just never stopped to open the eyes and ears of my heart (see Jn 14:18).

I offer this testimony as an encouragement to those who may be suffering as Christians, who may be asking exactly the same things I asked. I share this with those who may feel abandoned by God, those who need answers. What you are looking for is not as far away as you might think; rather, it is very near to you. It's as close to you as God's heart is towards you. If you but open the eyes and ears of your heart, you will see God's guidance and you will hear God's voice. It is the same in every age for those who seek the promised land: "I will never leave you, nor forsake you."

Jeremiah 29:11 reads, "For I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope." But upon reading further we should also note: "Then you will call upon Me and come and pray to Me, and I will hear you. You will seek Me and find Me; when you seek Me with all your heart" (Jer 29:12-13). Chapter 29 of the book of Jeremiah speaks of a letter sent to the Jewish captives, taken to Babylon in 597 B.C. (2 Chron 36:5-8).

Jeremiah's letter reminds us that it is when we feel like God has handed us over to the den of lions, when we feel like God no longer cares, that we fail to realise God's thoughts are still towards us, for our peace and not for evil. We should never forget God's heart is always

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towards us. Even in our moments of captivity, the lowest moments of our life, God's heart is still towards us.

Having said all this, I would like to briefly share some reflections upon reading Deuteronomy Chapter 8. The chapter begins with Moses' exhortation to Israel that they should be careful to observe the Lord's commands. This exhortation is vital to the life of a Christian; we should always live a life of self-examination. I would venture to say that all followers of Jesus will have to face suffering at some point in their lives, and that suffering is not without purpose. While we cannot always say suffering is due to sin (Jn 9:3), we can connect suffering with something meaningful (Acts 14:22). Often

Often sufferings and trials force us to re-examine who we are and what we are doing. It forces us to re-examine whether we live in the Lord's commands

sufferings and trials force us to re-examine who we are and what we are doing (1 Kings 19:1-18). It forces us to re-examine whether we live in the Lord's commands. Sufferings and trials are, as stated previously, part of the human experience, but more than just that, they are part of a spiritual learning and growth process (Rom 5:3-5; Jas 1:2-4).

If an Israelite were to ask, "Lord, why did you make me suffer all those years in the wilderness?" What would God's answer be? It would probably correspond to this: "To humble you and test you, to know what was in your heart, whether you would keep [My] commandments or not" (Deut 8:2). The Lord allows us to suffer, He allows us to hunger, but the Lord God also allows us His unfailing grace.

Manna came down from heaven for a purpose: "that He might make you know that man shall not live by bread alone; but man lives by every word that proceeds from the mouth of the Lord" (Deut 8:3). We often suffer in mundane ways because God wants to teach us to open our eyes to the spiritual. When Jesus was being tempted to turn stones into bread He quoted Deuteronomy 8:3 to Satan (see Mt 4:1-4); for the moment we shift our focus from the spiritual into the material, we have already lost the battle against Satan.

Today, we know we live in a time where there are spiritual voids crying out for fulfilment. There are gaps within the lives of millions of people. It is nothing material wealth or abundance alone can resolve. Who then will fill these gaps? If we as God's covenant people, are unwilling to open our eyes to the

...for the moment we shift our focus from the spiritual into the material, we have already lost the battle against Satan

spiritual, then we will always have gaps that need to be filled. And some, like the Israelites in the wilderness, can only look back to Egypt (Ex 14:11-12, 16:3, 17:3; Num 11:4-6, 14:3; see Lk 9:57-62). We need eyes that can see beyond the physical.

“Know then in your heart that as a man disciplines his son, the Lord your God discipline you” (Deut 8:5; see Heb 12:5-11). God’s grace keeps us on our journey (Deut 8:4), but we still often stray from the path. We often wish to go our own way; we want to pave our own future. We live by this creed because we feel God has an insignificant role in our lives. And it’s not surprising that most of us live according to our own likes and dislikes. We often want what we want; it is in some ways self-centred, in others, self-defeating. Self-centred because we only consider ourselves. Self-defeating

We often want what we want; it is in some ways self-centred, in others, self-defeating

But our feet are no longer our own. We are journeying to a promised land now — a land where the Lord alone sends rain from heaven

because we become depressed when expectations are not met.

We often look at God when we face hardships but fail to see ourselves. If God chastens us, we must be grateful that God still considers us as His children. If you are undergoing sufferings, you should take a careful look at your life, not in an attempt to find sins that aren’t there, but in an attempt to find God’s purpose for you in your suffering. This is the hardest step to take, but it is the step that God often looks for. God’s purpose for you to undergo sufferings may be to illuminate you to your sins, but God may also want to teach you something. Once you begin to recognise God’s purpose, it is often the beginning of a better understanding of your relationship with God and with your journey to the promised land.

Israel was being brought into a “land of brooks of water, of fountains and springs, flowing forth in valleys and hills, a land of wheat and barley...” (Deut 8:7-9), We often paint the promised land in such a way that nobody in their right mind

would refuse, but we often fail to mention that the journey to the promised land required a lot of faith on the part of the Israelites. It was God who told the Israelites where to go, not the Israelites themselves (Num 9:15-23). And if we look in Deuteronomy 11:10-11, we read, “For the land which you are entering to take possession of it is not like the land of Egypt, from which you have come, where you sowed your seed and watered it with your feet, like a garden of vegetables ; but the land which you are going over to possess is a land of hills and valleys, which drinks water by the rain from heaven.”

In Egypt, the river Nile flooded yearly and precisely every summer, there was no second guessing and no need for the unpredictability of heaven. But in Canaan, the fertility of the land was in the hands of heaven. Like Israel, we often want to live in an Egypt where we can use our own methods, walk our own way, use our own feet, be our own boss. But our feet are no longer our own. We are journeying to a promised land

**The grace that we
receive, we receive
from heaven**

now — a land where the Lord alone sends rain from heaven. The predictability of the Nile's alluvial deposits no longer apply. The question is : "Are you willing to wait for the grace from heaven?"

The grace that we receive, we receive from heaven. "For land which has drunk the rain that often falls upon it, and brings forth vegetation useful to those for whose sake it is cultivated, receives a blessing from God. But if it bears thorns and thistles, it is worthless and near to being cursed; its end is to be burned" (Heb 6: 7-8). We often feel helpless and manipulated by the "hand of God." But if we can once again open our eyes and ears, we will see that God's grace is not holding us captive. Most likely, we have much to learn and many things to go through in our lives. God gives us the grace to suffer, but He also gives us the grace to grow. Hopefully, we will never forget that grace, for I know firsthand

how easily we can forget (see Deut 8: 11-20).

I end by relating something Jesus said before His crucifixion. If we were to ever be able to empathise with true sorrow, then I believe we could begin to understand how sad Jesus felt before His hour of trial (Jn 16:32). Jesus told His disciples, "Truly, truly, I say to you, you will weep and lament, but the world will rejoice; you will be sorrowful, but your sorrow will turn into joy. When a woman is in travail she has sorrow, because her hour has come; but when she is delivered of the child, she no longer

"And calling to Him a

child, He put him in the

midst of them, and said,

'Truly, truly, I say to you,

unless you turn and

become like children,

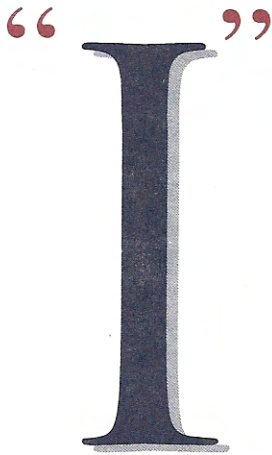
you will never enter the

kingdom of heaven' "

remembers the anguish, for joy that a child is born into the world. So you have sorrow now, but I will see you again and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you" (Jn 16:20-22). "And calling to Him a child, He put him in the midst of them, and said, 'Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven' " (Mt 18:2-3). May all the glory and honour be to our Lord Jesus. Amen. ■

"O MY GOD, MY SOUL IS CAST
DOWN WITHIN ME, THEREFORE
I REMEMBER THEE FROM THE
LAND OF JORDAN AND OF
HERMON, FROM MOUNT MIZAR.
DEEP CALLS TO DEEP AT THE
THUNDER OF THY CATARACTS;
ALL THY WAVES AND THY
BILLOWS HAVE GONE OVER ME.
BY DAY THE LORD COMMANDS
HIS STEADFAST LOVE; AND AT
NIGHT HIS SONG IS WITH ME. A
PRAYER TO THE GOD OF
MY LIFE" (PS 42:6-8).

THE UGLY OLD



— A POSSIBLE REAL STORY IN OUR LIFE

“There is another ‘I’ inside him, who often suppresses the godly ‘I’”.

Human fallen nature is demonstrated in the fallen world. Many Christians still submit to their old ‘I’. No doubt these poor souls deserve our care and love. But Oswald feels sad about the ignorance that blinds them to their purpose of life. In fact, he is pitying himself. If he were still in sin (in reality he is), life would be a long list of weekly lottery numbers, gradually conquered by other vices such as those stated in Mark 7:21-22, “evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly” (NIV).

One day, when reading the Bible, solely by chance, he realises that the ugly old ‘I’ which had supposedly been crucified ages ago with Christ is still very much alive in him. Despite outwardly following Christ, he still keeps the old ‘I’ inside. Worse still, he knows he shouldn’t, but he allows ‘him’ to live on.

In this world, there are people who take pride in their sinful activities. Sometimes, Oswald wishes to be different. Unfortunately he does not want it radically enough. He goes on committing what he thinks are negligible or pardonable sins — not condemning adultery but watching pornographic films; telling others to be tolerant and forgiving but attacking and slandering his correctors; wanting his close friends to attend weekly Sabbath services but skipping others; promoting his family in church but degrading the fervent and the knowledgeable. There is another ‘I’ inside him, who often suppresses

the godly ‘I’.

Oswald’s problem is partly the result of social allurements to which he is subject at work, but can be overcome if he is determined enough. It is, he knows very well, not possible for one to be indulgent and godly at the same time. But he still goes to casino — though he does not gamble big — a vice that ruins his Christian identity and morals. As a result, the reputation of the church suffers.

When he was younger, he had behaved quite well. He was a responsible youth in church, and he cared for the needy, both physically and spiritually. He participated heartily in the ministry of saving souls. He was exemplary to many older members. Later, his fervency for the Lord dwindled. As soon as his family moved away from the church following his father’s job transfer, he began to spend more time with his schoolmates. Gradually the well-established relationship with the church was severed. Perhaps, he should have been ready to face the challenge to his spirituality posed by his new environment. But it might not have been entirely his fault.

Maybe he or the church should have persuaded his father to look for another job or make a wiser decision, though both were not in any position to do so and this has caused him his piety for God. In life, the responsibility of stating what is right and what is wrong, especially in difficult situations, tends to be replaced by ‘it will be fine, if we pray for him constantly.’ It is true that no one likes to be labelled interfering, offering advice on matters that are not of their direct concern. However, is that a biblical reason for not doing it? A difficult

decision which has to be dealt all the more straightforwardly with God-given wisdom.

Now Oswald has returned to the church. But he is no longer as pure and sincere as his earlier days in church. He continues to join his colleagues for 'unbiblical activities', and he even plays 'politics' in church.

Like any other who indulges in sin, Oswald can only help himself if he realises that there is a pressing need to do so. Until then, Jesus is just another person, perhaps someone whom he

needs only when he is in trouble. This realisation may come about when he calms his heart down, and focuses his attention on God and His word.

He should be able to change himself for the better, if he return to the wise choice of his school days — mixing with church brethren who are active in the gospel work, and leading prayerful lives. He had experienced the ebb of faith in the past, and was guided through both by God and the helping hands of the brethren. Convinced then that he needed to stay close with those in the community of faith, the godly 'I' grew in him progressively.

He ought to know that now the godly 'I' is barely surviving. Indeed, sometimes in his spiritually awakened moments, he can only think of one reason for worrying about 'him' — if the godly 'I' is dead he loses his salvation. But then he feels that if the godly 'I' is too 'alive', he will be restrained from and deprived of the fleeting pleasures of the world. He believes that a person's fallen nature is widely demonstrated in this fallen world, and most people behave the same way. Why should he make himself drastically

different from the rest of the world?

The question is "Are these valid excuses?" Above all, does God accept them?

Surely He does not.

Jesus has been praying for us to be protected against the wickedness of this world. However, we should play our role diligently as well as to put to death, by the Holy Spirit, the old 'I'. And this is achievable, because the Lord will give us the strength that we need to overcome all temptations. It is usually a question of how determined we are to take the first step to change and to rely on God. If we remain careless, and allow the old 'I' to thrive, by continuing to indulge in worldly pleasures, we will surely destroy our own spiritual life. Are the vain and fleeting pleasures of this world worth such a sacrifice? ■

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References

1. Rom 7:14ff
2. Col 3:1ff
3. Phil 1:9f
4. 1 Thess 1:14ff
5. Tit 1:15f

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DEDICATION OF PAUL

Paul's original name was Saul. Paul was his Roman alias, which in Latin was "Paullus". Paul's life could be divided into two different phases; the first half of his life when he used all types of methods to fiercely persecute the Christians, and the latter part of his life when he offered his entire body and soul to Jesus. This dedicated serving was almost to perfection and throughout the centuries, he was a model to many Christians. This article gives a brief account of the dedication of Paul, to serve as an encouragement not only to brethren who offer themselves to full-time ministry, but to all brothers and sisters in Christ (Rom 12:1; 14:7-8).

Paul was a Jew belonging to the Benjamin tribe. Born a Roman citizen in Tarsus (Rom 11:1; Acts 22:3, 29), he grew up in Jerusalem and was taught by Gamaliel (Acts 22:3, 21, 29; 23:3). From young he hated Christians (Acts 7:58-60); later, he became their persecutor and went, from place to place, to arrest and imprison them. He even had authority from the high priest to put many of them to death. On many occasions, he slandered the name of Jesus and forced the believers to

blaspheme (Acts 8:1-3; 26:10-11; 9:1-2; 22:4-5).

When Paul was still actively persecuting the church, the Lord's calling came upon him, when he was on his way to Damascus. Suddenly a light from heaven shone around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" And he said, "Who are you, Lord?" And he said, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting; but rise and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do" (Acts 9:3-6; 22:5-10). Paul got up, but when he opened his eyes, he discovered he was blind. For three days, he remained in this condition, and did not eat or drink (Acts 9:8-11). Later, the Lord sent a disciple named Ananias to lay his hands on Paul. Paul had his sight restored, received the Holy Spirit and was baptised for the remission of his sins (Acts 9:10-12, 17; 22:3-10, 16-18). From then on, Paul's new life unfolded.

What factors caused such a complete change in Paul that he maintained a full devotion to the Lord's work and to accomplish all that had been entrusted to him? What gave him the strength to endure all difficulties in order to complete his three

missionary journeys, to write the many invaluable epistles and to accept imprisonment and death calmly and fearlessly?

Some reasons we can gather are :

1. The Heavenly Vision

On one occasion, during his audience with King Agrippa, Paul testified of his experience along the journey to Damascus and of the Lord's commission to him and declared that he "was not disobedient to the heavenly vision" (Acts 26:12-23).

The call of the Lord became the main motivating force behind Paul's dedication. For this reason he said, "For if I preach the gospel, that gives me no ground for boasting. For necessity is laid upon me. Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel! For if I do this of my own will, I have a reward; but if not of my own will, I am entrusted with a commission" (1 Cor 9:16-17). In acknowledgement of the Lord's commission, Paul offered himself completely and strove to accomplish his task. He went from Damascus to Jerusalem, to all Judea and reaching out to the Gentiles also, he preached the message of repentance (Acts 26:16-20).

2. The Love of Christ

Paul said, "For the love of Christ controls us, because we are convinced that one has died for all; therefore all have died. And he died for all, that those who live might live no longer for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised" (2 Cor 5:14-15). Paul knew that death and eternal condemnation faced all sinners (Rom 6:21; 2 Thess 1:8-10). Neither the law nor their own good deeds could save them. Yet, God came into the world to give salvation freely to all who believe in Him. Such monumental love touched Paul greatly and became his motivating force. He said, "I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me; and the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me" (Gal 2:20). To repay the Lord's grace and love, Paul was compelled to live for the Lord (ref: Gal 2:15-16; Eph 2:8-9; Rom 5:6-8; 1 Cor 15:1-5; Rom 1:16-17; 3:24-25).

3. The Surpassing Gain of Knowing Christ

Paul said, "But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For His sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as refuse, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in Him, not having a righteousness of my own, based on law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith" (Phil 3:7-9). He received special grace from the Lord and was lifted up to paradise where he heard inexpressible things (2 Cor 12:1-4) and saw the glory in the Heavenly Kingdom. He experienced the blessings of being with the Lord, he testified, "I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us" (Rom 8:18), and "For this slight momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison" (2 Cor 4:17). Paul yearned for the imperishable eternal heavenly heritage and strove towards the goal in order to receive the heavenly reward from God through Christ Jesus.

4. Passion for Lost Souls

Paul said, "I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings" (1 Cor 9:23). He knew full well of the goodness and importance of salvation. He considered that he was bound "both to Greeks and barbarians, both to the wise and the foolish" (Rom 1:14-15) and told the Corinth church, that his "heart's desire and prayer to God for them is that they may be saved" (Rom 10:1). He wholeheartedly wanted to "preach the Gospel not where Christ has already been named" (Rom 15:20-23). It was obvious that he earnestly wanted all men to receive salvation. It is this kind of love and sense of responsibility that propelled him throughout his dedication to the ministry of preaching.

5. Willingness to Bear the Cross

The Lord said, "If any one comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple. Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me, cannot be my disciple" (Lk 14:26-27). To offer oneself to be a full time preacher, one must possess the will to sacrifice oneself and to endure hardships. Paul had indeed fulfilled this, and became a model for Christians of the end time. In his epistles, Paul recorded the sacrifices he made and the sufferings he endured for the Lord:

- (ii) For the Lord Jesus: "I do not account my life of any value nor as precious to myself, if only I may accomplish my course and the ministry which I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God" (Acts 20:22-24). "What are you doing, weeping and breaking my heart? For I am ready not only to be imprisoned but even to die at Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus" (Acts 21:10-13). True enough, soon after Paul arrived at Jerusalem, he was arrested; later sent to Caesarea where he was imprisoned for two years. In the end, he died as a martyr for the Lord in Rome (refer to 2 Tim 4:6).



(a) Sacrifices

- (i) For the believers: "But we were gentle among you, like a nurse taking care of her children. So, being affectionately desirous of you, we were ready to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you had become very dear to us" (1 Thess 2:7-8).

(b) Sufferings

- (i) Persecutions: "... with far greater labours, far more imprisonments, with countless beatings, and often near death. Five times I have received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. Three times I have been beaten with rods, once I was stoned" (2 Cor 11:23-25). ▶

Bible study

- (ii) Life threatening situations: “Three times I have been shipwrecked; a night and a day I have been adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brethren; in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure” (2 Cor 11:25-27; refer to 1 Cor 4:11-12).
- (iii) Mental torture: “And, apart from other things, there is the daily pressure upon me of my anxiety for all the churches. Who is weak, and I am not weak? Who is made to fall, and I am not indignant?” (2 Cor 11:28-29). “When reviled, we bless; when persecuted, we endure; when slandered, we try to conciliate; we have become, and are now, as the refuse of the world, the offscouring of all things” (1 Cor 4:12-13).



Paul successfully lived out the dedication of his whole life to the service of the Lord. When he knew that he was about to be martyred, he was not afraid or remorseful. On the contrary, he was greatly comforted and filled with joy, for he knew that there was in store for him “the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to (him) on that Day” (2 Tim 4:7-8).

It is hoped that all my beloved co-workers who have offered themselves to the service of the Lord and all brothers and sisters in Christ will follow Paul’s exemplary footsteps in being totally obedient to the Lord’s calling; in being motivated by the love of Christ, in wholeheartedly seeking to gain Christ, in the passion for lost souls and in bearing the cross.

The Lord will surely strengthen us to fight the good fight, to complete the race and to keep the word. Like Paul, who emerged victorious, we will be able to enjoy blessings and glory that surpass all things, enduring to eternity. ■

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TRANSLATED FROM CHINESE

ECCLESIASTES 1

NEWNESS OF LIFE

A man refused to get out of bed one morning. When his wife reminded him that he would be late for work, the man buried his head under the pillow and grumbled, "I don't care if I get sacked. I do not want to subscribe to this routine everyday just to earn my three daily meals!"

The wife replied, "Then you had better start getting used to a routine of one meal a day."

Ecclesiastes Chapter 1 advances the theme of the vanity of human effort. Quite a number of us do not need any reminding of this fact. We go to work because we have to and not because we want to.

But there are some who are enamoured of life and may not comprehend what all the gloom is about. " 'We're here, right?' Might as well enjoy ourselves as much as we can while the going's good!"

These young and young at heart optimists ought to take a second look at the inspired thesis of the venerable King Solomon. Consider these opening points:

- 1. What does a man gain by all the toil at which he toils under the sun? — Death.**
- 2. All is routine and there is nothing new — You'll get fed up after a while.**
- 3. It is no advantage knowing more than others — For in much wisdom is much vexation.**

Before we go out into the world today to do our work, let's first consider why we are going to do what we are going to do. Recall the three important questions of life:

- 1. Where do I come from?**
- 2. What am I supposed to do here?**
- 3. Where am I going?**

The question we want to answer is Number 2. As Christians enlightened by the saving grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, we must start to comprehend that the escape from the routine and morbidity of life lies in the way we conduct our lives and that so in a spiritual manner. For to continue to live in the flesh is to live out the momentary pleasures of sin and the drab but certain conclusion of life as philosophised in Ecclesiastes Chapter 1.

Take this thought with you as you go out into the world this morning — We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life — Romans 6:4

Bible Reading :

1. Ecclesiastes Chapter 1
2. Romans 8:5-14
3. Hebrews 11:25 ▶

ECCLESIASTES 2

LIFE ACHIEVEMENTS

When I was in the National University of Singapore, a business undergraduate residing at one of the hostels declared that he would achieve his first million dollars by the age of 35. That was some time ago and it represented a lot of money in a very short time. He was a confident, dynamic kind of guy and someone who would easily make the list of those most likely to succeed.

We all graduated in due time but not long after, I heard that one morning, the confident young man had been found drowned in a public swimming pool. Experience has now added the possibility of suicide due to failure at the stock market but at that time, all I could think of was that accidents could cut short anyone's most brilliant plan.

The hostel flew the hall flag at half-mast in recognition of his past contributions. The university continued its strive for achievement but few were those who had read Ecclesiastes 2:16-17:

How the wise man dies just like the fool! So I hated life, because what is done under the sun was grievous to me; for all is vanity and a striving after wind.

The modern world has two labels for people — underachievers or overachievers. I think it is clear which is supposedly desirable. To Christians however, we should adjudge most issues in terms of the truth. So, instead of asking, "Are we underachievers or overachievers?" and go pell-mell into working overtime to get that extra pay and that promotion and to move in the right club circles, we should prayerfully reflect, "Are we right achievers or wrong achievers?"

The smart man learns from his own experience, the wise man learns from the experience of others. Why rush into working hard for something only to realise years later that it was not worth sacrificing for? On the different kinds of achievements, listen to what King Solomon had to say:

1. I said of laughter, "It is mad," and of pleasure,

"What use is it?"

2. On property, art and aesthetics, servants, music, sex — I considered all that my hands had done and the toil I had spent in doing it, and behold all was vanity and a striving after wind, and there was nothing to be gained under the sun.
3. On intellectuality — How the wise man dies like the fool!
4. On leaving it all to your sons — I must leave it to the man that will come after me; and who knows whether he will be a wise man or a fool?

Solomon lived before Christ and did not have a full understanding of the salvation plan of God. He saw plainly the futility of life as it was and was distressed by the realisation that 'Death ends life's achievements'. Despite this, Solomon being a prophet of God was allowed a glimpse of redemption and reached this minor conclusion in Chapter 2:

1. Eat and drink and find enjoyment in your toil. This is from the hand of God — Work at a job you enjoy (if you have a choice). Enjoy the simple pleasures of life.
2. To the man who pleases God, He gives wisdom and knowledge and joy — Have a right relationship with God. He will bless you in your life and give meaning to it.

Everyone achieves something in life — death. The question worth answering is whether all our other achievements end there or have done something in this life to achieve the life after. The counterpoint to Ecclesiastes' gloomy perspective of life is the Christian message of hope. Be like Paul who declared: "For to me to live is Christ and to die is gain" —Philippians 1:21

Bible Reading:

1. Luke 10:24
2. Matthew 10:38-39
3. Matthew 16:26

ECCLESIASTES 3

MAN'S DESTINY – GOD'S CONTROL

Asian folklore tells of a prince who once set out to battle a dragon. When warned about the ferocity of the beast and the immense danger to his life, the prince replied, “If I am fated to die battling a dragon, even if I were to flee a thousand miles from here, I would still be slain by a dragon. However, if I am not fated to die fighting a dragon and I set out today to slay it, it would be impossible for me to die!”

A belief in Fate as the overpowering will of heaven that mortals cannot overcome or escape is popular in many less-developed and more superstitious societies. In this concept, every man's life has been mapped out from birth to death and there is no swerving from the assigned path. Christians do NOT hold this view of fate. To do so would be to concede that we are but puppets in the hands of God and that there is no free will of man. Instead, Christians believe in predestination.

Chapter 3 of Ecclesiastes tells us that everything under the sun is under the control of God and the schedule that He has set up. Life and death, weeping and laughing, loving and leaving — all these happen according to their time. Yet, fatalism is not the theme here. If a man were to jump from the top of a high building, the logic of the Asian prince cannot prevent a crumpled and mangled mess of flesh and bone at the foot of that same building. Man has a part to play in his own destiny.

In good times, a man may feel that he is capable of achieving anything. During these times, lest pride overtakes and a man over extends himself to sin, it is good for a Christian to realise that a man's destiny also lies in the hands of God.

Take for example the issue of salvation. A man is saved by grace through faith. Grace is the free gift of God. Faith is man's acceptance with the help of the Spirit's inspiration.

An allegory may help here. A man is told to go to a town 40 kilometres away and to do so in half an hour. Running at 100 metres per 10 seconds (the speed of a world class sprinter) will require 66.7 minutes. On his own power, it cannot be done. If a car were provided, it suddenly becomes possible. However,

the man must still know how to drive and then to actually drive the car safely to the destination.

Salvation is like that distant town. No man can reach it on his power. God's grace through the blood of Jesus is like the car — it transforms the whole situation and makes salvation reachable. Man's understanding and following of the truth of God is driving the car. His effort is still needed here.

Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for God is at work in you ... Philippians 2:12-13.

In bad times, a man may think that life is too big for him and he is swamped by circumstances beyond his control. His business collapses overnight when war breaks out in some distant country and his customers are unable to pay. A happy family is plunged into gloom when an accident takes away lives. As in good times, a Christian who realises that a man's destiny also lies in the hands of God will find comfort in his faith. We may not understand but our faith must allow us to replace a desire for comprehension of WHY with a comprehension that God is good, knows what is happening and has allowed it to happen for good.

So before you go out to work this morning, remember to be nice to God and to pray to Him for guidance for He controls the times. Besides, put in your effort and take pleasure in your toil — it is God's gift to you. And should you think that you are bigger than life, note that one thing the best man is like the lowliest beast — for the fate of man and the fate of beasts is the same; as one dies, so dies the other. We return to a recurring theme in Ecclesiastes — Death ends Life. On the right side of this fate, one must stay on the right side of God lest the other of this fate sees us in the bottom side of eternity.

Bible Reading:

1. Ephesians 1:4-12
2. Romans 8:28-30
3. Ephesians 2:8-10
4. Psalm 73 ▶

ECCLESIASTES 4 CONTENTMENT

In Arthur Miller's 1949 play, 'Death of a Salesman', Howard, the employer of the salesman, is seen totally fascinated by his new toy, a tape recorder. He remarks that he is giving up the rest of his hobbies to devote himself to this new pastime. Living in the 90's, we are amused at this engrossment in what we take for granted today.

Sometimes when I compare my life with that of the kings of the past, I truly think that mine is more luxurious than theirs. I have air-conditioning and elevators. My car can travel faster than horses. I can fly. I drink Coca-Cola and have durians all the year round. Yet, so many richer than I are dissatisfied with their lot today.

Stop and think for a while. Why are you not content?
Ecclesiastes 4 tells of three kinds of people :

1. ... all toil and all skill in work come from a man's envy of his neighbour (v4)
2. The fool folds his hands and eats his own flesh (v5)
3. Better is a handful of quietness than two hands full of toil and a striving after wind (v6)

The first is the competitor, the second the sluggard and the last the quiet man. Which one are you?

Kings in the past were perceived to lead more luxurious lives simply because they had things which their neighbours did not possess. Perhaps, it was a castle or then maybe, a stable of horses or a court orchestra. Science has given man better things today, but many continue to envy the present rich for their better cars, their private jets and their bigger homes. And so, many compete from envy and strive ten times harder to obtain something intrinsically only a tenth better (a Mercedes costs S\$500,000 while a Toyota costs S\$100,000).

Christians are warned against laziness and told to do their best at work. We have to work hard sometimes to survive. The problem of unhappiness and materialism arises only when our

effort is precipitated out of envy and a need to achieve something in this world. The doctor working overtime to save lives is commendable but one who opens his practice morning, afternoon and night, seven days a week to protect his market share does not know the meaning of life.

Take a break from climbing up the corporate ladder. Be very good at a certain level you are comfortable in and make yourself indispensable there. You will then have job security and time to carry out your Christian responsibilities and to live life fully.

Be content in the working world. Do not be complacent with your spiritual life.

Bible Reading :

1. I Timothy 6:6-10
2. I Thessalonian 4:11-12
3. II Thessalonian 3:11-12

TAY ENG GUAN
[SINGAPORE]

the

Each morn as I open my eyes,
A voice in me would say;
Before you attempt anything,
Go to the well today.

I know of a fathomless well,
Where living waters flow;
It matters not where I am, it's
Never too far to go.

There are many things in this world
That would lead me astray;
But they do not tempt me — I have
Been to the well today.

Some days are harder than others,
I stumble, almost fall;
And those days I tarry longer
At the well, I would stall.

Thanks be to our dear Lord JESUS
For showing me the way;
I drew grace, peace, mercy, love and
More at the well today.

And when the day has drawn from me,
I lower my vessel;
There returning in prayer to God,
I know that I am well.

CHIRECE MITCHELL
[DETROIT, USA]

well

Respondents on full-time ministry

OUR Lord Jesus once said, the harvest is plentiful, but the labourers are few. When we compare the number of full-time ministers with the demands of the church's ministry, the Lord's statement is true indeed. We believe that an insight on the motivation and experiences of the current ministers will help to inspire, direct and encourage more of you, our Manna readers, to at least consider serving the Lord on a full-time basis. It is with this in mind that we have designed this simple questionnaire for our ministers to share their testimonies with you.

Elder Lin Feng Lai

Period of Ministry: 41 years

Area: Taiwan

1. What made you decide to offer yourself as a full-time minister?

In March 1945, I was shipwrecked off the South China Sea. I drifted on the sea for a period of five days before being rescued by a US submarine. For this reason, I decided to become a preacher. The shipwreck happened when I was 22. I became a preacher at the age of 27. At 68, I retired. So, I have been a preacher for 41 years. I am 72 this year (I was born on 2 March 1923.)

2. In your ministerial work, what experiences have you encountered that left very deep impressions?

From 27 March to 27 May 1968, I was working in Sabah, Malaysia. There I witnessed the great power of the Holy Spirit. There were 120 who received baptism and a total of 40 who saw visions. I was truly moved and know for sure that our church is the True Church. For the church to progress, we must rely on the Holy Spirit.

3. What are your aspirations/hopes for the True Jesus Church?

Our church needs to strengthen in the area of theological education. This is the most fundamental step in church progress. Every GA should establish a theological seminary and the seminary must be of a certain

standard. There must be emphasis on Biblical exegesis. If we are to fulfil the commission to reform the faith of the world's churches, we must first strengthen our own religious education.

Preacher Joseph Chong Oi Yue

Period of Ministry: Since 1982

Area: Peninsula Malaysia

1. What made you decide to offer yourself as a full-time minister?

It was due initially to the numerous blessings and protection bestowed by our Lord upon my family during my teenage days; a sense of repaying the bountiful grace of our good Lord sprouted in my young heart. Later (in the mid-sixties) with earnest encouragement given by the two preachers from Taiwan to churches in the South-East Asia Region, my urge to serve the Lord became stronger. Nevertheless, this aspiration of mine could only materialise in the late seventies because of both personal and career factors. The key factor that prompted my final decision was several bible verses that greatly spurred me during the later stage of my working days.

(Please see Lk 14:26-27; Mt 19:29; 1 Jn 2:15-17).

2. In your ministerial work, what experiences have you encountered that left very deep impressions?

The healing of an almost broken family always leaves me with a precious happy memory. Barely one month after my graduation from the seminary, I was assigned to pastor the Bahau Church in Central Region, West Malaysia. Together with the Chairman of the local committee, I visited a family, 12 km away. The only believer in this family then was a Sis Kua originally from Petaling Jaya. She led a miserable Christian life after marrying into a staunch idol-worshipping family. Her faith was seriously hampered and threatened. Her gambling and alcoholic husband added to her miseries. (They had three young children then.) She wept and poured out her sorrow to us when we visited her. After learning of her plight, we prayed earnestly with her. The good Lord soon worked miraculously and wonderfully in this family, so much so that an almost broken family was redeemed! Her husband together with her in-laws changed and were converted to Christianity — and they led a wholesome and increasingly happy family life after that! Praise and glory be to our gracious and almighty Lord. Amen.

3. What are your aspirations/hopes for the True Jesus Church?

It is my earnest hope that we (TJC) will fully revive and restore the ORIGINAL essence of the apostolic church; that is, besides preaching the genuine gospel and teachings of the early days (Mt 28:20; Eph 2:20), we need very much to excel further in our Christian living (Acts 2:42, 46-47; Col 1:4, 16; 1 Thess 1:3) and our spirit of evangelism (Phil 1:5; Acts 8:4; 11:19-20) so that the same rapid church development will reappear in our midst (Acts 9:31). Emmanuel!

Preacher Jonathan Chou

Period of Ministry: 12 years
Area: USA

1. What made you decide to offer yourself as a full-time minister?

- (a) My father was healed of a serious disease. Moreover, I had held the work of a preacher in high regard ever since I was a child.
- (b) When I was a student, I prayed for a long time but

did not receive the Holy Spirit. Then I made a vow and received the Holy Spirit.

(c) After graduation, I stepped into society. Everything went on smoothly until 1981 when I was afflicted with a serious illness. I had to quit my job. Then I repented before the Lord. By His mercy, I was able to repay my vow to Him and I subsequently enrolled in the seminary.

2. In your ministerial work, what experiences have you encountered that left very deep impressions?

(a) The allowance I received after joining the seminary was in no way comparable to what I was earning previously. However, through all these years, I never had to worry about my livelihood, for the care and grace of God is more than sufficient.

(b) I was with the RE unit of the Taiwan General Assembly (GA) for 4 years and was involved in the revision of the RE syllabus. I am very grateful for the opportunity to have worked with a few hundred members in that project.

(c) During my pastoral work, I am often touched by the simplicity of the members, to the point of finding them adorable. Their thirst for the Word of God propelled me to constantly seek for improvement in my own spirituality. In the early years of my work, I experienced many spiritual battles and witnessed for myself the work and power of the Holy Spirit.

3. What are your aspirations/hopes for the True Jesus Church?

(a) The True Jesus Church is established by the Holy Spirit; it is the Ark of the last days. Every member of the church must be firmly rooted in the faith and to constantly strive for improvement in the knowledge of the Truth and for spiritual strength .

(b) Towards the work of world evangelism, we should all unite and work as one. In the areas of evangelism and literary ministry, there should be a holistic plan, with proper delegation of jobs to minimise the wastage of resources. GAs from the various countries should not be individualistic. Together, we should build up the body of Christ, bearing in mind the world-wide evangelistic work.

THE HOLY WORK IN CALGARY:

A PERSONAL PERSPECTIVE

As a result of the uncertainty after the Tiannamen Square massacre in Beijing, my sister-in-law urged my family to emigrate to Canada where she was currently residing. We applied without much expectation. However, by the beginning of May 1992, we left Hong Kong for Calgary.

During those early times, the True Jesus Church did not exist in Calgary. Our daily worship consisted of hymns, Bible study and prayer. However, since we were the only members there, we often felt spiritually weak and lonely. At about the same time, we were even invited to attend services at another denomination. At first, I contemplated accepting the invitation. Thankfully, my eldest son firmly opposed this idea. He reminded me that even though I might stand firm in faith, my children might be significantly influenced by the teachings of that church. Consequently, I declined their invitation.

Shortly after this, we learned that the Vancouver and Edmonton churches would be holding spiritual convocations in the near future, and that there were other members who resided near us. Later, with six members and one truth-seeker, we started family services. A brother from Edmonton travelled monthly to pastor the Calgary flock.

During December in 1992, a truth-seeker, Josephine Chung became seriously ill. She suffered from insomnia, loss of appetite and nightly convulsions. She said that there were many demons singing and dancing within her everyday. In fact, the doctor was of little help as the demons tormented her. Because she lived some distance away and I was not familiar with the roads, we could only pray for her at home. Later, however, we decided to visit her one night after receiving much assurance from several brethren that they would support us in prayer.

With the courage given by God, we braved the bitter, cold and snowy night and drove to Josephine's house. We found her lying in bed, without the strength to even speak. She nodded in agreement when we told her that we would pray for her. We

prayed earnestly and after a while, I was filled with the Holy Spirit and loudly spoke, "In the name of the Lord Jesus, I cast out the demons!" Josephine screamed and wanted us to stop praying immediately. We ignored her and continued to pray. Her husband rushed in and saw the frightening look on her face caused by the demons that possessed her. Eventually she calmed down and praised the Lord. She said that she felt better because quite a few of the demons had left her. However, there were still some that remained. While her husband wanted to take her to the hospital to find a treatment for her nightly convulsions, Josephine insisted that the best treatment would be prayer.

Inspired by her faith, we prayed for her once again. Praise God! She saw three demons leave her body in the form of smoke. Afterward, she felt better and regained some appetite. We thanked God because we knew that He had answered the prayers of the brethren that night. During the next few days, Josephine's condition varied. Whenever she deteriorated, I contacted the other churches for their support in prayer. Thankfully, she improved after each prayer.

She later travelled to Los Angeles and participated in the spiritual convocations. She received the Holy Spirit and was baptised on 27 December 1992. During her baptism, she saw the blood of Jesus surrounding her.

Josephine is now a fervent member of the church. She always testifies of the grace and love that the Lord has bestowed upon her, and she brings many to receive the Word of God. Her son, Peter, was also baptised in June the following year.

The Lord continued to guide Calgary's holy work over the next few years. The congregation grew as more were added to the flock and more members migrated there. Ministers also came to pastor us and conduct evangelistic services.

Praise the Lord! The Calgary Prayer House was established on 1 April 1995 with 26 members, four of whom have recently moved back to Malaysia. At present, Edmonton Church sends

brothers to conduct services twice monthly in Calgary. Four brothers and sisters in Calgary take turn to deliver the sermon on Friday evenings and Sabbath Days. There are about six truth-seekers.

In the past few years, we have experienced God's guidance and at the same time realised how Satan has tried his utmost to attack us through our weaknesses. It is therefore important for us to work together with unity and love. Only then will God dwell among us and we can overcome the wiles of Satan. We will encounter difficulties in the process of growing. However,

as long as we realise how vulnerable and weak we are in comparison to God's omnipotence, we will begin to stand firm by relying on God and entrusting to Him everyday.

May you continue to pray for us so that God will continue to show His mercy and use us, His humble vessels, to preach His Gospel to glorify His name. May glory and praise be forever unto our Heavenly Father. ■

ROSE YIP
[CALGARY, CANADA]

HE SPOKE TO ME

Hallelujah, in the name of our Lord Jesus I testify. The following incident happened to me when I was scheduled to lead a Bible study session on Sabbath Day, 24 November, 1990.

On that day, our youth fellowship began at 12.00 noon with hymn singing and prayer. During the first prayer, I heard someone whispering into my right ear, saying, "Belinda, do not be nervous or worry about the Bible study session later on. Everyone will participate well with good response." Not realising that it was God who whispered to me, I replied, "Okay, whatever you say." After the prayer, we began our Bible study by reading through Exodus chapters 8 to 10. To my surprise, the discussion was lively. It was then that I recalled the voice that had whispered into my ear earlier and I realised that it was God who spoke to me.

After the youth fellowship ended, the Sabbath service began. During the first prayer session, I saw a very bright light passing right in front of me. This vision ended when the bell rang. Then in the second prayer after the sermon, the vision appeared again. The bright light that had appeared earlier shone through

my eyes. I also heard a voice calling my name, "Belinda, Belinda!". The voice was so sweet and gentle.

I asked, "Who are you?"

The voice replied that He was God.

At that moment, I was filled with the Holy Spirit. And He spoke again, saying, "Belinda, I want to speak to you."

I replied, "If you have anything to say to me, please be quick, because our prayer session will end soon."

He said, "I know you are anxious, but this prayer session will be long."

Without realising that He knows everything, I hesitated and replied, "Please make it quick even if the prayer is going to be long, the bell may still ring at any time."

Then He said, "Belinda, didn't I reassure you not be nervous and worry about the Bible study session! You have done a very good job in leading the youths here. Now, I have another thing to tell you."

I interrupted and said, "Please hurry up, for the prayer will end very soon!" He continued again, saying, "Belinda, this is a very important matter, you must listen carefully without any interruption. You must tell the youths in Vancouver

that I love them very much. Whenever they encounter problems or troubles in the church's ministry, I shall be with them and shall guide them through. Belinda, you must tell the youths what I have told you."

I answered obediently, "Okay, I will."

As soon as the conversation ended, the bell rang concluding the prayer session. When the chorus of Hymn 208 was sung, I could not control myself anymore and I started crying. In my heart, I felt so happy that I have seen God in the vision and have actually spoken to Him. Since God did not specify when I should convey the message for Him, I found excuses to delay passing the message to the youths.

During that afternoon's hymn practice, I could only sing very softly because in my heart, I was crying all the while. I kept on telling myself that I would share the vision with the youths the following Saturday. Suddenly, I felt someone pushing me and whispering into my right ear saying, "You must tell them, you must tell them." When the hymn session ended, the hymn leader wanted me to lead the prayer. It seemed that he knew that I had something to say, so I

walked to the front. Before I started the prayer, I told the youths about the vision and the message God that wanted me to convey. The message moved the youths to tears. During the prayer, I told God that I had conveyed His message and I also promised to testify again the following Saturday. I then heard a voice saying, "I know!" Usually, at the end of the prayer, we would say the Lord's prayer together, but surprisingly when I opened my mouth, I found myself singing the chorus of the hymn "God is Love". We all sang aloud with joy in our heart.

I thank God for allowing me to see this vision. From the message, we know that He is always with us, guiding and helping us in our holy work in Vancouver Church. I also learned that, in God's work, we should not delay. Whenever we have the opportunity, we have to do it as soon as possible. If we delay or make excuses, we may be discarded and left aside (Jn 15:2), for His coming is like a thief entering a house without warning. So, we must always prepare ourselves for His second coming (Mk 13:32-33). Whatever tribulations or troubles we may encounter, we know He is always here to guide and assist us, as God is love and His love dwells in us always. Amen. ■

BELINDA YONG
[VANCOUVER, CANADA]

HE SANG WITH US!

Hallelujah, in the name of our Lord Jesus I bear witness.

In Vancouver Church, we have youth's hymn practice after every Sabbath service. The testimony that I would like to share with you happened on 27 October, 1990. On that day, there were only seven of us staying for the practice. After singing the first hymn "Till We Meet Again", we sang "God is Love". It was then that I saw a vision.

While we were practising "God is Love", I heard someone knocking at the door three times but I ignored it. Then I saw a person in glorious white entering the door. He was so bright that I could not even see His face! He greeted the youths and sat next to me. When I looked at Him, I felt that He was smiling at me. In a very polite and gentle voice, He said "This song is very sweet and nice, let's sing it together." When I heard this, I wanted to stand up and share it with the youths, but was filled with so much joy that I started crying.

At one point during the practice, the conductor shared a humorous experience of teaching "God is Love" to some elderly

members in Taiwan, prompting laughter from the youths. Then I heard Him tell me to disregard the hilarity and concentrate on singing.

Towards the end of the practice, we revised the first hymn, "Till We Meet Again". While singing this hymn, He comforted me saying that "When you sing 'Till We Meet Again', you must not cry for I will come back again." After saying this, He disappeared.

After the choir practice, I asked the conductor whether he had noticed a man dressed in white sitting beside me, but he said no. It was then that I told the youths the vision that I had and gave thanks to God to glorify His name.

From this experience, I am certain that the Lord Jesus is always with us. Furthermore, we must take heed and prepare ourselves for His second coming, for we never know when He will come again. Amen. ■

CELINA YONG
[VANCOUVER, CANADA]

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I HAVE SET YOU TO BE A LIGHT
FOR THE GENTILES,
THAT YOU MAY BRING SALVATION
TO THE UTTERMOST PARTS
OF THE EARTH

ACTS 13:47

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