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(unless otherwise noted, answers to questions by Keith Sharp)

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Finally, brethren
**WHATEVER
THINGS** are true
are noble
are just
are pure
are lovely
are of good report
IF THERE IS ANY VIRTURE AND IF THERE
IS ANYTHING PRAISEWORTHY –
meditate on these things.

PHILIPPIANS
4:8

You can download this month's Meditate On These Things as a PDF file by clicking [here](#). Also, an archive of past MOTT issues is available at christistheway.com.

Tanner Campbell, who now preaches in Rapid City, South Dakota, is making good progress after a near fatal bout of meningitis. We look forward to getting excellent articles from him again.

"Freedom consists in conformity to that which, in the realm of intellect, is called truth, and in the realm of morality, law. The only way in which we know truth is to obey it, and God's truth gives freedom from sin and death." (J.W. McGarvey, **Fourfold Gospel**. 457, comments on John 8:32).

"Minds filled with ideas of the devil find it difficult to comprehend the thoughts of God, no matter how plainly expressed" (Ibid. 458, comment on John 8:43)

Isaiah and Salvation

Message from Reader

You made a false statement when you stated "The word 'salvation' is found twenty-six times in Isaiah and only seven times in all the other prophets combined"!!!! According to Strong's Concordance (and my own personal studies), the ACTUAL number that the word "Salvation" is found in the book of Isaiah is 28! Please correct this so that your not giving false information to God's children.

Response

Thank you for showing me this error. It was certainly inadvertent. I rechecked and the word "salvation" is found 28 times in the book of Isaiah in the **New King James Version** of the Bible and 10 times in the remainder of the Old Testament prophets. I apologize for the error and will make the correction. May the Lord richly bless you.

Question from Ethiopia about Tithing

Keith Sharp | Mountain Home, Arkansas, USA

Question

I have a question as usually, please I would like to have sound understanding and am writing booklet on the teaching of tithing in OT and offering in the NT church (Deuteronomy 14:22-29)

Reply

Tithe or Free Will Contribution?

The Law or the Gospel?

Galatians 5:1-4; Colossians 2:13-17

Jews	Christians
✧ Israel was to give a tithe of all the produce of the land. - Leviticus 27:30-33; Deuteronomy 14:22	✧ Christians are to give to the local church each first day of the week. - 1 Corinthians 16:1-2
✧ The tithe was to be given to the Levites. - Numbers 18:21-24	✧ by free will - 2 Corinthians. 8:3-5
✧ The Levites were to give the priests a tithe of the tithe. - Numbers 18:25-26	✧ as prospered - 2 Corinthians 8:12
✧ The tithe was to be taken to the tabernacle. - Deuteronomy 12:5-6; 14:22-26	✧ bountifully - 2 Corinthians 9:5-6
✧ Every third year a tithe was to be shared with Levites, strangers, fatherless and widows at home. - Deuteronomy 14:27-29; 26:12-15	✧ as purposed - 2 Corinthians 9:7
✧ The tithe, as part of the Law of Moses, was done away when Christ died. - Colossians 2:14-17; Hebrews 7:5	✧ cheerfully - 2 Corinthians 9:7; cf. 8:1-2

Where is the tithe?

- not in the "moral law" (Exodus 20:1)
- not in the gospel (2 Corinthians 9:7)
- in the "ceremonial law" (Leviticus 27:30-32; Deuteronomy 14:28-29)

The tithe was of all their produce (Deuteronomy 14:22). When they brought it to the sanctuary, they were to eat a joyful, sacrificial meal to the Lord, to learn to fear Him (Deuteronomy 14:23). If it was too far to the sanctuary, they could exchange the crop for money (Deuteronomy 14:24-26). They were to include the Levites in the meal (Deuteronomy 14:27).

Paul, To The Ephesians

Every Spiritual Blessing

Patrick Farish | Lancaster, Texas, USA

When Paul speaks of "every spiritual blessing" in Ephesians he does not leave us in the dark about them. In a

lengthy sentence beginning with chapter one verse four he identifies these blessings.

The first blessing is, "God chose us in him". The word "chosen" here is often translated "elect." Each of these words points to a selecting. How is the selection made?

Some have the idea that, as some kind of tyrant, God arbitrarily picks out, "chooses," Peter, Paul, and Mary to be saved; and Huey, Dewey, and Louise to be lost - with no impact on that verdict from the good or the evil they did. Why? Because the despot ruled that way, and no questioning will be allowed. Such people are not aware that God is no respecter of persons (Acts 10:34; Romans 2:11).

The fact, though, that He "shows no partiality" (Acts 10:34) must affect our conclusion as to who is chosen by God. Not particular personalities, God "chose us in him." He chose a class of people, "before the foundation of the world." Before there were any people God said I choose people who act in a certain submissive, obedient, way. Furthermore, they will be "holy and blameless." They must be holy, and they must be blameless.

To be "holy" is to be set apart from things sinful. "Holy" is elsewhere rendered "hallowed" (Matthew 6:9); "saint" or "sanctify" also translate from the same word in the original (Ephesians 1:18; Acts 20:32). Jesus pointed to the way of holiness when He prayed to the Father, in John 17:17, "Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth." People who temple at His word (Isaiah 66:2), who "receive with meekness the implanted word" (James 1:21), will be receptive to and obey His word; and by this be set apart and blameless, from those who do not.

The Unchanging Word

Jefferson David Tant | Roswell, Georgia, USA

In one of the conversations our Lord was having with his disciples, he stated: "Heaven and earth will pass away, but My words will not pass away" (Matthew 24:35). And the apostle Peter wrote: "For, all flesh is as grass, and all the glory thereof as the flower of grass. The grass withers, and the flower falls: but the word of the Lord abides forever. And this is the word of good tidings which was preached unto you" (1 Peter 1:24-25).

God's Word was committed to written form by Moses well over 3,000 years ago. It has endured through the ages in spite of efforts of men to destroy it, or at least to keep it out of the hands of the common man. Some 2,600 years ago, in Jeremiah 36, King Jehoiakim ordered God's word written on a scroll to be burned, as he did not like its message. Then we have these words in verse 32: "Then Jeremiah took another scroll and gave it to Baruch the son of Neraiah, the scribe, and he wrote on it at the dictation of Jeremiah all the words of the book which Jehoiakim king of Judah had burned in the fire; and many similar words were added to them." The Roman emperor Diocletian, in 303 A.D. ordered that all copies of the scriptures were to be burned. He died, but the Bible still lives. In the Dark Ages the Roman Catholic Church forbade the common people to have the Bible accessible to them. I have seen images of a Bible with a hole in the cover that allowed it to be chained to the pulpit so that no common man could take it and read it for himself. The Church did not want men to read for themselves and see the differences between what the church practiced and what the Bible taught. William Tyndale was burned at the stake October 6, 1536 for having the audacity to translate and print the Bible in English so the common man could read it for himself.

The French philosopher Voltaire (1694-1778) declared that within 50 years the Bible would be dead. But a half century later, he was dead, and the presses upon which he had printed his attacks were actually used to print Bible, and his own house was used as a Bible distribution center. My suspicion is that God is far more powerful than any king, church official, or atheist. Which all brings me to my point. The Bible is the Living Word of the Living God. It is not up to man to change it, add to it, or take away from it. We really only have two choices - to believe it or reject it. There is no middle ground, i.e., to take part of it and reject other parts that do not suit our particular whims. The modern thinking in many denominations is that we don't need to take the Bible literally. After all, it was written thousands of years ago, and times have changed. Therefore we need to "keep up with the times." One prominent British clergyman, N.T. Wright has written that the Bible is just a narrative, a story. It doesn't have commands or obligations for us to follow, if I understand what he has written.

One problem with such thinking is that God doesn't change, nor does his Word. The nature of man, the nature of sin, and the nature of Satan has not changed. Satan's approach may change, with the times. For example, he may

appeal to the lust of the flesh through internet pornography which was not available 100 years ago, but the lust of the flesh is still a sin (1 John 2:16).

Where did we get the right to sit in judgment on God's words? I have heard people say, "Well, I see what the Bible says, but I don't believe it." Or they may say, "But times have changed." Some have even gone so far as to claim a certain teaching is not in their Bible. My father related an incident when he was preaching in Denver many years ago. He was having a discussion with a woman on the matter of the necessity of baptism, and quoted Mark 16:16: "He that believes and is baptized shall be saved..." (Mark 16:16a). She said, "That's not in my Bible." My father insisted that it was, and she just as strongly insisted that it was not. My father then asked to see her Bible, and upon receiving it turned to the passage. Sure enough, it was not in her Bible! She had taken scissors and cut it out! Problem solved! Or so she thought.

Another incident occurred over the same passage, as a visitor to the services where my father was preaching made a comment after the service that she "didn't see it that way," referring to my father's mention of Mark 16:16. My father took out his Bible, turned to the passage and read it without any comment. She replied, "I don't see it that way." What way? The way it read. She understood exactly what the passage said. My father did not give his "interpretation." He just read the verse. Her problem was not that she didn't "see" it. She knew exactly what it said. Her problem was that she didn't want to believe it. But rather than bluntly saying she didn't believe the Bible, she put a more acceptable "spin" on the matter by saying she didn't "see" it that way. Which way? "That" way, which indicated that she perfectly well understood what the verse said.

I had a similar experience in a discussion with a denominational preacher that lived across the street from me in Portales, New Mexico. I had asked him if he believed salvation was by "faith only." He said he did. Then I turned to James 2:24 and asked him to read it. "You see that a man is justified by works and not by faith alone." He closed the Bible, handed it back to me and said, "That's not the kind of God I serve." End of discussion. He admitted he did not know that verse was in the Bible, but its presence made no difference. His mind had already been made up. In his mind, he had taken that teaching out of the Bible.

Consider some clear statements God has given us in regard to this matter. "You shall not add to the word which I am command you, nor take away from it, that you may keep the commandments of the LORD your God which I command you" (Deuteronomy 4:2). "Whatever I command you, you shall be careful to do; you shall not add to nor take away from it" (Deuteronomy 12:32). "Only be strong and very courageous; be careful to do according to all the law which Moses My servant commanded you; do not turn from it to the right or to the left. so that you may have success wherever you go" (Joshua 1:7). "Do not add to His words or He will reprove you, and you will be proved a liar" (Proverbs 30:6). "I testify to everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: if anyone adds to them, God will add to him the plagues which are written in this book; and if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God will take away his part from the tree of life and from the holy city, which are written in this book" (Revelation 22:18-19).

Balaam understood his obligation to respect God's word very well. When he was encouraged by Balak to come and curse Israel, "Balaam replied to the servants of Balak, 'Though Balak were to give me his house full of silver and gold, I could not do anything, either small or great, contrary to the command of the LORD my God'" (Numbers 22:18).

Dear Reader, God's Word is truth, and truth does not change. Opinions change, theories change, ideas change, man's doctrines change, but God does not change, and truth does not change. Through the prophet Malachi God stated, "For I, the LORD, do not change..." (Malachi 3:6).

As Christ's crucifixion drew near, he was praying to his father, and in the prayer made a petition for his disciples: "Sanctify them in the truth; Your word is truth" (John 17:17). And it is by this word that we will be judged at the last day. "He who rejects Me and does not receive My sayings, has one who judges him; the word I spoke is what will judge him at the last day" (John 12:48).

If I were in medical school studying to become a doctor, there would come a time for the final exam before being accredited as a doctor. I would be examined over what I had learned from the textbooks and through my observations. Now, suppose that I was asked about a certain medical procedure that was explained in my

textbook. But I didn't like what the textbook said, and wrote on the exam paper, "I don't believe what the textbook said. I have my own ideas." Do you think I would "pass" the exam and be certified as a doctor? You know the answer. Why does anyone think that he will pass the Great Final Exam when he answers "I didn't like that particular commandment, so changed it to suit my preferences."?

In one of Christ's parables, he told of a master who returned unexpectedly and found a certain servant unprepared. "And that slave who knew his master's will and did not get ready or act in accord with his will, will receive many lashes..." (Luke 12:47). Notice that phrase "or act in accord with his will." Evidently that servant did not believe everything his master told him, or decided he didn't have to follow everything his master told him.

Consider Jesus' words in Matthew 7:21-23: "Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven will enter. Many will say to Me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?' And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from me, you who practice lawlessness.'"

What is the "lawlessness" Christ mentioned? Here are people who are sincerely doing good works, but Jesus said they would not be accepted. So obviously it takes more than just sincerity to be found in God's favor. The "lawlessness" term simply refers to that which is without authority. They were doing things which had not been authorized by God. What may be good in man's thinking may not be good in God's thinking. That's why we need to respect the admonition given in Colossians 3:17a: "Whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus..." Our teaching (words) and our deeds (actions) are to be done "in the name of the Lord"—by his authority, according to his will.

If my children want to inherit my estate, they must comply with the terms in my will. Everyone understands that. They are not free to pick and choose which conditions they agree with. Our Lord makes the same comparison concerning his Father's will—the New Testament. Oh, there are many people who have some ideas that seem good to them, but they are not things that are a part of the Father's will.

Men through the centuries have added their own ideas of what would seem to be good doctrines and good practices, etc., but our Lord says they will not be accepted. "But in vain do they worship me, Teaching as their doctrines the precepts of men" (Matthew 15:9). These doctrines, creeds, disciplines, catechisms, etc., that men have devised as laws for their churches change from time to time. As examples, note the following.

1. "No divorce, except for adultery, shall be regarded by the church as lawful; and no Minister shall solemnize marriage in any case where there is a divorced wife or husband living; but this rule shall not be applied to the innocent party to a divorce for the cause of adultery..."
2. "In view of the seriousness with which the Scriptures and the Church regard divorce, pastors may solemnize the marriage of a divorced person only when they are satisfied by careful counseling, that (1) the divorced person is sufficiently aware of the factors leading to the failure of the previous marriage, (2) the divorced person is sincerely preparing to make the proposed marriage truly Christian, and (3) sufficient time has elapsed between the divorce and the contemplated marriage for adequate preparation and counseling."

Did you note a little difference? Both are quotes from the Methodist Discipline. The difference is that the first quotation is from the 1904 edition, and the second is from the 1972 edition. Neither edition is the true standard for determining faith or practice – only God's word can do that - but at least the 1904 edition far more closely represents what God's Word says in Matthew 19:9: "And I say to you, whoever divorces his wife, except for immorality, and marries another woman commits adultery." The 1904 edition forbids a minister to perform a wedding ceremony for a person who is divorced, unless the divorce was for adultery. The 1972 edition rubs out that ruling, and says that under certain conditions the minister can ignore both the Discipline and the Bible.

The Discipline is titled "The Constitution of the Methodist Church" on page 9 of the edition I have. I would rather consider the Bible to be the constitution of the church than a man-made creed that changes from time to time. God's law has not changed, but the church's law has changed. This is typical of virtually every denomination that exists, as their laws change over time to reflect the changes in society, but God's word is not determined by a majority vote! Catholic doctrine has changed, Mormon doctrine has changed, Episcopal doctrine has

changed, Baptist doctrine has changed...well, you get the point. Would it not be better to be a part of a church that accepts only God's Word as its constitution, its creed, and its rule of practice? Such churches do exist.

For emphasis, let me repeat the earlier citation of Matthew 15:9: "But in vain do they worship me, Teaching as their doctrines the precepts of men." It would do us well to give heed to that clear teaching from Jesus Christ.

With respect to inspiration, i.e. the revelation of the mind of God to man, the apostle Paul writes: "For who among men knows the thoughts of a man except the spirit of the man which is in him? Even so the thoughts of God no one knows except the Spirit of God. Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, so that we may know the things freely given to us by God, which things we also speak, not in words taught by human wisdom, but in those taught by the Spirit, combining spiritual thoughts with spiritual words. But a natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually appraised. But he who is spiritual appraises all things, yet he himself is appraised by no one. **For who has known the mind of the Lord, that he will instruct him?** But we have the mind of Christ" (1 Corinthians 2:11-16). The point is very clear in the foregoing passage. The Holy Spirit has revealed the mind of God. This is God's wisdom, not man's. But some evidently think their wisdom is better than God's wisdom. Oh, they may accept some of what the Bible says, but in some areas they may disagree and then place their own wisdom above God's wisdom. But then the passage asks who is smart enough to give instruction to the Lord? Obviously no one would claim to do that, but in reality that is what they are doing when they reject anything that God has revealed. In effect, they are saying they know better than God, and he needs to accept their wisdom. What arrogance!

The completed revelation. In the closing days of Christ's time with his disciples, he made a promise to them. "I have many more things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. But when He, the Spirit of truth, comes, He will guide you into all the truth; for He will not speak on His own initiative, but whatever He hears, He will speak; and He will disclose to you what is to come" (John 16:12-13). Take note that he said the Spirit would reveal "all the truth." If that is true, then there is no "new truth" nor no "new doctrine" that would be revealed in the ages to come. In Jude we find a similar idea presented in these words: "Beloved, while I was making every effort to write you about our common salvation, I felt the necessity to write to you appealing that you contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all handed down to the saints" (Jude 3). "Once for all," meaning "the faith," the system of faith, was given in the first century for all time and for all people. If we can understand the language, that means no new revelations and no additions to "the faith once delivered" (**American Standard Version**).

Yet what do we see from men? As an example, here is evidence presented concerning the pope of the Roman Catholic Church. In the Roman Catholic dictionary by Lucius Ferraris, entitled **Prompta Bibliotheca Canonica**, Volume 6, pages 438, 442, there is an article entitled "Pope." Among the many claims concerning the person and authority of the pope is this: "The pope can modify divine law, since his power is not of man but of God."

Among the long list of new doctrines announced by various popes through the centuries are the following. Pouring officially substituted for immersion, 1311; Purgatory officially proclaimed as dogma by Council of Florence, 1438; Immaculate conception of Mary, 1584. We could go on for page after page of such changes. But if all these doctrines are true, and matters of faith, what happened to Christ's promise to the disciples in John 16 that all truth would be revealed to them? A publication from the Knights of Columbus, a Catholic organization is titled, "The Bible Is NOT Our Sole Guide," and features a chapter on "Inadequacy Of The Bible As The Sole Rule of Faith." This flies in the face of everything God said about his revelation!

But this must be the sentiment of every denomination that has books of doctrine besides the Bible. And these books all differ from the Bible, as they differ from one another. If all we had was the Bible, and we all followed it, then we would be **one body, one church**, in keeping with God's plan.

What did Christ pray for? Unity! "I do not ask on behalf of these alone, but for those also who believe in Me through their word; that they may all be one; even as You, Father, are in Me and I in You, that they also may be in Us, so that the world may believe that You sent Me" (John 17:20-21). What we have is division, not unity. Therefore we are not respecting Christ's prayer. The apostle Paul stated the matter in very simple language. "There is one body and one Spirit just as also you were called in one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all who is over all and through all and in all" (Ephesians 4:4-6). In modern thought,

there are thousands of bodies (churches), one Spirit, one Lord, many faiths, several baptisms and one God.

I have never heard of a preacher telling people to worship the god of their choice, or follow the lord of their choice. But time and time again the same preacher may tell people to go to the church of their choice, and choose the kind of baptism they desire (sprinkling, pouring, immersion, sprinkling rose petals, etc.) All this does is produce confusion and division, not the unity that Christ prayed for. Billboards encourage people to “go to the church of your choice.” Would it not better to encourage people to “go the church of God’s choice”?

Does the word of truth teach one church that Jesus is divine (John 1:1), but another church that he is not divine, but an angel (Jehovah’s Witnesses)? Does the word of truth teach one church that God is a spirit (John 4:24), and does not have a physical body (Luke 24:39), but then teach another church that Adam is now God and has a physical body in which he came to earth and had a sexual relationship with Mary, which produced Christ, which means she was not a virgin (Mormon church).?

Then we consider the case of the self-styled prophet of God, Joseph Smith. Concerning polygamy, he claimed he had a revelation from God on July 12, 1843 about “the new and everlasting covenant...including the plurality of wives.” (Doctrine and Covenants. 132, introduction) This “revelation” gave sanction to a plurality of wives, and “all those who have this law revealed unto them must obey the same” (132.3). This was a “new and an everlasting covenant; and if ye abide not in that covenant, then are ye damned” (v. 4). Therefore, this “everlasting covenant” enjoins upon Mormons polygamy. Smith had some 25 or more wives, including a 14-year-old girl.

Many years later, after the Mormons had migrated to Utah Territory, they applied for statehood. The US Congress said they would allow this if the Mormon Church would outlaw polygamy. So...the Mormon presidents simply changed the rules and rescinded the “everlasting covenant.”

“Inasmuch as laws have been enacted by Congress forbidding plural marriages,... I hereby declare my intention to submit to those laws, and to use my influence with the members of the Church over which I preside to have them do likewise.

There is nothing in my teachings to the Church or in those of my associates, during the time specified, which can be reasonably construed to inculcate or encourage polygamy; and when any Elder of the Church has used language which appeared to convey any such teaching, he has been promptly reprovved. And I now publicly declare that my advice to the Latter-day Saints is to refrain from contracting any marriage forbidden by the law of the land. “ Wilford Woodruff – President of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. (1889 Quotes from church archives)

If what Joseph Smith wrote was an “everlasting covenant,” and those who did not abide in it would be damned, then what happened to allow Woodruff to change it?

We could go on page after page citing countless examples of church doctrines that contradict one another, as well as contradicting the Bible. If this is not what God wants, then it must be the product of the influence of Satan, who is the source of all sin, which includes division and departing from the simple truth that is contained in God’s word.

Second John 9 encourages us to be very careful about God’s Word: “Anyone who goes too far and does not abide in the teaching of Christ, does not have God; the one who abides in the teaching, he has both the Father and the Son.”

Friend, let us be careful to accept the mind and wisdom of God, for he is our Creator and our Savior. Let his wisdom and revelation be our guide. “For My thoughts are not your thoughts, Nor are your ways My ways,” declares the LORD. “For as the heavens are higher than the earth, So are My ways higher than your ways And My thoughts than your thoughts” (Isaiah 55:8-9).

Question: Why would **anyone** presume to add doctrines, subtract or change anything that God has written? **They are not God!** I don’t understand why God’s Word is not sufficient. Consider the words of the inspired apostle Paul: “Every scripture inspired of God is also profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for instruction which is in righteousness. That the man of God may be complete, furnished completely unto every good work” (2 Timothy 3:16-17). So...why isn’t that sufficient? “Do not add to His words Or He will reprove you, and you will be

proved a liar" (Proverbs 30:6).

The Anvil—God's Word

Last eve I passed beside a blacksmith's door,
And heard the anvil ring the vesper chime;
Then, looking in, I saw upon the floor
Old hammers, worn with beating years of time.
"How many anvils have you had," said I,
"To wear and batter all these hammers so?"
"Just one," said he, and then, with twinkling eye,
"The anvil wears the hammers out, you know."
And so, thought I, the anvil of God's Word,
For ages skeptic blows have beat upon;
Yet, though the noise of falling blows was heard,
The anvil is unharmed---the hammers gone.

I Have Never Sinned

Mike Thomas | Beaver Dam, Kentucky, USA

Here is a list of things I have found to be true, unfortunately, either through experience or observation, regarding sin. As a result, I have never sinned...

Without Regretting It

Sin brings a dark chasm to our soul. It fills our heart with fear and shame; with dread and terror; with sorrow and regret. It is as David said, "For my iniquities have gone over my head; like a heavy burden they are too heavy for me. My wounds are foul and festering because of my foolishness. I am troubled, I am bowed down greatly; I go mourning all the day long" (Psalm 38:4-6). When I am honest with myself, I have found the same to be true with my own sins. They always result in disappointment, disgust, and despair.

Without Thinking of Self

I have never sinned without placing my own desires above God's will, since sin is the act of violating God's law. "Whoever commits sin also commits lawlessness, and sin is lawlessness" (1 John 3:4). It is the result of pursuing our own desires (James 1:14-15). Thus, gossip is a choice, hatred is a decision, lust is a desire, and lying is a response. If I am to be pleasing to God, I must put off "the old man which grows corrupt according to the deceitful lusts, and be renewed" in the spirit of my mind, and I must "put on the new man which was created according to God, in true righteousness and holiness" (Ephesians 4:22-24).

While Praying for Strength

God promises to give strength to those who ask Him for help in turning away from sin and ungodly desires. He says, "If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all liberally and without reproach, and it will be given to him" (James 1:5). I have never seen Him fail to keep that promise. He truly is a God who "gives power to the weak, and to those who have no might He increases strength" (Isaiah 40:29). But, let us be resolved in our own mind that we truly do want to resist the devil and put away wickedness. If we are not committed to coming out of the world and being separate, the prayer for strength and wisdom will not benefit us. We will be "like a wave of the sea driven and tossed by the wind. For let not that man suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord; he is a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways" (James 1:6-8).

Without Separating Myself From God

Sin results in spiritual separation from God. Even the prophet of old said, "The soul who sins will die" (Ezek. 18:4). He was referring to the same thing Paul referred to when he said the "wages of sin is death" (Romans 6:23). No one has ever sinned without experiencing that result. When Adam and Eve sinned, they were cast out of the Garden of Eden. When we sin, we are also removed from fellowship with God. If left unchanged, we will be eternally separated from Him in the "second death" (Revelation 20:14). No sin is worth those consequences, especially when we may "come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need" (Hebrews 4:16). There is no reason for us to remain in sin.

Facing Your Enemies

Sean P. Cavender | Raymore, Missouri, USA

The Scriptures teach us to pray without ceasing (1 Thessalonians 5:17). The Lord Jesus Christ gave ample instruction about how we are to pray (Luke 11:1-4; 18:1-14). Yet, we do not pray as we should. There is a void in our life because we choose to not pray. Do we go days, or even weeks without praying? Then, maybe when we finally do choose to pray we feel a tinge of guilt. We know we should have been praying more often and regularly, but then we feel like our falling short of praying is a reflection upon how God will react to our prayers. Will He not listen because we are just now returning to praying to Him?

Sometimes in the moment of temptation we need to pray like we never have before. Maybe we need to pray the hardest we ever have when there is illness in our family. We need to take the “prayer of last resort.”

“And call upon me in the day of trouble: I will deliver thee, and thou shalt glorify me,” (Psalm 50:15).

The Prayer of a Busy Man

Hezekiah was king of Judah and he was a mostly good king. We can read of an occasion when he was trying to deliver Judah from the Assyrians, and he made an alliance that he felt was sure and certain (2 Kings 18:15-16). When Assyria was a strong presence in Palestine, having taken the 10 northern tribes and brought the fortified cities of Judah into captivity, Hezekiah sought to form an alliance to bring relief to Judah. Self-preservation was his concern. Hezekiah gave Sennacherib all the silver in the temple and the gold that was in the temple.

He did not first turn to God like he should have. He had more confidence in his alliance with Assyria than he did in Jehovah. He acted without consulting God.

Yet, we do the same far too often. We allow work to be our number one priority in life. Or we seek to make certain that we are taken care of – we want more and more stuff to have a secure life. We are more concerned about the things of this world than we are spiritual matters. But Hezekiah learned of his mistake. He then humbly prayed to God, seeking His protection and aid (2 Kings 19:14-19).

We then can read of when Hezekiah was told that he would die (2 Kings 20:1-7). At this time there is no hesitation on Hezekiah's part. He turns to God in prayer! Even when we may be busying trusting in ourselves, mortality is eye opening. That is certainly a time that we need to pray to God. When we begin to realize that our life is like a vapor and will be gone sooner rather than later, then we need to turn to God (James 4:13-16).

The Prayer of a Prideful Man

We can also read of Manasseh in the Old Testament. Manasseh was a terribly wicked king, leading Judah to the depths of unrighteousness (2 Chronicles 33:3-9). He led to open rebellion, idolatry, and bloodshed in Judah.

He was led off by captors, but he turned to God (2 Chronicles 33:11-17). But even this wicked man, when he prayed, the Lord was moved and heard his entreaty.

Even when we have sinned, we need to turn to God. We must repent of sin and pray to God. Christians can repent and pray to God (Acts 8:22-24), knowing that God is merciful and willing to forgive (1 John 1:9). If the prayer of repentance were the last prayer to come off your lips then it was a good prayer! Not only was it a good prayer, it was the prayer that was needed the most.

The Prayer of an Idle Man

Nehemiah was a man that we know led Israel to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem. We praise him for his work and the efforts he made even in the midst of scoffers. He is the example of hard work, perseverance, and diligence.

Yet, when we are introduced to him, he was the king's cupbearer. He was not in Jerusalem; he was in the palace of the king. Apparently he only learned of the hardships in Jerusalem due to the reports given to the Persian king. He was not “in the trenches,” working. His story begins with a prayer of confessing his sins.

“Let thine ear now be attentive, and thine eyes open, that thou mayest hear the prayer of thy servant, which I pray before thee now, day and night, for the children of Israel thy servants, and confess the sins of the children of Israel, which we have sinned against thee: both I and my father's house have sinned

” (Nehemiah 1:6).

He prayed a prayer that prepared him to work for the Lord. He asked for the Lord's blessing (Nehemiah 1:8-11). Nehemiah knew he needed to be serving God, but he had been hindered by his other duties. He was idle in busying himself for the Lord's service.

Once he finished his prayer his attitude is summarized by “arise and build” (Nehemiah 2:20). A hindrance to our prayers is our own laziness, lethargy, and idleness.

Too many times we are lazy in the Lord's kingdom. We forget the benefit of praying and preparing ourselves to build up the church of Christ! In the New Testament the apostles prayed before preaching the gospel (Acts 4:31; 6:4, 6).

Do we not have success in our gospel meetings? Pray for success! Do we not have visitors to have Bible studies with? Pray for those opportunities!

Prayer is too important for us to neglect. We should pray without ceasing (1 Thessalonians 5:17). We need to pray, even if it is the last thing we do.

from the e-book, "And They Shall Become One Flesh"

Two Ships OR A Threefold Cord

William J. Stewart | Kingston, Ontario, Canada

Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their labor. For if they fall one will lift up his companion. But woe to him who is alone when he falls, for he has no one to help him. Again, if two lie down together, they will keep warm; but how can one be warm alone? Though one may be overpowered by another, two can withstand him. And a threefold cord is not quickly broken. (Ecclesiastes 4:9-12)

Spending Time Together

Think of the days when you and your spouse dated. What do you remember most from those days? What are the things that you would do together? It took time and togetherness to build a relationship; and it takes time and togetherness to maintain a relationship. Here's a list of possible activities that were part of the building process - they need to continue in the maintenance of your marriage:

- Going for walks;
- Playing board games, card games, etc.;
- Sharing long talks about things;
- Going out to movies;
- Sharing evenings with friends & family;
- Going to community events;
- etc., etc., etc.

We understand the need to continually deposit money in our bank accounts, in order to have funds available for withdrawal. Equally, we must make regular deposits of love, affection, attention and togetherness into our marriages, if we expect there to be anything there for withdrawal. As busy as life may be, as many things as there are which may demand our attention, we have a responsibility to build and maintain a successful marriage.

The law of Moses commanded,

When a man has taken a new wife, he shall not go out to war or be charged with any business; he shall be free at home one year, and bring happiness to his wife whom he has taken.
(Deuteronomy 24:5)

What an amazing law! God understood the importance of the relationship between man and wife, and implemented in His law a guarantee that the relationship would have an unhindered beginning. God's word goes on to affirm the need for them to grow in their relationship.

Let your fountain be blessed, and rejoice with the wife of your youth. As a loving deer and a graceful doe, let her breasts satisfy you at all times; and always be enraptured with her love. For why should you, my son be enraptured by an immoral woman, and be embraced in the arms of a seductress? (Proverbs 5:18-20)

If a couple does not share time and activities together, a door is open for their relationship to fall apart. Solomon warns about the possibility of a man's attention being turned to another woman if he and his wife do not delight in one another. Jesus clearly indicated that we must build our marriages, and not allow them to fall apart. He said,

Have you not read that He who made them at the beginning 'made them male and female,' and said, 'For this reason man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh'? So then, they are no longer two but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let not man separate. (Matthew 19:4-6)

Spending Time Together With The Lord

There are numerous Bible texts which speak of the importance for all people to be diligent students of God's word. Certainly, Bible reading can be an individual activity, but in the marriage relationship, there is the added delight of learning together.

That God wanted His word to be important among His people is evident. Hear His command to Israel:

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 lie down, and when you rise up. You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates. (Deuteronomy 6:6-9)

It is important that couples read together, study together, and pray together. What better way to make the threefold cord stronger, than for all three segments to interact together?

The Difficult Days

Keith Sharp | Mountain Home, Arkansas, USA

When I was a youngster I enjoyed hearing my dad preach on the book of Ecclesiastes. When he got to Ecclesiastes 12:1-7 and cleverly explained Solomon's poetic description of the debilities that accompany old age and eventual death, I thought it was quite funny. Now that I'm a "senior citizen," as my mother used to say, "Tain't funny, McGee!"

The preacher (Ecclesiastes 1:1) admonishes young people to enjoy life while they can, but to keep God in their lives, because childhood and youth are vain (11:7-11), that is, they are fleeting and temporary. Old folks often observe to uncomprehending young folks how quickly life flies by.

Then follows a sadly beautiful, poetic description of the advancing bodily decay that leads to eventual death (Ecclesiastes 12:1-7). Waves of trouble and sorrow follow one upon another (verse 2). The hands begin to tremble, the teeth fall out, the back and legs weaken and bend, the eyes grow dim (verse 3). Hearing fails, sleep is difficult and easily interrupted, and the voice fails (verse 4). The loss of balance causes fear of heights, the brave young man becomes a timid old man, the hair turns snowy white (or falls out), strength and bodily appetites fail (verse 5). The time comes to return to the "eternal home, and the mourners go about the street" (verse 5). Our most precious, earthly possession - life - is taken irremediably away. We will never walk this way again.

The silver cord is loosed, ... the golden bowl is broken, ... the pitcher shattered at the fountain, ... the wheel broken at the well. Then the dust will return to the earth as it was, And the spirit will return to God who gave it (verses 6-7).

Yes, that is sad, and Solomon so declares it. He encourages young people to remember God and thus to fully enjoy life "before the difficult days come, and the years draw near when you say, 'I have no pleasure in them'" (verse 1). The pains, difficulties, and troubles of advancing age make it very difficult to enjoy life. Add to this the facts that some are lonely and sad due to the loss of their spouse, some feel they are useless since they no longer have husband and children at home for whom they care, or they no longer work to provide for family, and life

can be very depressing.

So, what can old folks do? Paul described himself as “Paul, the aged” (Philemon verse 9). He had some sort of a bodily infirmity that gave him difficulty (2 Corinthians 12:7-10; Galatians 4:13-14), he apparently had poor eyesight (Galatians 4:15; 6:11), and he endured incredible suffering for the Lord (2 Corinthians 11:23-28). As his life neared its violent end (2 Timothy 4:6), he was in prison, virtually alone, and in need of a warm coat (2 Timothy 1:8; 4:9-13,20-21). At the time he wrote to the Philippians, he was in chains in prison (Philippians 1:12-14), he was being criticized by some of his brethren in Christ (Philippians 1:15-16), and he faced the imminent possibility of a violent, unjust death (Philippians 1:19-26).

But still he could truthfully assert, “I have learned in whatever state I am to be content” (Philippians 4:11-13). He advised the Philippians how to have peace and joy regardless of what life brought them (Philippians 4:4,8). The keys to peace and joy are complete dedication to Christ (Philippians 1:21), humble obedience to God and service to others (Philippians 2:3-10), spiritual mindedness (Philippians 3:8), gentleness to others (Philippians 4:4-5), prayer (Philippians 4:6-7), and mental focus on things that are good (Philippians 4:8), yes, a positive outlook on life. After all, the worst that can happen is death, and, for the faithful in Christ, that means we get to go and be with the Lord (Philippians 1:21).

Believing Prayer is an important tool to overcome anxiety and depression.

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 (Philippians 4:6-7).

We must leave our troubles with our loving Father in prayer, ask Him for what we think we need, and trust Him to do what is best for our salvation.

But our prayers must be accompanied with thanksgiving (Ibid). He has promised to supply what we need (Matthew 6:31-34), and He cannot lie (Titus 1:2). Instead of complaining (Philippians 2:14), thank the Lord for the freedom, prosperity, and security we have. Over the last twenty years I have had African preacher friends die suddenly of unknown maladies, be murdered, die in tragic accidents, and live on the edge of starvation. Yet most maintain cheerful, thankful attitudes. How can we complain?

Complete dedication to Christ means we will assemble with the brethren every time we can (Hebrews 10:19-25), and we will thus encourage each other to “love and good works” (verse 24). A focus on helping others takes our minds off our own troubles (Philippians 2:4). There is something each can do to be useful. The one talent man was condemned, not for having little ability, but for failing to use what he did have (Matthew 25:24-30).

Those still in “the prime of life” (Ecclesiastes 11:10, **New American Standard Bible**) need to consider the needs of those advanced in age (Philippians 2:5), show them respect (1 Peter 2:17; 5:5), and do things to help them meet the trials of aging. Include them in social activities, check on them, visit with them. Someday you will be like them.

The dark days must come for all. We will have days of loneliness, pain, sickness, and weakness. The silver cord will eventually be loosed for each. We must so live that we may echo Paul, “For me to live is Christ, and to die is gain.”

Parables of the Master

The Best Place

Keith Sharp | Mountain Home, Arkansas, USA

As the Lord was eating in the home of a ruler who was a Pharisee (Luke 14:1-6), He observed them, noticing the maneuvering each employed to obtain the petty honor of a better place at the table (verse 7).

In Jesus' day the Jews had accepted the Greek custom for placing dinner guests. Three low tables were arranged in the shape of a “U” with a flat bottom. The open end allowed the servants to easily serve all the guests. The diners reclined on couches with their feet outward, away from the table, and each leaned against the guest behind him. The guest of honor, usually a rabbi, was seated at the center of the middle table. The closer a guest sat to

him, the more honored he was. The Pharisees, in their vain pride, competed for the best places (Matthew 23:6; Luke 14:7).

Luke observes that the Master “told a parable” to them (verse 7). What follows is not a story with a spiritual application as in other parables. Rather, the Lord simply gave some practical advice concerning attending wedding feasts capped by a proverbial expression He used repeatedly. But the Lord wasn’t so much interested in where each of them reclined at a feast as He was in the spiritual principle this illustrated. Thus, His brief message was a parable in the sense of “an example by which a doctrine or precept is illustrated” (Thayer. 479).

Avoiding directly criticizing their efforts to occupy the best places at this feast, He advised them how to seek a place at a wedding feast (verses 8-10). If you take the most honorable place, you might be humiliated when a more important guest arrives, and the host directs you before all the guests to take a less honorable place. Since all the more important places would already be taken, you would suffer the embarrassment of having to take the lowest place as all watched your “come uppance” in amusement. Conversely, if you take the least honorable place, you will be honored before those assembled when the host calls you “friend” and asks you to take a more important place.

The Master interpreted His advice for the guests at this feast and for us. In doing so He stated one of the great principles of the heavenly kingdom. “For whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted” (verse 11; cf. Matthew 23:12; Luke 18:14). It summarizes proverbial advice Solomon gave (Proverbs 25:6-7).

After James and John had sought the distinction of sitting on the Lord’s right and left hands in His kingdom, causing the other apostles to react indignantly (Matthew 20:20-24; Mark 10:35-41), the Master taught the principle of greatness in His kingdom.

But Jesus called them to Himself and said, ‘You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and those who are great exercise authority over them. ‘Yet it shall not be so among you; but whoever desires to become great among you, let him be your servant. ‘ And whoever desires to be first among you, let him be your slave-- ‘just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many (Matthew 20:25-28; cf. Mark 10:42-45).

Greatness in the kingdom of Christ is the exact opposite of that in the nations of men. It is measured by humble service rather than honorable position.

Jesus Christ Himself is the paramount example. After His last Passover, the Master removed His robes, wrapped Himself with a towel, washed the disciples’ feet, and directed them to follow His example (John 13:3-5,12-17). The Master portrayed in this act of humble service the greatest of all deeds of humility - His own renouncement of the glory and honor of divinity to walk upon earth as a man, a servant, a humble, obedient servant, and to suffer in service for us the greatest humiliation, the death of the cross (Philippians 2:5-8).

We express the mind of humility in the same way Christ Jesus did. When we promote peace and unity among our brothers and sisters in Christ, looking out for the good of others, not our own selfish interests, we are demonstrating the mind of Christ, the mind of humility (Philippians 2:1-4). We must be as Paul, to whom the prospect of a violent death as the result of seeking to instill faith in others brought joy (Philippians 2:17-18). We should imitate Timothy, who sincerely was interested in the welfare of his brothers and sisters (Philippians 2:19-24). We should follow Epaphroditus, who gladly served Paul though he was so sick he almost died and was sorrowful only at the heartache his suffering would cause his brothers and sisters in Christ (Philippians 2:25-30).

But we as Christ Jesus also show our humility by willing obedience to the Father (Philippians 2:12-13). We must do this without complaining and arguing (Philippians 2:14). Both of these sins of the tongue are the result of selfishness rather than humility. Complaining demonstrates a lack of gratitude toward God, and arguing shows a lack of love for others. By humble obedience we become “lights in the world,” showing Christ to others in word and life (Philippians 2:15-16).

Because Jesus so humbled Himself:

Therefore God also has highly exalted Him and given Him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those in heaven, and of those on earth, and of those under the earth, and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father (Philippians 2:9-11).

If we will likewise humble ourselves to obey and serve, God will exalt us with His Son.

To willingly obey God regardless of the cost and to gladly serve others no matter how demeaning the service with no regard for self is real humility. It is the mind of Christ. If we are to be exalted with Him, we must humble ourselves as He did (James 4:10; 1 Peter 5:5-7). "For whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted."

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