

TRUE JESUS CHURCH

# Manna

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*Prayer*



**Impressions of a Trip to India**

**Lessons Learned from Saul and David**

**Keeping Intruders Out of Your Marriage**



# Lessons Learned from Saul and David

Phoebe Tsai—Baldwin Park, California, USA

Saul and David both had humble beginnings. Saul came from the smallest tribe of Israel (1 Sam 9:21); David was the youngest son in his family (1 Sam 16:11). By God's grace, both Saul and David were chosen from the bottom rung of the social ladder and exalted to kingship. At God's command, Samuel anointed them with oil in their respective times, during which the power of God descended upon them (1 Sam 10:1, 9-10 and 16:13).



**E**ven so, both of them were still susceptible to human failings and were punished for their sins. But why did David find favor in God's sight despite his failings, while Saul ultimately did not? The answer lies in the differences between David and Saul's attitude toward God and His commandments.

## OBEDIENCE & FAITH

Obedience and faith are two essential ingredients in building a strong relationship with God. Unfortunately, Saul was never fully obedient nor did he ever truly rely on God because he was proud and took God's commands lightly. Saul valued his own reasoning and will over God's. As a result, he made three major mistakes, which ultimately cost him his kingship and his life.

### Saul's Mistakes

**Mistake #1.** Saul's first mistake was to make offerings despite God's instructions to wait seven days for Samuel. Saul did wait for Samuel, but the seven days were not completely over when his men began to scatter. Saul panicked and was more concerned about pleasing man than God. Relying on himself rather than God, he impulsively made the offerings. Samuel arrived shortly after and reprimanded Saul. He told Saul that his kingdom would not endure as a consequence of his disobedience (1 Sam 13:13-14).

**Mistake #2.** Saul's second mistake was to place his men under oath, saying, "Cursed is the man who eats any food until evening, before I have taken vengeance on my enemies" (1 Sam 14:24). Saul instituted this command without stopping to think if it was God's will for the troops to fast. Unaware of the oath, Jonathan ate some honey.

Afterward, Saul suspected that someone had broken the fast because God was not responding to his inquiries. As they cast lots, Saul made another foolish oath, saying, "though it be in Jonathan my son, he shall surely die" (1 Sam 14:39). Jonathan was found to be the culprit. To save face, Saul said, "God do so and more also; for you shall surely die, Jonathan" (1 Sam 14:44). The troops, however, came to Jonathan's rescue

and spared his life. Saul made these empty vows without regard to God's warning to "not swear falsely" but to "perform your oaths to the Lord" (Mt 5:33-37).

**Mistake #3.** Saul made his third mistake when he disobeyed God's command to "attack Amalek, and utterly destroy all that they have" (1 Sam 15:3). Though God explicitly instructed him to destroy everything, Saul defied the Lord's command in order to keep the goods and riches. He also spared Agag, king of the Amalekites, to augment and bask in his own glory.

Saul's pride and vanity got in the way of fully obeying God. In the end, "Saul died for his unfaithfulness which he had committed against the LORD, because he did not keep the word of the LORD... he did not inquire of the Lord; therefore He killed him, and turned the kingdom over to David the son of Jesse" (1 Chr 10:13-14).

### David's Virtues

**Seeking God's Will.** David, on the other hand, constantly kept God's will in mind and never instituted his own decrees or went to battle without consulting God first. David always inquired of the Lord before making any decisions. He did so at Nob (1 Sam 22:13-15), at Keilah (1 Sam 23:2, 4, 10-12), and at Ziklag (1 Sam 30:7-8), to name a few examples. Is it any wonder that "Saul [had] slain his thousands, and David his ten thousands" (1 Sam 18:7)?

Another example of David's reliance on God was when David asked God if the citizens of Keilah would betray him (1 Sam 23:9-14). David was in a life-or-death situation, one more precarious than Saul's situation with the Amalekites. But unlike Saul, David managed to keep his head and take the time to seek God's will and blessing.

**Trust in God.** David's simple heart of reliance and confidence in God was evident from the time of his youth. The most renowned incident was his encounter with Goliath. Despite his brother's disparaging remarks (1 Sam 17:28), Saul's doubts in his youth and inexperience (1 Sam 17:33), and Goliath's crude insults (1 Sam 17:43-44), David remained confident—not in himself, but in God. He told Saul, "The LORD, who



delivered me from the paw of the lion and from the paw of the bear, He will deliver me from the hand of this Philistine” (1 Sam 17:37).

Unlike Saul, David did not care what other people thought and therefore was not intimidated. Instead, he turned to God for help. In answer to Goliath’s snide remarks, David answered (again with confidence not in himself but in God), “You come to me with a sword, with a spear, and with a javelin. But I come to you in the name of the LORD of hosts...” (1 Sam 17:45).

**Obedience and Faith.** David was able to achieve success in everything because of his obedience and simple reliance on God. Proverbs 3:5-6 says:

*Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and lean not on your own understanding; In all your ways acknowledge Him, and He shall direct your paths.*

Proverbs 16:3 says, “Commit your works to the Lord, and your thoughts will be established.” Solomon probably received inspiration for these verses by witnessing his father’s demonstration of obedience and faith in the Lord Almighty.

## TRUE REPENTANCE

Both Saul and David committed grave sins, but why did God remember David and his descendants (1 Kgs 11:12-13) but not Saul’s? The difference was in their responses to the Lord’s rebukes.

### Saul’s Impenitence

**Shifting the Blame.** Whenever Saul’s mistakes were pointed out, he justified himself and even lied instead of admitting his sin against God. For example, when Samuel finally arrived to offer the sacrifices, he asked Saul, “What have you done?” In response, Saul futilely explained, “When I saw that the people were scattered from me, and that you did not come within the days appointed... I felt compelled, and offered a burnt offering” (1 Sam 13:11-12).

Saul tried to shift the blame onto Samuel for not arriving sooner. Moreover, he lacked faith in the Lord Almighty. To cover it up, he feigned

piety by mentioning his desire to offer the sacrifice. Little did he realize that “the sacrifices of God are a broken spirit, A broken and a contrite heart—These, O God, You will not despise” (Ps 51:17).

**Refusal to Admit Wrong.** Another incident where Saul refused to admit his wrongdoing was when he disobeyed the Lord’s command to completely destroy the Amalekites. He fooled himself into thinking that he had faithfully carried out God’s instructions and said so to Samuel.

But Samuel asked him, “What then is this bleating of sheep in my ears? What is this lowing of cattle that I hear?” Saul replied, “They have brought them from the Amalekites; for the people spared the best of the sheep and the oxen, to sacrifice to the Lord your God; and the rest we have utterly destroyed” (1 Sam 15:15).

Saul tried to cover up his disobedience by mentioning his seemingly good-intentioned sacrifice to God. Saul could not understand that “to obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed than the fat of rams” (1 Sam 15:22).

**Insincere Repentance.** Unfortunately, by the time Saul was ready to admit that he had sinned (1 Sam 15:24), he had already crossed the line. He confessed only with his mouth, but in reality he was not sincere, and both God and Samuel knew it.

Saul never knew how to truly repent. His actions did not reflect his words. Saul repented to David after he had spared his life, “You are more righteous than I, for you have rewarded me with good, whereas I have rewarded you with evil” (1 Sam 24:16-21). Although he admitted that he was wrong, afterward he still continued to seek David’s life. That is not true repentance. As a result, the spirit of God left him, and in its place, an evil spirit filled his heart (1 Sam 16:14).

### David’s Sincere Repentance

**Admitting Wrong.** David, on the other hand, had true respect for the Lord and was sincere in his repentance. Every time he realized that he had sinned, David would either immediately pray to God for forgiveness or rectify the situation. He never tried to cover it up, justify himself, or blame



someone else. Instead, he humbly and bravely accepted the consequences of his actions.

When Nathan the prophet rebuked David for committing adultery and murder, David immediately said, "I have sinned against the Lord" (2 Sam 12:13). What a contrast to Saul's response to rebuke! David gave no excuses—no ifs, ands, or buts. David simply admitted that he had sinned, and afterward, he never committed the same sin again. That is true repentance.

**A Contrite Heart.** Another time, David stealthily cut off a corner of Saul's robe as Saul relieved himself in a cave. Afterward, David's heart troubled him for what he had done. He told his men, "The Lord forbid that I should do this thing to my master, the Lord's anointed, to stretch out my hand against him..." With those words, he rebuked them and kept them from harming Saul (1 Sam 24:4-7).

An example of David's malleable and contrite heart was when he was conscience-stricken after he counted the number of his fighting men. Immediately, he prayed, "I have sinned greatly in what I have done; but now, I pray, O LORD, take away the iniquity of Your servant, for I have done very foolishly" (2 Sam 24:10). This time, he did not even need the prophet Gad to point out his sin. Although David was never exempt from punishment, the Lord was merciful to him because of his sincere repentance.

## PRAISE AND GLORY TO GOD

Yet another difference between Saul and David is that the former sought glory for himself, whereas the latter gave all the glory to God. Saul did not know how to worship the Lord and was rather stingy in giving praise to God, but David was the complete opposite.

Why was there such a contrast? Perhaps it was because David always meditated on God's words (Ps 119:148). In fact, he thirsted after God (Ps 42:1-4, 63:1) and loved His commandments (Ps 40:8, 119:127). His personal experience and close relationship with God enabled him to humbly give credit where it was due and to be grateful to the Lord.

The Bible only records one instance where

Saul built an altar to the Lord (1 Sam 14:35). Other than that, Saul sought only to glorify himself. For example, he erected a statue in his own honor (1 Sam 15:12) and lied about wanting to give God the glory. Not once did he praise or give glory to the Lord.

Unlike Saul, David never built a statue in his own honor despite his many achievements. On the contrary, he desired to build a temple for "the ark of the covenant of the Lord" (1 Chr 28:2) and made preparations to build it. Although God did not permit David to build it, he made sure that his son, Solomon, would carry it out to completion (2 Chr 6:7-11).

Though David had an extremely difficult life, he never complained or ceased to give praise and glory to God. He often rejoiced in the Lord and offered prayers of thanksgiving. He danced, sang, prayed, played the harp, and acknowledged God's greatness in public and in private.

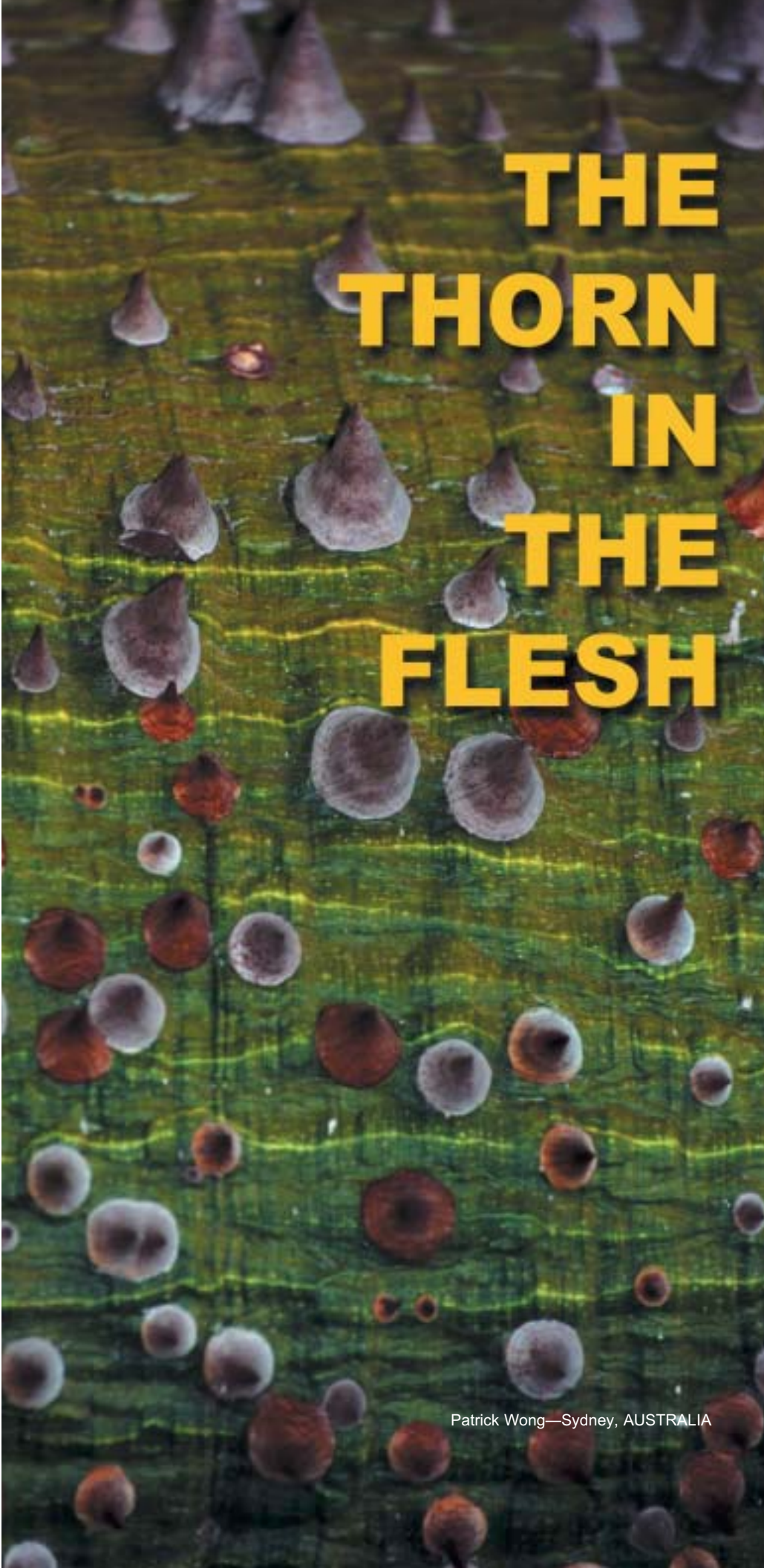
## A PERSON AFTER GOD'S HEART

Despite the mistakes they made, David found favor in God's sight while Saul did not because of their different responses to God's calling, discipline, and commands. Saul was disobedient, lacked faith in God, was too proud to admit his wrongdoings, and sought glory for himself. Although God gave Saul time to redeem himself, he chose to depart further and further until he was finally cut off.

It is such a pity that Saul had such a promising beginning only to go through life and end it in misery and dishonor. God gave him so many chances to repent, but he let these opportunities slip through his fingers.

Let us learn from Saul's mistakes and David's virtues—obeying and trusting in God, truly repenting, and praising and glorifying God's holy name. By doing so, we too can ultimately be a person after God's own heart (1 Sam 13:14). ★

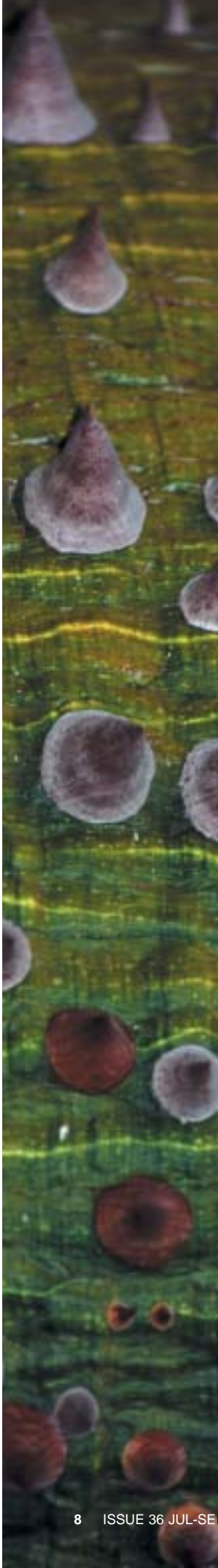




# THE THORN IN THE FLESH

**A**nd lest I should be exalted above measure by the abundance of the revelations, a thorn in the flesh was given to me, a messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I be exalted above measure. Concerning this thing I pleaded with the Lord three times that it might depart from me. And He said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness.” Therefore most gladly I will rather boast in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in needs, in persecutions, in distresses, for Christ’s sake. For when I am weak, then I am strong. (2 Cor 12:7-10)

Patrick Wong—Sydney, AUSTRALIA



Many Christians are familiar with this passage and you probably have your own interpretation of these verses. Let's examine this well-known passage again and study, according to Scripture, what these verses mean and how they apply to our lives.

## THE THORN

What exactly was Paul's "thorn"? Many Christians interpret the thorn in Paul's side as some kind of physical illness that caused him suffering and hindered his work for the Lord. Let's evaluate this popular interpretation in light of Paul's character and his work for the Lord.

Paul had a deep understanding of Christ's love (Rom 8:35-39), suffered numerous beatings for the gospel (2 Cor 11:25), and was even willing to die for the Lord (Acts 21:13). Once Paul was even stoned to the brink of death (Acts 14:19), and yet he still continued to preach the gospel. Would such a faithful servant truly ask the Lord to take away his physical illness? What kind of physical illness caused him more suffering than what he had already experienced?

To understand the meaning of the "thorn," we need to study the word in other parts of Scripture. In 2 Samuel 23:6, David uses thorns to describe his adversaries: "But the sons of rebellion shall all be as thorns thrust away, because they cannot be taken with hands." A psalmist also uses thorns to describe his adversaries: "All nations surrounded me, but in the name of the LORD I will destroy them.... They surrounded me like bees; they were quenched like a fire of thorns...." (Ps 118:10-13)

Paul's thorn was not a physical illness but most likely his adversaries. What kind of adversaries did Paul have? In Paul's second epistle to the Corinth church, he refers to these adversaries:

*For such are false apostles, deceitful workers, transforming themselves into apostles of Christ. And no wonder! For Satan himself transforms himself into an angel of light. Therefore it is no great thing if his ministers also transform themselves into ministers of righteousness, whose end will be according to their works. (2 Cor 11:13-15)*

In the Corinth church, there were false teachers who stirred up the people against Paul, attacking his character (2 Cor 10:10) and claiming that he was unqualified as an apostle of Christ (2 Cor 11:16-23). These deceitful workers obstructed Paul's ministry and caused him much spiritual suffering. These were the messengers of Satan, the thorn in Paul's flesh.

## THE WEAKNESS

Paul pleaded with the Lord to take away his thorn, not one but three times, because of the obstruction to the Lord's work. The Lord did not do so but instead said to him, "My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness" (2 Cor 12:9).

What is this "weakness"? Popular interpretation equates "weakness" with sinful desire or the work of the flesh (Gal 5:19-21). If this is true, then does this mean we must remain in sin in order to achieve perfection? Should this be how we interpret "For when I am weak, then I am strong" (2 Cor 12:10)? Of course not. Paul tells us, "What shall we say then? Shall we continue in sin that grace may abound? Certainly not! How shall we who died to sin live any longer in it?" (Rom 6:1-2).

In order to understand the meaning of "weakness" in this passage, we again need to study the word in other areas of Scripture. In 2 Corinthians 13:4, Paul writes, "For though He was crucified in weakness, yet He lives by the power of God...." This passage states that Christ was crucified in "weakness," but this "weakness" surely does not refer to sin, because Jesus was without sin.

To understand the meaning of "weakness" in this passage, let's refer to another passage referring to Jesus' crucifixion. Paul writes in Philippians 2:8-9:

*And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross. Therefore God also has highly exalted Him and given Him the name which is above every name.*

This passage states that Jesus "humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of



death.” God exalted Jesus because of His humility.

Putting these two passages together, we see that Jesus “humbled Himself” to the point of death and was “crucified in weakness.” The “weakness” of Christ therefore refers to the humility of Christ. Using the same interpretation, then, the weakness in 2 Corinthians 12:9 is not the work of the flesh, but humility.

## A SPIRITUAL BATTLE

Paul is describing a spiritual battle in this passage. Satan used the false apostles of the Corinth church to attack Paul because Paul remained humble despite the abundance of revelations he received from God (2 Cor 12:7).

Paul recognized Satan’s attack and asked the Lord to intervene and remove the thorn. However, instead of taking away the thorn, God answered him, “My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness.” Paul then began to understand God’s purpose for the thorn: it helped Paul achieve perfection, making him even more humble and reliant on the Lord. Satan wanted to make Paul fall, but God turned this adversity into a blessing (Deut 23:5).

Many servants of God also experienced similar “thorns” in their flesh in the midst of spiritual battle. Jesus suffered a “thorn” in the form of Judas Iscariot, His own disciple that would betray Him (Jn 13:21-26). Jeremiah’s thorn was his fellow countryman, who mocked his prophecies and desired that he fall (Jer 20:7-10). Job’s thorn was his three friends, whom he called “worthless physicians” and “miserable comforters” for persecuting instead of comforting him in his greatest hour of need (Job 2-31).

## LESSONS TODAY

Like Paul, we too may encounter adversity and “thorns” in our flesh when we work for the Lord. Sometimes our adversaries are those outside of the body of Christ, but sometimes they are our own brethren, our friends, or even our family members.

It is often the most difficult to bear when we face opposition from those close to us. We should remember, though, that we are engaged in spiritual battle and our real enemy is not those who oppose us, but Satan himself. Paul tells us:

*For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places. (Eph 6:12)*

However, if we do find brethren in sin, we should follow the Lord’s teaching and encourage them to repent (Mt 18:15-20; Jas 5:19-20). This was also the main purpose of Paul’s second epistle to the Corinth church (2 Cor 12:14—13:6).

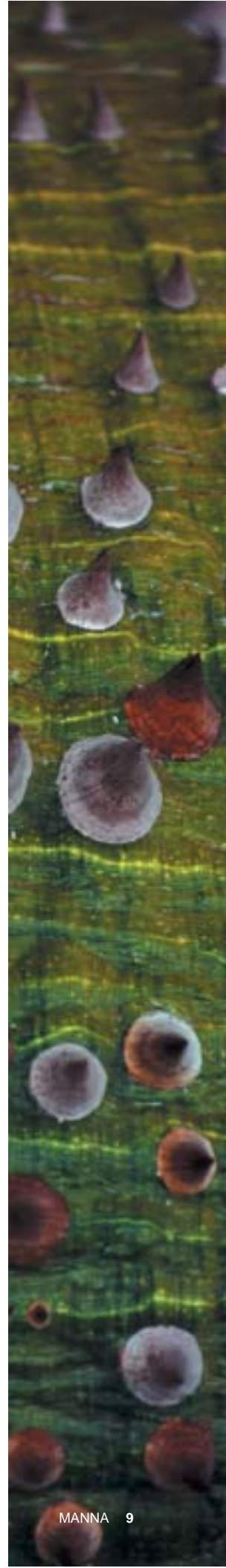
Within the body of Christ, we should seek unity and peace. Paul encourages us:

*...walk worthy of the calling with which you were called, with all lowliness and gentleness, with longsuffering, bearing with one another in love, endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. (Eph 4:1-3)*

According to this passage, important ingredients to keeping unity and peace within the body of Christ are “lowliness and gentleness,” or in other words, humility. Paul encourages us not to do anything out of selfish ambition or conceit, but “in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than himself” (Phil 2:1-4).

Problems often start when we start looking at others’ faults and expect them to have the same gifts as we do. This causes contentions, jealousy, outbursts of wrath, etc. (2 Cor 12:20). We should recognize that everyone has different spiritual gifts, and each one of these gifts is for the edification of whole church (1 Cor 12:7).

Sometimes the opposition we face may not depart from us even after we have offered many fervent prayers, just as the Lord did not take away Paul’s thorn. But we should not lose heart, and remember the purpose of the thorn: to make us even more humble and reliant on God. God’s strength is made perfect in our weakness. Therefore, we should take pleasure in reproaches, in needs, in persecutions, in distress for His sake (2 Cor 12:9-10), and the power of Christ will rest upon us (1 Pet 4:12-14). ★



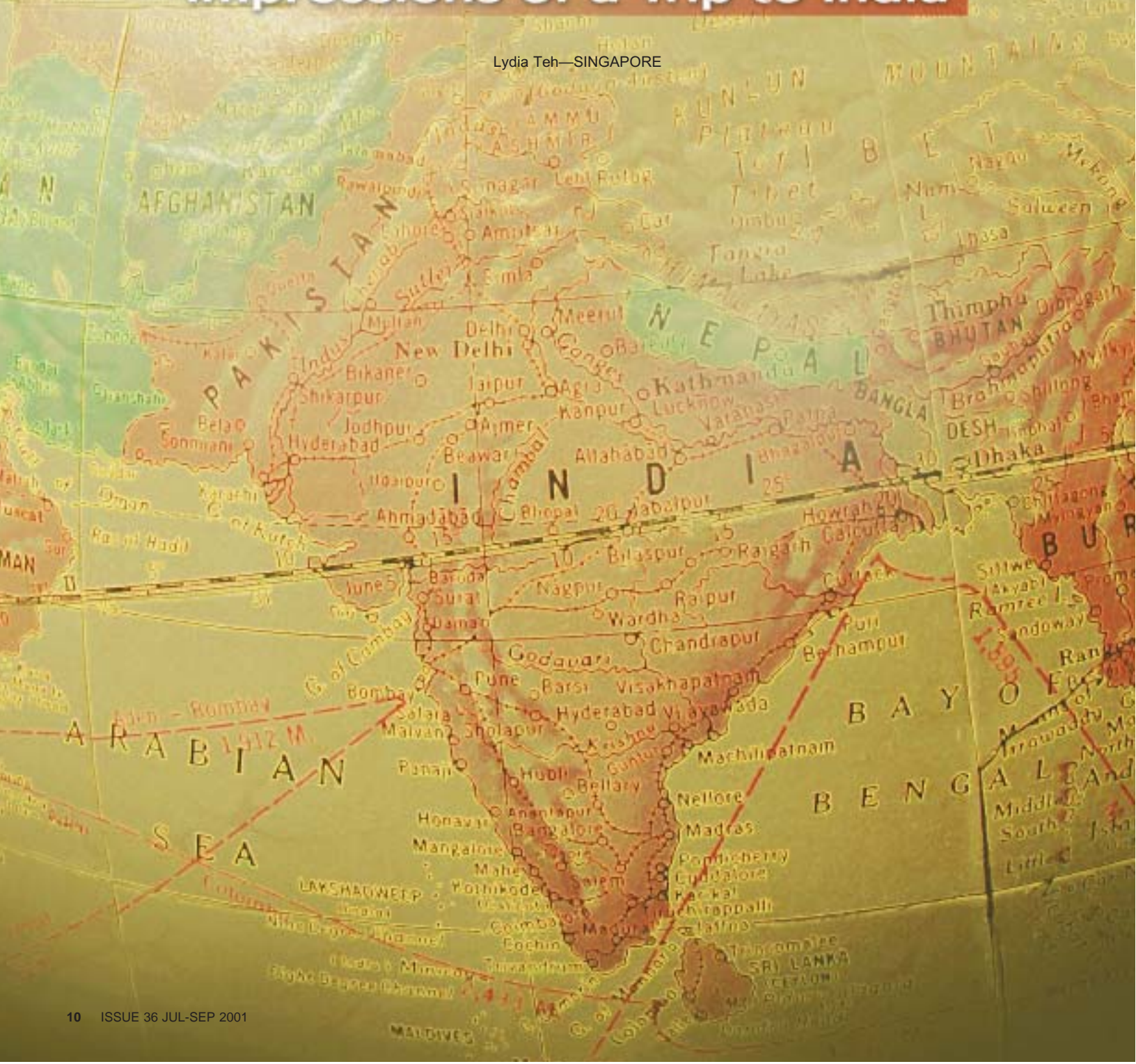


SPECIAL FEATURE

# God Will Make A Way:

## Impressions of a Trip to India

Lydia Teh—SINGAPORE





**D**espite the gospel having been preached to India for about thirty years, there is still no proper religious education (RE) system there. RE classes in these churches have only started in the recent years, and they are still in its infant stages. The India Mission Committee hopes to implement a concrete RE system, and they have started by holding a Religious Education Training Course from May 16 to May 24, 2001.

Four church members including a pastor and a sister from West Malaysia, a sister from Taiwan, and myself from Singapore were the lecturers for this training course. The purpose of this seminar was to train at least one member from each church to impart some form of RE to the children through proper RE classes and set up. Approximately twenty trainees from five churches (Thirunelai, Thiruvittiyor, Chengalpet, Pammal, Ambattu) and an orphanage participated in this seminar. Their ages ranged from the early teens to the sixties. The theme of the seminar was “All for Jesus and the Next Generation,” and topics covered included psychology, counseling, children’s hymns, activities, pedagogy, and the RE Teacher’s Manual.

The training seminar was held at the India Theological Training Centre located in Ambattu (a small town in Chennai, India), but we did get to visit our churches in Pammal, Thirunelai, Ambattu, Thiruvottiyur, and Chengalput. The Pammal church has the most comprehensive RE system, with classes from kindergarten to intermediate youths. The Ambattu church has RE on Sunday morning, but there is only one class for children between the ages five and twelve. Only eight to ten of the children are baptized members of our church, and the rest are non-members, mostly relatives of church members. They enjoy listening to the

Bible stories and singing hymns. The rest of the churches do not have RE classes, but sometimes there is someone to tell Bible stories to the children.

### PERMISSION GRANTED

This trip all began with an e-mail: “Can you please help out in the Religious Education Teachers’ Training course in India? We need someone to take charge of the music and activity sessions. The course will be conducted in May...”

When this message popped up in my in-box, I was a swirling cauldron of thoughts and mixed feelings. I was really happy because I was finally given an opportunity to help out in the divine work in India. I was also very thankful to God for giving me this opportunity. Yet, there was a sense of fear—for one thing, this would be my first time lecturing RE teachers. All along I had only been teaching RE students! For another, I was afraid that I would not be able to adapt to living conditions in India.

However, above all, the most cru-

cial point for me was obtaining permission from my parents for the trip. Although my parents are believers in our church, their love and parental instinct naturally make them very protective of their children. They were extremely worried that I would not be able to take the living conditions in India. I was worried that their worry would translate into adamant refusal to let me go, and I did not want to defy them. So I knew that only God could move them to allow me to go, that only God could make a way for me. The testimonies of sisters who had been to Africa were also a great source of encouragement. My co-worker shared this with me, saying, “God looks at our hearts. When He sees that you sincerely want to serve Him, He will surely make a way for you.” Indeed, if we stand on the side of God, will He not make a way for us? With this simple belief, I put this matter into my daily prayer.

One month passed very quickly. I soon received another e-mail requesting



*The youths of the Chengalpet church, where brothers far outnumber the sisters*



an answer. I knew that I could not push off seeking my parents' consent any longer. Hence, one evening, I plucked up all my courage and brought it up. To my amazement, all they asked were, "Whom would you be going with? When would you be going?" That was it! No interrogation, no hesitation, no objections at all! I was truly amazed at how quickly they agreed. Deep down I knew that it was indeed God who had paved a way for me.

Each of us is but a useless vessel (2 Tim 2:20-22). Our strength and abilities are insignificant. But God looks not at how much we can do nor how capable we are. What He looks at is our heart. Is there a burning desire to serve Him? Is there a willing heart? When we have

a willing and sincere heart, He will surely make a way for us. He did for me.

## PREPARING FOR THE TRIP

After my trip to India had been confirmed, I set out to find out more about India, a country located in the South Asian sub-continent. Reading through the International Assembly handbook, I came across this description of India: "The temperature in India between May and June can exceed 45°C (113°F)." Prior to this, I had heard preachers who had been there talking about how hot Indian weather could get. One might even become dehydrated!

I have suffered from a serious case of eczema since childhood. Eczema is an itchy, dry, hypersensitive skin disorder. It appears in the form of an inflamed rash, which is often accompanied by an intense itching. Hot weather and dust often worsens the condition. Heat has always been my greatest enemy. In hot weather I perspire, rashes surface on various parts of my body, and I start to itch. Even in the tropical climate of Singapore where the temperature rarely rises above 35°C (95°F), this was a serious problem—what more in India where the temperature could exceed 45°C (113°F)! Again, I knew that only God could help sort out a way. Hence, I added this to my daily prayer list.

Knowing my condition and how hot India could be, many loving sisters hunted down ways to cool me down and relieve me of my itch. They gave me a hat, "prickly heat powder," "Magic Cool" (a spray which cools the body), and Fisherman Throat Lozenges. One sister taught me to suck a lozenge in my mouth and then drink water, which would cool one down considerably. And it worked indeed! A sister also recommended a kind of bath lotion that curbed itchiness. Many hands of prayer were lifted up for me. Even a three-

year-old church sister told me she had asked God to help me be less hot and itchy. I was really moved by their gestures of thoughtfulness and love. May the Lord remember all their kindness.

Furthermore, I gathered from travel guides and hearsay that it was normal for one to run for the toilet the first few days of stay in India, as one's stomach might need some time to adjust to the spicy food. So I brought along a considerable amount of diarrhea pills and dehydration salt, just in case.

One day before I left for India, a deacon who had just returned reported that the temperature on the day he left was already 43°C (109°F). That was at the beginning of May. The weather was supposed to get even hotter in June! No doubt I was scared, but I knew that God would take care of us.

## NOTHING IS IMPOSSIBLE WITH GOD

During my two-week stay in India, I truly experienced that "with God nothing is impossible" (Lk 1:37). Often I could feel perspiration dripping down my body even when I was seated, lecturing in the classroom. But the heat did not bother me nor hinder me in my work at all. And the most amazing thing was that there were no rashes and no itch! To many, this might seem like nothing really significant, but to me, it was miraculous. God had made possible what had seemed impossible to me!

Deep down inside many of us, there have been times when we thought of doing something for the Lord. However, before we have even begun, we come up with a long list of possible difficulties and problems that we might encounter. At the end of the day, we become so overwhelmed by this list that we decide we could never do it. So we give up without even giving it a try. We do not give God a chance to work; we do not let Him make a way for us!



*The three RE lecturers and a preacher from Taiwan in traditional Indian attire*



In order to acquire the promised land flowing with milk and honey, the Israelites needed to cross the river of Jordan. According to human logic, one should cross the river only when the depth of the river is at its lowest, when the current would not be that strong. But God wanted the Israelites to cross the river when it was overflowing (Josh 3:15), when the current was the strongest. The Israelites must have worried about how their children might be swept away, how their foodstuff might get wet, and how the ark of the covenant might be damaged by the current. But when they believed and trusted in the Lord and took the first step, God made a way for them:

*And the feet of the priests who bore the ark dipped in the edge of the water, and the waters which came down from upstream stood still, and rose in a heap very far away at Adam... (Jos 3:15-16)*

It is often difficult for us to take the first step because we tend to walk by sight and not by faith. Frequently, we look at the strong current and the overflowing water, not at the omnipotent power of God and His omnipresent help. Let us therefore be resolved to take this first step to serve the Lord. Believe that "God will make a way where there seems to be no way, He works in ways we cannot see; He will make a way for me!"\*

God can stop the flow of the river water (Jos 3:15,16), He can also give rain (1 Kgs 18:41-46); God can raise the dead to life (Jn 11:38-44), He can also take away one's life (Acts 5:1-11); God can give the blind eyesight (Mk 10:46-52), He can also heal the lame (Acts 3:1-10); God can walk on water (Mt 14:25); He can also calm the wind and the waves (Lk 8:22-25). God can heal a woman with the flow of blood (Mt 9:20-22), and He can let another not



*Participants of the Training Seminar, each holding their "prayer poster," which they made during the activity session*

itch. What else is there that God cannot do? Hence, let us just trust in Him, take the first step, and see how He makes a way for us.

### **SPIRIT OF LEARNING AND LOVE FOR GOD**

Something which left a great impression on me was the spirit of learning of the students, especially a few sisters who were in their fifties and sixties. The lessons began at 6:40 a.m. and often stretched into the night, about 8:30 p.m. Because time was short, sometimes sessions were even conducted after dinner at 9:30 p.m. But the Indian brethren continued to listen with intense concentration. Rarely did they doze off, not even in the hot, summer afternoon. This is indeed worthy of our emulation.

Because of the shortage of working personnel, some of the students also had to double up as duty personnel. One morning, I noticed that one of the elderly sisters came into class quite

late. I was quite surprised because for the past week, she had always come to class early, even before the lesson had begun. As the students were supposed to have their practical sessions that day, I thought that she might have been busy preparing for the session. It was only when I spoke to her later in the day that I discovered she had actually rushed to the market early in the morning to get all the food needed for the day before rushing back to attend lessons again! She went to bed late after preparing for the practical sessions but woke up early to go to the market and was still attentive during the lesson. Her love for the Lord and spirit of learning truly touched me.

How many of us are guilty of not wanting to take part in church courses or seminars because we would have to wake up early and go to bed late? How many of us are guilty of dozing off during lessons? Indeed, we have much to learn from our Indian brethren in their spirit of learning and love for the Lord.



## LITTLE GRACE + BLESSINGS = A GREAT MIRACLE

When I returned to Singapore, there was a sister who asked me to recount any great signs or miracles which took place during my stay in India. I thought for a while and replied that there was none. I did not see any great signs or miracles during my stay in India, but to me the little grace and blessings that God showered upon me daily added up to a very great miracle indeed.

God's little gifts: Getting up every morning. (This was something I appreciated anew especially when I heard one day during my stay in India that more than forty people died from the intense heat.) Not itching. Adapting to the food quickly. Health and wisdom to conduct the lessons everyday. Enabling the participants to concentrate even in the hot afternoons. Rain to cool the surroundings.

May and June in India is supposed to be the driest and hottest season when there would be very little or no rainfall at all. But God gave us "showers of blessings" during our stay there. In our two-week stay there, there were four days of downpour. As the Indian brethren said, "This kind of rain only comes during the monsoon season. You have brought the rain with you!" God was indeed gracious to us, to give us these showers that made the weather much cooler.

The list of God's grace is endless. Here then is the great miracle, a daily reiteration of God's presence. As hymn "Count Your Blessings" reminds us:

*Count your many blessings,  
name them one by one  
and it will surprise you  
what the Lord hath done!*

God has truly given more to us more than what we asked for!

## IN JESUS CHRIST WE ARE ONE FAMILY

Although I came from Singapore, a multi-racial country, I had hardly any contact with Indians apart from my few years in primary school. And the few occasions that I actually did interact with them were unfortunately all unpleasant experiences. Hence, it was with much apprehension that I made this trip to India.

However, the spirit and love of Jesus Christ is amazing indeed—it truly binds us as one family in Him. The older brethren treated me like their daughter, pinching my cheeks from time to time, buying fruits and cakes for me, making my rice into balls for me (because I had difficulty eating with my hands!). The younger brethren treated me like a sister, sharing their life of faith with me, putting jasmine flowers into my hair for me, teaching me how to make Indian coffee and tea. Knowing that we were not really used to spicy food, some kind and thoughtful

brethren in India went to the trouble of preparing less spicy food for us. With this, coupled with God's care, none of us needed to make frequent visits to the toilet.

It was truly wonderful how the spirit of the Lord enables us, His children, to become one in Him regardless of nationality, skin color, or language. Though this was only a short trip of two weeks, the close relationship developed with these brethren would always be cherished and fondly remembered. For all this, I truly thank the Lord for His grace and wonderful arrangements, as well as for the love and care of the Indian brethren.

May all praise and glory be given unto our heavenly Father. Above all, let us never forget that "God will make a way, where there seems to be no way. He works in ways we cannot see, He will make a way for me." ★

\* Don Moen, *God Will Make a Way*, Integrity Music 4111TX, ©1993.



The RE class at Ambattu church, with the children singing "My God Is So Big"



# Prayer



**J**ust as communication is vital to any relationship, so prayer is essential to our relationship with God. Prayer can be simple; it can also be a deep and complex process.

The following theme articles encourage us to emulate our Lord Jesus Christ, who set the perfect example of a prayerful life. These articles also identify certain obstacles that make prayers less effective, and they correct commonly held misconceptions about prayer.

Finally, these articles help us understand that prayer is not an action that occurs only when we're down on our knees or speaking with the Lord. Every thought, every action as we go about our daily lives is a prayer to the Lord, a communication that says more than any prayer we could ever make.



# "Lord, Teach Us to Pray"

Percy Tsai—Pacifica, California, USA



***N**ow it came to pass, as [Jesus] was praying in a certain place, when He ceased, that one of His disciples said to Him, "Lord, teach us to pray, as John also taught his disciples." (Lk 11:1)*

According to the Gospel of Luke, Jesus was a prayerful man; He prayed often, whenever and wherever He saw fit. Luke 11 tells of one instance when He prayed with His disciples. It's unusual that the disciples, having followed their Master for a long while, were still ignorant of how to pray and of the meaning of prayer. John the Baptist taught his disciples to pray, as Jesus' disciples may have noticed and admired. They then asked their Master to do the same so that they could follow suit and perhaps be viewed as equals among their peers. Jesus responded to their request and began to teach them what to say in their prayer, the content of which, as the Lord's Prayer, has become quite familiar to us modern Christians (Lk 11:2-4; cf. Mt 6:9-13).

Jesus is God incarnate. Theoretically, He does not have to pray, because praying to oneself is self-contradictory and does not make sense. Jesus did pray, however, and prayed quite a lot. We may interpret this as an expression of His human needs. It may also be a manifestation of His filial humility.

The more appropriate explanation should be that He demonstrated Himself the model Christian, an ideal character He wanted His disciples to emulate. We can elaborate this point by focusing on some accounts in the Gospel of Luke.

### *Jesus prayed for preparation*

Luke mentions that while Jesus was being baptized by John the Baptist, He was at the same time praying (Lk 3:21). This observation is unparalleled among the Synoptic Gospels. It shows that Luke regards Jesus' praying as highly significant in relation to the subsequent opening of heaven and confirmation of Jesus' divine sonship (Lk 3:22). It also has close bearing on what Jesus intended shortly to do. After His baptism and prayer, Jesus was filled with the Holy Spirit and went to meet His temptation, a spiritual struggle that inaugurated His earthly mission (Lk 4:1).

After the temptation, Jesus pronounced His plan of salvation at the synagogue in Nazareth (Lk 4:16-19). He then performed a series of mighty acts in various places, including casting out the demon in Capernaum, healing Peter's mother-in-law, producing a miraculous catch of fish in the lake of Gennesaret, and cleansing a leper in a certain city, all of which testified to the

fact that the reign of God had dawned in the human world (Lk 4:31-5:14). We should be reminded that Jesus accomplished these miracles due to His sound preparation—most notably, His prayers.

The miracles Jesus performed brought Him fame and praise, and great crowds gathered about Him (Lk 5:15). This immediate success, however, did not cloud His sense of mission or lead to vainglory. Rather, He made an unexpected and dramatic turn: He withdrew to deserted places and prayed (Lk 5:16).

Jesus began His ministry with prayer and ended His holy work with prayer, too. He knew when and how to start, as well as when and how to stop. By praying, Jesus manifested not only His power but also His wisdom. This quiet retreat into solitary prayer concluded His previous busy engagements; it at the same time prepared Him for more work to come.

### *Jesus prayed for missionary direction*

Jesus was conscious of the significance of His mission, and to Him prayer was the only way to realize what He was entrusted with. It was His usual practice to pray on the mountain.

When it came to important decisions, He would pray longer and more earnestly. Luke informs us that in order to select the twelve disciples who were to form His inner circle, Jesus prayed all night (Lk 6:12). Afterward He chose the best candidates from among the multitude of followers and named them apostles, or messengers (Lk 6:13). They became Jesus' co-workers who would together proclaim the good news of the kingdom of God (cf. Lk 9:1-2).

Again, Jesus did not have to pray in order to pick the right men for His service. He prayed for our learning; He wanted to show how crucial it is to make prayers whenever important affairs arise. He prayed because as God incarnate He sympathized with our weakness and intended to point a way out of this weakness for us.

### *Jesus prayed for transformation*

Sometimes Jesus prayed alone, but at times He liked His disciples to pray with Him (Lk 9:18; 11:1). This is because while prayer might be very



private, it can also be communal. Communal prayer was especially teachable and demonstrable.

On one occasion Jesus took with Him Peter, John, and James, the pillars of the future church (Gal 2:9), to pray on the mountain. There the Master was transfigured, assuming His celestial appearance in dazzling glory. The slumbering disciples were awakened, amazed and speechless, to witness Jesus' spiritual identity (Lk 9:28-36).

This scene of revelation might be mystical in a sense, but its message is by no means impalpable. The Master brought His close disciples to the mountain not so much to disclose His true self as to demonstrate the way to divinity. Through deep prayer, as Jesus would teach, one could transform one's base humanity and gradually ascend to the spiritual height, a realm where such respectful figures as Moses and Elijah reached. Indeed, if Jesus and the ancient saints could become divine through prayers, His disciples should and could do likewise.

## *Jesus prayed with persistence and humility*

Jesus taught His disciples how to pray through His living demonstration. In addition, He taught them the right attitude of prayer through parables. Luke records two of Jesus' parables about prayer in chapter 18, which are also unique among the Synoptic Gospels.

The first is about a poor widow who was bullied by her opponent and sought justice from a corrupt judge. She appealed to him incessantly. The judge, although godless, granted her request due to her insistent entreaties. If even an unjust judge could change his mind, as Jesus underlined in His lesson, "shall God not avenge His own elect who cry out day and night to Him, though He bears long with them? I tell you that He will avenge them speedily" (Lk 18:7).

The second parable is about two contrasting characters, a self-righteous Pharisee and a repentant tax collector. The former prayed to God with a conceited mind and pompous words, intending to elevate his importance in the presence of God. The latter, realizing that he was a sinner unworthy of God's grace, simply asked for God's mercy. Jesus again concluded His parable with a clear verdict: "Everyone who exalts himself will be

humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted" (Lk 18:14). A spirit of persistence, humility, and repentance is the means for making effective prayers.

Jesus did not merely emphasize this in His parables; He demonstrated praying with a persistent and humble spirit in the last stage of His life. When He was about to be arrested, Jesus prayed in agony at Gethsemane. He sensed the impending danger, fully aware of the pain and suffering waiting ahead. If possible, He prayed, He would avoid tasting the bitter cup. Yet out of His filial submission, He would see the Father's will fulfilled.

His prayer this time was another psychological tug-of-war, a spiritual struggle more serious than His first temptation. He prayed with such importunity that, as Luke vividly describes, an angel from heaven appeared to Him and gave Him strength. In His anguish He prayed more earnestly, and His sweat became "like great drops of blood falling down to the ground" (Lk 22:42-43). God listened to His prayer as a result, and the heavenly power Jesus gained brought His mission to the perfect, final consummation.

## *Emulating Jesus through prayer*

Jesus advised His disciples to pray in alertness (Lk 21:36), and twice he warned them to escape from trial through constant prayer (Lk 22:40, 46). Prayer henceforth plays a decisive role in a Christian's earthly journey and substantially determines his spiritual life.

Recognizing the importance of prayer, how then do we get started? The question is akin to the wish Jesus' disciples expressed when they said, "Lord, teach us to pray." He taught them what to say when they prayed, but more significantly He demonstrated to them how and when to pray in real-life situations.

He prayed at the beginning and end of holy work. He withdrew into solitary and quiet prayer even with an extremely busy schedule. He prayed very earnestly when facing important decisions. He revealed His divine appearance in prayer to show us the means for spiritual transformation. And in every prayer, He was always persistent, humble, and serious.

If Jesus showed Himself a model Christian, should we not try our best to emulate Him? ★

## Understanding Prayer

F.F. Chong—London, UK

**W**hile the importance of prayer is a recurring theme in biblical history, its importance in application has confounded many. In reality, there remains a gap between knowing the significance of prayer and deriving the actual benefits through practice. Prayer is not just a simple Christian ritual we can learn and wholly know in a short span of time. There is always something to learn about prayer.

Prayer must become an integral part of our life, as it is the will of God in Christ Jesus (1 Thess 5:16-18). To understand prayer better, it is necessary to answer a few commonly raised questions.

### Why do we need to pray always?

The importance of prayer does not exist only in times of desperation, when we want God to meet our needs. By praying constantly, we establish a firm relationship with God and enable our faith to take root in Him. In times of trial, we are much less anxious than one who does not pray constantly would be.

*Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God; and the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus. (Phil 4:6-7)*

Having daily communion with God makes us know His purpose. When we are close to Him, we will know what He wants us to do better than if we were not regular in our prayers. As prayer forms part of our nature, we pray for others and the matters of the church in great length and with fervent devotion. This is a spiritual experience.

### How should we pray?

It is equally important not only to communicate with God, but also to examine the content of our prayer. A prolonged absence of vindication from God, for example, frustrates us who pray eagerly for an immediate answer (cf. Lk 18:1-8). Two factors contribute to such frustration: lack of importunity and lack of thanksgiving. They lead to two possible

responses: we may stop praying completely, or pray with a negative attitude. When the way ahead of them was smooth, the Israelites gave thanks to God. Their thanksgiving could instantly turn to murmuring when they faced adversity (Ex 5:21; 14:10-11).

Nonetheless, the will of God is that we do everything with thanksgiving (Col 3:17), be it amid continual affliction or lasting prosperity (Col 4:2; Phil 4:7). This is one aspect we have to learn, so that our prayers can always be of benefit to ourselves and we do not become disheartened. An example in the Bible is Psalm 77:

*In the day of my trouble I sought the Lord; my hand was stretched out in the night without ceasing; my soul refused to be comforted. I remembered God and was troubled; I complained and my spirit was overwhelmed. (vv. 2-3)*

In his moment of agony, the psalmist felt utterly devoid of the presence and assistance of the Lord. His unbelief drove him even to question His mercy and promise. This was devastating to his faith, but he rectified the situation by pondering over what God had done for him (v. 10). He grew in his prayer. His focus was on God (vv. 11-13), who gradually became the Master of his life (v. 14). Though he was very uncertain of the ways ahead, he knew somehow the Lord was and would be there to guide him (vv. 19-20).

### Why are prayers unanswered?

The final question is the most common, or perhaps the trickiest one. Why does God at times refuse to answer a prayer?

#### Being insistent on human will

The first possible reason is that we insist on our will. We must not impose our will upon the will of God. The Bibles teaching that we let our requests be made known to God (Phil 4:6) indi-



cates God's divine authority over human requests. He treats our requests by His divine will, not by granting a definite realization, for God knows what is best for us.

For example, praying for divine assistance and guidance in applying for a job is biblical. But to demand that God grant us the position is to superimpose our will upon the divine one. Rejection and acceptance are two possible outcomes in this case. A vital step to trusting in God is requesting for strength and the courage to face rejection. The Holy Spirit only intercedes and guides if we offer a prayer according to God's will, with the willingness to submit to His sovereign decision (Rom 8:26-27).

*If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, ask whatever you will, and it shall be done for you. (Jn 15:7)*

*If we ask anything according to His will He hears us. (1 Jn 5:14; 1 Jn 3:22)*

Human insistence has no part in these circumstances. There are times, however, when persistence can come into play and is necessary. The parable of asking for bread shows that the persistence of the borrower is commendable (Lk 11:8). It ends with the need to ask for the Holy Spirit from the Father:

*If you then being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him! (Lk 11:13)*

The Holy Spirit is a promised gift for which we can persistently pray.

The most difficult aspect of this question concerns praying for the sick. Asking for healing is not an imposition of human will on God:

*The prayer of faith will save the sick man, and the Lord will raise him up. (Jas 5:15)*

Faith is the key to recovery. It not only leads to the understanding that God can heal, but also produces the reliance that His sovereign decision is the best.

Paul, a man of God, did not receive physical healing after three separate requests (2 Cor 12:8-9). He asked for healing the third time, even though he knew from the first two occasions that God refused to heal him. It is necessary to pray until we are able to know that God has refused to heal, or to accept the physical affliction with a peaceful mind. It is entirely up to God if He wants to heal (Heb 2:4). Yet, we can know that it is His will to refine us through sickness and ensure that we remain in Him perpetually.

### Having an Incorrect Motive

Sometimes, unanswered prayer stems from having the wrong motive: the pursuit of a personal objective. This is classified as asking amiss (Jas 4:2-3). The most obvious example is asking for the much-vaunted gift to speak in public, to teach, and to prophesy—the gift of gab. In the context of James' epistle, there were members who prayed for gifts to spend them on their pleasures (Jas 4:3). There was also much conflict among the members because God refused to grant their requests (Jas 4:1). Instead, they should have prayed to change themselves, that they might attain what God required of them.

### Having Friendship with the World

James also explained that some of the members were having friendship with the world, which had severed their relationship with God and caused God to ignore their prayers.

*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 an enemy of God. (Jas 4:4)*

Friendship in the Bible does not refer to the common association between our friends and us. Friendship with God means we do what He wants us to do; in turn, Jesus tells us what He has heard from the Father (Jn 15:14-15). In contrast, friendship with the world means we embrace what the world offers and live like the people of the world.

### Possessing Sin

The fourth matter that prevents a prayer from reaching God is sin (Ps 66:18; Lam 3:40-44). In Lamentations 30, the prophet Jeremiah does not suggest only the immaculately clean have the privilege to pray. Rather, he emphasizes how an unwillingness to repent and confess sin makes prayer ineffective. To bear fruit in keeping with repentance is requisite for God to answer our prayers (cf. Job 27:7-9; Prov 28:9). The same staggering problem confronted the people in Isaiah's ministry:

*Behold, the Lord's hand is not shortened,  
That it cannot save;  
Nor His ear heavy,  
That it cannot hear.  
But your iniquities have separated you  
from your God;  
And your sins have hidden His face  
from you,  
So that He will not hear. (Is 59:1-2)*

The entire existence of Israel was corrupt; the way of peace they had not known (Is 59:8). What they did was gravely contrary to God's ways. The way they lived their lives directly affected their prayers offered to the Lord.

Self-righteousness is a sin that deserves our careful attention, for it is often overlooked. It comes in two forms. The first is a contempt for others (Lk 18:9) that is reflected in our daily lives (Mt 6:5-7; Mk 12:40). In the parable of the tax collector and the Pharisee, Jesus reveals that self-righteousness originates from the heart. In the pream-

ble of the parable, He exposes the hidden ugliness of the Pharisee's prayer. He trusted only in himself and held an indifferent attitude. He justified himself in the sight of man (cf. Lk 16:15), so much so that self-justification became part of his prayer. The Pharisee failed to realize that what is honorable in human eyes may be utterly detestable in God's. He who always justifies himself will always think he is righteous.

Jesus explicitly distinguishes righteousness from self-righteousness. A righteous person will not look at others with contempt. On the contrary, he desires to see sinners turn over a new leaf and pursue after the righteousness of God.

The second form of self-righteousness is being unrepentant.

*If we say we have no sins, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. (1 Jn 1:8-9)*

This is also one of the problems with the Pharisee in the parable, who brought to attention only his religiosity. He neither addressed his prayer nor gave thanks to God for His providential care, let alone ascribing glory to Him. Neither did he confess his sins nor make any effort to repent. His prayer was so self-centered that he condemned another person to magnify his own religious piety. His piety led him to think that he was good before God. He thought he had been fulfilling the requirements of the Law, but in fact, he had neglected the weightier provision of the Law, though he may have claimed otherwise (cf. Lk 11:42).

The Pharisee's prayer totally cast the Shema (Deut 6:4) out of his mind. He violated the tenet that "the Lord is God" and of loving Him totally. If the Lord is God, then our prayer must have the components of thanksgiving and extolling Him. The Pharisee prayed to

gain righteousness by religious deeds and failed to view himself correctly before God and man.

### Being Unforgiving

The last major obstacle to prayer is the inability to forgive. The forgiveness of others is the only part of the Lord's Prayer that demands our action and our compliance. It is not something conceptual. Nor is it just a pattern of prayer. It has to be translated into our lives, if we take prayer seriously and earnestly want God to listen and forgive.

*And forgive us our debts. As we also have forgiven our debtors. (Mt 6:12)*

The word "debts" is a common expression for "sins" in the Gospels. Jesus explicitly states that it is necessary to forgive in order to receive forgiveness. Our forgiveness of others becomes the condition attached to God's forgiveness of us. Many other examples in the Gospels testify to this infallible truth:

*Forgive and you will be forgiven. (Lk 6:37; Mk 11:25; Mt 6:14)*

*Forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone who is indebted to us. (Lk 11:4)*

Divine forgiveness works not only on God's magnanimity toward us, but also on our determination to apply this virtue toward others. God is more than willing to forgive. But His forgiveness of us rests completely on our forgiveness of others. Sometimes, our reluctance and inability to forgive makes God withhold His forgiveness.

*You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you begged me. Should you not also have had compassion on your fellow servant, just as I had pity on you? And his master was angry, and delivered him to the torturers until he should pay all that was due to him.*

*So My heavenly Father also will do to you if each of you, from his heart, does not forgive his brother his trespasses. (Mt 18:33-35)*

This parable exposes the unforgiving nature of man and its tragic consequence. Being unforgiving will cause past sins, which had once been forgiven by the Master, to be re-accounted for (Mt 18:23-35). The forgiveness of man should include forgiving others when we are offended (Mt 18:35) and asking for forgiveness when we offend others (Mt 5:23-24).

Regardless of our position, be it right or wrong, we must exercise forgiveness. Our love toward others is part of a reciprocal relationship: God forgives (loves) us that in turn we forgive (love) others (Eph 4:32; Col 3:13; Lk 7:47). We forgive because we have been forgiven.

### Reflecting the nature of God

The effectiveness of our prayers does not rest solely on their length. It comes as a result of changing ourselves to reflect the divine principles in our lives. Our behavior affects our prayer. The Bible tells us that even the prayer of one who does not heed God's Law is an abomination in His eyes (Prov 28:9; 15:8). Aside from asking God to grant our requests, we must be determined to learn from our prayers by submitting to God's will and thus growing spiritually. A spiritually mature and prayerful person will not willfully sin against God. In his interpersonal relationships in society, church, home, he always discloses the nature of God. ★



# PRAYING IN THE SPIRIT

For we do not know what we should pray for



**T**he simplicity of prayer has been compared to that of breathing. Yet over the history of thousands of years, how many biblical figures maintained a life of prayer? The elect did not understand that God regarded their obedience more highly than their sacrifices (1 Sam 15:22). They substituted the essence of prayer, which combines speaking and acting in the truth, with material sacrifices. Prayer may appear to be simple, but it is one of the most difficult aspects of our spiritual life.

### The flawed sacrifice God loathes

Cain's works were evil (1 Jn 3:12), yet he offered a sacrifice to God. Nadab and Abihu, the sons of Aaron, offered profane fire to God. The Israelites in the wilderness cried out to the Lord for meat; later, in Samuel's time, they demanded a king. That king, Saul, overstepped his authority and offered a sacrifice only the priesthood could perform.

It was not for lack of sincerity that these people incurred God's wrath. On the contrary, they offered their prayers and sacrifices with such earnestness and importunity that God granted them their wishes in His anger (cf. Hos 13:11). It is a pity that the fool who follows his own emotions rather than the teachings of God never realizes that his prayers and sacrifices are evil in God's sight (Ecc 5:1). Nadab and Abihu, though zealous, were immediately consumed by God's fire (Lev 10:1-4) because they overlooked the importance of offerings made in line with God's truth. Following their own sensibilities rather than His instruction, they offered what was an abomination to God (Prov 15:8).

### Prayers do not need to be long

While it is commendable that we encourage each other to pray longer, it is possible that over time, we pray with length in mind and make long prayers a symbol of spiritualism. It is wonderful to offer long prayers, but a frivolous definition of prayer may cloud our spiritual judgment.

Many effective long prayers are recorded in the Bible, but many more prayers that were short and simple found God's favor. An example would be Abraham's prayer for the city of Sodom, when he negotiated with God for the lives of the righteous. Each time he asked God to reduce the conditions, God granted him his wish (Gen 18:22-33). Other examples include Moses and Aaron praying to God for the atonement of the Israelites' sins (Num 16:41-50); Elijah calling for fire from heaven (1 Kgs 18:36-38, 2 Kgs 9-12); King Hezekiah pleading with God to extend his life (2 Kgs 20:3-5); Jesus reviving Jairus' daughter (Mk 5:41); the Lord summoning Lazarus to come out of the tomb (Jn 11:43); and Peter presenting the resurrected Dorcas to the believers (Acts 9:40). These were all short but effective prayers.

Whether a prayer is long or short, its power comes from the same source. Setting a specific time to fix your eyes on the Lord or fasting forty days and nights cannot guarantee your prayers will be answered. The short prayer of a believer—“one look of your eyes” or “one link of your necklace” (Songs 4:9-10)—can capture God's heart, because you have shown a love toward Him in your daily life that is wonderful in His eyes. We should not just mirror the image of Christ only during prayer by crying out and shedding tears, but live in His likeness every day of our lives. Indeed, the power of prayer comes from the culmination of a dedicated life following God's will.

### Prayer depends on the truth and everyday living

We need to learn how to pray, and we need to pray aided by the truth. Praying is not just calling out to God but communing with Him in the Spirit. Through prayer we can come to understand God's words and proclaim His wonderful mystery. Through prayer we gain the source of strength to build ourselves up.

Experience tells us, however, that just because a person opens his mouth to speak doesn't mean anyone will listen to him. A person who speaks nonsense or makes empty boasts will turn off even those who know him best. Such is the case with our prayers to God. The Pharisees acted charitably, fasted, and made long prayers. Their appearance as model servants of God deceived men but not God. The Lord, who knows the hearts of men, condemned their hypocrisy:

*Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you pay tithes of mint and anise and cummin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith. (Mt 23:23)*

An effective prayer is one that stems from knowledge and practice of the truth (Jas 4:3, 5:6). God will not listen to prayers with ulterior motives, no matter how spiritual your requests may be. You may pray for power to edify the church, yet only be asking to excel among fellow workers. We do not know how God will respond, but we can be certain that God knows our hearts, and may respond reluctantly, out of His displeasure. You may have your prayers granted yet still lose everything obtained.

### The absurdity of deducing the reason from the outcome

We often determine whether or not our prayers were “according to God's will” on the basis of the outcome. We





rejoice and give thanks if things turn out the way we planned, but become dispirited, repentant, and even divided when things do not go our way. This kind of understanding only directs our prayers toward the will of man instead of the will of God. We make choices that suit our own inclinations or the general trends; we give them a little spiritual flavor; ignore any opposing views, and believe that we need only to pray hard for God to fulfill everything. Naturally, things turn out the way we had planned; they fall into place; given the overall direction of things; but we ascribe this to God's will. Deluded by the success of the outcome, we continue to pray in this pattern. With a thankful heart, we think we are walking with the Lord, when really we are drifting farther away from Him.

### Asking forcefully: prayers granted in God's anger

Many examples of prayers in the Bible indicate they were not according to God's will. They were granted, however, because they forced God to answer. If we focus on the fulfillment of our prayers, then praying out of forceful human desire will always be quicker than waiting patiently in the Spirit. If the Third Wave Pentecostal movement becomes mainstream, then under the slogan Ask in Faith, many people will pray with this forceful approach, and many requests will be fulfilled. They will shake the mind-set of the spiritual who pray that even if God does not deliver us, we will not forsake God (Dan 3:16-18).

God promised the Israelites a king, one who would rule over them with the Book of Law after they had acquired the land of Canaan. They became impatient, however, demanding God's promise to be fulfilled before the night time, in spite of God's warnings and Sammel's repeated discouragement. Ultimately, God granted them their desire in His anger, setting off a chain of events that would lead the Israelites through four hundred years of political turmoil and end in their exile (Hos 13:11).

The Israelites cried out for meat in the desert. Their wailing and weeping aroused the anger of the Lord (Num 11). He instructed Moses to have the people sanctify themselves in preparation for the meat they were to receive. They thought their prayers had been answered and even Moses wrongfully thought that their cries had touched God, not knowing the wrath behind their blessing. God indeed sent them quail the next day, but inflicted a plague on them as they ate (Num 11:31-35).

Elisha swore to God that he would accept nothing from Naaman. Gehazi, in faith, swore that he would not return without some kind of gift from the Syrian commander. God accomplished his faith and he returned joy-

fully with gifts, thinking how foolish his master was. But before Gehazi could stop rejoicing, God struck him with leprosy so severe he was to laugh no more for the rest of his life (2 Kings 5).

These are just some of the nightmares that befell those who wanted their prayers answered quickly; they sharply illustrate the false belief that the fulfillment of our wishes signifies the harkening of God. We ought to beware of what may be awaiting us after our prayer is answered if we pray in rashness, driven by human desire.

### Discerning between "a prayer that is answered" and "a prayer that is heard"

We often construe that if a prayer is not answered then it was carnal, and displeased God. Jesus prayed three times in the Garden of Gethsemane and did not have His prayers answered. Paul failed to have the thorn removed from his side even though he asked three times. On the other hand, can we say that the carnal prayers of the stiff-necked, complaining Israelites were aligned with God's will? How else would their prayers have been answered so quickly?

Since the time of Abraham, the prayers of many saints appear not to have been answered. It was as if God had forgotten them or could not hear them. The psalmist David explicitly expressed this pain of being forsaken in Psalm 22:1. When Joseph was sold, it was as if God did not hear his pleas, which after twenty years still left an indelible memory on his brothers' minds (Gen 42:21).

So what do all these examples mean? That God abandons his loyal servants? That He turns a deaf ear to their prayers? No. He did not grant their requests because He had better plans for them. We must learn to distinguish between prayers being answered and prayers being heard.

When Moses pleaded with God to take his life, God did not comply, but He did hear Moses' distress and appointed seventy elders to assist him (Num 11:14-17). God did not remove the metaphorical thorn from Paul, but imparted to him the most profound truth, My grace is sufficient for you (2 Cor 12:9). Though He did not permit Joseph to return home, the Lord never left him, even when Joseph felt most lonesome and forsaken (Gen 39:23).

While God did not answer their prayers, He heard them and bestowed on these saints even greater blessings, giving them peace beyond their expectations. On the contrary, His answer to the Israelites' prayers was plague and other punishment.

Unfortunately, we often direct our faith toward how we want our prayers to be answered. The notion that prayers are answered by faith has pushed some to the verge of demanding by force.

### Faith and tests

There is a longstanding debate regarding one of Satan's tests for Jesus in the wilderness. The devil set Jesus on the pinnacle of the temple and said, If you are the Son of God, throw Yourself down, for it is written, He shall give His angels charge concerning you; in their hands they shall bear you up, let you dash your foot against a stone (Mt 4:5-6).

The interpretations of the phrases They shall bear you up and Throw yourself down are entirely different between the devil and Jesus. The devil was attempting to trick Jesus into thinking that unless He jumped, He would show no faith in what the Scripture said. However, Jesus knew it was wrong to force God's hand by jumping. Men misuse faith in this manner to force God to take prompt action toward our requests, as if God were a servant. This kind of faith tests God.

A genuine faith involves wholehearted trust: knowing that a prayer may not be answered in the time desired, but accepting the decision of God whatever it may be. Regardless of whether it is answered today, tomorrow, or never, true faith knows that He will arrange the best in the end.

### "What I wish" vs. unreasonable carnal demands

We repeatedly assume that only prayer in a spiritual tongue is praying completely according to God's will, while praying with words of understanding inevitably carries our selfish desires. The former enables us to pray with groanings which cannot be uttered, but inhibits heartfelt reflection; the latter comes from a sincere and fervent heart, but cannot express as the Spirit can when we do not know what we should pray for as we ought. How then we should pray?

Does praying in the Spirit disallow any presence of what would the presence of in a prayer mean it is fulfilling carnal requests? The Lord taught us how we should pray:

*Our Father in heaven,  
Hallowed be Your name.  
Your kingdom come.  
On earth as it is in heaven. (Mt 6:8-10)*

Did He exclude any presence of self in prayer? Even the Lord Himself, in His agony, prayed to God three times on the basis of His own needs: O My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as You will (Mt 26:39). The Son profoundly hoped that the Father, for whom all things are possible, would first consider the Son's wishes; but if this could not be, then He wished the Father's will be done. Of course, the Lord knew the mag-

nitude of the Father's love would not allow Him to die if it were not necessary. Even still, He carried this thread of hope and was not ashamed to plead three times to the Father, weeping in the sight of His disciples, to be spared of His plight.

What I wish is not the same as a carnal demand. If I pray without any of my self, then it is not my prayer. When Paul said, For we do not know what we should pray for as we ought, but the Spirit Himself makes intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered (Rom 8:26), he did not mean that prayer in the Spirit consists only of groanings which cannot be uttered without any shred of what I wish. Paul, like Christ, followed his own feelings and pleaded with God three times for the thorn in his flesh to be removed. It is through that groaning in the spirit that our requests are made known to God.

Thus, capriciously equating one's self with the carnal impulse and stripping prayer of self removes that most precious, intimate affection between God and man. Rejecting that connection leaves but a spiritual tongue that only God comprehends. Regrettably, over time, prayers are spoken but no longer heartfelt. While Jesus and Paul prayed in the Holy Spirit, they persisted in telling God what they wished and received a peace which surpasses understanding. Barring our souls to God is the best way to understand what praying in the Spirit really means.

### A heart full of thanksgiving

To let your requests be made known to God (Phil 4:6) without being mired in carnal demands, keep Paul's full exhortation in mind:

*Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God.*

Even before you know what lies ahead, entrust everything to God in prayer with earnest supplication and thanksgiving, and with the full assurance that God will arrange what is best. Even when you grieve through God forsakes me, hold fast in praising the Lord my Creator. Thus the earnest supplication made from a heart of thanksgiving will transform what I wish into the surging power of submission.

The consummate prayer is not merely pouring out your feelings. The consummation of prayer occurs when, after you have told God your wishes, you are able to receive a response that is not what you wished with a heart of thanksgiving. Giving thanks that He has heard your prayer, and rejoicing that His grace is sufficient for you. This is the greatest blessing and spiritual grace that comes from praying in the Spirit. Amen. \*

# Ask, Seek, Knock



Jackson Jeng—Garden Grove, California, USA



A few years ago, I was engaged in a project at work where every team member was under a lot of pressure. As everyone worked hard to finish their work, people became impatient with each other and started to make rude comments to each other. The entire work atmosphere became very unpleasant. This situation

Like human relationships, our relationship with God also requires good communication. As Christians, we often communicate with Jesus through prayer, telling Him our needs and asking for help. Jesus encourages us in Matthew 7:7-8:

*Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened.*

Sometimes, though, it may seem like our communication with Him is "one-way"—that is, we do all the asking, seeking, and knocking, but there isn't much of a response from Him. In reality, God does communicate with us—we just need to understand *how* He communicates. And whether we like it or not, Satan also communicates with us. We need to be aware of how he communicates, so that we can avert his temptations and not fall into his trap.

## OUR COMMUNICATION WITH GOD

### Our Asking

When we need help, we obviously go

to someone who can help us, not to someone who is incapable. In the same way, we can only ask God for help if we recognize that He is greater than us and that He is able to help us. God wants us to recognize that we are nothing and that we need Him. Through our asking, we practice humility and acknowledge God's greatness.

So what should we ask for? Basically, anything. Paul tells us in Philippians 4:6, "In everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God." There is no request too small.

In September 1999, my company sent me on a long-term out-of-town assignment. It was corporate policy to assign housing in pairs, but I really wanted to live alone because I was dealing with some personal issues at the time and needed a place to pray. When I approached my supervisor with this request, he refused because it was against company policy. I put this matter in prayer, and when it came time to assign my housing, the human resources department offered me a single apartment without my asking. God knew the desire of my heart and granted my request.

### Our Seeking

Imagine what would happen if God gave us everything we asked for. Perhaps we're angry with a friend and say, "I wish he were dead"—and the friend falls over and dies. Or we're frustrated at work and say, "I wish I didn't have to work"—and we lose our job. It would be pretty frightening if God answered every one of our requests.

For this reason, it's important to seek God's will when we pray. We should not only ask for what we want, but also seek His will—His kingdom and His righteousness. Jesus set the best example in the Garden of Gethsemane when He asked God to remove the bitter cup. But Jesus prayed, "Not as I will, but as You will." In seeking God's will, His answer will be "yes" or "no" and sometimes "wait."

### Our Knocking

Luke 11 describes a man who, in the middle of the night, goes knocking on his neighbor's door because he needs bread for a guest. Initially, the neighbor does not open the door because he's already in bed. But because the man keeps knocking and knocking, his neighbor gets up and gives him "as many as he needs."

This story teaches us the importance of persistence. When we pray to God about something, we need to keep knocking on God's door. If we pray earnestly with persistence, God will open the door and give us as many as we need.

But persistence alone is not enough. There's one more condition for God to open the door, and that is we must be holy. 1 Timothy 2:8 says, "I desire therefore that the men pray everywhere, lifting up holy hands, without wrath and doubting."

Whom would we more likely open the door for, a well-dressed man or a man with a shotgun? Probably not the man with a shotgun. In the same way, we need to first we put away our anger, hatred, and filth when we come knocking on God's door. We need to make sure we are holy because without holiness, we will not see God (Heb 12:14).

## GOD'S COMMUNICATION WITH US

### God's Asking

There is a children's hymn that goes, "Jesus is a gentleman, he never forces his way in." Even though our Lord Jesus has all the power in the world, He never forces His way into our lives. Though He knows what is best for us, He does not force His will upon us. Instead, Jesus shows us His will by "asking" us nicely through His word, the Bible. If we want to hear God's voice, we have to read His book!

God also speaks to us through the sermons at church. If we humble ourselves and listen carefully, we can hear God's voice through the voices of pastors and other speakers. God may also speak to us through church literature, like magazines, articles, booklets, and study guides.

### God's Seeking

Sometimes we may have wandered so far from God that we don't read the

Bible anymore, and our hearts may be darkened so that we can no longer hear His voice through sermons or literature. During these times, God will come looking for us.

Luke 15: 4-10 describes a shepherd who leaves his ninety-nine sheep to look for the one lost sheep. When he finds it, he lays it on his shoulder and carries it home. He invites his friends to rejoice with him because this one sheep was lost but now is found. This shepherd really loved this sheep. God loves us as one of His precious sheep, and when we stray from His fold, He will come looking for us. He will travel a great distance to look for us, to forgive us, and to bring us back home.

God is spirit, so He probably won't physically go looking for us. However, God may come looking for us through some important people in our life. Probably no one else loves us more than our parents. No matter what we might have done, our parents will always accept us and welcome us home. Besides our parents, God can also come looking for us through spiritual friends, like church ministers, or our brothers and sisters in Christ. These people genuinely care about our spiritual well-being, and will come looking for us and will welcome us back to God's fold.

### God's Knocking

God wants to live in our heart and be the king of our lives. But instead of forcing His way into our life, He will stand at the door of our heart and knock until we open it. Revelation 3:20 says, "Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and dine with him, and he with me."

How does God knock on our door? The Holy Spirit knocks on the door of our heart; and if we open it, God's Spirit will come in and live in our heart. The Holy Spirit will give us direction and

strength to complete the journey of salvation. It will also remind us of God's great love and kindle the fire within us to serve Him.

But before the Holy Spirit comes into our heart, we must first clean it up. No one likes to stay at a filthy, dirty, and smelly house. Similarly, God's Holy Spirit will only come in and stay if we first clean up our heart.

## SATAN'S COMMUNICATION WITH US

### Satan's Asking

No one likes to be forced into doing anything; we all want to be asked nicely. We want to feel like we are making decisions for ourselves. Satan is not stupid; he is actually very crafty. He will subtly draw us away from God by asking us nicely. He "asks" through the various temptations around us.

Satan did not say to Eve, "Eat that fruit or I'll kill you." Had he threatened Eve this way, she probably would have run the other way. Instead he asked her nicely, telling her how beneficial it would be to break God's rules. He made her think it was her own decision, but it was really part of his plan.

Satan will "ask" us in the same nice and subtle way. He will use different temptations to make us think it would be okay to break God's rules. He will make us think we're making our own decisions, but it's all really a part of his plan.

The devil plants many temptations in our world: television, movies, music, literature, and the Internet. Satan tempts us in any way he can because he wants us to depart from God, to lose our eternal glory, and to suffer eternally with him. Knowing his plan, we ought to be more watchful and ask for God's help to stand strong in His word.

### Satan's Seeking

As Christians, we may be able to resist the temptations of this world and stay



out of Satan's trap. But Satan does not give up there; he often comes seeking us. Satan especially looks for us when we are most vulnerable. This may be late at night when we are alone, when we are looking for something new to enjoy, or when we are lonely. 1 Peter 5:8 tells us, "Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil walks about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour."

Since God and Satan are two opposing forces, any time we are far from God, Satan will be seeking us. Just as God does not physically come looking for us but seeks us through the people around us, Satan often seeks us through the people we associate with. People often say to us, "Try this—it's really good," or "Go see that—I think you'll like it," or "Let's go do this or that."

Sometimes Satan will come seeking us through people close to us—even family members, friends, or church members. It is the invitation of our family and friends that is the most difficult to say "no" to. But no matter who is looking for us or inviting us—stranger, friend, family member, or even church member, we need to distinguish whose invitation it's really from: God or Satan.

### Satan's Knocking

Just as God wants to rule our heart, Satan wants to live in our heart and be the king of our lives as well. In Matthew 12:43-45, Jesus says:

*An unclean spirit goes out of a man, looking for a place to live but found none. So it decides to return to the house from which he came. When he comes, he finds it empty, swept, and put in order. So he goes and takes with him seven other spirits more wicked than himself and they entered and dwell there; and the last state of that man is worse than the first.*

It's good that we clean our heart, but we need to actively fill our heart with God's Spirit, otherwise Satan will come in again even worse than before. One or the other will be the king of our heart and ruler of our life—God or Satan.

The last thing Satan wants is for us to draw closer to God. The closer we are to God, the more Satan wants to attack. Sometimes Satan will try to knock us down and make us lose our faith in God by giving us tribulations and hardship. Other times he will interfere with our spiritual growth, especially when we are preparing ourselves to serve God.

There was a young brother who, after attending a church seminar, resolved to live a holy life. He decided to devote one hour a day to prayer and personal Bible study. After he had done this for about a week, one night he heard a noise in the living room as he was about to fall asleep. Then he immediately saw a dark shadow move into his bedroom, and the shadow pressed down on him so he couldn't breathe. He had a hard time saying, "hallelujah," but when he finally did so, the shadow went away. This brother knew in his heart that Satan was trying to discourage him from leading a spiritual life.

### A TWO-WAY STREET

We aren't the only ones asking, seeking, and knocking; God is also asking, seeking, and knocking, and so is Satan. The communication is a two-way street.

**Asking.** It's easy to receive something from someone if they want the same thing for you. For example, a teenager probably wouldn't receive a motorcycle from his parents, but he probably would receive a car, because safety is what his parents would want for him. Today if we ask for worldly pleasures, we will probably get it because that's what Satan wants for us. On the other hand, if we ask God for

strength and wisdom in our spiritual journey, we will receive these blessings because that's what God wants for us. The secret to receiving what we ask for is to ask for the things God wants us to have—His kingdom, His righteousness, and His glory.

**Seeking.** Whenever we feel lost and are looking for something, that something is probably looking for us too. If we are seeking the pleasure of sin, it will probably find us very quickly—and once it finds us, it will not easily let go. However, if we earnestly seek God when we feel lost, God will also be seeking us, and will find us and bring us home. "Draw near to God, and He will draw near to you" (Jas 4:8)

**Knocking.** When we really want something, we might knock on different doors to find it. But before we raise our hand to knock, we should ask ourselves, "Whose door is this that I'm going to knock on? Jesus' or Satan's?" Sometimes the only thing between us and God, or us and Satan, is a door. We need to be careful which door we decide to knock on.

No matter how far we may drift from God, He is always asking us to come back to Him, seeking the one sheep that has wandered away and knocking on our door so that we will open our heart to Him. But Jesus will never force His way into our lives. We also have to be willing to ask, to seek, and to knock as well. If the lost sheep doesn't want to be brought home, the shepherd will not drag it home. If the prodigal son decides that he likes living with the pigs and doesn't leave his filthy lifestyle, he will never be able to live in His father's blessings again.

Jesus is there for you; He has been there before, and He will be there again. The question is, are you willing to ask, to seek, and to knock? ★



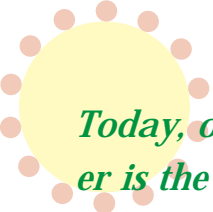
# **FORSAKING ALL OTHERS**

## **Keeping Intruders Out of Your Marriage**

A Jar of Clay







*Today, one out of every two marriages ends in divorce. Still higher is the rate of people who break their marriage vow to “forsake all others,” instead becoming unfaithful to their spouse. Some critics blame these problems on the declining morality or values of this generation. But even Christians who hold strong convictions against infidelity are part of these appalling statistics. Living in a world where marital unfaithfulness is becoming the norm, we as Christians need to take extra caution to protect our marriages in these times. What are some ways that you can keep intruders out of your marriage? Let’s take a look at a few together.*

### **Staying alert: Paying attention to wake-up calls\***

If you talk to people who have had extramarital affairs, most of them will tell you that they did not look for opportunities to cheat on their spouse. In fact, many share the experience of being surprised at their attraction to someone who somehow made them “come alive” and get in touch with emotions that they had not felt in years. Such magical feelings of connection and affection made going forward with developing an illicit relationship seem somehow right. What these individuals often do not realize is that the beginning of their downfall usually lies in failing to recognize their attraction to someone else as a danger signal. They do not see it for what it is—a wake-up call that sounds an urgent and sober warning to mend an emotional void in their marriage. This void may have gone unnoticed and unattended to for many years, and it has made them vulnerable to temptations.

When left unmet, our emotional needs pave the way to longings and vulnerabilities. We are particularly susceptible to extramarital affairs when we are dissatisfied with our own marriage. Such dissatisfaction often develops as a result of unfulfilled needs and desires, which give way to an emotional void that may grow undetected in our marriage. Over time, this void makes us vulnerable to the attention and affection of others. Gestures of concern, no matter how innocently

extended by someone other than our spouse, may happen to fulfill an emotional void within us, creating an illusion of intimacy and stirring up feelings of attraction for that person.

A match may be made in heaven, but the ensuing marriage is built on earth. Every marriage, even the best of them, has its shares of “downs,” emotional voids, and negative aspects that are vulnerable to intruders. What separates the successful marriages from the doomed ones, however, is how an attraction to a potential intruder is handled. Those who go on to have affairs interpret the attraction they feel to an extramarital other as a sign that they and their spouse have grown irreparably apart. In contrast, those who hold steadfast to their marriage vows soberly heed this kind of attraction as a wake-up call to do some mending to their marriage. They recognize that an emotional void has budded in their marriage and needs to be snipped before it can take root and destroy the marital blessings that God has given them.



### **Communicating with your spouse and regaining sobriety\***

In a popular television sitcom, “Mad About You,” a young wife struggled to tell her husband after she had shared a kiss with a male co-worker. She wanted to keep silent for many reasons: “Oh, it didn’t mean anything.” “It won’t happen again.” “Why bring it up and hurt him over nothing.” The

list goes on. Like her, most of us would prefer to keep our feelings of attraction for someone else a secret from our spouse. As difficult as it may be to bring this subject to light with our spouse, it is an essential first step if we truly wish to resolve the marital issues that may lie beneath the red flag of the attraction.

The Bible teaches us to communicate honestly with our spouse. Communication is a necessary weapon against illicit relationships, which can only begin when a person deceives his or her spouse. Yet only when we truthfully acknowledge our feelings to our spouse can we begin to address any emotional voids that may be growing in our marriage. But first we need to recognize these voids before any mending can take place. As the wife in “Mad About You” discovered, revealing the kiss to her husband did create some unwelcome waves in their marriage, but it also helped bring into focus important relationship problems that they had previously overlooked.

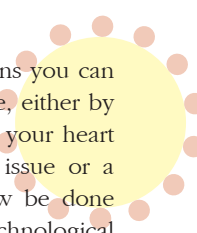
Another integral part of healing from extramarital temptation is regaining a sense of sobriety. Whenever we begin to develop feelings of attraction for someone other than our spouse, we need to take important steps to regain a sober heart and mind. We can extinguish these inappropriate feelings for someone only when we eliminate the conditions that fostered the attraction in the first place. Besides communicating with our spouse, this almost always means stopping further contact with the potential intruder as much as possible.

Equally important is letting go of the enamored memories of and feelings and longings for that person. Even if the intruder is no longer physically present, these memories and yearnings may linger in our hearts. Unless we thoroughly snuff them out, with the help of God, they could get in the way of our capacity to develop closeness with our spouse.



### Guarding what you say\*

Couples who have a successful marriage usually have a healthy support network of friends and family. Friendships and relationships with different people are a necessary and natural part of life. Certainly, there is nothing wrong at all with venting your frustrations to friends so that you need not rely solely on your spouse for support. In our technologically advanced world, communication with others knows no geographical



bounds. With the click of a few buttons you can easily reach someone across the globe, either by telephone or on the internet. Pouring your heart out about a particular philosophical issue or a specific struggle in your life can now be done effortlessly. But as much as this technological convenience may be a blessing, it can also be a curse. If you are not careful, you could easily say too much for the good of your marriage.

An extramarital affair usually happens with someone you already know. Often it is with a friend, a co-worker, or even a fellow churchgoer. Its catalyst is usually a feeling of fondness for someone. Because affection grows out of conversations shared by two people, we need to be especially careful about what we disclose to those of the opposite gender. We need to watch out that we don't communicate with friends or others as closely as we do with our spouse. A key to protecting our marriage is to not allow potential intruders to gain access to our hearts. Protect your heart, the wellspring of emotional closeness, because only your spouse should have access to your innermost thoughts, yearnings, dreams, and despairs.

Guarding what we say means not complaining about our spouse to friends, co-workers, or even clergy of the opposite sex behind our spouse's back. Why? Because in periods of heightened vulnerability, by complaining about our spouse to members of the opposite gender we are revealing our unmet desires and wishes to them. When this disclosure takes place behind our spouse's back, we are in essence inviting this other person to meet our needs, and trying to create an illusion of closeness that is missing from our marriage. The other person may not even realize that he or she is creating feelings of attachment or attraction in us. But once a channel of exclusive, intimate communication is established, it opens the door widely for Satan to tempt us by distorting even the most innocent gestures or by creating inappropriate thoughts and feelings where none existed in the first place.

This is why the most prudent advice is for us to pour out our hearts and discuss our marital problems with our same-sex friends. We all need support and comfort from others when we are in need. But we must be careful not to invite Satan to take advantage of our vulnerabilities by tempting us to turn to someone who could potentially be an intruder in our marriage.



## Being a prudent helper

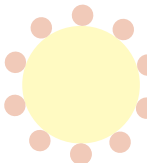
The converse is just as true. We need to be equally careful whenever we lend a helping hand or a sympathetic ear to someone in need. Remember that people in need feel vulnerable and have unsatisfied wants. When we offer them support, we give ourselves the chance to meet their needs, and this often elicits feelings of closeness in them toward us.

Developing a bond with same-sex friends and with church brothers and sisters is the stuff that camaraderie and fellowships are made of. But fostering extramarital intimacy with an individual of the opposite-sex simply creates temptations. Even if we are happily married and have no intention of pursuing an illicit relationship, it is irresponsible of us to allow ourselves to be viewed by an emotionally vulnerable friend as his or her lone confidant. It's as if we are inviting an intruder to look to us to fulfill their needs and to challenge our own marriage in the process.

Therefore, we ought to be prudent helpers. We must take extra caution particularly when we help those of the opposite gender. Our guiding goal should be to help others get closer to their spouses and to God—but not to us. That means that whenever we try to help, we should involve the other person's spouse as well. It also means that we should avoid being alone when we approach the needy recipient, so that an exclusive bond cannot develop. We might need to bring a friend, a fellow churchgoer, or a family member, but what is most important is that we remain vigilant when we extend our support to a person of the opposite sex.

By not allowing potential intruders the opportunity to grow emotionally attached to us, we are protecting our own marriage.

## Praying for divine abidance



*For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. Therefore, put on the full armor of God so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand.” (Eph 5:12-13)*

We are fighting a spiritual war. We should never think that we could fight off Satan's schemes and attacks against our marriage by ourselves, without God's help. Sure, we need to be alert and do everything we can to protect and nourish our marriage, but these precautions alone aren't enough.

We also need to continually recognize the limits of our efforts. We cannot fight and win a spiritual war by ourselves. With humility, we need to come before God and continually ask that He protect, bless, and guide our marriage. We need divine protection and wisdom to overcome the devil's temptations, which grow the strongest whenever jobs, family situations, or missionary trips separate us from our spouse for a period of time.

Even when blatant challenges aren't on the horizon, we still need to pray for power to mend the many imperfections in our marriage, so that we don't leave a foothold for Satan to tempt us. We need to pray for meekness when we are too stubborn to change our harmful ways. And we always need to pray for strength from God to ward off intruders who entice us to be unfaithful to our spouse.

## Protect Our Marriage

A marriage is not self-sustaining. “Be self-controlled and alert. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour” (1 Pet 5:8). Time and time again, we need to protect our marriage from the various temptations put out by the devil. We can only be successful if we continually nourish our marital relationship, stay alert to warning signs, take steps to keep the intruders out, and do all these things with help from God. Only God has the power to overcome the forces of evil. And only with the Lord's abidance can we stay true to our spouse and “forsake all others,” never allowing them to intrude into the union that God has blessed us with. ★

\* This suggestion adapted from an article by Willard F. Harley Jr., “Coping with Infidelity (Part 1)—How Do Affairs Begin?” from [www.marriagebuilders.com](http://www.marriagebuilders.com).

*“Love & Marriage” seeks to address and provide biblical advice on a wide range of questions and issues related to dating, singleness, and marriage. If you have any comments or suggestions for this column, please write to [love.marriage@tjc.org](mailto:love.marriage@tjc.org).*

# Eat Right and Exercise for Spiritual Fitness



Susan Estrada—Pacifica, California, USA



Proper nutrition and adequate exercise go hand in hand to promote physical fitness. As concerned parents, we begin early on in our children's lives to teach them how to eat right and exercise. This principle also applies to our children's spiritual fitness. When our children feed on the Word of God and exercise their faith in Him, they will grow strong in the Lord. In this column, a mom shares insights garnered from her parenting experience.

## Give Your Child a Suitable Bible

God's Word is in the Bible, so give your child a Bible of his or her very own. When you do this, you want it to be a Bible that he or she can read and understand. A very young child would be able to "read" a picture Bible. The colorful pictures are attractive and the accompanying text captures the essence of happenings in the Bible. Little children enjoy having their favorite books read to them over and over again. So, for example, each time you read the story of the Creation, you once more impress upon your child the all-important truth that God made this world and everything in it. Some picture Bibles come with easy-to-read stories. These are suitable for the young child who has learned to read. They are not too difficult that he becomes frustrated, and they are not too easy that she becomes bored. Many of these come with Bible verses. The child who has learned to read will have the opportunity to locate them in your "grown-up" Bible.

A child who is in elementary school is ready to have his or her own nearly grown-up Bible. Bibles for this age

group come in a wide variety. Many are available online and can be purchased from the convenience of your home. However, you might want to take time out of your busy schedule to browse through the shelves of a bookstore in your neighborhood or workplace. Whether you make the final selection or have the child go with you into the store, the important thing to consider is that the Bible you purchase is one that the child can read and understand. A Bible that sits on a bookshelf or on a tabletop in your child's room is like food that sits on a refrigerator shelf or on the dining table. Your child will still be hungry until he or she has eaten some food.

When my children were in elementary school, I bought each of them a grown-up Bible. I wanted them to have a Bible they could bring to Sabbath services and practice looking up Scripture verses during sermons. If I thought those Bibles were a little too grown-up for them, I imagined they would grow into them soon enough. But a time would come when I realized that I wanted my children's copy of the Bible to be a book they could "dig right into!"

One day, I saw a Bible in "giant print" at a Christian bookstore. Being at that age where I had difficulty reading tiny print, I was very pleasantly surprised at my good fortune. I grabbed the Bible and made my purchase. So I began looking for Bibles that I thought would meet my children's specific needs. It was a long process. I scrutinized advertisements in Christian magazines, checked out catalogs, and visited bookstores. Eventually, I found what I considered an appropriate Bible for my junior higher. Called *The NIV True Love Waits Bible*, it comes with articles, study notes and devotions that reiterate God's mandate to save oneself for marriage. Considering the stranglehold that the sexual revolution has on popular teen culture, I saw this Bible as the perfect tool with which to arm my junior higher.

As for my other child, I selected a *Youth Walk Devotional Bible*, New International Version. Three years younger, and still in elementary school, the pressures of popular teen culture made no impact on her world. All the child cared about, beside going to school and doing her homework, was whether there was another good book she could "sink her teeth" into. My new purchase filled an urgent need. A voracious reader, the youngster devoured the 365 devotions in one day.

## Instill a Love of Reading in Your Child

Unlike eating, reading does not come naturally. It's a skill that needs to be taught and encouraged. Unless you homeschool your children, most of us depend on teachers to teach ours how to read. However, moms and dads can help their children develop this new skill in the home. This is not an option really. If your child attends a school

where one teacher is responsible for thirty students in a room, you want to take an active role. A child who does not learn the basic skills of reading at a young age will find reading the Bible a very difficult thing to do.

Is reading a normal part of everyday life in your home? Where reading is a natural activity in the home and good reading materials are in plentiful supply, a child learns to develop a love of reading. If your children are very young, look for books that they find attractive. You also want books they can hold in their hands. Books made from fabric available at discount stores meet this need. They come with instructions and can be sewn together with a little effort. Best of all, they can be washed and ironed, again and again. And you do not have to worry that your child will crumple the pages or tear them out. Books with laminated pages that you can wipe clean are also a good investment. They don't tear easily either.

Give your little ones permission to pick them up to "read" whenever he or she feels inspired to take a bite, literally and/or figuratively. Make reading a fun experience. If a child learns from the start that reading is fun, studying the Word of God becomes a natural and positive thing to do.

## Build a Reference Collection for Your Child

In addition to an appropriate Bible for your child, help her put together a small collection of appropriate reference materials. Books and magazines are just two categories about what's available in the market place today. Keep these in a place where the child can reach for them. Let her drink in the attractive pictures. Let him soak up bite-size pieces of facts and figures. They lay

the foundation for in-depth study later on. Stories that tell the Creation are most meaningful and relevant, especially if you look at the big picture of the times we are living in and see how God is slowly and methodically being made irrelevant and obsolete in the everyday lives of regular folks.

One reference book that still gets a lot of use at our house is called, *It's Fun Finding Out About Bible Times*. A lot of basic information is packed into its thirty-five pages. Its front cover alone offers a great religious education. One picture tells the story of Jesus preaching and teaching. Another picture tells the story of Paul on the road to Damascus. Then there's the picture that tells the parable of the wise and foolish maidens. We also see the picture of a man driving the kind of oxen cart known to exist in the days when the Romans occupied Bible lands. There's a farmer plowing the field. Look at those jars of clay. This is only just the beginning. Inside more pictures bring the Bible to life. A few capture the stories of God's relationship with Abraham, Moses and David. Others show how people traveled, what they wore, what jobs they had.

Living as we do in the twenty-first century, pictures of weights and measures or pictures of the different stages of the farming year help to orient parents and children alike in our study of the Bible.

Reference materials can take a big bite out of your budget, so do not rush out on a big shopping spree. Build your collection over time. Keep it small. Only buy what your child will read and understand. To help you get started in your search, visit your church library for some ideas. Also find out what church publications you can subscribe to. If you happen to live near a large bookstore, invest some time scouring the

shelves marked "clearance." These are new books that may have been sitting on the shelves for longer than the retailer had anticipated. You can buy them at very low prices. Where I live, public libraries sell used books and magazines donated by its patrons at token prices. Garage sales in your neighborhood are another place to take a look. Don't forget the folks at church who have books or magazines they want to give away. Reference materials that help your children digest God's word are timeless treasures. You, too, will be greatly edified. In this respect, you cannot actually place a dollar amount on the value of your child's collection of reference materials.

## Encourage Your Child to Exercise Faith

This is the hard part of the eat-right-and-exercise equation. But I think it helps if parents begin with a resolve. This keeps us focused and motivated. I know it worked for me.

Although having been born into a family where three generations of womenfolk claimed membership in the True Jesus Church, I was more versed in the ways of the world than I was in the ways of the Lord. When I became a mother about twenty years ago, I longed to raise my baby the right way. Only problem was I didn't know how. When I was expecting my second child, I came across a Bible that I could read and understand. The timing was perfect. I was starved for knowledge on parenting in general and Christian parenting in particular. Now, I had plenty to chew on.

You may know from experience that when you choose to exercise, you pick a program that meets your needs. The program I picked to help me learn how to be a Christian parent is found in Deuteronomy 6:4-7:



*Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one! You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength. And these words which I command you today shall be in your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, when you walk by the way, when you lie down, and when you rise up.*

Even after so long, these words still have a liberating effect on me. They remind me that God talk is not confined to one day a week or one hour a day. This is a good thing. When parents become aware that the spiritual conditioning of our children is a twenty-four hour a day, seven day a week endeavor, we will not pass our responsibility to the preachers or the religious education teachers at church. Instead, we learn to have the fear of God in our hearts and hold ourselves accountable before the Lord. Living with this mindset, we know to make every effort to bring God and matters of faith to our children's attention at all times.

Deuteronomy 6:7 offers practical Christian parenting advice. Because parents cannot teach matters of faith in a vacuum, we must learn to teach our children within the context of everyday living. You'll notice how God asked Moses to tell the Israelite parents to talk to their children about God's commandments day and night. Today, the Lord expects us to communicate His message to our sons and daughters in the same way. But God's plan can only be carried out if there is a sense of warmth in the home.

Today's children face a lot more pressure than those of previous generations. The world they live in is unsafe in every sense of the word. Children of school age, in particular, need to be

able to come home at the end of the day and find refuge. This is how a high school freshman summed up her feelings. She wrote, "I love my home. It makes me feel good (and warm and fuzzy) inside just knowing I am fortunate enough to have a home to go to. If all my friends should one day decide they hate me, I know I will be able to come home and find comfort." Although this statement, by no means, paints a picture-perfect place—the young writer confessed that the home is sometimes "boring" and that the family sometimes "get in arguments"—she nevertheless describes a warm home environment. Children raised in this environment have a safe place to learn about God and matters of faith. This is possible, even in the midst of adversity. They may feel the pain, but they will not become discouraged for long and their hearts will not become hardened that they cannot feel God's love and compassion.

When children feel God's love in the home, they are open to learning exercises of faith. Faith is not a stand-alone subject. It is always accompanied by hope. When parents can give their children a sense of hope, they do much to encourage their children to exercise their faith in God. I see this firsthand. My children's lot in life has been one of uncertainty. Losing their father to death at an early age and living in a neighborhood where the public schools rank near or at the bottom, my older daughter often worried about getting into college. I would say to her, "God has never let you down." So although her road to college was full of obstacles, my daughter learned to trust God and follow His lead every step of the way. Today, she is a student at a prestigious private university on a generous scholarship.

24/7 parenting tapers off when our sons and daughters are on the verge of

becoming young men and women, about to lead independent lives. When this time comes, we hope that while our children depend on us less and less, they will depend on God more and more. After all, this is what we have been preparing them for all these years. We can hope for this to happen because children raised with the fear of God in their hearts will not do as they see fit. Then, too, they will not be without counsel because the Holy Spirit will guide them.

However, our children's transition to adulthood is a very stressful time in the home. For many of them, this rite of passage is both an exhilarating and a harrowing experience. They are excited to be all grown up but they are also anxious about the future. As parents, we are no less affected. You should have seen the nervous wreck I was last spring, when my older daughter was trying to decide which one of the seven colleges and universities she wanted to attend.

But there is no more crucial time than when our sons and daughters are going through transitions in life that parents must maintain a warm home environment. This helps take off some of the pressure our children are already experiencing. If we can make this effort, our soon-to-be young men and women will have a safe place to calm their nerves and seek God's will.

The Lord our God will not let them down. He never has, remember? ★

*"Family Altar" is dedicated to providing practical, biblical insight for parents who face the challenge of raising a family in today's fast-paced and variant society. Please direct comments on this article or questions about parenting to [family.altar@tjc.org](mailto:family.altar@tjc.org).*

# Christians on the Job



Richard Solgot—Tampa, Florida, USA



**Would you agree that there is great tension between the world of work and the world of religion? Who do you think is winning the battle?**

Recently, the Princeton Religion Research Center published a landmark survey conducted for the Wall Street Journal on the moral conduct at the workplace. The researchers measured a wide range of moral and ethical behaviors at the workplace, such as calling in sick when not sick, cheating on income tax, and swindling company supplies for personal use. The results were disappointing to say the least. But what the researchers found most startling was that there was no significant difference between the church and the unchurched in their ethics and values on the job. They discovered that the Christian workers were just as guilty as the non-Christian workers when it came to calling in sick when not sick, cheating on income tax, and using company supplies for personal use.

To me, this survey suggests that many Christians are living double lives. At church they swear allegiance to values informed by Scripture. But at work, they follow the values depicted by the world.

Since worldly values are apparently influencing the Christian workforce, several principles on our behavior as Christians in the workplace will be discussed in this article.

## Respect and Obey

First, as Christian workers we should respect and obey whoever is in a leadership role.

*“Bondservants, be obedient to those who are your masters according to the flesh, with fear and trembling, in sincerity of heart, as to Christ: not with eyeservice, as men pleasers, but as bondservants of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart.” (Eph 6:5-6)*

In practical terms for us today, this passage is teaching us to obey our employers, just as though we were obeying Christ. If our employers ask us to do something, we should do it without grumbling and complaining. We are to be model employees, always willing to go the extra mile to please our employers.

You may be wondering, do we have to obey our employers even if they want us to do something that is wrong and unethical? No. If your employer asks you to do something that is wrong and against the word of God, then you should not do it.

*“...We ought to obey God rather than men.” (Acts 5:29)*

While serving as government administrators in Babylon, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were told by their employer, King Nebuchadnezzar, to bow down and worship a golden idol. They were given direct instructions by their employer to do something that was wrong and against their faith.

What did they do? Did they obey God or their boss?

*Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego answered and said to the king, “O Nebuchadnezzar, we have no need to answer you in this matter. If that is the case, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and He will deliver us from your hand, O king. But if not, let it be known to you, O king, that we do not serve your gods, nor will we worship the gold image which you have set up.” (Dan 3:16-18)*

Since they would not obey the king's order, they were thrown into a furnace.

If you are ever faced with this dilemma, always obey God over your employer. You may be punished; you may even be fired. However, God will bless you for standing up for the truth. He will rescue you from the blazing furnace, just as He did Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. We are to respect and obey our employers and do what they ask us to do as long as it is not wrong and against our faith.

## Who Is Your Boss?

Secondly, as Christian workers, we should always do our best because we are ultimately working for the Lord.



*“Bondservants, obey in all things your masters according to the flesh, not with eyeservice, as men-pleasers, but in sincerity of heart, fearing God. And whatever you do, do it heartily, as to the Lord and not to men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the reward of the inheritance; for you serve the Lord Christ.” (Col. 3:22-24)*

This passage is teaching that while we are at work, we are to do our jobs with all of our hearts, not necessarily to please our bosses, but to please God, because we are ultimately working for Him. God is our employer.

*Many years ago, on an extremely hot day, a crew of men was working on the roadbed of the railroad when a slow moving train interrupted them. The train came to a stop and a window in the last car—which incidentally was custom made and air-conditioned—was raised. A booming, friendly voice called out, “Dave, is that you?” Dave Anderson, the crew chief called back, “Sure is, Jim, and it’s really good to see you.” With that pleasant exchange, Dave Anderson was invited to join Jim Murphy, the president of the railroad, for a visit. For over an hour the men exchanged pleasantries and then shook hands as the train pulled out.*

*Dave Anderson’s crew immediately surrounded him and expressed astonishment that he knew Jim Murphy, the president of the railroad as a personal friend. Dave then explained that over twenty years earlier he and Jim Murphy had started to work for the railroad on the same day. One of the men half jokingly and half-serious asked Dave why he was still working out in the hot sun and Jim Murphy had gotten to be presi-*

*dent. Rather melancholy Dave explained, “Twenty-three years ago I went to work for \$1.75 an hour but Jim Murphy went to work for the railroad.”*

If you only go to work to earn a paycheck, and that is your sole motivation, then all you will reap is a paycheck. You will dread your job and be unhappy. You will only give a half-hearted effort.

If you go to work to please God, and work for Him, then not only will you receive a paycheck, but you will also receive personal fulfillment and contentment. If you work only for pay, you will have a miserable day, but if you work for God, you will have happiness. Whatever you do for a living, do your best, so that you will glorify your Father in heaven.

## The Spirit of Kindness

Thirdly, as Christian workers, we should always go out of our way to be kind and friendly to others.

As Christians, we are to care, be gentle, and show a warm smile. We are to be kind to others.

*“And be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another...” (Eph. 4:32)*

*“Therefore, as the elect of God, holy and beloved, put on tender mercies, kindness, humility, meekness, longsuffering.” (Col. 3:12)*

*“See that no one renders evil for evil to anyone, but always pursue what is good*

*both for yourselves and for all.” (1 Thess 5:15)*

In *Chicken Soup for the Soul at Work*, Naomi Rhode wrote of an experience she witnessed while working at a hospital.

*John was admitted into the emergency room and placed on the cardiac floor. He was unshaven, dirty, dangerously obese, and wore a black motorcycle jacket.*

*The nurses at the station looked wide-eyed as this mound of humanity was wheeled by, each glancing nervously at Bonnie, the head nurse. “Let this one not be mine to admit, bathe and tend to...” was their pleading, unspoken message.*

*One of the true marks of a leader is to do the unthinkable. To tackle the impossible. To touch the untouchable. It was Bonnie who said, “I want this patient myself.”*

*As she put on her latex gloves and proceeded to bathe this huge, very unclean man, her heart almost broke. Where was his family? Who was his mother? What was he like as a little boy? She hummed quietly as she worked. It seemed to ease the fear and embarrassment she knew he must have been feeling.*

*And then on a whim she said, “We don’t have time for back rubs much in hospitals these days, but I bet one would really feel good. And it would help you to relax your muscles and start to heal. That is what this place is all about... a place to heal.”*

*The thick, scaly, ruddy skin told a story of an abusive lifestyle: probably lots of addictive behavior with food and other things. As she rubbed those tense*



muscles, she hummed and prayed. Prayed for the soul of a little boy grown up, rejected by life's rudeness and striving for acceptance in a hard, hostile world.

As John rolled over onto his back, tears ran down his cheeks and his chin trembled. With amazingly beautiful brown eyes, he smiled and said in a quivering voice, "No one has touched me for years. Thank you. I am healing."

This special nurse went out of her way to show kindness to a rugged and filthy stranger.

How many of us go out of our way to show kindness to co-workers or customers? How long has it been since you have approached a co-worker to tell him or her what a good job he or she is doing? If you are an employer, how long has it been since you have done something nice for your employees besides giving them just their paychecks?

As Christians, we should flood our workplace with kindness. Every day we should touch lives by taking the time to care about others. Let us go out of our way by reaching out with the spirit of kindness to everyone we work with, even those we may not like.

## Establish Proper Priorities

Lastly, as Christian workers, we must never put our careers before God and our families.

Let's face it, in society the family is in serious trouble because careers are becoming more important than the family. It is not enough anymore to just

work forty hours a week. Now, people are choosing to work longer hours or get second jobs so that they can make more money to keep up with the Smiths and the Joneses. The family unity is disintegrating because husbands, wives, and parents are more preoccupied with their professions than they are with their own families' needs.

In the Bible, Eli, who was a priest and judge in Israel, was a man who spent more time working, then he did caring for his family's well being. In fact, Eli was so preoccupied with his career that he did not even know about the trouble that his children were in.

*Now Eli was very old; and he heard everything his sons did to all Israel, and how they lay with the women who assembled at the door of the tabernacle of meeting. So he said to them, "Why do you do such things? For I hear of your evil dealings from all the people. No, my sons! For it is not a good report that I hear. You make the LORD's people transgress. If one man sins against another, God will judge him. But if a man sins against the LORD who will intercede for him? Nevertheless, they did not heed the voice of their father, because the LORD desired to kill them. (1 Samuel 2:22-25)*

Eli's sons had followed in their father's footsteps by both becoming priests. However, these two ministers of God became so immoral that they were sleeping with their co-workers. To make things even worse, their father, the priest did not even know what was going on, even though everyone else did. Because he was spending too much time at the office, Eli had lost touch with his family. His children even lost respect

for him (v. 25).

If the family unit is going to survive, it must understand that God and family are more important than money and careers.

## Principles to Work By

If we want to be true Christians in the workplace, then we need to be actively following four principles:

- We should respect and obey whomever is in authority.
- We should always do our best because we are ultimately working for the Lord.
- We should always go out of our way to be kind and friendly to others.
- We must never put our careers before God and our families.

May the Lord guide us in our daily Christian walk with our employers, employees and, most importantly, our families. ★

1. Jack Canfield et al., Christian Soup for the Soul at Work (Deerfield Beach, FL: Health Communications, 1996), pp. 9-10.
2. David McGee, "The Best is Yet to Come," [http://members.truepath.com/jeannie/thebestis\\_yettocome.html](http://members.truepath.com/jeannie/thebestis_yettocome.html) (6 July 2001).

"In the Workforce" is a recurring column in Manna dedicated to survival tips and advice on how to shine the light as a Christian at work. If you have some advice or anecdotes from your own work experience that you feel may be edifying to the fellowship of brothers and sisters in Christ, please send it to [workforce@tjc.org](mailto:workforce@tjc.org).



# CHOOSING FRIENDS WISELY

Chloe—USA



Once we move on to college, we have to make a lot of decisions for ourselves. We have to decide what bank to open an account with, what major to study, and who to spend our time with. That last decision may be the most pressing when we first enter the college scene. As Christians, we ought to include God in our major decisions, such as choosing what kind of people to be our friends. How do we choose our friends from such a diverse student body? Is it important to find friends who are in church?

When we think about these questions, let us see what advice God has given us in the Bible.

*He died for us so that, whether we are awake or asleep, we may live together with Him. Therefore encourage one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing. (1 Thess 5:10-11, NIV)*

One of the goals of friendship is to build oneself up in character and integrity, pleasing in the eyes of God. What better place to find a friend than in a place where all the people our age are striving toward that goal? The first place we should look for friends is in our local church.

### DO I REALLY NEED FRIENDS THAT SHARE THE SAME BELIEFS?

Yes, we do. Why? Well, we should ask ourselves, do we want to hold onto the values we have learned from studying the Bible and attending church? Do we want to keep ourselves pure from the unwholesomeness in this world? If the answers are yes, then we need to find friends that share similar Christian beliefs.

Despite what we may think of ourselves, we are influenced by the environment we live in and the people we deal with. If a person constantly exposes himself to an environment where morals are lax and godliness is of little importance, very slowly, he will begin to think that certain things are okay to do, for “evil company corrupts good habits” (1 Cor 15:33).

The Bible was not written in the twentieth century, and does not specifically address issues that are present in our daily lives. Questions like, is dating in college acceptable? Are we allowed to

drink alcohol? Is it okay to go to a gathering where people might get rowdy? Is it okay to go to a review session instead of going to church?

The Bible doesn’t give us clear-cut answers. These kinds of situations sit in the “gray” area between right and wrong. Think of it like a delicately balanced scale: on one hand, the Bible doesn’t explicitly say that skipping service to attend a much needed review session is wrong, but on the other hand, attending church service helps us to build our relationship with God.

Depending on your faith, the scales may seem equally balanced, and your choice of friends can tip the scale ever so gently in one direction or the other. Spending time with a crowd of people who are determined to do what is pleasing to God will definitely help tip the scale in the right direction. If evil company can corrupt good habits, then surely virtuous company can nurture good habits. The church community is a great place to begin looking for “good company.”

It’s one thing to say we’ll make some friends at church, and another thing to actually do it. In reality, sometimes there are obstacles to that ideal. For example, we may find that some church youths get on our bad side, or very simply, we don’t feel a connection to the youths at the local church.

### WHAT IF I CAN’T FIND ANYONE IN CHURCH I CAN RELATE TO?

If this is the case, we first need to examine ourselves. Do we have a tendency to avoid people that don’t share the same interests and activities? Do we have expectations of Christians that the church people we come in contact with don’t seem to fulfill? Are we “initiators,” or do we wait for someone else to initiate a relationship?

After some reflection, we may notice that we've answered "yes" to some of the questions above. This doesn't mean that there is something wrong with us; rather, it presents something that we can do to get to know people at church. We can't demand that people be our friends, so the only thing we can do is to demand from ourselves that we be friendly.

If we are disillusioned with the people at church, we need to realize that spiritual perfection is a goal that takes an entire lifetime to pursue. In all likelihood, the people at church, including us, are "works in progress;" we all have imperfections that need to be ironed out. Since this is the case, we should try to be understanding and not judgmental of one another's shortcomings. Instead of shunning a group of imperfect youths, we should be united and encourage one another to pursue spiritual growth. In short, spiritual imperfection is not to be treated with disdain but, rather, with love and understanding.

Next, we should make a conscious effort to try to get to know people at church. In the same way that our character cannot be fathomed after one meeting or conversation, it takes time and effort on our part to get to know other people.

When I first arrived at the local church near my university, I often kept to myself and avoided situations with people that could be potentially awkward. I thought to myself, I'm new here, how come no one seems to notice me or show that they care about me? There were also some habits in the youth group that bothered me beyond words. I would get upset at church people in my heart, and wish that I could return to the church I grew up in. As a result, I almost never attended youth fellowship or any after-service activities; every Saturday I'd go back to the dorms and do my own thing.

After a year of being disillusioned with the youths at this particular church, I found out that many of them were going through tough episodes in their lives: some had not received the Holy Spirit and were discouraged, and others were having family problems. It suddenly occurred to me that in the duration of that year, I did not make an effort to know the people around me. Apparently, I wasn't the only one with problems; other people had issues in their lives, and I was so caught up with myself, I did not even take the effort to address their needs. After that, I made an effort to attend fellowships

and choir practice and got to know some of the youths better. From these simple church activities, I made some friends, and those friends helped me through some of the toughest times of my life. And all I had to do was to decide to focus less on myself and more on other people.

"He who loves purity of heart and has grace on his lips, the king will be his friend" (Prov 22:11). A friendly, considerate person is more likely to have friends than a person who isn't. It'll take some effort to open up and take the initiative toward friendship, but it is definitely worth the while. Having a few brothers and sisters as close companions will help us grow in our faith in God and be a source of encouragement for you when you feel discouraged.

## DO I NEED FRIENDS OUTSIDE OF CHURCH?

Even as we build up friendships in church, it is also necessary to make friends outside of church. Making friends in the campus environment helps us gain an understanding of people from all around the world and from different backgrounds. Ultimately, having that understanding will shape how we, as Christians, relate and communicate our beliefs to those around us. The Lord Jesus did not pray to the Father that He should take us out of this world (Jn 17:15); rather, He commanded that we go into it to share the good news with other people (Mk 16:15). The friendships we make will broaden and deepen our understanding of people's struggles, their needs, and how faith fits into the picture. In the end, they can give us the opportunity to touch others' lives.

In all likelihood, we will spend more time with our friends at school than those at church—which means that we have to choose them all the more carefully. There are many people out there who can be positive role models by showing us how to work diligently toward a goal or how to be dedicated to a worthy cause. In the same way, there are people out there who won't be good influences. In either case, we need to acknowledge that we are influenced to some degree by the people we befriend, and that they may shape our values or views.

So what should our approach be? How can we keep our footsteps pleasing to God while mingling with people whose lives are not necessarily oriented around Him?



## CHOOSING FRIENDS FROM AMONG CLASSMATES

First, we need to decide for ourselves what kind of person we want to be. As Christians, we want to preserve the values and principles set in the Bible, and pursue worthwhile goals, such as being charitable or acquiring knowledge to help improve the world around us. We should look for people who are like-minded and strive for similar goals. There are plenty of non-Christians out there whose lifestyles do not contradict Christian values and who work to improve the environment around them. Befriending them can become a positive influence on our lives and help us to achieve our goals.

While I was in college, I really wanted to learn how to use my time efficiently and constructively and to avoid laziness. I was fortunate enough to meet people who knew how to squeeze the most out of their day; they studied, volunteered with the honor society, and even played sports or instruments. After seeing how they could divide up their time so carefully, I was able to divide up my time in a more streamlined fashion to do schoolwork, church work, and other extracurricular activities. Being around people who weren't lazy really helped motivate me to make the most of my day.

Undoubtedly, we will encounter people on campus who have grown up in environments quite different from our own. While we ought to be open-minded toward other lifestyles and cultures, we must also be cautious. We need to choose friends who will respect our Christian beliefs and allow us to be the individuals we want to be, as opposed to shaping us to be like them. We should stand up for our beliefs, while respecting the beliefs of your peers. Mutual respect is one of the things that keep two friends together for the long run.

## NEVER COMPROMISE WHAT YOU BELIEVE IN

When we first start interacting with our peers, there is a period of time when we find out about each other and discover what things we would or would not do. During this initial phase of friendship, we should be sure to set forth our values and beliefs with surety and without flinching. It is much easier to be frank at the beginning about something that could become awkward than to wait a long time before addressing the issue.

I had two roommates my first year in the dorms. I liked them a lot because they were very friendly and easygoing; however, they had some not-so-good habits, like clubbing Friday night until the wee hours, drinking, and having the occasional joint. They weren't "bad" people, but the things they did were not "beneficial," as Paul would put it. The interesting thing was, even though the three of us were pretty open with each other, they never asked me to go clubbing with them or drink or smoke with them. We did go out for ice cream and candy together, shop for CDs, and celebrate special occasions together.

Why the distinction? They knew I was Christian. They saw the Bible on my desk and knew I read it and knew that I was a consistent churchgoer. Because of these things, it went without saying that I would not go clubbing with them, nor would I drink or smoke with them. Simply by setting down my religious beliefs and life principles right from the beginning and sticking to them consistently, I avoided situations in which I would be presented with an opportunity to do something that would be displeasing to God.

In the same way, if we establish our boundaries clearly with our school friends right from the start, we can avoid being tempted to do things we wouldn't otherwise do. Avoiding temptation is a lot easier than dealing with it when it hits us head-on. Picking the right friends in school helps us avoid facing temptation all the time.

## CHOOSING FRIENDS WISELY

Choosing friends is a life-changing decision. Many things that happened in my life were a direct result of the people I chose to be my friends. The wise choice ultimately comes from knowing who we are, realizing how we have anchored our lives, and recognizing what is its core. "He died for us so that" we may live together with Him. " If we keep this as our purpose, then in every new situation or every new encounter we will never really stray from that goal. ★

*"On Campus" seeks to support and inspire an active faith among our youth through candid discussion and exploration of the many challenges facing Christians on campus. Please send comments on this article or questions about student life to [on.campus@tjc.org](mailto:on.campus@tjc.org).*





quately.” This act was of no small significance for as we learn in subsequent verses, Apollos became a most effective messenger of the Lord’s perfect gospel. “When Apollos wanted to go to Achaia, the brothers encouraged him and wrote to the disciples there to welcome him. On arriving, he was a great help to those who by grace had believed. For he vigorously refuted the Jews in public debate, proving from the Scriptures that Jesus was the Christ” (Acts 18:27, 28). This example could be repeated again and again in our time.

Still, in a sea of denominations and non-denominations that span the globe, the True Jesus Church is small and insignificant. While much of the Christian world elbow for position and recognition on the world’s stage, we go about our lives quietly, worshiping God and minding our own business. While they turn their heads and lean their hearts toward new teachings added to and/or subtracted from the one doctrine and one faith, we remain unaffected. Secure in the one doctrine and one faith as revealed by the Lord Jesus Christ to the earliest workers of His church in 1917, we shut our doors behind us upon entering the sanctuary of our homes and chapels. We say our prayers and sing our hymns. We listen to our sermons and read our Bibles. And all is well.

But all is not well when men and women are left to sink or swim in this sea of many denominations and non-denominations. When the Lord was on earth, He told His followers that they were obligated to be the light of the world (Mt. 5:14). Light, by its nature, draws attention to itself. It offers light to those in the dark and warmth to those in the cold. Even from a distance, light fills the weary and confused traveler with hope, perks up his spirit, and encourages him to make that one more step in the right direction. It carries the message that tells him where he is at and shows him which way he must go.

A light was, in essence, what Priscilla and Aquila became to Apollos. Without drawing attention to themselves and stealing the spotlight, this couple worked behind the scenes. Sensing a devout and God-fearing man, Priscilla and Aquila reached out to this newcomer in their midst. Though fully equipped with the knowledge of God and certain of His way, they were careful not to dampen Apollos’ spirit and snuff out his faith. Mindful of God’s grace, they sought only to explain “the way of God more adequately.” In that sense, they shone like a beacon in the night to guide Apollos and help him stay on course while he was navigating his spiritual journey.

As followers of Christ’s one doctrine and one faith today, we too must shine like beacons in the night. Beacons exist to warn or guide ships that navigate the seas as they make their way from their place of departure to their place of destination. They’re an especially welcome sight to the navigator on rough waters and in times of distress and foul weather. Today many devout and God-fearing men and women are navigating the rough waters of many denominations and non-denominations even as they are battling the winds of increasingly fierce relativism. The time has come when we must reach out like beacons in the night. Anchored ever so securely in the one doctrine and one faith, we shall be an especially welcome sight to the multitude of weary and confused navigators before us.

Make no mistake. The challenge before us is no small matter. And we will be tested and tempted. But none of this should deter us. Remember the Lord’s exhortation, “Freely you have received, freely give” (Mt 10:1-8). Take it to heart.

Take this statement to heart as well: “The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few.” Heed the advice that follows, “Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into His harvest field. (Mt 9:37). There is no more urgent plea than this today. Though we do not always know it, devout and God-fearing men and women present in our midst are watching and waiting for a way out of the confusion of many denominations and non-denominations of this world. Who among us will bring them the message of the perfect gospel? Who among us will reach out to explain the way of God “more accurately”? Let every one of us begin by asking the Lord for the strength and courage to emulate Priscilla and Aquila. Let us ask Him, not tomorrow or the day after, but today. Surely He will hear our prayers and fulfill His promises in the time of His favor.

Love,  
Mom

*Written as a mother would her child, “Letters from Mom” addresses the struggles of our young people as they step toward the threshold of adulthood. This column hopes to encourage, comfort, and urge the youth to continue living as children of God. Please send comments or questions to [this.mom@tjc.org](mailto:this.mom@tjc.org).*



# HEAVEN'S CHOIR

Chen Sam Khean—Petaling Jaya, MALAYSIA

I found myself at Heaven's Gate,  
Adorned in gold and gems and white.  
An angel beckoned me to enter straight  
Beyond the Gate that shines so bright.

I saw scores of angels flying high above.  
Saints, brothers and sisters gathered round.  
So amazing their warmth and love—  
Measureless, such joy was found.

Among the skies of cloud and air,  
I lifted my eyes and saw in awe  
The One who saved me from sin and snare  
Upon His throne, the God of Love.

And then I saw a glittering light  
Far across the ocean skies,  
A choir of angels with robes so bright  
Singing praise with heavenly cries...

Melodies of love and thanks  
To glorify our Heavenly King,  
Who set us free from evil's ranks,  
All praise to Him forever ring!

Oh Heaven's Choir,  
Sing and sing to your hearts' desire.  
Sing it loud, sing it strong  
Till Hell trembles with your mighty song!

My eyes filled with joyful tears,  
My heart with gratitude and faith sincere;  
He held me near in His embrace,  
Wiped dry my tears with His sweet grace.

He looked at me with tender eyes:  
"Do not cry, oh My little one,  
Be joyful always and cease all sighs.  
Soon you will be with Me in Heaven."

My heart content with His assuring word  
Would sing the songs of Heaven I heard.  
I opened my eyes from prayer time;  
While Heaven's Choir's tunes still chime...