

MANNA

ISSUE 76

Commission



**The Keys of the Kingdom of Heaven • Be An Evangelist
• The Blessing and Curse of Servitude**

“The goal of Manna is to inspire believers to live an active faith through mutual encouragement and the study of biblical truths.”

MANNA
ISSUE 76 Vol 39 No. 2
Publication date: June 2015

Commission

Editorial

by Derren Liang

Before Jesus ascended to heaven, He entrusted two great commissions to His disciples: to preach the gospel, and to pastor His sheep.

The Lord's disciples took up the first commission and preached the gospel from Jerusalem, to Judea, Samaria, and to the end of the earth (Acts 1:8). Why did these disciples have such a fervent heart, overcoming all difficulties in order to complete this commission? It was because they were effectively trained by Jesus.

When He had first begun to preach the gospel, Jesus chose and called His disciples to follow Him. He later sent them forth to preach the gospel. Within the three years of His ministry, He also spent time with them so that they could witness His compassion—how He preached the heavenly gospel, revealed the authority of the heavenly kingdom, healed the sick, cast out demons, fed the hungry, and solved man's problems. His resurrection and ascension gave man a living hope. The disciples saw, heard and touched the manifested Christ. They had a deep understanding and a vivid experience of the Lord Jesus (1 Jn 1:1–3). Preaching the gospel was proclaiming the Lord Jesus who had dwelled with them. The disciples each shared a deep love and a personal relationship with Him. Preaching the gospel not only fulfills Jesus' command, but repays His love. If we preach with such a heart, then our deeds will be pleasing to the Lord.

Jesus asked Peter three times: “Do you love Me?” And three times, Jesus commanded Peter to nurture His sheep (Jn 21:15–17). This is the second commission. To love the Lord is to be entrusted with the most important task of pastoring His sheep. Jesus is the Good Shepherd, sacrificing His life for the sheep. When His love fills us,

we can love those whom He loves. Jesus' greatest love was revealed on Golgotha.

Paul says, “For if we are beside ourselves, it is for God” (2 Cor 5:13a). By pondering over the saving grace we have received, counting God's blessings, praying unceasingly, and submitting to the Holy Spirit, we will be filled with the love of God, which enables us to make sacrifices for the sheep. This is how Paul could genuinely care for the believers, spending and being spent for them, watching and praying unceasingly for their spiritual lives.

Accomplishing these two great commissions goes beyond studying theology, or holding seminars on the duties of a disciple. What is more important is to establish a personal relationship with Jesus. For He said, “If anyone loves Me, he will keep My word” (Jn 14:23a). If we do this, then we can fulfill Jesus' commission. He also instructed, “[Teach] them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age” (Mt 28:20). If we, as disciples of Christ, establish a close and personal relationship with Him, and zealously strive to accomplish the commission which He has entrusted to us, He will continually sustain us in our service.

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Manna (ISSN1528-8617) is published quarterly by the True Jesus Church, IA Department of Literary Ministry, 21217 Bloomfield Avenue, Lakewood, CA 90715 USA.

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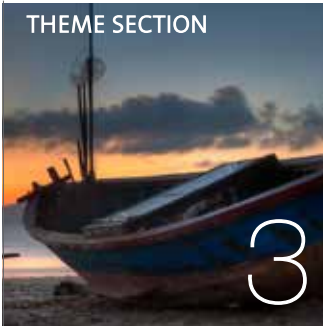
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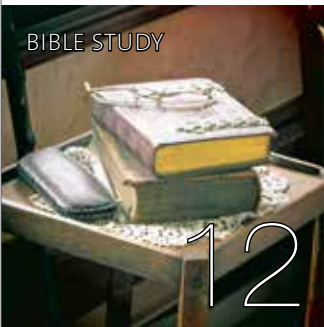


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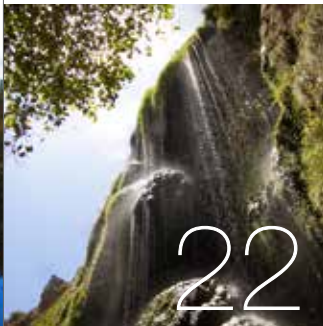
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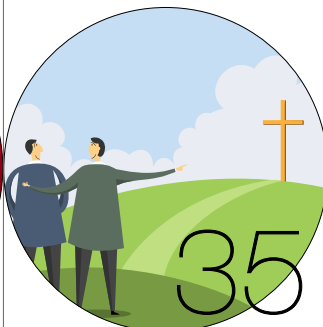
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Commission



Understanding and Fulfilling Our Commission

Philip Shee—Jakarta, Indonesia

When Jesus was faced with His impending death, He said, “But for this purpose I came to this hour” (Jn 12:27b). Jesus clearly understood His ultimate purpose on earth, and never let Himself be distracted from it. He was regularly overwhelmed by crowds of people who sought Him for healing, but He would say to them: “I must preach the kingdom of God to the other cities also, because for this purpose I have been sent” (Lk 4:43). And when He was interrogated by Pilate, Jesus responded, “For this cause I was born, and for this cause I have come into the world, that I should bear witness to the truth” (Jn 18:37b).

Jesus was sent to the world with the commission to preach the gospel of salvation and to give His life as a ransom for us, and He stopped at nothing to fulfill His duties. Are we able to be as dedicated as we carry out our own commission as ambassadors of Christ?

UNDERSTANDING OUR COMMISSION

There are many who commit their lives to a certain cause or career. Some do so out of duty, while others are driven by passion or ideology. They brush aside distractions and dedicate themselves to what they deem to be their calling. A rich heir may seek to expand his family's business empire. A musician may devote lifelong practice to present that perfect performance. A political activist may risk his life to influence society according to his ideology. And an altruistic man may work unceasingly

to help the underprivileged. But what about us? What is our calling today?

We have often heard about the great commission Jesus gave His apostles: “Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature” (Mk 16:15). Indeed, this commission is entrusted to all Christians. But do we have a clear understanding of our purpose and the conviction to carry it out? If we want to stay on the right path, then we must know what our purpose is and carry it out with conviction

“But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.”

(Acts 1:8)

This commission was given to the church, but it was not until the Holy Spirit descended that the church was established and sent to do the work. Therefore, before we preach the gospel, we must first be sent by God (Rom 10: 15). The presence of the Holy Spirit confirms that the church has the authority to cleanse sins and save souls through water baptism (Mk 16:16; Acts 2:38; 1 Jn 5:6–8). When we received the gospel and were baptized, we gained salvation. But just as we have freely received, we need to freely give (Mt 10:7–8). We have not only received salvation, but also the commission to bring salvation to others. If we do not pass it on, then who will?

Like Jesus, we must understand



that this is the reason we have been called. This is the purpose of our lives. We may come from different walks of life, harbor different passions, or have different talents. We may live in different countries, work in different companies, or study at different academic institutions. Without a doubt, these factors will shape our lives, but they do not define our purpose on earth. Instead, our lives are defined by our commission to preach the gospel. We should ask ourselves: Why has God placed me in this country, this company, or this college? How can I use my circumstances to further the work of the gospel? And how can I offer my knowledge and talents for the same purpose?

FULFILLING OUR COMMISSION

The early apostolic church left us a positive example of fulfilling the commission. After the church was established on the Day of Pentecost, the brethren continued to worship together daily, learning the word of God, praying and breaking bread from house to house. Preaching the word became the center of their daily activities, so “the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved” (Acts 2:47). When they were threatened with punishment for preaching in Jesus’ name, they raised their voices to God with one accord and prayed for boldness to speak His word (Acts 4:24, 29). And, indeed, they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and boldly spoke the word of God (Acts 4:31). These passages show that the early church was not deterred by threats and persecution. Not only the apostles, but the entire church, strived to fulfill their commission.

Furthermore, the early church remained committed to their cause

even in the face of heightened persecution. When Stephen was martyred, a great persecution arose against the church in Jerusalem. Believers were scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria. But this did not prevent the spread of the gospel, for “those who were scattered went everywhere preaching the word” (Acts 8:4, 1). This persecution even caused the gospel to spread beyond Jerusalem, into Judea, Samaria and to the end of the earth, thus fulfilling Jesus’ word.

Apart from the apostles and other workers who had devoted themselves to the ministry, the believers would have had their own occupations, such as tentmakers Aquila and Priscilla (Acts 18:3). Still, the work of the gospel took center stage, while their livelihoods were used to support the ministry. For example, Aquila and Priscilla provided lodging for Paul while he was in Corinth, and even sailed with him to Syria. They also played a part in correcting Apollos in Ephesus (Acts 18:1–3, 18, 24–26).

We are certainly better off today, as most of us can practice our faith without persecution. God provides for our physical needs, even exceeding our needs and expectations. We have received a good education, and may have a stable job or a place in college to further our education. But have we, like the early believers, taken our commission seriously? In Paul’s epistle to the Corinthians, he calls us ambassadors for Christ, entrusted with the ministry of reconciliation, to reconcile man to God (2 Cor 5:18–20). In the world of international

diplomacy, an ambassador may host various events, galas and social functions in the country he has been sent to, but the purpose behind these is to promote his own country. Hence, wherever God places us, whatever we do there should be secondary to, or the means by which we fulfill, the real purpose of God.

It does not matter where you end up. The key is to preach the gospel wherever you are.

For example, if we are students, there will be many opportunities to meet new friends. While our schedules may be packed with lectures, laboratory sessions or examinations, there will still be pockets of time that we can spend socializing. If we fully understand our commission, we will seize every opportunity to reach out to our friends. It can start by simply asking them about their weekend plans, and then inviting them to church. Or discussing with them about the existence of God, or their aspirations in life, and then sharing about God’s purpose for human beings. If they are already Christians, we can ask about their views on certain topics, such as speaking in tongues or the existence of so many denominations today, and proceed from there to explain the biblical perspective.

Similarly, for those who are already working, there will be times when we are having tea or lunch with our colleagues. During these occasions, we can reach out to them, even if it is simply an invitation to an evangelistic service. Like the early believers who were scattered, it does not matter where you end up. The key is to preach the gospel wherever you are.

We have not only received salvation, but also the commission to bring salvation to others. If we do not pass it on, then who will?

Have we understood our true purpose and what God's commission is for us? If not, we need to slow down and examine our lives. Have we aligned our lives to God's commission?

HAVE WE FORSAKEN OUR COMMISSION?

When we read about Jesus' calling of Peter, it causes us to reflect upon our own purpose and calling in life. When Peter was first called by Jesus, it was after he had "toiled all night and caught nothing" (Lk 5:5). This encapsulates a life that is focused on secular things, and not on Christ and His commission for us. We will toil throughout our days and, in the end, gain nothing. Jesus then commissioned Peter to undertake his true purpose—to "catch men" (Lk 5:10). So Peter left his nets, forsook all and followed Him (Lk 5:11).

The next few years saw Peter leading a much more meaningful life as he accompanied Jesus in His ministry. He was sent to preach from city to city and was given authority to cast out demons and to heal. However, after Jesus was arrested and crucified, Peter lost his direction. He forsook his commission and returned to fishing. The other disciples followed suit. But they discovered that, as before, they toiled all night only to catch nothing (Jn 21:3). This again emphasizes the futility of life that is not directed by the purpose of God.

Many people devote their entire lives in pursuit of material goals such as wealth, status, fame, enjoyment or intellectual achievement. But no matter how hard you work, success cannot be guaranteed. Even if you achieve your goal, all will be lost at the point of death. If we do not understand the spiritual purpose of God and devote ourselves to it, then we will be like the disciples toiling all night and catching nothing—our labors will be futile.

After one of these fishing expeditions, Jesus again appeared to Peter. During their conversation,

the Lord stirred him up to reflect on and reaffirm his love for Him. Then Jesus called Peter once again, as He did at the beginning, saying, "Follow Me" (Jn 21:19; cf. Mt 4:19). Even though Jesus revealed how Peter would suffer a terrible death, Peter readily accepted His commission (Jn 21:18–19). And this time, he did not turn back.

As we journey through our lives, it is not uncommon to be overwhelmed by the pressures of the world and the fear of being left behind. We may get swept up in the endless pursuit of physical advancement. If this happens, we do not have the luxury to slow down and ponder: Why are we chasing these goals and where do they really lead us? Before long, we may discover that we have rushed through life without really having lived. Have we understood our true purpose and what God's commission is for us? If not, we need to slow down and examine our lives. Have we aligned our lives to God's commission, just as Jesus and the believers in the apostolic church did? Or have we suffered some setbacks or confusion in our service, like Peter? If we want meaning and purpose to come back into our lives, then let us subject ourselves again to Jesus' commission, and live to fulfill it. ★





The Thief, the Hired Hand and the Good Shepherd

Adapted from lectures by Jason Hu—Phoenix, Arizona, U.S.

Before Jesus ascended to heaven, He commissioned His apostles to take up the ministry of salvation, to “make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you” (Mt 28:19–20).

As the church of God, our mission is to preach the gospel of salvation to the ends of the earth. But Jesus’ commission was two-fold: once a believer has been baptized into the flock, our duty is to “[teach] them to observe all things that [Jesus] commanded.” We should continue to care for their spiritual needs. Therefore, pastoral ministry is as important as preaching. This was further elaborated in Jesus’ final instructions to Peter: to feed His lambs, and to tend and feed His sheep (Jn 21:15–17).

Pastoral work does not only rest with the ministers of the church—the preachers, deacons and elders—but also to church council members, religious education teachers, parents, and others who hold a leadership role. In fact, most of us will be a pastor at some point.

The parable of the good shepherd (Jn 10:1–16) teaches us how to be a good pastor. This passage records three types of workers, each with a different attitude. To be a worker pleasing to God, we should approach our pastoral duties with the correct mindset.

THE THIEF

“Most assuredly, I say to you, he who does not enter the sheepfold by the door, but climbs up some other way, the same is a thief and a robber...The thief does not come except to steal, and to kill, and to destroy.”

(Jn 10:1, 10a)

The first type of worker is the thief. A thief is a person who takes what does not belong to him. But to God, withholding what should have been given to the rightful owner is also theft. For instance, the Israelites were seen to have robbed God because they did not offer to the Master what was rightfully His (Mal 3:8–9).

In the pastoral context today, what have we withheld from the Master and wrongfully treated as our own?

One example is our children. They are a heritage entrusted to us by God (Ps 127:3). God wants us to raise them to be godly offspring (Mal 2:15). And specifically, He reminds us to diligently teach them about His love, and His commands, statutes and judgments (Deut 6:1–7). Yet, we often raise them as though they belong to us alone. Although we may have baptized them as infants and taken them to church, once there is a conflict between church and their studies, we teach them that God and faith can wait. We tell them that success waits for no man, so it is acceptable to focus on building their careers first—“God will understand” that they are too busy for divine work.

The Lord’s command is for us to feed these lambs and train them up in the right way (Prov 22:6). We must be vigilant not to fall into the trap of defining the right way in secular terms only, and end up feeding the bodies and minds of our children, but not their souls. We should not forget they belong to God.

Another example is our brethren in church. If we treat them as our own, rather than God’s, we end

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up suffering from “professional jealousy” and competing with co-workers. This is not without precedent. On one occasion, the disciples of John the Baptist came to tell him indignantly that Jesus Christ, the One whom he had baptized, was Himself baptizing even more people. Instead of being upset that his younger relative appeared to be encroaching on his territory, John corrected his disciples with the analogy of the bridal party (Jn 3:27–30). Recognizing that Jesus was the Christ (and the awaited bridegroom), John honestly declared that he was only the bridegroom's friend, who was to do the preparatory work of priming the hearts of the people (the bride). When Christ appeared, he (John) rejoiced, and prepared to fade into the background. John clearly understood that his commission was to pastor and to lead others to God, not himself.

A thief lures sheep to himself not because he wants to care for them, but for other ulterior motives. Jesus once spoke a parable depicting such religious leaders and workers who blatantly withheld the fruits of the vineyard from the owner (Mk 12:1–12). This man had leased his vineyard to vinedressers. However, come harvest, the tenants refused to give the fruit to the owner. They even shamelessly beat the servants who were sent by the master to collect the harvest; and eventually killed the son of the owner so that they could lay hold of the inheritance (Mk 12:7).

The Pharisees immediately understood that the parable was about them, and were so angry that they sought to arrest Jesus. The inheritance in Jesus' parable referred to the people of God. These Pharisees were the vinedressers. They knew that Jesus was alluding to the fact that they had not been faithful pastors. Their focus was on ritual and rigid adherence to the letter of the Law (Mt 23:1–36) rather than turning

people towards God's righteousness (Mt 23:24). In addition, when the Son of Man came, the priests and Pharisees were unwilling to give up their authority and honor, so they plotted to murder Him.

As pastors of the Lord's sheep today, we must ensure we do not fall into this trap (Ezek 34:2–4)—ostensibly serving God, but actually working for our own benefit.

“Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravenous wolves.”
(Mt 7:15)

In these last days, another type of thief will appear. He is not interested in feeding the sheep, but just wants to feed on the sheep! In order to steal the sheep from the True Shepherd, these thieves infiltrate the sheep pen, appearing to be part of the community. When they have successfully lulled the sheep to complacency through their apparent sincerity, they then show their true nature and lead the trusting sheep to destruction. Paul spoke of a time when false teachers would rise from among the believers to lead them astray (Acts 20:29–31). As we strive to fulfill our pastoral commission, we must always guard our hearts and spirituality in order not to be used by Satan to lead our brethren to destruction.

THE HIRED HAND

“But a hireling, he who is not the shepherd, one who does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and flees; and the wolf catches the sheep and scatters them. The hireling flees because he is a hireling and does not care about the sheep.”

(Jn 10:12–13)

The second type of pastor is the hired hand. They are the direct

opposite of the thief who wants to wrongfully keep the sheep for himself. The hireling feels no sense of ownership or responsibility towards the sheep. It is just a means of livelihood for him. He is unlikely to exert himself too much for the sheep, so those under his charge will suffer from neglect. Such a hireling may not personally prey on the sheep, but because he cares more for himself than for the sheep, the sheep are not safe from predators.

We sometimes find hired hands among the workers. These are ones who only serve at their convenience. They will fulfill their duties but they put in minimal effort. They do not mind joining the different ministries as long as they do not have to sacrifice (too much) time or energy. They believe that initiative and going beyond the call of duty should be

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someone else's job. If this attitude is prevalent, it will be hard to find a good shepherd. The sheep will suffer—there is no one to fight off the ferocious beasts determined to consume them; there is no one to seek the sheep who have wandered astray (cf. Lk 15:4).

God harshly rebukes such unfaithful shepherds and vows punishment (Ezek 34:7–10). This was also the fate of the irresponsible servant who thought he could get away with just “safeguarding” his master's money (Mt 25:14–30). Therefore, pastoral work does not only rest with the ministers of the church. In fact, most of us will be a pastor at some point. We must rise above the natural human tendency to care only for ourselves and our immediate family.

The apostle Paul typifies the right mindset:

[B]esides the other things, what comes upon me daily: my deep concern for all the churches. Who is weak, and I am not weak? Who is made to stumble, and I do not burn with indignation?

(2 Cor 11:28–29)

Though we are all busy with our lives and work in the wider world, we must constantly remind ourselves that our secular activities are God's way of providing us the means to support our spiritual growth; and the latter is inextricably linked to the spiritual wellbeing of the larger family in Christ (1 Cor 12:12–26). In addition, if we are lazy and unfaithful pastors, our families too will eventually suffer. The example of Eli the priest and the downfall of his priestly household is a frightening reminder. And if we do not protect the flock well, when the wolves come for the sheep, our families will be among the sheep in danger of being devoured.

THE GOOD SHEPHERD

The third type of worker is the good shepherd. How can we become a good shepherd? John chapter 10 outlines several characteristics of such a worker:

Walks ahead

"And when he brings out his own sheep, he goes before them; and the sheep follow him, for they know his voice."

(Jn 10:4)

The Bible does not use the goatherd as an illustration of a good pastor, because they hit their charges to make them walk in a straight line. Instead, the scriptural analogy is a good shepherd who walks ahead of the sheep. By walking in front, the shepherd is a good example for the sheep, and is the first line of defense when danger comes. Such a shepherd takes responsibility and is willing to suffer.

There was a time when it was snowing and the roof of our local church was damaged. As no one was

willing to go up to fix it, the minister decided to do it himself. When two brothers saw his example, they immediately joined him; the three of them then climbed up together and fixed the roof.

If we are a church council member or a leader, the direction in which we take the sheep is very important. We need to be good examples. If we encourage members to attend various seminars organized by the church, but do not attend ourselves, then the members will follow suit.

Similarly, what are we teaching our children if we drop them off at church, then leave to go to work ourselves? If parents truly believe that going to church is good for their children, then why do they themselves not attend? The children will learn that church attendance is a burden and a superficial act, and eventually stop going to church.

Our actions can influence our children and those around us either positively or negatively. There are workers who truly love the Lord and lead by example. Through them, the church becomes more prosperous, as many will follow their lead. But the hypocritical leader will spawn a superficial community.

Make sacrifices

"I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd gives His life for the sheep... As the Father knows Me, even so I know the Father; and I lay down My life for the sheep."

(Jn 10:11, 15)

A good shepherd is one who is willing to sacrifice himself, to deny his own will for that of our heavenly Father, and for the good of the sheep. This is the principle we must live by and hold fast to. We must have the mind—the values and the direction—of the Lord Jesus. And a key attribute of the Lord Jesus was His consistent willingness to put the will of the Father far above His own. Throughout His life on earth, the Lord was always focused on doing the work of His Father (Lk 2:49; Jn

4:34); He was always concerned about the wellbeing of the multitudes and the disciples (Mt 14:14–19; Jn 21:12–13).

Therefore, to be a true and faithful shepherd, we must deny ourselves and wholly follow the Lord (Lk 9:57–62). This is not an easy task that can be achieved overnight, as humans are inclined to seek their own interests first. But it is not impossible if we rely on the Holy Spirit to overcome our selfish will. The Lord Jesus does not expect us to jump into martyrdom immediately. There are many other ways of giving up our lives for others, e.g., putting aside personal matters and praying for others before ourselves; sacrificing that annual holiday to help in church events; or spending time and money to help brethren in need. The key is to give priority to the Father's will and work.

BIBLICAL EXAMPLES OF GOOD SHEPHERDS

Joshua—Strong and Courageous

Joshua succeeded Moses as leader of the Israelites. Today, we may only need to lead a small household of two, three or four. Joshua had to lead 2 million! But, apart from the Battle of Ai, Joshua successfully led the people to eventually conquer Canaan. What was the secret of his success? God taught him how to be a good shepherd (Josh 1:5–8).

Firstly, he should be strong and courageous, willing to sacrifice his own life, for God would be with him (Josh 1:5–6). Each of us likes a peaceful and comfortable life. But if we know God is with us, and God has something better in store for us, we will not be afraid to give up physical comfort, material possessions, and even our lives.

Secondly, God commanded Joshua to abide by the Book of the Law and meditate on it daily (Josh 1:7–8). Joshua did so and, before he died, he ensured that he conveyed God's word to the people (Josh 24:26). As leaders and pastors, we may sometimes have to make very difficult decisions or deal with intractable issues. If we

Let us practice fearless self-denial, dedication to the word of God—to understand, practice and teach it—and cultivate a loving heart to help the sheep rebuild their faith.

consistently meditate on the word of God, God will inspire us and open a way for us; He will guide us to the right decisions in all circumstances.

Some claim that their duties in church are so pressing that they hardly have time to read the Bible, let alone meditate on it. But it is impossible to go without and still be a good shepherd. If our children or brethren have problems, how will we counsel them without a good foundation in God's principles? If we spend more time reading self-help books or Bible commentaries because they are easier to understand than the Bible itself, we may apply our own or secular logic to come up with solutions, or experiment with different approaches to deal with matters. These may end up exacerbating the original problem or cause even more problems. Since God's way is the best way, we must be familiar with the word of God in order to lead the sheep.

Ezra—Devoted to the Law

For Ezra had prepared his heart to seek the Law of the LORD, and to do it, and to teach statutes and ordinances in Israel.

(Ezra 7:10)

There were three things that made Ezra a good shepherd of God: he devoted himself to studying the word, practiced its teachings, and then taught them to Israel.

Some may feel they are too advanced in age to learn the word of God, but age is no obstacle if one is willing and dedicated. To equip oneself with the word of God is to be armed with the sword of the Spirit (Eph 6:17), which we need in order to edify others and fight false prophets. We should thus seek a deeper understanding of the word of God, and not be content with a superficial one. This can only be achieved through applying and practicing the word. As the saying goes: "If I hear, I

will forget; if I see, I will remember; if I do, I will understand."

After the children of God returned from exile in Babylon, Ezra did many things to revive the faith of the people. One issue at the time was the Israelites' intermarriage with the Gentiles who had settled in the land (Ezra 9:1–4). This was against the commandments of God, and the children from these marriages were not being brought up in the Lord. Ezra responded to this terrible situation in the household of God by tearing his clothes and pulling out his hair. Ezra could foresee the pain and bondage of sin to come if this practice was allowed to continue. However, Ezra did not speak or rebuke, he only prayed and confessed before the Lord, as though the sin were his own. Those who were God-fearing gathered to weep with him (Ezra 10:1–2). Ezra's actions revealed his sincere love for the people. Inspired by his example, the people also prayed, acknowledged their sin and repented.

Later, Ezra read the Law before the people and explained its meaning (Neh 8:5–12). Deeply touched by the word of God, the people repented. Their fear towards God and desire to hear His word were revived, so God allowed them to understand. If we are to bring about a similar revival of faith amongst the flock, we need to have the same sincere love for them and lead by example.

Nehemiah—a Heart with God's People

Nehemiah was Artaxerxes' cupbearer, a privileged position in the palace of the Persian king. When he heard about the plight of Jerusalem—that the city was destitute and the walls broken—he wept (Neh 1:1–4). His heart was with God's people; their suffering was his suffering. So he dedicated himself to returning and leading the rebuilding of the wall.

Nehemiah was distraught at the

thought of the broken wall because it not only reflected the people's lack of physical security, but also their sorry spiritual state. The wall represents our faith and spiritual defense. Today, we should be building the wall of the church to be like that of the New Jerusalem in Revelation 21. This vision describes the beauty and perfection of the latter church, which embodies the glory, truth and holiness of God. The wall of the city was very high (Rev 21:12), to prevent those who are unholy from entering, and to act as a spiritual defense against the trends of the world.

Today the walls protecting some of our believers are badly damaged; this has allowed the Lord's sheep to be taken captive by worldly things, such as video games, fame, wealth, sex and gambling. A good shepherd would have the heart of Nehemiah. Our hearts should ache at the bad news regarding the state of the community of faith; and our zeal would be stirred anew, motivating us to arise, to return and help rebuild the damaged walls.

CONCLUSION

The Lord Jesus' commission to shepherd the flock is a calling that we must all answer, whether the flock in our care consists of our young family, the children we teach in religious education, various fellowship groups, or the whole church, either on a local or a national level. If we are to be a good shepherd, then we must deny ourselves and lay down our lives for the sheep, making an effort not to steal what belongs to God. We must walk before the sheep as a good example, to take responsibility and defend them, in the same way that Christ did. Just like Joshua, Ezra and Nehemiah, let us practice fearless self-denial, dedication to the word of God—to understand, practice and teach it—and cultivate a loving heart to help the sheep rebuild their faith. In this way, the spiritual needs of the flock will be well tended, and the church of God will flourish. ★



Be An Evangelist— Our Mission to Take Up the Ministry

Joshua Phoong—Malaysia

Our Lord Jesus came into this world with a clear purpose, which was to save souls. To this end, He proclaimed the gospel of salvation and died on the cross for our sins. His mission was set out in the prophetic words of Isaiah which He read in the temple at the beginning of His ministry:

*"The Spirit of the LORD is upon Me,
Because He has anointed Me
To preach the gospel to the poor;
He has sent Me to heal the
brokenhearted,
To proclaim liberty to the captives
And recovery of sight to the blind,
To set at liberty those who are
oppressed;
To proclaim the acceptable year of
the LORD."*

(Lk 4:18–19; cf. Isa 61:1–2)

JESUS' FAITHFULNESS TO HIS MISSION

During His time on earth, the Lord Jesus conducted Himself with purpose and determination. He declared, "My food is to do the will of Him who sent Me, and to finish His work" (Jn 4:34); and "for this purpose I have been sent" (Lk 4:43b). Travelling

The ministry of reconciliation starts when one resolves to walk the beautiful path of an evangelist to proclaim the gospel of salvation.

far and wide, He reached out to the masses, imploring them with the words: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Mt 4:17).

Jesus manifested God's desire to save souls, admonishing the people to turn away from their evil ways in order to live (Ezek 33:11). "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life" (Jn 3:16). Jesus emphasized that the purpose for His coming was so that man could not only have life, but an abundant life through Him (Jn 10:10).

In Romans 10:13–15, it is written that in order for man to have life, they must call upon the Lord. But how can they call on Him if they do not believe? And how can they believe if they have not heard the truth? And how can they hear if no one preaches it?

TAKING UP THE MISSION

The ministry of reconciliation starts when one resolves to walk the

beautiful path of an evangelist to proclaim the gospel of salvation (2 Cor 5:18–20). When we do this, we follow in the footsteps of Jesus, taking up the work that He began.

After Jesus completed His work of salvation on earth, and before He ascended to heaven, He commissioned His disciples to take up the ministry of the gospel, saying, "As the Father sent Me, I also send you" (Jn 20:21b). Jesus breathed on them and promised that they would receive the Holy Spirit and be empowered. His words were duly fulfilled at Pentecost. From that day, the disciples committed themselves to witnessing for Jesus, the risen Lord and Savior, in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the end of the earth (Acts 1:8).

Jesus prophesied that, in the end days, the "gospel of the kingdom will be preached in all the world as a witness to all the nations, and then the end will come" (Mt 24:14). This calling to preach is for those who have received the grace of God and

have been chosen as disciples of Christ. As 2 Timothy 1:9 reminds us, we have been called according to God's purpose, which is to take up the mantle of the gospel ministry. The question is, are we willing to "[g]o into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature" (Mk 16:15)?

STEWARDS OF THE GOSPEL

After Apostle Paul received the grace of God and the commission to propagate the gospel (Acts 9:15), he fully embraced his calling. He wrote:

For if I preach the gospel, I have nothing to boast of, for necessity is laid upon me; yes, woe is me if I do not preach the gospel! For if I do this willingly, I have a reward; but if against my will, I have been entrusted with a stewardship.
(1 Cor 9:16–17)

Paul was able to humbly and faithfully do his duty, seeing himself as an unprofitable servant (Lk 17:10). If today, we do not fulfill the stewardship of the gospel, are we not disobeying the Lord's calling?

Paul wrote: "For if I do this willingly, I have a reward" (1 Cor 9:17). If we share the glad tidings with others with a willing heart, we will be rewarded. Indeed, when others receive salvation, we will have a part in their joy and blessings, and this is a reward in itself. A willing heart will also help us when we face trials, temptations, and persecution—all of which will certainly come our way. We will be able to work with joy, knowing that our labors are not in vain, and continue steadfastly in the path of an evangelist.

MINISTERING WITH COMPASSION

As we have freely received the gospel from God, so we should freely share it with others, regardless of their race, culture or background. We should learn from the compassion of the Lord Jesus when He saw the multitudes, who "were weary and scattered, like sheep having

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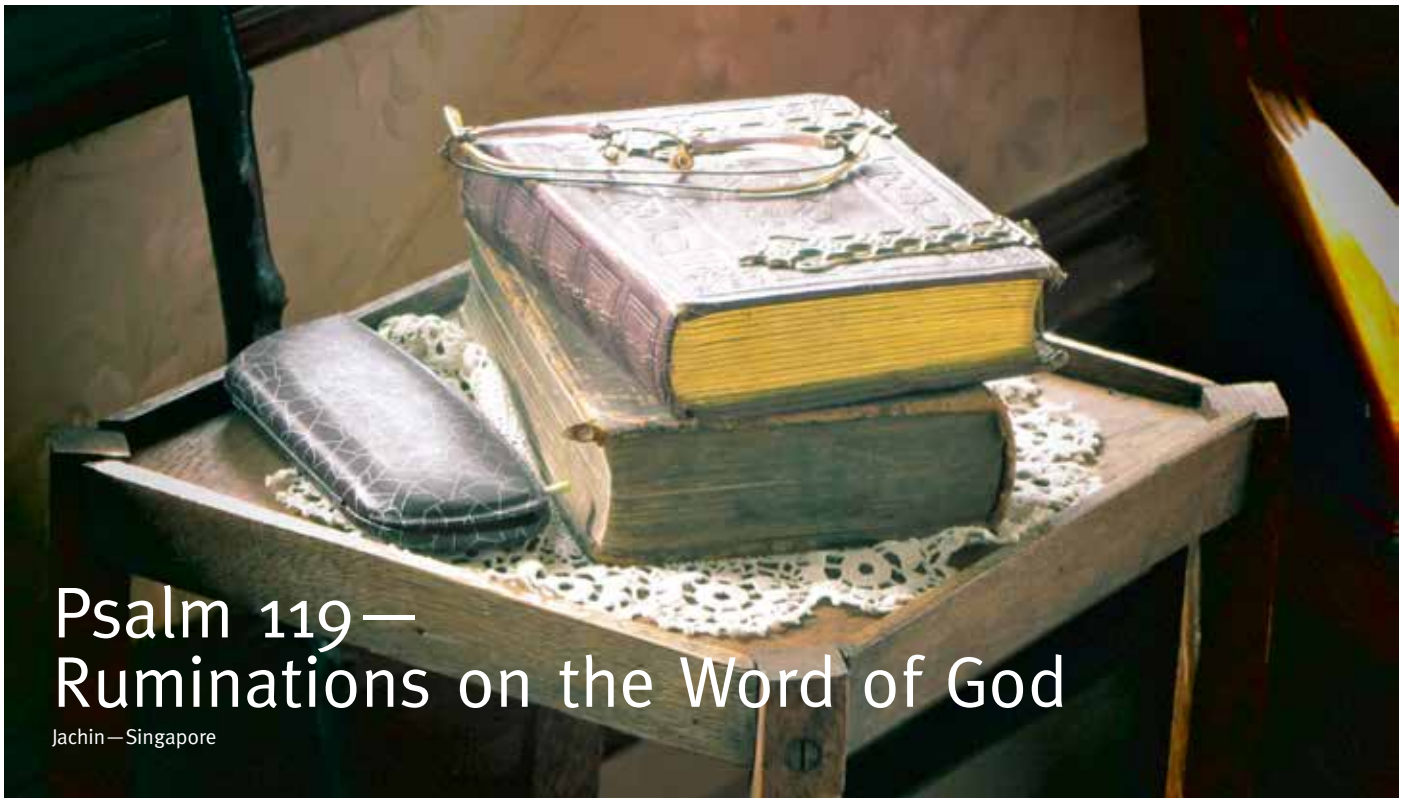
no shepherd" (Mt 9:36). Jesus said to His disciples, "The harvest truly is plentiful, but the laborers are few. Therefore pray the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into His harvest" (Mt 9:37–38).

Today, when we see that the people of the world are living without purpose, living for the wrong reasons and dying without hope, how can we stand by and do nothing? Do we turn a blind eye, like the priest and the Levite who walked past the wounded man in the parable of the good Samaritan (Lk 10:25–37)? When will we respond to the Lord's calling to preach the gospel of salvation?

We should not be like the wayward prophet Jonah, who refused to preach to the Ninevites because he judged them to be unworthy of salvation. For this, God rebuked him and asked, "[S]hould I not pity Nineveh...?" (Jon 4:11a). We must not judge the people of the world as being unworthy of God's salvation. Indeed, Jesus said, "I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners, to repentance" (Mt 9:13b). Humankind is in desperate need of salvation and must be called to repentance.

As Christians, we have freely received the gospel of salvation, which is the grace of God. We have also received the commission to share this grace with others. Therefore, let us take up the mission with the same commitment as Jesus and Paul, walking the path of an evangelist to bring the mercy of God to the world. ★





Psalm 119— Ruminations on the Word of God

Jachin—Singapore

To “ruminate” denotes turning a matter over and over in the mind. It is also etymologically linked to chewing the cud; animals that chew the cud are known as ruminants. Sometimes, we use the expression “to chew the cud” as an allegory for meditating deeply on a certain matter for a period of time.

In the New King James Version of the Bible, the editors have given Psalm 119 the subtitle: “Meditations on the excellencies of the word of God.” This psalm is a lengthy rumination on God’s word.

The Book of Psalms is the longest book in the Bible, which reflects the primacy of praise and worship in our Christian lives. Furthermore, Psalm 119 is the longest psalm and the longest chapter in the Bible. Since it is a meditation on the word of God, this reveals the importance God places on His word.

Psalm 119 is not only special in its subject matter, but also its form. It is an abecedarian¹ poem, an ancient poetic structure that is arranged in alphabetical order to aid memorization, especially when

literacy and access to the written word were limited.² In the original Hebrew, each section of eight lines³ is assigned a letter of the alphabet. Each line of that section begins with the corresponding letter—so the first eight lines begin with Aleph, the first letter of the alphabet, and the next eight, Beth, and so on. With twenty-two letters in the Hebrew alphabet, and eight lines per section, there are 176 lines altogether.

Significantly, every line of Psalm 119 makes reference to the word of God, with about three to five lines doing so indirectly. This means the psalm explores almost every aspect of its subject.

MEDITATING ON GOD’S WORD

Firstly, the psalmist devotes himself to meditating on the word of God.

*I will meditate on Your precepts,
And contemplate Your ways.*
(Ps 119:15)

*My hands also I will lift up to Your
commandments,
Which I love,
And I will meditate on Your statutes.*
(Ps 119:48)

Throughout the psalm, the psalmist continually resolves to meditate on God’s word (Ps 119:27, 78). In this world of instant gratification, we have become impatient. If we wish to learn something new, we want to do so quickly. Yet, Psalm 119 reveals that the word of God requires patience. One cannot expect to fully know the word of God in a matter of days or weeks; studying the Scriptures and meditating upon them is a lifelong task.

In fact, the psalmist reveals how much time and effort is required:

*Oh, how I love Your law!
It is my meditation all the day.*
(Ps 119:97)

*My eyes are awake through the
night watches,
That I may meditate on Your word.*
(Ps 119:148)

¹ The abecedarius is a type of acrostic poem, in which, typically, the first letter of each line spells a word or a phrase.

² There are many examples of abecedarian poems in the Bible, such as Psalms 111 and 112, which both have twenty-two lines, each corresponding to a letter of the alphabet.

³ In English translations of the psalm, each verse is the equivalent of one line.

One cannot expect to fully know the word of God in a matter of days or weeks; studying the Scriptures and meditating upon them is a lifelong task.

God's word is in his thoughts throughout each day, and not just during worship time or when he is reading the Scriptures. He also meditates at night, when others would be asleep. For us today, some might stay up late to finish their work, play computer games or surf the Internet, but how many would meditate on God's word? Why does the psalmist devote so much time and effort to this pastime?

TREASURING GOD'S WORD

The psalmist devotes himself to meditating on God's word because he truly values it:

*I have rejoiced in the way of Your testimonies,
As much as in all riches.*

(Ps 119:14)

On reading this verse, we may think that the psalmist should have written "much more than all riches." But let us not forget that the psalmist was divinely inspired. It is meaningless to claim that one values the word of God above all else in the world without first testing the veracity of that statement. People will go to amazing lengths to seek something that might be worthless, just on the off-chance it might be gold. Are we not the same in our pursuit of physical wealth? Are we willing to put in the same effort to learn God's word? This is why the psalmist writes that, firstly, he values the word of God as much as riches.

But the psalmist does not stop there: he progresses from valuing the word of God as much as "all riches," to deeming it better "than thousands of coins of gold and silver" (Ps 119:72), and loving it more than "fine gold" (Ps 119:127). The psalmist does not

Today, do we still find treasure when we search the word of God, or do we just find a barren field?

remain stagnant in his faith—he continually improves himself as his love for the word grows. Has our relationship with God's word similarly progressed, or has it regressed?

"Again, the kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and hid; and for joy over it he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field."

(Mt 13:44)

When we are first enlightened by God's word, it is just as though we have discovered treasure in a field, like the man in this parable. But today, do we still find treasure when we search the word of God, or do we just find a barren field?

EXPLORING THE DEPTHS OF GOD'S WORD

The psalmist uses two methods to ensure his relationship with the word of God does not regress. Firstly, he prays to the Lord: "Open my eyes, that I may see wondrous things from Your law" (Ps 119:18). There is always treasure in the field of God's word. It only depends on whether our spiritual eyes are open. As his eyes are continually opened by God, the psalmist's love for His word develops.

Secondly, the psalmist's meditation on the word of God is complete. We can see the many different terms he uses to describe the word of God. These illustrate how deep and broad his meditations are:

- In verse 1, he uses the word "law," which appears twenty-five times throughout the psalm. The word can refer to a single commandment, or to the Law of Moses, or to the entirety of the Scriptures, all of which reveal our duties towards God.
- In verse 2, the psalmist uses "testimonies," which means "to be witness." This points

to the Scriptures as a reliable testimony of God, and all His works recorded in it.

- In verse 3, "ways" is used, referring to the characteristic manner in which God acts, which is contrary to the ways of man. Are we walking in the ways of God?
- In verse 4, "precepts" is used, which refers to God's mandate, and connotes man's responsibility in paying close attention to God's instructions.
- In verse 5, "statutes" is used, encapsulating the permanence of God's word, as though set in stone.⁴
- In verse 6, "commandments" is used, which signifies the authority of God.
- In verse 7, "judgments" is used, which points to the righteous and just nature of the Lord.

From the synonyms found in these few verses alone, we can see how comprehensively the psalmist thinks about the word of God. A common pitfall is that we take an extreme or limited view of God's word. Jesus highlighted one example of this:

"But woe to you Pharisees! For you tithe mint and rue and all manner of herbs, and pass by justice and the love of God. These you ought to have done, without leaving the others undone."

(Lk 11:42)

The Pharisees stuck closely to the minor details of the law, and carefully tithed all they had, but they glossed over the more important matters of justice and love. They neglected to wholly follow the God's will. Since the word of God is complete, they should have observed the details, while being faithful to the rest.

Another example is when David attempted to transport the ark of God on a wooden cart (1 Chr 13).

⁴ The original Hebrew, *hoq*, is from the root *haqaq*, which is to cut in, engrave, inscribe and, by implication, to enact a decree by inscribing it on stone tablets. W.E. Vine, Merrill F. Unger, William White, Jr., *Vine's Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1996), 244–246.

There is a limit to everything in this life; even the most wonderful things come to an end. But the word of God is limitless.

When the oxen stumbled, Uzza put out his hand to support the ark, and was struck down by God. David had wanted to bring the ark to Jerusalem out of a sincere love for God, so why did this joyous occasion end in tragedy? It was because David had glossed over the details and failed to follow God's commands (1 Chr 15:13). According to the Law, the Levites were to carry the ark on their shoulders, using the poles (Num 4:5, 15; Ex 25:14; Josh 3:3).

The writer of Psalm 119, on the other hand, thinks about every aspect of the word of God. When we are faced with an issue or situation, we usually react immediately. Our initial thoughts are often impulsive, ill-considered and immature. If we have a disagreement with another person, we will perhaps think, *Why is he doing this?* or, *That's crazy*. But in such situations, we should slow down and consider the matter holistically.

This also applies to the way we approach the word of God. What does the law of God say about this matter? What are His testimonies? How do I direct my way to walk in His way? What are the details of God's precepts? Does God command me to do otherwise? What would God's judgment be in this particular situation? If we are able to think about the word of God deeply and holistically, and consider every aspect of the word of God and its application in our lives, then we will be able to remain as faithful as the psalmist.

DIRECTED BY GOD'S WORD

The reason the psalmist meditates so deeply on God's word is so that he can be put it into action:

*Oh, that my ways were directed
To keep Your statutes!
Then I would not be ashamed,
When I look into all Your
commandments.*

(Ps 119:5–6)

The psalmist does not study the Scriptures for the sake of knowledge, or to admire them as literature. He is a doer of the word, and fulfills it so that his conscience will be clear whenever he reads it. Moreover, he is determined to keep the law of God—emphatically stating that he will keep it “forever and ever” (Ps 119:44).

*I made haste, and did not delay
To keep Your commandments.*
(Ps 119:60)

At times, we do not immediately do God's word, thinking that we will have time to act in the future. The psalmist, however, does not delay. He is fully committed to keeping the word of God, and has sworn to do so (Ps 119:106). We may think it unwise for the psalmist to make such a vow—what if he falls short and fails to fulfill it?

During Old Testament times, when the Israelites made a covenant with God, they said: “All that the LORD has said we will do, and be obedient” (Ex 24:7). This was confirmed by the sprinkling of blood. Later, they would have sung Psalm 119, and affirmed the words “I will keep Your righteous judgments” (v. 106). The psalmist's vow is merely a reiteration of the one that was made when they entered into the covenant with God, and therefore, a reconfirmation of it.

Today, as Christians, we have also entered into a covenantal relationship with God, which was confirmed by the blood of Jesus during baptism. This is our declaration that we will follow Jesus to the end. It is our duty, therefore, to uphold the teachings of the Bible. Are we as committed as the psalmist to fulfill the terms of our covenant with God?

CONCLUSION

*I have seen the consummation of all
perfection,*

*But Your commandment is
exceedingly broad.*

(Ps 119:96)

This verse can be interpreted in two ways. The New International Version translates it as: “To all perfection I see a limit, but your commands are boundless.”⁵ In other words, there is a limit to everything in this life; even the most wonderful things come to an end. But the word of God is limitless.

The second interpretation is that the psalmist has seen the ultimate fulfillment of perfection in the word of God itself, for it has no end. This is why he devotes himself so diligently to its study. Both interpretations point to the boundless nature of God's word, and the joy that can be gained from meditating upon it. This psalm reveals a taste of this joy, though it is but a drop in the ocean.

What is most evident is the psalmist's relationship with the word: from his meditations and observations of the wondrous things in God's law, to his resolution to keep and act on God's word, we see how fully the word of God occupies the psalmist's life. His entire world revolves around it, and is enriched by it. If we are able to treasure the word of God, meditating on it day and night, examining it widely, deeply and from different angles, then we can be like the psalmist. We will be able to follow God's way with devotion, and an ever-increasing faithfulness as our love for His word grows day by day. ★

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The Keys of the Kingdom of Heaven

K.C. Tsai—Toronto, Canada



TWO QUESTIONS

When Jesus came into the region of Caesarea Philippi, He asked His disciples, saying, “Who do men say that I, the Son of Man, am?”

So they said, “Some say John the Baptist, some Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.”

He said to them, “But who do you say that I am?”

Simon Peter answered and said, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.”

(Mt 16:13–16)

The Lord Jesus asked His disciples two thought-provoking questions when they came to the city of Caesarea Philippi: “Who do men say that I, the Son of Man, am?” and “Who do you say that I am?”

He did not ask out of curiosity, for He knew how people viewed Him, as well as the disciples’ knowledge of Him (Jn 2:24–25). Rather, He asked these questions for the disciples’ edification. What others said about Him did not matter. Jesus wanted the disciples to reflect on how they viewed Him, and to subsequently fix their eyes on Him so they could see who He really was.

To the first question, they answered, “Some say John the Baptist, some Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.”

At their first encounter with Jesus, Andrew and Nathanael had confessed that He was the Messiah (the Christ) and Son of God (Jn 1:41, 49). Later, the disciples witnessed Jesus walking on the waves of the sea, and declared, “Truly you are the Son of God” (Mt 14:33). Despite these experiences, they may still have had some doubts—the hearsay about Jesus could have confused their perception of Him. Hence, the Lord Jesus wanted them to ascertain once again: *Truly, who is the Lord that you are following?*

Simon Peter answered, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.”

Jesus answered and said to him, “Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah, for flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but My Father who is in heaven. And I also say to you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build My church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it. And I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever

you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.”

(Mt 16:15–19)

Peter’s understanding of the Lord Jesus did not come from human teaching or his own wisdom—it was from the revelation of the heavenly Father. Where matters of God are concerned, if He does not reveal them to man through His Spirit, man will never be able to understand (1 Cor 2:10–13). Since the disciples had already recognized Jesus as the Son of God, Peter’s Spirit-inspired answer was likely to have represented what they all believed.

PREVAIL OVER THE GATES OF HADES

Jesus told Peter: “[Y]ou are Peter [petros, Greek: “a piece of rock”], and on this rock [petra, Greek: “a mass of rock”] I will build My church” (Mt 16:18a). As Jesus said in Matthew 16:17, Peter’s understanding of the Lord came from the revelation of God (the Holy Spirit)—who is the “mass of rock” to which verse 18 refers (Deut 32:4; 2 Sam 22:47; 1 Cor 10:4). The Holy Spirit enabled the disciples to

The Holy Spirit enabled the disciples to understand the revelation of God, so that they could build the church upon the correct understanding of the salvation truth.

understand the revelation of God, so that they could build the church upon the correct understanding of the salvation truth. In fact, the church is the house of God, the pillar and ground of the truth (1 Tim 3:15). It is built on the cornerstone, Jesus Christ (Eph 2:20), the source of all revelations and the only foundation of the church (1 Cor 3:11).

Jesus also said that “the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it [the church]” (Mt 16:18). The “gates of Hades” refers to the power of death. Therefore, death shall not prevail against the church built by Jesus. Rather, the church shall prevail against the power of sin and death through the Lord Jesus Christ (1 Cor 15:55–57).

The church is the body of Christ

When Jesus spoke of establishing the church, He called it “My church”; in other words, the true church belongs to Him, as she is redeemed by His blood (Acts 20:28). He reveals the truth to the church through His Holy Spirit, so that the church becomes “His household” and the pillar of truth (1 Tim 3:15). One cannot separate the church from the Lord Jesus; the claim “I believe in Jesus but not the church, which is just an organization,” will not stand. In fact, the true church is the body of Jesus Christ (Eph 1:23; Col 1:24), with Jesus as her head (Eph 5:23). The head cannot be separated from the body.

For as the body is one and has many members, but all the members of that one body, being many, are one body, so also is Christ.

(1 Cor 12:12)

The body is made up of many members—other than referring to believers of one locality, this also refers to members of different ethnic, social and cultural backgrounds

(1 Cor 12:13–14). Paul referred to the church as “the churches of God” (1 Cor 11:16; 1 Thess 2:14; 2 Thess 1:4). This suggests that the church at that time consisted of many churches in different localities. Every local church was an integral part of the whole. No church could claim to be separate from other member churches, for together they were the churches of God. Likewise, the true church today comprises a vast number of local churches, consisting of believers from diverse ethnic backgrounds, in many countries across the world. A structured organization exists to allow the body of Christ to work together. General assemblies and coordination centers help to organize the work on a national level, while the International Assembly provides global coordination. In this way, the member churches can support one another, making the overall church the glorious body of the Lord Jesus.

No, much rather, those members of the body which seem to be weaker are necessary. And those members of the body which we think to be less honorable, on these we bestow greater honor; and our unpresentable parts have greater modesty, but our presentable parts have no need. But God composed the body, having given greater honor to that part which lacks it, that there should be no schism in the body, but that the members should have the same care for one another. And if one member suffers, all the members suffer with it; or if one member is honored, all the members rejoice with it. Now you are the body of Christ, and members individually.

(1 Cor 12:22–27)

During his missionary trips, Paul visited the local churches (Acts 15:36; 18:23; 20:1–2), and he realized that

in some places, certain brethren had started to preach heresies (Gal 1:6–9; 2 Thess 2:1–2). Also, the Holy Spirit revealed to Paul that in the latter times (referring to the latter days of the apostolic era, as well as the present last days), “some will depart from the faith, giving heed to deceiving spirits and doctrines of demons” (1 Tim 4:1). This prompted Paul to leave Titus in Crete and Timothy in Ephesus, instructing them to stop the mouths of those who spread false teachings (Tit 1:10–14; 1 Tim 1:3). Paul told Timothy: “Hold fast the pattern of sound words which you have heard from me, in faith and love which are in Christ Jesus. That good thing which was committed to you, keep by the Holy Spirit who dwells in us” (2 Tim 1:13–14). Paul emphasized the need to keep the unity of the faith among the churches of God, so that there would be no schism in the body of Christ.

THE COMPLETE SET OF KEYS

A key is for the purpose of locking and unlocking (Rev 3:7). Therefore, the keys of the kingdom of heaven are to open and shut the doors of heaven. They represent the salvation truth that is essential for one's entry into heaven.

There is only one way to heaven. When Jacob dreamed of a ladder leading to heaven, he knew that place was the gate of heaven and house of God (Gen 28:17). Later, Jesus revealed the significance of that ladder. He said: “Most assuredly, I say to you, hereafter you shall see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man” (Jn 1:51). Jesus is the ladder to heaven. He is the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Him (Jn

The keys of the kingdom of heaven are to open and shut the doors of heaven. They represent the salvation truth that is essential for one's entry into heaven.

14:6). Since the church is the body of Christ (Eph 1:23; Col 1:24), this means that she holds the salvation truth by which we can be saved—she holds the keys of the kingdom of heaven.

The Lord Jesus said that He would give the keys of the kingdom of heaven to Peter. But this does not mean that the keys were given to him alone; Peter represented the apostles and New Testament prophets (Eph 2:19–20). Jude wrote that the faith, the salvation truth, was delivered to the saints—collectively—once for all (Jude 3). And the Holy Spirit would guide them in the exposition and strengthening of the content of the salvation truth, to establish the church as the pillar and ground of the truth (1 Tim 3:15).

Access into the kingdom of heaven requires a set of keys. Only when one has the complete set will one be able to enter through each gate (Rev 21:12–21); not a single key can be missing. This goes to show that the salvation truth handed to the true church is complete and unblemished. It is a set of keys given to open every door to the kingdom of heaven. The true church has the complete doctrines, which are biblically sound, since the Holy Spirit is able to guide her into all truth (Jn 16:13).

The common faith

While the basic beliefs of the true church are complete, each local church should agree on the same understanding of the doctrines (Gal 1:6–9). There cannot be different interpretations or stances among the member churches that contradict the church's core beliefs. For example, if one local church believes that it is essential to observe the Sabbath, while another thinks otherwise, they have two different faiths. Or if one performs baptism in the name of Jesus Christ in living water, while another baptizes in an artificial pool in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost, they have two different baptisms. Regardless of the number of member churches, the collective church has only one body, one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one

faith, one baptism, and one God (Eph 4:4–6). And it is through the guidance of the Holy Spirit that this set of core beliefs is established. One faith of salvation is instituted by one Lord. Hence, there is one common faith (Tit 1:4), to serve the one true God (Deut 6:4; Mk 12:29; Jn 10:30; 17:3).

Today, the true church has a truth-research mechanism where inconsistent understandings of the truth are clarified, just like the meeting of the Jerusalem Council recorded in Acts 15. Participants of the truth-research meeting must submit to the Holy Spirit, willing to seek out the will of the Holy Spirit together in one accord, in order to expound and uphold the truth of the Bible (2 Tim 1:13–14). Most importantly, all local churches must become one in the truth, so that the entire church can attain the fullness of the stature of Christ (Eph 4:13).

He answered and said to them, "Because it has been given to you to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given. For whoever has, to him more will be given, and he will have abundance; but whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken away from him. Therefore I speak to them in parables, because seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand."

(Mt 13:11–13)

The Lord Jesus allowed only His disciples to understand the mysteries of the heavenly kingdom—this is what it means to receive the keys that unlock the gates of heaven. The disciples had forsaken everything and followed Him wholeheartedly; they were willing to listen to His teachings and abide by them. The Lord Jesus will not make the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven known to those who do not have the heart to follow Him, who only want to see miracles or follow the crowd. Because "seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand" (Mt 13:13), they are just like those

who have been locked out of the gates.

TO BIND AND TO LOOSE

"And I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven" (Mt 16:19). Here, Jesus does not speak of binding or loosing men. Since this statement is about the keys of the kingdom of heaven, it must refer to practices pertaining to the locking and unlocking of the gates of the kingdom of heaven.

From the Acts of the Apostles, it can be clearly seen that the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven were revealed to the apostles through the work of the Holy Spirit. When the Lord bestowed the keys of the kingdom of heaven to the church, it was to hand over the authority of binding and loosing (which is, to release) to the church. She would be able to clearly discern between teachings which must be observed from ordinances that are irrelevant to salvation. What

The salvation truth handed to the true church is complete and unblemished.

the church defines on earth, is exactly the will of heaven (of God). For example, the sins of man can only be washed away through water baptism conducted according to the Bible (Acts 22:16). This salvation truth is bound on earth and also in heaven—no one can have his sins removed from him unless he is baptized in the name of Jesus. It is one of the keys of the kingdom of heaven. On the other hand, circumcision, the laws pertaining to sacrifices, and the complex purification rites of Mosaic Law were loosed by the Holy Spirit through the apostles; those seeking salvation are not bound by these.

The Council of Jerusalem (Acts 15) was the first gathering of the apostolic church to ascertain the truth. They discussed the issue of whether the Gentile believers needed to undergo

The Holy Spirit led these early workers along a path which they had never set foot on, and they could not help but follow.

circumcision and observe the Mosaic Law. After much debate, Peter, Barnabas and Paul each recounted their experiences of preaching to the Gentiles. They spoke of how the Gentiles believed and received the Holy Spirit, who purified their hearts by faith (Acts 15:7–9). Finally, James drew a conclusion, to which the apostles and elders agreed (Acts 15:13–21). They decided to write to the local churches with the decree:

“For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit, and to us, to lay upon you no greater burden than these necessary things: that you abstain from things offered to idols, from blood, from things strangled, and from sexual immorality. If you keep yourselves from these, you will do well.”

(Acts 15:28–29)

While recollecting the work of the Holy Spirit, the apostles realized that Gentiles who believe in the Lord were not bound by circumcision; its observance was no longer binding, unlike the “necessary things” which all believers of the Lord must observe.

IT SEEMED GOOD TO THE HOLY SPIRIT AND TO US

Though the participants of the Jerusalem Council debated with one another, they eventually submitted to the guidance of the Holy Spirit. This does not only refer to the decision-making process, but also to how they discerned the direction in which the Holy Spirit was leading them.

As the apostles recounted the works of the Spirit, they were able to identify His will. In Acts 10, the Holy Spirit instructed Peter, saying: “What God has cleansed you must not call common” (Acts 10:15). After this, the Holy Spirit sent Peter to the household of Cornelius, a Gentile. As Peter preached, the Holy Spirit fell on them. Seeing this as confirmation that the Gentiles were accepted by

God, Peter boldly baptized these uncircumcised individuals. In Acts 13, the Holy Spirit sent Barnabas and Paul to Crete and Galatia. Initially they went to the Jewish synagogues to preach and debate. Though some Jews were willing to believe, Barnabas and Paul were frequently rejected and slandered. Hence, they turned to the Gentiles instead, who accepted the gospel, and were baptized into the Lord (Acts 16:15, 33; 18:8).

The Holy Spirit led these early workers along a path which they had never set foot on, and they could not help but follow (cf. Josh 3:3–4). The Spirit, through Peter, Paul and Barnabas, laid the path of salvation for the uncircumcised, and walked before them all the way. Therefore, James was assured of the will of

As the Holy Spirit led the growth of the church during the apostolic times, He continues to guide the church today, clarifying any uncertainties that may arise in the understanding of the salvation truth.

the Holy Spirit “to lay no greater burden” on the Gentile believers other than the abstinence from things offered to idols, from blood, from things strangled, and from sexual immorality. The apostles and elders loosed the yoke of the Law from the neck of the Gentile believers. At the same time, the believers were bound by the four restrictions. After the churches received this epistle, they “were strengthened in the faith, and increased in number daily” (Acts 16:5)—the decision made by the apostles and elders was affirmed in heaven, i.e., what they bound on earth was bound in heaven and what they loosed on earth was also loosed in heaven.

Today, the true church of the last

days also emphasizes and submits to the guidance of the Holy Spirit. As the Holy Spirit led the growth of the church during the apostolic times, He continues to guide the church today, clarifying any uncertainties that may arise in the understanding of the salvation truth. The true church does not follow a leader, or venerate any individual because of his knowledge. Rather, the church explores the footsteps of the Holy Spirit and closely follows on to uphold the common faith, the keys of the kingdom of heaven. ★



The Blessing and Curse of Servitude

Adapted from a sermon by H.H. Ko—Heidelberg, Germany

During the Old Testament era, God established the priesthood so that there would be dedicated people to minister in His tabernacle during the wilderness years and in the temple during the settlement period. Their role was to fulfill the ceremonial duties relating to worship, offering sacrifices and making atonement for the chosen people, and acting as a mediator between God and man. This was an honorable vocation, and one not to be taken lightly. In return for faithful service, God offered the priests a special blessing, with the right to enter into a covenant conferring life and peace:

*"My covenant was with him, one of life and peace,
And I gave them to him that he might fear Me;
So he feared Me
And was reverent before My name."
(Mal 2:5)*

However, if the priests failed to uphold their part of the covenant, they would reap a curse:

"And now, O priests, this commandment is for you.

*If you will not hear,
And if you will not take it to heart,
To give glory to My name,"
Says the LORD of hosts,
"I will send a curse upon you,
And I will curse your blessings.
Yes, I have cursed them already,
Because you do not take it to heart.
Behold, I will rebuke your descendants
And spread refuse on your faces,
The refuse of your solemn feasts;
And one will take you away with it."*

(Mal 2:1–3)

God illustrated the dire nature of the curse: He would take dung from the sacrificial animals at the holy feasts and smear it on the faces of the priests; and He would then have them removed from His presence.

In this New Testament era, there is no longer a need for physical priesthood. What we have today is a spiritual priesthood comprising believers cleansed by the blood of Jesus and given the privilege of

serving God directly (1 Pet 2:5, 9; Rev 1:6; 5; 20:6). Nevertheless, the standards of our eternal God do not change; the principles of servitude still apply as they did in times past.

BLESSINGS FOR THOSE WHO FOLLOW JESUS

*"If anyone serves Me, let him follow Me; and where I am, there My servant will be also. If anyone serves Me, him My Father will honor."
(Jn 12:26)*

Jesus promised a blessing for those serving God. However, from His words, "If anyone serves Me," we understand that it is conditional upon a spirit of willingness. In truth, our service to God should not be rendered under compulsion.

The Song of Solomon records three occasions when God says, "Do not stir up or awaken love, until it pleases" (Song 2:7; 3:5; 8:4). These words tell us that God is waiting for us, as believers, to be ready

God is waiting for us to be ready and willing to show our love and devotion to Him; He will not compel us.

If we are faithful, God will bless us with life and peace. More wonderfully, He will speak to us face to face and be attentive to our intercessions and feelings. We will experience His presence in our lives and feel the light of His countenance shining on all we do.

and willing to show our love and devotion to Him; He will not compel us. Indeed, if we feel pressured or obliged to undertake a task for God, such that we grudgingly do it, our service will not be pleasing to Him.

It is with good reason, then, that Jesus says if we are to serve Him, we must first follow Him. This entails self-denial and submission to His will. Whether we find this easy or difficult to do depends on our level of spiritual cultivation and our self-regard, in terms of how confident we are in our own gifts and abilities. Generally speaking, the knowledge, experiences and accomplishments we acquire over the years will make it harder for us to practice self-denial. When we were young, we could perhaps accept criticism and were able to forgive and forget; but do we maintain the same humility with the advancing years? Self-denial for a worker of God can be a real challenge—one that lasts a lifetime because our Christian journey entails following and serving Christ for life.

There is a saying: “A person might work so hard that his face is covered in sweat, while other people’s lips will be full of criticism.” We may have experienced or witnessed the truth of this saying ourselves, where we have worked very diligently to take care of church affairs, but others have not appreciated the effort. In fact, there are members who simply do not know how to be appreciative. Instead, they come to church as auditors, constantly finding fault. These are likely to be the ones who like to critique the sermon speakers or to complain that the church has no love. It really is not easy to serve God. But still, there are members in our midst who continue to serve Him steadfastly, with a heart of self-denial and submission. These are the workers whom God will surely honor.

HONORED BY GOD

Jesus says, “If anyone serves Me, him My Father will honor.” Normally, it is man’s duty to honor God, but here we are told that God will show respect to the one who serves Him. How will He do this?

Numbers 6:22–27 records the blessing of the high priest for the people of Israel. It is a complete and perfect blessing containing three strands:

“The LORD bless you and keep you.”

(Num 6:24)

These words confer a blessing from God, the heavenly Father on high, to His chosen people below.

“The LORD make His face shine upon you, and be gracious to you.”

(Num 6:25)

These words bring to mind the relationship between God and Moses. Moses had the privilege of speaking with God face to face as a friend (Ex 33:11). After conversing together on Mount Sinai for forty days and nights, Moses’ face reflected and radiated God’s divine light. Today, we know that we, too, can commune with God through prayer and experience His face shining on us.

“The LORD lift up His countenance upon you, and give you peace.”

(Num 6:26)

In the Bible there are many verses that speak of believers lifting up their faces to God. But in this blessing, God is the One who will lift up His countenance upon us. When we serve Him, He will honor us, placing us on high to be with Him, and grant us peace.

MOSES GAINED GOD’S HONOR

Exodus 32 records an incident where the Israelites made a golden calf, while Moses was on the mountain receiving the commandments and ordinances from God.

And the LORD said to Moses, “Go, get down! For your people whom you brought out of the land of Egypt have corrupted themselves.”

(Ex 32:7)

These were harsh words God directed at Moses, the man He honored. God referred to the Israelites as “[Moses’] people, whom [he] brought out of the land of Egypt.” It seemed God was distancing Himself from the chosen people; previously, He had addressed the people, saying, “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage” (Ex 20:2).

How did Moses respond?

Then Moses pleaded with the LORD his God, and said: “LORD, why does Your wrath burn hot against Your people whom You have brought out of the land of Egypt with great power and with a mighty hand?”

(Ex 32:11)

Here, Moses reminded God that the people belonged to Him and He was the One responsible for their deliverance.

And the LORD said to Moses, “I have seen this people, and indeed it is a stiff-necked people! Now therefore, let Me alone, that My wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them. And I will make of you a great nation.”

(Ex 32:9–10)

God wanted to destroy the Israelites, yet, He was mindful of Moses’ feelings. If Moses had not tried to intervene, God would have destroyed the sinful people there and then.

ELI LOST GOD'S HONOR

Eli was a loyal priest. Despite his advanced years, he always remained on duty, sitting by the doorpost of God's tabernacle. And each night, he would retire to the priests' quarters (1 Sam 1:9; 3:2). At the time, priests started their ministry at the age of thirty and retired at fifty. But even at retirement, the priests would continue going to the temple, although their work would be lighter. It would be left to the younger, stronger, priests to undertake the laborious tasks—for example, to skin and butcher the oxen and carry the carcasses to be sacrificed at the altar.

Now when he came, there was Eli, sitting on a seat by the wayside watching, for his heart trembled for the ark of God. And when the man came into the city and told it, all the city cried out...Then it happened, when he made mention of the ark of God, that Eli fell off the seat backward by the side of the gate; and his neck was broken and he died, for the man was old and heavy. And he had judged Israel forty years.

(1 Sam 4:13, 18)

Eli was watching and waiting for news of the ark of God. When he learned of its fate, he immediately fell backwards and broke his neck. His death marked the end of a generation. All that he left behind was a grandson by the name of Ichabod, meaning "inglorious," for the glory had departed from Israel. What had brought about such a tragic ending?

The Bible says that Eli's two sons had been wicked and corrupt and did not know the Lord (1 Sam 2:12). This is curious as they had been trained up from a young age for service in the tabernacle located in Shiloh. They should have been familiar with the laws and statutes of God. But God had to send a messenger to point out their sins to Eli.

Then a man of God came to Eli and said to him, "Thus says the LORD: 'Did I not clearly reveal Myself to

the house of your father when they were in Egypt in Pharaoh's house?... Why do you kick at My sacrifice and My offering which I have commanded in My dwelling place, and honor your sons more than Me, to make yourselves fat with the best of all the offerings of Israel My people?' "

(1 Sam 2:27, 29)

Even though Eli was loyal in many respects, he lacked true knowledge. He did not honor God or His sacrifices; he allowed his sons to show disregard for the sacrifices and to commit adultery with the women at the door of the tabernacle. Eli could have dealt with his sinful offspring, but he chose not to. For this reason, God issued a warning through a messenger:

Therefore the LORD God of Israel says: "I said indeed that your house and the house of your father would walk before Me forever." But now the LORD says: "Far be it from Me; for those who honor Me I will honor, and those who despise Me shall be lightly esteemed. Behold, the days are coming that I will cut off your arm and the arm of your father's house, so that there will not be an old man in your house... Now this shall be a sign to you that will come upon your two sons, on Hophni and Phinehas: in one day they shall die, both of them."

(1 Sam 2:30–31, 34)

It was unfortunate that Eli did not heed this message. God tried again, this time, sending a little child to speak to him. This child was Samuel.

Then the LORD said to Samuel: "Behold, I will do something in Israel at which both ears of everyone who hears it will tingle. In that day I will perform against Eli all that I have spoken concerning his house, from beginning to end. For I have told him that I will judge his house forever for the iniquity which he knows, because his sons made themselves vile, and he did not restrain them."

(1 Sam 3:11–13)

Again, Eli failed to act, thus bringing a curse upon himself and his two sons. On the same day, all three were cut off from God.

CONCLUSION

From the contrasting examples of Moses and Eli, we can see how our service to God can either bring abundant blessings, or dire consequences. If we are faithful, God will bless us with life and peace. More wonderfully, He will speak to us face to face and be attentive to our intercessions and feelings. We will experience His presence in our lives and feel the light of His countenance shining on all we do.

However, if we are complacent in our servitude, we will be shamed by God. Our works will be unfruitful and bring no pleasure to Him. He may punish or warn us through various means, but if we persist, we will be removed from serving before Him—the gift of service will be taken from us, and God will no longer abide with us.

Therefore, whether we receive a blessing or a curse is up to us—it depends on the faithfulness of our servitude, whether we undertake it with submission and self-denial. Since priesthood is an honor and a gift (Num 18:7), which brings blessings that the Lord God does not have to render, let us be thankful and carry out the work with a willing heart. ★



Overcoming Trials and Temptations (II): The Joy of Trials

Aun-Quek Chin—Singapore

In their walk of faith, Christians have to handle trials and temptations. In the first part of this series, we looked at Elder James' guide on how to distinguish between trials and temptations. In this second part, we hone in on what the world would consider a strange joy—the joy of trials.

THE JOY OF TRIALS

The epistle of James was specially written to the twelve tribes who were scattered abroad (Jas 1:1). From the perspective of the church, these twelve tribes fell into two groups—those who believed in Christ, and those who opposed Christ. Amongst the twelve, only a small segment of the Jews were believers, who were persecuted by the anti-Christian majority. The apostle Paul was once one of the most zealous persecutors who went around threatening and imprisoning Christians. By God's marvellous grace, this fierce anti-Christian became a believer of Christ.

Despite the conversion of this influential Pharisee, believers continued to be persecuted. The decision to believe in Christ almost automatically led to the loss of peace in their lives and a multiplication of turmoil. It would be understandable for Christians in such circumstances to grumble. Evildoers have no choice but to accept their consequent suffering. Yet anyone finding themselves afflicted with various

trials because they chose to believe in Christ would find little cause for joy, and may well become resentful.

Thus James wrote to encourage them and correct their erroneous perception of trials. He told them that it should be considered all joy, not misfortune, to fall into various trials (Jas 1:2). Some may conclude that James was indulging in sophistry or self-deception. However, this is not self-consolation, but the spirit of faith that will help us to overcome trials.

The apostle Peter echoed James' definition of the spirit of faith (1 Pet 4:12–16). We should not be alarmed by trials, but instead rejoice in them because they allow us to have a part with the sufferings of Christ. When Christ comes, we will rejoice with Him. To man, our suffering is calamity and shame, but to God, it is a blessing and glory. Those who reproach us for the name of Christ (1 Pet 4:14) have no such spirit of faith. As a result, what they see is misfortune and suffering. They cannot see the glorious Spirit of God abiding with those in suffering.

In summary, the two apostles

teach us the right concept of faith. James teaches us to count it all joy when we go through various trials because the Spirit of the Lord rests upon us and we partake of Christ's sufferings. Peter reinforces this by contrasting the suffering of evildoers and of Christians. The former deserve their suffering and the shame of it as a consequence of violating the law. However, the latter are not being punished, and instead will reap eternal joy and glory for their willingness to suffer with Christ.

UNDERSTANDING THE BENEFITS OF TRIALS

Trials Ascertain Faith

Every Christian knows the importance of having faith. But how do we gain a pure faith? Just as gold is purified through fire, and gold medals are won through relentless and rigorous training, pure faith is gained through patient endurance of various trials (1 Pet 1:6–7).

Great heroes of faith in both the Old and New Testaments understood this.

Job willingly accepted and overcame his great trial (Job 23:10) because he knew he was being refined. The apostles urged the believers to rejoice during trials for these would prove the genuineness of their faith. In fact, faith refined through trials is even more precious than gold.

Those who have converted to Christianity despite severe opposition from their family may feel that this is sufficient evidence of the sincerity of their faith. They may balk at the thought of more affliction and trials. However, the process of refining gold is not just to ascertain its genuineness but to purify it. Refinement is critical because the purer the gold, the higher its value.

To man, our suffering is calamity and shame, but to God, it is a blessing and glory.

In the refinement process, gold is heated to its melting point and liquefied. Impurities in the gold rise to the surface and are removed. The smelting is repeated so that more deeply embedded impurities can surface and be eliminated. Traditionally, gold must be refined seven times before it is considered pure gold. The purification of silver is the same (Ps 12:6).

Analogously, our faith may be true, but is it pure? Job appeared to have very pure faith since he was more God-fearing than anyone else around him. But God knew that impurities still existed in Job's faith. Hence He permitted the testing of Job.

God knows that our faith is true but may be impure. The only way for us to rid ourselves of these impurities is through the fiery refinement of trials. Thus God tries us till we become perfect and without blemish. When the Divine Refiner says, "It is complete," He will be the first to rejoice at the level of our purity.

Trials Produce Patience

The testing of faith produces patience (Jas 1:3) but this is no ordinary patience. Undeniably,

those who are patient by nature can generally endure more than those who are born impatient. However, this inborn endurance is still unlikely to stand the test of a more prolonged or intense affliction. In contrast, the patience produced by the testing of faith is durable, unyielding, non-compromising and indefatigable. It is manifested by a refusal to give up. Trials of increasing intensity cannot erode such patience. A believer with such patience perseveres till the very end and he is perfect (Jas 1:4).

Acquiring this level of perseverance is critical. A race partially run earns the runner nothing. Similarly, all prior effort, time and suffering are wasted if the believer throws in the towel midway through the trial. There would be no subsequent benefit for his life or faith. Trials are thus necessary to ensure that we gain that extraordinary perseverance which is sustained to the very end.

A reason we may not have been able to build up such perseverance, despite our best intentions, is our unwillingness to undergo trials under normal circumstances. When we encounter problems, we complain. Whenever we meet with obstacles, we give up. Jesus once spoke of such people:

But he who received the seed on stony places, this is he who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy; yet he has no root in himself, but endures only for a while. For when tribulation or persecution arises because of the word, immediately he stumbles.
(Mt 13:20–21)

Some people immediately accept the word of God with joy, knowing that this word can save their souls. But when tribulation or persecution appear, these believers fall away. They only delight in the beginning and the end of their journey of faith, and would rather not face any

tests along the way. It seems easier for them to give up on their faith, thinking these trials will disappear. A true and genuine faith can only develop through tests. In short, "no pain, no gain."

Enduring Trials Leads to Blessing

Elder James declared that the man who endures temptation is blessed (Jas 1:12). However, the Greek word for "temptation" (*peirasmon*) in the original text means "trials" (cf. Jas 1:2). In other words, the man who endures trials is blessed.

No one wants to suffer for nothing. The willingness to endure suffering is dependent on whether a blessing awaits us at the end of the affliction, and whether the blessing is valuable enough to make the suffering worthwhile. James assures us that the reward for enduring the trials of faith is no ordinary blessing; what awaits us is the crown of life.

What is the crown of life? The crown symbolizes glory. So wherein lies the glory of life? There are many self-made men and women whose success has brought glory to their family and to themselves. But how long does such glory last? And will their wealth eventually be a source of worry?

The Scriptures tell us that Judas betrayed the Lord, and Demas deserted Him because of their love of the world. While they may have gained temporary wealth, they earned the scorn and condemnation of generations of Christians. On the other hand, mention Peter or Paul to a believer, and the response is generally that of profound respect. Although the two apostles had suffered much physically, they have gained true and great glory. They have received honor from both believers and the Lord for their sacrifices.

One of the messages in Revelation was addressed to the church in Smyrna. The Smyrna Christians had undergone so much tribulation for so

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If we understand the glory of the crown of life and the blessings we will receive, then we will not fear when we undergo sufferings and trials.

long that they had begun to weaken and fear had crept in. At this point, the Lord comforted them, “Do not fear any of those things which you are about to suffer” (Rev 2:10a). However, this could be considered cold comfort because the Lord went on to warn them that some of them would be imprisoned, and worse, their tribulation would last ten days. In other words, their suffering was not going to end any time soon!

The perception of the passage of time is subjective. Time appears to fly when we are enjoying ourselves or rejoicing, but in affliction, time slows to a crawl. For the believers in Smyrna, who had been trying to patiently endure persecution for the Lord’s sake, who could blame them for wondering why God had to prolong their suffering for another ten days?

Additionally, the Lord urged them to be faithful until death. What is the point of enduring and continuing to endure if the outcome is still death? Any ordinary person would be in total despair at this point. Yet, the believers in Smyrna were greatly comforted because they highly valued the promised reward—they would be given the crown of life.

The church in Smyrna also drew comfort from the example of their predecessors, the apostles. These saints persevered because they knew that after the temporary suffering, they would enjoy eternal glory. They remembered the parable that Jesus had told concerning the rich man and Lazarus. They were comforted that, one day, they too would be in the bosom of Abraham. For those who persevere in their faithful labor, death is not a frightening abyss, but a blessed rest, for their works follow them (Rev 14:13).

If we understand the glory of the crown of life and the blessings we will receive, then we will not fear when we undergo sufferings and trials. Fear

arises from our suspicion that Jesus has forsaken us. We weaken because it seems that He no longer abides with us and even allows our enemies to trample on us. We wonder why He allows us to suffer such agony and humiliation if He loves us.

We often hear and declare that God our heavenly Father abides with us. But when we see His grace upon other people, while He seems impervious to our affliction, we may erroneously conclude that He only values certain people. In these cases, our omniscient God has additional comfort for us, proclaimed through the prophet Isaiah.

Zion—which is the children of God—once concluded that the Lord had forsaken her because He had permitted the destruction of the temple and Jerusalem (Isa 49:14). But God’s answer was emphatic. Even if the near-impossible could happen—a mother forgetting to nurse her child—He would never forget the Israelites because they were His most precious treasure (Isa 49:15–16). We are not just held, but inscribed on the palms of His hands. Jesus will never forsake us because He truly loves us. His birth, suffering and death were all for our sakes. We can only love because He first loved us.

When God allows us to suffer trials, it is as if He is no longer holding our hands. But letting go is not desertion. Even though He is not holding on to us, His eyes still intently and unceasingly watch over us. Parents know this well. They start off holding the hands of the toddler who is learning to walk, but they eventually let go so that the child can be independent. And although they are not holding the toddler,

their eyes are intently fixed on them. The moment the child stumbles, the parents immediately reach out to offer support.

Likewise, our heavenly Father allows us to walk independently. This is a trial for us to learn to grow to maturity. But God continually watches over us. However, we occasionally look elsewhere. Like Peter, we fear because we only see the dark clouds and raging waves. At such moments, we ought to turn our eyes back to Jesus, and He will stretch out His hand to help us (Mt 14:28–31).

A Promised Crown After the Trials

A farmer braves the elements to sow, then waits patiently for the harvest. He does this willingly because he knows that the coming harvest will be worth it. Confidence in God’s promised blessing allows us to endure trials. However, many Christians in the midst of trials and sufferings start to doubt the veracity of these promises. They start wondering whether the gospel truly leads to salvation and whether the church really has the right interpretation of doctrine.

Why are we so sure His promises will all be fulfilled? For the answer, we can turn to Paul. Once the feared persecutor who put scores of Christians to death, Paul converted to Christianity, giving up everything to take on trials and sufferings (2 Cor 11:23–27). He did this without a second thought because he knew that all the promises of God were true (2 Cor 1:20).

Paul tells us we can be assured of God’s promises because of the Holy Spirit and the truth. Two-thousand years ago, the promised Holy Spirit came upon the apostolic church, and upon receiving the Holy Spirit the believers spoke in tongues and preached what the Lord Jesus

When God allows us to suffer trials, it is as if He is no longer holding our hands. But letting go is not desertion. Even though He is not holding on to us, His eyes still intently and unceasingly watch over us.

told them to preach. Two-thousand years later, in our era, the same Holy Spirit descends upon us as well. By the guidance of the Holy Spirit (Jn 16:13), the truth that had been lost has re-emerged in the true church. What the true church preaches today is indeed what the apostles preached. There are many in Christendom today who do not believe that receiving the Holy Spirit is essential

The crown of life is promised to those who love God (Jas 1:12). In the midst of trials, will we continue to love the Lord?

for salvation, or that it is evidenced by tongue speaking. Unfortunately, this erroneous teaching has also crept into the true church today, leading some to downplay the role of the Holy Spirit. We must not compromise on this essential tenet of our faith.

The Holy Spirit received today in the True Jesus Church, evidenced by speaking in tongues, reaffirms that He is the same promised Holy Spirit that God poured down on the apostles. He is an irrefutable witness, testifying to the resurrection of Jesus, and confirming that what is preached in the true church is the truth. He is the Spirit who seals us and acts as the guarantee that all the promises of the Lord are true and will be fulfilled. Therefore, we must persevere to the very end.

There is another reason—more theological in nature—underlying our confidence in God's promises. In Hebrews 6:13, it is recorded that God swore a promise by Himself. A person who makes an oath and swears by himself is not credible because humans are fickle and unreliable. But God, by definition, is the Being with infinite and ultimate authority, power and accountability. His swearing by Himself is the greatest guarantee of His promise.

Persevere in Love

The crown of life is promised to those who love God (Jas 1:12). In the midst of trials, will we continue

to love the Lord? If the affliction is not too intense, many are still able to continue to love the Lord. Job's wife is one example. She was stoic when Job lost his possessions. She remained calm even when all her children were killed. But when sores plagued Job's body, her restraint broke. She told Job, "Curse God and die!" (Job 2:9b). She thought it futile to continue holding on to faith and loving a God who permitted a relentless barrage of trials to afflict them. Her lack of perseverance prevented her from gaining what the Lord had promised.

The Lord's promise is to those who are steadfast in their love for Him even through the most severe trials. To some, it is too difficult, perhaps even unfair, to be put through unceasing suffering. It is incessant tribulation that will differentiate those who truly fear and love the Lord from the fair-weather believer. The former love the Lord regardless of circumstances, while the latter want to receive blessings but are unwilling to suffer with Him.

John chapter 20 tells us of the events after Jesus' crucifixion and burial. When Mary Magdalene went to the tomb and found it empty, she quickly informed the disciples. The apostles ran over to take a look; the linen cloths that bound Jesus were there but the body was indeed gone.

No matter what sufferings assault our faith, we should not leave or stop loving the Lord. Instead, cling to the promises of the Lord Jesus to those who love Him.

There seemed to be nothing more for them to see, so the disciples went off to their own homes. But Mary stayed behind and looked into the tomb (Jn 20:11).

During Jesus' ministry, there were many Jews who did not believe that Jesus was the Messiah. Some believed in Jesus but left after a while; others followed a little longer but still left when He died. However, Mary stayed. And although it was empty, she still wanted to look into the tomb.

Why did Mary remain? Why stare into an empty tomb? Mary was not just staring vacantly. The tomb was empty but her love for the Lord was intact, and the Lord knew of Mary's love for Him.

The love of others for the Lord waxed and waned, but Mary's love for Jesus remained strong. She wept as she stooped and looked into the tomb because she truly loved the Lord. Her effort in looking was rewarded when the resurrected Lord appeared to her. It was not to Peter, who had been given the keys to the kingdom of heaven, nor John, the disciple whom He loved, nor His mother Mary. The first person to whom Jesus revealed Himself after resurrection was Mary Magdalene because of her immense love for Him—a love which was unchanged and unforsaken despite her great agony at His death.

Some claim to love Jesus, but are selective about which of His commands they want to obey. If our love were as unwavering as Mary Magdalene's, we would obey all of His commandments, and doubt none (Jn 14:21). Then, when our Lord Jesus comes again, we shall be like Mary, filled with joy and pleasant surprise. But if we are fickle or lukewarm in our love, we will be like Judas, filled with fear and shame.

CONCLUSION—GAINING THE BENEFITS OF TRIALS

Let us learn from the examples of Job, Mary Magdalene and Paul. We ought to understand the Father's heart and trust His will. Refinement through various trials rids us of impure thoughts, and helps us become like Christ. We are then truly God's children who can share in His glory. No matter what sufferings assault our faith, we should not leave or stop loving the Lord. Instead, cling to the promises of the Lord Jesus to those who love Him. His promises are true because He is the true God. Let our love towards Him be true. ★

Worship God According To His Will

Adapted from a sermon by Brian Lim—Singapore



In the Old Testament, Solomon's temple was at the center of the Israelite faith. It was where the presence of God, represented by the ark of the covenant, rested. The temple may have been built by Solomon, but its design was ordained by God. Through the revelation of the Spirit, David received detailed plans for the building of the temple, which he passed on to his son (1 Chr 28:18–19). Indeed, Solomon followed these plans to the letter, and when the building was completed, fire descended from heaven to consume the sacrifices, and the glory of the Lord filled the temple (2 Chr 7:1). This act of God showed His acceptance of the temple.

The Old Testament records several structures that were also constructed according to God's design. One of these was Noah's ark: because he carefully followed the dimensions given to him by God, the ark was able to withstand the flood (Gen 6:14–22). Later, Moses and the children of Israel were just as fastidious when building the tent of meeting and the ark of the covenant according to God's pattern (Ex 25:9).

As children of God, it is important

that we do all things according to His will. In fact, in God's eyes, we are more than children. He calls us "a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people" (1 Pet 2:9a). Therefore, we have a special obligation to obey His commands.

At the dedication of the temple, Solomon offered a prayer for the people of Israel. Afterwards, God appeared to assure him that his prayer had been heard, and promised to walk with him if he continued to keep His statutes (1 Kgs 9:1–9; 2 Chr 7:12–22). God said:

[I]f My people who are called by My name will humble themselves, and pray and seek My face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin and heal their land. Now My eyes will be open and My ears attentive to prayer made in this place.

(2 Chr 7:14–15)

These words outline the attitude with which God's people should seek Him: with humility, seeking His face through prayer, and turning away from wickedness. We will study

verse 14 more closely to learn how to worship God according to His will.

MY PEOPLE WHO ARE CALLED BY MY NAME

In the Old Testament, God chose the Israelites to bear His name. As part of this special relationship, they would know God and commune with Him through their worship.

"For you are a holy people to the LORD your God; the LORD your God has chosen you to be a people for Himself, a special treasure above all the peoples on the face of the earth. The LORD did not set His love on you nor choose you because you were more in number than any other people, for you were the least of all peoples; but because the LORD loves you, and because He would keep the oath which He swore to your fathers, the LORD has brought you out with a mighty hand, and redeemed you from the house of bondage, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt."

(Deut 7:6–8)

These verses express just how much God loved His people, and

As the people of God, let us realize our holy status and know that our Lord God is the only God whom we must serve. Let us not take our special relationship with Him for granted. Instead, let us respond with humility to our Lord.

how precious they were to Him. As His “special treasure,” they were priceless.

However, He also knew their weaknesses. They were a small nation compared to others. But more significantly, they constantly murmured against Him, despised the prophets He sent to warn them, and turned away from Him to worship idols. They did not deserve His love. But God is a loving God who keeps His promises. Here, He reminded the Israelites that they experienced such grace because of His love and faithfulness.

Today, we also belong to God and are precious in His eyes. When we were baptized, we became spiritual Israelites, the seed of Abraham and heirs according to the promise, regardless of our ethnic or cultural background (Gal 3:26–29). Therefore, God sees us as a people above all others on the face of the earth. This does not mean we can be arrogant about our status as children of God; instead we should see it as a blessing that comes with the requirement to worship Him in truth and spirit. As true worshippers of God and recipients of His love, we must also extend our love to those in need. And we must keep ourselves undefiled and separate from the world in order to maintain our noble status (Jas 1:27).

As the people of God, let us realize our holy status and know that our Lord God is the only God whom we must serve. Let us not take our special relationship with Him for granted. Instead, let us respond with humility to our Lord.

MY PEOPLE WILL HUMBLE THEMSELVES

To worship God according to His word, we must be humble. Humility before God and man is a virtue that

all children of God ought to have (Tit 3:2; 1 Pet 5:5). But where humility before man can be feigned, it is impossible to worship God with false humility, for He knows the intents of our hearts. Therefore, we must offer our Sovereign Lord the utmost honor and respect, for we are but dust before Him. Knowing our physical weaknesses, He has provided us with many instructions and warnings to prevent us from falling into the snare of the devil. Unfortunately, biblical history shows that the children of God were either too stubborn to realize the goodness of God, or refused to submit to His sovereignty.

What about us today? Jesus said:

“Most assuredly, I say to you, he who hears My word and believes in Him who sent Me has everlasting life, and shall not come into judgment, but has passed from death into life.”

(Jn 5:24)

As children of God, we have received amazing grace, for it is by hearing and believing in His word that we can pass from death into life. But hearing and believing are not enough, we must also understand and apply His word to our lives. God’s word—the commandments, warnings and teachings in the Bible—is the living word, which lies dormant on the page, but comes alive through application.

God is the Author of all things and He is omnipotent and omniscient. On the other hand, as humans, we

do not know what will happen to us in the next minute. For this reason, Peter writes: “Therefore humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you in due time” (1 Pet 5:6). Before making any decisions, we must pray for God’s guidance. And when we receive His guidance, we should humbly submit ourselves to His will, even though it may not be according to our liking. If we do so, He will exalt us in due time and bless us in whatever we do.

Every believer must have this same humility, or the whole church will face divisions and cracks will arise for the devil to take advantage of. If there are heresies or disagreements in the church, we should deal with them with love, as Paul said:

“But as for you, brethren, do not grow weary in doing good. And if anyone does not obey our word in this epistle, note that person and do not keep company with him, that he may be ashamed. Yet do not count him as an enemy, but admonish him as a brother.”

(2 Thess 3:13–15)

We may meet with objections and opposition when we try to be peacemakers, but we should “not grow weary in doing good.” The church of God is made up of human beings who are imperfect. Disputes may be difficult to settle, but the answer is for all parties to be guided by humility. If there is anyone who disobeys the word of God, we ought to gently admonish him with love, and he will be more likely to respond positively. And if we are on the other side of the equation, as the one who is corrected by a brother, then we should accept it with humility of mind to keep the bond of peace (Eph 4:3). If one refuses to be corrected after repeated admonishment, allowing

Hearing and believing are not enough, we must also understand and apply God’s word to our lives. His word is the living word, which lies dormant on the page, but comes alive through application.

divisions to persist, action must be taken to prevent more from being led astray. In fact, verse 14 says that we should “not keep company” with such people.

MY PEOPLE WILL PRAY AND SEEK MY FACE

In our life of worship, prayer is the most direct form of worshipping God. In prayer, we are able to praise God and make our requests known to Him. Although He already knows what is in our hearts, when we kneel in prayer, we are humbling ourselves before Him. We speak to the invisible God, and it requires faith for us to believe He is listening. It also demonstrates that we need God. In prayers, we reflect upon our lives, and whether we have sinned against Him or our brethren. We also meditate on the blessings we have freely received, thus reminding us of God's presence in our lives. In short, prayer helps us to cultivate our faith and reliance on God.

Moreover, God delights in the prayer of the upright (Prov 15:8). As His children, let us talk to God in prayer as often as we can, but let us also strive to live a life of righteousness. In this way, we can pray according to His will.

Finally, God desires that we should seek His face. To seek His face is to pursue a deeper understanding of Him. But why do we need to do this?

*Glory in His holy name;
Let the hearts of those rejoice who
seek the LORD!
Seek the LORD and His strength;
Seek His face evermore!
Remember His marvelous works
which He has done,
His wonders, and the judgments of
His mouth.*

(Ps 105:3–5)

If we seek His face and constantly remember His marvelous works and power, we can receive strength from Him. How do we seek His face? By obeying His commandments. Yet at the same time, we also need strength to carry out His commandments, to

resist temptations and quench the fiery darts of the devil. In fact, the act of submitting to God's will is itself a source of strength, allowing us to resist the ploys of the devil (Jas 4:7). In seeking God's face, we consciously “turn from [our] wicked ways” (2 Chr 7:14); we turn from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God (Acts 26:18). Only when we have turned from sin, will our prayers be heard and our sins healed (2 Chr 7:14; Acts 26:18). God will not accept our worship if we continue to persist in our wicked ways. This is why we must go further to seek God and His will.

To seek, or to search, requires time and effort. It is not enough to only know God through searching the Bible. We still need to experience God in our lives to perceive who He really is. Look at Job, who went through one of the worst ordeals in history. His trials were so severe that many believe he is a myth, or that his trials were metaphorical. During his ordeal, Job stood firm before God. He was righteous in his own eyes, but he knew God had the right to do whatever He wanted to him. Job's strength to endure came from

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His knowledge of God. But towards the end of his ordeal, his endurance began to wane. Just as he was about to give up, God spoke to him out of the whirlwind, and asked him a series of rhetorical questions. This exchange revealed the true scope of God's omnipotence (Job 38–41). After this, Job proclaimed: “I have heard of You by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees You” (Job 42:5).

It is important for us to be familiar with the Bible, but we cannot simply

rely on this to know God. We may be able to quote the Scriptures and know where to find certain passages in the Bible, but if we do not live out these teachings, such knowledge alone is useless.

Nor can we fully know God through what others tell us. Without a personal relationship with God, our faith means nothing. How can we be motivated to wholeheartedly apply what we have read and heard if we do not love God and know Him on a personal level?

CONCLUSION

Since Old Testament times, God's instruction to His people concerning their worship and service is clear. And yet, we often fall short of God's standards and our status as a holy nation. Therefore, let us seek God's will by drawing closer and closer to Him in daily prayers, by meditating on His words day and night, putting them into practice, and turning away from sin. As children of God, we need to worship Him according to His will—in humility, in prayer, and in seeking Him in our life of worship. ★



The God Who Has Led Me All My Life

Ren-De Huang—Tainan, Taiwan

I was born in 1946 and baptized into the True Jesus Church (TJC) right after my birth. Looking back, I feel that God has watched over me all my life, and I have received abundant blessings from Him.

But You are He who took Me out of the womb;

You made Me trust while on My mother's breasts.

I was cast upon You from birth.

From My mother's womb

You have been My God.

(Ps 22:9–10)

Thank God, I was blessed to be born into a TJC family. God chose me from the day I was born. Hence, I did not have to go through the process of seeking the truth. Instead, God was already there to lead me throughout my life. This is God's special grace to me.

MY GRANDFATHER'S CONVERSION

In 1926, my grandfather and my father converted to the TJC from a Presbyterian church, where my grandfather had been an elder. A group of TJC members from Xiamen,

China, had come to Taiwan to spread the gospel. That year, three churches were established in Taiwan.

During that time, Elder Barnabas Chang preached the gospel in my grandfather's town and was well received. This was when my grandfather started to study and discuss the truth with the TJC ministers. He believed that a person who has faith in Jesus Christ must have the Holy Spirit. When the TJC ministers asked my grandfather whether he had received the Holy Spirit, he replied, "We also have the Holy Spirit."

Then they asked, "Where is the Holy Spirit?"

My grandfather replied, "We received the Holy Spirit when we believed."

The ministers asked my grandfather to turn to Acts 19:2, 6 and 7. These verses show that a person who believes in Jesus Christ and

confesses Christ with his lips does not automatically receive the Holy Spirit. Instead, when a believer receives the Holy Spirit, he or she will speak in tongues.

After this explanation, my grandfather and a few others prayed for the Holy Spirit according to the method taught by the TJC. Subsequently, a few among them received the Holy Spirit. After experiencing the Spirit, they believed that Jesus Christ is truly with the TJC. Thereafter, a few families, totaling about thirty people, left the Presbyterian church and converted to TJC.

OMNIPOTENT GOD

About fifty years ago, one of my father's nephews came down with a fever that lasted many days. His temperature peaked above forty degrees Celsius. The doctor across the street examined the boy several times. He told my father, "We're good friends, so I'll be honest. I have tried every medication available, including antibiotics. The prognosis is not good." This was a worrying thing for my father to hear.

But then, he remembered a certain

Looking back, I feel that God has watched over me all my life, and I have received abundant blessings from Him.

The God we worship is almighty, transcending time and space. Although Deaconess Yang and my father had been praying seventy kilometers away, God's power still came upon the sick child at home.

deaconess by the name of Mary Yang. God had blessed her with special gifts. If a person was ill or demon-possessed, they would be healed after she prayed for them. So my father got on his motorcycle and rode to Kaoshiung, which was seventy kilometers away from our hometown Matou, to find her. At that time, all the roads were unpaved gravel roads, and the motorcycles were made of scraps of metal. The journey to Kaoshiung took him over two hours. When my father finally arrived, he explained everything to Deaconess Yang. However, she was busy with the local church work at that time, and would probably be physically unable to endure the two-hour ride on the motorcycle back to Matou. So she asked my father to sit down and read John 4:46–53.

This passage records how a nobleman from Capernaum came to Cana to ask Jesus to heal his child. But instead of going to Capernaum with him, Jesus told the man, “Go your way; your son lives” (Jn 4:50). At the time, the man's son was in Capernaum, which was about twenty-five kilometers away. On his way home, the nobleman was met by his servants, who reported to him that his son was healed. Upon inquiring further, he discovered that the fever had left his son at the exact time Jesus had said, “Your son lives.”

After my father had read this passage, Deaconess Yang said, “Let's pray together. Afterwards, your nephew will be well.” So my father prayed with Deaconess Yang at the church in Kaoshiung and then returned to Matou, resting at the church in Tainan on the way. Once he reached home, my sister-in-law met him at the doorway. She said, “Dad, the fever has receded.” Moreover, my father found out that the fever had reduced at around 11 a.m., when he had been praying with Deaconess

Yang in Kaoshiung.

The God we worship is almighty, transcending time and space. Although Deaconess Yang and my father had been praying seventy kilometers away, God's power still came upon the sick child at home. I'm thankful for my father's testimony, for it not only strengthened the faith of the second and third generation of believers in our family, but it also helps us to understand the God we worship—He is truly living, omnipotent and omnipresent.

GOD'S GUIDANCE IN MY LIFE

Career

So I perceived that nothing is better than that a man should rejoice in his own works, for that is his heritage. For who can bring him to see what will happen after him?

(Eccl 3:22)

Through God's guidance in my life, I was able to find a job that I truly enjoyed. From young, I had always wanted to be a teacher. When I was fifteen years old, I visited Taipei with a few other people. As we toured the city, we passed by the best university for education in Taiwan. I thought to myself how wonderful it would be if I could one day be admitted to this university. I even asked someone to take a picture of me in front of it. God fulfilled my wish some fourteen years later. At the age of twenty-nine, I enrolled at this university to study education.

The doctor said the weight loss seemed to be due to a tumor. Four days later, he called to confirm the diagnosis of colon cancer. I became weak at the knees.

Since I worked in education, I also became heavily involved in the religious education and counseling work at church. Hence, God allowed me to serve Him according to my talents and interest. He also allowed me to work happily as a teacher for thirty years, which I believe is a special grace from God.

Family

I have no greater joy than to hear that my children walk in truth.

(3 Jn 4)

I believe that those who have a family will put their focus on their children, and will be concerned about their children's future. But the Scriptures tell us that we do not need to worry, as long as our children walk in the truth.

My wife and I took our three sons to church services since they were young, even at night. Attending church became part of their lives and they continued to attend services regularly after they started school, even when their school assignments increased and things became more challenging. If they had an exam the next day, they would attend the evening worship service and study afterwards.

As a parent, this made me feel more at ease, because I knew that this habit of regular church attendance would help my children hold on to the foundation of faith, so they would not easily go astray. Thank God, today all my children have graduated from university and have their own careers and families. Most importantly, they have remained in the church and are able to participate in church work, which gives me great comfort. In fact, the best inheritance that we can give to our children is the inheritance of faith.

Health

In 2002, I took early retirement. In September that year, I attended a wedding officiated by Elder Huang from Tainan. He had not seen me for six months, and remarked that I had lost a significant amount of weight.

Although I attributed this to exercise and eating a healthy diet since retirement, he was still worried and recommended that I get a check-up. A couple of weeks later, some visiting theological training program students also noticed my weight loss and suggested the same thing. Although I felt fine, I thought I might as well take their advice.

I waited a month before I booked an appointment at the hospital, as I could get a twenty percent discount during the month of my birthday. The day after my physical examination, I returned for the results. The doctor said the weight loss seemed to be due to a tumor. Four days later, he called to confirm the diagnosis of colon cancer. I became weak at the knees when I heard this. Since we live next door to church, my wife and I immediately went there to pray.

Later, I underwent surgery to remove fifteen centimeters of intestines, followed by six months of chemotherapy. Although I was in remission, the doctors continued to monitor my condition for seven to eight years afterwards.

In retrospect, if God did not send various people to recommend that I see a doctor, I would not have done so. But God alerted me through these brethren, and prompted me to take action. Though the diagnosis was bad, it was discovered early, so the treatment had a greater chance of success. God is indeed a God who constantly watches over and takes care of us.

Our Jesus is More Powerful

In April 2009, during the last day of our spiritual convocation at my home church, I had a heart attack and was taken to hospital. Because my condition was critical, my heart was stopped and I was connected to a mechanical pump for four days. This procedure was effective, but it came with adverse effects. I experienced facial edema, or swelling caused by a build-up of fluid in the facial tissues. Later on, there were problems with my kidneys and blood circulation. My blood vessels burst, and the locations of the bleeding were not found until

seven or eight days later.

I had to stay in the Intensive Care Unit for eighty days, where I was comatose for the first forty-four days and hooked up to a ventilator.

The attending physician, Dr. Wang, informed my wife and children that the prognosis was not good. Since he had seen my wife and kids praying, he asked them if our religion permitted resuscitation, and whether I would want to return home before taking my last breath. These questions sounded like a death sentence, so my wife became very sorrowful. She said, "Last month, when my husband was unconscious, Jesus saved him. Now, we can only ask that you use your professional judgment to help us, while we pray at home."

Later on, my wife called two sisters and asked that they notify everyone to pray for me. The doctor had pronounced that there was nothing more he could do, so the only way now was to rely on God.

Over the following few days, my wife noticed that my dependence on the ventilator was gradually declining. The doctors had said that even if I recovered, I would be attached to a ventilator for the rest of my life. Yet, after a week, I was able to breathe on my own. My wife was overjoyed. The doctor remained cautious, but after five days of observation I remained stable, so I was moved to a regular cardiology ward.

My attending cardiologist, Dr. Yeh, came to see me in the cardiology ward. The first thing she said was, "Uncle Huang, Dr. Wang said that your Jesus is definitely more powerful than he is." When we heard this, we were greatly comforted. Dr. Wang was an experienced professional working in a large hospital. But since my recovery defied his prognosis, he

could only declare that this was a miracle from God.

*He sent His word and healed them,
And delivered them from their
destructions.*

(Ps 107:20)

When we are ill, it is natural to seek the best medical care possible, but we must have the correct mindset. It is our Sovereign God who allows us to live and heals our illnesses. Doctors may aid the process, but God is sovereign and in control. So when we see a doctor, we must remember to constantly rely on God through prayer.

Since my recovery, I have continued to give thanks to God for the grace He has bestowed upon me. May this sharing encourage everyone to have more trust in the Lord Jesus. May all the glory and honor be to our heavenly Father.

Hallelujah! Amen. ★

When we are ill, it is natural to seek the best medical care possible, but we must have the correct mindset. It is our Sovereign God who allows us to live and heals our illnesses. Doctors may aid the process, but God is sovereign and in control. So when we see a doctor, we must remember to constantly rely on God through prayer.



INTRODUCTION

The True Jesus Church in Canada was first planted in Toronto, when church members who immigrated to the region started to gather for family services. Later, in 1971, the Toronto House of Prayer was established. The membership grew over the following years, resulting in the dedication of the True Jesus Church in Toronto in 1977.

From the 1970s to the 1990s, a steady increase of immigrants, mainly from Hong Kong, Malaysia and Taiwan, brought new growth in membership to different areas of Canada. After the 2000s, believers from China followed in large numbers to settle in the country. Under the continuous guidance of God and by the power of His mighty hand, the Canadian churches flourished and were established in succession.

In order to utilize human and financial resources more efficiently, the churches in Canada held their first annual National Church Conference (NCC) in Toronto in October 1992. On the same occasion, the Canadian Coordination Centre (CCC) was officially founded, in line with the International Assembly (IA) by-laws.

The purpose of the CCC is to pool and share the resources of the Canadian churches, to better carry out the sacred work across the country. These included the consolidation of the faith of the believers, preaching the word of God, carrying out the commission of God, and providing standardized training for the younger generation.

Up until this point, the church in Canada did not have any fulltime ministers. However, from 2002 onwards, God prepared three preachers and a deacon to help with the national church ministry on a voluntary assignment basis. Thank God for His providence, Timothy Yeung responded to the call of preacherhood and signed up for the IA Theological Training Program (TTP). After graduating and completing his five-year post-TTP assignment to a pioneering area, he returned to Canada in 2006 to serve as a fulltime preacher. In 2009, Preacher Luke Hsieh joined the sacred work to serve the church in Canada. In 2015, having completed four years of theological training and internship placements, Preacher Tony Kuo was ordained to become the third fulltime

minister in Canada. This ordination marked a milestone because it was the first time a preacher had been ordained in Canada.

By the grace of God, there are currently four churches and one prayer house in Canada: Toronto (established 1971), Vancouver (1988), Edmonton (1990), Calgary (1994), and Montreal (1994), respectively. In total, there are 812 members. Most churches began with immigrant members who gathered for family services, which progressively expanded into houses of prayer, and eventually churches.

ORGANIZATIONAL STATUS

The CCC Executive Committee (EXCO) comprises seven council members, including the chairman. There are five departments in the CCC EXCO: the Department of Religious Affairs, the Department of Training, the Department of Literary Ministry, the Department of General Affairs, and the Department of Financial Affairs. Each department is managed by one director, who is responsible for mobilizing the work of the church on a national level.



CHALLENGES

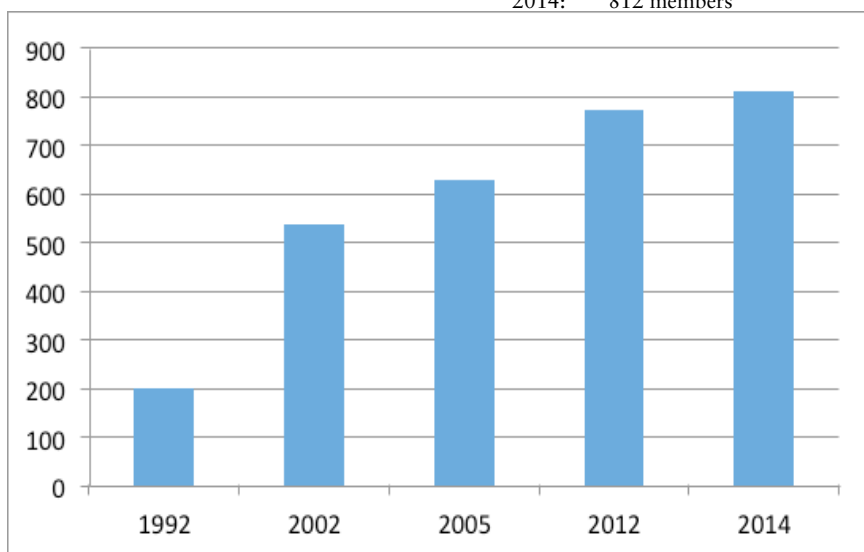
The Canadian True Jesus Church membership is largely composed of immigrants and is predominantly Chinese in ethnicity. In addition, the local churches are geographically spread out and many provinces are still without churches or members. This poses some challenges to the pastoral and evangelistic work of the church nationwide. Many members left their native countries to seek a better life in Canada, but such a significant move is not without setbacks and hardships. As such, the church in Canada needs to address some problems for newcomers, such as the language barrier, cultural differences, the education of the younger generation, obstacles in professional life, and psychological pressure. For those who are already well adapted and comfortable in Canada, there is often the challenge of a lack of fervency as well as the tempting influence of worldly values.

Language Barrier

The official languages of Canada are English and French, but most church members speak a different mother tongue. In order to cater for the needs of the diverse membership and the local population, each church conducts services which are delivered and/or interpreted into Chinese, English, and sometimes French. Some local churches have also created multilingual websites, evangelistic materials and online resources to reach out to the non-Chinese.

NATIONAL MEMBERSHIP STATUS

1992:	About 200 members
2002:	540 members
2005:	620 members
2012:	774 members
2014:	812 members



Cultural Differences

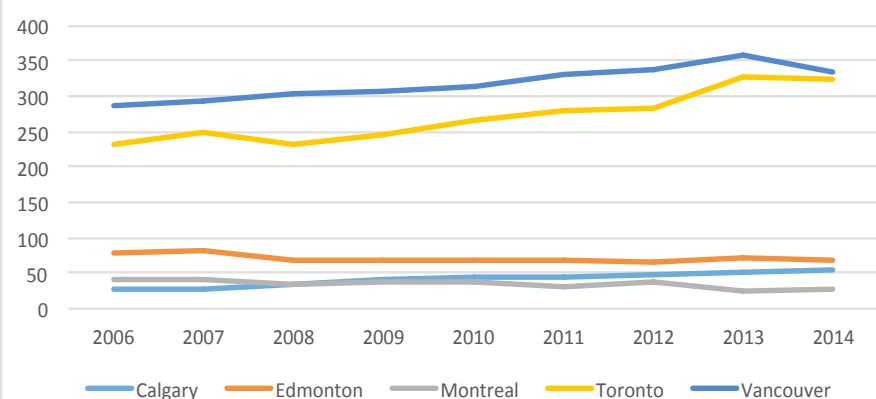
Canada is a multicultural country with different ethnic and cultural groups coexisting side by side. Many believers live within their own cultural communities, and often have limited interaction with wider society. Thus, it is sometimes difficult for these members to relate to the Canadian lifestyle and find common ground with the general public. In order to preach to non-Chinese-speaking truth-seekers, the churches hold hymnal evangelistic services and outreach activities. Communication and mutual understanding are vital in a church that is increasingly diverse. Cultural clashes are inevitable, but the local churches are striving to

encourage integration and maintain harmony, while teaching the correct biblical doctrines to preserve the faith. It is the responsibility of the church in the present time to integrate everyone into the faith, without favoring one culture over another, or compromising with the trends and practices of society.

Educating the Younger Generation

Inter-generational gaps occur when the younger generations become proficient in English and French, and lose their ability to communicate in their mother tongues. First-generation immigrant parents may find it difficult to speak to their children, let alone pass down their faith. The generations of youths who grew up in Canada have been educated with certain principles, concepts and values in school, which are inconsistent with the values they are taught at home and in church. Our children are the future of the church, and the greatest challenge in raising them is this conflict between the truth and worldly views. The church should encourage parents to raise their children in Christ, so that they will not deviate when they grow older. All parents, whether they are immigrants or not, face these issues in the education of their children. One must first hold on to the

LOCAL CHURCH MEMBERSHIP





complete faith, to be an example to the children, teaching them to adjust to changing environments while remaining in the truth. The church is tasked with strengthening and building up the faith of each family.

Obstacles in Professional Life

Canada does not accept professional qualifications from most foreign countries, and many immigrant professionals need to retake examinations before their credentials are recognized by the government. It is also difficult to find employment in one's chosen field, because most jobs require Canadian work experience. Thus, many members are not employed in their field of expertise. However, they are able to use their skills to serve as volunteers in church, and to help various individuals and fellowship groups. If we build our faith on the Rock, facing obstacles can further our knowledge of God's

grace and love, and tribulations can become blessings in disguise. The church should instill this faithful attitude in members, so that they can overcome such challenging circumstances of life.

Psychological Pressure

The church can provide new immigrants with counselling, to help them to adjust and integrate into Canadian society. When dealing with members under great stress, the church needs to provide the word of God, in addition to caring and encouraging actions. Members need to learn to leave their comfort zone, lift up their eyes and look upon the Lord Jesus. In this way, they will be released from the bondage of stress, and live a life of heavenly joy and freedom in Jesus Christ. This is the goal that the church strives to reach, so that the name of Christ Jesus will be glorified and praised.

Complacency

As life is very comfortable in Canada, members may become complacent when their lives are blessed with material abundance. Members need to be alert to seemingly insignificant changes and influences in their environment, so that they are not led astray; they must respond by cultivating their spirituality instead. Without cultivation, they may lose their initial love and fervency for God, and lack the sense of mission to work for a greater purpose. One of the biggest threats that the church faces today is feeling contented with where we are now, without having the urgency to expand and grow. Canada, after all, is the second largest country in the world by landmass, so there is still much terrain to be conquered. In order to do this, the church in Canada needs to train up more workers and spread the gospel more rapidly.

Christian Values versus Worldly Values

Canada is a liberal country which proudly embraces the tolerance and acceptance of all cultures. Its nation-founding policies also emphasize human rights and the freedom of people. True Jesus Church members growing up in Canada, with no exception, are being inculcated with these values from a young age in school. However, some of the values and practices that have become acceptable in Canadian society, such as same-sex marriage, among others, are straying further and further away from the teachings and principles of the Bible. The church is the watchperson and the voice of the end time, and she must stand on guard for God's people, to help them fight the tides of this world.



BLESSINGS

As we recount the blessings of the True Jesus Church in Canada, we can only see God's wonderful guidance and plan. We are thankful for the effort and hard work of our predecessors in various regions across the country, and look forward to a bright future. We pray that the Lord will continue to abide with all the brothers, sisters and church workers, so that we can stand firm in our faith and practice love. May the Holy Spirit guide the church to reach out and preach to all people in every corner of Canada, so that Jesus' name may be glorified. Amen. ★



As we read the Book of Acts, we notice the remarkable spirit of God's servants. The ministry of these workers is defined by their courage, conviction and power in the Spirit, and also by their humility and willingness to learn. The spirit in which the early church served the Lord stands as a guide for our own ministry today. In this article, we will look at the attitude of three early workers, Peter, Paul and Apollos, whom we should seek to emulate.

BOLDNESS TO SPEAK THE TRUTH

After Jesus' death, Peter was among the disciples who hid behind closed doors for fear of the Jews. However, after he saw the resurrected Christ, witnessed His ascension, and received the promised Holy Spirit (Lk 24:50–53; Jn 20:19; Acts 2:1–4), his heart was changed. He received a heart of boldness, which enabled him to go out and tell the whole world about the truth.

After he received the gift of the Holy Spirit, Peter immediately began to preach Jesus in Jerusalem. He boldly stood up with the eleven and preached to the devout Jews who

were gathered from every nation under heaven (Acts 2:14). In that sermon, Peter confidently told them that Jesus, whom they had killed with "lawless hands," was the Christ they had all been waiting for (Acts 2:22–23).

With all good conscience, Peter unreservedly proclaimed what he and others had seen: that the same Jesus who had died had truly resurrected. He told them, "This Jesus God raised up, of which we are all witnesses" (Acts 2:32). You can feel the truth running through Peter as he recounts Jesus' ascension, not withholding any details (Acts 2:33).

Only when the truth is boldly proclaimed can people have the opportunity to hear and choose to follow it to salvation.

Then Peter, filled with wisdom and conviction through the Holy Spirit, testified that this exalted Jesus was the One who had poured out the Holy Spirit upon them, proving that Jesus is Lord and Christ. It was the

fulfillment of what God had said through Joel: "I will pour out My Spirit on all flesh" (Acts 2:17). The Jews could not deny the truth, as they believed that there is only one Lord and the Lord is one (Deut 6:4); they were cut to the heart. This happened because God's Spirit had inspired Peter to boldly preach the gospel (Mt 10:20; Lk 12:12).

In the end time, the True Jesus Church needs members, especially youths, who are more than just acquainted with a few verses of Scripture that outline the basic beliefs. We need more people who are strongly grounded in their faith, with full conviction and courage to share the truth. For only when the truth is boldly proclaimed can people have the opportunity to hear and choose to follow it to salvation. So, if you do not know, ask. If you know a bit, increase it, and share. The more you know, the wider the scope of people to whom you can convey the truth. Let us therefore learn from Peter's spirit of conviction and equip ourselves with a deeper knowledge of the truth so that we, too, may be able to boldly preach the gospel.



UNRELENTING—TO MOVE FORWARD AND BEYOND

Unlike Peter, Paul had always been a courageous person. So, as a new convert, he took up his newfound faith with great zeal:

Immediately he preached the Christ in the synagogues, that He is the Son of God.

(Acts 9:20)

He was not ashamed to tell everyone that he had been wrong and that Jesus is the Christ (Acts 9:22). Even when faced with possible death, Paul carried on speaking boldly and disputed with those who held on to the erroneous beliefs that he himself had previously shared (Acts 9:29). In his ministry, Paul met with many more hardships: he was expelled from a city (Acts 13:50–51), stoned and left for dead (Acts 14:19), and even faced disputes within the church (Acts 15:1–5). Yet he never once gave up; he continued boldly to go where Jesus sent Him. He was armed with the mission Jesus had given him, for Jesus had said: “[H]e is a chosen vessel of Mine to bear My name before Gentiles, kings and the children of Israel. For I will show him how many things he must suffer for My name’s sake” (Acts 9:15–16). In addition, Jesus personally told Paul, “Depart, for I will send you far from here to the Gentiles” (Acts 22:21). So, despite having to brave the tempestuous sea and being bitten by a poisonous viper, Paul continued preaching, even to Rome (Acts 28:14–16).

Paul’s life illustrates what kind of spirit we need to have if we are to complete our mission in the end time: we need to have Paul’s unrelenting drive to fulfill the will of the Lord!

Today, there are many brothers and sisters in our church who have made sacrifices to join in the mission

to spread the gospel. Partnering with preachers and other volunteers, they encounter challenges that they could have avoided if they had stayed in the comfort of their homes. Yet they continue to go to distant countries, braving hardships and giving what they have to those deprived of the true gospel. Their testimonies serve as an example for us to follow, but also as our encouragement.

All of us need to have the vision that the True Jesus Church is not limited to the boundary of our own local church. Our home church is like a member of the whole body of Christ. The body of Christ is made up of members and congregations throughout the world. Some areas have plenty of workers to look after the churches there. Churches in other areas require many more workers to go the extra mile in order to minister to them, so that they can one day stand up, be self-sufficient, know the truth and pass it on. Why not pray for the heart to go forward? Why not let the love of God compel us to move beyond what we are used to, week-in week-out? Why not rely on God and let Him show us His grace working in those to whom we minister the truth?

STAND CORRECTED, BUT STAND STRONGER

Another notable worker recorded in Acts is Apollos; he was no ordinary Jewish convert. He possessed qualities that many would be glad to have. He was eloquent. He was well-versed in the Scriptures, which meant that he had a substantial understanding of the Bible. He was instructed in the way of the Lord, which also indicated that he must have spent time to learn the truth. He must have gained awareness of what the Scriptures said about Christ and how it had been fulfilled. No one would doubt Apollos’ credentials as a speaker of

God’s word. He did not speak off-the-cuff but made sure what he said was accurate; as far as he could, Apollos did his homework (Acts 18:25). Although he had just started out, “he began to speak boldly in the synagogue” (Acts 18:26a). When a person speaks boldly, he must be confident that his knowledge is true and complete.

Imagine you were Apollos. You are fervent in spirit (Acts 18:25), but then Aquila and Priscilla, a couple who are merely tentmakers by occupation (Acts 18:3), hear you preaching

As we grow and mature in our ministry, we will gradually learn to serve according to the spirit of Jesus’ teachings, for the glory of His name. Eventually we may share our knowledge and experiences with future generations of workers.

and take you aside to correct you (Acts 18:26b). How would you feel? Apollos could have felt so ashamed that he dared not speak again for fear of getting it wrong. Or he could have become angry because of pride, ignored the couple’s good intentions, and continued to spread incomplete teachings of salvation. But rather than having a defeatist attitude, Apollos stood corrected and stood stronger: “And when he desired to cross to Achaia...he greatly helped those who had believed through grace; for he vigorously refuted the Jews publicly, showing from the Scriptures that Jesus is the Christ” (Acts 18:27–28).

In the end time, the future pillars of the church must progress to face the challenges that lie ahead. Having the heart and fervency is a great start. Studying the Bible and equipping ourselves with God’s word and spiritual understanding is crucial to say the least. But, incorporated with that sense of urgency should be a humble spirit and the willingness to receive correction. To receive correction is part and parcel of our service to the Lord. Peter was corrected. Paul was corrected.

Paul’s life illustrates what kind of spirit we need to have if we are to complete our mission in the end time: we need to have Paul’s unrelenting drive to fulfill the will of the Lord!



Jeremiah was corrected. Moses was corrected. Being corrected is not easy to take. However, if our heart is sincere for God, we will cut away and cut through how the correction makes us feel, and grasp its immense value for our continual service for God and the next generation.

So, let us become noble vessels for the Lord, ready to be filled with God's truth as we gain more experience. As we grow and mature in our ministry, we will gradually learn to serve according to the spirit of Jesus' teachings, for the glory of His name. Eventually we may share our knowledge and experiences with future generations of workers.

CONCLUSION

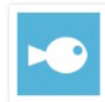
Let us learn from these three workers in Acts: Peter, Paul and Apollos. May we follow their footsteps to have the conviction to share the truth, to continuously carry the truth to regions beyond in the face of challenges, and to come clean when corrected so that God may use us. Amen. ★

Five Loaves and Two Fish

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Love as Brothers

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"Finally, all of you, live in harmony with one another; be sympathetic, love as brothers, be compassionate and humble." (1 Pet 3:8 | NIV)

We are privileged to belong to God's family, a community with Jesus Christ as the founder and foundation. Everyone in this community is related - we are all brothers and sisters, loved equally by God. God teaches us to love one another. But sometimes we may feel that it is much easier to love God than to love others. It is easy to say that we love God when it doesn't cost anything more than weekly attendance at church services. But the real test of our love for God is how we treat the people in front of us - our family members and fellow believers. We cannot truly love God while neglecting to love people around us in God's family.

Whoever hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him. (1 Jn 3:15)

Does this mean that if you dislike someone, you aren't a Christian? John's words focus on the attitude that causes us to ignore or despise others, to treat them as irritants, competitors, or enemies. Christian love is not a feeling but a choice. [Continue reading →](#)

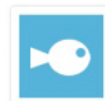
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The Practice of Love – Humility

"[Love] does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud." (1 Cor 13:4 | NIV)

Our Lord Jesus Christ commands us to love one another. What is brotherly love? It goes beyond our affection for each other, our sense of belonging, or our social group. Biblical love is not envious, proud, or self-centered. The practice of brotherly love encompasses humility.



Love does not envy. Do we bicker out of jealousy? When Jesus saw Nathanael coming, He addressed him as an Israelite indeed, in whom is no guile. This is a compliment to the honesty and sincerity of Nathanael. We need to affirm the good qualities and achievements of our fellow believers. Rather than criticize each other, we should encourage and become advocates for each other. [Continue reading →](#)

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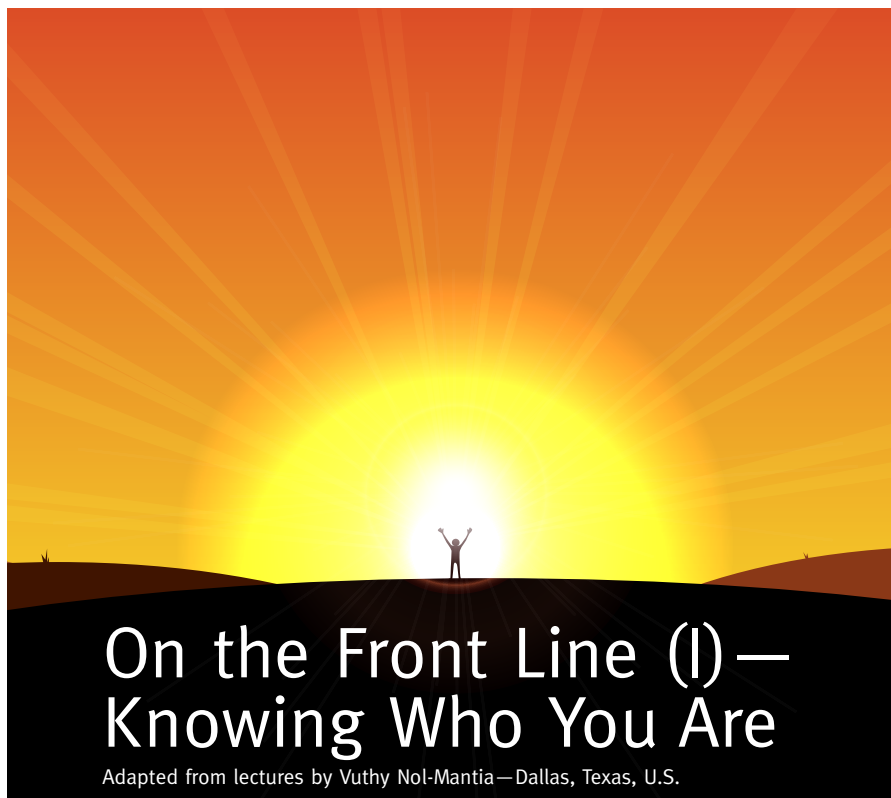
Five Loaves and Two Fish

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On the Front Line (I) — Knowing Who You Are

Adapted from lectures by Vuthy Nol-Mantia—Dallas, Texas, U.S.

Most—if not all—of us have seen soldiers in uniform, be it in the flesh, on the streets, in the movies or on TV. They generally evoke admiration because they seem so different—so cool and capable. Growing up, many children say it is their ambition to be a soldier in order to protect their family and country. However, being a good soldier is not easy; a soldier has to be self-disciplined and proactive; he must be willing to endure hardship and be ever ready to fight. Fundamentally, soldiers need to have a clear understanding of who they are and what they are supposed to do.

These are the very questions of identity, sense of belonging and role that many youths today struggle with. In particular, as youths in the True Jesus Church, how do we see ourselves?

This series of articles discusses the following questions: Do we truly know and understand who we are? Do we know our purpose in life? Are we equipped to fulfill this purpose?

IDENTITY: SOLDIERS OF CHRIST

When we were baptized, we became children of God by His grace (Jn

1:12–13; 3:5; Rom 6:4). Besides being adopted, we automatically enlisted in God's spiritual army; each and every one of us is a soldier of Christ. Since we accepted baptism by faith, the nature of our enlistment is voluntary. Even if we were baptized as an infant, if we have experienced God for ourselves then His grace and love will compel us to follow His calling and to serve Him. In fact, being a child and soldier of Christ is a precious status. Not everybody obtains this status because although God so loved the world, not all respond to this love. Though many are called, few are chosen. Hence, we must treasure this status which has been freely given to us.

ROLES OF GOD'S ARMY

Ready to Fight

What is the purpose of God's army? Most armed forces of this world have several service branches which play different roles in defending their homeland; some are more active and high-paced while others have a more passive or defensive function. The Lord's armed forces clearly must belong to the former category

because the enemy we fight is ever seeking opportunities to invade and conquer (1 Pet 5:8). In fact, a spiritual war is already being fought on our territory—the church. We cannot afford to hunker down and just wait to be bombarded. Instead, we must fight back by penetrating our enemy's front line and gaining victory over Satan (Eph 6:11–12). Satan seeks to destroy our faith through temptations, tribulations, and deception; he also wants to prevent us from saving more souls. So we must always remain on active mode, ready for spiritual warfare, whether it is at home, school, work, or church.

Determined to Save

The mighty men of King David were chosen—like us—to fight on the front line (2 Sam 23:8–12). On one occasion, the chief of the mighty men, Josheb-Basshebeth, single-handedly defeated an astounding 800 men. Perhaps we cannot relate to the feats of these mighty men but consider another man who, even more amazingly, defeated 3,000 in one go; that man is Peter. After the Holy Spirit descended upon him,



Do we truly know and understand who we are? Do we know our purpose in life? Are we equipped to fulfill this purpose?

Peter was moved to speak a sermon that cut to the hearts of his listeners. Many believed, repented, and were baptized—thus putting their old selves to death and being reborn in Christ Jesus (Rom 6:3–6).

From this perspective, the act of defeating men no longer pertains to physical death, but rather to turning men to Christ and putting to death their old man. The motto of the US Army's Special Forces, *De Oppresso Liber*—which means “to liberate from oppression”—describes well our role as the Lord's Army. There are many people who are still held captive by the king of the world (Jn 12:31; 14:30; 16:11). The primary act of spiritual warfare, then, is preaching the gospel of salvation—bringing people to the realization of their sinfulness, and their need for Jesus to liberate them.

When we reflect on our abilities, skills, and weaknesses, we may feel that we will never reach the heights achieved by the mighty men of the Bible. However, we should not easily give up. David's mighty men were originally homeless renegades, but they became mighty men after years of training. Peter was a fisherman given to bursts of impetuosity and whose nerve failed him at a most critical moment. But the Holy Spirit transformed him, bolstering his courage and bringing to mind all that the Lord had taught (Lk 22:33; Jn 18:10, 15–26; Acts 4).

Therefore, we too need to undergo training and equip ourselves with the Spirit and word of God, to be able to fight on the front line and to break through the enemy's line. Most importantly, we must acquire the attributes of a soldier in God's army.

CHARACTERISTICS OF GOD'S ARMY

Clothed in Fine White Linen

As with any army, the heavenly army has its uniform. John witnessed

“the armies in heaven, clothed in fine linen, white and clean” (Rev 19:14a). The fine, white linen that they wore was obtained at the point of baptism (Rev 7:13–14; 1:5; Acts 22:16). Hence, as we approach the end times, we must strive for holiness to ensure that our white linen robes remain unblemished (Rev 3:4; 16:15), because they identify us as members of this heavenly army.

Are our thoughts, words, and actions pure?

Riding on White Horses

In John's revelation, the armies in heaven rode on white horses (Rev 19:14). Jesus, the Lamb of God, also rode a white horse when “he went out conquering and to conquer” (Rev 6:2b). The white horse represents the true church, which means that Jesus will use the church to conquer and fulfill His purpose. In the same way, the armies in heaven rode on white horses; this signifies that we need to abide in the true church if we wish to be part of the heavenly army and have the power to overcome the enemy.

Do we really believe that the True Jesus Church is the only church that is saved in these last days?

Stay Focused

No one engaged in warfare entangles himself with the affairs of this life, that he may please him who enlisted him as a soldier. (2 Tim 2:4)

As a soldier of God, we must not entangle our lives with the things of this world. This does not mean that we spend all our time praying and reading the Bible or that we should all become full-time ministers; in fact, we should continue to study and work hard, since these activities can support the work of evangelism.

Neither does it mean that we cannot enjoy a life of variety. But our perspective should be different from that of the world. We must remember that the things of this world are

temporary and that they can keep us from reaching our full potential as mighty men of God. Our first priority should always be to serve God.

Today, what are we focusing on?

Be Watchful

*Behold, it is Solomon's couch,
With sixty valiant men around it,
Of the valiant of Israel.*

*They all hold swords,
Being expert in war.*

*Every man has his sword on his
thigh*

Because of fear in the night.

(Song 3:7–8)

There were about two million Israelites at the time, but Solomon chose only sixty to guard his carriage. These hand-selected sixty were experts in war. They all held swords which were bound on their thighs, meaning that they were always ready. Moreover, they had fear in the night, which, coupled with their readiness, shows that they were always watchful. Their fear also made them more humble, for they knew their limitations and weaknesses.

Today, we too must be watchful at all times. Do not complacently assume that our faith is strong enough to withstand any temptation that Satan can throw at us. The wily wicked one will tirelessly try to destroy us by planting impure thoughts in our heads and by using a plethora of temptations. Hence, we must be prepared. As Christian soldiers, we are on duty 24/7. In order to defend ourselves, we must pray and read the Bible regularly, for God's Spirit and word are the weapons we wield against Satan.

Are we Spirit-led and do we keep the word of God in mind at all times?

Being a full-time soldier is physically, emotionally, and spiritually challenging. But we can do all things through Christ who strengthens us.



Willing to Suffer

You therefore must endure hardship as a good soldier of Jesus Christ.

(2 Tim 2:3)

The soldiers of Christ must be willing to suffer for Him. As we preach the gospel or serve God in other ways, we may often have to give up our personal comfort and leisure activities, or sacrifice time with our families and friends.

Being a full-time soldier is physically, emotionally, and spiritually challenging. But we can do all things through Christ who strengthens us. We have been chosen by God to join His awesome army and to fight in His great battle, the battle at Armageddon (Rev 16:16). Therefore, we must fight to the end.

Are we prepared to endure hardship?

WILLING AND ABLE

Another battalion of the US army has *Volens et Potens*—"willing and able"—as a motto. Jesus Christ willingly gave His own life in exchange for ours so that we, though unworthy, can receive eternal life. If God so loved us, we too ought to be determined to engage in this spiritual battle—to be well-equipped with the armor of God, so that we can be like one of the mighty men on the front line, fighting for our Lord Jesus Christ and protecting our beloved family in Christ.

Are we willing and able to fight? ★

[To be continued...]

The International Youth Ministry website

The new online home for the International Youth Ministry is a simple platform for discovering youth training resources from around the world.

Visit the site to also find out about:

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Zaphnath-Paaneah

K.C. Tsai—Toronto, Canada

Z*aphnath-Paaneah* was the Egyptian name bestowed upon Joseph by Pharaoh (Gen 41:45). It means “the man who reveals mysterious matters,” for Joseph was able to interpret Pharaoh’s dreams and to foretell future events. To Pharaoh, Joseph was a Hebrew man of unknown background; he was as mysterious as the mysterious matters he revealed. Nevertheless, the dreams that Joseph interpreted allowed Pharaoh to see God’s will and God’s determination to bring them to pass (Gen 41:32). For this reason, he was willing to put the lives of the Egyptians and his own life into Joseph’s hands, for Joseph was a man “in whom [was] the Spirit of God” (Gen 41:38).

Hebrew shepherds were an abomination to the Egyptians (Gen 46:34), and the Egyptians disdained eating together with them at the same table (Gen 43:32). When Joseph was brought before Pharaoh, he was not only a Hebrew, but a criminal, newly shaven; a stranger whom others would not trust easily.

Yet Pharaoh was willing to believe him, and elevated him to the position

of governor. As a result, the whole of Egypt was delivered from the famine. Most people would have attributed Egypt’s survival to Pharaoh’s wisdom—how he recognized Joseph’s extraordinary talents and appointed him to steer them through potential disaster. But Joseph, with his spiritual insight, was able to see the “sending” of God (Gen 45:5–8).

Yes, God had sent him to go through the hatred and betrayal of his elder brothers, and into thirteen years of injustice and shame. But eventually, through his tenacity, Joseph was able to manifest the beautiful will of God.

When Joseph was sold to Egypt and became a servant in Potiphar’s house, the Bible records that God was with him (Gen 39:2). When he was tempted by his master’s wife, framed and imprisoned, the Scriptures continue to say that God was with him (Gen 39:21). It was God’s abidance that gave him the strength to remain strong and pure amidst the shame of slavery and the temptation to sin. God’s constant presence sustained him and prevented him

from giving up on himself in the face of all these humiliations.

God was with Joseph, not just for a moment, but throughout his whole life. He walked with him through good times and bad times.

Likewise, you only realize that God has been walking you through the difficult times when you pause to look back in time. That is when you see that you could not have made it through without God. Having God with you does not equate to having a smooth life. Rather, it is like a pilot flame that continues to burn red in the lamp during life’s dark times—a flame that will eventually light up a beautiful and vibrant life.

Forgiveness and compassion are important themes in the Bible. For example, the people of God rebelled against Him time and again, yet God would forgive and accept them as long as they were willing to return to Him. But His salvation grace was prepared not only for the elect, but also for the people of the world who are living in sin. The Lord Jesus repeatedly exhorted His followers with teachings of forgiveness and,



eventually, He forgave those who crucified Him. He also said that if a person wishes to receive God's forgiveness, he must first learn to have compassion and forgive others (Mt 18:33–35).

Nevertheless, Joseph's willing forgiveness of his elder brothers was no ordinary feat. They had sold him to Egypt, where he was enslaved, imprisoned, and made to endure injustice and shame.

During the famine, Joseph's brothers came to Egypt to buy grain. When they were brought before him, Joseph immediately recognized his brothers. However, they were unaware that he was the brother they had betrayed. It was then that Joseph remembered what he had dreamed in his youth, and was enlightened (Gen 42:6–9). Through these two dreams, God had foretold him of what was to happen. Long before Joseph had left home, God had already paved the way for him (Gen 45:5–8). He sent Joseph to be sold, framed, and imprisoned; to be forgotten by the butler; and finally to become the governor of Egypt, thus delivering his father's household and continuing the bloodline of Abraham.

It was at this moment that Joseph saw clearly the beautiful will of God, that there was a purpose for everything that had happened in his life. This sudden understanding of God's will empowered him, enabling him to unreservedly forgive his brothers. It was the moment of his *Peniel* (Hebrew: "the face of God," or to see God face to face). His forgiveness did not come from human effort, nor was it out of compulsion. It was made possible only through the understanding of God's perfect will. Joseph finally realized that all those humiliations and adversities were part of God's unyielding love for him and his forefathers. By the end of Genesis, when his father

passed away, Joseph even comforted his brothers when they were haunted by how they had wronged him in the past (Gen 50:15–21).

Therefore, it is only when you are willing to let go of your emotions and calmly seek the will of God in things that befall you that you can receive the peace and strength God has long prepared for you. This will be the moment of your personal *Peniel*. You will know why things happened as they did. And you will be victorious over the challenge of any misfortune.

When Pharaoh appointed Joseph as governor, he gave him an Egyptian name and fine Egyptian garments. He put a signet ring on his hand and a gold chain around his neck, and even gave him the daughter of an Egyptian priest to be his wife. He made Joseph, this lowly Hebrew slave, into an honorable Egyptian.

When his first son was born, Joseph named him *Manasseh*, meaning "causing to forget": "For God has made me forget all my toil and all my father's house" (Gen 41:51). He then named his second son *Ephraim*, saying, "God has caused me to be fruitful in the land of my affliction" (Gen 41:52). He thought he was ready to accept reality, forget his father's household, and assume a new life as an Egyptian noble. He was even ready to establish an Egyptian family and to govern the land of Egypt, his new home.

This being so, why did he give his two sons Hebrew names? Perhaps he could never truly forget everything that was in his father's house. Why? Because God was in his father's household! This was the God who established a covenant with his great grandfather, his grandfather and his father. His father's house was the root from which his connection

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with God stemmed. How could he possibly forget or give it up?

Eventually, Joseph brought his father and all his father's household out of the famine and moved them to Egypt. When Jacob was on his deathbed, Joseph brought his two sons before their grandfather. Jacob blessed them, saying, "Behold, I am dying, but God will be with you and bring you back to the land of your fathers" (Gen 48:21). But how could Manasseh and Ephraim enjoy, or even appreciate, their grandfather's blessing? They led the life of princes in Egypt. Their father was the second most powerful man in Egypt, and they lacked nothing. Their grandfather's blessing meant that they would return to the land of their forefathers to lead a nomadic life dwelling in tents—what was so good about that?

But through God's sending and the blessing of his father, Joseph saw what he truly wanted: he wanted to return! This desire, and his ability to see God's beautiful plan, allowed him to let go of the grandeur of Egypt.

It is always very difficult to forgive a person who has mistreated you, or come to terms with past suffering. However, Joseph was willing to overlook his own afflictions for the wonderful will of God, and follow through to accept whatever would happen. Consequently, it was the sending of God that allowed Joseph to look beyond the splendor of his achievements in Egypt and toward the precious covenant God had established with his forefathers. He was willing to let go of Egypt, which God had placed in his hands, and requested for his bones to be returned to the land God had promised to his forefathers (Gen 50:2–25).

Hence, Joseph took an oath from

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the children of Israel, saying, “God will surely visit you, and you shall carry up my bones from here.” Even if he was unable to return during his remaining years, his bones would go back to the promised land after his death (Gen 50:24–25).

Hebrews 11 records: “Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen... [And] without faith it is impossible to please Him” (vv. 1, 6). The author also describes the extraordinary acts of faith of the ancient saints. Joseph’s life of faith is summed up as follows: “By faith Joseph, when he was dying, made mention of the departure of the children of Israel, and gave instructions concerning his bones” (Heb 11:22). Joseph’s extraordinary act of faith was his desire to depart from Egypt and the instructions he gave concerning his bones.

In Egypt, Joseph had everything, and he had the ability to take care

of his relatives. The children of Israel established their homes in Egypt, and could thus lead a peaceful life and enjoy their work (Gen 47:27). However, Joseph knew that this was not the land given to them by God (Gen 50:24). They needed to return to the promised land. As for himself, his heart had taken off. He yearned for that promise.

Four hundred years later, Moses took Joseph’s bones out of Egypt (Ex 13:19). And after another forty years, when Joshua led the people to conquer Canaan, the Israelites buried Joseph’s bones in Shechem (Josh 24:32), the land which his father Jacob had given to him almost five hundred years before. This was the fulfillment of God’s promise to his forefathers: “[T]o you and your descendants I give all these lands” (Gen 26:3b; Gen 15:18).

When the meaning of his two dreams unfolded before him, Joseph

experienced *Peniel* in his life—he saw the traces of God’s work. Hence, he was willing to entrust himself to the Lord and to continue to accept His sending. This commission did not end when he became the governor. Egypt was only the means through which Joseph realized the unbreakable tie between his father’s household and God.

Oh Zaphnath-Paaneah, what mystery have you revealed?

Return to your homeland! You desire a much better homeland in heaven (Heb 11:15–16). You have transcended the glory and prosperity of Egypt, to see the true promise of God, and by faith, you have received the promise before passing away (Heb 11:13).

“Therefore God is not ashamed to be called [your] God...”

(Heb 11:16b) ★

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Manna Magazine Issue 75
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Towards Maturity

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MANNA
Towards Maturity

Growth—science tells us—delineates the living and non-living. All living things grow; the non-living do not. A pebble does not grow up to become a rock and then a mighty boulder. But little acorns become tender saplings and, in time, great oaks. Newborns become adolescents, adults, and eventually the aged.

Generally, when physiological growth is accompanied by intellectual, emotional, or social development, we say that the person has matured. In particular, parents hope that children do not just grow, but mature because then, these offspring will make the right choices to give themselves a good life.

Growth and maturity are just as indispensable in the spiritual sense. Before we came to know Christ, we were dead in sin. But the Lord Jesus’ sacrifice has given us life anew. Since we are spiritually living, then we ought to spiritually grow. And like any anxious parent, the heavenly Father hopes that we not only grow but attain spiritual maturity for there is much at stake. The mature will know the right path to take towards eternal life. The immature are easily led astray and quickly devoured by the evil one.

But precociousness is sometimes mistaken for maturity. A child who dresses like an adult and parrots adult speech is still not a true adult. So what is true spiritual maturity? How can we attain it?

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Manna is looking for certain types of articles, or article genres. Each genre constitutes a different subject matter and writing approach. If you are planning to write an article (regardless of topic), please try to adhere to one of the genres below.

Christian Living

A Christian Living article gives practical biblical guidance on real-life issues and how to use Jesus' teachings in our daily lives.
Article length: 1500-2000 words.

Bible Study

A Bible Study explores a passage or character from the Bible and draws out the teachings for readers to apply to their lives.
Article length: 2500-3000 words.

Doctrinal Study

A Doctrinal Study examines an aspect of True Jesus Church beliefs and may present it in comparison to other beliefs.
Article length: 2500-3000 words.

Exhortation

An Exhortation encourages and admonishes the reader in different aspects of the Christian faith.
Article length: 2000-2500 words.

Testimony

A Testimony recounts an experience in the Lord that will encourage and edify the reader.
Article length: 1500-2000 words.

Creative Writing

Creative Writing pieces include poems, parables, or short stories that illustrate a biblical teaching or idea. Keep in mind as you're writing: how will this edify the reader?

SUBMISSION INFORMATION

Please email electronic files of articles (Microsoft Word) to manna@tjc.org.

Please direct any questions to manna@tjc.org or Fax: +1-562-402-3190

In your submission, please include your name, mailing address, email address, and telephone number even if you wish to remain anonymous.

CALL FOR ARTICLES

Author Guidelines and Editorial Calendar

Issue #78:

Topic: Making Time for God

Articles due: August 1, 2015

See then that you walk circumspectly, not as fools but as wise, redeeming the time, because the days are evil.

(Eph 5:15–16)

In today's high-pressured world, time is precious: it has even become a commodity to be sold and a resource to be depleted. As advancing technologies continue to erode the boundary between work-time and home-life, spare time can seem a rare pleasure.

When we do have free time, do we fill it with our own pursuits and leisure? How much of our daily routines do we give to God? Do we only squeeze ten minutes of Bible reading and prayer around the edges of our packed schedules? Or do we only worship Him on the Sabbath?

The Bible says, "To everything there is a season, a time for every purpose under heaven" (Eccl 3:1).

God has given us twenty-four hours in a day—enough time to complete our God-given duties. So how can we balance a busy life with time for God? Should spending time with God be just another task on our list, or should He be at the center of all we do?

As children of God, we must become more Christ-like through personal spiritual cultivation. How can we prioritize our time so that we can do this? How can we make time between our studies, work and family responsibilities to serve God? And how can we redeem our time more wisely and efficiently to serve Him more?

In your submission, please include your name, mailing address, email address, and telephone number.

GENERAL WRITING GUIDELINES

CONTENT

- Content should be biblically sound and adhere to biblical principles.
- Article should be organized and have a logical flow of thought.
- The main point or teaching of the article should be clear to the reader.
- Readers should be able to apply what they have read to their daily lives.

GRAMMAR/STYLE

- Use active instead of passive voice.
- Write concisely.
- Use concrete words and ideas instead of abstract concepts.
- Use "plain old English" instead of obscure, academic language.
- Use the NKJV version when quoting Bible verses.
- Use American spelling, if possible.
- Adhere to the IA Style Guide in its latest edition.

True Jesus Church

Articles of Faith

Jesus the True God

Jesus Christ, the Word who became flesh, died on the cross for the redemption of sinners, resurrected on the third day and ascended to heaven. He is the only Savior of mankind, the Creator of the heavens and earth, and the only true God.

Holy Bible

The Holy Bible, consisting of the Old and New Testaments, is inspired by God, the only scriptural truth, and the standard for Christian living.

Church

The True Jesus Church, established by our Lord Jesus Christ, through the Holy Spirit during the time of the "latter rain," is the restored true church of the apostolic time.

Baptism

Water baptism is the sacrament for the remission of sins for regeneration. The baptism must take place in natural living water, such as the river, sea, or spring. The Baptist, who already has had received baptism of water and the Holy Spirit, conducts the baptism in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ. And the person receiving the baptism must be completely immersed in water with head bowed and face downward.

Holy Spirit

Receiving the Holy Spirit, evidenced by speaking in tongues, is the guarantee of our inheritance of the kingdom of heaven.

Footwashing

The sacrament of footwashing enables one to have a part with the Lord Jesus. It also serves as a constant reminder that one should have love, holiness, humility, forgiveness, and service. Every person who has received water baptism must have his/her feet washed in the name of Jesus Christ. Mutual footwashing may be practiced whenever is appropriate.

Holy Communion

The Holy Communion is the sacrament to commemorate the death of the Lord Jesus Christ. It enables us to partake of the flesh and blood of our Lord and to be in communion with Him so that we can have eternal life and be raised on the Last Day. This sacrament shall be held as often as possible. Only one unleavened bread and grape juice shall be used.

Sabbath Day

The Sabbath day, the seventh day of the week (Saturday), is a holy day, blessed and sanctified by God. It is to be observed under the Lord's grace for the commemoration of God's creation and salvation and with the hope of eternal rest in the life to come.

Salvation

Salvation is given by the grace of God through faith. Believers must rely on the Holy Spirit to pursue holiness, to honor God, and to love humanity.

Last Day

The Lord's Second Coming will take place on the last day when He descends from heaven to judge the world: the righteous will receive eternal life, while the wicked will be eternally condemned.

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For additional information on the True Jesus Church, contact us or visit us on our website. We look forward to hearing from you!

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