

Manna

ISSUE 97 / FEBRUARY 2025



SPIRITUAL NURTURE

God's Word

PART TWO OF TWO

SPIRITUAL HEALTH

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As with our physical health, we must look after our spiritual health. There are various factors we must take into consideration to remain spiritually healthy. The axiom “Prevention is better than cure” rings true to all, particularly those who are health conscious. This also applies to our faith. To stay clear of sin and corruption is the wisest choice in life. To be tainted by sinful influence can be so devastating that we may not make it to where God has prepared for us.

Diligently guarding one's heart against negative influence is vital for good spiritual health, because from the heart flow the issues of life (Prov 4:23). When the will to be close to God is built up, the propensity to sin is proportionately fast vanishing. In this way, the heart is kept sanctified. One must also be aware that guarding the heart by one's own strength is never possible. Divine help must always be solicited. Praying in the Spirit and genuinely searching God's word frequently is indispensable to a healthy spiritual life.

The importance of praying in the Spirit is always taught in the church (Eph 6:18). But to do it effectively is quite another matter. We are witnessing faith-related problems on the rise, even uncontrollably, in the lives of believers. Our prayers, no matter how they increase to meet this rising need, will be ineffectual if we do not pray in the Spirit and practice God's word (Prov 28:9).

Practicing God's word is always absent when we succumb to the allure of the world, rendering living out the word undoable. One key factor is a lack of respect for the word. We cannot take the word of God for granted. It must be observed with

great diligence from the heart (Deut 6:17). Particularly, the basic beliefs of the church must be honored. They are not the word of man that can be understood by any academic means; they are the word of God (1 Thess 2:13) given to the church by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. The word of truth is the foundation of a healthy church, producing spiritual individuals when the word is well kept.

Like medical check-ups, we must do regular examinations to ensure good spiritual health. For example, examining our attitude in serving the Lord is necessary, as we can lose focus in our service. We serve because we are required to build up ourselves and the church. For example, speaking on the pulpit about the need to look after the brethren is biblical. However, if we mean to portray how good we are in caring for the sheep, while demeaning those who may not have done much in this aspect, then this is pride. This is a serious illness that kills if not treated quickly.

A second example is to examine if we guard our tongues, as the Bible teaches. True religion cannot be detached from controlling our words (Jas 1:26). We can act gentle and nice to others in public, but if we lash out at those who have done better than us behind their back, then what religiosity do we have before God? In the eyes of God, we are ungodly. Truly, caring for others must be accompanied by a God-given ability to bridle our tongues and speak graciously in all circumstances. This, when a person does, indicates his spiritual health is good.

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

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U.S. Postmaster: send change-of-address forms to 21217 Bloomfield Avenue, Lakewood, CA 90715 USA.

Back issues of Manna can be downloaded at: www.mannamagazine.com. Please direct any enquiries to manna@tjc.org.

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THE WORD OF GOD IS TRUTH

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*"Sanctify them by Your truth.
Your word is truth."*

(Jn 17:17)

SANCTIFIES AND GRANTS ETERNAL LIFE

Before ascending to heaven and departing from His disciples, Jesus prayed to the Father, saying, "I have glorified You on the earth. I have finished the work which You have given Me to do" (Jn 17:4). Jesus also said, "And this is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent" (Jn 17:3).

An essential part of the work that Jesus completed was to give the word of God

to those whom the Father had given Him (Jn 17:8–9). Thus, they knew that Jesus had come from God and had been sent by God's Spirit to the world to fulfill God's salvation plan. The ones whom the Father had given Jesus were the eleven apostles and those who would believe in the Lord because of their word (Jn 17:20). Those who came to believe in the Lord through the apostles' witness would become one with the apostles, just as the Lord and the Father are one (Jn 17:22). Therefore, today, amidst a baffling array of Christian denominations, persevering in the apostles' teaching is key to ascertaining the true church. The true church's preaching must be consistent with that of the apostles. For example, baptism should be administered in the name of the Lord Jesus (Acts 2:38), not in any other name.

Those who receive the promised Holy Spirit will speak in tongues (Acts 10:44–46). Conversely, the true church must not do what the apostles neither practiced nor instructed, such as celebrating Christmas, Easter, and so on.

The word of God is a crucial channel for man to know God (Jn 17:3). God speaks in multiple ways to those who are willing to believe in Him. He speaks through the ancient saints in the Old Testament who feared and trusted Him, through the interactions between them and Himself, through the words of the prophets, and through the words spoken directly by Jesus. Everyone has the opportunity to know Him and inherit eternal life (1 Tim 3:16). However, we must carefully learn God's word from the entire Bible, not just selecting parts that appeal to us while discarding the rest. We must not only heed what God directly speaks but also His messages conveyed through biblical characters and events.

SWEETER THAN HONEY

*How sweet are Your words to my taste,
Sweeter than honey to my mouth!
Through Your precepts I get
understanding;
Therefore I hate every false way.
Your word is a lamp to my feet
And a light to my path. (Ps 119:103–105)*

"The word of God is a lamp to my feet, and a light to my path." When these words were written, there were no electric lights as we have today. After dark, if clouds obscured the moon, paths would be indistinguishable. Torches or lanterns were essential if people wanted to walk around. The Psalmist's analogy emphasizes the importance of God's word as the lamp illuminating the path ahead to prevent one from stumbling in a pitch-dark world. God's word is the light that indicates the direction we should travel, especially when we are faced with choices at life's crossroads. In short, if we want to walk peacefully and smoothly and enter into eternal life, we must faithfully obey the word of God.

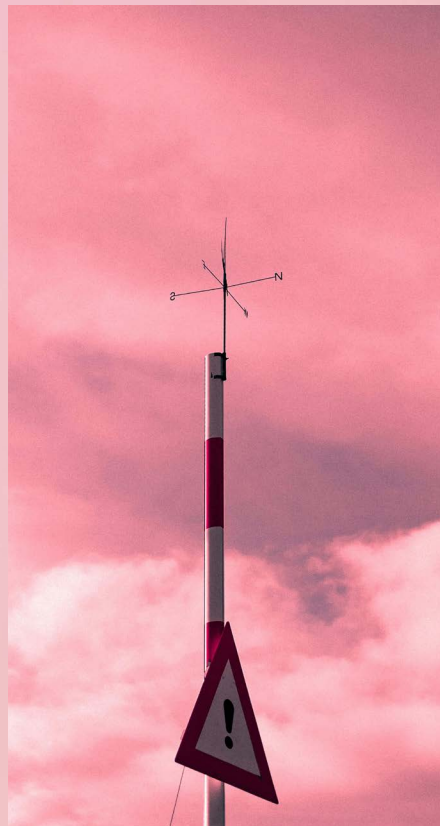
"God's instructions for our walk of faith are not burdensome. The enlightenment that His word brings surpasses any worldly sweetness"

"How sweet are Your words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth!" Another critical aspect the Psalmist highlights is that God's instructions for our walk of faith are not burdensome. In fact, the enlightenment that His word brings surpasses any worldly sweetness. Therefore, if we cannot taste the sweetness of God's word when reading the Bible, it is because we have not sincerely pondered the meaning of the

words or immersed ourselves in them. If our hearts are filled with secular things, are longing for worldly matters, or are consumed by the lusts of the flesh or of the eyes, then our hearts cannot contain the word of God. This is why many of us often read the Bible, pray, and listen to sermons, yet lack spiritual knowledge in our hearts. Our speech and actions do not reflect spiritual virtues.

SHARPER THAN A TWO-EDGED SWORD

For the word of God is living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the division of soul and spirit, and of joints



and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart. And there is no creature hidden from His sight, but all things are naked and open to the eyes of Him to whom we must give account. (Heb 4:12–13)

"The word of God is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart." To help make sense of the world, we often categorize things or people in terms of their similarities or dissimilarities. However, we must be careful not to inadvertently do it in a way that causes division in the church. For example, some people separate believers in the true church into two groups: those who have believed from a young age and those who converted to Christianity later in life. What is the purpose of making such a distinction? How does it help—if ever—the church? If there is no ostensible benefit, we should refrain from making such a distinction lest it erode the unity of the church.

Friendship with the World Is Enmity with God

Adulterers and adulteresses! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Whoever therefore wants to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God. (Jas 4:4)

Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world—the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life—is not of the Father but is of the world. (1 Jn 2:15–16)

On the other hand, there are important differentiations that we should make. One such distinction is between being human-centered and God-centered. The human-centered individual brings in what he has learned from the world and views church affairs through a solely secular lens. He emphasizes individual rights, human relationships, and interactions. He advocates for the church to be managed and led according to secular principles, using legislative, administrative, and management concepts originating from a society without God.

On the other hand, the God-centered individual seeks the will of God in all matters, as revealed in the Bible. He fears God and puts Him first. He constantly examines himself to ensure he still walks before God and faithfully serves Him. The God-centered individual understands that God shepherds His church through His chosen servants. These servants must obey the word of God, leading and caring for the believers according to God's will. They serve willingly, not for

dishonest gain. They serve not by being lords over those entrusted to them but by being examples to the flock (1 Pet 5:2–3).

There is only one way to progress from being human-centered to being God-centered: we must diligently study the word of God and rely on the power of the Holy Spirit.

Pierced by the Word of God or the Word of Man

Sometimes, we are deeply moved, even to the point of tears, by a sermon. What exactly is it that touches us? Is it the memorable anecdotes of members who endured great hardships? Is it the eloquence and expressiveness of the speaker? Or are our hearts touched by the recognition of God's manifold love and unfailing mercies? Are we touched by the vast, boundless grace of Jesus Christ—how patient, longsuffering, and forgiving He is towards stubborn and rebellious man? We must have spiritual wisdom to discern the messages that we hear.

It is not wrong to be touched by emotive words and stories—we would be heartless if we were not. Many people are swept away by fictional romance novels or drama series created to evoke strong emotions in the target audience. But when it comes to sermons about faith, we need to discern whether the message aligns with the principles of the Bible and allows our souls to be touched by God's truth rather than superficial feelings.

For this reason we also thank God without ceasing, because when you received the word of God which you heard from us,

you welcomed it not as the word of men, but as it is in truth, the word of God, which also effectively works in you who believe.
(1 Thess 2:13)

The believers in Thessalonica heard the message preached by Paul, Silas, and Timothy and could discern whether it was the word of God or the word of man. They could confidently welcome and accept what they heard because they compared what they heard with the Scriptures. Can we do the same?

INCORRUPTIBLE SEED

Since you have purified your souls in obeying the truth through the Spirit in sincere love of the brethren, love one another fervently with a pure heart, having been born again, not of corruptible seed but incorruptible, through the word of God which lives and abides forever.
(1 Pet 1:22–23)

The word of God is an incorruptible seed; it is full of life. When nurtured and cultivated with care, it will surely grow and mature. Our rebirth is a transformation from being born of flesh and blood to being born of God, being born from above. One is born again through baptism in the true church and is a child of God through the abidance and testimony of the Holy Spirit. Such a person must continue to be renewed and transformed by submitting to the Holy Spirit and obeying God's living word. To finally enter into eternal life, one must continually maintain a born-again life (Jn 3:3–8).

In the parable of the sower spoken by Jesus, the seed represents the word of God that falls on different types

of ground. While the word of God is unchanging truth, its effects vary depending on the individual listener. Some people's hearts are like the wayside, where the devil snatches away God's word from their hearts. Others are like the rocky ground, receiving the word with joy but failing to let it take root. Some are like the thorny ground, filled with the deception of worldly cares and riches that choke the word of God and prevent it from growing and maturing (Lk 8:12–14). The word of God is the word of life, but such people fail to see its value.

The wise are those whose hearts are like the good ground—they receive the word with a noble and good heart, keep it, and bear fruit with patience (Lk 8:15). They allow the word of God to take root in their hearts. They persist in living out the word of God amidst life's challenges and, in so doing, bring glory to God.

CONCLUSION

When the apostle John was in his old age, based on his experience and understanding of serving God, he said:

*The Elder,
To the elect lady and her children, whom I love in truth, and not only I, but also all those who have known the truth, because of the truth which abides in us and will be with us forever.*
(2 Jn 1:1–2)

The recipient of Elder John's letter, the elect lady, is the true church. Her children are the members within. Elder John said that the truth is the motivation of his love for the brethren. A love



outside of the truth is not true love, as he continues to write:

This is love, that we walk according to His commandments. This is the commandment, that as you have heard from the beginning, you should walk in it. For many deceivers have gone out into the world who do not confess Jesus Christ as coming in the flesh. This is a deceiver and an antichrist.
(2 Jn 1:6–7)

If anyone comes to you and does not bring this doctrine, do not receive him into your house nor greet him; for he who greets him shares in his evil deeds.
(2 Jn 1:10–11)

“He reveals His love within His written word and imparts His word to us so that we can follow it and be saved from destruction”

We emphasize love in the church, but it must be a discerning love that differentiates the truth from falsehood. God’s love cannot be separated from the truth. He reveals His love within His written word and imparts His word to us so that we can follow it and be saved from destruction. In turn, we love God by following His commandments.

Knowing this, let us be sanctified by the truth, ensuring we follow the same gospel preached by the apostles, which aligns with God’s principles throughout the Bible. Allow God’s word to take root in our hearts to illuminate our path, distinguish God’s will from worldly ideals, and bring sweetness and spiritual vitality to our lives. Learning the word of God and constantly meditating on it is vital to our survival in a world full of confusion and deceit. As we walk on our journey of faith, let us pray for the Holy Spirit to guard us with the truth and keep us in the love of the Lord Jesus.

SPIRITUAL HEALTH: THE WORD OF GOD

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THE IMPORTANCE OF SPIRITUAL FOOD

There is an old adage: “You are what you eat.” The food we consume becomes a part of us as our body breaks it down and extracts the nutrients it needs to fuel and repair itself. If we only eat junk food, our body will lack the essential nourishment needed to develop and be healthy. Conversely, a wide-ranging and balanced diet will make our body healthier, stronger, and less prone to sickness. Therefore, the food we eat directly impacts our physical health. An elder once commented that eating more of what God has made (fruits, vegetables, fresh fish, meat, and so on) and less of what man has made (heavily processed foods with added salt, sugar, and additives) is the foundation of good health.

While physical food is important, our spiritual life also needs the right kind of nutrition to grow and thrive. If we are what we eat, then we need to be mindful of what we feed our heart and soul. To be spiritually healthy, we need food that edifies our spiritual life.

Man Shall Not Live By Bread Alone

“So He humbled you, allowed you to hunger, and fed you with manna which you did not know nor did your fathers know, that He might make you know that man shall not live by bread alone; but man lives by every word that proceeds from the mouth of the LORD.” (Deut 8:3)

While the Israelites wandered in the wilderness, they were humbled and allowed to hunger to learn an important lesson. God knew their physical needs and provided manna from heaven as sustenance. However, they had to obey God’s instructions regarding when and how much to gather, how long they could keep it, and how to prepare for the Sabbath (Ex 16:4–5, 19–26). They had to have faith and trust in God’s commands to survive. When they obeyed, they witnessed how God blessed them with manna daily. Though not sumptuous, they always had something to eat, which was no small miracle in the wilderness. God’s grace was sufficient for them (2 Cor 12:9). They could live because of

every word that proceeded from the mouth of the Lord. This is how God taught them the importance of obeying His word and commandments; we must also understand this lesson.

God is the source of all life. His words are spirit and life (Jn 6:63). His word brought the universe into existence (Heb 11:3; Ps 33:6). When God said, “Let there be light,” there was light (Gen 1:3). Every stage of creation was wrought by His word, giving us the life and the world we have today. This same God is the One who speaks to us from heaven through the Scriptures (Heb 12:25), so we need to hear and obey. When we can trust and obey by faith, we will see how God provides us with our daily bread.

All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work. (2 Tim 3:16–17)

We believe the Holy Bible, comprising the Old and New Testaments, is inspired by God and is the only scriptural truth and standard for Christian living. God’s word provides the principles we should live by and helps us cultivate the lifestyle and virtues His people should possess. Through God’s word, the man of God may be complete and capable of doing “good works.” These good works are not just general niceties. We are taught God’s righteousness so we can live a life pleasing to God and beneficial to those around us. These good works reflect the One who is good: God Himself (Mk 10:18). Thus, the Bible is the spiritual food we require to support our spiritual growth to glorify God.

Psalms 1 gives us further insight:

*Blessed is the man
Who walks not in the counsel
of the ungodly,
Nor stands in the path of sinners,
Nor sits in the seat of the scornful;
But his delight is in the law of the LORD,
And in His law he meditates day and night.
He shall be like a tree
Planted by the rivers of water,
That brings forth its fruit in its season,
Whose leaf also shall not wither;
And whatever he does shall prosper.* (Ps 1:1–3)





When we are physically hungry, our body is compelled to seek food. But we must endeavor to desire the right kind of food. It is a choice: do I grab unhealthy junk food, or do I get a proper, nutritious meal? Psalm 1 presents us with a similar choice.

“If we constantly feed ourselves with the worldly doctrines of men, we run the risk of being spiritually unhealthy”

We could choose to feed ourselves the thinking and concepts of the ungodly, the sinners, and the scornful (proud), which would lead us to exhibit the corresponding behavior. The advent of the internet and technological advances mean that we live in an age with myriad information and media at our fingertips through multiple devices. These can be useful tools for work and education, among other things. However, such tools also allow us to encounter many incorrect and unbiblical thoughts, behaviors, and trends that can negatively influence us. Hence, we observe the decline of morality and the increase of social problems that plague our society—abuse, violence and vengeance, sexual immorality, broken families, and so on. Proverbs 4:23 tells us to keep our heart with all diligence, for out of it spring the issues of life. Our thoughts, speech, and behavior towards others and in different situations come from the heart. If we constantly feed ourselves with the worldly doctrines of men, we run the risk of being spiritually unhealthy. We become desensitized to sin as certain concepts and behaviors become more socially acceptable or normalized, and we end up being unable to discern what is pleasing and correct before God.

As God’s people, we realize this is not a healthy choice. Since we desire to be blessed, we ought to delight in and meditate on the law of the Lord day and night. Then we shall be like a tree planted by the rivers of water. We will constantly be full of spiritual vitality—nourished and able to bring forth fruit in its season and prosperous in whatever we do. The question is, how does the word of God nourish and promote the spiritual growth and prosperity we seek?

THE IMPORTANCE OF REGULAR MEALS AND DIGESTION

To find “delight” is to find pleasure or enjoyment in something. The term “law” can be understood as the Torah, in part or the whole, but it can also be an all-encompassing term for God’s commandments, instructions, and teachings. Consuming more knowledge of God’s word brings us joy because we learn more about His heart for His people, what He has

done and will do for His people, and His expectations of and hopes for His people. Such knowledge is good because it allows us to discern between right and wrong, what is pleasing and not pleasing, in God’s sight.

Psalm 1:3 teaches us to meditate on the word day and night. This encouragement gives us a couple of points to reflect on:



1. MAKE SURE YOU EAT

We need to provide ourselves with daily opportunities to receive God’s word.

[A]s newborn babes, desire the pure milk of the word, that you may grow thereby. (1 Pet 2:2)



DESIRE PURE MILK

Peter encourages us to be like newborn babes, desiring the pure milk of God’s word. Babies get hungry quickly and need to be fed regularly. We must cultivate this hunger and desire for God’s word. Just as regular meals are beneficial physically, receiving God’s word regularly is essential for our continued spiritual growth.



SABBATH FEASTS

First and foremost, we should arrange our time and affairs to allow us to observe the Sabbath day and attend church services and activities. God loves us so much that He integrated a weekly opportunity into our lives to gather unencumbered, to listen to and reflect on His word.



DEEPER CULTIVATION

Thirdly, we can earmark a time to do more in-depth study, alone or with others. This requires more time and effort but is very beneficial.



DAILY NOURISHMENT

Secondly, we should spend a little time with God’s word daily. Life can be busy at times, so we must make a conscious effort to set aside time until it becomes second nature to us. We can ringfence a slot in our schedule to read the Bible or church publications, for example, over breakfast, during lunch break, or before bed. We can use our daily commute or when we do chores to listen to a sermon. Technology has made it easier for us to access these opportunities.

2. MAKE SURE YOU DIGEST

Digestion is how our body obtains nutrients from food. Spiritually, it is equivalent to understanding and then applying the word. Meditating—or reflecting—on God’s word is the process by which we digest it to nourish and maintain our spiritual life and grow. In Psalm 1, the Psalmist mentions meditation in the sense of talking to oneself while pondering. Ordinarily, someone talking to himself may be a cause for concern. However, in this case, it is a good thing to do, as we are speaking the word of God to ourselves.



SUCH MEDITATION CAN BENEFIT US IN A FEW WAYS. WHEN WE SPEAK GOD’S WORD TO OURSELVES:



UNDERSTAND

We try to understand God’s words to be educated in righteousness.



REFLECT

We reflect on how we can apply God’s word in our life.



COMPARE

We compare our current behavior with the behavior God desires and consider how to bridge the gap between the two.

THE RUMINATIVE MIND

Those who meditate are sometimes called “ruminants,” as the meditative process is akin to the ruminative digestion process of animals such as cows and sheep. Since grass is difficult to digest, ruminants will regurgitate the partially digested grass and “chew the cud” before re-swallowing it. Various bacteria and digestive juices further break down the processed mixture so it can be fully digested. This digestive process continues throughout the day and employs four stomach chambers to extract the nutrients required.



When it comes to the word of God, we may not immediately understand what we receive. It can take time, prayer, reflection, reading other passages, and hearing others’ sharing before we understand. We may have a basic understanding now and obtain a more in-depth understanding in the future. That is the beauty of God’s word—the layers of understanding and edification we gain over time. Some foods are easier to digest, while some take longer, so the benefit from the food will come sooner or later. Similarly, when we read the Bible, sometimes we connect with

what we read quickly and can see the application. Other times, we may not fully understand the meaning and relevance to us or be able to apply the teaching immediately. We do not need to worry or become frustrated because we think we are not getting anything from reading the Bible. Psalm 1 tells us that regularly spending time with God’s word is like being a tree planted by the rivers of water. We have constant access to the water and nutrients critical to sustaining us, allowing us to bear fruit in season.

One possible meaning is that God’s word

will lead to natural growth as we continue to delight in and meditate on it. Another possibility is that, in time, the meaning or teaching will become apparent, and as we put it into practice, we will grow and bear the fruit God desires. We must appreciate that learning and applying God’s word is a lifelong process that we must couple with prayer; this is spiritual cultivation. It is the process by which we are refined and prepared for the day when Jesus comes again. Not that we are earning our salvation, but we are more certain of it because we are living according to our faith.

GROWTH THROUGH APPLICATION

Evidently, the word of God should be intertwined with our everyday life. Constant consideration of God's word guides us to see from God's perspective so we can make choices pleasing to Him. Knowledge of God's word is a blessing, but greater blessings and joy are found in application.

James exhorts us to be doers of the word and not hearers only (Jas 1:22). It is easy to "talk the talk" when it comes to how we *should* think, speak, and act as a godly person. However, if we do not "walk the walk" by applying the teachings we know, then our theoretical knowledge does not manifest its true value—allowing us to be blessed in what we do (Jas 1:25).

For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man observing his natural face in a mirror; for he observes himself, goes away, and immediately forgets what kind of man he was.

(Jas 1:23–24)

James likens hearing the word to looking into a mirror. Mirrors show us our true likeness—every gray hair, spot, and wrinkle is reflected. We cannot deny what we see because it is the reality of who we are. Receiving God's word shows us our true self. If we are obedient to God's word, we can be thankful for what we see because this is the image a child of God should have. We are encouraged to continue doing these good things and more. However, we often feel ashamed of what God shows us. We see our true selves: we lack love and patience for others; we struggle to forgive; we are proud; we are lazy; we are lacking in our role as a husband, wife, parent, or child; we have bad habits that affect our lifestyle. God has spoken, and we have heard. Our conscience is pricked with guilt. We resolve to do better and promise God we will change and grow.

As genuine as these thoughts are at the time, sometimes we suffer the "walk away effect." After looking in the mirror, we turn and go away, immediately forgetting what kind of person we were shown to be. We identified

what aspects of ourselves needed to change or improve. However, the prior remorse and resolve gradually disappear as we leave the chapel, the fellowship ends, or we put the Bible or church publication down. We forget what we saw and may even replace it with an idealized or false self-image: *I am a kind, gentle, and loving person; I*

"God lifts the mirror for us to see ourselves. He presents us with the opportunity to uncover what we need to work on and the chance to change"



am a great spouse; I know the teachings of the Bible, so I must be fine. We deceive ourselves into thinking we are spiritually good because we know the "right answer" when it comes to faith. However, without "walking the walk," we are not tackling the issues and changing for the better. Instead, we become complacent, lax, and self-indulgent in our life of faith. The worst-case scenario would be that we reject what God shows us, essentially calling God a liar (1 Jn 1:10).

In His love, God lifts the mirror for us to see ourselves. He presents us with the opportunity to

uncover what we need to work on and the chance to change. When these moments come, we need to respond like those on the Day of Pentecost who were cut to the heart by Peter's words, asking what they should do to remedy the situation (Acts 2:37). When Peter gave them the answer, those who gladly received his word affirmed their belief through action, and three thousand were baptized that day. Likewise, when God sends someone to us who speaks the truth in love (Eph 4:15), we need to humbly reflect and come before God in prayer, repenting of our errors and asking for help to address those issues.

MEDITATE, DEDICATE, GROW

Paul encouraged Timothy to be an example to the believers in word, conduct, love, faith, and purity (1 Tim 4:12). These are all manifestations of God's word and teachings in his life.

Meditate on these things; give yourself entirely to them, that your progress may be evident to all.

(1 Tim 4:15)

He instructs Timothy to meditate on these things and to immerse himself in doing them. The resulting transformation, accomplished through obedience to God's word, will be seen by all. This way, he can save himself and those who hear his encouragement (1 Tim 4:16).

If we desire to progress in our faith, we must take the words of Paul as personal encouragement. We need to organize and make time to receive and meditate on the word of God. We need to dedicate ourselves to practicing what we have learned. When we commit ourselves to these two actions, we and others will naturally see the growth the Lord intended.

And do this, knowing the time, that now it is high time to awake out of sleep; for now our salvation is nearer than when we first believed.

(Rom 13:11)

If we have not started already, it is time to take control of our spiritual diet and feast on the spiritual food that God has provided us. Let us be constantly nourished and strengthened in our spiritual life to grow into healthier and more mature believers.



GOD'S WORD AND I

Boaz—Malaysia

According to Guinness World Records, the Christian Bible is the best-selling book of all time, with over five billion copies published over the 1,500 years since its content was standardized.¹ By the end of the twentieth century, the Bible had been translated into nearly 325 languages, with parts of it translated into 1,800 other languages.² However, the Bible's broad distribution is inexplicable when we consider the consistent opposition and eradication attempts it has faced throughout history.

The phenomenal preservation and dissemination of the Bible attest to its significant impact on its readers. Along with the cohesiveness of its message, despite having multifarious contributors from across time, place, and socio-political backdrops, this proves that the Bible is indeed the word of God, written through His inspiration (2 Tim 3:16). The Bible's authors describe God's word as having life and power (Jn 6:63; Lk 1:37). Some hold it so dear that they have risked their lives to continue reading, possessing, printing, and sharing the Bible under the threat of persecution.

GOD'S WORD IN THE BIBLE

The authors of the Bible use many metaphors and images to describe the word of God and its spiritual, life-giving effects.

¹ "Best-selling book," Guinness World Records, accessed September 20, 2024, <https://www.guinnessworldrecords.com/world-records/best-selling-book-of-non-fiction>.

² John Hick, Lawrence E Sullivan, et al, "Christianity," Encyclopedia Britannica, updated September 23, 2024, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Christianity>.



Here are a selection:

- a lamp (Ps 119:105)
- a mirror (Jas 1:22–25)
- a sword (Heb 4:12–13; Eph 6:17)
- bread/food (Mt 4:4; Jer 15:16)
- rain/dew (Deut 32:2)
- sweeter than honey, more precious than gold (Ps 19:10)
- brings understanding (Ps 119:130)
- brings freedom (Jn 8:32)
- purifies (Jn 15:3)
- is proven (Ps 18:30; 2 Sam 22:31)
- is everlasting (Mt 24:35)

Despite its esteemed status, we may find that the Bible's message does not resonate with us. We may wonder, "What good is the Bible to me?" Ironically, this thought process has been described in the Scriptures: "Those who are well have no need of a physician" (Mt 9:12b). If we have no need for the guidance of God's word, then naturally, we will not see how the Bible is relevant to us.

SPIRITUAL SICKNESS

If a person is sick but cannot see the symptoms of his illness, it does not mean he is well. Similarly, an inability to see the need for a physician does not mean that a physician is unneeded. The truth is, today, we are all afflicted with an illness that stems from the emptiness in our hearts, which is symptomatic of the human race turning away from God and towards sin. Since there is no God in our hearts, there is a void. In order to fill this void, we constantly strive with all our strength for something that will fill the void and become a substitute for "God" in our hearts (Ps 16:4). That something differs from person to person—some pursue knowledge, art, love, money, or fame. Nevertheless, paradoxically, the more we try to fill the void, the greater it grows (Eccl 1:7–8, 14).

This malaise can be exacerbated by external factors. The world is chaotic, and much of life is fundamentally out of our control; regret, sorrow, and dissatisfaction are part and parcel of the human condition. These feelings, if unprocessed, can manifest as anxiety and depressive disorders (Prov 12:25). The World Health Organization estimates that approximately five percent of the world's adult population



suffers from depression (not including the myriad of other anxiety disorders), and more than 700,000 people commit suicide annually, with the number growing with each passing year.³

The methods we use to ease our inner discomfort—whether or not it rises to the classification of mental illness—may not always lead to positive outcomes. For example, we seek comfort and escape in the alternative realities of entertainment, games, and the virtual world. However, media platforms, smartphones, and social media algorithms are designed to trigger our most basic psychological, behavioral, and neurological impulses, causing us to become unhealthily dependent or addicted to them. It has been estimated that 400 million people worldwide suffer from internet addiction, which is defined by compulsive and continued use despite harmful consequences.^{4,5}

*"Behold, the days are coming,"
says the Lord God,
"That I will send a famine on the land,
Not a famine of bread,
Nor a thirst for water,
But of hearing the words of the LORD."
(Amos 8:11)*

Through the prophet Amos, the Bible prophesied our modern predicament—that even those living in abundance and privilege are deeply dissatisfied and anxious. This is because we are deprived of the word of God, whether by choice or otherwise. Only when we realize that the emptiness within stems from the absence of God's word in our lives will we perceive our infirmity and need for Jesus the Physician.

Jesus said, "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God" (Mt 4:4b). God's word is closely related to our existence as living beings. God's breath imbued man with a living spirit (Gen 2:7). His breath also inspired and formed the Bible, the word of life: "All Scripture is breathed out by God" (2 Tim 3:16a, ESV).⁶ Since both man and the Bible are formed by the same breath, they share the same essence. Therefore, to nurture our inner spirit, we must feed on God's word.

³ "Depressive disorder (depression)," World Health Organization, March 31, 2023, <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/depression>.

⁴ Nick Galov, "20 Eye-Twitching Tech Addiction Facts for 2023," Web Tribunal, updated March 6, 2023, <https://webtribunal.net/blog/tech-addiction-facts/#gref>.

⁵ "Definition of Addiction," American Society of Addiction Medicine, updated September 15, 2019, <https://www.asam.org/quality-care/definition-of-addiction>.

⁶ The Holy Bible, English Standard Version. ESV® Text Edition: 2016. Copyright © 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers.

SPIRITUAL HEALTH

Our physical health is clinically assessed through various instruments and metrics, with cholesterol, blood pressure, and blood sugar levels being three key health indicators routinely monitored. Similarly, we can examine three aspects of our spirituality—the spirit, soul, and body (1 Thess 5:23)—to evaluate our spiritual health. This spiritual health check assesses how close we are to God and how aligned we are to His word and the likeness of Christ.

Spirit

A conscience that cannot discern between truth and falsehood, between right and wrong, is a sick spirit.

*The spirit of a man is the lamp of the LORD,
Searching all the inner depths of his heart.* (Prov 20:27)

According to this verse, the conscience acts as a lamp, scrutinizing our innermost thoughts and secret actions, revealing whether they are right or wrong. Hence, when we do something wrong, our conscience is pricked, spurring us to confess and repent.

However, in our weakness, we sometimes ignore our conscience and make excuses for doing what we should not, or vice versa. Each time we allow ourselves to do so, it becomes easier to disregard our inner moral compass. Through this repeated pattern of behavior, our conscience gradually becomes desensitized towards doing wrong. Hence, an unresponsive conscience is a sign of a sick spirit.

Normalizing sin prevents our conscience from functioning as it should, like seared skin losing its sensitivity (1 Tim 4:2). The process is similar to forming callouses on our hands and feet. Skin subject to constant friction will form a thick layer of dead tissue to protect itself. When we experience the continuous pricking of our conscience, we soothe ourselves and ignore the feeling of guilt, developing a thick spiritual callous over time. We become numb to sin, unable to distinguish right from wrong, and deaf to good advice. Like Pharaoh's heart, our heart becomes hard when hearing God's warnings (Ex 7:13, 22; 8:19; 9:12, 35).

Indeed, the heart of man is exceedingly deceitful (Jer 17:9). The various excuses and lies we use to justify our wrongs come from within. Since sin entered the world, humanity has lived under its sway (Rom 5:12). Living in a fallen world, man is naturally inclined towards sin, becoming enslaved to sin. We need only look around to see the inherent sinfulness of human nature.

So, how do we return the spirit to a healthy state, able to discern right from wrong? We must rely on the Lord, who searches the heart and tests the mind (Jer 17:10), and be cleansed by the blood of Christ from the guilt of our past sins (Heb 9:14). Through the Holy Spirit, our slumbering conscience is awakened, and our hard hearts are replaced by a heart of flesh, able to sense the pricking of our conscience (Ezek 36:26).

As part of this spiritual transformation and renewal, the word of God acts as the guide and standard against which we measure ourselves to ensure we are on the right track (Rom 2:15). Like a mirror, God's word shows us our actual spiritual state, whether or not we are doers of the word, practicing the perfect



law of liberty (Jas 1:22–25). Going deeper than our outward behavior, God's word can also be a scalpel, dissecting between soul and spirit to expose the heart's deepest intention and removing the hidden diseases that evade our self-examination (Heb 4:12–13; Ps 19:12).

In the New Testament, the requirements of holiness far exceed our outward behavior, encompassing even our inner thoughts and the intention of the heart. Human laws can only govern and punish actions and deeds without jurisdiction over unconsummated desire (Prov 24:10–12). However, Jesus tells us that not only should we not commit adultery or murder, we should not even harbor lust or anger in our hearts (Mt 5:28, 21–22).

The standard of God's law can seem uncompromising compared to human law, but it is the absolute moral standard under which our spirit thrives. Following God's word, our conscience will no longer lose its direction but will compel us to set our sights, minds, and actions to adhere to God's will. Only then can we be assured that our conscience and, in turn, our spirit remain healthy.

Soul

A self-centered life is a marker of a diseased soul.

Of the various ways the word "soul" is used in the Bible, the most common conveys the sense of a person's identity, being, or ego (Ps 103:1–2). And like a healthy spirit that is oriented towards the law of God, a healthy soul is one that mirrors or is like God. Conversely, an unhealthy soul is one that is averse to God's will and chooses instead to act according to personal desires. Such self-centeredness and carnality lead to jealousy, anger, and conflict, such as in the case of the Corinthian believers who formed factions and brought one another to court before unbelievers (1 Cor 3:3; 6:6). The more self-centered someone is, the less considerate he is of others' feelings and perspectives, increasing the likelihood and severity of conflict.

Self-centeredness is a rejection of God as King in our lives. We see examples of such diseased souls during the time of

*"They saw their own
lusts and desires as
the only thing worth
pursuing, superseding
even God's law"*

Noah when the sons of God saw that the daughters of men were beautiful and took as wives whom they chose, or the Israelites during the time of the Judges, where everyone did what was right *in their own eyes* (Gen 3:2; Judg 21:25). These souls acted contrary to what God willed for men, instead choosing to satisfy their flesh. They saw their own lusts and desires as the only thing worth pursuing, superseding even God's law. The people of Israel went so far as to demand Samuel to anoint a king over them, to be like other nations. This was a clear rejection of the Lord God as their true King, who had led them out of Egypt and in their conquest of the promised land (1 Sam 8:5–8).

Today, we see the same human tendency. As the ideologies of



individualism and humanism continue to grow in influence, we find that society no longer accepts God's absolute moral standard as universal. In this relentless pursuit of human rights and progress, men's lifted pride has caused them to reject and usurp God as King in their lives. The prophet Ezekiel draws a comparison between the king of Tyre—who was proud because of his riches and wisdom in trade—and Satan—whose heart was lifted because of his beauty, corrupting his wisdom for the sake of splendor (Ezek 28:5–6, 17). With the ever-increasing technological and scientific advancement, souls in these last days have become afflicted with the same terminal condition—imagining themselves as gods (Ezek 28:9).

How can we overcome this disease of self-centeredness and pride? The apostle Paul reminds us that we, who have been redeemed and have had our conscience cleansed, should also put off our old self-centered selves that are driven by fleshly lusts and instead be renewed as new men, created according to God for His righteousness and holiness (Eph 4:22–24).

Then He said to them all, "If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow Me." (Lk 9:23)

Following Christ is a continual process of self-denial. This means unraveling an egocentric worldview that begins at birth. In *How to Win Friends and Influence People*, the self-help author Dale Carnegie wrote that the sweetest and most important sound a person will ever hear is his or her own name. Our name may be forgettable to others, but for us, it carries a profound meaning representing our reputation, character, and abilities—our personal "brand." Can we remove our name and ourselves from the center of our personal universe to follow Christ?

The way to remedy this sickness is to de-center ourselves by focusing on God's word and Christ's example. In doing so, we learn to bear the yoke of Christ and allow Him to form in our hearts. Then, we will have the strength to deny ourselves completely, flushing out the old self by being filled with Christ. The space in our hearts may be infinitely vast, but we are selective, at times hating one because we love another. If the heart chooses Christ, we will naturally diminish and exclude our sense of self.

Becoming less self-centered and arrogant will also result in less friction and conflict with others. As Christ re-takes His throne as King of our lives, we will naturally rely on Him in all things, and our worries will be lifted.

A soul filled with Christ will be healed from the inside out, transforming from the inward heart to outward behavior and becoming more Christlike as a partaker of the divine nature (2 Pet 1:4).

Body

A diseased body is one that is trapped in the indulgence of lust.

The body and its needs are inseparable; unless our body dies, we will always be



driven to fulfill its needs. However, while it is normal for our bodies to have needs, if we overindulge excessively and are constantly driven to satisfy those needs, then our needs have become lust and evil desires.

Foods for the stomach and the stomach for foods, but God will destroy both it and them. Now the body is not for sexually immorality but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body. (1 Cor 6:13)

Addressing one of the most fundamental human needs, Paul quotes a common saying of the time that was used to justify the overconsumption of food. The saying implies that if one does not eat all the available delicious food, one is doing a disservice to his stomach

and his body since the stomach is made to enjoy food. While indulging in food seems innocuous, the Bible records many examples of people doing foolish things or committing grave sins just from the simple act of indulging in food. Eve perceived the forbidden fruit as good for food—a delicacy—while Esau, in hunger, sold his birthright for a bowl of red stew. Hence, Paul warns us that even with what seems to be innocuous indulgence, "God will destroy both it and them."

"Those who live according to the flesh will die, but those who overcome their desires will live. Therefore, we must put to death the misdeeds of the body"

Paul goes on to draw a parallel between gustatory appetite and sexual desire (1 Cor 6:15–18). Both are basic, physical urges—gifts from God to enrich our lives. It is a blessing to eat and drink the fruit of our labor, as it is to live joyfully with one's wife (Eccl 5:18–19; 9:9). But unrestrained craving for food and sex can tip into evil desire, overindulgence, and debauchery, harming us both physically and spiritually.

So, how can our bodies overcome lust?

1. The truth shall make us free (Jn 8:32)

Philosophers and religious leaders throughout history have contemplated the issues of sin and death but without a satisfactory conclusion. Since these great thinkers were mere men, themselves deeply entangled in the flesh, they were unable to overcome sin and death—only Jesus could. Therefore, God's word not only makes us aware of sin (which these great men could understand) but also gives us the power to overcome sin (surpassing these great men). Only the truth can set us free. True freedom from sin is to live in a world of sin, yet not be of this world (Jn 17:14–17). Every word from God carries power, and every promise and prophecy is fulfilled (Lk 1:37). Even creation was wrought through God's word. How can His word not enable us to overcome the bondage of sin?

2. Put to death the deeds of the body (Rom 8:13)

If, in our lives, we continually yield to bodily desires, we will surely perish. Therefore, we must discipline our

bodies, bringing them into subjection, not in the manner of one beating the air (1 Cor 9:26–27). To “discipline” means to strike repeatedly, figuratively, to practice self-control rather than be controlled by our desires—to bring our bodies into subjection rather than be subject to our bodies. This involves strict and consistent efforts to ensure that we are always in control of our bodies and not allow our bodies to drive our actions. Those who live according to the flesh will die, but those who overcome their desires will live. Therefore, we must put to death the misdeeds of the body which stem from our desires.

Then, when desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, brings forth death. (Jas 1:18)

If, over time, we fail to curb the sins born from our desires, they will develop into compulsive behavior. We become entrenched in sin and can no longer stop ourselves. Willpower alone is not enough; we need to call upon the name of the Lord Jesus and rely on the Holy Spirit’s power to put these desires and deeds to death.

3. Present our bodies to God (1 Cor 6:13b; Rom 6:13b)

After we have been redeemed by baptism into Christ, the ownership of our bodies belongs to God. While we remain in control, our bodies are effectively on loan from the Lord. Though once we used our bodies as instruments of unrighteousness to sin, now we offer them as instruments of righteousness to God. Life is not meant for indulging our desires or solely for our physical existence, but to live for God.

I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifices, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service. (Rom 12:1a)

Those who offer their bodies as living sacrifices to the Lord will surely suffer in the flesh, either facing persecution (2 Tim 3:12) or spiritual refinement (1 Pet 4:1). The apostles endured much physical pain and suffering for the sake of the gospel; Paul was given a thorn in his side to keep him vigilant over his own pride (2 Cor 11:23–25; 12:7). To safeguard the body presented to Him, God will at times allow us to suffer the thorns of fleshly affliction or persecutions. Though these bring us momentary pain, they will yield eternal salvation.

CONCLUSION

Then the dust will return to the earth as it was, And the spirit will return to God who gave it.

(Eccl 12:7)

When our life on earth ends, what will become of us? The Bible tells us that our bodies will return to dust, but this is not the end of the story. The Lord has a plan for faithful Christians when He comes again. Our lowly bodies will be resurrected and transformed to conform to His glorious, incorruptible body and receive our heavenly citizenship and inheritance (Phil 3:20–21; 1 Cor 15:52).

Therefore, life is not just about our flesh; it is primarily about the spirit. The animating breath that brought life to our bodies of dust is the same breath that conveys God’s word. While the body can be sustained with bread and water, the spirit cannot survive without the teachings of the Bible, which explains the spiritual sickness under which humanity toils. We must recognize our infirmity and turn once again to the Bible. It is only through strengthening our relationship with God and His healing word that we can revive our conscience, remove the tumor of self-centeredness, neutralize the influence of lust on our bodies, and return to total spiritual health.

A PSALM FOR THE SLEEPLESS AND ANXIOUS

Zhi Xian—Singapore

The saying goes, “A ruffled mind makes a restless pillow.” It is estimated that approximately a third of adults experience periodic symptoms of insomnia.¹ Among the numerous causes and contributors to poor sleep, anxiety is a common coexisting factor for sleep disturbances.

Anxiety is characterized by worried thoughts, feelings of bodily tension, and physical changes like increased blood pressure or breathing rate, typically in response to a perceived threat that may occur in the future.² We all experience varying degrees of anxiety in our lives. Some have a better grasp of it, others struggle whenever it surfaces, and there are those who have battled chronic anxiety for a long time. Anxiety often rears its ugly head in the quiet of the night and robs us of restfulness and sleep. We pray to God for peace to calm our hearts when anxiety overwhelms us, sometimes to no avail. We are left to our own devices, often in the literal sense, to find reprieve and capture that elusive sleep.

Is there a place for God’s word to effect positive change during these moments of internal distress and helplessness? Psalm 77 provides a helpful biblical framework of pragmatic steps that we can practice to help us cope with short-term or chronic anxiety and sleeplessness.

THE PSALMIST UNDERSTANDS

*In the day of my trouble I sought the Lord;
My hand was stretched out in the night*

¹ “Anxiety,” APA Dictionary of Psychology, American Psychological Association, last modified, April 19, 2018, <https://dictionary.apa.org/anxiety>.

² Tianxin Mao, Bowen Guo, Hengyi Rao, “Unraveling the complex interplay between insomnia, anxiety, and brain networks,” *Sleep* 47, no. 3, (March 2024), <https://doi.org/10.1093/sleep/zsad330>.

*without ceasing;
My soul refused to be comforted.
I remembered God, and was troubled;
I complained, and my spirit
was overwhelmed.
You hold my eyelids open;
I am so troubled that I cannot speak.*
(Ps 77:2–4)

*Will the Lord cast off forever?
And will He be favorable no more?
Has His mercy ceased forever?
Has His promise failed forevermore?
Has God forgotten to be gracious?
Has He in anger shut up His
tender mercies?*
(Ps 77:7–9)

The experiences of the Psalmist of old, Asaph, resemble our own. Like many, Asaph prayed but could not seem to find comfort and rest for his soul. What followed were the doubts, cynicism, and negative thoughts that arise when we are not in a good headspace. Other than doubting our abilities and prospects, we may also start to distrust God’s goodness and abidance in our lives.

*And I said, “This is my anguish;
But I will remember the years of the right
hand of the Most High.”*
(Ps 77:10)

However, Asaph acknowledges that this internal dialogue came from his anguish, which also means infirmity or weakness. This is a common weakness of man: when we are overwhelmed with unpleasant emotions like sorrow, grief, or anxiety, we start to perceive and remember things in a more negative light. Gloomy and pessimistic thoughts become magnified and monopolize our attention, while good and true ones retreat backstage. This internal buildup can affect our psychological and emotional well-being, spilling over into our external reality, and impacting our day-to-day functioning and relationships with people dear to us, including our heavenly Father.

I have considered the days of old,

*The years of ancient times.
I call to remembrance my song
in the night;
I meditate within my heart,
And my spirit makes diligent search.*
(Ps 77:5–6)

Here, Asaph describes several actions he took while in the depths of misery:

1. He considered the days of old.
2. He remembered his song in the night.
3. He meditated within his heart.
4. He diligently searched deep within himself.

Consequently, he was able to restore his faith in God and emerge from the spiral of negative emotionality and unhelpful introspection. Let us explore each of these strategies of the psalmist and how we can employ them in our lives.

REMIND OURSELVES OF GOD’S GOODNESS IN OUR LIFE

*I will remember the works of the LORD;
Surely I will remember Your wonders of old.
I will also meditate on all Your work,
And talk of Your deeds.*
(Ps 77:11–12)

First, Asaph shifts his mind’s eye away from his present distress to the days of old when God’s presence, abidance, and goodness were manifested to His people through His deeds and wonders. When our mind brings up unwanted images and thoughts to fill the attentional vacuum at night, we can steer it towards more positive and uplifting scenes from our past experiences and encounters. Even King Ahasuerus resorted to this ancient coping strategy: when he could not sleep, he had the book of the records of the chronicles read to him (Est 6:1–2). This account probably depicted his life story, past victories, and accomplishments. This reading

evoked an immense gratitude towards Mordecai for saving his life.

Likewise, when worrying about tomorrow, we can purposefully recall the blessings and favors we have received in life and the challenging periods God has helped us overcome. Be it illnesses, trials, or temptations, we can reflect on how we emerged from them, restored, strengthened, wiser, and more grateful.

Psalms 107 provides a helpful template for a variety of circumstances where God's goodness and mercy accompany us as we traverse the dark valleys of life. When we are attacked, oppressed, or taken advantage of, God delivers us and brings us to a safe place (Ps 107:2–3). When we are lost, hungry, or distressed, God shows us the right path to walk and revitalizes our weary souls (Ps 107:4–9). When we disobey His will and word and suffer the consequences of sin, God delivers us out of our afflictions and bondage after we cry out to Him (Ps 107:10–16). When we are afflicted with terrible illnesses, loss of appetite, and are close to death, God heals and delivers us out of our agony (Ps 107:17–20). When we meet with threats and dangers along our travels, God preserves our lives and leads us safely to our destination (Ps 107:23–30).

*Whoever is wise will observe these things,
And they will understand the
lovingkindness of the LORD.* (Ps 107:43)

How else has God's lovingkindness shown in your own experiences or those close to you? To aid our reflections and remembrance, we can employ practical strategies such as writing in a journal, organizing photo albums or records on our devices, and placing photos or meaningful items within our visual field in the bedroom. A heart of gratitude towards God arises when we intentionally evoke these positive memories. This strengthens our trust and assurance in God's providence and invisible hand, even when we confront uncertainty and difficulties. *If I have overcome troubles before, surely I can overcome them again with God's grace and lovingkindness, and with all He has already provided me.*

REMEMBER OUR SONG IN THE NIGHT

*The LORD will command
His lovingkindness in the
daytime,*

*And in the night His song shall be
with me—
A prayer to the God of my life.* (Ps 42:8)

Since antiquity, songs have been an important memorization technique because music helps the mind encode and retrieve information more easily. Think about how children are taught their ABCs with the alphabet song and how catchy or meaningful lyrics stay in our heads for years. Today, we have been gifted with many songs of praise. We have the Psalms—God-inspired prayers and songs that contain God's teachings and exhortations, His nature and deeds, and His hopes and love for us. We also sing many Christian hymns during our church worship, containing relatable, meaningful, and biblically-inspired lyrics and reminders.

Like Asaph, the sons of Korah encourage us that if we ever feel that our soul is cast down and disquieted within us, we can sing God's song and pray to Him in the night to renew our hope and trust in Him (Ps 42). Two of Jesus' disciples exemplified this practice. Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns at midnight while imprisoned at Philippi (Acts 16:25). They were facing an uncertain future and the threat of death, but their songs generated peace and strength to tide them through the long night.

*Let the word of Christ dwell in you
richly in all wisdom, teaching and
admonishing one another in psalms
and hymns and spiritual songs, singing
with grace in your hearts to the Lord.* (Col 3:16)

There is power in psalms and hymns as they contain the wisdom and word of God. Which hymns bring you comfort and encouragement? Which hymns tug your heartstrings whenever you hear or sing them? If you have to sing a hymn right now, which one comes to mind first? You will probably find that the hymns you resonate with are relevant to whatever you are going through right now.

One challenge is that when we are in a tug-of-war with our anxieties or discomfort, our emotions may overwhelm our capacity to recall these words of hope and comfort or our impulse to search for them. Hence, while we are emotionally well, it is a good idea to create a folder of hymns on our devices or curate playlists in our preferred music app to help us access these songs easily in the night.

MEDITATE WITHIN OUR HEARTS

*Make me understand the way of
Your precepts;
So shall I meditate on Your
wonderful works.
My soul melts from heaviness;
Strengthen me according to Your word.* (Ps 119:27–28)

Meditating entails focusing our thoughts on a particular subject or speaking to ourselves inwardly. This is apt when we consider the weakness that Asaph mentions: our tendency to ruminate, think negatively, or catastrophize about the future when our emotions cloud our reason. When people are confronted with distressing thoughts, they may try to silence them through distractions like music, games, and social media, with some turning to substances to numb the emotional pain. Instead of such a response, we can learn to proactively refocus our thoughts and internal dialogue onto more meaningful and helpful things.

Paul suggests a variety of categories we can meditate on in Philippians 4:8–9:

*[W]hatever things are
true, whatever things are
noble, whatever things
are just, whatever things
are pure, whatever things
are lovely, whatever
things are of good*



report, if there is any virtue and if there is anything praiseworthy—meditate on these things.

Besides memories of God's goodness and hymns, we can also turn to God's word to draw strength, hope, and comfort (Rom 15:4). What are your favorite Bible verses, passages, or stories? Which verse tugs your heartstrings whenever you encounter it? If you have to recall a Bible verse right now that aligns with what you are experiencing, which one comes up most naturally? God's word is living and powerful; it can discern the thoughts and intents of our hearts and address the root of any problem or struggle that we face (Heb 4:12). We only need to make room in our hearts and minds for the word to be rooted and nurtured, and allow the Holy Spirit to bring to remembrance His word, which speaks to our anxieties and discomfort.

I once spoke with a young Christian who was struggling to overcome depression and the strong impulse to steal even though he knew it was unnecessary, wrong, and senseless. Whenever he felt the urge to steal, he found it helpful to take out his phone and look at Bible verses, reminders of his Christian identity, and what God willed for him to do. This coping strategy, among others, helped him to overcome his strong urges and was a bulwark of hope amidst his feelings of despair and helplessness.

A practical strategy we can do today is to compile meaningful and relevant Bible verses so we can quickly access them when we struggle with sleeplessness and anxiety. We can highlight verses in our physical Bibles, bookmark verses in our preferred Bible apps, or create albums of Bible verse illustrations on our devices. Other than verses, we can file encouraging or inspiring messages we have heard in sermons or testimonies. When your mind wanders aimlessly at night, open up these resources, look at them, and set your mind to meditate on these words and the memories that surface.

MAKE DILIGENT SEARCH IN OUR SPIRIT

*The spirit of a man is the lamp of the LORD,
Searching all the inner depths
of his heart.* (Prov 20:27)

When we pray to God in the midst of our anxiety, we often ask Him to take away our discomfort and give us peace to quiet our overactive minds and lull us to sleep. Usually, the petitions and requests we present to God only scratch the surface of our concerns. Hence, our worries and fears resurface time and time again. Making a diligent search in our spirit entails looking inwards and examining our hearts deeply to ascertain what underlies our anxieties, using the lamp of the Lord—God's word and principles—to uncover the root of the issue.

Searching for "anxious" in the Greek language within the New Testament brings up verses that indicate one's care towards something or someone. For example, every member of the body should have the same "care" for one another (1 Cor 12:25). This means that our worries and anxieties spring from what we care about in life. The more we care about something, the more we worry over it. Hence, we ought to use the lamp of God to identify and evaluate the cares in our hearts that are generating and driving our anxieties.

Are our worries driven by the cares of this world, the deceitfulness of riches, or the desire for non-essential things, causing us to be choked with anxiety and distress

(Mk 4:19)? If we have overemphasized their significance in the present state or stage of our lives, we need to refocus our perspectives and consider our relationship with these goals and wants. When we care less about these matters, our worry naturally decreases.

Alternatively, if our cares are associated with Christian love, Christ-centered relationships, salvation, ministry, and service to God and His people, then our worry is driven by beneficial cares. This is seeking the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and if we do this, Jesus assures us that God will hear and provide for us (Mt 6:33). When we mourn and worry over our Father's business, He will comfort us (Mt 5:4) and remind us that He is in control. When we adopt this renewed perspective that our worries are justified, we pray to God differently because we are confident that these cares align with His will, and we can entrust the outcome into His hand (1 Jn 5:14–15).

HIS COMFORT DELIGHTS OUR SOUL

*In the multitude of my anxieties within me,
Your comforts delight my soul.* (Ps 94:19)

In this world, we will have tribulations, and anxiety is an inevitable human experience. Thank the Lord that we have His word as a lamp and guide to navigate life's vicissitudes. Psalm 77 gives us insight into some strategies we can adopt: remind ourselves of God's goodness in our lives; turn to our song in the night for peace and strength; meditate on the word of God to evoke comfort and hope; and diligently search our spirit to identify and evaluate the cares that generate these worries. Let us trust in the Lord, commit our works to Him, and make room within ourselves to receive His transcendental peace and comfort, which the world can never give (Jn 14:27).



RISE AND WALK THROUGH THE LAND

Dear Youths of the True Jesus Church,

Hallelujah! Greetings to everyone in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ!

Praise and thank God, the International Assembly (IA) will hold the International Youth Fellowship (IYF) in Taiwan on June 22–29, 2025.

The theme for IYF 2025 will be **“Rise and Walk through the Land”**

With the True Jesus Church in the end time, we would like to use this occasion to invite youths from all over the world to come together to share and reflect on the God-given mission for the church and to kindle their zeal through the power of the Holy Spirit. Based on the capacity of the host church, we will open registration to 250 youths. Registration will close when the number of applicants reaches capacity.

THE FELLOWSHIP EVENT WILL BE IN TWO PARTS:

1. June 22–26:

Five-day sharing & fellowship

2. June 27–29:

Three-day visitation & tour

REGISTRATION FEE:

Fellowship: **US\$50**

Visitation & Tour: **US\$250**

All interested participants should obtain the information and registration form from their local churches and submit their registration forms to their local churches before **March 15, 2025**. Once the church council signs the form, it should be forwarded to the respective General Assembly/Coordination Center, which will then forward it to the IA Office in the US (contact email: ia@tjc.org). Applicants should book their flight tickets and register online after receiving a confirmation letter.

May the Lord Jesus Christ move you to take this rare opportunity to meet and have fellowship with brethren in Christ from various parts of the world!



SPIRITUAL POWER FROM PRAYER (PART 2)

Based on sermons by Timothy Yeung—Calgary, Canada

Editor's note: The first article of this two-part series (Manna 96), discussed how prayer is not only a means of making requests to God, but, more importantly, the channel through which we gain the spiritual power to transform our lives. Through praying in the Spirit, we gain insight and strength to turn from sin and a new heart of submission to God's will. In this concluding part, we learn from Elijah about how effective intercessions begin by returning our hearts to God.

THE POWER TO RETURN OUR HEARTS TO GOD

Elijah was a man with a nature like ours, and he prayed earnestly that it would not rain; and it did not rain on the land for three years and six months. And he prayed again, and the heaven gave rain, and the earth produced its fruit.

(Jas 5:17–18)

Elijah had the same weaknesses as any man, and—despite being a zealous prophet—experienced highs and lows in faith. But God heeded his prayers because he was righteous and prayed earnestly (Jas 5:16); his prayer changed the weather! Nonetheless, the cause and effect of this incident is not so simple—something else had to happen for Elijah's prayer for rain to

be effective. God had already planned when to withhold and when to bestow rain. Rain represents the love, mercy, and grace of God. If the people's hearts were far from God, they would not receive rain. But once the hearts of the people returned to God, rain would fall. In other words, Elijah's prayer brought rain because he had interceded for the people before God and had been able to turn their hearts back to God (1 Kgs 18:37).

The end-time Elijah will also do the same:

"Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet Before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the LORD. And he will turn The hearts of the fathers to the children, And the hearts of the children to their fathers, Lest I come and strike the earth with a curse."

(Mal 4:5–6)

Today, the true church is to fulfill the role of Elijah in the end-time. Living in an age where the world seems ever more alluring, we will see some around us falling away from God. We ourselves may not be fully walking the way of God either. We must thus learn from Elijah and use the power of prayer to return hearts to God. And for our prayers to be effective, we must first return to God ourselves.

HOW TO PRAY LIKE ELIJAH

And Elijah came to all the people, and said, "How long will you falter between two opinions? If the LORD is God, follow Him; but if Baal, follow him." But the people answered him not a word. *(1 Kgs 18:21)*

When Elijah challenged the false prophets on Mount Carmel, the hearts of the Israelites were vacillating between two positions. This is a common state—some believe in God but also trust in worldly ideas, principles, and values. Such believers cannot wholeheartedly follow Him because their hearts still love the world (Mt 6:24; Jas 4:4). The church may have a vibrant worship and activity calendar, but the members are superficial in their faith and lack zeal in service. In such times, we need the intercession of many Elijahs.

HEAVENLY FIRE

Elijah prayed for two things; when these were fulfilled, they signaled that the people's hearts had changed. Firstly, he prayed for fire from heaven:

And it came to pass, at the time of the offering of the evening sacrifice, that Elijah the prophet came near and said, "LORD God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, let it be known this day that You are God in Israel and I am Your servant, and that I have done all these things at Your word." *(1 Kgs 18:36)*

Elijah's prayer was simple: let it be known that the Lord is God. The Israelites may have known this truth, but they did not truly embed it in their hearts. Otherwise, they would not have followed other gods. Since the people had strayed so far and no longer honored the sovereignty of God, drastic action was needed to turn their hearts back to Him. Elijah prayed for God to send fire because this was an undeniable sign of God's power and existence (Gen 19:24; 2 Chr 7:1).

Today, we experience fire from heaven through the Holy Spirit. Some contaminants cannot be washed away with water—they must be burned by fire. God sends His Spirit of burning because He knows this is the only way to cleanse our impure and stubborn hearts (Isa 4:4). And when the Holy Spirit moves the hearts of men to change, God's power and presence in our lives are made evident.

There was a mother with a rebellious teenage son who often stayed out late with his friends, occasionally taking drugs. The mother was powerless to change him; her advice and rebuke fell on deaf ears because she had neglected him as a child. So, she cried and prayed over him daily, knowing only God could help. One day, when her son was heading out, she neither argued nor pleaded with him but only prayed, "Lord, have mercy on my child. Nothing can change him, apart from You and Your Spirit of burning."

Miraculously, after a night of partying and drinking, the son suddenly felt utterly empty and alone. The world outside no longer seemed fun, and he realized his friends did not truly care for him. He thought, *What am I doing? Why do I keep making my mother sad?* His heart changed suddenly—not because of his mother's nagging, but through the Holy Spirit's movement. Even a small flame from the Spirit of burning can reawaken a person's conscience.

Sometimes, fire from heaven can severely burn. There was a brother in South Africa who was encouraged to attend a spiritual convocation. However, he not only skipped the convocation, but had the gall to go to a casino. As he drove home after gambling, he was violently attacked and robbed by a gang. He suffered multiple gunshot wounds and bled profusely. Thankfully, the Lord had mercy on him, and he survived despite being gravely wounded. When

the brethren visited him in hospital, they did not rebuke him. But he understood that this was the consequence of his own actions. He knew that he had to go to church after he recovered.

"When fire from heaven falls, God Himself turns our hearts back to Him"

Before fire falls from heaven, our advice may go unheeded. But when the fire falls, we do not have to speak at all.

"Hear me, O LORD, hear me, that this people may know that You are the LORD God, and that You have turned their hearts back to You again." Then the fire of the LORD fell and consumed the burnt sacrifice, and the wood and the stones and the dust, and it licked up the water that was in the trench. (1 Kgs 18:37–38)

When fire from heaven falls, God Himself turns our hearts back to Him—whether through reawakening our conscience or disciplining us.

HEAVENLY RAIN

Then Elijah said to Ahab, "Go up, eat and drink; for there is the sound of abundance of rain." (1 Kgs 18:41)

After the fire descended, the second thing Elijah prayed for was rain. When Elijah spoke to Ahab, there was not a single raindrop. But the prophet's faith gave him confidence that there would soon be rain. Following the miraculous events on Mount Carmel, the prophets of Baal were executed (1 Kgs 18:40), and the hearts of the people returned to God. So Elijah knew that after the fire, rain would come; it was just a matter of time.

Likewise, today, when we pray for those around us and they remove false gods from their hearts, the grace of God will fall on them. But we must also ask ourselves: do we have false gods or false prophets in our hearts? We may not worship a literal idol, but anything or anyone that we hold as equally or more important than God is an idol.

Fundamentally, if the Lord God is the most important in our lives, we would not replace Him with other gods. If we do, our sins increase, and so will our sorrows (Jer 30:15). Do we feel our sorrows increasing? Perhaps God has been supplanted in our hearts.

Some treat their career as their god—they rely on the security of wealth and

status, so they strive to earn these. Some put their children in the position of God, planning all their time around making their children happy, enriched, and accomplished with an activity-packed schedule. Education, material possessions, physical health, and wellness will become gods when our focus, ambitions, and self-worth are tied to them. If we spend most of our time and energy on such pursuits, nothing is left for nurturing our relationship with God.


We must constantly examine whether we have allowed anything to separate us from God or negatively influence our relationship with Him. If we wish to hear the sound of abundant rain, we must reprioritize and invite God back to His rightful position in our hearts.

By faith, Elijah heard the sound of rain, but he still ascended to the top of Carmel to pray. He prayed seven times before there was any sign of rain (1 Kgs 18:42–44). Sometimes, we pray over a matter for a long time—for ourselves or our loved ones—but we feel nothing has changed. At these times, we may doubt: *Have we not already turned back to God? Why has He not sent His rain?* This is a test of faith: wait for the seventh time; wait until we are unwavering.

After Elijah's seventh prayer, a cloud as small as a man's hand appeared. Sometimes, God's answer comes as a dramatic experience. But more often than not, God's work takes time. It starts small. So when we observe a small change, we must thank God and hold on to it. It signifies that more will follow; God's grace will fall on us in abundance.

CONCLUSION

Although we are merely flesh and blood, like Elijah, our prayers can bring heavenly fire to turn hearts back to God. So let us pray that the Holy Spirit awakens the conscience and consciousness of those we pray for, whether through a still small voice or dramatic intervention, so that they acknowledge and submit to God as King over their lives. And as we pray for others, reflect on our own righteousness and whether there are any idols to remove from our hearts. When we and those we pray for have returned to God, He will send heavenly rain through spiritual blessings and grace. So, let us intercede unwaveringly and patiently for our families, our fellow members, and God's church as a whole. Give thanks for the smallest changes we see on the horizon for these portend abundant showers of blessing.



LET EACH ONE REMAIN IN THE SAME CALLING

Jachin—Singapore

It is said that dissatisfaction is the mother of improvement and the fuel of ambition. Technological advances are made when people seek solutions to unsatisfactory situations, and we are taught to continually seek improvement in our lives, not maintaining the status quo.

However, the Bible teaches something very different. Paul writes:

Let each one remain in the same calling in which he was called. (1 Cor 7:20)

Paul encourages the believers in Corinth

to remain in the state they are in, even if their circumstances do not seem ideal. Why does the Bible give such a teaching? How is this message relevant to our lives today?

GOD PLACES US IN DIFFERENT STATES

But as God has distributed to each one, as the Lord has called each one, so let him walk. And so I ordain in all the churches.

(1 Cor 7:17)

God calls every one of us in different states and stages in our lives. In Paul's time, some believers were called while unmarried, and others were called while married. Some were circumcised at the time of their calling, and others, uncircumcised. Some were slaves, others free. Paul instructs them to continue in the same state they were called, whatever that state may be. In fact, he repeats the sentiment twice more and adds, "so I ordain in all the churches" (1 Cor 7:17, 20, 24).

Why does Paul place such emphasis

on this principle? Because it is human nature to feel dissatisfied, especially when we see others who are better off. Comparison is the thief of joy. When a fellow believer is blessed by God in their lives, we may expect similar blessings. However, this will not always be the case!

Concerning our spiritual status, we are all equal; we have all had our sins forgiven and are all children of God. However, with regard to our worldly state, we cannot expect equality since it was God Himself who placed us in our respective situations (1 Cor 7:17).

The Bible is *not* opposed to changes that make our lives better. However, the Bible *is* opposed to dissatisfaction.

Let us take a closer look at this principle and how it can apply to different groups of people.

TO THE UNMARRIED

Recognize God's Purpose for You

But I say to the unmarried and to the widows: It is good for them if they remain even as I am. (1 Cor 7:8)

The Bible says, "It is not good for man to be alone" (Gen 2:18) and "Two are better than one" (Eccl 4:9). Why, then, does Paul say that it is good to remain unmarried?

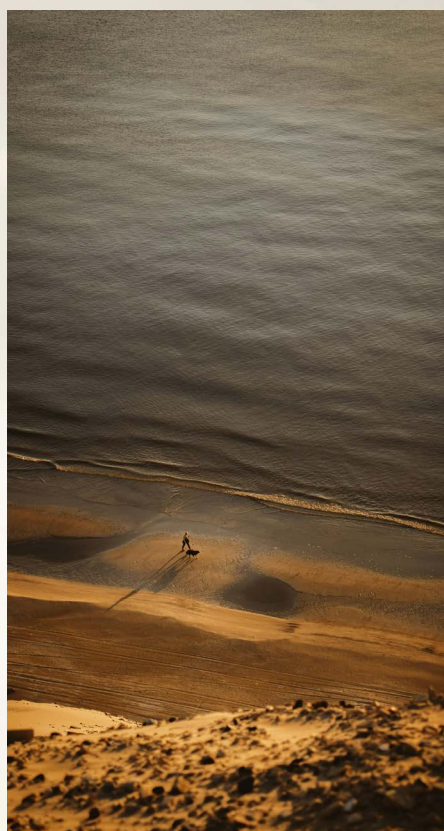
"God has a purpose for every situation He puts us in. If we are single right now, His purpose is not to frustrate us but to allow us to devote ourselves to the matters of God"

Paul mentions that this was not a commandment from the Lord but from his own judgment (1 Cor 7:25). However, he says, "I think I also have the Spirit of God" (1 Cor 7:40)—in other words, his judgment was guided by the Holy Spirit. There would be little reason for an uninspired opinion to be recorded for us in the Bible as all Scripture is useful for teaching and training in righteousness (2 Tim 3:16–17).

The context of the time informs Paul's

judgment: the Corinthian believers were in a time of distress, facing intense persecution (1 Cor 7:26). Remaining unmarried would thus spare them "trouble in the flesh" (1 Cor 7:28). Married men care about how to please their wives. Married women care about how to please their husbands (1 Cor 7:34). This is not wrong—spouses have a responsibility to please each other. But these spousal responsibilities, combined with the added stress of external persecution, would divert their attention away from pleasing the Lord (7:32–33).

However, Paul does not propose that every unmarried person should remain so. The condition for remaining



unmarried is the ability to exercise self-control (1 Cor 7:9). Without this, the person may burn with passion and even commit sin. Since this gift of celibacy is not universal (1 Cor 7:7), there is no sin in getting married, even in times of persecution.

Today, we may not be undergoing significant stress or persecution. But Paul's counsel remains highly pertinent because those without the gift of celibacy may experience a period of singlehood that lasts longer than

expected, making them frustrated that they have not found a suitable partner in the Lord. In such situations, some believers hold God to ransom and demand that He give them the person they like, while others take matters into their own hands and look for a partner outside of church. If we are at such a stage of singlehood, let us not move ahead of God.

There was a preacher whose sister was of marriageable age but could not find anyone. So, he told her, "Let us commit this matter to our daily prayers, and if God wills, you will find a husband." She followed his advice and prayed about it every day, and after some time, she indeed met someone and married in the Lord.

God has a purpose for every situation He puts us in. If we are single right now, His purpose is not to frustrate us but to allow us to devote ourselves to the matters of God (1 Cor 7:32). We should entrust our marriage prospects into His hands and allow Him to work in our lives. Let us remain in the state He has called us and not become frustrated while we are single.

TO THE MARRIED

Have a Christ-Centered Perspective

Now to the married I command, yet not I but the Lord: A wife is not to depart from her husband. But even if she does depart, let her remain unmarried or be reconciled to her husband. And a husband is not to divorce his wife. (1 Cor 7:10–11)

In the previous case, Paul gave a concession to single believers who wanted to get married. In this case, Paul commands married believers hankering to exit their marriage: "A wife is not to depart from her husband" and "a husband is not to divorce his wife."

This command extends to unions where one spouse has come to believe in the Lord, but the other has not. The Bible tells us that this is an incompatible marriage—but even so, Paul says that one cannot divorce their unbelieving wife or husband (2 Cor 6:14; 1 Cor 7:13).

There could be many reasons sparking a believer's desire to leave their unbelieving spouse, such as differences



in belief, the spouse's bad character, or neglect of the family. While the world accepts these as grounds for divorce, Paul says these are not valid reasons. As long as the other party is willing to live with us, we cannot divorce them (1 Cor 7:12–13).

"True happiness does not come from our worldly state. We find joy in Christ, regardless of our state, if we obey the commandments of God"

Similarly, Jesus tells us that adultery is the only acceptable cause for divorce (Mt 5:32; 19:9). Unhappiness is not. In our marriage vows, we say, "For better, for worse, in sickness and in health." We do not say "until I am unhappy."

Some time ago, I stumbled upon an online Christian forum where many wives considered leaving their marriages. They had many complaints against their husbands, such as "he did not do this," "he hasn't changed," or "I can't stand him anymore." The phrase "I am unhappy" often appeared. When challenged with the word of God, they replied, "But what about my happiness?" A forum member replied, "God is not interested in your happiness. God is interested in your obedience."

This is not entirely true. God is interested in our happiness. However, true and lasting happiness can only come from obeying God. From a self-centered perspective, we may view our happiness as more important than God's commands. From a Christ-centered perspective, we accept our circumstances, holding space for the possibility that things may change for the better (1 Cor 7:16). In the end, we may even save our unbelieving spouse!

Often, people walk out of their marriages because they have the misconception that they will be happier if they are free of the other party. But in reality,

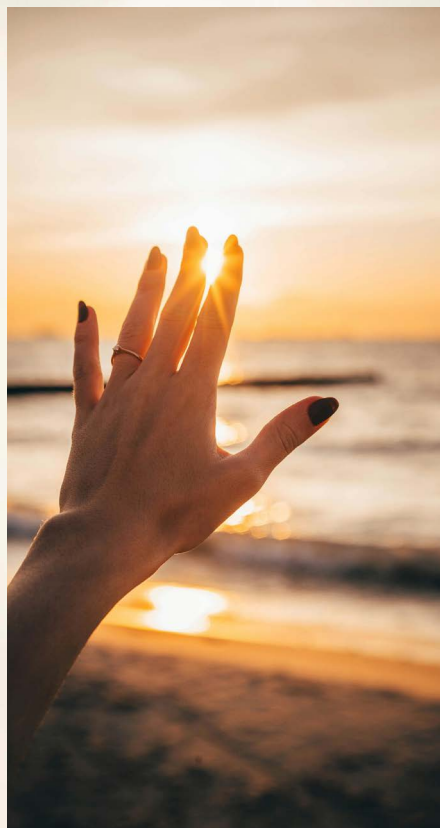
true happiness does not come from our worldly state. We find joy in Christ, *regardless* of our state, if we obey the commandments of God.

Before marriage, we carefully consider whether to enter into marriage, but after marriage, separation should not be an option. Instead, let us remain in the state we were called (1 Cor 7:24).

TO THE CIRCUMCISED AND UNCIRCUMCISED

Know What Matters

Was anyone called while circumcised? Let him not become uncircumcised. Was



anyone called while uncircumcised? Let him not be circumcised. Circumcision is nothing and uncircumcision is nothing, but keeping the commandments of God is what matters.

(1 Cor 7:18–19)

To some Jews, circumcision was everything. It signified their special status and covenant with God. It

mattered so much to some of the Jewish Christians that they tried to force the Gentile Christians to become circumcised as well. But here, Paul shatters their worldview: circumcision actually counts for nothing in Christ!

Then, there was another group of Jewish believers who was ashamed of being circumcised and wanted to become uncircumcised. However, Paul tells them that what really matters is whether they keep God's commandments.

Today, we probably have no desire to become circumcised or uncircumcised. However, there may be other things we proudly cling to or seek, such as academic accomplishments, financial success, or social influence. While the world looks highly upon these, Paul puts them into perspective: such status markers are worthless compared to gaining Christ (Phil 3:4–8).

Conversely, we may be ashamed of our circumstances, such as growing up in a poor or troubled family. The feeling of shame drives people to change their situation or seek some form of escape, positive or otherwise. These aspects of our history may feel significant, but Paul reminds us that such distinctions do not matter in Christ (Gal 3:28–29; Col 3:11). As Christians, we should accept the circumstances we came from and may still exist in. Do not take these to heart



because we dwell with God in whatever state we are called (1 Cor 7:24).

TO THE SLAVES

Be Content in Any Situation

Were you called while a slave? Do not be concerned about it; but if you can be made free, rather use it. For he who is called in the Lord while a slave is the Lord's freedman. Likewise he who is called while free is Christ's slave. You were bought at a price; do not become slaves of men.
(1 Cor 7:21–23)

In those days, slaves were on the lowest rung of society. There was no equality between a slave and his master; the slave was always inferior. But Paul says that those called as slaves should not be overly concerned because, from a Christ-centered perspective, it is of no consequence. Whether we are a slave or free in the world, in Christ, we are free. Moreover, in Christ, we are all slaves to Him (1 Cor 7:22).

"We work diligently because it is God's will for us to serve our masters in the world with sincerity and submission, as to the Lord"

Traditional slavery has long been abolished. However, many of us may be slaves to our work. We slog to gain a promotion or incessantly seek a higher-paying job to free ourselves from the drudgery of lowly-paid labor. We pursue side hustles or start a business to achieve financial independence. There is nothing wrong with taking the opportunities presented to us—as Paul tells the slaves, "if you can be made free, rather use it" (1 Cor 7:21). The problem is when we become *overly concerned* about these things—when we start sacrificing our family time, our mental and physical health, and our relationship with God to climb the corporate ladder and pursue a better status.

Undoubtedly, slaves who witnessed others gaining freedom would desire

the same liberation. The desirable outcomes that hard work can bring—affluence, an aspirational lifestyle, early retirement—are even more apparent in this age of global mass marketing and social media. While the Bible advocates working hard in our worldly labors (Prov 6:6; 13:11; 14:23), we must have the correct perspective.

We labor for our daily needs and sustenance (Gen 3:19; 2 Thess 3:10–12), not to build wealth and improve social status. We work diligently because it is God's will for us to serve our masters in the world with sincerity and submission, as to the Lord (Col 3:22–23; 1 Pet 2:18–20). We cannot serve both our heavenly Master and mammon (Mt 6:24). So



while we work diligently within the expectations of our particular vocations, we should not enslave ourselves to our work and become overly concerned with pursuing a higher status. Do not become slaves to material rewards but focus on the spiritual—laying up treasures in heaven (Mt 6:19–20, 25–34).

Paul exemplifies the ideal perspective: to be content regardless of our status

(Phil 4:11–12). He was not discontented in times of need or smug in abundance. He could accept any state God wanted him to be in, whether rich or poor. Can we do the same?

CONCLUSION

But this I say, brethren, the time is short, so that from now on even those who have wives should be as though they had none, those who weep as though they did not weep, those who rejoice as though they did not rejoice, those who buy as though they did not possess, and those who use this world as not misusing it. For the form of this world is passing away.
(1 Cor 7:29–31)

We should not weep if there are things in this world that we do not possess nor overly rejoice if we do possess them. Since the form of the world is passing away, whatever state we are in is only temporary. So, what is there to weep or rejoice over?

If one owned the world for five minutes, would he rejoice? If one lost all his worldly possessions for five minutes, would he grieve? Whether it is five minutes or five decades, our current state is only temporary; it will pass one day. Therefore, we should not cling to the things of this world as though they mean everything to us. Instead, let us remain in the same state in which we were called—to be content with whatever situation God has placed us in.



GOD CALLS US TO SEEK HIS FACE

Aveline Shek—Edinburgh, UK

INTRODUCTION

In the name of Jesus, I testify how God provided me with accommodation for my final year of university and taught me that time spent with Him is never wasted. If we use our time for God and focus on building up our faith through prayer and His words, He will not only look after our spiritual needs but will also provide for our physical needs far beyond our expectations.

REBUILDING MY FAITH DURING YTTC

I was baptized when I was young and my parents have always instilled in me the importance of prayer and Bible reading. They have also regularly reminded me that we need not worry about our physical lives since God will always provide what is best if we pursue spiritual things. However, in my second year of university, driven by peer pressure to prepare for my future and boost my curriculum vitae (CV), I took on many extracurricular commitments alongside my studies. This included joining several student society committees and volunteering for organizations outside of university. Without a conscious effort to examine myself and put God first each day, my life became increasingly filled with the things and people of the world, and less of my time and thoughts were directed toward my spiritual life. I could no longer focus during prayer or gain edification from Bible reading. Attending church became a habit that had no real impact on my daily life as I strayed further from God's commandments. When I finished my exams, I could only think about my uncertain future. I worried about my

final year of university and what I should do after graduating.

"I realized I was no longer relying on God because the people and things of the world had become my idols"

Before my final year began, I attended the Youth Theological Training Course (YTTC) in Edinburgh in August 2022. I wondered whether or not it would be worth it, as all my university friends and classmates were traveling or working, and I would not have access to social media or email. Yet, in the back of my mind, I knew I needed this time in a spiritual wilderness to seek the face of God again.

Draw near to God and He will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners; and purify your hearts, you double-minded.
(Jas 4:8)

During the three weeks of YTTC, I reflected on why I worried so much about my future and put so much effort into my worldly commitments but almost none into my spiritual life. I realized I was no longer relying on God because the people and things of the world had become my idols. Cherishing them over the abidance of God had clouded my spiritual eyesight and weakened my faith.

Time spent drawing near to God is never wasted. We should not say we are weak in faith but dismiss opportunities to draw nearer to God. Whenever we get distracted in prayer, skim-read the

Bible, or say we will work on our faith tomorrow, we must remember that the strength to draw near to God comes from Him alone; we cannot rely on ourselves. God calls us to return to Him throughout the Bible:

*So rend your heart, and not your garments;
Return to the LORD your God,
For He is gracious and merciful,
Slow to anger, and of great kindness;
And He relents from doing harm.*
(Joel 2:13)

*For thus says the Lord God,
the Holy One of Israel:
"In returning and rest you shall be saved;
In quietness and confidence shall
be your strength."*
(Isa 30:15a)

Thank God for answering the intercessions of my parents and spiritual friends. He opened and cleansed my heart and allowed His word to open my eyes during the YTTC (Ps 19:8b). Through painful self-examination in prayer, I was shown how much I needed God and that nothing can compare to or replace Him. By the end of the YTTC, I stopped worrying about my future and prayed instead for God never to leave my sight and to help me not be negatively influenced by my university friends. Realizing the importance of prayer and Bible reading in keeping me from going astray again, I also determined not to take them for granted. However, after the YTTC ended, I did not immediately act on this.

THE TESTING OF FAITH PRODUCES PATIENCE (JAS 1:3)

I learned the hard way that attending spiritual retreats such as YTTC is only the beginning and that the true test of our faith comes when we return to the real world. As the YTTC drew to a close, I began to worry about life outside of church again.

When I opened my email inbox the day after the course ended, I was shocked to discover that my accommodation for my final year of university had been canceled and that I had missed several emails asking for a final confirmation letter. I panicked immediately. We were in the middle of a student housing crisis,¹ and with my limited student loan budget, I could only afford university accommodation. I felt as if the rug had been pulled out from under me. I had planned everything well in advance, had booked my accommodation earlier than other students, and had chosen to stay in the same building because I still had friends living there. Why had I not checked my email during the YTTC? I even thought about how this would not have happened if I had not attended the course.

For the next few days, I explored all possible avenues. I refreshed the university's accommodation portal countless times and emailed the staff at Residential Services, thinking I could resolve this issue by utilizing my network. However, no rooms were available and my initial booking was already allocated to someone else. In desperation, I looked into private student accommodation, even though I knew it was unlikely there would be any affordable options. I grew increasingly anxious as there was just over a week left before I was due to return to London, and there was no solution in sight.

Thank God that my parents told me not to worry. They reminded me that since I had lost my initial place because I was attending the YTTC and building up my faith, God would surely provide the

best for me. Since there was nothing more I could do except wait on the Lord, I concentrated on praying, reading the Bible, and listening to sermons. By dedicating more time to receiving God's word and praying, the uncertainty of my accommodation quickly stopped weighing on my mind. For the rest of that week, as I continued with spiritual cultivation, I noticed how God's word turned my eyes back to Him and changed the direction of my prayers.

When a preacher's family living more than an hour away from campus offered me their spare room, I wondered at God's sense of humor. If He literally placed me far away from my non-believing friends in central London, this would certainly help me not to be influenced by them! I was no longer worried about where I would live, and I trusted that God would provide what was best for me.

**"They also reminded me
that rather than gaining
the whole world, we will
find eternal life if we
seek after God"**

Over the next few days, sermons shared with me online and on the Sabbath reminded me that what we think is important and essential will not necessarily benefit our spiritual lives. They also reminded me that rather than gaining the whole world, we will find eternal life if we seek after God (Mk 8:36; Mt 6:19–21). Furthermore, two sermons based on 2 Samuel chapter 5 reiterated the importance of being watchful after experiencing spiritual success. The Philistines coming up against David right after he became king can represent when we have resolved to return to the way of God and set Him as "King" over our hearts and our sinful nature. Satan will come up against us through a sudden difficulty or obstacle. One speaker shared a sister's baptism testimony: her boss uncharacteristically said she would be dismissed if she did not turn up at work on her baptism day. After reflecting on her priorities, she decided to get baptized. Miraculously, her boss did not comment on her absence when she returned to work the next day, as if nothing had happened. This was my final encouragement to put God first. The next day, I set specific times in the morning and evening to read the Bible and pray.

GOD WILL PROVIDE

That afternoon, exactly one week after YTTC had ended, Residential Services emailed me saying they had found a place for me in one of the university's halls of residence. God's arrangement was perfect: it was within my budget and located within walking distance of our church in central London. It was also in the building that I stayed in during my first year of university. I immediately accepted the offer and thanked God that within only one week of this problem arising, He had helped me rely solely on Him and showed me how much He can do when I come to a deadend.

Finally, when I moved into my accommodation, I was amazed to find it was the same room I had lived in during my first year! How could this space be found at such last minute without God's arrangement? It was even newly refurbished. God knew what I needed and more, and I did not need to worry about anything. Throughout my final year, as my workload increased and I wondered about God's guidance in my life, I looked at my room number and remembered that He had been guiding and providing for me all along. I just needed to seek Him first.

CONCLUSION

When I tell my non-believing friends how God helped me to get my accommodation, I often feel limited in sharing how God provided what I was physically seeking. Indeed, non-believers worry about their physical lives, but we should not seek after or worry about such things (Mt 6:31–33). Have our worries about life prevented us from drawing nearer to God? Has it been a while since we have felt our prayers truly reach God? When was the last time the word of God touched our heart and moved us to change something in our life? Let us take time to draw near to God and away from the world, whether through a church event, a Sabbath service, fellowship, listening more to His word, or spending time alone with Him. God calls out to us through His word, asking us to seek His face. When we respond by saying, "Your face, LORD, I will seek" (Ps 27:8), He will surely provide above and beyond our expectations.

¹ Rachel Hall, "UK student housing reaching 'crisis point' as bad as 1970s, charity warns," *The Guardian*, December 26, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2022/dec/26/uk-student-housing-reaching-crisis-point-as-bad-as-1970s-charity-warns>.





NAVIGATING A LIFE OF FAITH

Beatrice Kang—London, UK

In the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, I share my journey of faith.

Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter:

*Fear God and keep His commandments,
For this is man's all. (Eccl 12:13)*

This verse concludes the Book of Ecclesiastes, written by King Solomon. Despite being born into the church, I have struggled to consistently practice this simple principle in my youth, and it is something I am still striving to do. Walking according to God's commandments is challenging in today's increasingly secular

world. But in my faith journey, God has revealed my spiritual complacency, doublemindedness, and pride. I have learned that only by relying on Him can we overcome the temptations and lusts of the world.

THE DANGERS OF SPIRITUAL COMPLACENCY: PEER PRESSURE AND DOUBLE-MINDEDNESS

When I was eight, my family immigrated to the Swedish capital, Stockholm, a city without a local True Jesus Church (TJC)—a decision that was not made lightly because of the potential impact on our faith. While this country has a five-hundred-year history of Protestantism, today, it is one of the most secular countries in the world.

My faith was constantly challenged, both subtly and overtly, in this secular environment, and I often fell into spiritual complacency. However, through the grace of God, He has reminded me at various times in my late teens and early twenties to draw back to Him and strengthen my faith.

As I grew up, it became clear to me that Christianity was not viewed positively in the society I lived in—instead, it was deemed backward and unprogressive. For example, the following are memorable conversations I have had with several classmates during my early teens:

"Oh, you're a Christian? My dad says that Christianity is just a cult. He says it is some form of effective brainwashing: the opium of the masses."

¹ "Sweden 'least religious' nation in Western world," The Local Sweden, April 13, 2015, <https://www.thelocal.se/20150413/swedes-least-religious-in-western-world>.

"Religion breeds all sorts of irrationality. It just makes no sense."

"How can you support a religion of hate? How can you deny LGBTQ+ people their right to love freely?"

These conversations caused me to feel ashamed of my core identity as a child of Christ. After an incident in middle school, where my teacher and classmates laughed at me for questioning Darwin's theory of evolution, and a public fallout with my best friend for my being a "bigot" and declining to attend the annual Pride parade, I became afraid to draw attention to myself by speaking out. For the rest of my teenage years in Stockholm, I kept quiet out of fear but also spiritual complacency. I convinced myself it was best to avoid a faux pas, and in any event, society is beyond reasoning on such issues. I proudly believed that, despite my silence, I was strong enough not to compromise my Christian values personally. However, my silence slowly led to my becoming double-minded. I was like a spiritual fence-sitter vacillating between conflicting identities, indifferent to concepts and ideologies that went against the truth of the Bible. Thus, I separated my "school self" and "home self" into two different persons.

My attitude did not improve after moving away from home to a different country for university, even though I was now able to travel to attend church every Sabbath. During my first year, I continued trying to fit in by conveniently omitting that I was unavailable on the Sabbath, simply mentioning to my friends that I had "commitments" on Saturdays without further explanation. Soon, I did not even say I was Christian in conversation. In addition, I socialized in friendship groups that had individuals who confused my values further, for example, those who practiced polyamory or "relationship anarchy," who were staunch supporters of the LGBTQ+ movement, and who had drinking or partying habits. While I did not take part in their activities, I did not equip or strengthen myself through spiritual cultivation during the week, doing only the bare minimum on the Sabbath. I naively reasoned that I was not encouraging or approving of these activities and that these friendships were simply a necessity of living in society—I could not actively avoid these individuals in a university setting. Thus, I was proudly wise in my own eyes and foolishly did not depart from evil (Prov 3:7).

Despite my shortcomings and undeserving mindset, God reminded me during a prayer later in my first year of university of when I received the Holy

Spirit. I was thirteen at the time and saw a vision: Christ nailed to the cross, all bloodied and bare. I had suppressed my memory of this vision and had not earnestly asked for the infilling of the Holy Spirit consistently since then. This, coupled with my inability to stand firm in my values, made me fall into a spiritual slumber; I had failed to be sober and watchful (1 Thess 5:6). The memory of this vision shook me to the core and prompted me to reassess my heritage as a child of God. I was determined to live worthy of His calling. To pick up my cross and follow Him, I needed to stop being unstable in my ways and draw near to God (Jas 1:8; 4:8).

"God's gentle and timely reminder that day prevented me from straying further from the truth"

While I am grateful that God granted me the Holy Spirit in my youth, upon reflection, I shamefully failed to cherish God's precious Helper throughout my teenage years, and my foolish willfulness prevented me from fully submitting to the Holy Spirit. God's gentle and timely reminder that day prevented me from straying further from the truth. In hindsight, growing up in a secular environment and moving away from home during university were trials that helped me develop spiritual resilience and overcome indirect persecution by learning to stand firm in my identity as a child of Christ. I gradually cut contact with bad company, which was initially daunting and lonely. However, I eventually formed friendships with people with similar values. Some were Christians from other denominations with whom I could share biblical encouragements and discuss doctrines. I even invited them to Sabbath services—a milestone I never thought I would achieve. From then onwards, I no longer shied away

from explaining to others why I must attend Sabbath services on Saturdays and was moved to spend more time in church after services. This shift in perspective brought me greater peace within my heart as I was no longer constantly warring against myself. As Jesus reminds us, we cannot serve two masters, for we will "hate the one and love the other" and "be loyal to the one and despise the other" (Mt 6:24).

The spiritual teachings I learned from this period are reinforced by the story of Noah, which inspires me to stand firm in my faith. Through godly fear, Noah chose to condemn the world and singularly follow God's commands. Despite the social and cultural situation at the time, Noah humbled himself to obey God's instruction to build an ark when there were no signs of incoming rainfall or flooding (Gen 6:22; Heb 11:7). Noah knew to trust the word of God wholeheartedly. Thus, due to his perseverance and obedience, Noah





against God while failing to fulfill my promise to Him. Indeed, "Better not to vow than to vow and not pay" (Eccl 5:5-7).

saved himself and his family, physically and spiritually (1 Pet 3:20). In these end times, we must continue steadfastly and set our sights towards the kingdom of God (Mt 6:33). We must stand firm in the word of God, and patiently wait for Him (Jas 5:7-8).

CULTIVATING SPIRITUAL MATURITY: REPLACING PRIDE WITH HUMILITY

Although I had made positive changes, as I entered my final year of university, my focus shifted to worldly goals, and I again slipped into spiritual complacency. Prioritizing extracurricular pursuits, my focus on God took a backseat. As my successes increased, my heart swelled with pride.

Before attending university, I promised God that, should I be accepted into a particular university, I would willingly journey to the nearest church to attend the Sabbath service every week. However, the journey to the nearest church would take four to five hours by bus—the most affordable form of travel on my student's budget. Alongside a growing sense of social exclusion, my increasing workload, and the mounting pressure of university life, juggling my daily schedule and attending Sabbath service became more challenging. I began to dread journeying out of campus every week, and the commute felt more burdensome. My time spent in church during the Sabbath grew shorter and shorter, and I forgot my initial promise to God. In hindsight, I had become self-entitled and prideful. I thought I was sacrificing "my time," forgetting that the Lord can easily take what He has given (Job 1:21). Most appallingly, I was unwittingly murmuring

"My attitude toward Him made me unworthy of His attention. Like Cain, I presented God with second-class fruits of the soil while failing to guard my heart against pride and self-entitlement"

Thankfully, God reminded me of my folly and insolence by repeatedly delaying my buses, trains, and local traffic, causing me to miss most of the Sabbath service each week. These delays were often caused by extraordinary events outside my control, such as a bus tire bursting en route or a disorderly passenger situation requiring police intervention. In addition, during this period, I performed below average academically and felt overwhelmed by the syllabus despite allocating more time to study and less time to God during the Sabbath. The coincidence of these unusual delays over several weeks and my declining academic performance caused me to reflect on my attitude. God had barred me from attending service properly because my attitude toward Him made me unworthy of His attention. Like Cain, I presented God with second-class fruits of the soil (Gen 4:2-5) while failing to guard my heart against pride and self-entitlement (Prov 4:23), resulting in a poor attitude towards God. Despite my mistakes, God reminded me gently. I felt ashamed in light of God's mercy. Therefore, this chapter of my university experience taught me that "pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall" (Prov 16:18; see also Prov 18:12). My inability to prioritize keeping the Sabbath in true fear of the Lord would have led to my spiritual downfall.

I repented to God and endeavored

to attend Sabbath on time, giving ample time for unforeseen delays. Rather than mindlessly observing the Sabbath, I resolved to reflect on my conduct throughout the week to prepare a reverent heart for the Sabbath. This shift in attitude made me appreciate the blessing and joy of observing the Sabbath; seeing God's abidance in His church brought comfort in the knowledge that He is my refuge and strength in times of trouble (Ps 46:1-2). This period in my faith also reminded me of the importance of prioritizing and keeping God's commandments—in this case, the holy Sabbath—wholeheartedly and in godly fear and reverence.

GOD'S CONTINUAL REMINDERS: TRUST GOD'S WILL

Later, I again experienced God's gentle reminders regarding my pride. During the global pandemic, I faced the considerable pressure of final examinations and the uncertainty of finding employment, especially after rounds and rounds of unsuccessful interviews.

After my exams, my family took COVID-19 antibody tests. I tested positive for the antibodies, confirming that I had contracted COVID-19 in the months before my exams. Instead of being grateful that my family did not contract the virus and that I still passed my exams, I was too preoccupied with moping over my weaker-than-hoped final results. I worried this would prevent me from entering the job market. This showed that pride was still rooted within my heart. As Elder James reminds us:

[Y]ou do not know what will happen tomorrow. For what is your life? It is even a vapor that appears for a little time and then vanishes away. Instead you ought to say, "If the Lord wills, we shall live and do this or that."

(Jas 4:14-15; compare Acts 18:21)

From this event, I have learned that although I may have specific plans and goals in my heart, God's plans and counsel will always triumph for the betterment of those who serve Him (Prov 19:21). Instead of worrying about tomorrow (Mt 6:25), I should have entrusted my worries to God and humbled myself in obedience and thanksgiving (Phil 4:6-7). Deep self-examination revealed I relied on my strength and will instead of God's will. Through His mercy, God humbled me by reminding me that although I may not know what tomorrow holds, I should know who holds my hand. Only

after I swallowed my pride did God unexpectedly grant me a job.

In hindsight, my year-long job search was a blessing. I was able to spend time with my family—drawing closer to God together and building our family altar during the pandemic—after several years of studying abroad and living alone. This extra year allowed me to grow in spiritual maturity through encouragement from my family and spending more time to reflect on my faith earnestly.

The job God had granted me was also a blessing. Although it was in a different country, I could move after the lockdown had lifted and was close to a large and established local church. This has been an opportunity for me to draw closer to God spiritually, draw nearer to the community of faith, and learn to serve in the household of God humbly. Although I am away from my family, God has steered me towards my family in Christ. While I am still riddled with imperfections and still learning to rely more on Christ and less on my strength, I have never been lacking each time I do so. Christ has always paved and smoothed my path towards Him. For example, I once worked in a department that often required weekend work. By the grace of God, by keeping firm in my beliefs, we always found a workaround that allowed me to observe the Sabbath. God blessed me with helpful colleagues and understanding superiors, which was not a common experience for everyone in the organization.

Upon reflection, I am comforted by Jesus' reminder:

"Look at the birds of the air; for they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns; yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? Which of you by worrying can add one cubit to his stature?" (Mt 6:26–27)

Therefore, although our lives may not progress precisely as planned, we should trust in God's will in godly fear and obedience and continue to keep His commandments even when the alternative seems easier.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS AND ENCOURAGEMENTS

The story of Naaman's healing from leprosy provides us with spiritual encouragement (2 Kgs 5). As a renowned general of a conquering state, Naaman had to humble himself four times during his journey by accepting the advice of a foreign slave girl; traveling from the palace to see the prophet Elijah, only

to be met by Elijah's messenger with curt instructions; acting on the advice of his servants to travel to the River Jordan, which he saw as inferior to rivers in his homeland, after an already long and challenging trip (2 Kgs 5:9–13); and bathing himself *seven times* in the Jordan, as a leper in full view of the public.

"We must endeavor to follow God's will and commandments completely, in godly fear and submission. There is little room for double-mindedness in our journey of faith"

We must be willing to humble ourselves and lean not on our understanding when determining our paths (Prov 3:5–6). Like Naaman, out of pride, I had lashed out in anger when my plans had not gone exactly as planned—my disrupted journeys from campus to church, my disappointing university grades, and my delayed entry into employment. Instead of being grateful for God's timing and providence or asking myself what spiritual lessons I could learn in the event of unforeseen circumstances or perceived failures, I murmured when the journey took a long, unexpected turn. I have learned to accept that the "race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong" (Eccl 9:11) and God has His time for everything (Eccl 3:1). As the story of Naaman reminds us, only through fully humbling ourselves to accept

God's will can we truly experience His grace and save ourselves from the follies of our pride.

We must endeavor to follow God's will and commandments *completely*, in godly fear and submission. There is little room for double-mindedness in our journey of faith. Naaman would not have been healed if he had only bathed six times that day. By God's grace and Naaman's complete obedience, he was healed from leprosy. Likewise, to overcome our "spiritual leprosy," we must completely trust and obey God's will. We must humbly accept His time, His way, and His method.

I thank God for His patience and grace despite all of my shortcomings. I am determined to continue to put these teachings into practice and serve Him in a manner worthy of my calling. I will need to constantly self-examine and ask God to guide me on my faith journey. As King Solomon concluded in Ecclesiastes 12:13, our faith journey need not be overly complicated; we simply need to fear God and keep His commandments.

All glory be to God.
Amen!



SAFE IN THE STORM: TRUSTING IN GOD DURING HEART SURGERY

Kwai Lin Ly—Paris, France

In the name of the Lord Jesus, I testify of God's wondrous grace throughout my heart surgery.

*Oh, give thanks to the LORD, for He is good!
For His mercy endures forever. (Ps 136:1)*

At the end of October 2020, I suddenly woke up in the middle of the night with a sharp pain in my chest. This happened twice that night, but I fell back asleep since the pain did not persist. Over the following weeks, I started experiencing minor heart palpitations that became increasingly frequent. My daughter and husband, who are both doctors, heard a murmur in my heart, so we decided to consult a cardiologist in Paris in case I needed a referral to a major hospital for an operation.

France was in the middle of a partial

lockdown during the pandemic, so the earliest appointment I could get with a cardiologist was in January 2021. He diagnosed a prolapsed mitral valve. The heart has four chambers, each with a valve—a flap that acts like a door. He suspected that the cords of one of these valves had ruptured, causing the valve to malfunction and allowing oxygenated blood to leak back into my heart.

The cardiologist found no underlying health issues but suspected a possible tear from the night I had woken up in pain. A transesophageal echocardiogram confirmed that I needed a heart operation—in March if possible and before summer at the latest, as my heart condition would deteriorate and affect my lungs. If these cords were not able to be repaired during the operation, I would undergo

open-heart surgery on the spot for a valve replacement, which would require ten days in hospital followed by three weeks in a heart rehabilitation center.

PEACE: JESUS CALMS THE STORM

As I am generally healthy and only used medication for allergies, I never imagined I would need a heart operation. Thank God, despite the shock, I remained peaceful and calm. On the way home from the cardiologist, I recalled a Bible study I had prepared a few weeks earlier about Jesus calming the storm (Lk 8:22–25). It reminded us that we never know when a tempest will disrupt our lives, but as long as Jesus is in our boat, we will safely make it through the storm.



God knew my needs and had prepared me for this trial. Life is indeed fragile, but God's creation is wonderful; our complicated human body is designed to work in perfect harmony. Who would have thought that a minute tear would affect the functioning of the whole body? Surely, only God is the giver of life, and it is truly a blessing to be able to wake up every day.

"I prayed that He would grant me the mercy and strength to accept whatever He had planned for me and to glorify Him, whatever the outcome"

Before the operation, I started to imagine what would happen to my family if things went wrong. My first instinct was to repent; perhaps I had fallen short in certain areas and failed to ask for God's forgiveness. Next, I prayed to understand what God wanted me to learn through this experience. Knowing that His thoughts are above mine (Isa 55:9), I prayed that He would grant me the mercy and strength to accept whatever He had planned for me and to glorify Him, whatever the outcome. The night of that prayer, I informed my sister and brother in the UK about the operation, and they immediately sent a prayer request to the UK brethren.

I spent the next few weeks in and out of the hospital for various examinations and procedures. Because of the coronavirus, I had to attend them alone, but I was often strengthened and comforted by reading Psalms on my Bible app in the waiting areas. Thank the Lord that everything went smoothly. In mid-March, I finally saw a surgeon specializing in 3D mitral valve surgery.

He explained that there were two different valve-replacement options if my valve was not reparable: a biological animal valve, which would require a replacement every ten to fifteen years, or a mechanical valve, which would require lifelong blood thinners to prevent blood clots forming around the valve, in turn posing the increased risk of hemorrhage. As I was only fifty-four, he recommended the mechanical valve. He explained that the operation had its risks; my heart would be stopped during the procedure and my blood would circulate through a heart-lung machine. My upper body would be anesthetized for two days to ease the pain. I gave my consent while entrusting everything to God. The number of daily heart operations had been reduced from four to one during the pandemic, so mine

was scheduled for April 19, 2021.

In the intervening period, I was deeply touched by the love and concern of brethren worldwide. A preacher had also asked members in Africa to intercede—they were experiencing far greater difficulties than we were during the pandemic, yet they were praying for me! I felt unworthy of having so many members asking for God's mercy on my behalf. I was also encouraged by every member's expression of concern, whether it was a phone call, a simple message, words of comfort, a Bible verse, or a hymn played or sung. Some members even continued to send me daily encouragement throughout my months of convalescence. They were all exemplary models from whom I could learn. As my operation was high risk, I prayed and fasted more to ask God to grant me additional faith, to thank God for the members' intercessions, and to bless them.

During this time, I experienced God's embrace and the movement of the Holy Spirit in my prayers. Many times, I would suddenly hear the chorus of the hymn *I Am So Glad That Jesus Loves Me*, and was filled with joy and overflowing tears. God was personally comforting me. My first experience of this was while praying earnestly for some church matters. Thus, I understood that if God loves me, I need not fear whatever happens. Later, I realized He also reassured me that everything would be fine. Other times, I would hear the hymn *Faith Is the Victory* in my mind while praying, encouraging me not to be afraid. God is indeed our God of comfort (2 Cor 1:3).

Despite the situation, God granted me amazing peace that enabled me to pray with thankfulness and praise. I adopted a slow pace of life to ease the physical pressure on my heart. Thank the Lord that, miraculously, my heart palpitations and breathlessness gradually disappeared. I felt so well that



I even used a stethoscope to see if my heart murmur had gone away!

A week before my operation, one of my blood tests revealed an unusually high marker that indicated a bleeding disorder. The hospital staff said they would take precautions and reassured me that this would not affect the operation. However, they told me other underlying health issues might require further investigation. This was another trial, but we just prayed to God to help us step by step.

PATIENCE: WAIT ON GOD DURING UNCERTAINTY

Threedaysbeforemyhospitaladmission, my operation was postponed without further information. With the outbreak of a third wave of COVID infections, hospitals were once again inundated by patients and deaths. However, I trusted that God knows best and continued to pray and fast for extended periods alone and with my family. We all had our concerns but continued to support one another physically and in spiritual communion. God's peace is beyond our imagination. Amidst uncertainty, I was serene, like a bird safely resting under the Lord's loving wings as the tempest raged around me (Ps 91:4). I ate normally and slept better than usual. Aside from a couple of nights during a June heatwave, God miraculously enabled me to sleep through each night until my rescheduled operation (Ps 127:2). Throughout those few months, my heart had a few sudden shudders, but thank the Lord for watching over me and keeping my condition stable. Finally, I received a new date for the operation: Friday, June 25, 2021.

My breathlessness started again in mid-June, and I was eager to get my operation done. I was admitted to the hospital the day before the operation

and was woken the next morning at 6 A.M. for pre-operative procedures. By 8 A.M., I was ready for the operating theatre. I waited and prayed throughout the whole morning, but at 12 noon, my operation was canceled! The nurse felt very sorry for me, and I broke into tears after all the emotion, wondering how I would be able to wait another few months. It was a hard lesson, but I had to continue to trust and turn to God for strength. Later, the surgeon apologized, telling me the cancellation was due to staff shortages because of the pandemic. My operation was rescheduled to the following Tuesday, so I returned home for the weekend.

When I was re-admitted, I took the opportunity to testify to the different healthcare workers I met. I plucked up



the courage to preach to a nurse, and before I was put under anesthetic, I thanked the medical staff and shared that I had prayed for God to guide their hands.

"I prayed for God to have mercy on me and waited for the pain to pass. I thought of how much agony Jesus must have gone through on the cross for us"

The whole procedure lasted approximately four to five hours, and I was on the heart-lung machine for an hour and a half. When I woke up, I felt a stabbing pain in my lower back and could not feel my right side at all. I was given a shot of morphine and placed in an upright position for the night. The next day, the surgeon announced that my valve cords had been successfully repaired with an annuloplasty ring, and the only complication had been a drop in blood pressure. A large volume of liquid had been induced to restart my heart, but everything was functioning. Praise and thank God for sparing me from having open-heart surgery and a valve replacement!

GOD'S MERCY: LEARNING TO TRUST CONTINUALLY

The next few weeks were not as smooth sailing. But God was teaching me to continue to trust Him even after the operation was over, and He graciously walked me through each step. I was in the intensive care unit (ICU) for two days and then the coronary care unit (CCU) for four days. I had three sudden bouts of excruciating pain, worse than the pain of my three childbirths! I prayed for God to have mercy on me and waited for



the pain to pass. I thought of how much agony Jesus must have gone through on the cross for us. We can never fathom how great His love is. I was thankful and deeply felt the love from members' intercessions alongside God's mercy during those hard times of struggle.

My low blood pressure meant that I could only start walking again five days after the operation—pushing around two drip stands of medication, an external pacemaker, and two drainage bottles in the process. I woke up twice in a pool of blood on the bed because I was bleeding from one of the wounds caused by the drainage tubes. Though I could not eat and was still very weak, thank the Lord, I was discharged on the eighth day. Returning home for two nights with my family to refresh myself before heading to the heart rehabilitation center was a blessing.

In the center, I was still in pain but had to walk to various places. Returning to my room after meals and activities, I would doze off out of exhaustion. During the first few nights, a persistent cough prevented me from sleeping and caused pain around my fresh surgical wounds. Thank the Lord that with inhalers and the intercession of members, I was back to normal and able to rest after three days.

After heart operations, patients are normally prescribed medication to manage their heart rhythm because of the risk of sudden cardiac arrest. This medicine can cause low blood pressure, so the doctors decided not to prescribe it to me and, instead, advised careful observation. In the rehabilitation center, a couple of patients were wearing "life vests"—jackets incorporating defibrillators that deliver shock treatments as soon as they detect life-threatening arrhythmia. Thank God for preserving my condition without such interventions.

I followed the physiotherapy program and exercises designed to help my heart function properly again. My pains diminished amazingly quickly, and I was able to stop using painkillers by the second week in the center. I took the opportunity to testify to various patients. I met three patients who had all had the same operation as me, with the same surgeon. Two of them had to undergo a valve replacement and were very disappointed; the first patient's cords were repaired but did not function properly, while the second patient's cords were not reparable. Indeed, many physical factors affected the reparation of my valve, but I know that I am indeed blessed to have God's mercy. I also learned in the center that some patients had contracted COVID-19 during their



hospital stay, which caused further complications. Praise and thank God for arranging for me to have my second dose of the COVID vaccine while waiting for my operation and for allowing the procedure to be successful.

"My residual pain and scars remind me of God's wonderful grace and mercy, which carried me through this episode of life"

Thank the Lord that the three weeks at the heart rehabilitation center flew by and felt like a holiday. I returned home on July 29, one month after my operation. Some of my nerves were damaged and needed more time to heal, but it was indeed God's grace that my main organs were not injured. My residual pain and scars remind me of God's wonderful grace and mercy, which carried me through this episode in my life, enabling me once again to see His almightiness.

*"I have heard of You by the hearing of the ear,
But now my eye sees You." (Job 42:5)*

Though the tempest may arise, we need not fear. We are blessed and must remember that we have the support of our spiritual brethren. God is there to comfort us through His Holy Spirit and strengthen us by His word. All we need to do is learn to trust and commit our ways to Him, and He will surely carry us through.

Praise the Lord! I truly thank God for my big family in Christ, for His great lesson of trust, and for His everlasting mercy. May all glory be unto the Lord.



TAKING THE “I” OUT OF SERVICE

Bianca Chong—Essex, UK

In the name of Jesus, I testify. While studying for my degree in my early twenties, I was offered a three-month internship in London. During those few months, by God’s grace, my faith grew exponentially and I learned important lessons about serving God.

HIDING MY TALENTS

I started learning to play the piano when I was around ten. Having started later than my peers, I always felt inadequate in comparison. I soon developed a fear of playing the piano in front of others and kept it secret for many years.

Over the years, as I progressed through the piano grades, church members encouraged me to play for hymnal sessions or religious education lessons. I declined every time and encouraged other brethren to play instead, as I felt they were more talented. I feared the embarrassment of playing incorrectly and was ashamed of my skill level compared to others who could play more confidently. Since

there were many gifted members at my local church in Newcastle, I did not feel the need to serve God in this particular holy work.

Eventually, brethren stopped asking me, and I diverted the musical abilities God had given me to composing music and choir leading. Using my talents in other ways, I would not need to play the

piano. I thought this would still please God as I was not wasting my talents but serving Him the way I wanted to without challenging myself too greatly. In hindsight, this did not address me not wanting to submit to God and His will, which only lingered and grew inside my heart.

Serving in London Central

When I moved to London for my three-month internship, I attended the church in London Central. As there were fewer members in London than in Newcastle, I noticed that most members had multiple roles and responsibilities, resulting in a shortfall of workers when they had to prioritize other duties.

I joined the cleaning and cooking groups, but when asked to play the piano for service, I declined. Although I felt a slight pang of guilt from knowing there was a lack of pianists, I was still unwilling to take up this church work.

GOD’S TEACHING ON THE WAY TO NEWCASTLE

My cousin and a brother from London organized a weekend road trip to Newcastle, so I joined them to give my family a surprise visit. During the car journey, I rested my eyes while half-listening to a sermon on the car speakers. Miraculously, it seemed as if the sermon leader was speaking directly to me.

The sermon leader spoke about our mindset and attitude in service—how we focus on humility but downplay submission to God when we serve. Serving God with both humility and submission is important. These are

two different yet interlinked attributes: humility is to be humble, without pride, giving all the glory to God; submission is surrendering ourselves before God, being obedient, and allowing Him to use us as *He wills* (Phil 2:8). Ultimately, the focus of our service is solely on God and not on ourselves.

Hearing this biblical truth, I realized the error of my thinking. My skewed understanding of humility and lack of submission meant I was not allowing God to lead me. I only focused on my



will and what I thought was best, not on God and His will. I quickly understood what I needed to put into prayer and repent from. I truly thank God for this timely lesson.

GOD'S ONE-TO-ONE PRACTICAL LESSON

I returned to London carrying this teaching in my heart and reflecting deeply on my service to God. During the pre-service prayer on the following Sabbath, I prayed that if it was God's will, to please grant me another opportunity to play the piano for Him. I knew it was time to overcome my fears and submit to God.

Then the bell rang, signaling the end of prayer. While I was getting up from my knees, the sister beside me asked if I wanted to play for the Bible study session, which would start in a few minutes, instead of her. Immediately, I knew that God had answered my prayers! He gave me this opportunity to learn to serve Him with humility and submission. I accepted the sister's offer and went to sit at the piano. Despite not having time to practice, what little confidence I had grew when the Bible study leader chose a simple hymn that I could sight-read.

As I played the hymn, doubts, and fears started creeping into my mind again. After playing one flat note, making a mistake, and then another, all I could think of was how terribly I was playing. The anxiety within was growing. My hands were sweating, my legs shaking,

my confidence plummeting. Just when I was about to have a panic attack, I pleaded to God in my heart: *God, please help me!*

Instantly, the sound of the piano was drowned out like I was playing the hymn underwater. It happened so suddenly after my silent prayer. Even though I was looking down at my fingers pressing the keys, the sound of the piano was murky and unclear. No matter which notes I played or how hard I pressed the keys, the sound was unusual and out of focus. Instead, my ears automatically tuned into the singing of the congregation instead of my own playing. Their praises were louder and clearer than ever before. It was like someone had adjusted the volume control in my ears by lowering the sound of the piano to a minimum while raising the voices of the congregation.

"I knew exactly what God was teaching me: He was telling me to focus on Him, reminding me that I was not serving alone"

My heart leaped with thanksgiving to God! I knew exactly what God was teaching me: He was telling me to focus on Him, reminding me that I was not serving alone but with the congregation and God.

By the end of the hymn, peace and joy filled my entire being. I could not wait to share this miracle and God's teaching with my spiritual brothers and sisters. Truly, thank God.

CONFIDENCE IN GOD

When we step into a new role or start doing church work that we are inexperienced in, we may feel daunted by the unknown and struggle with our confidence. But when our lack of confidence is left alone to fester, it hinders our faith and can even lead to unwillingness to serve God altogether.

In some ways, this crisis of confidence masquerades itself as humility when, ironically, the root problem is pride. This warped sense of humility can manifest in multiple ways. We may find ourselves quickly discouraging ourselves when asked to serve: *I'm not good enough to do it.* This self-doubt leads to unwillingness, and we may eventually push away God-given opportunities to serve Him. We may even belittle our talents and skills compared to others, thinking, *Other people can do it better and quicker than*

me, so why bother?

But have we considered the One who has given us these gifts and opportunities to serve in the first place? When we focus on our lack of confidence or talent, we fail to see that it reveals our lack of confidence in God. Our distorted understanding of humility negatively impacts the way we view ourselves as God's vessels and damages our zeal to serve Him, so we may end up disobeying and defying God's will.

For if there is first a willing mind, it is accepted according to what one has, and not according to what he does not have.
(2 Cor 8:12)

Instead of looking at what we lack, we should be grateful for what God has given us. No matter how much or how little we have been blessed with, we must have faith that it can be useful to the Master, if we are first pure and willing to offer, just like the widow of Zarephath with the handful of flour and the little jar of oil (1 Kgs 17:12–16).

Serving God may not always be comfortable or easy, and we must not think that we must perfect our talents and skills before serving. This notion comes from our self-serving desire to be "perfect" in our own eyes. But God does not require "perfection" according to our standards. What He accepts is our willingness to give what we already have back to Him, our obedience in doing the good works He has prepared for each of us, and our submission to the Spirit, who is working with us to fulfill His will (1 Cor 12:11).

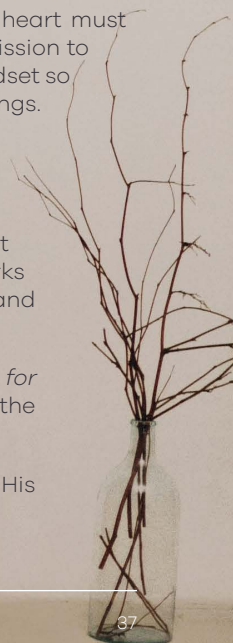
For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them.
(Eph 2:10)

CONCLUSION

When serving God, our focus is on Him and not on ourselves. Our heart must entwine humility and submission to God to create the right mindset so that He will accept our offerings. We must humbly accept the talents and opportunities God has given us, have a willing mind to offer what He desires of us, and submit to Him who faithfully works through us to do His work and glorify God.

We serve *with* God and *for* God. Let us all learn to take the "I" out of our service.

May all glory be unto His name. Amen!

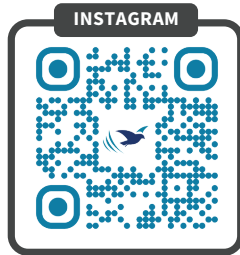


IA MEDIA MINISTRY: RESOURCES

SOCIAL MEDIA



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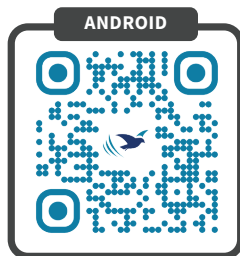


 Meet Jesus

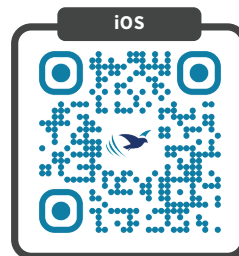
MOBILE APP



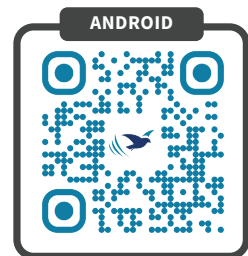
TJC-IA
(iOS)



TJC-IA
(Android)



eRhema
(iOS)



eRhema
(Android)

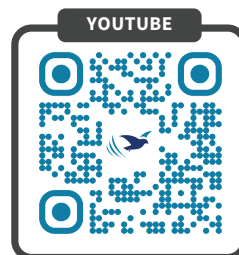
MEDIA MINISTRY RESOURCES VIDEO



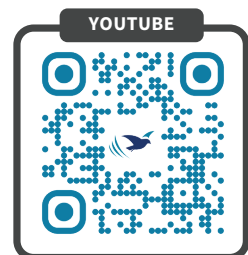
 Website



 Bible Learning



 Social Media



 Bible &
Hymnal App

BIBLE & HYMNAL APP



bible.tjc.org
(eRhema)



hymnal.tjc.org

BIBLE LEARNING



learn.tjc.org
(eLearning)



bsg.tjc.org
(Bible Study Guides)

IA WEBSITE



tjc.org



tjc.org/welcome
(For new visitors)



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 #99: Mend Our Nets
Articles due: June 27, 2025

"Again the kingdom of heaven is like a dragnet that was cast into the sea and gathered some of every kind, which, when it was full, they drew to shore; and they sat down and gathered the good into vessels, but threw the bad away." (Mt 13:47–48)

The parable of the dragnet depicts the heavenly kingdom—the church—as a dragnet, collecting all kinds of fish and sea creatures from the ocean of the wide world. In the end-time true church, we have been given two commissions—to preach to all nations and pastor the flock (Mt 28:19–20; Jn 21:15–17). If casting the net represents the evangelism

effort, the next step is to bring the souls who have entered the dragnet safely to shore, ready for the Lord's judgement day. How can we do this, ensuring our net remains strong and unbroken (Jn 21:11)?

In terms of fishing, net maintenance is a time-consuming but essential task (Mt 4:21; Lk 5:2). Fishermen must painstakingly remove any sludge and metal that could rust, and wash and dry their nets thoroughly to avoid damaged and rotten ropes. If there are any tears, they must be mended to prevent the next catch from being lost. In the same

way and with even more care, we must clean and mend our proverbial nets to safeguard our spiritual catch—to pastor those who have been saved.

As the church grows, what spiritual gaps must we pay attention to and mend? How can we remove corrupting elements from our hearts to maintain the integrity of our pastoral work? How can we strengthen the net and promote unity by healing interpersonal conflicts and taking care of newly baptized members so that they can become fully integrated into the church?

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.

Issue 97 Vol. 49 No. 1
Publication date: February 2025
Spiritual Nurture: God's Word



CONTACT INFORMATION

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