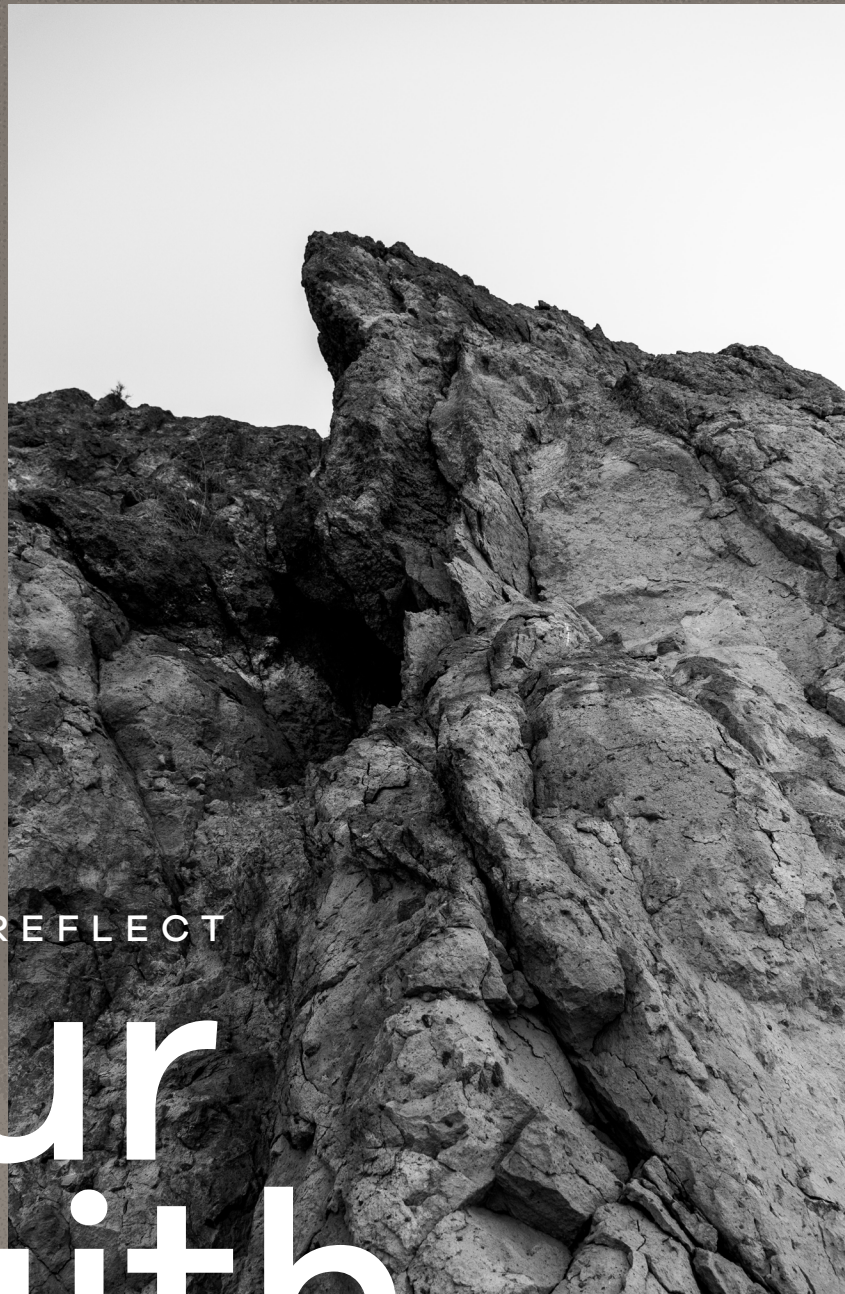


Manna

ISSUE 93 / OCTOBER 2022



TIME TO REFLECT

Our Faith

PART ONE OF THREE

REFLECTING ON OUR FAITH

KC Tsai—Toronto, Canada

There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all.
(Eph 4:4–6)

A baptism administered in the name of the Lord Jesus is not the same as one conducted in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. There is no name in the latter. These two modes of baptism cannot be from the same faith (one faith, one baptism) and hence not of the same body of Christ (one body), the church of salvation.

Our salvation depends on choosing the correct faith to follow. Therefore, we must humbly be taught by the Bible and rely on the Holy Spirit's guidance to look into the differences between faiths and make the right decision.

DRAW CLOSER TO GOD

The purpose of man's life is to seek God (Acts 17:27). Faith in Him is the most important thing. Without faith, it is impossible to please God, for whoever would draw near to God must believe that He exists and that He rewards those who seek Him (Heb 11:6).

We know we should draw near to God, but things around us drag us far from Him. Our faith goes up and down. How to increase in faith daily and always trust in God is a lifelong learning process. What prevents us from maintaining a good level of faith in Him?

WHAT CAUSES US TO LOSE STRENGTH?

From the Bible, we find even great prophets faced times of distress where they wanted to give up. Even Moses and Elijah, at the lowest points in their ministries, pleaded for their lives to be taken.

For Moses, this happened when God's people cried out for meat in the wilderness. The people craved for more than manna, the bread from heaven, and cried at the doors of their tents. The Lord's anger

was greatly aroused, and Moses' faith was immensely challenged. He felt powerless to move forward, so he pleaded with God to take his life (Num 11:15). He said: "I am not able to bear all these people alone, because the burden is too heavy for me" (Num 11:14). He thought he was doing everything alone!

But from the beginning, when God commissioned him, God told Moses, "I will certainly be with you. And this shall be a sign to you that I have sent you: When you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall serve God on this mountain" (Ex 3:12). God had not, and would not, leave His servant alone.

God gave him a sign (evidence), but he would only see it through faith—he had to first go to Egypt, administer the ten plagues by God's instruction, cross the Red Sea, and then walk nearly three months into the Wilderness of Sinai before he could witness this sign. He had to walk by faith, not by sight.

When Moses felt powerless, it was because he had insufficient faith in God's might. However, God reminded him, "Has the LORD's arm been shortened? Now you shall see whether what I say will happen to you or not" (Num 11:23). God caused quail to flutter near the camp of His people, delivering what they craved. God also sent seventy elders to assist Moses, thus reviving his faith.

THE IMPORTANCE OF SELF-EXAMINATION

It is essential to examine our faith periodically. Do you feel as though you are serving all by yourself? Are there certain things that you think are impossible for God to accomplish? We must walk by faith and draw close to God for strength.

Issue 93, *Our Faith*, is the first of three *Time to Reflect* issues, which will encourage us to examine our spiritual life on a deeper level. The articles in this issue look at how to strengthen and renew our relationship with God, and how faith affects every aspect of our existence. May we be spiritually enlightened through these articles and the Holy Spirit's guidance.

EDITOR IN CHIEF: Anna Khoo
MANAGING EDITOR: Marian Shek
DESIGN: Terence Shek, Priscilla Ho, Kirsty Ho
REVIEW BOARD: Andrew Chu (Australia), Tony Kuo (Canada), Joel Chong, Isaiah Phan (Malaysia), Peter Shee, Simon Chin (Singapore), FF Chong, Michael Chan, Zephaniah Hsu (UK), Lois Kuo, Patricia Chen, Richard Pang, Stephen Ku (USA)

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FROM KNOWLEDGE TO KNOWLEDGE

Vincent Yeung—Cambridge, UK



FAITH AND KNOWLEDGE

There would appear to be a tension between faith and knowledge. On the one hand, we believe that the tenets of our faith are based on biblical evidence, so improving our biblical knowledge is the way to progress in our faith. On the other hand, the Book of Hebrews defines faith as “the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen” (Heb 11:1). Therefore, some may feel that deep study of the Scriptures is a futile and academic endeavor, producing knowledge that stimulates the mind rather than strengthening faith.

Of course, placing faith and knowledge at opposite ends of a spectrum is an oversimplification. If this is an inadequate description, then how should we define the relationship between faith and knowledge?

The Role of Evidence

As mentioned, we have accepted this Christian faith because we believe in the biblical evidence upon which it is based. We think it is reasonable to accept certain biblical passages as proof for a belief or doctrine. Most believers—as rational people who understand what “evidence”

looks like—have decided that these texts prove the truth of our beliefs “beyond a reasonable doubt.”¹

However, if the evidence is so strong that the conclusion is indisputable, then what part does faith play? In fact, there are many aspects of doctrine that cannot be validated by irrefutable evidence. Statements such as “He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned” (Mk 16:16) or “unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God” (Jn 3:5) involve belief in the existence of life after death, final judgment, as well as heaven and hell. Such spiritual matters are intangible and cannot possibly be presented in a worldly courtroom.

The lack of physical evidence does not necessarily mean something is untrue. Scientists tell us that we are merely the activity of carbon and proteins as science does not recognize or measure the spiritual dimension of life. The existence of our souls—the “I” who exists, feels, and lives—

can neither be demonstrated nor proven; yet, it is inseparable from the concept of life beyond death and our beliefs. Often people cannot explain what they know to be true, but this does not diminish the truth of their claims. To Paul, God’s invisible attributes are clearly seen through His creation (Rom 1:18–20). We do not know the essence of God—His proportions are not evident to us. But these can be demonstrated by things we can observe, namely, by His effects. However, for non-believers, no reason has yet been given to prove God’s existence is self-evident.

Evidence or proof—subsumed in the term “knowledge”—is no substitute for faith. Nevertheless, our belief cannot exist in a vacuum. Without basis or substance, our faith would be blind faith or superstition. When we say we believe in God or Jesus, we must be able to substantiate our belief. When we repent and are baptized, we must know why we need repentance and baptism. Peter declares that the end result of our *faith* is the *salvation* of our souls (1 Pet 1:9); Paul says that salvation and *full knowledge of the truth* go hand in hand (1 Tim 2:4).

With this in mind, how should we pursue knowledge to support our faith? Is it necessary to know a lot before believing? What constitutes the full knowledge of the truth?

¹ In the court of law, the “standard of proof refers to the duty of the person responsible for proving the case. There are different standards of proof in different circumstances.” Proof beyond a reasonable doubt is the highest standard of proof, used in criminal law cases where a defendant’s life or liberty is at stake, so the jury must be convinced that the defendant is guilty beyond a reasonable doubt. Source: “Different Standards of Proof,” HG.org, accessed March 25, 2022, <https://www.hg.org/legal-articles/different-standards-of-proof-6363>.

KNOWLEDGE AS THEORY

The faith of God's chosen people is rooted in history—in what God has done for them. Paul summarized God's grace to them succinctly in one verse—"the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the service of God, and the promises" (Rom 9:4). Knowing God's historical dealings with the chosen people is the basis of our faith. In the same vein, our precious faith is obtained through the righteousness of God (2 Pet 1:1) and the resurrection of Jesus from the dead (1 Pet 1:3).

However, while knowledge of God's grace and Jesus' words and works is integral to faith, knowing may not lead to belief. Titus Flavius Josephus, the first-century Romano-Jewish historian, described Jesus as "a wise man." He wrote that Jesus "appeared to those who love him on the third day" and that the "tribe of the Christians, so called after him, has still to this day not disappeared" (*Antiquities of the Jews* 18:63). Josephus (born 37 C.E.) knew of Jesus, His message, the account of His death and resurrection, and the preaching of His followers. Yet his contemporaneous knowledge did not give rise to belief. We cannot go back in time to personally witness every historical event. Only a few hundred people witnessed Jesus' resurrection (1 Cor 15:3–6), and our belief is based on their testimonies. Thus, there will always be a gap between what the world considers as proof and what people of faith require. In the wisdom of the world, the wisdom of the wise, the message of the cross was considered foolish; only the people of faith considered it God's power (1 Cor 1:18–21) and were saved through their belief.

As such, some have come to view knowledge negatively and, in turn, those who profess to have superior knowledge, whether secular or spiritual (Col 2:8; 1 Cor 8:1). These "knowledge-sceptics" view all academic study of the Bible as bad, believing that only spiritual knowledge gained through Bible reading, listening to sermons, or via theological training in the church is good. Undeniably, modern theological studies seem to be increasingly devoid of piety towards God's word and belief. For example, some scholars assume that miracles did not happen and prophecies were *vaticinium ex eventu* (written after the authors already had information about the events being foretold).² These theologians maintain that predictions made by Jesus—such as the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 C.E.—were actually added to the gospels by the early church to make the message credible. In fact, there appears to be an

innate assumption that supernatural events or predictions cannot be true and are, therefore, inauthentic. Clearly, such a stance would not be conducive to faith in God.

"Man cannot find God by his own wisdom or effort. God took the initiative through the ages to reveal Himself at various stages of human development"

However, such a simplistic dichotomy between worldly and spiritual knowledge also carries its own danger.

Man cannot find God by his own wisdom or effort. God took the initiative through the ages to reveal Himself at various stages of human development. He appeared to Abram and invited him to leave his own home and travel to the promised land. The knowledge of the mystery of Christ was hidden for centuries, only to be revealed to the apostles and prophets by the Spirit at the time of His choosing (Eph 3:4–5; Rom 1:17; 1 Pet 1:20). The apocalypse, revelation, or unveiling of something covered is the way God conveys His purpose to humankind. Many had seen Jesus' work and heard His testimony, yet many did not believe in Him. The Pharisees knew the Scriptures well and searched them fervently, yet they did not come to believe in Jesus (Jn 5:39–40). Many of the Jews saw what Jesus had done and believed in Him, such as after Lazarus' resurrection (Jn 11:45). But the chief priest and Pharisees refused to accept (Jn 11:47). Those who shut their hearts and minds could not see, and God only opens the heart of those who seek after Him (Act 16:14).

² "Statements in which Jesus speaks of the suffering, death and resurrection of the Son of Man. This group of sayings is also not authentic, for in them Jesus predicts his passion and resurrection in a way that displays such detailed knowledge of what is to happen that the sayings simply must have originated as *vaticinia ex eventu*, as "prophecies" after the events had occurred or were believed to have occurred." Rudolf Bultmann, *The History of the Synoptic Tradition*, trans. John Marsh (New York: Harper and Row, 1963), 153.

³ GA Wells, *Did Jesus Exist?* (London: Pemberton Publishing Co, 1986), 124.



As Christians, we can acquire knowledge by learning the basic doctrines, studying the Bible, meditating on His word, participating in group discussions, or listening to sermons. The teachings of Jesus, the apostles, and the prophets form the foundation of our faith. However, revelation becomes information once revealed, written down, taught, and learned. The disciples witnessed Jesus' miracles of feeding five thousand and four thousand, but all they could remember was mere information; they failed to see the significance behind the miracles (Mk 8:19–21). We do not want to be mere archivists of information, adept at stringing together Bible verses and regurgitating the doctrines without progressing in knowledge. What more do we need to progress? Are we merely possessing information without reaping its benefits?

KNOWLEDGE AS EXPRESSION AND EMPOWERMENT OF FAITH

Growth in faith and knowledge are interrelated, not mutually exclusive. Knowledge does not supplant faith, and faith does not discount knowledge. Knowledge is more than theoretical conceptualization or the acquisition of information. People know God, but not all accept His lordship (Rom 1:21). Faith intertwines with knowledge—it actualizes and is augmented by it.

In Johannine terminology, “to believe” precedes “to know” (Jn 6:69; 8:31–32). “To know” gives “to believe” new power (Jn 16:30; 17:7–8). Jesus' followers saw the relationship between the Father and the Son gradually unfold. The initial encounter leads to belief, and further insight leads to the augmentation of faith. The disciples saw the first sign in Cana, and they believed in Him (Jn 2:11). They reaffirmed their belief by acknowledging that Jesus is the Son of God (Jn 6:69), yet their understanding was only partial (Jn 14:8–9). Knowing the significance of the relationship between the Father and Son reinforced their belief (Jn 17:7–8).

Faith and knowledge develop through experience. Paul did not know God would deliver him in Asia (2 Cor 1:8–11). After his experience of God's deliverance, he was in a position to comfort others (2 Cor 1:3–6). Knowledge thus consists of first and secondhand experience. The latter is acquired through learning, the former through experiencing. The former reinforces the latter, leading to a deeper understanding of God.

KNOWLEDGE AS A PRACTICE

Orthodoxy (correct doctrine) is vital, but it needs to be supplemented with orthopraxis (correct behavior.) The Christian view of knowledge is determined by an obedient and grateful acknowledgment of the deeds and demands of God.

The Hebrew *yada* (“to know”) denotes not only knowledge but also obedience towards God's word. God's chosen people did not know God (Isa 1:2–3), not because of their neglect of sacrifices, Sabbaths, or prayers (Isa 1:11–15). God loathed their offerings to Him because of injustice and oppression within the community. Therefore, living a Christ-like life is the true manifestation of orthodoxy, not the mere holding of a form of religion—boasting of our divine calling (Rom 2:17) and personal achievement in divine ministry (Mt 7:21–23).

To know God does not merely mean the knowledge gained from investigation, observation, or speculation. Religion is not a science but a devotion. God's love for the world is actualized in the sending of the Son (Jn 3:16), and Jesus' love, in obedience to the Father and service to the

world. Since the knowledge of Jesus or of God expresses itself in love, observing the commandments might also be called a criterion of “knowing” Christ (1 Jn 2:3–6). Merely saying we know God without having the behavior God desires will not lead us to salvation. Even Satan knows God very well but can only wait in fear for his judgment (Jas 2:19).

“Peter warned the believers that false prophets would arise among the people and bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Lord who bought them”

Heresies are nothing new in the church. Peter warned the believers that false prophets would arise among the people and bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Lord who bought them (2 Pet 2:1). There was much speculation about Jesus, angels, and demons during the apostolic and post-apostolic times, which continues today. However, the most insidious heresy in Christendom is denying the Lord. Of course, no Christian would deny Jesus outright. However, denying His power, promises, and demands is equivalent to denying Him. Peter was not writing about some far-fetched doctrinal speculation but about mundane deviance



in the form of indulgence, pleasure, carousing (2 Pet 2:13), lusts of the flesh (2 Pet 2:14, 18; 3:3; Jude 18), liberty (from the constraint of Christian norms) (2 Pet 2:19), and denying the second coming and, thus, the return of Jesus and the final judgment (2 Pet 3:4). Same-sex marriage, re-marriage, denial of the second coming, of resurrection, of heaven or hell, final judgment and eternal condemnation are common attitudes and practices that are advocated openly in non-True Jesus Church (TJC) denominations. What is unknown is the number of TJC members who secretly sympathize with some of these ideas or ideals or even practice them. False knowledge comes not only from academic theological research without true reverence towards God; it also encompasses knowing God's words without truly coming to Christ.

The knowledge is of God and of Jesus, but this knowledge should manifest in the form of godliness and virtue (2 Pet 1:2–3). These two words appear sixteen and four times in the New Testament; but in 2 Peter alone, "godliness" appears four times, and "virtue" three times. This being Peter's final encouragement to the believers, we can deduce how much weight he gave to pursuing godliness and virtue as vital steps in our journey of faith. We, the partakers of the divine nature, should not stagnate at mere theoretical knowledge of Jesus. The ladder of faith starts with faith, followed by virtue, knowledge, self-control, perseverance, godliness, brotherly kindness, and love (2 Pet 1:5–8). If we do not climb this ladder, the knowledge we possess will be useless. We remain barren and unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus (2 Pet 1:8). Without any progression in faith, our salvation is less than assured, and we may only barely scrape through to the kingdom of God (2 Pet 1:10–11; Phil 2:12). There are many pitfalls and temptations in life that may lead us to forsake the right way and go astray. We may become entangled in and overcome by the pollutions of the world, turn from the holy commandment, and be led away with the error of the wicked (2 Pet 2:15, 20, 21; 3:17). Paul warns us against the alluring fallacy of thinking we should sin more so that grace may abound (Rom 6:1). There are many who claim that since God is love, eternal damnation would contradict His nature. Restoration (*apokathistēmi*) of the kingdom of Israel (Act 1:6) could easily be leading to *apocatastasis*—restoration of all things—the final restoration of all

sinful beings to God and to the state of blessedness. However, Paul's answer was an unequivocal: "Certainly not! How shall we who died to sin live any longer in it?" (Rom 6:2).

CONCLUSION

Man comes to the knowledge of the truth not by exercising his reasoning powers but by accepting or being given the faith that enables him to use his reason correctly. Reason does not precede faith, as rationalism supposes, but faith precedes reason.⁴ The Septuagint Text of Isaiah 7:9 is translated as, "If you will not believe, you shall not understand" (Isa 7:9, LXX).⁵



We should first believe, then we will come to understand the thing which we believe. Reason itself must be justified by faith, by believing something that is not self-evident or demonstrable to all men. It is a fallacy to suppose that faith can be selected as the result of a purely rational and objective examination of facts; two people can arrive at opposing interpretations of the facts and even disagree about what are

⁴ Augustine, *De Utilitate Credendi*, 22-5: "Therefore seek not to understand that thou mayest believe, but believe that thou mayest understand." Augustine, *On the Profit of Believing* (United States of America: Beloved Publishing, 2014), 37–49.

⁵ Εάν μη πιστεύσῃτε οὐδε μὴ συνήτε: "If you should not trust, neither should you perceive." The NKJV is based on the Masoretic Text: "If you will not believe, surely you shall not be established."

and are not facts. This is the power of the human mind to pervert the truth, tempting men to believe that they are rational and that they alone can achieve salvation (Jer 17:9).

The unaided power of fallen reason, limited by the gaps in our empirical knowledge, fails to arrive at objective judgments of truth, especially in existential matters. Rational men will ask for rational evidence that goes beyond the limits of natural reason. Nevertheless, faith in the apostolic testimony is not a "blind" act of believing apart from any evidence; it is a characteristic of faith that it carries its own evidence. It is not a gift of knowledge, but a gift of seeing, by which knowledge comes. Faith is not a substitute for understanding but a condition of it; God resolves differences in opinion by revealing to those who are spiritually mature (Phil 3:15).

The danger in these last days is false pretenses in religion, holding a form of godliness but denying its power (2 Tim 3:5). The word of God does not benefit us when we are devoid of faith (Heb 4:2) and practice or action. Faith, love, and hope are intangible values, but they can be manifested in the form of work, labor, and patience (1 Thess 1:3).

"We must therefore grow and come to the unity of faith and of knowledge of the Son, resisting every wind of doctrine"

Cognitive understanding of God's word, wholehearted belief in Him, obedience to His will, and practicing His word constitute true knowledge of Him. God's word must be mixed with faith (Heb 4:2). If we lack understanding of what we believe in and how that is translated into action, we will become entrenched in complacency. We must grow and come to the unity of faith and knowledge of the Son, resisting every wind of doctrine (Eph 4:11–16). Paul states that he prays for wisdom, knowledge, and understanding on behalf of the believers so that they may be patient (faithfully observing the word), bear fruit (right behavior), and grow in the knowledge of God (having their understanding reinforced and enhanced) (Col 1:9–10). If we possess these three elements of knowledge, we shall be able to stand firm against every wind of adverse influence that besieges us on our heavenly pilgrimage.



STRAINED RELATIONSHIPS, STEADFAST FAITH

Philip Shee—Singapore

Moreover, brethren, I declare to you the gospel which I preached to you, which also you received and in which you stand, by which also you are saved, if you hold fast that word which I preached to you.

(1 Cor 15:1–2)

While receiving and standing in the word of God is indeed key to our salvation, it is equally critical that we hold fast to the word right to the end. This is consistent with the Bible's teachings about holding on to our faith and enduring to the end:

*"Now the just shall live by faith;
But if anyone draws back,
My soul has no pleasure in him."*

But we are not of those who draw back to perdition, but of those who believe to the saving of the soul.

(Heb 10:38–39)

And you will be hated by all for My name's sake. But he who endures to the end will be saved.

(Mt 10:22)

But he who endures to the end shall be saved.

(Mt 24:13)

These passages point to the need to remain steadfast even in extreme suffering, adversity, and persecution. Regrettably, as we pore over old pictures, we are often reminded of brethren who were once fervent in the faith and zealous in service but are no longer in the church. They might have left because they were offended or disappointed in some way. While their departures were not without reason, it is sad that the triggers are often nowhere near the level of adversity for which the above Bible passages prepare us. Sometimes people leave due to the actions of others and, over time, seek to justify their departure by deviating from

the truth they once embraced and picking faults with basic biblical doctrines. How can we preserve our faith and salvation when we face relationship issues that could eventually cause us to forsake the truth?

MISUNDERSTANDING

As the church is a body of diverse people who interact frequently, there will inevitably be instances of miscommunication and misunderstanding between members. These can rapidly deepen into mistrust if they go unresolved, resulting in further misunderstanding. Involved parties begin to view every conversation with suspicion, analyzing every word for hidden meanings, and scrutinizing every action as each person doubts the other's intentions. Relationships begin to splinter and break. Eventually, such broken relationships, particularly between those who were once best of friends, can lead us to distance ourselves from other members. This can then spiral into us doubting our faith and diluting the truth we once accepted with these same people.

*"When both ploys failed,
Satan started planting
misunderstandings
between members to
divide the church"*

We must recognize Satan's hand in stirring such troubles in church. As the apostolic church grew, Satan's insidious

disruption also multiplied. The initial persecution came from external sources, with the arrest of Peter and John after the miracle at the gate called Beautiful. But Satan's subterfuge rapidly moved into the church with the corruption of Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 3–5). When both ploys failed, Satan started planting misunderstandings between members to divide the church:

Now in those days, when the number of disciples was multiplying, there arose a complaint against the Hebrews by the Hellenists, because their widows were neglected in the daily distribution.

(Acts 6:1)

The daily distribution of food to widows was a favorable arrangement of love within the early church. Ironically, even a positive practice was hijacked by Satan to attack the church. The disagreement could have arisen from the oversight of the Hebrews or the oversensitivity of the Hellenists. However, to conclude that it was a deliberate, systemic, and malicious decision by the Hebrews would deepen any existing misunderstanding between members who were already one in Christ, who "were of one heart and one soul," and "had all things in common" (Acts 4:32). This was a dangerous development as it could have triggered deep division within the church as each community viewed the other with suspicion and animosity, resulting in individuals and households feeling unfairly treated.

Thankfully, the apostles had wisdom and guidance from God to handle this swiftly, resulting in a good outcome. The church was asked to appoint from among themselves seven men of good reputation,

full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom, to assist the apostles in this matter. It is noteworthy that the ones chosen included people with Greek names, such as Nicanor, Timon, and Parmenas, who were likely Hellenists. This was an elegant way to resolve sensitivities, as these seven men would have been trusted to be fair, given the representation from the Hellenists and the respect they would have had from the believers who selected them.

Similar challenges could occur in church today as Satan continues to disrupt the work of God. If unaddressed, such misunderstandings could build up negative emotions among members. Cynicism can set in if they cannot reconcile the perceived lack of justice or fairness in church with the word of God they hear, particularly if they already harbor prejudice against specific speakers or church leaders.

As we recognize Satan's ploys, we should increase our vigilance, "with all lowliness and gentleness, with longsuffering, bearing with one another in love, endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (Eph 4:2–3). And as we continue to embrace "the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God... we should no longer be like children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine" (Eph 4:13–14).

PRIDE

The Corinthian church comprised many gifted and affluent believers, knowledgeable, eloquent, and full of worldly wisdom. They could have used their resources and blessings from God to further His ministry. Unfortunately, their pride took the front seat as they sought to glorify themselves, boasting of their gifts rather than glorifying God or edifying the church. And as they pandered to their ego, each elevated themselves above others. Some even felt superior to Paul and despised him and his teachings. They started to find reasons to differentiate themselves from others, including making distinctions between the workers of God, as though these workers were divided, with different views of the truth:

Now I say this, that each of you says, "I am of Paul," or "I am of Apollos," or "I am of Cephas," or "I am of Christ." Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?
(1 Cor 1:12–13)

[F]or you are still carnal. For where there are envy, strife, and divisions among you, are you not carnal and behaving like mere men? For when one says, "I am of Paul," and another, "I am of Apollos," are you not carnal?
(1 Cor 3:3–4)

As Paul defended the unity of the apostles—that he, Peter, and Apollos were completely aligned—he also called out the error of the Corinthians:

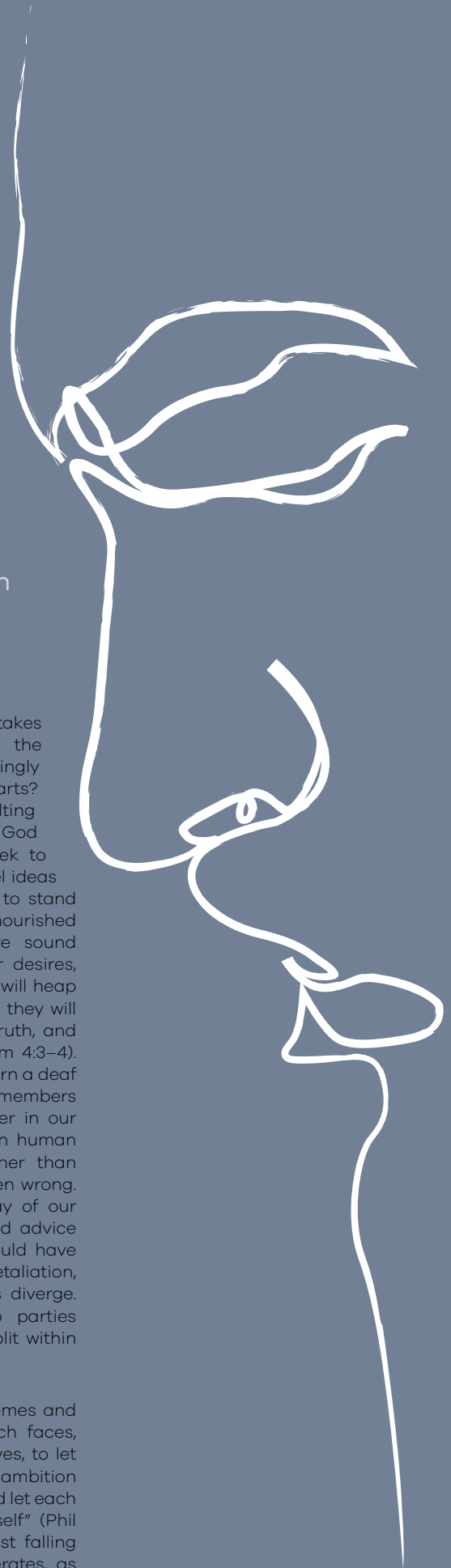
Now these things, brethren, I have figuratively transferred to myself and Apollos for your sakes, that you may learn in us not to think beyond what is written, that none of you may be puffed up on behalf of one against the other. For who makes you differ from another? And what do you have that you did not receive? Now if you did indeed receive it, why do you boast as if you had not received it? (1 Cor 4:6–7)

Knowledge puffs up, but love edifies. And if anyone thinks that he knows anything, he knows nothing yet as he ought to know. (1 Cor 8:1b–2)

"Our pride can stand in the way of our relationships in church as sound advice is deemed an attack"

We need to learn from the mistakes of the Corinthians and heed the teachings of Paul. Have we unwittingly allowed pride to creep into our hearts? If so, we could be in danger of exalting ourselves rather than glorifying God or edifying others. We may seek to establish ourselves through novel ideas or unsound new teachings just to stand out. Our pride may be further nourished by some who "will not endure sound doctrine, but according to their desires, because they have itching ears...will heap up for themselves teachers; and they will turn their ears away from the truth, and be turned aside to fables" (2 Tim 4:3–4). As our fan base grows, we may turn a deaf ear to advice from concerned members as we entrench ourselves deeper in our deviant views. This is a common human reflex: defending ourselves rather than admitting that we may have been wrong. Our pride can stand in the way of our relationships in church as sound advice is deemed an attack. What should have prompted reflection sparks retaliation, and relationships sour as views diverge. This could eventually lead to parties departing from the faith or a split within the church.

As we recognize the devil's schemes and this potential danger the church faces, let us constantly humble ourselves, to let "nothing be done through selfish ambition or conceit, but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than himself" (Phil 2:3). We must also guard against falling into how the proud person operates, as Paul observes:



If anyone teaches otherwise and does not consent to wholesome words, even the words of our Lord Jesus Christ, and to the doctrine which accords with godliness, he is proud, knowing nothing, but is obsessed with disputes and arguments over words, from which come envy, strife, reviling, evil suspicions, useless wranglings of men of corrupt minds and destitute of the truth.

(1 Tim 6:3–5a)

HUMAN DIFFERENCES

While the apostolic church was clearly led by the Holy Spirit and serves as a positive model for us on many fronts, we can also learn from records of human weaknesses among early church workers.

Euodia and Syntyche were good workers who labored with Paul in the gospel and with Clement and many others whose names are in the Book of Life. While both were sincere workers who could cooperate well with others, they could not get on with each other. The underlying reasons are unclear, but their animosity was so severe that Paul had to implore them to be of the same mind. Paul also urged other members to help these women overcome their differences (Phil 4:2–3). If coworkers cannot agree, they leave a foothold for the devil to disrupt the work of God and divide

the church. Their disagreement may initially be due to different approaches to church work. But as distrust and animosity deepen, each may build up supporters who oppose the work of the other, even contradicting their teachings and views. At this stage, confusion in the word of God may surface among the members.

For the sake of the church, we must seek to disregard our differences and endeavor to “keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (Eph 4:2–3).

“Such a clash between two leaders in the church could have led to a major crisis”

Peter and Paul also disagreed at a point in their ministry. At that time, there were different views in the church concerning Gentile believers. While Peter had accepted them and would eat with them normally, he withdrew and separated himself from them when some circumcised believers came to visit. His hypocrisy also triggered similar behavior from the other Jewish believers, including Barnabas. When Paul witnessed Peter’s conduct, he confronted him directly (Gal 2:11–14). Such a clash between two leaders in the church could have led to a major

crisis. Peter could have become defiant, defensive, or even adversarial from a bruised ego. After all, he was a key pillar in the church, and he might have wondered how Paul, being a newer worker, had the audacity and arrogance to tell him off so directly.

On the other hand, Paul could have continued riding his moral high horse, treating Peter with disdain and disrespect. This would have been disastrous for the ministry. Thankfully, both Peter and Paul were magnanimous spiritual leaders who could move forward positively. They did not let their clash drive them apart or cause them to diverge in their teaching of the word. On the contrary, they both converged and cooperated in their ministry. Paul’s epistles were available to Peter, who referred to him as a beloved brother. In his teachings, Peter also reinforced Paul’s epistles, urging believers to remain steadfast and not twist the Scriptures:

[A]nd consider that the longsuffering of our Lord is salvation—as also our beloved brother Paul, according to the wisdom given to him, has written to you, as also in all his epistles, speaking in them of these things, in which are some things hard to understand, which untaught and unstable people twist to their own destruction, as they do also the rest of the Scriptures. You therefore, beloved, since you know this beforehand, beware lest you also fall from your own steadfastness, being led away with the error of the wicked.

(2 Pet 3:15–17)

While serving in church we may also experience clashes between coworkers. In such times, let us learn from the spirituality of these two early workers.

On another occasion, Paul and Barnabas had firm but differing opinions about whether to take John Mark along on their missionary trip. Their contention was so sharp that Barnabas took Mark, Paul took Silas, and they parted ways. Again, this appeared to be an unfortunate development in the ministry and put a regrettable strain on the relationship between two good coworkers (Acts 15:36–40). Both Paul and Barnabas had valid reasons for their opinions. To Paul, missionary work was not to be taken lightly, and John Mark had indeed left the missionary work midway in the past (Acts 13:13). Conversely, Barnabas probably felt that John Mark was just a young, inexperienced worker who ought to be given a second chance and nurtured with patience. We may experience similar situations in church today. Again, given that both Paul and Barnabas were spiritual workers, they did not allow their contention to lead to deviation from the truth. They neither regarded each other with enmity nor viewed each other's work with disapproval. The church continued to prosper (Acts 16:5), and Barnabas also managed to turn John Mark around to become a good worker, beneficial to the ministry, which was acknowledged by Paul (2 Tim 4:11).

FAMILY CONFLICTS

Just as disruption from within the church is more dangerous than external threats, a far more significant blow to our faith may, unfortunately, come from our family members within the church. This would be a double whammy, as our loved ones often impact us the most.

What if there are conflicts within our family despite everyone being supposedly within the faith? Would these conflicts affect our conviction in the truth, our faith in God's love, and our zeal in our service? Would we distance ourselves from church if we were privy to behavior we deemed hypocritical among our family members, who may be respected within the church, concluding that others in the church are similar?

“Even the most spiritual people have flaws that they have yet to overcome or moments of weakness when they fail to live up to God's standard”

For a start, we must recognize that nobody is perfect. Even the most spiritual people have flaws they have yet to overcome or moments of weakness when they fail to live up to God's standard. David, a man after the heart of God, fell into sin over Bathsheba and was unaware of his hypocrisy (2 Sam 11:1–12:14). Abraham, the father of faith, lacked the courage to protect his wife when he told Abimelech that Sarah was his sister (Gen 20). Peter and Barnabas were hypocritical in their behavior towards the Gentile believers (Gal 2:11–14).

Hence, even as we witness weaknesses and failures among our family members who should know better, let us not be overwhelmed by surprise, disappointment, or disgust. After all, their human weaknesses have no bearing on the faithfulness of God. We must also be careful not to be overly judgmental just because we are more familiar with these family members than others are—as Jesus warned us, “A prophet is not without honor except in his own country and in his own house” (Mt 13:57).

A more unfortunate and trickier situation would be when one or more of our family members stray from the truth or commit a mortal sin. As we interact with them, we may experience a deep conflict within as we try to defend the truth, tantamount to proclaiming judgment on our loved ones.

As we struggle with the pain and turmoil within us, we may even question or blame God for the situation. Such circumstances are indeed unfortunate, and we may not always have immediate answers as to why they transpired.

However, our indignation will not help us to better understand or solve the challenge. The only option is to remain steadfast, continue doing what is right, and trust that God will have an answer for us eventually. We can learn from how Jonathan chose his spiritual relationship with David, established in the Lord, over his physical relationship with Saul, his father. He opposed his father's erroneous behavior and supported David instead (1 Sam 19–20). When the sons of Aaron—Nadab and Abihu—died before the Lord for offering profane fire, this must have been difficult, sad, and painful for Aaron. But he held his peace when God explained the reason (Lev 10:1–3). Abraham, when tested, offered his son, Isaac, on the altar. And God acknowledged that Abraham did not withhold even his son from Him (Gen 22:1–12). Hence, while we should love our family, we must recognize that such love must never exceed our love for God. For this reason, the Lord Jesus left the following teaching for us:

He who loves father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me. And he who loves son or daughter more than Me is not worthy of Me. (Mt 10:37)

FINAL REFLECTIONS

As we continue our walk of faith, our fellowship in the church, and our service to the Lord, it is inevitable that Satan will attempt to disrupt and derail our journey to salvation. There may be times when we experience challenges in our church relationships or conflicts within our family. We learn from the records of the apostolic church and the experiences of the saints that they also faced similar challenges. They were, however, able to overcome them to reach good outcomes. Likewise, whether we face disappointments, provocations, misunderstandings, or any other challenges within our relationships, let us not allow these to translate into doubts about the truth that we have embraced, and let us remain steadfast in our faith to the end.

RENEWING OUR SERVICE TO GOD

Timothy Yeung—Vancouver, Canada

INTRODUCTION

Though serving God is the duty of every born-again Christian, we may sometimes find that our service lacks strength and direction. Some brothers and sisters serve, yet struggle with the fundamentals of their faith, eventually leaving the church. Others lack the strength to carry on in their service because of personal issues and external factors. How do we find inspiration and power from God to continue serving diligently? The answer is to renew our attitude to service through spiritual cultivation. How can cultivating our faith help us to renew our service to God?

1. SERVING GOD WITH A RENEWED MINDSET

I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable

to God, which is your reasonable service. And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God. (Rom 12:1–2)

Paul tells us that when we serve God, we must serve with a renewed mind. This means removing our old mindset—the mindset of the world. The world focuses on outcomes, achievements, and other metrics to judge performance, rather than looking at core beliefs and values. What God wants from us and how He judges our service is different from how the world measures success. So what should our mindset be?

We must start by asking the question: what is the work of God? Does it refer to taking on duties in the church? Charitable acts? Or making a sacrifice? When asked to define “God’s work,” Jesus gave a straightforward answer:

Then they said to Him, “What shall we do, that we may work the works of God?” Jesus answered and said to them, “This is the work of God, that you believe in Him whom He sent.” (Jn 6:28–29)

Re-establishing Our Faith in Sound Doctrine

As we serve God, let us not forget the fundamentals of our faith—the truth that leads to salvation. The basics of serving God lie not in carrying out church work but in believing in Him. This means believing in God’s word and having deep conviction in sound doctrine:

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)

But you must continue in the things which

you have learned and been assured of, knowing from whom you have learned them, and that from childhood you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus.

(2 Tim 3:14–15)

“Let us reflect on our attitude and relationship to God’s word”

If we desire to serve God in a certain ministry or volunteer for church duties, let us reflect on our attitude and relationship to God’s word: do we wish to serve others or be in the spotlight, but find no interest in studying basic doctrine, believing this to be for truth-seekers or new believers? Do we enjoy digging into the Bible in seemingly new and obscure ways but lack the zeal to build a strong foundation on the basic beliefs? On the contrary, we should have a humble attitude toward God’s word, and unshakeable faith in the basic beliefs. Only through humility can we have insight into God’s word and strengthen our foundation

so that we will not be influenced by worldly knowledge and reasoning, or attempt to use logic to change the understanding of the basic beliefs. That is why Paul encouraged Timothy not to deviate from the pattern of sound words. This is the true, and most important, way of serving God.

Brethren, do we build ourselves up in the most holy faith (Jude 20)? Let us renew our service with a deeper understanding of and conviction in the pattern of sound doctrine, which makes us wise for salvation, given to the one true church.

2. SERVING GOD WITH RENEWED STRENGTH

When we serve God in various church ministries, be it through youth ministry, sermon speaking, interpreting, teaching religious education, or participating in visitation groups, we may find that after an initial period of excitement and learning, we begin to feel fatigued. We may lack the strength to continue.

When this happens, we can become

unmotivated and easily dissatisfied. We compare ourselves to other workers and wonder why we are doing all the heavy lifting, or why others are not participating. We start to focus on the weaknesses of others and what they are not doing, which discourages us even more. This may even lead us to consider quitting or scaling back our commitments to focus on our own lives. How do we prevent ourselves from burning out? What can be done to revive our zeal in the ministry?

Renewing Our Love to Jesus By Faith in His Salvation

I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service.

(Rom 12:1, emphasis added)

Paul was human and sometimes felt disheartened. He faced persecution, hunger, imprisonment, danger, false brethren, loneliness, and other challenges (2 Cor 11:23–27). But how did Paul maintain his zeal and persist in serving the Lord?



It all comes back to the foundation of his faith. Through faith, Paul believed Jesus loved and died for him, and these facts were all that mattered.

Focusing on God's mercy is the key to reviving our motivation to serve Him. It is the only way to propel ourselves forward and get back on task when we feel tired and discouraged.

This is a faithful saying and worthy of all acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am chief. However, for this reason I obtained mercy, that in me first Jesus Christ might show all longsuffering, as a pattern to those who are going to believe on Him for everlasting life.
(1 Tim 1:15–16)

Paul took Jesus' sacrifices and salvation very personally. His strong faith in the personal nature of salvation constantly

reminded him of Jesus' love, inspiring him to live for Jesus every day of his life. Even though Jesus came to save the whole world, Paul knew he was the worst of all sinners and that Jesus died for him.

When we focus on the cross, all other things, including hardship, persecution, and the weaknesses of others, fade into the background. No wonder Paul writes:

Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written:

"For Your sake we are killed all day long; We are accounted as sheep for the slaughter."

Yet in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us.
(Rom 8:35–37)

If we ever tire of serving God, we should examine our faith (2 Cor 13:5). Faith produces hope, and hope produces love, and love in Jesus Christ can help us endure all difficulties in our life and service. The love that compelled Paul to serve through hardship will also help us serve Jesus to the end. Therefore, we should pray and ask God to increase our faith.

3. SERVING GOD WITH A RENEWED DIRECTION

And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God.
(Rom 12:2)

Another reason for a weakened attitude



to service may be that we lack direction. Imagine sailing a ship without navigation or driving a car aimlessly, wasting time and gas. We would be frustrated, and every lost minute would feel like forever. We need direction to be motivated. At times, it is not that we lack focus but that we are heading in the wrong direction. Instead of being directed by God's will, we insist on our own, and the resulting struggle between the two drains our time and energy. Look at Peter's service before he received the Holy Spirit:

From that time Jesus began to show to His disciples that He must go to Jerusalem, and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and be raised the third day. Then Peter took Him aside and began to rebuke Him, saying, "Far be it from You, Lord; this shall not happen to You!" But He turned and said to Peter, "Get behind Me, Satan! You are an offense to Me, for you are not mindful of the things of God, but the things of men." (Mt 16:21–23)

Peter believed in the correct thing, that Jesus was the Son of God. He forsook all to follow Jesus because he wanted to serve Him. He, therefore, loved Jesus very much, to the point that he wished to save Jesus' life. Peter loved Jesus according to his logic. However, Jesus sternly rebuked him and cast out Satan, because, at that moment, Peter had unwittingly worked for Satan to oppose Jesus' salvation plan. Peter's direction was the opposite of Jesus' direction, which posed a problem for Peter and his ministry.

"We think certain things are good for the church, our family, and ourselves; we impulsively argue or fight for what we believe is best"

This can happen to any one of us today. We do what is right in our own eyes. We think certain things are good for the church, our family, and ourselves; we impulsively argue or fight for what we believe is best. However, true service is not about following our judgment; it requires putting ourselves aside, humbling ourselves, and seeking God's will. God's will can be very different from our plans and preferences. Sometimes His will goes against common logic—His wisdom is hidden within His

timing and arrangement. Without humility, we will never really understand God's will and timing. That is why Paul says of Jesus' salvation:

*Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and His ways past finding out!
"For who has known the mind of the LORD? Or who has become His counselor?"
"Or who has first given to Him And it shall be repaid to him?"
For of Him and through Him and to Him are all things, to whom be glory forever. Amen.* (Rom 11:33–36)

It is important to surrender to God's will when serving Him. Sometimes we must



learn that God's time is not our time. Or that God does things His way, while training us to submit to Him. When Jesus was praying in the Garden of Gethsemane, His own will was struggling with the Father's will, which is why He was in so much agony:

Then Jesus came with them to a place called Gethsemane, and said to the disciples, "Sit here while I go and pray over there." And He took with Him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, and He began to be sorrowful and deeply distressed. Then He said to them, "My soul is exceedingly

sorrowful, even to death. Stay here and watch with Me." He went a little farther and fell on His face, and prayed, saying, "O My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as You will." (Mt 26:36–39)

Jesus, who had a body like everyone else, would have naturally feared the impending torture of crucifixion. He did not wish to drink the bitter cup, so He asked the heavenly Father to take it away. However, there is a crucial lesson in this struggle: when Jesus chose to accept the will of the heavenly Father, He chose a new direction, and His strength was renewed. He said:

"Father, if it is Your will, take this cup away from Me; nevertheless not My will, but Yours, be done." Then an angel appeared to Him from heaven, strengthening Him. And being in agony, He prayed more earnestly. Then His sweat became like great drops of blood falling down to the ground. (Lk 22:42–44)

We rely not on our strength but on strength from God, which comes from submitting to Him. When we choose to lay down our life, we obtain life. Our service will be strengthened when we serve God with this new direction of complete submission.

CONCLUSION

*He gives power to the weak,
And to those who have no might
He increases strength.
Even the youths shall faint and be weary,
And the young men shall utterly fall,
But those who wait on the LORD
Shall renew their strength;
They shall mount up with wings like eagles,
They shall run and not be weary,
They shall walk and not faint.* (Isa 40:29–31)

Faith, spiritual cultivation, and service are inseparable. If our service to God is not built and based on belief in sound doctrine, then our service will be worthless in God's eyes. Moreover, there is so much to cultivate while serving God. The only way to be a pleasing, living sacrifice to Him is to serve with a mindset renewed by belief in sound doctrine, strength renewed by faith in His salvation, and a direction renewed by submission to His will. These are the areas God wants us to work on so we are continually inspired and empowered to glorify His name.

WHO AM I? (Part 1)

Boaz—Malaysia

Editor's note: This two-part series looks at understanding ourselves and how our different roles and identities can either contradict or complement our Christian status. This first article focuses on managing our conflicting dual identities.

UNDERSTANDING OURSELVES

"Who am I?" is not a question we ask ourselves regularly. In contrast, "Who are you?" is more common, either sparked by curiosity or even uttered with disdain. But it is essential to turn the question on ourselves, to spur us to know our true selves better. In this quest for self-knowledge, the important questions to ask are:

Who am I after I shed my work positions and titles?
Who am I after I lose my wealth and abilities?

Who am I without health and mobility?
Who am I behind the outer facade?
Who am I when my soul leaves my physical body?

DUAL IDENTITIES

Much like a coin, human nature has two sides—golden on one side, rusty on the other. Human nature is golden and noble when it yields itself to the radiance of love. However, in its cruel willingness to destroy life, human nature is corroded and base.

All of us have dual identities. As an individual, I harbor two conflicting extremes. My visible physical body coexists with my invisible soul. I have a short and temporal physical life but also an eternal spiritual life.

I am also filled with contradictions. My actions often contradict my thoughts. Even as I take medication for hypertension because I fear death, I binge on my favorite fatty meat with little thought of the consequences! Although I have the Holy Spirit of God abiding in me, I think and behave like one who does not know God. While I know that I will die one day, I refuse to face up to this reality and make adequate preparation for this eventuality.

1. Son and Sinner

The biblical example epitomizing the dual identity of son and sinner is the prodigal son. He was both scion and swineherd, both son and sinner. Since we also hold this dual identity as God's children and sinners, we often find ourselves in conflict.

The apostle Paul captures it succinctly:

I thank God—through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, with the mind I myself serve the law of God, but with the flesh the law of sin.
(Rom 7:25)

This is the conclusion to the passage in which Paul explains his struggle. He once lived as a sinner who incurred the wrath of God. But the Lord Jesus' death on the cross paid the debt of his sin. Therefore, Paul's mind desires to submit to God's law, and his soul was revived after baptism, making him the son of God. However, his soul is still trapped in a fleshly body heading for death because the flesh submits to the law of sin.

The death of the fleshly body is the common end of all man, regardless of whether one believes in God. Through baptism, our souls are reborn. But the reborn soul within the physical body is like a free person who remains imprisoned. In his prison of sinful flesh, man cannot do good liberally by merely depending on the resolution of his heart. Worse, man often perceives himself as kind and just while blind to his sin!

If we recognize our transgressions and weaknesses, we will not be so blasé. Instead, we would immediately give thanks for God's amazing grace. Who am I that the heavenly Father would choose me, out of the billions in the world, to be His son?

For whom He foreknew, He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the firstborn among many brethren. Moreover whom He predestined, these He also called;

whom He called, these He also justified; and whom He justified, these He also glorified.
(Rom 8:29–30)

Even more marvelously, the holy and Almighty God foreknew sinners such as us before we were formed in our mother's wombs (Jer 1:5) and even before the creation of the world (Eph 1:4). From foreknowing to calling, when the time was ripe, God led us—the stiff-necked donkey—with gentle cords and bands of love (Hos 11:4). Through the blood of His only beloved Son, we were made righteous and could put on Christ. On the last day, He will raise us from death and allow us to enter His glory.

As sinners, we were worse than the prodigal son who lived with the unclean swine. Yet we became sons, not by our own righteousness, but by God's grace.

What price did we have to "pay" to avail ourselves of such grace? We needed only to believe in Jesus to be fully and freely justified.

[B]eing justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.
(Rom 3:24)

But to him who does not work but believes on Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is accounted for righteousness. (Rom 4:5)

"What price did we have to 'pay' to avail ourselves of such grace? We needed only to believe in Jesus to be fully and freely justified"

What a contrast this is to the world where "there is no such thing as a free lunch!" Even if we have access to free products and services, this is only in exchange for our valuable personal data.

What price did Jesus have to pay to make a sinner a son? The glorious Son of God became as a sinner to suffer death on the cross. Every time the thought of His incomparable love and sacrifice comes to mind, my heart cries out, "Hallelujah," as I thank Jesus from the bottom of my heart!

2. Holy Spirit and Carnal Desires

Receiving the Holy Spirit is a joyous and unforgettable experience. But who would dare claim that all our fleshly desires ceased the moment we received the Holy Spirit? Even today, who can declare

that we are no longer tempted and troubled by our carnal desires?

At the moment of receiving the Holy Spirit, we felt victorious and determined that sin would never again encroach into our lives. However, as time went by, our bad habits slowly returned. Despite having once been completely razed by "heavenly fire," the weeds of these old habits began to sprout when the spring breeze (carnal desires) blew. Indeed, we may even be unsure whether we truly have the Holy Spirit because, apart from the evidence of tongue-speaking, we do not seem to possess any power to overcome these desires.

For the flesh lusts against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; and these are contrary to one another, so that you do not do the things that you wish. (Gal 5:17)

Our body is a battlefield where the Holy Spirit wars with our carnal desires; we will be hard-pressed between the two if we try to remain neutral. If we yield to our flesh, we grieve the Holy Spirit. If we yield to the Holy Spirit, our flesh cries out that it is suffering. For example, our flesh murmurs to us, "You are already so exhausted, just skip prayer this once," or "You are already serving so zealously. Just relax a little today and have a beer. It's just a beer; you are not committing a crime!"

We would not be the first to be placed in such a quandary. Even the father of faith faced difficult choices. In particular, Abraham had to choose between his sons. Keeping both Isaac—the son born of promise—as well as Ishmael—the son born of the flesh—would have been disastrous. There would have been no peace in Abraham's household. Therefore, God instructed him to drive Ishmael out.

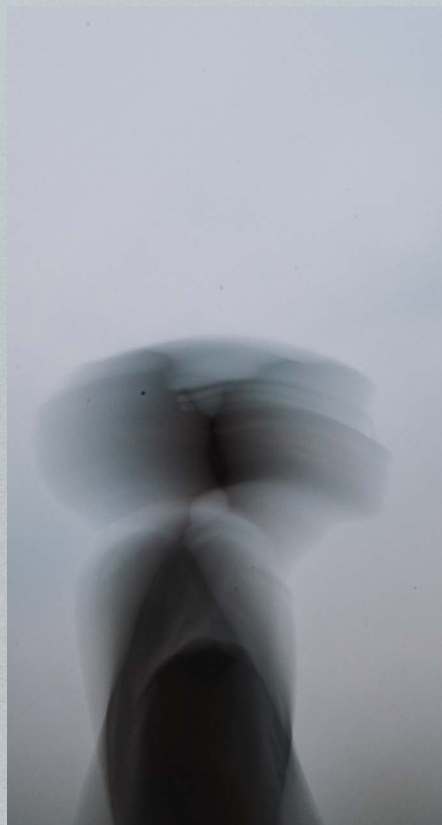
Today, driving out our carnal desires is the only way our body can rid itself of the harassment of our carnal desires. This is literally a battle of life and death. If we are defeated, death—not of our fleshly body, but of our eternal soul—is a certainty! Overcoming our carnal desires is the only way to enjoy the peace of both body and mind. If we fail to extricate ourselves, our daily lives will be a painful vicious cycle of weakness-sin-repentance-weakness.

For if you live according to the flesh you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live.
(Rom 8:13)

True repentance is critical. We may pray for forgiveness each time we sin but are our hearts sincere in repentance? True repentance requires us to turn away from our transgressions. But often, we dare not promise God that we will not repeat the sin. In fact, we are keenly aware that our weakness will resurface, that we are unable to break free from the bondage of carnal desires. We were unbound, then bound again. Nevertheless, if we strive to improve, we can and will reach the honorable goal that God has set for our life. But if we yield to lust, we sink into degradation and end up in a depraved state.

For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you should abstain from sexual immorality; that each of you should know how to possess his own vessel in sanctification and honor.
(1 Thess 4:3–4)

In the parable of the prodigal son, the younger son ended up living with the swine and eating their food. It was not that the prodigal son had forgotten that the swine was an unclean animal according to his Jewish faith and that his actions



were akin to committing a sin. Rather, he had forgotten his identity as his father's son—that he could fall back on his father no matter what. Eventually, this man came to his senses and returned home to his father's bosom. Had he remembered his identity earlier, he would not have had to live with the swine.

Who we are—this honorable identity as the son of the Almighty—must always be foremost in our minds. Remembering that God has redeemed our body and soul at a great price will help us maintain our holiness and keep us from yielding to our carnal desires and defiling our bodies.

3. Body and Soul

When standards of living rise, we no longer worry about whether we have enough to eat. Instead, we are more concerned about eating and drinking to remain healthy. We consciously take health supplements and exercise. We do all these good things to maintain the bodies given to us by the heavenly Father. Those particular about their looks are willing to pay considerable amounts for cosmetic treatments to eliminate wrinkles.

And yet, regardless of how well we eat, how much we exercise, or how advanced medical science is, who can add one cubit to his stature? Who can avoid death? No one!

Those who only plan for their physical bodies are short-sighted. They forget that within the visible outer shell is an invisible soul—the "I." Consider our smartphones. These comprise not just the visible



hardware but also invisible software. The hardware is subject to wear and tear. Parts can be replaced, but we must also update the phone's operating software to keep our phones functioning smoothly. Similarly, besides keeping our physical bodies healthy, we must also ensure that we are spiritually fit and healthy (1 Tim 4:8).

"To determine whether we are spiritual 'savers' or 'spendthrifts,' compare our earthly bank balances against our offerings to God"

Why do people save or make long-term investments? It is because they have faith or hope in the days to come; they want to be prepared for the future. Conversely, those who do not think there are better days ahead would seek out instant gratification and enjoy themselves while they can. Similarly, Christians store up treasure in heaven because their hearts are in heaven, and they value the everlasting future much more than the temporal world they live in (Mt 6:21). To determine whether we are spiritual "savers" or "spendthrifts," compare our earthly bank balances against our offerings to God. Do not merely store up treasure on earth. Otherwise, we will reach heaven as paupers, with our riches left behind on earth, if we are fortunate enough to make it to heaven. It would be tragic if we ended up in hell due to inadequate heavenly investments!

Do not become the rich fool (Lk 12). From the perspective of the temporal world, he was a successful man. He had a flourishing business and the foresight to increase his goods store. But in the eternal kingdom, he was foolish and ignorant. Although he appeared to be preparing his soul (he told his soul to take ease and enjoy), he was not making any preparation for his eternal life. What the soul needs is not the security brought by physical resources. Instead, it needs to return to God.



When should we start to prepare for the future of our soul? To borrow a phrase commonly used by insurance companies: "Start as soon as possible." Do not be discouraged if we have neglected to do so. In John 3, Nicodemus—a Pharisee and a Jewish leader—came to learn from Jesus. The Lord did not think that this rabbi was over-age or too steeped in Judaism to be reborn and enter the kingdom of God. Jesus patiently explained to him the mystery of spiritual rebirth because, in Jesus' eyes, it is never too late to prepare to enter the heavenly kingdom.

CONCLUSION

As we go through life, we have to manage our dual identities, lest we forget who we are. Who am I when I am stripped bare of the ephemera of worldly wealth, status, and physical facade? I was a sinner, but Jesus gave His life to redeem me and reconcile me to God. I am a human being who still yields to carnal desires, but Jesus sends His Spirit to dwell in me to help me become a victorious Christian. I used to chase material wealth foolishly but am now following Jesus' exhortation to store my treasures in heaven.

Who am I? Many may not know me, but God does. Most precious, although I was made from mere dust, the Almighty God knows me by my name. Just as He called His chosen prophets by name, He has recorded my name in the Book of Life. Moreover, if I diligently prepare for the future of my soul, when the roll is called up yonder, Jesus will call me by name.

DO NOT LOSE YOUR HEIRLOOM

Aun Quek Chin—Singapore

The Oxford English Dictionary defines the word “heirloom” as “a valuable object that has belonged to a family for several generations.” An heirloom’s significance may be derived from its market price as a rare antique or from its sentimental value as a tangible piece of family history. For example, we may think of a sewing machine that a great-great-grandmother used to make a living and raise her family, subsequently passed down through the generations. No matter its monetary worth, an heirloom is a treasured item handed from parent to child.

As children of the heavenly Father, we have a spiritual heirloom that He has set aside for us: the kingdom of heaven. We know, too, that this heirloom is not freely gained—it is through the blood of Jesus that we have come to receive this precious legacy. So we ought to ask ourselves: Have we esteemed this inheritance lightly? How do we ensure that we do not lose this heirloom?

GIVE EARNEST HEED TO THE WORD

Therefore we must give the more earnest heed to the things we have heard, lest we drift away. (Heb 2:1)

In our day and age, it is undeniable that the most popular seminars

are about wealth creation or wellness. We all need money and health to lead comfortable lives; unsurprisingly, everyone is looking for the best ways to gain both. Nevertheless, these seminars only concern our body and our present life on earth. No matter how healthy or wealthy we are, we will all one day die, and the years pass in the blink of an eye. More important are our salvation and the heirloom that we are to receive.

If we believe Jesus redeems us from our sins so that we can receive the eternal inheritance, we must give more earnest heed to what we have heard. These things are not spoken by men but by God concerning our eternal salvation and life. Jesus said, “He who has an ear let him hear” (Rev 2:7). Jesus repeated this phrase throughout His message to the seven churches in Revelation, to emphasize the need to hold on to the things we have heard and not drift away.

Do we heed the word earnestly and hold on to what we have heard? Or are we like a leaky pail that

brings home less water than it was filled with? When we attend services and listen to sermons each week, do we retain the word of God that we receive? Can we recall the teachings or how God’s word may be applied in our lives? Today, there are many things to learn and consider, and we eagerly study these techniques and knowledge in the quest for a better life or self-improvement. But do we love these ideas more than God and our heirloom? Be careful lest we drift away.

“If our faith is weak today, it is not because we do not believe but because we do not diligently and actively secure our faith”

To “drift away” refers to a boat adrift at sea. A drifting boat does not move according to the pilot’s wishes but simply follows the tide and current. If our faith is weak today, it is not because we do not believe but because we do not diligently and actively secure our faith. We allow our faith to drift along with the ebb and flow of the current of time, and we drift farther and farther away from our heirloom. Someone once asked Jesus, “Lord, are there few who are saved?” (Lk 13:23). Jesus did not answer him directly but told him to strive to enter the narrow gate. The heavenly kingdom, the heirloom of our heavenly Father, is for those who strive to receive it. The heavenly kingdom belongs to those who are diligent in entering it. We should not relax and allow ourselves to drift along



with the currents but put in the effort to row the boat towards our destination.

DO NOT NEGLECT OUR SALVATION

[H]ow shall we escape if we neglect so great a salvation, which at the first began to be spoken by the Lord, and was confirmed to us by those who heard Him? (Heb 2:3)

We may think that “neglect” is a small matter because it is so passive—we are simply not acting. So we may wonder: how can inaction be a sin, and how can it cause us to lose our heirloom?

The seat belt is one of the most basic safety systems in the car. According to statistics,¹ seat belt usage in the United States is high, at 90.4 percent in 2021, but 51 percent of passengers killed in car accidents in 2020 were unrestrained. In 2017, seat belts saved an estimated 14,955 lives, but could have saved an additional 2,549 lives if they had been used. Although it is widely accepted that seat belts save lives, some commuters still do not use them. Cherishing our heirloom is like fastening the seat belt of our souls. If we neglect to put on this seat belt, we may lose our eternal life.

Of course, the alternative—actively striving to secure our heirloom—is not easy, and there will be times when our faith is unsteady. Yet whatever the situation, we must persist. It may feel like a heavy burden, but if we take small steps, the burden will be bearable. There have been testimonies of church members who, even though they were reprimanded at work by their bosses, could still quieten their hearts and go for service. Imagine that you are starving but about to leave for church—would you stop to eat food even though you would certainly be late for service? We can think of many excuses not to come to service, but let us be diligent with the basics of our faith. Remember that Jesus told us to strive to enter by that narrow way. We must put in our due effort to hold on to our heirloom, and Jesus will do the rest.

ASSEMBLING TOGETHER

And let us consider one another...not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together...and so much the more as you see the Day approaching. (Heb 10:24–25)

If we believe that the Lord’s Day is approaching, we will all the more renew our efforts to gather with our brethren. We may understand that Sabbath services are important, but do we view other scheduled services in the same light? Attending services and the coming of the Lord Jesus are inextricably linked.

At Jesus’ second coming, where there are two in the field, one will be taken, and the other left behind (Mt 24:40; Lk 17:36). This is commonly interpreted as a distinction between believer and unbeliever, but it can also describe a situation where both are believers of Christ. It all depends on our relationship with Him.

“I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing. If anyone does not abide in Me, he is cast out as a branch and is withered; and they gather them and throw them into the fire, and they are burned.” (Jn 15:5–6)

Those baptized have established a relationship with God and are connected to the true vine. However, we should not take for granted that we will always remain so; baptism is only the beginning. We must strive to stay connected to the vine and never depart. Only then will we receive His preservation and our heirloom.

“However, some have grown cold and no longer gather in church, arguing that Christ, not the church, was nailed on the cross for us”

The church is the body of Christ. When we come to church, we abide in the Lord Jesus. However, some have grown cold and no longer gather in church, arguing that Christ, not the church, was nailed on the cross for us. Therefore, they believe it unnecessary to gather in church and that worshipping Jesus alone is enough. However, the Bible tells us that the church is the body of Christ. The Spirit of God fills the church, and we are saved through the church, by water baptism in the name of Jesus. Through the church, we partake in the Holy Communion, to have eternal life. Through the church, where sermons are spoken, we are encouraged. When Christ comes again, we will be lifted up, but those not in the church will be treated as unbelievers—in Revelation, Jesus told John not to measure those in the temple’s outer court (Rev 11:1–2). Therefore, we must have a relationship with Jesus in which we abide

in His temple, the church. Let us esteem coming to services and assembling. We will only receive the heirloom prepared for us at the end of all things.

DRAW NEAR WITH FAITH

[L]et us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. (Heb 10:22)

Some have complaints against the church: They say they do not feel God or His love, or they see hypocrisy in the church. They feel that their problems persist and God does not help them, so there is no reason to continue attending church.

However, when we come before God and seek to draw near to Him, we should be relying on faith, not feelings. We will be disappointed if we draw near based on what we feel. Our coming before God with faith pleases God (Heb 11:6). And we should reflect on our intentions—are we drawing near God with a true heart?

Suppose you are visiting a friend’s house, and he does not tidy before you come or serve you anything when you are there. Complaining about these reveals that you did not visit your friend with a true heart. If you had, all the above would not matter. You would just be glad to spend time with him, even if no food is served, the sofa is hard, or the ambiance is terrible. Being happy to be there shows you are a true friend with a true heart.

“God did not provide me with bread. God did not heal my sickness. Brothers and sisters did not help me with my problems.” All these complaints reveal the intents of our heart. If we do have a genuine need, those needs should be secondary. The primary purpose of coming to church is to worship the God who saved us, and the grace of worshipping God should be enough for us to offer our life to Him. No one was willing to die for us and suffer for us. But Jesus was. How can we neglect so great a salvation? How can we neglect the heirloom paid for at so high a price? With that in mind, we should reflect on whether we go to church with a true heart to worship God.

Let us treasure and hold fast to the priceless heirloom of the heavenly kingdom and the salvation God has given us. Give earnest heed to His word, not neglecting our salvation or assembling with our fellow brothers and sisters, but drawing near to worship God with a pure heart.

¹ “Seat Belts,” National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, accessed June 2, 2022, <https://www.nhtsa.gov/risky-driving/seat-belts>.

PARABLES OF THE HEAVENLY KINGDOM

(Part 5)

KC Tsai—Toronto, Canada

Editor's note: The seven parables in Matthew 13 reveal the knowledge of the kingdom of God, enabling men to find the true church. In the first parable—the parable of the sower—only seeds that fall on good soil will grow, be deeply rooted, flourish, and bear fruit. Everyone has an equal chance to find the kingdom of heaven, but only the truly receptive heart will understand the gospel, come to the true church, and continually walk in God's word. In the second parable—the parable of the tares—tares sown among the good seed will ultimately be weeded out and destroyed. The devil works through false brethren to trouble the true church. True believers should not lose heart but trust God to ultimately eradicate these sons of the wicked one. In the third parable—the parable of the mustard seed—the eponymous seed grows into a huge tree, attracting birds to nest in its branches. The growing true church will suffer the infiltration of heresies. To continue to enjoy God's abidance, the true church must firmly uphold the truth at all times. In the fourth parable—the parable of the leaven—leaven hidden within a small measure of meal leavened the entire lump. The true church must remain hypervigilant because the slightest tolerance of immorality and infidelity to the truth will corrupt and destroy the church.

This installment continues with the fifth and sixth parables.

THE PARABLE OF THE HIDDEN TREASURE

"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)

In ancient times, there were no convenient facilities such as banks and safe deposit boxes to keep valuables safe. Most people would hide their treasures in the ground (Mt 25:24–25). Over time, some of these treasure owners might forget their exact location or die without leaving instructions about their buried wealth. So the treasure would remain "lost" until someone "found" it. In the parable, the man who found the treasure was not a professional treasure hunter who went around searching for and collecting riches. He just happened to see the treasure, or part of it, protruding from the ground. Under rabbinic law, if a laborer unearthed something valuable buried in a field, it would belong to the landowner. In this case, the finder was honest enough not to steal the treasure. But he understood its great worth, so he carefully re-hid it before quickly selling all he had to purchase that field. By so doing, he gained rightful ownership over the treasure.

There are several aspects of the parable worth reflecting on. First, what treasure is so precious it is worth giving up everything one owns? The apostles and prophets give us some clues.

Yet indeed I also count all things loss for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as rubbish, that I may gain Christ. (Phil 3:8)

Paul's greatest treasure was the *knowledge of Jesus Christ*. In the past, he had high

status, learning, and wealth. But he was willing to forsake all these for Christ. Moses was a prince dwelling in magnificent Egyptian palaces. However, he regarded the reproach of Christ as far greater riches than the treasures of Egypt because he looked to the reward (Heb 11:26). Thus, his greatest treasure was to *suffer reproach for Christ*. Similarly, although Peter and the apostles were arrested, questioned, beaten, and threatened by the council, they rejoiced that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for the Lord's name (Acts 5:41). These apostles treasured and gloried in the opportunity to suffer for Christ.

"Like the fortunate protagonist of Jesus' parable, and like the apostles, we have freely received opportunities from the Lord to know Him, serve Him, and suffer for Him"

Second, the discovery of the treasure was completely serendipitous. The man did not set out to look for the treasure; the treasure found him! Realizing that such an opportunity may not come again, he immediately took action. Like the fortunate protagonist of Jesus' parable, and like the apostles, we have freely received opportunities from the Lord to know Him, serve Him, and suffer for Him. The question is whether we recognize the value of this treasure and, if we do, whether we joyfully and immediately cast aside all the "rubbish" of our worldly lives to ensure that we secure these spiritual treasures.

Third, the man in the parable accidentally stumbled across the treasure, but the Scriptures tell us that there are hidden treasures that we should continually seek.

*My son, if you receive my words,
And treasure my commands within you,
So that you incline your ear to wisdom,
And apply your heart to understanding;
Yes, if you cry out for discernment,
And lift up your voice for understanding,
If you seek her as silver,
And search for her as for
hidden treasures;
Then you will understand the fear
of the LORD,
And find the knowledge of God.*

(Prov 2:1–5)

While different people would perceive different things as treasures, a person truly concerned about God's kingdom and his spiritual life would constantly seek *wisdom*. Wisdom leads us to have a better knowledge of God and His word. Wisdom enables us to understand the true value of the trials we suffer (Jas 1:2–5).

Treasure in Earthen Vessels

But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellence of the power may be of God and not of us.
(2 Cor 4:7)

Fourth, it is believed that first-century Romans would bury their valuables in clay pots in the ground. Paul uses the metaphor—treasure in earthen vessels—to remind us of our commission. Earthen vessels refer to the lowly and weak bodies of the Lord's servants. The treasure is the *ministry that they have received* (2 Cor 4:1, 5–6). Through the Holy Spirit's revelation and guidance, they can proclaim God's word and the gospel of salvation to shine forth Christ's glorious light in a dark world.

RE-EMERGENCE OF THE TRUE CHURCH

Afterward he brought me to the gate, the gate that faces toward the east. And behold, the glory of the God of Israel came from the way of the east. His voice was like the sound of many waters; and the earth shone with His glory. It was like the appearance of the vision which I saw—like the vision which I saw when I came to destroy the city. The visions were like the vision which I saw by the River Chebar; and I fell on my face. And the glory of the LORD came into the temple by way of the gate which faces toward the east. The Spirit lifted me up and brought

me into the inner court; and behold, the glory of the LORD filled the temple.
(Ezek 43:1–5)

This treasure was hidden in the ground during the period represented by the latter part of the parable of the mustard seed and the parable of the leaven. Only when the fullness of time came would this treasure be found. According to various biblical passages, the true church would be from the "east" (Ezek 43:1–5; Rev 7:2).



Establishment of the True Jesus Church

On May 23, 1917, God spoke to Wei En-Bo of Beijing, China, saying: "You must fast for thirty-nine days." He obeyed God's instruction and began fasting. During this period of fasting, Wei would often preach by the roadside during the day, and pray and write at night. On May 26, 1917, when he was praying, he suddenly heard a loud voice from heaven saying, "You must receive the baptism of Jesus!" Guided by the Holy Spirit, he came to Dahongmen River. As he knelt in the water and prayed, a great voice said, "You must face downward and be immersed in the water." Wei obeyed the instruction and bent forward into the water. When he came out of the water and looked up, he saw the glorious Savior appear before him. Emerging from the water, he felt physically and spiritually purified. When he entered the woods, the Savior appeared to him again, instructing him to change his name to "Paul" and to correct the errors of other denominations.¹

On November 11, 1917, to establish the church, Paul Wei printed a leaflet entitled *Rules and Regulations of the Church that Corrects Errors*, and published a book, *True Testimonies of the Holy Spirit*. Following this, he went to the city of Rongcheng in Shandong Province, where he sold part of the land he owned. On November 16, he sold another two and a half acres of land in exchange for RMB ¥46, to fund the work of evangelism. On November 27, he sold another piece of land for approximately RMB ¥100, to pay for his coworkers' expenses and for printing costs.

The experience of the early workers of the True Jesus Church reflects that of the treasure-finder in the parable. Guided by the Holy Spirit's revelation, these early workers gained the precious knowledge of the truth of salvation. They then joyfully "sold all that they had"—some sold land, some forsook family businesses—to travel to various places to preach the reformed truth and establish churches. This was the treasure they received: the commission of the Holy Spirit to preach the complete truth of salvation imparted by Him.

¹ Jiazheng Zheng, *Introduction to the True Jesus Church and Her Doctrinal Thoughts* (Taichung: Philemon Bookstore, 2015), 14–15.

THE PARABLE OF THE PEARL

"Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant seeking beautiful pearls [plural], who, when he had found one pearl of great price, went and sold all that he had and bought it." (Mt 13:45–46)

Jesus begins this parable with the word "again," which links it with the preceding parable of the hidden treasure. Both are about men who found something so valuable they were willing to sacrifice all they had to own it. However, in contrast to the laborer who accidentally discovered the hidden treasure, this parable is about a knowledgeable merchant who looked for fine pearls and succeeded in finding one. This merchant not only knew how to buy and sell, he knew how to seek beautiful pearls and could discern between good and bad pearls.

What does the beautiful pearl refer to?

Pearls: Complete Truth of the Gospel of Salvation

Then one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls filled with the seven last plagues came to me and talked with me, saying, "Come, I will show you the bride, the Lamb's wife." And he carried me away in the Spirit to a great and high mountain, and showed me the great city, the holy Jerusalem, descending out of heaven from God. ...The twelve gates were twelve pearls: each individual gate was of one pearl. And the street of the city was pure gold, like transparent glass.

(Rev 21:9–10, 21)

The Bride of the Lamb is the holy city, the New Jerusalem, and the spiritual true church which will descend from heaven. This is the city with foundations, whose builder and maker is God. It is prepared for the triumphant saints (Heb 11:8–10, 16).

But there shall by no means enter it anything that defiles, or causes an abomination or a lie, but only those who are written in the Lamb's Book of Life.

(Rev 21:27)

This is why the holy city has twelve gates, and each gate is a pearl. These twelve pearls stand guard as the gates of this city. Only those whose names have been written in the Lamb's Book of Life may enter. They enter the true church through the pearls.

The twelve pearls pertain to the complete requirements of God concerning righteousness. These refer to His complete word, the truth of the salvation gospel. We can infer this by comparing what the Lord

Jesus and Peter once said.

According to our Lord, we should not "give what is holy to the dogs; nor cast [our] pearls before swine, lest they trample them under their feet, and turn and tear [us] in pieces" (Mt 7:6). According to Peter, those who have "known the way of righteousness" and "turn from the holy commandment delivered to them" are like dogs who return to their vomit or pigs who, despite being washed, return to "wallowing in the mire" (2 Pet 2:21–22). In other words, "what is holy" and "pearls" refer to the holy commandment and the way of righteousness. These pearls are the teachings of the Lord and the salvation grace He has accomplished—the words of life and genuine, spiritual wisdom.

Pearl: Wisdom from Above

But God has revealed them to us through His Spirit. For the Spirit searches all things, yes, the deep things of God. For what man knows the things of a man except the spirit of the man which is in him? Even so no one knows the things of God except the Spirit of God.

(1 Cor 2:10–11)

The true church is likened to a connoisseur and merchant who seeks and can recognize a beautiful pearl (biblical truth, wisdom from above). However, success in one's search for the pearl depends not on one's skill but rather on opportunity. Through the Holy Spirit, God led the church to the valuable pearl. It is also the Holy Spirit who enabled her to see the value of the pearl. The early workers of the church thus forsook all that they had (the worldly wisdom and erroneous beliefs they once esteemed) in exchange for this pearl (the mysterious wisdom of God, the complete truth) (1 Cor 2:6–10).

Similarly, after the light of the Lord shone upon him, Paul understood the truth (Acts 9). All the things he used to cherish—the Jewish traditions, the requirements of the Old Testament law (Gal 1:13–14), and his high position within the sect of the Pharisees (Acts 22:3–5; 26:4–5)—were little more than rubbish. He counted "all things loss for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus" (Phil 3:8).

Pearl: Teachings from the Bible

Beautiful pearls (plural) refer to the teachings from the Bible. Biblical teachings are always consistent throughout the Old and New Testaments. For example, concerning forgiveness, the Lord Jesus said:

"For if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses." (Mt 6:14–15)

He also said, "So My heavenly Father also will do to you if each of you, from his heart, does not forgive his brother his trespasses" (Mt 18:35). The Old Testament perfectly illustrates this divine forgiveness: God forgave His people time and time again. This teaching regarding forgiveness is a beautiful pearl through which men can be forgiven by the heavenly Father. Others, like "love one another," "honor your parents," "do not judge," "do not commit immorality," and so on, are all beautiful pearls.

Pearl: Doctrine of the Church

This precious pearl is so valuable that the merchant could afford it only after he had sold all he had. The extent of the merchant's sacrifice reflects his conviction that living without this pearl would be impossible. Today, this priceless pearl refers to the complete, pure, and genuine doctrine of the true church. Without this pearl, salvation becomes impossible.

"Baptism is unquestionably not just an 'outward act' of belief in the Lord but is for the 'remission of sins'"

Baptism for the remission of sin: Many Christians believe that the remission of sin happens at the point of belief. But after Paul was called and had understood the salvation grace of the Lord (i.e., he believed) Ananias told him, "And now why are you waiting? Arise and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on the name of the Lord" (Acts 22:16). In other words, the remission of sins takes place *at the point of baptism*. Baptism is unquestionably not just an "outward act" of belief in the Lord but is for the "remission of sins" (Acts 2:38–39). Baptism is to be washed, sanctified, and justified in the name of the Lord Jesus (1 Cor 6:11).

Footwashing to have a part with the Lord: When Jesus was washing His disciples' feet, He told Peter, "If I do not wash you, you have no part with Me" (Jn 13:8). After washing Peter's feet, Jesus reiterated, "For I have given you an example, that you should do as I have done to you" (Jn 13:15). Therefore, if footwashing is not part of a

Christian's faith, then they "have no part in the Lord"—how can they then bring people before the Lord?

Holy Communion: The Lord Jesus said, "Most assuredly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you have no life in you. Whoever eats My flesh and drinks My blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day" (Jn 6:53–54). The Lord said His words are spirit and life (Jn 6:63). After thanksgiving, the unleavened bread and grape juice become respectively the flesh and blood of the Lord in spirit. Those who do not eat of it will have no life; whoever eats it shall have eternal life and resurrect on the last day.

Holy Spirit: "But you are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God dwells in you. Now if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he is not His. ... But if the Spirit of Him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, He who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through His Spirit who dwells in you" (Rom 8:9–11). If a believer of the Lord does not pray for the Holy Spirit (Lk 11:13), how can he be raised from the dead through the Holy Spirit?

Sabbath: "Also the sons of the foreigner who join themselves to the LORD, to serve Him, and to love the name of the LORD, to be His servants—everyone who keeps from defiling the Sabbath, and holds fast My covenant—even them I will bring to My holy mountain, and make them joyful in My house of prayer. Their burnt offerings and their sacrifices will be accepted on My altar; for My house shall be called a house of prayer for all nations" (Isa 56:6–7). How can a believer who does not keep God's everlasting covenant by observing the Sabbath ascend the holy

mountain of the Lord and be pleasing to the Lord in his prayers?

All these teachings and other core beliefs of the true church make up the complete doctrine (Jn 7:16–17). If there are flaws in any of this doctrine, it will be incomplete; and the church that holds an incomplete doctrine is not the true church as recorded in the Bible. This doctrine is a valuable pearl, which one can purchase only when he sells all he has.

CONCLUSION: TREASURE THE TRUTH

These two parables share a common theme. In them, the protagonists are prepared to sacrifice everything to own and retain the treasure they have found. The difference between them is that in one, the man came across the treasure serendipitously, while in the other, the man was seeking priceless pearls. Today, the true church has many believers who have had different journeys to the truth. Some of us stumbled across the church in various amazing ways, while others had searched for the truth and the true church for a long time. Recognizing how priceless this grace is, we have discarded previous beliefs to embark on the correct way to salvation, eschewing worldly pleasures to remain on this true path. We are prepared to obey the Lord Jesus' commission to take His gospel to all corners of the world. Importantly, we must never tire of seeking wisdom from above to help us grow into the image and measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ (Eph 4:13). As a church, we have the priceless blessing of the truth and the surpassing knowledge of Jesus Christ. We must do all we can to keep this truth and contend for the faith.



WATER BAPTISM

PHILIP SHEE, SINGAPORE

INTRODUCTION

Most churches don't believe baptism is necessary for salvation

SOME SAY

BAPTISM IS ONLY AN OUTWARD EXPRESSION OF AN INWARD FAITH

WE CAN FOLLOW JESUS' EXAMPLE, BUT THERE'S NO REAL PURPOSE

IF YOU HAVE FAITH IT MEANS YOU'RE ALREADY SAVED

IT'S THE INWARD FAITH THAT SAVES YOU

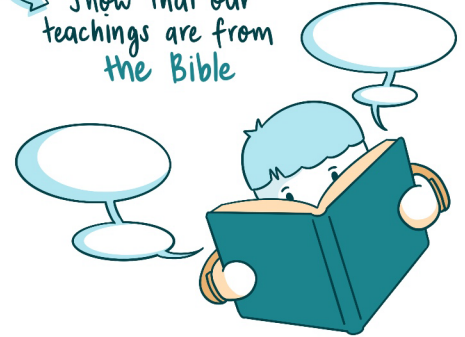


We don't need to hide this fact

But in TRUE JESUS CHURCH we need to be clear that

WE ARE DIFFERENT

Show that our teachings are from the Bible



BAPTISM IS NECESSARY FOR SALVATION

"And He said to them, 'Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature.'

He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned."

(MK 16:15-16)

Being born of water - the washing of regeneration is **necessary** for salvation.

- JOHN 3:5
- TITUS 3:5
- 1 PETER 3:21

These verses reinforce this teaching

The Bible is a very **consistent** book and its teachings are **consistent** when you read the Bible in its entirety!

BUT, WHY?

Baptism is not merely an outward expression of inward faith

"Then Peter said to them, 'Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.'" (ACTS 2:38)

After being cut to the heart, what were they to do?

Peter **did not** tell them to repeat a statement of belief



or

raise their hands if they believe



This happens at Christian rallies today

Repent, and be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission / forgiveness of your sins.

If one's sins are not washed away, he **cannot** be saved.

We are not denying the death and blood of Jesus washes away our sins.

BAPTISM WASHES AWAY OUR SINS

"And now why are you waiting? Arise and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on the name of the Lord."

(ACTS 22:16)

After Paul received his sight and understood the gospel, the next step was to arise and be baptized to wash away his sins.

Are we saying that Christ's death is not enough?

Jesus shed His blood for our salvation

We are washed by His blood at baptism

HOW BAPTISM SAVES

Romans describes baptism:

Physically We go into the water **Spiritually** We are baptized into Christ's death

How does this save us?

Baptism is a death burial, and it is also a resurrection, for if we have been buried with Him, we will rise with Him.

“Or do you not know that as many of us as were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death? Therefore we were buried with Him through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life.

For if we have been united together in the likeness of His death, certainly we also shall be in the likeness of His resurrection, knowing this, that our old man was crucified with Him, that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves of sin.

For he who has died has been freed from sin. Now if we died with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with Him.”

(ROM 6:3-8)

DIED AND BURIED WITH CHRIST

During baptism, we die with Christ, but what has died?



Our old man

Our former person, a complete sinner



This old man is crucified with Jesus

Through Christ we have overcome sin



Body of sin is done away with and we are raised in newness of life

He took over our sin so that we can be raised as a new man as He was raised from the dead



RAISED WITH CHRIST

If you don't die, how can you be born again?

We died and were buried in baptism, and that's why we can be born again

That is why being born again refers to baptism



It isn't referring to "being born of a mother's womb"



You are resurrected as a new man without sin



EFFECTS OF BAPTISM

BECOMING A CHILD OF GOD

“For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.”

(GAL 3:26-28)

This understanding of baptism also aligns with other major teachings in the Bible.

SOME SAY

BELIEVING IS ALL YOU NEED TO BE A CHILD OF GOD

When we read this verse in context, what does it say?

We are sons of God through faith for (because) as many have been baptized have put on (are clothed with) Christ.

Clothing ourselves to define who we are



Clothing yourself with Christ means putting on God's recognition of who Christ is - His son

Sin causes us to lose our status as God's children



Baptism washes our sins away



We are born again as a child of God



SPIRITUAL CIRCUMCISION

“In Him you were also circumcised with the circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the sins of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, buried with Him in baptism, in which you were also raised with Him through faith in the working of God, who raised Him from the dead.”

(COL 2:11-12)

What is this circumcision made without hands?

It is done by putting aside the body of sin and flesh. During baptism, the old man, the body of sin, was done away with

Therefore, baptism is spiritual circumcision

In the Old Testament, circumcision was to segregate the people of God from Gentiles.

It is baptism, the circumcision made without hands, that indicates you are a child of God in the New Testament.



MODE OF BAPTISM

WHEN SHOULD WE SPEAK ABOUT THIS?

Speaking about the mode of baptism should come after a truth-seeker has accepted the True Jesus Church and they are ready to consider baptism.

IN THE NAME OF JESUS

HEAD BOWED

FULL IMMERSION

LIVING WATER

BAPTIST HAS ALREADY RECEIVED BAPTISM AND THE HOLY SPIRIT

IN THE NAME OF JESUS

Most churches use the baptismal formula "in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit."

"Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit."
(MT 28:19)

Yes, the Lord commanded the disciples to baptize in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit

When we invoke the name "Jesus" we are in fact **obeying the command** to baptize in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit

The name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit is **JESUS**

So, why do we baptize in the name of Jesus?

In every instance where baptism is recorded in ACTS, the apostles baptized in Jesus' name without exception

First recording

ACTS 2:37-38

Did Peter forget what Jesus said? They understood it was a **single name**, not names. They were able to set the standard from the start.



Importance of the name

ACTS 4:10-12

The name Jesus is given by God to us for salvation, and there is **no other name**.



Examples

ACTS 8:12, 16; 10:48; 19:5; 22:16

These examples illustrate how they were baptized.

It was **in the name of Jesus**, not the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and not any other name.

HEAD BOWED

Romans 6 gives us a description of what happens spiritually during baptism.

"Or do you not know that as many of us as were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death? Therefore we were buried with Him through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life."

For if we have been united together in the likeness of His death, certainly we also shall be in the likeness of His resurrection."

(ROM 6:3-5)

Bowing our heads in **humility** → Shows we are **willing to die** with Him

Willing to die with Him → Our sins will be **washed away**

FULL IMMERSION

Other churches may do sprinkling, pouring and even backwards immersion.

"When He had been baptized, Jesus came up immediately from the water; and behold, the heavens were opened to Him, and He saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting upon Him."

(MT 3:16)



There's no biblical basis for these methods of baptism.

They were established later in church history.

What is the likeness of His death?

Jesus bowing His head before His death showed it was a **CONSCIOUS ACT** of sacrifice

Being baptized is a **CONSCIOUS CHOICE** to bury the old man and be raised as a new man

Why must it be immersion?

How did Jesus come out of the water if He wasn't in the water?

He must have **come up out of the water**



The eunuch went down into the water and came up out of it



BAPTISM means **IMMERSION**

Immersed for the **forgiveness of sins**

"So he commanded the chariot to stand still. And both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water, and he baptized him. Now when they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord caught Philip away, so that the eunuch saw him no more; and he went on his way rejoicing."

(ACTS 8:38-39)

LIVING WATER

This is a natural source, and not an artificial pool.

Examples

- River
- Stream
- Lake
- Sea
- Ocean
- Well
- Oasis



Biblical examples

MT 3:5-6, 13

John baptized in the Jordan River.

ACTS 8:35-38

The eunuch was keen to be baptized after hearing the gospel.

It wasn't until they came across water that he could be baptized.

By following the examples set in the Bible, we know we are following the right mode of baptism.

Spiritual significance - FOUNTAIN OF LIVING WATER

Prophecy of Jesus' coming is described as a fountain that will be opened for the cleansing of sin

"In that day a fountain shall be opened for the house of David and for the inhabitants of Jerusalem, for sin and for uncleanness." (ZECH 13:1)

The blood of Jesus Christ isn't stagnant water, but a **FOUNTAIN OF LIFE**

"For My people have committed two evils: They have forsaken Me, the fountain of living waters, and hewn themselves cisterns - broken cisterns that can hold no water." (JER 2:13)

The people forsook God, the living fountain, and chased after broken cisterns

Only Jesus Christ is the **FOUNTAIN OF LIVING WATERS**

BAPTIST HAS ALREADY RECEIVED THE HOLY SPIRIT

Baptism is effective only if it's conducted by the true church established and graced by the abiding presence of the Holy Spirit.

"This is He who came by water and blood - Jesus Christ; not only by water, but by water and blood. And it is the Spirit who bears witness, because the Spirit is truth.

For there are three that bear witness in heaven: the Father, the Word, and the Holy Spirit; and these three are one.

And there are three that bear witness on earth: the Spirit, the water, and the blood; and these three agree as one."

(1 JN 5:6-8)



The blood of Jesus is in the water because the Holy Spirit is present

This is why the one true church is important

Only the church sent by the Holy Spirit has the authority to conduct baptism for the forgiveness of sins.



CONCLUSION

"There is also an antitype which now saves us - baptism (not the removal of the filth of the flesh, but the answer of a good conscience toward God), through the resurrection of Jesus Christ." (1 PET 3:21)

"Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, And in sin, my mother conceived me." (PS 51:5)

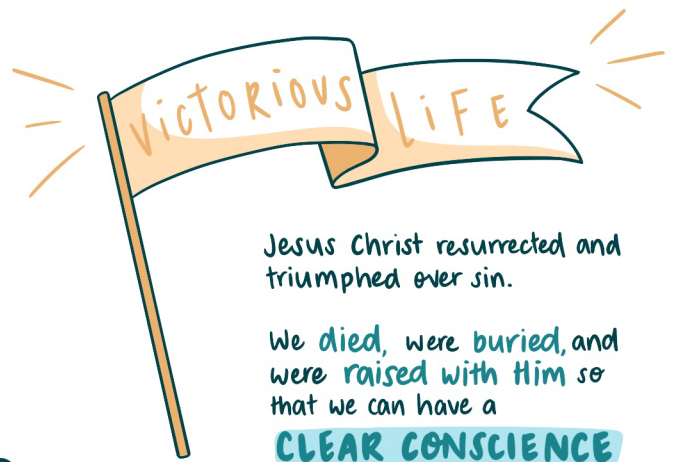
We are all born into sin so we all need baptism.

If a man has sinned, how can he ever have a good conscience before God?

Without forgiveness, we cannot have this good conscience.

The baptism that saves us is not the removal of filth, but the answer of

A GOOD CONSCIENCE TOWARD GOD.



Jesus Christ resurrected and triumphed over sin.

We died, were buried, and were raised with Him so that we can have a

CLEAR CONSCIENCE before God and walk in the **NEWNESS OF LIFE**

THIS IS BAPTISM.

BECOME A STAR OF THE LORD JESUS

Daniel Liew—Portsmouth, UK

“You’re a star!” is a phrase that we use in the United Kingdom to thank someone who has been particularly helpful. He or she has risen above others, putting in extra effort and shining like a light in the darkness of difficult times. As Christians, have we realized that this phrase holds more significance to us than the common usage?

THE STAR OF THE LORD

In Matthew 2:1–11, we learn about the wise men who came from the East to seek out the One born King of the Jews. The Bible does not explicitly explain how they knew of the King of the Jews or His importance, only that they saw His star in the East (Mt 2:2). Then, after they departed from Herod, the same star appeared to them again and went before them, guiding them to the Child (Mt 2:9). Seeing the star, they greatly rejoiced (Mt 2:10) and followed it to the abode of Jesus and His family. Then they entered the house, fell down, and worshipped Jesus, presenting their gifts to Him (Mt 2:11). The star was why they could find their way to Jesus and worship Him.

Today, the Lord Jesus has given us the mission to preach the gospel so that more people may come to know and worship Him. What qualities can we learn from this star so that we, too, can fulfill our role as a star of the Lord Jesus?

THE STAR SHONE BRIGHTLY

Matthew 2:2 records that the wise men saw the star in the East and then came searching for Jesus. When we look up into the night sky, what do we see? Numerous stars dot the darkness, twinkling in the sky. Since there are so many, what would draw our eye to one particular star over another? Perhaps the star was shining brighter than the others. Likewise, how can we shine brighter today?

“Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven.” (Mt 5:16)

“When others see these good deeds, they will rejoice and give glory to our Father in heaven”

Jesus tells us that we are the light of the world, and we shine before men through our good works. When others see these good deeds, they will rejoice and give glory to our Father in heaven. The pattern is the same when the wise men saw the star in the East: they saw it, were exceedingly glad, and then worshipped Jesus. Our daily conduct is integral to our being a star for the Lord Jesus. As believers, we



are ambassadors for Christ, and the Scriptures exhort us to be exemplary in our conduct, speech, and attitude in life, in a way observable to those around us. But can we rely on our efforts alone to manifest this light for the Lord Jesus?

Exodus 34:29–35 describes a time when Moses ascended Mount Sinai to speak with God and receive the two stone tablets. A miraculous phenomenon occurred: Moses' face started to shine (Ex 34:29–30). Why did this happen? Moses spoke face-to-face with God often, receiving His words and relaying them to the Israelites. In time, his face naturally started to shine, reflecting the glory of God. If we wish to shine brightly for the Lord Jesus today, we must spend time with Him and cultivate ourselves spiritually. First, this involves receiving God's word, whether by reading or listening, so we can know the difference between right and wrong in the sight of God. Next, prayer is an integral part of our spiritual cultivation. In prayer, we reflect upon God's word and ask for strength and wisdom to apply His teachings in our life. Cultivating ourselves in this manner will lead to observable changes in our character, speech, and conduct. Our progress will be visible and evident to those around us (1 Tim 4:15).

“Underlying our speech and action are our fear of God and the knowledge that He is always watching us”

People should see there is something different about us compared to others. Our speech will not be littered with swearing and foul language. Instead, it is seasoned with grace, without bitterness or complaining. Our behavior will not be self-centered or selfish but considerate of the needs of others. We will face difficulties with a positive attitude, knowing that the testing of our faith and character develops us and is for our good. Underlying our speech and actions are our fear of God and the knowledge that He is always watching us. We know we should glorify God in all we do and are held accountable for every word and deed.

With the Lord Jesus' help, our good works will shine brightly before others, like the light shining from a star, and others will notice something different about us. As we shine brightly, our work as a star of the Lord Jesus will have begun.

THE STAR HAD NO NAME

This star was a unique phenomenon at that time. No one would have seen anything like this before, nor would anyone be likely to ever again. Despite being exceptional, this star was not named or explained except to describe its function—to lead the wise men to Jesus. The celestial bodies have long fascinated humans, becoming sources of folklore and the focus of study. Even stargazing through telescopes is a popular pastime. Usually, a star appearing and shining brightly like this would be an attraction in and of itself. However, here we see that the star is not the main attraction. As much as it outshone the other stars in the sky, its purpose was to bring the wise men to Jesus because He was the focus of their worship.

“Our role in the work is to preach the gospel to others. We are not the main character of the gospel, and we will never be”

When it comes to preaching, while we are shining for the Lord Jesus, our hope is not that our friends and family will be drawn to us and build their faith on us. Instead, our earnest desire is that they come to know Jesus through us and focus their faith and worship on Him alone. Invariably, when we preach to someone and bring them to the church, we are expected to give them much of our time and attention. On the one hand, we feel responsible for them since we introduced them to Jesus, and we hope they will continue in the church. Other brothers and sisters may not care for them to the same level as we do. Not wanting them to feel neglected or uncared for, we put in extra efforts. Maybe we message them more or go out of our way to pick them up for church activities or drop them home after. Perhaps we even shower them with little gifts. As well-intentioned and innocuous as these seem, we may

inadvertently create a dependency on ourselves that is difficult to sustain, especially when there are other truth-seekers or members for whom we should care. We may even become protective or possessive, saying, “These are the truth-seekers I brought to the church. I’ll take care of them, and no one else needs to do anything for them.”



It is right to put effort into preaching and pastoral work, and showing love is an essential part of that, demonstrating that we are the disciples of Jesus (Jn 13:35). However, if our friends and family only come to church because of us, there is a great danger. Those who go on to believe may become dependent on us in their life of faith. If we do not attend services for a time, move to another area, or stumble in our faith, this may cause those dependent members to lose their faith and depart. How can we counteract this?

Firstly, we must remain humble in our work for the Lord.

So then neither he who plants is anything, nor he who waters, but God who gives the increase.
(1 Cor 3:7)

Our role in the work is to preach the gospel to others. We are not the main character of the gospel, and we will never be. At best, we are the supporting actors who lead the “audience” to the main character: Jesus Christ. We are just unprofitable servants, doing what our Master instructed us to do (Lk 17:10). Armed with this mindset, we would not think anything more of ourselves than we ought to. We would continue to do the work of preaching the gospel and bringing people to Jesus faithfully, knowing we will be rewarded.

Secondly, we need to ensure that we always direct the focus to the Lord Jesus, helping our truth-seeking friends and family have the right mindset from the start. Jesus is the One they need to know and worship. His words are more important than my words. Refer them to the Bible and what God teaches. That way, we help them to see more of Jesus and less of ourselves. While our opinion may be valued, so long as we ground everything we share and explain in the Scriptures, God’s word will become the foundation of that person’s faith.

Thirdly, we should do our utmost to connect other brothers and sisters from the church to our friends and family. When the circle of friends expands, there is less dependency on one or two people. Instead, more relationships can be built among the brethren, and, ultimately, they will develop a strong connection with God and His church.

THE STAR HAD DIRECTION

The star first appeared in the East to alert the wise men to Jesus’ birth (Mt 2:2). Then it reappeared to lead them out of Jerusalem, into the countryside, along various roads and paths, until it stopped above the

very house where the young Child Jesus and His family were staying (Mt 2:9). Only then had the star fulfilled its purpose. The star only led them until they could come before Jesus and worship Him. Thus, we can see that this star had a strong sense of direction. It moved with purpose and did not detour from its final goal. It followed its path not only to bring itself before Jesus but also to guide the wise men there. The question is, do we know our direction and goal in life? Where is the end of our journey?

“Life is filled with so many distractions that we may lose our sense of direction and forget why we strive for our faith”

Peter tells us that the end of our faith and our life in this world is the salvation of our souls (1 Pet 1:9). We strive towards that ultimate goal. Peter knew the believers were grieved by various trials and encouraged them that this was a necessary part of the journey—for their faith to become refined like gold (1 Pet 1:6–8). He was concerned that they would lose sight of the reason for their suffering, so he pointed out the prize waiting at the end of the road. We, too, face similar trials, tribulations, and tests of our resolve and faith. Life is filled with so many distractions that we may lose our sense of direction and forget why we strive for our faith. We must keep this heavenly goal in sight to be driven to maintain our faith. This will affect the way that we behave in our daily lives.

The author of Hebrews similarly states that the hope God has given us is an anchor of the soul (Heb 6:19). An anchor’s purpose is to enable a ship or boat to hold its position. It prevents the wind and the waves, though boisterous, from moving the vessel away from where it wants to be. Challenges may come and threaten to push us off course, but we will maintain our position by God’s grace, anchored in this hope. Practically

speaking, how can we ensure that we remain faithful to the course?

Our attitude to worshipping God, especially on the Sabbath day, is one good indicator. God blessed the seventh day of the week and made it holy, setting it apart as a reminder of the eternal Sabbath that we will enjoy in our heavenly future.



If we choose to enjoy the blessings of the Sabbath every week, we will eagerly attend Sabbath services and allow God to strengthen our faith and trust in Him. We know that with each Sabbath that passes, we are one Sabbath closer to receiving the fulfillment of our hope. Naturally, when our school friends and work colleagues inquire about our weekend plans, it is time to show our direction:

“I go to church to attend Sabbath services and other church activities.”

“Really? Every week?”

“Yes, every week.”

While it may seem strange to others, our resolve and faithfulness to observe the Sabbath and spiritually cultivate ourselves show that we strive towards a goal. It is a goal that we believe is precious. If it were not so, we would not invest our time and effort in such a manner. Our friends and colleagues may further ask, “Why do you do it?” This is when we must fulfill the role of being a star of the Lord Jesus.

But sanctify the Lord God in your hearts, and always be ready to give a defense to everyone who asks you a reason for the hope that is in you, with meekness and fear. (1 Pet 3:15)

We hope we will be able to appear before the Lord, and we hope the same for our friends and family. We can introduce Jesus to those around us and share our faith with them. Then, God willing, we will be able to guide them to follow us to the presence of the Lord Jesus.

CONCLUSION

“Those who are wise shall shine Like the brightness of the firmament, And those who turn many to righteousness Like the stars forever and ever.” (Dan 12:3)

We have already been made wise for salvation through the word and mercy of God (2 Tim 3:15). Now, we have a responsibility to fulfill. We are to be like stars who turn many to righteousness by leading them to the Lord Jesus.

May the Lord Jesus help us become good and faithful stars for Him so that many more can be made exceedingly glad and worship the one true God.

EXPERIENCES OF GRACE

Li-Bin Mok—Vancouver, Canada

*Traversing the Valley of Death with peace in heart,
In God's will and plan I trust.
With grace and manna am I daily blessed,
Praise and gratitude for God unceasingly flow.*

Hallelujah! Praise the Lord that I may share this testimony with you. As a servant of God, I cannot steal His glory. Jesus healed ten lepers (Lk 17:11–19), but only one returned to thank Him and give praise to the Lord. I emulate this leper. Although these events happened within a few months, they demonstrate God's almightiness and His grace shown to me.

Records of God's Grace

In August 2018, I started experiencing dull pain at the base of my neck. It was bothersome but bearable. As it got more severe, I had it checked by my family doctor, or general practitioner (GP), who felt it was either a sports injury, a pulled muscle, or a neck and back strain from poor sleeping positions. The GP suggested massage or physiotherapy and referred me for a series of scans and tests.

The results from the tests and scans did not raise any red flags to the doctors and radiologists who reviewed the results. However, by the end of the year, my neck

had become so stiff that I had difficulty turning my head. Through it all, I felt intensifying pains gradually spreading to different parts of my spine and ribs.

During one of the tests with a neuromuscular specialist, she concluded that the pains were not a result of neuromuscular injury. Immediately after her appointment, she had me admitted to the hospital's emergency room (ER).

It was a rather strange day in the ER. The place was overwhelmed with cases of drug overdose, traumatic accidents, and major injuries from fights. As cases in the ER are triaged according to urgency, all these cases took priority above mine.

"The distraught doctor announced that I had Stage 4 cancer...[which] is incurable and usually terminal"

Time flew by as I sat on my bed and watched the different dramas unfold in front of me. It had been over eight hours since I was admitted, yet no doctor was available to attend to me. While waiting, I underwent a series of tests to help the ER doctors ascertain the problem.

By 10:00 p.m., I noticed some doctors from the 11:00 p.m. shift arriving early to

help handle the backlog. A doctor came rushing in, changed clothes, and went over to the wall of clipboards. He picked one at random and started reviewing the file.

After a few minutes, he introduced himself as the doctor overseeing my case before he hurried off again. I noticed he was a fellow—a physician who has completed a residency and is doing a fellowship within a sub-specialty—not a regular resident doctor. From my hospital bed, I could see him reviewing my medical records. Over the next few hours, he put me through more tests and scans.

By the next morning, a diagnosis had been made, and he needed to talk to me privately. That is when the distraught doctor announced that I had Stage 4 cancer, hence the pains in different parts of my skeletal structure. Such advanced cancer is incurable and usually terminal. From this point on, the strategy and treatment plan would be to slow down the cancer's progression and prolong life.

For most people, such a diagnosis would likely be followed by devastation, disbelief, confusion, or even anger. I was surprised to find that I was relatively calm and at peace. At least now, what ails me has a name! With a diagnosis, the doctors and I could tackle the problem. Otherwise, I would have died within a few months without knowing the cause.

Because of the seriousness of the condition and its aggressive nature, the doctor gave me a stack of requisitions for more tests and scans in different hospitals. They all had the word “URGENT” stamped in red to expedite the diagnostic process.

I believe it was God’s hand that guided this fellow to choose my file that night in the ER. His experience allowed him to accurately diagnose my condition’s severity and know the necessary follow-up protocols. His seniority and sense of urgency also meant I received the immediate treatment that terminal cancer requires. In my prayers, I asked God to prepare me for the journey ahead, with a mix of trepidation, excitement, and a deep understanding that important lessons would be imparted along the way.

Over the next few weeks, I would undergo the required tests and scans. Even though I was physically weaker by the day and could only move in slow motion due to the pains, God gave me enough energy and mental strength to endure the rigors of all the tests.

During a check-up with a senior oncologist, the doctor asked how many painkillers I was taking daily to gauge the intensity of pain I was suffering. I replied that while my bones were aching, it did not bother me enough to take painkillers. She shook her head in disbelief, saying, “You’re a toughie. Anyone in the same shoes would be taking handfuls of painkillers daily, and you are not taking any?” As she kept mumbling under her breath, under mine were the words, “Hallelujah, hallelujah, praise the Lord.” This is the abundant grace God gives to His children.

Finally, the full extent of the damage done by the ravages of cancer was presented to me. I was informed that a team of oncologists would be assigned to my case immediately to start the treatment process. As cancer treatments are also triaged, along with the whole expedited diagnosis process, I waited three days until the first slot was available to start chemotherapy—three weeks after I had been diagnosed in the ER.

By then, I felt almost drained of all life. On the first day of chemo, I was so weak that I could not stop myself from falling when I turned to get out of bed. I hit the base of my skull on the bedpost, sending an intense jolt of pain through my body.

The pain lingered as I tried to continue with

my day. Any slight movement would send excruciating jolts of pain throughout my body, but I was determined to make it to my first chemo session. When I returned from chemo in the afternoon, I was so tired and in such pain that I sat by the bed for a rest before attempting to haul myself up onto the bed.

It was at this moment I witnessed a vision of the masses at Jesus’ crucifixion in Golgotha, an area outside the city walls of Jerusalem. As I was immobilized by the intense and excruciating pain in my bones, God let me understand that it was such intense pain, and so much more, that Jesus had endured when he suffered on the cross for us. From my vantage point, I could clearly see the fleshly pains of Jesus. I could utterly relate to His cry on the Mount of Olives: “Father, if it is Your will, take this cup away from Me; nevertheless not My will, but Yours, be done” (Lk 22:42). To follow in His example, I mustered the courage to tell God I would go wherever He leads. I then prayed for God to give me the strength to complete this journey and the faith to know that this was part of His perfect plan.

“Whatever comes my way... I would be able to rise to the challenge because God walks with me”

The pains persisted with the same intensity the following morning. Since I was going to have my next chemo session later that day, I went into the ER to have it checked. The pains were so intense that it took at least seven ER nurses to move and position me for the different scans and tests. That is when they found that I had a cracked cervical vertebra from when I fell out of bed the day before.

The immediate course of action was to perform surgery to stabilize my neck with titanium plates. This would prevent the vertebrae from collapsing, which would result in paralysis. But I protested, so instead, a collar was given to support my head, and arrangements were made for me to see the spinal surgeon within forty-eight hours. I also signed papers to absolve the hospital of liability should I become paralyzed because of my decisions.

Still in pain, I was determined to go for my next chemo session, so I was discharged. With the collar on, I made it to my

appointment very slowly and cautiously.

The following day, I consulted the spinal surgeon. After a series of tests and assessments of my mobility levels, she concluded that titanium plates would be too drastic a measure at the time. She kindly decided to give medications and radiation a chance before putting me under the knife.

By the time I saw the radiation oncologist a couple of weeks later, I was not wearing the collar. I walked into the clinic, sat, and waited for him. A resident doctor came in and was so astounded to see me sitting there that he actually exclaimed, “You are sitting!” I answered, “Yes, I’m sitting.” He then left hastily, bringing another resident doctor to witness the sight. During the consultation, I was told that patients with similar injuries are generally wheeled in, either in a wheelchair or on a stretcher. And here I was, sitting and walking without assistance.

In Summary

These are just some of the miracles and grace God has showered upon me. Since then, I have undergone more rounds of treatment. But most importantly, I continued with life the best way I know how. Although I have no idea what God has planned, at least I know that whatever comes my way—be it a lesson to learn, a task to complete, or a journey for betterment—I would be able to rise to the challenge because God walks with me.

If a broken body is the cross I have to bear in this lifetime, then so be it, for I know with certainty that when one journeys with God, there is always something to look forward to. On this perilous trek, I have thanked God for every forward step I managed to take, however exhausting each one was. Hymns of praise constantly accompanied me, enveloping me with a sense of optimism and peace as I went along.

I believe these experiences are the talents I received from the Lord our God. Not sharing them is equivalent to hiding the talents in the ground (Mt 25:14–30) and diminishing the glory of God. God’s glory is the lamp that should be put on a stand and not under a bowl or bed, for “there is nothing hidden which will not be revealed, nor has anything been kept secret but that it should come to light” (Mk 4:21–25). Amen.



GOD GUIDES OUR STEPS (PART 2)

Various

Editor's note: In the first part of this article (Manna 92), four youths shared their experiences of God's guidance as they took their first steps into adulthood—in the years before, during, and after university. Through reflecting on the direction of their lives, they were shown the state of their faith and learned to trust and draw near to God even when things were not going to plan. In such formative moments, our relationship with our heavenly Father is shaped, and we forge an independent faith. In this second installment, we feature three more testimonies of how our choices can impact our faith and how we should commit our plans to the Lord and His will, for He directs our steps (Prov 16:9).

Seek First the Kingdom of God

Sarah Tan Hui Shyn—Singapore

Hallelujah, in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, I testify about my time studying abroad and learning to seek God first.

After completing high school in 2015, I decided to further my studies in Canberra, Australia, where the foundation studies program is only one year long, compared to the two-year pre-university college course in Singapore. This meant I could begin my tertiary education and enter university a year earlier. Many church members questioned my decision to study in Canberra because there is no local True Jesus Church (TJC). While I understood their concerns, I did not give them much thought. I knew attending church services was important but did not think it was *that* important. I felt that each person's faith was their personal relationship with God, so sixteen-year-old me did not see the need for a physical church. I naively thought that my faith would grow stronger in such a situation.

When I first arrived in Canberra, everything went smoothly. I prayed, did my daily devotions, and reserved the Sabbath for God. Life did not feel as hard as people had warned me.

However, as time passed, I realized I was falling behind in my routine. My daily prayers grew shorter, I put less effort into worship, and I started falling asleep while listening to sermons. I knew something was wrong and that I would risk losing God if I did not do something to rectify this problem. Coincidentally, during that period, I heard a sermon reminding us that our faith in God should be progressive. One's faith is never stagnant—it is either progressing or declining.

Because of this message, I started praying more and changed the way I worshipped. Instead of listening to sermons while lying on my bed, which made me sleepy, I sat at the table. This routine continued for the rest of the year, and I thank God that He preserved me and kept me safe in His arms.

Just as I was completing my foundation studies, a thought suddenly struck me: why did I choose to study in a place with no church nearby? Looking back, it made no sense. I was risking my spiritual well-being. I wanted to study law, which is not some niche degree. I no longer saw the advantages of studying in Canberra. I spoke to my dad about this, and we concluded that I should study in a city with a local TJC.

I prayed over this matter but soon started getting cold feet. I disliked the idea of starting over again—getting to know new people and adjusting to a new environment. After all, I had already been in Canberra for a year. I did not want to leave my friends who had gone through thick and thin with me.

I had to decide quickly, but I was very conflicted. During that time, a particular Bible verse stood out to me during my daily

devotions. Matthew 6:33: "But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you."

This verse was the deciding factor. Although I was apprehensive about my unknown future, I rested on God's promise. I believed He would arrange and settle everything for me because I sought Him first.

In retrospect, this was the first decision I made where I put God first.

Thank God, my decision to move to Melbourne was the right one. God blessed and guided me in settling down in a new environment, allowing me to worship Him in church. My year in Canberra helped shape my relationship with God and taught me how precious it is to be in His church. However, moving to Melbourne showed me the value of fellowship with brothers and sisters and the importance of having spiritual companions. I now understand why Paul missed his fellow brethren—I experienced the Melbourne members' warmth, love, and kindness, for which I thank God. We pray, play, and push each other to better ourselves in our walk of faith. I thank God for allowing me to serve in the choir, hymnal worship, and the evangelism team. I learned much and grew spiritually.

God also blessed me physically. My initial fears of starting over in a foreign place were unfounded, as God cared for all my needs. I stayed in a brand-new hostel on a beautiful campus, which I selected online despite having little information. Of all the hostels available, it turned out to be the best—it was in the most accessible location. God gave me three good campus friends. He also blessed me academically and provided me with several job offers in Singapore even while I was still studying in Melbourne.

That said, my greatest takeaway from my five years in Australia was the spiritual blessings. God taught me

to be accountable for my faith and to be alert and of sober mind, for the devil prowls around, waiting for the opportunity to devour us (1 Pet 5:8). By making adjustments to our life (whether big or small), God will help us draw near Him if we resolve to put in the effort. We can truly experience God's grace and blessings by seeking God first.

In life, whenever we are faced with choices, let us be brave and rest on His promise—that if we seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, He will surely provide (Mt 6:33).

God's Perfect Arrangement: My Journey to University

Jemima Hsu—London, UK

In the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, I testify about how God guided me into university. Looking back, I can see His hand throughout the application process. For those waiting for university acceptance offers or exam results, I hope my sharing gives some reassurance during this nerve-wracking step into adulthood. For the rest of us—whether we are long past university or a long way from it—I hope this reminds us that, while we may face uncertainty about our future, there is no need to worry because our heavenly Father is in absolute control.

“There is no need to worry because our heavenly Father is in absolute control!”

I wanted to study biomedical engineering, a niche subject not available at many universities. At the same time, I wanted to stay near the church. I knew I would find it extremely difficult to keep up my faith otherwise. I decided to apply to universities in three cities: Edinburgh, where I would have my family and religious education class (despite only general engineering courses being available locally); Glasgow, which has a True Jesus Church (TJC) place of worship and is within weekend traveling distance from Edinburgh; and London, where I knew there were

faithful and active youths in church.

In Scotland, students apply to a maximum of five university courses during the final year of high school, starting in October. I made my five choices and sent off my application in early December 2018. Many received their offers within a week or even on the same day. Those still waiting would become anxious and unsettled. University applications came up in almost every conversation. I have an active imagination and often dwell on the worst-case scenario. But this time, I felt calmer than my classmates—although I was worried, I knew everything was in God's hands. In my prayers, I asked God to lead me where He wanted me to go, to help me humbly accept His will and have faith that He knew best. Thank God I received my first two university place offers (my fourth and fifth choices) within a week.

It was not until mid-January that I received an interview invitation for my first-choice course at a highly competitive university. As the interview approached, I became increasingly nervous because I had not heard from the remaining two universities (my second and third choices). However, a week and a half before the interview, I received an offer from my third-choice university and an offer from my second-choice university four days later—and to my surprise, the latter offer was made without having to attend an interview. This was God's gracious timing—He gave me this reassurance just before my all-important interview. It boosted my confidence because I knew I had two backup offers I would gladly accept.

Before my interview, I prayed in silence and reflected on the grace that God had already shown to me. During the interview, I answered the questions confidently, even though I was not always sure I was correct. However, when I spoke to the other candidates after the interview, I was convinced that my interview had gone terribly in comparison. My fellow applicants came from all over the world, and I felt they were more knowledgeable than I. I doubted that I would receive an offer.

We were told that the offers would be released one month later. During this period of waiting, I asked God to guide me to trust His will and to help me accept His decision no matter the outcome. When the university contacted me, I was already half-convinced that I would not receive an offer. However, at 10 p.m., I received an offer on the condition of achieving three A grades at Advanced Higher (Scottish high school exams taken in the final year).

When the Advanced Higher results approached, I was confident that I had performed well enough in two of my three subjects but not in my Mechanics exam. The requirement for an A grade was seventy percent. Although a church sister told me Advanced Higher grade boundaries were often lowered by a few percentage points, I did not think it would be enough.

On results day, I was at the Youth Theological Training Course (YTTC) in Leicester TJC. When I learned I got three A grades, the brethren at Leicester thanked God for me. They knew how nervous I had been. When I got home, I discovered that I got sixty-five percent in Mechanics, and that the grade-A boundary had been lowered to exactly sixty-five percent. My mother and I realized that my precarious borderline result was not coincidental but arranged by God. As she pointed out, it told me two things.

“Looking back at everything that led up to the move, it is evident that God's hand was present throughout!”

Firstly, God wanted me to attend this particular university in London. Initially, I was worried about moving so far away. Yet if this was not God's will, my result only had to be one percentage point below the grade boundary for things to be very different. It is only by God's arrangement that everything turns out so perfectly. Also, the last two annual student spiritual convocations I had attended before university applications had been in London. God knew that I would need some familiarity and reassurance to move four hundred miles away from home to London. I had been praying for God's guidance from the start of my application process. Who was I to now question His decision when He had clarified my direction?

Secondly, God wanted to teach me to be humble. Without God's arrangement, I would never have made it into my first-choice university. Therefore, this was God's grace, not a result of my abilities or hard work.

As I enter my final year of university, I have to constantly remind myself that I am not here by my own ability but by God's grace. Looking back at everything that led up to the move, it is evident that God's hand was present throughout. I hope my story offers those about to enter university some hope and comfort at a challenging time in life.

Whether you are considering university or not, I hope you can see God's guiding hand in my testimony and reflect upon God's blessings in your life. We may not know what will come tomorrow, but the future is in God's hands.

*Trust in the LORD with all your heart,
And lean not on your own understanding.
In all your ways acknowledge Him,
And He shall direct your paths.*
(Prov 3:5–6).

God's Timing and Providence Are Perfect

Louise Chan—Edinburgh, UK

The transition from student to working life can be daunting. We may question: *Will I get a job? How long will the search take? What if there is no suitable role for me?* With an obscured career path ahead, it is natural to feel anxious about the future. In these moments, our human emotions may take the lead, making it difficult to put our complete trust in God.

In the Bible, Joseph had a rough start in his early life. From a secular perspective, he was cursed with bad luck: from being sold as a slave to being falsely accused and imprisoned. His future was uncertain, but God had a higher purpose for him. Our life journey may not pan out as we envision, and we may not understand why things seem to be going downhill, but we must remember that God has His plan and timing for us all.

Furthermore, God often uses events and the environment around us to teach us what we ought to learn. Through the experience of searching for my first full-time job, I learned to trust God, to have patience, and to have the humility to submit to His will.

ENCOUNTERING OBSTACLES

After graduating in the summer of 2018, my search for a job in graphic design lasted many months but only led to some temporary part-time roles. These were great for gaining experience, but I yearned for long-term work. I was also ambitious and desired to move away from home, where there were more extensive opportunities to excel in my career. However, things would take a downward turn whenever they started to look promising.

In the spring of 2019, I was accepted onto a competitive internship away from home. I was thrilled with this opportunity. Since this was what I wanted, I assumed it was also God's will for me. By summer, I had settled into a new city and was looking forward to the new role. But my contract was canceled abruptly after a week due to issues in the company. I found this difficult to accept and began to question: if this was God's will, why did He give, only to take it away so easily?

“I realized that no one would be able to help me in this situation—no family, no friends, not even the orthopedic surgeon—if anything went wrong”

Nevertheless, I returned to the job search. The longer the wait, the more discouraged I became, even to the point of considering a complete career change. I began to doubt myself and my skills. Deep down, I started to doubt God and His love for me. My doubtful heart made attending services and fellowships feel like a chore, and my service to God was performed reluctantly.

After a few months, I started working part-time in the retail industry. However, I had to resign three months into the job

because I had an accident outside of work—I fractured and dislocated my ankle, requiring surgery. In the moments on the way to and inside the cold operating theater, I realized that no one would be able to help me in this situation—no family, no friends, not even the orthopedic surgeon—if anything went wrong. I only had God to rely on. From this turning point, I resolved to put more effort into prayer, reading the Bible, and rebuilding a trusting relationship with God during my recovery, which lasted four months.

In December 2019, I had my first interview for what would become my current job. However, this position was subsequently put on indefinite hold because of the pandemic. Nothing was panning out as I had hoped. My job search had stretched on for over one and a half years. Thankfully, these circumstances created valuable space for self-examination. I realized that I had been impatient in my search. Through this journey, God wanted to teach me patience.

PATIENCE IS KEY

As I waited for my interview results, I prayed and chose to leave the outcome in God's hand. I resolved to wait on God to see if He would grant me this job. If not, I would wait for another opportunity. The job offer was eventually confirmed to start in April 2020, five long months after the initial interview. Today, there may be things that we are waiting for—be it a new job or a new chapter of our lives—but the time that God has appointed will be just right because He makes everything beautiful in its time (Eccl 3:11).

CLOTHED WITH HUMILITY

Upon deeper reflection, I realized I lacked the humility to submit to God's planned path. I was strong-willed and had a proud heart, as I had aimed to start my career in a high-flying role. God understood the

condition of my faith, and so prevented me from starting a full-time job immediately. He ensured I did not become puffed up and gave me the time to work on my faith. God did not allow me to do the internship because He knew I could not take the pressures of a competitive environment. He gave me enough time to reflect and to learn humility. Even though my current role was not what I had expected, it is the most suitable position for me in many ways while also giving me the flexibility to do church work. By submitting to His will, I learned that His providence is perfect. All things are done not by our own will, but by God's will: "If the Lord wills, we shall live and do this or that" (Jas 4:15b).

TRUSTING IN GOD

As time passed, I watched God's will unfold and soon saw the bigger picture. I realized I did not trust in God entirely. Now, I believe it was His will for me to stay in Edinburgh for work. Being at home, I was available when my family needed me the most, especially when my grandad was hospitalized and eventually called to rest in the Lord. Though we may not see the reason behind certain events, we must remember that God's thoughts toward us are of peace and not evil, to give us a future and hope (Jer 29:11). Gradually, my trust in God was strengthened, as I understood Him more through His word. Attending services and fellowships became a joy again. The more I trusted, the more I loved God. Serving Him became easier; I did not serve half-heartedly but willingly. Without love, we will

find it challenging to serve, as it requires us to dedicate time and effort. When we remember the grace of God in the Bible and our lives, we will be touched by Him, and this love will compel us to serve (2 Cor 5:14–15). After all, "we know that all things work together for good to those who love God" (Rom 8:28a), and He will provide for us when we put our faith and trust in Him .

GOD'S GRACE IS SUFFICIENT

Thank God for His wonderful grace: I was able to start a full-time permanent role during a nationwide lockdown in the middle of a global pandemic, a time when the chances of finding work were slim. Rather than moving several miles away, I am now blessed to work remotely from home. Through this experience, God guided me to where I needed to be. Indeed, a "man's heart plans his way, but the LORD directs his steps" (Prov 16:9).

"Even if times become difficult, we should remember that God gives us bitterness in our lives so that we can taste the sweetness of His grace"

Our life journeys may take an unexpected detour, but God remains our guiding light through the rough and smooth, over hills and valleys. Even if times become difficult, we should remember that God gives us bitterness in our lives so that we can taste the sweetness of His grace. In the story of Joseph, we know that the Lord was with him despite his difficulties. And whatever he did, the Lord showed him mercy and gave him success. We should be like Joseph—even when things are not going our way, we need to trust in God to lead us in His plan for us. God has a higher purpose for us, and we need to focus on our relationship with Him. As we transition to new stages in our lives, let us remember that everything has its season, and there is a time for every purpose under heaven (Eccl 3:1). Ultimately, the one true God in whom we believe is the One who created the heavens and the earth. In Him, we can certainly trust.





HOLY WORK SERIES: A MUSIC MINISTRY AFTER GOD'S WILL

Tina Yang—Phoenix, Arizona, USA

PRELUDE

What images come to mind when we think of music ministry: Choir presentations during evangelistic and spiritual convocations? Hymnal singing during services? Or sing-alongs during outreach services? While these are usually our first impressions of music ministry, God has a good, acceptable, and perfect will for this area of divine work. To lay down a foundation of basic knowledge of music ministry, let us consider some questions:

Question 1: When was the earliest instance of music worship recorded in the Bible?

Question 2: Who was the first person to praise God?

Question 3: Who initiated music ministry?

For Question 1, most of us would assume that the answer lies in the Book of Genesis. However, the first mention of music in Genesis refers not to music worship but to Jubal, a descendent of Cain, who chose to walk away from God's presence. Jubal invented musical instruments only for his own purposes. After leaving the Garden of Eden, men showed their appreciation to God by offering sacrifices on altars, as demonstrated by Abel, Noah, and Abraham. However, we do not see any record of music worship in the Book of Genesis.

The very first instance of music worship is actually recorded in Job 38:

"Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth?

Tell Me, if you have understanding.

Who determined its measurements?

Surely you know!

Or who stretched the line upon it?

To what were its foundations fastened?

Or who laid its cornerstone,

When the morning stars sang together,

And all the sons of God shouted for joy?"

(Job 38:4-7)

Here we see clearly that when God created the heavens and the earth, the morning stars (the hosts of heaven) broke out in singing and shouting for His marvelous work. This

first instance of music worship illustrates an important sequence of events:

1. God did an amazing work, in this case, creating the heavens and the earth.
2. The hosts of heaven witnessed the work of God.
3. This compelled them to sing and shout for God.

This same sequence occurred in the first instance of praise by humankind, which brings us to Question 2: who was the first person to praise God?

As mentioned earlier, offering sacrifices on altars was the primary way for men to show appreciation to God. However, praising God is different from offering Him physical sacrifices. Praising God is not only a statement of appreciation but also a verbal expression of the whole person who wants to attribute glory to God in a beautiful and obvious way. So who was the first person to praise God in the Bible?

In the Book of Genesis, there are three examples of individuals exclaiming, "Blessed be the Lord." In these instances, Noah, Melchizedek, and Abraham's servant uttered "Blessed be the Lord," to bless, to give thanks, and to attribute honor to God in response to His grace (Gen 9:26; 14:20; 24:26-27).

Leah is the first person in the Bible directly associated with the word "praise" (Gen 29:31-35). Leah was Jacob's first wife, but her husband did not love her. God saw Leah's sadness, so He granted her four sons in a row. We can see how Leah gradually came to understand God's great love through the names she gave her four sons: Reuben ("See, a son,") Simeon ("Heard,") Levi ("Attached,") and Judah ("Praise.") By the fourth son, Leah finally realized how much God loved her by giving her four sons in a row, compelling her to name him Judah. Originally, this name meant "clapping the hands," but the meaning was extended to mean "praise." What a beautiful and obvious way to praise God! So every time Leah called Judah, she was praising God and reminding herself of His wonderful grace

upon her. **Therefore, genuine praise involves an understanding and appreciation of God's work and blessing, compelling one to praise God from the bottom of the heart.**

Let us take a look at another example: the first song in the Bible, written by Moses and recorded in Exodus 15:1-18. We need to know the background to appreciate it fully. Moses sang this song right after witnessing the Egyptian army's complete destruction in the Red Sea. Have you ever wondered why Moses did not praise God when he first encountered Him at the burning bush? How about after the ten plagues? He did not verbalize any praise until this moment on the other side of the Red Sea. This is because, at that moment, Moses finally realized that the Egyptian army would never harm them again. They were finally free from Pharaoh; they would never be slaves again!

At this historical moment, Moses understood God's promise of salvation had come true and was overwhelmed by His great work and love. Therefore, he sang this song commemorating God's redemption and almighty hand and confidently prophesied of eventually entering the promised land. Moses sang this song in great joy and gratitude. He wholeheartedly gave glory to this great God of Israel!

Let us emphasize again: **genuine praise must come from experiencing the work of God, being touched by His grace, and then willingly giving praises and glory to God from the bottom of one's heart.**

Question 3: who initiated music ministry? After understanding genuine praise, it is easier to answer this question. We may think it was King David because he played the harp skillfully and loved music. But when we read 2Chronicles 29:25, we realize that God initiated music ministry! This verse specified that Hezekiah followed David's plan for the music ministry, "for thus was the *commandment of the LORD* by His prophets" (*emphasis added*.) Not only were Gad and Nathan prophets, but David himself was one too (Acts 2:30). It was God's good, acceptable, and perfect will to

establish music ministry when the kingdom of Israel became prosperous during David's time. With the support of Gad and Nathan, David established the music ministry in the hope of doing great service to God and His people.

THE PURPOSES OF MUSIC MINISTRY

So what are the good, acceptable, and perfect purposes of music ministry? I have found at least three:

1. To receive and teach the word of God.
2. To uplift and transform the spirituality of God's people.
3. To worship God in the beauty of holiness.

Now we will extend our perception of music ministry from the outward images of choir presentations and hymnal worship to the inner qualities of the worshippers. Jesus said, "But the hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for the Father is seeking such to worship Him" (Jn 4:23). To summarize, **the ultimate goal of music ministry is to ensure the spiritual growth of each believer, and for each believer to have a close and joyful relationship with God.**

How do we know that these are the purposes of music ministry? We can answer this question by looking at King David's service.

1. To Receive and Teach the Word of God

This first purpose of music ministry can be derived from studying the responsibilities of the Levites. When David set up the temple musicians, only the Levites could carry out the music ministry. Since Moses' time, the Levites were responsible for teaching the law and executing judgment (Deut 17:8–9). In 1 Chronicles 25:1–8, the listed duties of the temple musicians include prophesying according to the king's order, giving thanks and praises to God, and being the king's seers in the words of God. Interestingly, the word "prophesy" is translated into "sing" in Chinese versions of the Bible. By combining these duties, the Levite temple musicians would teach the people God's word pleasantly through singing or with the accompaniment of musical instruments.

This is the good, acceptable, and perfect way of teaching the word of God. In ancient times, most people were illiterate, so only the Levites, who received training for their duties as teachers and judges, were able to read. When reading the laws aloud to the Israelites in public gatherings, the best way to project the word would be through chanting. The next effective way would be through singing. Through David's organization of the temple ministry, the Levites had now also become musicians who wrote psalms and songs to help the Israelites remember God's word.

Today, most people are educated and can read the Bible themselves, but do we use this ability well by reading the Bible every day? If we only hear the word of God from sermons and religious education (RE) classes, we will never grow spiritually strong. Furthermore, if we can memorize the word of God with the help of songs, then we can recall God's word at any time to meditate on the living word. In this way, we will be greatly strengthened and empowered throughout our daily lives. This is the first and most obvious reason why God would like us to have a well-organized music ministry in the church.

2. To Uplift and Transform the Spirituality of God's People

Even if we read the Bible daily, do we often experience the transforming power of the living word of God? This is the second purpose of music ministry. Indeed, the music ministry established by King David had a long-lasting impact on the people of Israel. The Israelites, who complained throughout their wilderness journey, started to chant and sing psalms. Even though the kingdom of Judah was destroyed, the exiles continued to read, chant, and sing the laws and psalms. Israel's infamous reputation of constant complaining was replaced by a new quality of constant singing and praise.

"These beautiful hymns and soothing psalms draw many souls to the faith"

The Book of Psalms is proof of their transformation. The psalms are frequently quoted in the New Testament: the Lord Jesus used them in His teaching (Lk 20:17, 42–43); the other authors referenced them to prove the prophecy of the Messiah and His work (Heb 1:5–13); Peter and Paul also quoted them when they started preaching (Acts 2:25–28, 34–35; 13:33–35). All these records indicate the Book of Psalms was well known and widely practiced among the Jews of that time. Even today, the Jews use the psalms in their daily devotions, with some reading the entire book weekly or monthly.¹

The Book of Psalms is also a book beloved by many Christians for the comfort, encouragement, and hope therein. Christianity has a rich tradition of church music. These beautiful hymns and soothing psalms draw many souls to the faith.

However, one challenge in music ministry is the tendency to emphasize the music itself more than the truth in the lyrics. To resist

¹ "Which Psalms Should I Read Daily?" Chabad.org, accessed July 19, 2022, https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/764344/jewish/Which-Psalms-Should-I-Read-Daily.htm.

this, church music has already been reformed at least two times. The first time was during the end of the sixth century when Pope Gregory unified and limited church music to chanting to eliminate secular elements in worship music. The second time was during the sixteenth century, when Martin Luther started the Protestant Reformation. The rise of the Protestant or Reformed Church again prompted an emphasis on the lyrics and the message, a reaction against the complicated polyphonic music (multiple melodies being sung simultaneously) of the time, which hindered the congregation from participating in worship and obscured the projection of lyrics.²

Today, though we do not sing complicated music, believers may still indulge in the beauty of the music itself and forget to pay attention to the lyrics' message. In addition, some hymns may become so familiar that we are no longer cognizant of the lyrics and the truth they contain. Therefore, music ministry needs to be grounded in teaching the truth in the lyrics, upholding the message above the music. Music should always be the servant of God's word. With this principle, Christians can experience the transforming power of the word through the music ministry.

3. To Worship God in the Beauty of Holiness

To illustrate the third purpose of music ministry, we will look at the phrase, "Worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness," which is used several times in the Old Testament (1 Chr 16:29; 2 Chr 20:21; Ps 29:2; 96:9). "Beauty" is usually translated in these verses as "attire" or "behavior" in Chinese versions of the Bible. I will put these alternative translations side by side for the remainder of this article so readers can contemplate the meaning. This phrase was first recorded in David's psalm of thanksgiving, written to commemorate the smooth, peaceful, and joyful arrival of the ark of the covenant into Jerusalem (1 Chr 16:8–36, 29).

David brought the ark of the covenant to Jerusalem out of good intentions, but he did not initially realize the significance of the ark. The ark was where God talked to Moses during the wilderness years. Being in the ark's presence was to be in God's presence. Before God descended and spoke to the Israelites on Mount Sinai, He instructed Moses to tell the people to sanctify themselves (Ex 19:10–11). Furthermore, the tabernacle and everything within it needed to be anointed with holy oil before being used in ministry. Aaron and his descendants, who became the high priests, also needed to be sanctified by the holy anointing oil before ministering in front of the ark—that is, in God's presence (Ex 30:26–30). Without holiness, no one can see God (Heb 12:14).

During his first attempt, David did not fully appreciate the sanctity of the ark and transported it his way. This resulted in a failed attempt and a tragic death (1 Chr 13).

For the second attempt (1 Chr 15), David finally realized that the ark needed to be carried by the Levites, the way God had instructed Moses. Therefore, he asked the Levites and priests to sanctify themselves. David also organized the Levites and priests in a certain order: three chief musicians led the procession, followed by Levites playing instruments, a choirmaster with a large Levite choir, four gatekeepers, seven trumpet players, and finally, David with the captains and the rest of the Israelites (1 Chr 15:2–25).

These two processions were so different! The first one was a chaotic, large crowd with the noise of both music and commotion. The second was an orderly assembly, with Levites dressed in fine linen, playing and singing music harmoniously.

After the experience of the second procession, David understood how beautiful it is to obey the word of God and how merciful God is. In David's psalm of thanksgiving, written after this procession (1 Chr 16:8–36), David understood that the *word of God brings holiness* (all the Levites sanctified themselves), *order* (an orderly assembly), *harmony* (different ensembles playing in an orderly fashion), *beauty* (all the Levites dressed in fine linen), and *great joy* (1 Chr 15:25). This is God's good, acceptable, and perfect will that we can experience such a beautiful outcome when we obey His word! Therefore, David first wrote "worship in the beauty of holiness" in this psalm (1 Chr 16:29), acknowledging God' mercy for enabling the second attempt to proceed smoothly and peacefully (1 Chr 15:26). God had overlooked the imperfections of the gathered Israelites, and granted them peace and joy. This inspired David to coin another of his oft-repeated phrases: "Oh, give thanks to the Lord, for He is good, and His mercy endures forever" (1 Chr 16:34).

God wants us to know how joyful it is to worship Him in the beauty (attire) of holiness. Worship should not be just a command but something Christians love and look forward to participating in. From the final seven psalms in the Book of Psalms, and the praises in the Book of Revelation, we know that worship in the beauty (attire) of holiness is the theme of our life in eternity: the praises of the great multitude (Rev 7:9–10; 19:1–3), of the 144,000 (Rev 14:1–5), and of those who overcome (Rev 15:2–4), all illustrate the joy of worshipping God in eternity. But while we are still on the earth, each Christian should have this heavenly experience to keep our faith strong in tribulation or temptation until we can worship God in eternal beauty and glory.

PRACTICAL PRINCIPLES OF MUSIC MINISTRY FOR TRUE JESUS CHURCH

Now that we understand the music ministry according to God's will, we can derive some practical principles with the help of Paul's instruction on music ministry:

Do not be drunk with wine, which is dissipation; but be filled with the Spirit, speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord, giving thanks always for all things to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. (Eph 5:18–20, emphasis added)

Here Paul advises believers not to get drunk but to be filled with the Holy Spirit. Instead of wasting oneself or speaking filthy, foolish talk, or coarse jesting (Eph 5:4), Paul instructed believers on how to use their voice: they should speak and edify each other in psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs. They should glorify God by singing and making melody in one's heart with thanksgiving for all things. Paul mentioned three different kinds of music and three aspects of communication, which we can translate into skills to engage in the music ministry fully. Let us see how we can put these three aspects into practice at both personal and church levels.

FOR INDIVIDUAL MEMBERS

1. Speaking

The first aspect Paul mentioned is speaking. We have a misconception that music ministry only consists of singing or playing musical instruments. Not only can we sing psalms and hymns, but we can also edify each other by communicating and sharing the meaning of the texts and lyrics. We may question how we can "speak" spiritual songs. One definition of the word "speaking" in the original language means to utter or emit a sound. So it is fine to use "speaking" or "uttering" to describe how we deliver spiritual songs.

Speaking is a unique gift that God gives to human beings. The rest of creation does not have speech or language like

² Tim Dowley, *Christian Music: A Global History* (Oxford and Minneapolis: Lion Books, 2011), 88.

³ Andrew Wilson-Dickson, *The Story of Christian Music*. (Oxford and Minneapolis: Lion Books, 2003), 40.

ours, yet it declares the glory of God (Ps 19:1–4). The ancient Greek philosophers observed and marveled at this display of the order and harmony in the universe, and called this amazing presentation “the music of the spheres.”³ If this inaudible expression of the heavens can declare the glory of God, how much more can we glorify Him when we speak of His word and His wonderful work! Therefore, by speaking to one another in psalms, hymns and spiritual songs, we are practicing music ministry: by speaking to each other in psalms, we declare the word of God, and teach and admonish each other (Col 3:16); by speaking the lyrics of hymns, we share the grace of God, and encourage each other; by speaking spiritual songs in prayer, we receive comfort and joy from the Holy Spirit. We do not need music reading or singing skills to do these things. Just as Leah learned to praise God, all we need is a sincere heart to offer thanks and praises to God.

2. Singing

Singing is the next aspect in Paul’s instruction. It is also the skill most commonly associated with music ministry. While singing is mainly addressed to God, believers and non-believers around us are edified by hearing the beautiful sacred music. David set a good example of how to use musical skills correctly. When he played for King Saul, it was not just through his musical skills, but, more importantly, through his reverent heart that he produced sacred music to cast away the evil spirit and refresh Saul (1 Sam 16:23).

From the remarks earlier in this article, we can summarize a few guidelines for using our musical skills for ministry:

- Pay attention to the truth in the lyrics instead of only indulging oneself in the beauty of the music.
- Emphasize having and nurturing a reverent heart and attitude more than musical talent.
- Simplicity in music is better than complicated music, so everyone can participate in praising God.
- Focus on the holiness, order, harmony, beauty, and joy of music worship.

3. Making Melody in One’s Heart

The third aspect Paul mentioned, making melody in one’s heart, is also the least emphasized skill. What is it like to make melody in one’s heart? While speaking and singing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs, we are using our body and mind to praise God; making melody in one’s heart means that our heart and soul are fully engaged in praising God. When we master this third skill, we praise and thank God with our whole being: body, heart, and soul. We embody not just the outward image of a presenter but the inner qualities of a true worshipper.

When a believer reaches this stage, he is at peace with himself, his brothers and sisters, and God. He is making melody in his heart

out of peace and joy. There is a perceptible transformation. He has internalized the word of God and the sacred music, which are firmly rooted in him. He can make melody in his heart at every moment. How beautiful it is when all members can make melody in their hearts! It means that their hearts no longer harbor complaints, anger, or harmful words but only peace, joy, and grace. This is the ultimate result that Paul envisioned for music ministry, and another way to interpret the meaning of “in the beauty (attire) of holiness.” Let us strive to fulfill this third aspect of music ministry!

LOCAL CHURCH-LEVEL AND BEYOND



Generally speaking, we can see that our music ministry in most churches focuses mainly on the second aspect that Paul mentioned. Let us also take root in the first skill of speaking (edifying each other by speaking psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs), and strive to achieve the third skill of making melody in one’s heart (manifesting peace, joy, and grace). Below are some works the church can do to help everyone grow through the music ministry:

1. Teach clear biblical statements regarding God’s will in music ministry, including the purposes of music ministry. Encourage believers to practice the three aspects Paul instructed.
2. Allocate more time for worship with music. During services, we can give more time for hymnal leaders to guide the congregation’s

hearts by delving into the hymns’ messages and choosing hymns that align with the sermon topic. Dedicated hymnal worship services are also beneficial for members to practice speaking and singing to one another in psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs.

3. Design a training program for church musicians. Similar to the Religious Education Teachers Seminar (RETS), we can design a church musicians’ training program at local, regional, and national levels to increase awareness of the music ministry according to God’s will, and equip workers with the skills to lead the music ministry.

4. Produce more songs and hymns based on the complete truth. The True Jesus Church has the truth that many other denominations are unaware of. We can encourage members to write poems and praises based on the complete truth, from which songwriters can produce new songs and hymns. These songs and hymns will help the members remember and meditate on the truth at anytime. With the help of the Holy Spirit, we can produce sacred music that attracts and edifies people.

“After internalizing the sound of sacred music and good music, we can make melody in our hearts to praise God and illuminate harmony, peace, and joy in the church”

5. Encourage believers to listen to sacred music and good music. Not only is there sacred music produced by our choirs, there is also good music, such as well-written classical music and traditional folk songs from around the world. These kinds of music are better than current pop music and other genres of secular music. When listening to folk songs, one only needs to be careful that they are not associated with pagan religious worship. After internalizing the sound of sacred music and good music, we can make melody in our hearts to praise God and illuminate harmony, peace, and joy in the church.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, I hope this article is only the initial call to action for strengthening and expanding the music ministry in our church. I encourage and welcome feedback from all fellow music ministry workers, pastors, deacons, and elders. In the end time, music ministry plays a crucial role in serving the congregation in all areas of ministry. May God help us to learn His good, acceptable, and perfect will for the music ministry; edify each other through psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs; be transformed, and worship the Lord in the beauty (attire) of holiness forevermore!

May all honor and glory be unto His name!



GOOD WINE

KC Tsai—Toronto, Canada

At the start of Jesus' ministry, after He had chosen five of His disciples, He attended a wedding in Cana of Galilee. This is where He performed His first miracle:

On the third day there was a wedding in Cana of Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there. Now both Jesus and His disciples were invited to the wedding. And when they ran out of wine, the mother of Jesus said to Him, "They have no wine." Jesus said to her, "Woman, what does your concern have to do with Me? My hour has not yet come." His mother said to the servants, "Whatever He says to you, do it." Now there were set there six waterpots of stone, according to the manner of purification of the Jews, containing twenty or thirty gallons apiece. Jesus said to them, "Fill the waterpots with water." And they filled them up to the brim. And He said to them, "Draw some out now, and

take it to the master of the feast." And they took it. When the master of the feast had tasted the water that was made wine, and did not know where it came from (but the servants who had drawn the water knew), the master of the feast called the bridegroom. And he said to him, "Every man at the beginning sets out the good wine, and when the guests have well drunk, then the inferior. You have kept the good wine until now!" This beginning of signs Jesus did in Cana of Galilee, and manifested His glory; and His disciples believed in Him. (Jn 2:1-11)

Some may read this passage and think that this was an impressive but inconsequential miracle—a wedding may be an important day for a bride and groom, but running out of wine is not a matter of life or death. However, there is always a spiritual significance in the miracles Jesus

performs, and this is no less true for His first one. What can we learn? What actually happened at the wedding in Cana?

REMOVAL OF THE WATER

Jesus is the kind and loving God who never ceases to care for His people, blessing them with grace and happiness. But some would ask, "Why was His first miracle not performed to save lives, heal the sick, cast out demons, or even calm the waves of the sea? Why would it be turning water into wine?"

Turning water into wine was unlike most other life-changing miracles recorded in the Bible. However, it did serve to manifest Jesus' glory to the disciples at the launch of His ministry.

Wine is the focus of this miracle, but the transformation of the water in the six waterpots, representing the ceremonial ritual of Jewish tradition, is also significant. The waterpots would have contained water for ceremonial washing, but Jesus asked the servants to top up these pots with more water. After the miracle, the water in those six stone waterpots was replaced by wine. In the new covenant brought by Jesus, the old practices of ceremonial washing that belonged to the old were eliminated. This may be the significance of Jesus' first miracle—proclaiming the coming of the “new wine,” the gospel preached by Jesus, which would eliminate the Jewish practices of ceremonial washing. The very purpose of Jesus' words, which is the truth, is to set man free from the bondage of old (Jn 8:31–32).

Let us look into this passage in greater detail.

INVITE JESUS INTO YOUR MARRIAGE

The Bible says that the mother of Jesus was at the wedding (Jn 2:1). She was likely there to assist in the wedding banquet, as she would later instruct the servants to do whatever Jesus told them to, and the servants followed through.

Jesus was also invited to the wedding, and this invitation turned out to be the cause of a great blessing. An embarrassing situation was averted, and the joyful celebration could continue. In ancient times, the wedding feast (*seudah*) after the marriage (*nissuin*, meaning, “to take”)¹ might have included seven full days of food, music, dancing, and celebrations (Judg 14:10–12).² As narrated in the passage, sometime during the banquet, the wine ran out. It could have been a disaster for the family, but because Jesus performed a miracle to turn water into wine, the wedding ended in joy and thankfulness. Jesus' presence was the reason for a successful wedding.

A wedding is the beginning of a marriage. If we invite Jesus into our marriage, from the wedding and beyond, it will be a happy and blessed life indeed.

¹ *Nissuin* derives from *naso*, which means “to lift up.” As when Jesus said, “And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to Myself” (Jn 14:3a). When Jesus comes again, He will *take* us to Himself.

² “Ancient Jewish Wedding Customs and Yeshua's Second Coming,” *Messianic Bible*, accessed February 25, 2021, <https://free.messianicbible.com/feature/ancient-jewish-wedding-customs-and-yeshuas-second-coming/>.

Society today emphasizes fairness and equality between the couple in the marriage, a departure from biblical principles. Within a marriage established in the Lord, equality is not an issue. Jesus teaches us that marriage is when a man leaves his father and mother to be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh (Mt 19:5). For equality or inequality to exist, there must be at least two parties involved. Yet, the husband and wife become one body in matrimony if they are willing to follow the teachings of Jesus.

For two people from different families and backgrounds, becoming one is no easy task. Not only does married life necessitate sharing all things material and emotional,



but it also requires both partners to make adjustments in terms of faith and principles. All of these involve mutual learning. Besides demonstrating trust and forgiveness, sparing a thought for each other is what a new couple must work on. Only when they invite Jesus into their life together, not as a guest but as the Master, and both are determined to walk toward Him together, can they become one.

THE LORD'S TIME

Jesus said to her, “Woman, what does

your concern have to do with Me? My hour has not yet come.” (Jn 2:4)

Mary was Jesus' mother. How could He call her “woman”? It is certainly inappropriate for an ordinary man to address his mother in this manner. Yet Jesus was not only her son but also the Messiah who had a much more important work to do. When Jesus said to her, “What does your concern have to do with Me? My hour has not yet come,” He spoke these words in His authority as the Messiah. Mary understood this and was not offended. Instead, she said to the servants, “Whatever He says to you, do it” (Jn 2:5). Perhaps she expected Jesus to do something that only the Messiah could do.

According to the flesh, Jesus was born of the seed of David. He was a man. Yet, according to the Spirit of holiness, the eternal Spirit (God being Spirit), He is the Son of God (Rom 1:3–4). He is the eternally blessed God (Rom 9:5).

“By calling His mother ‘woman,’ Jesus showed us that the time to reveal Himself as the Messiah was entirely under His control”

Jesus had a specific time to do His work and be glorified—when He died on the cross, resurrected, and ascended to heaven. For this reason, He came into the world: to realize the salvation plan. His life on earth had a clear direction and destination—Jerusalem—and some events had to happen in the lead-up to that point (Jn 7:6; 8:20). His time came when, before His arrest, He spoke these words: “Father, the hour has come. Glorify Your Son, that Your Son also may glorify You” (Jn 17:1).

By calling His mother “woman,” Jesus showed us that the time to reveal Himself as the Messiah was entirely under His control. No one, not even His biological mother, could interfere in the chronology of His mission on earth.

Jesus is the Sovereign God, of whom the Bible says:

*“He does great things past finding out,
Yes, wonders without number.
If He goes by me, I do not see Him;
If He moves past, I do not perceive Him;
If He takes away, who can hinder Him?
Who can say to Him, ‘What are
You doing?’”*

(Job 9:10–12)

IN SPIRIT AND TRUTH

Now there were set there six waterpots of stone, according to the manner of purification of the Jews, containing twenty or thirty gallons apiece. (Jn 2:6)

The water prepared for the ceremonial washing of hands was essential for the wedding banquet. In a separate incident, the Pharisees found fault with some of Jesus' disciples after witnessing them eat bread with defiled (unwashed) hands (Mk 7:1–2). The passage provides further background:

For the Pharisees and all the Jews do

not eat unless they wash their hands in a special way, holding the tradition of the elders. When they come from the marketplace, they do not eat unless they wash. And there are many other things which they have received and hold, like the washing of cups, pitchers, copper vessels, and couches. (Mk 7:3–6)

In the marketplace, one might come in contact with people considered unclean under the Mosaic Law—for example, someone suffering from a bodily discharge or eating an unclean animal's meat. Therefore, water was prepared for guests to wash their hands for purification before entering the wedding banquet.

Jesus said to those Pharisees regarding their demand for ceremonial washing:

"Well did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written: 'This people honors Me with their lips, But their heart is far from Me. And in vain they worship Me, Teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.'" (Mk 7:6–7)

Jesus came to the world to preach the gospel of the kingdom of God, but first, He had to address these Jewish traditions. Under His salvation grace, practices such as the ceremonial washing of hands had to be removed. Jesus introduced a more

excellent internal cleansing of one's heart by His word.

Jesus taught:

"You have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not murder, and whoever murders will be in danger of the judgment.' But I say to you that whoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment. ... whoever says, 'You fool!' shall be in danger of hell fire." (Mt 5:21–26)

To those of old, a man's heart could harbor hatred and jealousy toward his brother. As long as he did not kill, he had kept the law. However, Jesus taught that this is not enough. He would bring about the grace of salvation, which was like new wine, and He wanted man to prepare a new wineskin to receive it (Mt 9:16–17).

When He was in Samaria, Jesus said to a Samaritan woman:

"Woman, believe Me, the hour is coming when you will neither on this mountain, nor in Jerusalem, worship the Father. ... God is Spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth." (Jn 4:21–24)

Jerusalem was where the temple of God stood, the gathering place for the chosen people to worship God. Yet after Jesus came, worshipping God was no longer limited to Jerusalem or any specific place. It is not about the place. It takes genuine faith in one's heart to truly worship and serve Him. The Pharisees taught in the synagogues according to the rules and ordinances of the law and Jewish tradition. Even so, most of them were hypocritical, which displeased God.

"We may come to sit in the church hall on Sabbath days, but do we come with a heart to worship in spirit and truth?"

Today, likewise, we know we have to observe the Sabbath. We may come to sit in the church hall on Sabbath days, but do we come with a heart to worship in spirit and truth? Or do we just come to show ourselves to others and socialize? After the worship service has ended, do we truly follow the teachings we have learned from God's word? Jesus performed the first miracle in a wedding banquet to remove the mask of hypocrisy.

A true worshipper must also do the same—first remove the

manner of false formality to offer the genuine self to serve God.

ABOUT THE LAW

But before faith came, we were kept under guard by the law, kept for the faith which would afterward be revealed. Therefore the law was our tutor to bring us to Christ, that we might be justified by faith. But after faith has come, we are no longer under a tutor. For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus. (Gal 3:23–26, emphasis added)

In the Old Testament, God's people were kept safe under the jurisdiction of the law. But this was in effect only until Jesus



brought about the grace of salvation, which we inherited through faith. Today, we observe the Ten Commandments, but we are no longer under the ordinances of the law. As the apostle Paul writes:

Now I say that the heir, as long as he is a child, does not differ at all from a slave, though he is master of all, but is under guardians and stewards until the time appointed by the father. Even so we, when we were children, were in bondage under the elements of the world. But when the fullness of the time had come, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born

under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, that we might receive the adoption as sons. (Gal 4:1–5)

HOW COULD YOU KEEP THE GOOD WINE UNTIL NOW?

When the master of the feast had tasted the water that was made wine, he called the bridegroom and said to him, "Every man at the beginning sets out the good wine, and when the guests have well drunk, then the inferior. You have kept the good wine until now!" (Jn 2:10).

Yes, the new wine is so much better than the old. This new wine is the truth of salvation, which came through the precious blood of Jesus, setting us free from Jewish tradition and the ordinances of the law.

The progression of salvation in the Old Testament was yearning for Jesus' new wine. The master of the feast's exclamation echoes this sentiment: "How could You keep the good wine until now?"



IF GOD WERE...

Ruby Leung—Houston, Texas, USA

If God were a cloud, I would wish to be the grass,
thirsting for the rain.

If God were a flower, I would wish to be a butterfly
fluttering nearby.

If God were a great tree, would He allow me to build
a nest in His branches?

If God were a river, I would wish to be a rowboat,
floating afar on His currents.

If God were a pasture, I would wish to be the sound
of the morning flute, joyfully welcoming the new day.

If God were a mountain, I would wish to be a nightingale dwelling
on His heights, singing the praises of my Creator through the night.

If God were a large meadow, I would wish to be
a lamb in His presence.

If God were a wanderer, I would wish to be a dog,
faithfully following Him, always together and never separated.

In life or death, forever in His embrace.
He is the Master I will look to every day of my life.

ARTICLES OF FAITH

JESUS CHRIST

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.

TRUE JESUS 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.

WATER 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.

LORD'S SECOND COMING

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.

CALL FOR ARTICLES

Issue #95: Our Life
Articles due: December 1, 2022

*What profit has a man from all his labor
In which he toils under the sun? (Eccl 1:3)*

*For who knows what is good for man in
life, all the days of his vain life which he
passes like a shadow? Who can tell a man
what will happen after him under the sun?
(Eccl 6:12)*

The Book of Ecclesiastes paints a bleak portrait of our existence under the sun. As the Preacher meditates on man's purpose on earth, he realizes that life is short and full of vanity and injustice (Eccl 1:14; 3:16; 4:1). The world is constantly moving but never progressing, and man's desires will never be satisfied (Eccl 1:1-11). What is striking about these initial meditations is the absence of God. But after considering everything humans labor for—fame, riches and knowledge—the Preacher concludes

that God is the One who defines man's purpose and the meaning of life:

*Let us hear the conclusion of the matter:
Fear God and keep His commandments,
For this is man's all.
For God will bring every work into
judgment. (Eccl 12:13-14a)*

In our *Time to Reflect* trilogy, issues 93 to 95, we are contemplating the fundamental aspects of our spiritual life. In issue 93, *Our Faith*, we reflected on the essence of our personal faith, remaining steadfast, renewing our relationship with God, and how faith informs every aspect of our life. In issue 94, *Our Beliefs*, we will look closely at our Articles of Faith and sacraments—the fundamental building blocks of our doctrines—the truth revealed to God's church through His Holy Spirit.

After this process of self-examination and reaffirming our faith and doctrines, what are the implications for our life? This is the question we turn to in issue 95, *Our Life*.

As the world lurches from disaster to disaster, from pandemics to geopolitical upheaval, we are reminded of the fragility and unpredictability of life—do we stay on track towards our destination, looking to Jesus, “the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross” (Heb 12:2)? Do we live our life under the sun or above the sun, with our hope and mind set on things of heaven (Col 3:2)? And after receiving God's amazing grace and gospel of salvation, we should be compelled to be transformed—how can we put on the image of Christ and offer our lives to God?

GENERAL WRITING GUIDELINES

Content

- Content should be biblically sound and adhere to biblical principles.
- The 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.
- Do not plagiarize the work of other writers or institutions, published either in print or online. Any quotations, ideas, or concepts taken from other sources must be properly referenced.

Grammar/Style

- Use active instead of passive voice.
- Write concisely.
- Use concrete words and ideas instead of abstract concepts.
- Use “plain English” instead of obscure, academic language.
- Use the NKJV version when quoting Bible verses.
- Use American spelling, if possible.

Manna only accepts submissions written by True Jesus Church members. 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

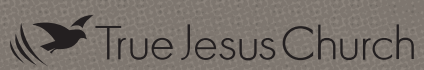
Creative pieces include poems, parables, or short stories that illustrate a biblical teaching or idea. Keep in mind as you are writing: how will this edify the reader?

Submission Information

Please email articles as Microsoft Word documents to manna@tjc.org, including your name, mailing address, email address, and telephone number.

By submitting an article, you consent to it being edited and published in Manna, in print and online, distributed globally and promoted on social media. If accepted for publication, your article may also be edited and/or translated for other True Jesus Church publications and websites.

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Our Faith



CONTACT INFORMATION

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

True Jesus Church, 21217 Bloomfield Ave, Lakewood, CA 90715 USA

Phone: +1-714-533-8889 | Fax: +1-562-402-3190 | Email: info@tjc.org | Website: www.tjc.org