

Maintaining Spiritual Momentum

**ON
TO
MATURITY**

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INTRODUCTION

A WORD ABOUT THE COURSE

As a sequel to *Living God's Way*, the study course for new Christians, *On to Maturity* is to take the believer into the next stage of spiritual development. You will need a New International Version edition of the Bible, a notebook, and a pencil.

The ground covered here is not as broad as in the earlier course. It is not possible to do justice to such aspects of truth as church life or prophetic scriptures, but it is hoped that these will be covered in subsequent study courses. The emphasis here is on personal growth and living for Christ in an alien society.

Living God's Way was designed for use in a local church setting where the new Christian is being personally disciplined. This is not so important with *On to Maturity*, and although it would be ideal to have someone older in the faith take you through, you will gain much through working on your own. But do seek the help of a leader or older Christian if you are stuck with a problem.

With each study there is a memory verse. May I encourage you to embrace this self-discipline? If your memory is poor, this exercise will work wonders. And developing the habit of memorizing key scriptures will prove over the years to be a great blessing in your life. The best method is to write the memory verse (including the scripture reference) on a small card that you can slip in your pocket. If there is another version of the Bible that you are more familiar with than the NIV, memorize from that version. And keep refreshing your memory on the verse you have learned. Constant rehearsing is the secret of memorizing.

The "Homework" tends to be practical rather than theoretical. Often it will demand more than simply acquiring head knowledge. You will need to seek God over the issues that are presented.

At the end of each study is an item called "For Further Study." This is to meet the insatiable appetite of those Oliver Twist students who always "come back for more." It's an optional extra, which is a little more demanding than the "Homework," with fewer references to guide your thinking.

May God bless you as you go through this course, bringing you into that spiritual maturity that has always been God's purpose for you since you came to Christ.

INTRODUCING THE THEME

"Fred, put your toys away and get ready for supper."

There comes no reply. A voice speaks a little more loudly, "Did you hear what I said, Fred?"

"Don't want any supper," mumbles Fred, continuing to play with his Lego toys.

"Whether you want it or not," replies his mother, "put your toys away."

You may think this is a typical exchange between mother and child until you learn that Fred is not an eight-year-old, but a young man of twenty-five, who is only eight years old mentally.

Alan was above average intelligence and eager to go to the university. But you would never think that he had seen eighteen summers. He was less than five feet tall, with a round boyish face that had never felt the touch of a razor. His parents told me how concerned they were to find the

treatment that would enable their boy to develop physically. What a heartache it is to the parents when the growth of their child is arrested mentally or physically.

Susan was strong-willed and stubborn. Her school friends found it hard to cope with her tantrums and self-centeredness. Three years ago she was converted to Christ. Now she goes to meetings instead of discos, but in lots of ways she's still the same old Sue. She has had plenty of teaching, but is still an up-and-down type of Christian. Her friends still find her self-willed and lapsing into moodiness if she doesn't have her way. She has picked up the spiritual jargon very well, can pray quite nicely and talk about spiritual things, but her behavior is not all that different from her unbelieving friends. If she is born into God's family she is certainly not growing up.

There are many children of God like this who are a heartache to their heavenly Father.

Often there is nothing that medical science can do for the mentally and physically retarded. But what about those who are spiritually backward? Is this like a club foot-something that you're born with and have to live with? No, that is not what the Bible teaches. God is not a tyrant. He doesn't set us a standard that we cannot keep or give us commands that we cannot obey. He gives us grace to grow and expects us to do so. Whatever our background, upbringing, or temperament. He holds us responsible for our immaturity.

If we are stunted believers we will lose out both in time and in eternity. We will deprive the church and the world of the blessing that would have been, had we matured. But more importantly, we shall thwart God's purpose in saving us and rob Him of His portion in our lives.

In our opening study we shall take a close look at the symptoms of spiritual immaturity. That should help us to discover where we are. Then in Section 1 we will consider what the Christian is as *The New Person in Christ* and how we may develop in every area of our renewed being. Section 2, *Growing Strong in God*, will touch a number of very practical areas that vitally affect our spiritual growth. Finally, in Section 3, *Living in the World*, we face the fact that the environment in which we are called to live for God is not "home" to us. In fact, it is antagonistic to the claims of Christ. But God has designed that this is the setting in which we are to fulfill our calling. Amazingly, he uses it to hone us, shape us, and mature us for our heavenly destiny.

STUDY 1

Facing Our Immaturity

Read Hebrews 5:11-6:3

Signs of Immaturity

God's simple plan for His children is that the crisis of new birth is followed by the process of spiritual growth, leading to a state of spiritual maturity. But it is possible for the process to be arrested. The Christians addressed in our reading (Heb. 5:11 -6:3), although truly born into God's family, had not grown up spiritually. They were behaving like spiritual babies. No one minds if a twelve-month-old toddler is constantly falling over, drooling, spitting out his food, or bursting into tears. But what if a teenager behaved like that? The writer of Hebrews knew those believers were not growing up in their spiritual understanding because he was finding it hard to teach them anything more than their spiritual ABCs, which he calls "elementary truths." No wonder he was urging them, "Go on to maturity."

It is serious not to be growing, but even more serious when we do not recognize that this is so. It is possible to be gaining knowledge about the Bible, to be talking or even praying in spiritual language, and yet not to be really growing. The passage from Hebrews gives us five marks of spiritual immaturity.

1. Having to Lay Again the Foundation of Repentance

The writer tells these Christians that not only are they not yet ready for more advanced teaching, but that they need to learn their "alphabet" all over again (5:12).

A few verses later (6:1) he says he wants them to be able to leave their ABCs "and go on to maturity, not laying again the foundation of repentance." He was likening their Christian lives to a building under construction, with repentance part of the foundation. It seems they were constantly having to dig up the foundation and lay it again, so that after all this time, the building had made little progress.

Let's take repentance. Do you find the same old temptations are flooring you? Are you having to repent over and over for the same sins? That could mean your foundation of repentance has not been laid thoroughly. You may be using the right words as you confess your sin to God, but are you repenting from the heart and really turning away from that sin? Failure to do so is a common mark of immaturity.

2. Unable to Share the Truth With Others

"By this time you ought to be teachers" (v. 12), says the writer. Was he being a bit tough on these Christians? No, he was not saying they should all be able to teach the congregation. He was saying that part of growing up spiritually is becoming confident about what we have learned and able to share it personally with others.

It is not just teachers, preachers, and leaders who are called to share in this sense. God wants all His children to be able to share. Read Hebrews 3:13 and 10:25. The word "encourage" (NIV) in these scriptures may also mean "exhort." First Thessalonians 5:11 says the same thing and teaches us that our sharing will "build each other up."

Let's look at an example. When encountering a fellow Christian who I know is going through tough times, I share with him the thought that God doesn't always or immediately change our circumstances. What He says is, "My grace is sufficient for you" (2 Cor. 12:9). In other words,

God's resources are available to give him victory in his situation. A very simple thought, but God speaks through it, and the man goes on his way strengthened and encouraged.

3. Unable to Take Solids

"You need milk, not solid food!" (v. 12), says the writer. He felt these Christians had known the Lord long enough to be able to understand the more advanced teaching he was bringing them. But they were saying, "It's too deep. We can't understand it. Please just give us the simple truths of the gospel."

Here then is another test of whether you are growing spiritually. You learned some simple truths when you first came to Christ-Jesus died for your sins, you have eternal life. He has gone to prepare a home for you in heaven, and so on. Do you have an appetite only for these basic principles, or do you find you're able to manage a much more solid diet without suffering spiritual indigestion? If not, do believe as you go through these studies. God will enable you to digest the solid food they contain.

4. Unable to Use the Word of Righteousness

"Not acquainted with the teaching about righteousness" (v. 13) is better rendered, "unskilled in the word of righteousness" (RSV). This has the thought of Scripture being a tool or a weapon that these believers should have been trained to handle. The fact that this was not so was another indication of their immaturity.

They did not know how to use the Word in meditation and to feed themselves spiritually. They didn't know how to use it to instruct and help others with their problems. They didn't know how to bring comfort to the sorrowful or counsel to the perplexed. Nor did they know how to use the Word in intercession, by pleading its promises with God. In short, they didn't know how to wield Scripture as "the sword of the Spirit" (Eph. 6:17) to drive back the attacks of Satan.

Ability to handle the Word of God practically is an important part of maturing. Pray that as you go through this course God will make you skillful in using the Word of righteousness.

The passage in Hebrews tells us that the mature "by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil" (v. 14). He who is immature is not able to do this and may easily be influenced and led astray.

A business friend persuades a young Christian to join her in a business venture which looks very attractive but is not fully honest. He falls for this temptation because he is not able to discern wrongdoing.

Someone comes to an immature believer's door and leaves him literature which contains sound Bible teaching. It all seems right and reasonable, but he fails to detect the falsehood. Scripture warns us not to be led astray by "false teachers" who will bring in "destructive heresies" (2 Pet. 2:1).

Paul teaches something very similar when he speaks of us all becoming mature: "Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming" (Eph. 4:14). When a young Christian is "tossed back and forth" by various teachings, he becomes unstable and insecure. In the early years of our Christian lives older Christians will be able to protect us and guide us in these areas, but we must not be satisfied to remain spiritual toddlers to be watched at every turn. We must grow up.

How You Hear Is the Key

We have looked at the signs that these Christians were not growing up, but what was the reason for their arrested development? The answer is found in the opening verse of our Scripture reading. It says they were "slow to learn." Older versions translate this more literally as "dull of hearing." That did not mean they needed a hearing aid! The meaning has to do with the "spiritual" ear, which enables the heart (rather than the head) to hear and understand. Jesus often spoke of this kind of hearing (Matt. 13:9; Rev. 2:7). The apostle's statement did not mean the Hebrew Christians had not had the right teaching. They had, in fact, been well taught in the basics of Christian living but had not properly taken it in. It did not mean they were lacking in human intelligence. Natural wisdom is not the key to spiritual understanding. See what Jesus had to say about this (Matt. 11:25-26).

Is your hearing of God's Word sharp or dull? This decides whether or not you are really growing up. Let us look at the parable of the sower (Luke 8:5-15). Some of his seed fell along the path, some on rocky ground, some among thorns, and some on good soil. Each brought different results. This parable is not meant to teach us how to scatter the seed but how to receive the seed; that is, how to hear God's Word. Jesus explained (vv. 11-15) that the different soils pictured how different people hear the Word (vv. 18-23).

The well-trodden path depicts the hard heart that doesn't respond to God's Word. The rocky ground speaks of the unbelieving heart. The ground is so full of rocks of unbelief that there is little room for the soil of faith. The thorny patch speaks of the divided heart, which is affected by life's worries, riches, and pleasures. These suffocate the good seed trying to grow up. Of these, Jesus says, "They do not mature" (v. 14). Finally, the good soil speaks of the noble and good heart that produces a crop.

What we learn from this parable is that the state of our heart determines how we hear. If you have been listening to God's Word but not growing, then it has something to do with your spiritual hearing. No wonder Jesus concluded the parable with these important words, "Take heed then how you hear" (v. 18 RSV). Your assignment in the second part of the homework is to practice listening for God's voice.

Memorize:

Therefore let us leave the elementary teachings about Christ and go on to maturity (Heb. 6:1).

Homework

1. Look first at the five signs of immaturity. Write down in your notebook which of them you feel are true of you. If you believe God is going to use this course to help you grow up, then confess that to Him now. It is always important to confess what we believe. Now take these marks of immaturity to God one by one, asking Him to begin to change you in each of these areas before you complete this course.
2. Turn again to the parable of the sower in Luke 8: 5-15. Write down in your notebook what Jesus said about each kind of soil. It will not be easy to recognize which soil (or soils) is a picture of your heart. The reason for this is given in Jeremiah 17:9. The heart is so deceitful it can even deceive its owner. The way through is given in verse 10. Instead of trying to search your own heart, let God do it for you. Pray the prayer of David in Psalm 139:23-24 and believe for change.

For Further Study

"Unable to use the word of righteousness" was one sign of immaturity in these Hebrew Christians. We saw God's Word was like a tool or weapon that can be used in several ways. Make a list of those ways. It's a good idea to have a notebook handy when you read the Bible and to write out complete scriptures that fall under these headings. In this way, you can build a reference collection of scriptures that will help you to be skilled "in the word of righteousness."

We can make valuable use of the "word of righteousness" by pleading God's promises in our intercession. Read chapters 14-16 of John.

1. Write down all the "asking" promises Jesus gave.
2. Note how many times He said we must ask in His name.
3. What do you think Jesus' teaching means? Give practical examples.

SECTION 1

THE NEW PERSON

STUDY 2

A MAN IN CHRIST

Read John 14:15-21 and 15:1-10

Introduction

"In Christ" was a favorite expression of the apostle Paul, and he was the only New Testament writer to use the expression "Christ in you." What do these phrases really mean? "In Christ" is another way of describing a Christian. Paul describes himself as "a man in Christ" (2 Cor. 12:2). Earlier in that letter he said, "If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!" (2 Cor. 5:17). We will discover that these expressions tell us much more – something of what it really means to be a Christian.

Jesus Said It First

It was not Paul but Jesus who first spoke in this way, saying to His disciples, "You are in me, and I am in you." On the night before He went to the cross. He was preparing His disciples for the moment when He would be forcibly taken from them. He promised that the Holy Spirit would come to them (John 14:16) and that the Spirit would more than fill the enormous gap left by His departure. He wanted them to know the sacred relationship He now had with them was not about to end but would shortly enter an even more wonderful phase.

It was at this point that Jesus made three mysterious statements the disciples found difficult to understand. In the first He said, "Before long, the world will not see me anymore, but you will see me" (v. 19). He was promising them spiritual sight. Then He said, "Because I live, you also will live." That meant a supply of spiritual life. Finally He said, "On that day you will realize that I am in my Father, and you are in Me, and I am in you" (v. 20). That pointed to spiritual union.

Before we look at these three statements, did you notice how the last one began "On that day ..."? To what day was He referring? Look back to verses 16-17. You will see He had been telling about the coming of the Holy Spirit. So "that day" was the day of Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit came upon the disciples. Pentecost is not only a past event but a present experience. Have you experienced it? Has the Holy Spirit come upon you? If not, ask a mature Spirit-filled Christian to help you and pray with you for this. Promises like those found in Luke 11:13, John 7:37, and Acts 1:8 are for you to claim. You cannot experience the full reality of what Jesus says in those passages without the indwelling of the Holy Spirit.

Spiritual Sight

What Jesus said was that when He had gone. His disciples would still see Him – with the eyes of faith. This is one of the wonderful characteristics of our relationship with Christ. Though we do not see Him physically, He is as real to us as if we did. It is by faith that we have this spiritual sight. Peter said, "Even though you do not see him now [physically], you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy" (1 Pet. 1:8). The world may say, "Seeing is believing," but the Christian declares, "Believing is seeing." If you lose sight of Jesus, or if your

vision of Him fades, you are certainly suffering from defective faith. You will need to find out why. With renewed faith comes renewed vision. It's vision that makes Jesus real.

Spiritual Life

"Because I live," Jesus said, "you also will live." Jesus had often warned the disciples of His coming death and promised that He would rise again. But they had been too afraid to absorb His words. Now He was telling them that this resurrection life would not be for Him alone but for them, too. It was important for them to know that fact when witnessing to a hostile world. It is equally important for us. Note how Paul prayed for the believers of his day: "That the eyes of your heart may be enlightened [that's spiritual sight] in order that you may know ... his incomparably great power for us who believe. That power is like the working of his mighty strength, which he exerted in Christ when he raised him from the dead" (Eph. 1:18-20). This power is "for us who believe." "God . . . made us alive with Christ" by the same resurrection power (Eph. 2:1-5) when we were born again.

You may say, "Yes, I've had that experience, but it's keeping it up that bothers me." Here the words of Jesus are so reassuring. He tells the disciples they will continue to enjoy the flow of His resurrection life. In effect He says, "Because I go on living, you also will go on living, by My resurrection life." Perhaps the disciples were thinking to themselves, "It sounds wonderful, but how will it work?" Jesus went on to explain.

Spiritual Union

"On that day you will realize that I am in my Father, and you are in me, and I am in you" (John 14:20). On that day, when the Holy Spirit would come to teach them, they would fully understand. At that point one thing was clear: He was telling them, "You will have the same relationship with Me as I have had with My Father. Just as I have been in My Father, so you will be in Me." Wow! The relationship He enjoyed with His Father was one they had watched with envy all the time they had been with Him. God seemed so close, so real to Jesus. To think that they could now have that kind of relationship with Him!

Jesus then, as He so often did, went on to make use of picture language. He used the wonderful parable of the vine and the branches (John 15) to explain this new relationship. It illustrates perfectly our union with Christ.

A Vine-Branch Relationship

He had said, "Because I live, you also will live." Now He says, "I am the vine; you are the branches" (v. 5). Do the branches have any expectation of life apart from the vine? Could they continue to live if the vine died? Now we begin to see the truth we share in Christ's resurrection (Col. 3:1). In the words of an old hymn:

Moment by moment I'm kept in His love,
Moment by moment I've life from above.

Notice that Jesus didn't say "I am the trunk," but "I am the vine." In fact, a vine has very little trunk. It's nearly all branches. Jesus is the whole vine. When we are born again, we are united with Him and become part of Him. Is it not true that the branches are in the vine and the vine in the branches? It is equally true that we are in Christ and He is in us.

Since we are part of Christ, "we have come to share in Christ" (Heb. 3:14). Just as everything the vine has is for the branches, so all that Jesus has is for us. Scripture says all the fulness of God dwells in Him (Col. 1:19). That fulness is available to us (Col. 2:9-10) and is all we will ever

need to live the Christian life. The apostle John spoke about it when he said, "From the fulness of his grace we have all received one blessing after another" (John 1:16).

The One Purpose

This wonderful relationship between vine and branch is not just to make the branches feel good. Jesus said His Father is the Gardener. Why does a gardener take so much trouble to cultivate his vine? He wants grapes. (Count how many times the word "fruit" occurs in verses 1-16.) But what is fruit? All fruit is the product of life, and the fruit that God wants can only come from the life of Jesus flowing through us. God is looking for the fruit of Christian character (Gal. 5:22-23) – what we are in Christ. He is also looking for the fruit of Christian service (Col. 1:6,10) – what we do for Christ.

Maintain the Union

According to Jesus, the one who remains in Him bears fruit. The word "remain" (or abide) occurs again and again in the parable. It is the key to our part in the fruit-bearing process. If you as a Christian are not bearing fruit, what, according to this verse, are you failing to do?

To the command, "Remain in me," Jesus adds by way of explanation, "No branch can bear fruit by itself." For the first years of my Christian life, I tried hard to prove that Jesus was mistaken. As a Christian, surely I could now bear fruit. I must pray a little more, read the Bible more often, try a little harder. God had to use the discipline of failure to bring me to cry out of desperation, "Oh God, I can't." Only then could I see that nothing but His life flowing through me, as the sap flows out to the branches, could produce fruit.

I began to understand what union with Christ really meant – a life of dependence on Him for everything. "Remain in Me" could only mean to maintain this living union by an attitude of trust. I saw how often an attitude of "I've got what it takes" had replaced a childlike trust. I could see that faith releases the "life sap" and unbelief cuts it off. See how even Paul had to learn this lesson of his own weakness and of God's wonderful sufficiency (2 Cor. 12:9).

Memorize:

Remain in me, and I will remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me (John 15:4).

Homework

1. John 15:2 speaks of God as the Gardener pruning fruitful branches. In what ways does He do this? See John 15:3; Ephesians 5:25-26; and Hebrews 12:9-11. Write down any experiences you have had of this pruning operation, and what you believe it has accomplished. Follow the Psalmist and acknowledge God's goodness in this. See Psalm 119:66-68.
2. Read about two disciples of Christ in Luke 10:38-42. Compare them with the two kinds of believers Jesus talked about in John 15, the one who remains in Christ and produces fruit, and the one who does not. Write down in your notebook the reasons why you think Jesus commended Mary rather than Martha. Would you qualify for Mary's commendation?

3. We saw that the greatest hindrance to maintaining our union with Christ is an attitude of independence and self-sufficiency and that God uses the discipline of failure to make us realize this. Write down what you think is the cause of this attitude in us, and how we should deal with it. (If, after a good think, you are without ideas, see if you find Proverbs 16:18 and 1 Peter 5:6 helpful.)

For Further Study

We saw that even Paul had to come to a place where he acknowledged his weakness and dependence on God. Turn to Romans 7:14-25, where he describes his struggle with indwelling sin. Note the verses in which he speaks of his perplexity as to why he behaved the way he did.

1. Write out the verse in which Paul acknowledges his total inability to live a life that pleases God. Compare this with two statements Jesus made in John 15:4-5.
2. Write out the verse that records Paul's desperate cry for deliverance.
3. Turn to Romans 8:1-4 and describe in your own words the great deliverance he discovered.

STUDY 3

THE MIND RENEWED

Read Hebrews 12:1-3

That Think Tank

There's a verse that says of man, "For as he thinks within himself, so he is" (Prov. 23:7 NASB). Someone has put it this way:

You are not what you think you are,
But what you think – you are!

In other words, if we had an electrical device that could throw your thought life onto a screen for all to see, everyone would know what kind of a person you are. Ouch!

Our minds are the seedplots of our lives.

Sow a thought, reap an act.
Sow an act, reap a habit.
Sow a habit, reap a character.
Sow a character, reap a destiny.

No wonder that when Satan attacked Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, he aimed first at their minds, sowing distrust in their thinking about God (Gen. 3:4-5). He is still at the same game.

The Mind Needs Converting

Since our minds, as well as every other part of us, were marred by sin, it is not surprising that salvation involves a complete turnaround in our thinking. Scripture tells us the mind of the unbeliever is:

- Defiled and corrupted (Titus 1:15)
- Blinded by Satan (2 Cor. 4:4)
- Hostile toward God (Col. 1:21)

Despite all this, through the gospel God appeals to man's intellect. He says, "Come now, let us reason together" (Isa. 1:18). He wants men to know the good news is neither unreasonable nor illogical. Sometimes the seed falls on hard ground, and the devil snatches it away. That's when men hear, but don't understand (Matt. 13:19). Salvation doesn't call for blind faith but reasoned faith.

In the change of mind that takes place at conversion, man has his part to play and God has His. Man is required to repent, which means to rethink. It's more than saying you're sorry. It's a change of mind leading to a change of course. We are to obey the call, "Let the wicked forsake his way and the evil man his thoughts" (Isa. 55:7). God, for His part, promises, "I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts" (Jer. 31:33). So before we start living God's way, we have to start thinking God's way.

This is the beginning of what the Bible calls "the renewing of your mind" (Rom. 12:2). New birth has to be followed by spiritual growth and that includes our renewed minds. Paul tells us, "Stop thinking like children ... but in your thinking be adults" (1 Cor. 14:20). Think of your mind as a garden. Remember how neglected and out of hand it was when the Lord Jesus took

possession of this property He had purchased. Things have changed, haven't they? But I'm sure you will agree, there's still a lot more renewing needed. Both clearing and planting are called for.

Clear the Ground

We are told to "gird up our minds" (1 Pet. 1:13 RSV). In Bible lands, the loose flowing robes of the Oriental had to be gathered at the waist with a girdle before he could walk, work, or fight; otherwise, he would trip. This was "girding up the loins." It means dealing with what hinders or impedes us. So the New International Version rightly translates Peter's phrase, "Prepare your minds for action." Deal with the negative things that hinder right thinking. In gardening terms we would say to clear the ground for planting. Let's look at three poisonous weeds we need to uproot.

1. Impure Thoughts

Do impure thoughts matter? Yes, because thoughts produce actions, habits, and character. Jesus said, "Anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart" (Matt. 5:28). He wasn't implying that the thought is as bad as the act, but that the thought is where sin begins. It must be nipped in the bud. This word of Jesus reminds us that the eyes are what Satan often uses to attack us with unclean thoughts. See how he did this with Potiphar's wife (Gen. 39:7) and later with King David (2 Sam. 11:2-4). Peter speaks of those who have "eyes full of adultery" (2 Pet 2:14).

There is always, of course, forgiveness and cleansing when we confess impure thoughts, but prevention is better than cure. Job solved this problem by setting a guard on his eyes (Job 31:1). For us, that would mean saying no to certain paperbacks, magazines, videos, late-night movies, and so on-things we know are calculated to stir up sexual desire.

Even when we avoid these, unclean thoughts may spring up unbidden in our minds. They are not sin if we reject them at once. Someone has said, "You can't stop a bird from lighting on your head, but you can stop it from making a nest in your hair!"

2. Anxious Thoughts

Worry is a form of fear, and Jesus dealt with fear on the cross when He dealt with all our sins (Heb. 2:14). Therefore, we have full deliverance from this destructive weed. We are not to make excuses: "I take after Mom, and she's the type who worries." As believers we are under command: "Do not be anxious!" "Not even over something very important?" "Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything... present your requests to God. And the peace of God ... will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus" (Phil. 4:6-7).

We could summarize the above statement by saying, "Turn your anxieties into prayer until the peace of God takes over." Indulging in worry is indulging in unbelief. Handing over the situation to God in prayer is acting in faith. In this way, we cultivate a steadfast faith. We can tell God with confidence, "You will keep in perfect peace him whose mind is steadfast, because he trusts in you" (Isa. 26:3).

3. Earthbound Thoughts

God knows we are human beings with physical bodies that have to be clothed, fed, and housed. We are not to be careless or unconcerned about material things. But neither are we to behave like unbelievers, whose minds are dominated by earthly things. "For the pagans," Jesus reminded us, "run after all these things." Instead we, who have a different set of values, are to "seek first his kingdom" (Matt. 6:32-33). Paul even stated that one mark of men who are "enemies of the cross" was that "their mind is on earthly things" (Phil. 3:18-19).

The Bible never suggests that material things are sinful. It is just our attitude toward them that may be sinful. We are not to feel guilty about that which "God ... richly provides ... for our enjoyment" (1 Tim. 6:17). But since the cross has freed us from being bound to material possessions and has given us a heavenly goal. God's Word exhorts us to "set your mind on things above, not on earthly things" (Col. 3:2).

If our minds are to be renewed, we must not only "clear the ground" but also plant.

Planting the Garden

Nature abhors a vacuum. If you clear the weeds but fail to plant the beds, the weeds will reappear and grow even more vigorously. We spoke of not letting impure thoughts roost in our minds, but Paul goes even further. He says, "Whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely... think about such things" (Phil. 4:8). This is how we plant the garden. But where is this "food for thought" to be found? Primarily, we'll find it in God's Word.

Colossians 3:16 says, "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another." Reading and meditating on the Bible is the way to fill your mind with God's thoughts and thus plant the garden.

Paul describes the minds of certain unbelievers: "Their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened" (Rom. 1:21). Futility and foolishness-that pretty well describes the minds of all of us until we were bom again and made "wise for salvation" (2 Tim. 3:15). But that change from foolishness to wisdom is a process that goes on as we fill our minds with the truth.

This does not mean reading the Bible as if you were "cramming" for a geography exam. It is not just filling your mind with biblical facts. Facts will teach you more about God, but that is not the same as knowing Him. How we plant the garden is vital. Letting the Word dwell in us richly requires faith, so that as you read or listen to the Word of God being read or explained, the Holy Spirit will give you the inner understanding which the Bible calls revelation. Do you remember when that verse or truth suddenly lit up for you? That was revelation. See how Paul prayed that the Ephesian Christians would have this (Eph. 1:17-18). I pray for this continually, especially in connection with my Bible reading. You do the same, and the garden of your mind will surely be planted.

Memorize:

Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is-his good, pleasing and perfect will (Romans 12:2).

Homework

1. Many Christians still have the mistaken notion that a believer's thought life doesn't matter very much. Write in your notebook the reasons why you think it is very important. The following scriptures will help you answer: Genesis 6:5; Psalm 139:1-2; 1 Corinthians 13:11; 1 Chronicles 28:9.

2. Let's have a ground-clearing exercise. We have mentioned only a few of the many poisonous weeds that spring up in the garden of the mind. There may be others of which you are conscious. Pray David's prayer in Psalm 139:23-24. Ask God to show you all the weeds He sees. Confess them one by one and be sure to receive by faith His promised forgiveness and cleansing (1 John 1:9). Then start planting. If it was proud thoughts you confessed, ask God to clothe you with Jesus' humility. Make an entry in your notebook about these new plants. It will be useful to look over them later and see how they have been growing.

For Further Study

1. "You are not what you think you are." What do you think of yourself? Consider two contrasting but accurate assessments Paul made of himself in 1 Timothy 1:15 and in 2 Corinthians 11:5 and his counsel to us in Romans 12:3.
2. Study the contrast between the spiritual mind and the unspiritual or fleshly mind. See Romans 8:5-9 and Colossians 2:18-19.
3. We are exhorted to have the attitude of Christ. See Philippians 2:5-11. Consider what this attitude is, how you cultivate it, and how it would affect your relationship with others (vv. 2-4).
4. In Matthew 22:37, Jesus tells us that loving God involves our minds as well as our hearts and our souls. What does this mean in practical terms?

STUDY 4

Controlled Emotions

Read: Isaiah 61:1-3

Understanding emotions

Since an emotion is a mental feeling, this study is closely linked with the previous one.

1. God Has Emotions

Love is the very essence of God's being (1 John 4:16), but He also hates (Prov. 6:16). We read of God being joyful (Zeph. 3:17), jealous (Exod. 34:14) and angry (Deut. 1:37). Since we are made in His image (Gen. 1:27), it is not surprising that we are emotional creatures.

2. People Vary Emotionally

The measure in which we experience the same basic emotions and the extent to which we express them vary greatly. This may be due to our sex (men being generally less emotional than women), our nationality, our culture, and even experiences we have had in life.

3. The Christian Life Is Emotional

How emotional our Christian life is varies with us all. Each of us will react differently beginning at the first experience of conviction, which pricks our consciences (Acts 26:14) and disturbs our peace; then through the new birth experience where the love of God is poured into our hearts (Rom. 5:5); and then to a "believing" which Peter calls being "filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy" (1 Pet. 1:8). All this could hardly be described as unemotional.

4. Our Bodies Are Involved

In the first place, emotional stress can bring on sickness or exhaustion. Doctors tell us bitterness can bring on arthritis, that tension can cause ulcers or back problems, and so on. On the other side of the coin, mental and physical exhaustion can deeply affect our emotions. After his spectacular victory on Mount Carmel, Elijah sank into deep depression, asking God to take his life (1 Kings 19:4). This would not only have been due to a sense of failure (running for his life at the threat of Jezebel) but also to physical and mental exhaustion after the dramatic events recorded in the previous chapter (v. 46). To maintain emotional stability we should avoid over-taxing our bodies.

Emotions Need To Be Released

God has not given us emotions to be repressed, but to be released. This is a real emotional need with many, especially in the West.

1. The Example of Scripture

Middle Eastern peoples are much less inhibited. We even see this as we look at the believers in the New Testament. They were much freer than most of us in expressing their love for one another, their joys, and their sorrows (Acts 20:36-38; 1 Thes. 5:26). We see this in a character as manly and rugged as that of Paul (2 Cor. 2:4; Phil. 4:10).

2. Facing Inhibitions

Emotions stifled or bottled up, especially in infancy or childhood, usually result in spiritual inhibition. My wife used to be a bad sailor. Before the boat left the dock she would feel queasy. Once, while she was being prayed for by a friend who knew nothing of this, she suddenly said, "I

see a little girl in a boat looking at the deep water. She is very afraid but dare not tell anyone." My wife did not know she had this repressed fear and could not remember that incident. But from that moment, she was released, and now even a rough voyage is no problem. Natural emotions, such as sorrow at the loss of a loved one, need to find free expression. Tears help the healing.

3. The Spirit-Baptism Factor

Most who have known the experience of the baptism in the Holy Spirit and the exercise of spiritual gifts testify to a real and valuable release in their emotional life. Some speak of being "all bound up inside" before they received the Holy Spirit. Others describe their receiving as "falling in love with Jesus for the first time." (See Rom. 5:5.) This emotional factor causes some to fear or even reject this experience, but it is often the very thing they need.

Emotions Must Be Controlled

If emotions are not to be repressed, as we have said, they are certainly to be controlled. God puts a high premium on this (Prov. 16:32). It determines whether we are wise or foolish (Prov. 29:11). Failure to control emotions could be more serious than repressing them.

1. The Devil Gets a Foothold

If we give free rein to such emotions as temper, lust, and jealousy, we may open the door to demonic activity in our lives. Paul warns us of this: "In your anger do not sin": Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry"-in other words, bring it under control, and so- "do not give the devil a foothold" (Eph. 4:26-27).

2. Some Biblical Examples

After David slew Goliath, the women, as they greeted the returning soldiers, praised David more than King Saul. Saul was angry and jealous (1 Sam. 18: 6-9). This opened the door yet further to demonic activity in his life and led to the first of many murderous attacks on David (vv. 10-11).

Another case: Amnon, son of David, fell in love with Tamar, his half-sister. Lust took over, and he raped her. Immediately, love turned to hate – a characteristic mark of demonic activity (2 Sam. 13:8-15). Later Amnon was murdered in revenge by Tamar's brother, Absalom. These examples illustrate another kind of wisdom than that of the self-controlled man we noticed in Proverbs – a wisdom that is "earthly, unspiritual, of the devil" (James 3:15).

Ruling Our Emotions

From a spiritual point of view, emotions may be positive, negative, or neutral. We need not concern ourselves here with the positive, such as love, joy, and peace, which are the fruit of the Spirit. Negative emotions, like the biblical examples we have just considered, are the reactions of our fallen nature and must be handled very firmly. The neutral ones are human reactions, as with the sorrow of bereavement, the joy at some piece of good news, or depression through sickness or disappointment. Although these are not to be suppressed, they do need to be controlled.

1. Handling Sinful Emotions

In dealing with a range of behavioral patterns that belong to our old way of life, including emotions, Paul calls us to take radical action. He says, "Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger" (Eph. 4:31). He says, "Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust" (Col. 3:5). But how?

- a) Confess the source from which any ungodly emotion comes, your earthly sinful nature.

- b) Renounce it before God. Do it audibly.
- c) Then, acknowledging that Jesus dealt with this at the cross, confess by faith that you have now "crucified the sinful nature with its passions and desires" (Gal. 5:24).
- d) Since the Holy Spirit as well as nature abhors a vacuum, seal the transaction by putting on by faith those spiritual emotions which are the opposite of those that you have just put off. "Clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility" (Col. 3:12).

2. Controlling Natural Emotions

Although it is healthy and good for these to have a normal outlet, they may easily "take over" and so become a spiritual hindrance. For example, to be downcast for a while through difficult circumstances is natural. But if we don't snap out of it the way David did (Ps. 42:5), we may sink into deep depression and our testimony be affected. A time of joy and exuberance must not go off into an emotional "high." Such are almost always followed by an emotional "low." Nor must sorrow be allowed to overwhelm us (2 Cor. 2:7). This is where we are to stand out as different from the world. Our sorrow is hope-filled (1 Thes. 4:13) while that of the world is death-filled (2 Cor. 7:10). If these are natural emotions we are talking about, how will we manage to control them?

We must recognize we are no longer merely natural people but spiritual people (2 Cor. 5:17) and have access to spiritual resources that natural people do not have.

When we yield ourselves to God, then our whole being, spirit, soul, and body – and that must include our emotions – come under the rule of the Spirit. And "the fruit of the Spirit is ... self-control" (Gal. 5:22-23).

We must commit any uncontrolled emotion to God and believe for the grace of the Holy Spirit to control it. If we cannot get through on this, we may be in need of emotional healing. We will touch on this in our final section as we turn our eyes on Jesus.

Jesus – Our Example

The emotional life of Jesus provides us with our perfect example. It was strong, rich, varied, and always under perfect control. Although it was predicted that He would be "a man of sorrows" (Isa. 53:3), we only read of two occasions where Jesus wept in public (Luke 19:41; John 11:35). However, it would seem that tears, even "loud cries," characterized His private prayer life (Heb. 5:7). But He never allowed His sorrows to bring heaviness to the company He was in. This must have been because of the joy that always characterized Him, even when facing the cross (Heb. 12:2). Paul spoke of being "sorrowful, yet always rejoicing" (2 Cor. 6:10). Jesus demonstrated this perfectly. God had anointed Him with "the oil of joy" above His companions (Heb. 1:9). When Jesus spoke to His disciples of His joy being in them, they knew He was promising them something very real and very wonderful (John 15:11).

Then there was His amazing love and compassion, not only for His own (John 13:1), but for His enemies (Luke 23:34). Compassion is a feeling of pity and deep sympathy toward those in need. Often we read of Him being moved with compassion as He looked at the crowds in their need or the sick in their distress (Matt. 9:36; 20:34). But note the striking absence of negative emotions. Though at times He displayed righteous anger at men's stubbornness, unbelief, or hypocrisy. He never had an outburst of temper. He was without bitterness or jealousy, and He never gave way

to self-pity or discouragement, moodiness or irritability. The only fear He knew was the fear of the Lord. He has sent the Holy Spirit to make us like Him.

He did not come simply to leave us with an unattainable standard to follow, but also to touch us and make us whole in our emotions as in everything else. Our Divine Physician knows and understands our inner wounds and bruises, that "crushed spirit" (Prov. 17:22), or those feelings of inferiority or rejection. We may, indeed we must, open up these areas to Him. Was He not sent to "bind up the brokenhearted" (Isa. 61:1)? We may need the help of a mature Spirit-filled Christian here, but we must not settle for anything less than the wholeness Christ came to bring.

Memorize:

The Lord is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit (Psalm 34:18).

Homework

1. Read Ephesians 4:31-32 and Colossians 3:5-8. Jot down any of these characteristics of your earthly fallen nature which persist in showing up. Whether they are strictly emotions or not, you are told to put them to death and get rid of them. Do as Paul says. The four steps outlined under *Handling Sinful Emotions* will help you.
2. Emotions are powerful motivators. They move us to action. Read the first account in Scripture of sinful emotions and the action that resulted (Gen. 4: 1-12).
 - a) What are the two emotions which moved Cain to murder his brother?
 - b) God's questions to him (v. 6) suggest a third emotion. What do you think it was?
 - c) Do you see any similarity in the murder of Cain and the crucifixion of Christ (Matt. 27: 17-18)? Is there a lesson for us?

For Further Study

Psalms 42 and 43 were one Psalm in the original Hebrew. Study these two Psalms. (It is only 16 verses.) You will find the writer is battling with an attack of depression. Try to find answers to the following:

- a) What do these Psalms reveal about the causes of his depression?
- b) Though his sky is presently overcast in some of the things he says, shafts of sunlight break through. Pick these out and use them to set out some spiritual remedies for being "down in the dumps."

STUDY 5

A Sound Judgment

Read 1 Corinthians 4:1-5; 6:1-6

We have studied the renewing of the mind in general, but now we must focus on a very important function of the mind—the exercise of our judgment. It concerns the process by which we discern or evaluate, thereby forming opinions and making decisions. It is something we do naturally all the time. For example, I feel an urgent need for fresh air, but the weather outside is cold and threatening to rain. Shall I go out for a walk, or leave it till later? I decide to go. All right, shall I wear an overcoat for warmth or a raincoat in case it rains? When I return, I shall know if my two judgments were sound! When we come to the much more important business of judging the character or conduct of others we may find ourselves in difficulty. Should we do it at all? Sometimes the Bible seems to say "No" and at other times "Yes." Since the Bible never contradicts itself, this is a challenge for us to look a little deeper. It usually means that the Scripture is referring to different things as with the two passages in our reading.

What it Means to Judge

First, let us notice briefly a number of different ways in which the Bible refers to human judgment. Later, we will look at some of these more closely and read the appropriate Bible references. There is the judgment of condemnation, which springs from a critical or condemning spirit. This "playing the judge" or sitting in judgment of one another, is what Jesus told us we were not to do. Both our Lord and Paul taught that when we judge one another critically we are condemning ourselves, for we are guilty of the same sort of thing. What we need to do is to judge ourselves and bring correction to ourselves. Only then would we be in a position to concern ourselves with our brother's deficiencies. This is the judgment of self-examination.

We are often exhorted to turn away from what is evil and to imitate what is good. How can we do this unless we distinguish between the two? That calls for the judgment of discernment. Do you remember when we touched on this in our opening study? The ability "to distinguish good from evil" is a very important aspect of maturing spiritually.

There is another aspect of this discerning judgment. For example, when a spiritual gift, such as prophecy, is operating in the church, we are not to accept everything that is uttered without discrimination. We are to "weigh" and to "test" what is said. You might call this the judgment of evaluation. Similarly, with a man's ministry, it needs to be "proved" before he is publicly appointed.

The Christian's life is to be guided continually and not just at the big decisions. Most of our guidance does not involve praying a special prayer, then waiting for "a word from God." It comes through our judging rightly what the will of God is through the influence of the Holy Spirit.

Finally, there is the judgment of corrective discipline. There are the civic authorities – the government, the judiciary, and the police – who are appointed by God to judge and punish wrongdoing and decide disputes. Within the family this is the role parents have toward their children. In the church, it falls to the leaders to whom God gives the main responsibility of maintaining good order and discipline within His house.

Judging to Condemn

Judging is variously described in Scripture as condemning a brother (Luke 6:37), looking down on a brother (Rom. 14:10), slandering or speaking against a brother (James 4:11). Although we are told not to do this, it is one of the most widespread and destructive sins in the professing church. Jesus said: "Do not judge, or you too will be judged. For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you" (Matt. 7:1-2). The One who spoke these strong words had been appointed by His Father as the Judge of the Universe (John 5: 22-23). No one on earth was better qualified to sit in judgment than He, but He did not do it (John 8:15). Understand the full force of what Jesus was saying: "You judge your brother like that, and one day I'll judge you like that." James says something similar (James 2:12-13).

Two men on safari were attacked by a rhino. One shinnied up a tree and the other dove into a great anthill. A few moments later, out came the man from the anthill. The rhino charged again, and again the man hid. When he came out a second time, his exasperated friend up in the tree called out "Get back in, you idiot!" "Ssh," hissed his friend, putting his finger to his mouth, "There's a sleeping lion in there!" Don't judge your brother, because you don't know all the facts and cannot determine his motives. We must leave judging to God's time and to the One whom God has appointed (1 Cor. 4:5).

Have you ever noticed when you point your index finger at your brother, you point three fingers at yourself? Read what Romans 2:1 says about it. In the passage just considered, where Jesus told us not to judge, He went on to say that we are hypocrites if we try to remove "the speck of sawdust" in our brother's eye without first tackling "the plank" in our own (Matt. 7: 3-5).

A hypocrite is one who pretends to be better than he really is. If I say, "Joe appears to be a very enthusiastic Christian, but his motives are not pure," it is time I examine my own motives. In the first place, I am putting my brother down in order to lift myself up. I want everyone to understand, "I would never be so unspiritual as to have impure motives!" Jesus would say to me, "Enough of that spiritual humbug! Take a long hard look at your own motives. Even if others don't know what you are like, I do." The finest antidote to this sort of judging is to engage in the judging we call self-examination.

When we pass sentence on one another in this way, without being in possession of the facts and without ability to search into another's heart, our judgments are unrighteous. They are superficial because they are based on how things appear to us. Isaiah wrote about Jesus, "He will not judge by what he sees with his eyes, or decide by what he hears with his ears; but with righteousness he will judge the needy, with justice he will give decisions for the poor of the earth" (Is. 11:3-4). That's why He was in a strong position to say to His critics and detractors, "Stop judging by mere appearances, and make a right judgment" (John 7:24). What then is a right judgment?

A Discerning Judgment

Some people think that the judging we have been considering is wrong because it is judging people, while discernment has only to do with facts. No, this also has to do with people. When we distinguish good from evil (Heb. 5:14) and the true from the false (1 Cor. 10:15), we are dealing with what people do and say. To imitate what is good (3 John 11), and to hold to the word that is true (1 Thes. 5:21) means I must exercise a discerning judgment as I look and listen. This kind of judgment differs from the other because of the purpose behind it and the spirit and attitude with which it is exercised.

Such spiritual judgment is very important when the gifts of the Holy Spirit are operating in the church, especially gifts of inspired utterance, such as speaking in tongues, interpretation of tongues, and prophecy. We need to be sure that the utterance is inspired by the Holy Spirit and

not by the human spirit or some other spirit. There is a gift called "the ability to distinguish between spirits" (1 Cor. 12:10). Those who receive this gift may know by revelation from God what spirit is operating. But this gift, given to only a few, is not to let the rest of us off the hook. We all need to exercise our spiritual judgment. The command to test prophecy is given not only to the leaders or to certain gifted individuals but to Christians in general (1 Thes. 5:20-21). But how do we do it?

This is too big a question to answer fully here, but there are some simple tests we may apply. An utterance inspired by the Holy Spirit will never contradict what that same Holy Spirit has said in His Word (Isa. 8:20). That's why it's so important to get to know your Bible. If the utterance fails this test it is to be rejected at once. If it seems consistent with Scripture, ask whether it does the three things prophecy is given to do (1 Cor. 14:3). It could well contain a rebuke, bringing conviction of sin and humbling before God, but that would serve to fulfill these three purposes. But if it brings condemnation and confusion rather than edification, there is something wrong. Prophecy should always be Christ-centered and draw hearts to Christ (Rev. 19:10), not to the personality or his gift. Finally, you should have the peace of Christ ruling in your heart as you listen (Col. 3:15), bringing the assurance that the Holy Spirit is speaking.

Judging What the Will of God Is

Most Christians know that the Christian life should be a life guided by God (Rom. 8:14) and that we don't have any built-in powers of self-direction (Jer. 10:23). The Old Testament picture of this is Israel journeying to the land of Canaan, being led by God in a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night (Exod. 13:21). Many of us confine this idea of guidance to the big decisions where we call on God for a special "word." God was not only guiding Israel when they came to an important crossroads, but all the time. It should be so for us. The promise of Isaiah 58:11 still stands. But most of our guidance comes through our human judgment – influenced by the Holy Spirit.

Did you memorize the verse in the previous study? Paul says when your mind is renewed "you will be able to test and approve what God's will is – his good, pleasing and perfect will" (Rom. 12:2). Testing and approving is an action of your judgment. Elsewhere he speaks of every thought being taken captive "to make it obedient to Christ" (2 Cor. 10:5). When that happens, God is guiding us by using our own thought processes.

Psalm 25:9 in the King James Version says, "The meek will he guide in judgment: and the meek will he teach his way." It has been said that "meek" here means we have a preference for God's will and that "judgment" refers to our own judgment. In other words. God will guide those who really want His will; guidance will not necessarily come by a visible sign but by God swaying their judgment in the same way a pair of balances is swayed by a finger on one pan or the other. If you want God to do this, you must keep your hand off. If you allow the finger of self-will to interfere, you are not truly meek. We must seek God for grace to be humble, or meek, and thus free the Holy Spirit to guide us continually.

What then are the keys to possessing a sound and healthy judgment? We must take great care not to think and speak critically of others. When we are aware of others' faults, we need to examine our own hearts and make sure we are not seeing a reflection of something in ourselves. We must have a mind that is well instructed in the truth of God's Word. We must also have a meek spirit that desires only God's will and is continually sensitive to the Holy Spirit.

Memorize:

Therefore judge nothing before the appointed time; wait till the Lord comes. He will bring to light what is hidden in darkness and will expose the motives of men's hearts. At that time each will receive his praise from God (1 Corinthians 4:5).

Homework

- a) John talks to his friend George about a mutual friend and church member named Bill. John tells his friend: "Bill's house group leader has reported that Bill has not shown up at the group meeting for weeks and that his church attendance has become very irregular. I phoned Bill to ask if we could meet together and talk, but he said he was too busy. When I asked him some pointed questions about his spiritual condition, he was very evasive. I am sure Bill is drifting spiritually, and I am really concerned for him. Could you contact him, George, since he's an old friend of yours? Could we pray together for him?"

John has made a spiritual judgment about Bill. Would you think he is judging righteously or unrighteously? Record your answer in your notebook, giving reasons and, where possible, supportive scriptures.

- b) "The spiritual man makes judgment about all things" (1 Cor. 2:15).

Write down in your notebook:

- a) What is meant by "the spiritual man"? Do all believers qualify? (1 Cor. 3:1-4; Gal. 5:13-6:3).
- b) What are the things you would need to watch to make such a judgment? Some of them are negative-things you would need to avoid. Others are positive-things you would need to cultivate.
- c) Put your notebook aside and talk to your Father about anything He has shown you that needs adjustment in the way you think and talk about others, and how you, in general, make judgments about things.

For Further Study

1. You saw the importance of the judgment of self-examination in connection with our tendency to judge others. Here are some other situations in which we are to examine ourselves:
 - a) to make sure that we really are "in the faith" and not self-deceived (2 Cor. 13:5).
 - b) before we partake of the Lord's Supper, so we do not eat and drink unworthily and come under God's judgment (1 Cor. 11:27-32).
 - c) to make a sober assessment of ourselves and our ministry (Rom. 12:3; Gal. 6:1-5).
2. We mentioned that there was a place for the judgment of corrective discipline in the church.
 - a. Study what Jesus said about this in the second of his two statements about the church (Matt. 18:15-18).
 - b. There was a serious case of immorality in the church at Corinth (1 Cor. 5). Notice how the church was reacting and how, according to Paul, they should have reacted

- (vv. 1-2). What are the reasons Paul gives for the strong action he urges them to take? Note the teaching of verses 12 and 13 on this matter of corrective discipline.
- c. See also what Paul says about the handling of disagreements among Christians, and what he thinks of one believer taking another believer to court (1 Cor. 6: 1-8).
 - d. Notice how the church in Ephesus handled evil men, false apostles in their midst (Rev. 2:1-3). Do you think that the head of the church was pleased or displeased with what they had done?

STUDY 6

A Body for the Lord

Read 1 Corinthians 6:12-20

Introduction

From ancient times there have been those who taught that everything material, including the body, is evil, and that man needed to be set free from this prison house of the soul in order to be spiritual. This led to extremes of self-denial and "harsh treatment of the body" (Col. 2:21-23). In modern times the pendulum has swung the other way, with a tendency to pander to the body and satisfy its every demand. Men not only beautify it, but glorify it, and almost worship it. Scripture does not support either of these attitudes, but shows us that the body is included in the plan of salvation (Rom. 8:23) and teaches us how to honor God in our bodies.

God Pronounced It Very Good

In the sixth and final day of creation, as His crowning wonder, God created man. The record says, "The Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground" (Gen. 2:7). That's all we know about how man received his physical body. At the end God said of all that He had made, man's body included, that "it was very good" (Gen. 1:31).

Though sin came in to mar the beautiful handiwork of the Creator, it did not alter God's original purpose. Through salvation man would be restored and God's intention for him would be fulfilled. By Himself becoming flesh, Jesus has forever stamped with purity and dignity what the Bible calls "our lowly bodies" (Phil. 3:21).

When Jesus had finished this work and returned to the Father, He did not leave His body behind. On the third day He was reunited with His body, and took it, glorified in resurrection, back to heaven. He is therefore "the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep" in death (1 Cor. 15:20).

First fruits is followed by harvest. If Jesus' resurrection is the first fruits, the resurrection of His saints when He comes again will be the harvest (v. 23). So the body of the believer has a glorious and eternal destiny.

For the present, God wants your body to be the means by which the life of God within you is expressed to men. Looking at our reading again, there is one major reason why you are to honor God with your body. Because -

You Are Not Your Own

Notice how this is emphasized:

- "The body is ... for the Lord" (v. 13). It's not primarily for us, but for Him. Just as He had a physical body prepared by God in which He did the will of God on earth (Heb. 10: 5-7), now the only physical body He has to continue His work on earth is that of the believer.
- "Your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit" (v. 19). This was fulfilling a wonderful promise that Jesus had made to His disciples when speaking of the coming of the Holy Spirit. He had said, "If anyone loves me, he will obey my teaching. My Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him" (John 14:23). So our bodies are a dwelling place for God by His Holy Spirit.
- "You are not your own: you were bought at a price" (vv. 19-20). When Jesus purchased you with His blood. He purchased your body as well as your soul. You have, therefore,

relinquished your right to yourself. If you really believe that, it must affect what you do with your body. If you know that you have been bought – and at such a price – you will want to use your body to honor the one who has bought you. How do you do it?

Honor God with Your Body – By Keeping It Holy

You might think that the questions Paul poses in verses 15-16 of our reading were very strange to put to a group of believers. But these Christians lived in Corinth, a city that was not only pagan but renowned for its immorality, much of it in connection with the Aphrodite temple where the goddess of love was worshiped. In verses 9-11 he lists the sins that were common in Corinth and reminds them, "That is what some of you were," before you were converted.

We have seen that God has purchased our bodies for His use. But how can a holy God live in a dirty temple? The heavenly Surgeon wants to use us to perform wonderful and delicate operations on the lives of others, but how can He operate with a dirty instrument? (2 Tim. 2:20-22). This involves a work of cleansing (2 Cor. 7:1). There is the cleansing by the blood as we confess (1 John 1: 7,9), and the cleansing of the Word as we apply it by faith (Eph. 5:26).

Honor God with Your Body – By Presenting It to Him

"I urge you, brothers," says Paul, "in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God-which is your spiritual worship" (Rom. 12:1). What this means was made vivid to me by a childhood experience.

My brother and I had been dressed up in our Sunday best, kid gloves and all, because my parents were expecting a visit from a lady and gentleman. While our parents went to pick them up, we boys whiled away the time near a stream. Finally they arrived, and our proud parents introduced their two little angels. We had been taught that English gentlemen always take off their gloves to shake hands with a lady, so there was a long pause while fasteners were undone and kid gloves removed. Alas, the operation only served to reveal the dirtiest little hands you ever saw! The laughter of our visitors saved the day and covered our parents' embarrassment.

When we try to offer ourselves to God without "clean hands and a pure heart" (Ps. 24:3-4), He certainly doesn't treat it as a joke. We must avail ourselves of the blood and the water, as we have just seen. Instead of the phrase, "offer your bodies," the older versions have "present your bodies." I prefer "present" because it is a bridal word. You are not to think of some terrible act of self-sacrifice, but one of loving and eager surrender, as a bride on her wedding day presents herself to her bridegroom to be totally his. You are now to present yourself to God, place yourself at His disposal to serve Him in whatever way He chooses.

Honor God with Your Body – By Accepting It as It Is

There are Christians who hold back when they should offer themselves to God because of some physical blemish or deficiency, real or imaginary.

"If only I had Jack's build. He looks so athletic."

"I really wish I could be average in height, like Sue; who wants such a lanky girl?"

"Why did I have to have such a long nose? At school they all call me Beaky."

Such thoughts are real, even if not expressed in words. How can you honor God with your body if you are rejecting that body?

The antidote to this wrong thinking is to first acknowledge that God has made you the way you are. You are not His first mistake! Moses had a problem with self-acceptance at the burning bush, because he was "slow of speech." He wanted to back off. What did God say to him? "Who

gave man his mouth?" (Exod. 4:10-11). In other words, "Moses, I take the responsibility for your lack of fluency, and I'm still calling you to serve Me. Don't try to be wiser than Me."

Secondly, recognize that He made you thus for a wise and wonderful purpose. You are not the result of some mindless accident. Not only what He gives, but also what He withholds are expressions of His loving wisdom. It is when we recognize that, we can then echo the words of David:

For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full well. My frame was not hidden from you when I was made in the secret place. When I was woven together in the depths of the earth . . . (Psalm 139:13-15)

When you can look at your body with all its blemishes and say "Your works are wonderful," you are honoring God with your body. But we must also -

Honor God with Your Body – By Keeping It Healthy

The bodies of many believers suffer from being worked too hard, exercised too little, and fed too much. That's a sure recipe for breakdown. We are not to pamper our bodies, but we are to take care of them as the temples of the Holy Spirit.

My father, who was a preacher and a writer, used to say "I'd rather wear out in God's service than rust out." He died at 49, during the height of his ministry. As a young fellow with the call of God on my life, I used to pray, "God, let me bum out for you." Then I noticed that God called Moses through a bush that burned, and he was not consumed (Exod 3:3). I realized that God does not call us to wear out or burn out. He wants us to wear on and burn on! That means honoring God by taking care of our bodies and keeping them fit.

"Could I borrow your lawn mower?" Vic asked.

"Sure," replied Rob, "but take good care of it. It's new." It was weeks later that Rob found a dirty mower in his shed. He hardly recognized it. The underside was caked with matted grass, the grass catcher was torn, and the engine wouldn't start. You could hardly blame Rob for being angry. "That may be the way he looks after his own property," he said, "but that mower is mine!" I think God wants to say to some of His children, "That body you're treating like that belongs to Me. It was bought with a price. Start honoring Me with it, as though you really believe it is My dwelling place."

Memorize:

Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your body (1 Corinthians 6:19-20).

Homework

If you really believe that you have been bought with a price and belong to God, it must affect what you do with your body. We are going to work through a practical application of that statement. The first task applies more to God's sons and the second one to His daughters.

God's Sons

We have seen that we honor God by keeping our bodies healthy and that this may be undermined by working them too hard and feeding them too much.

1. Overwork. Write down in your notebook the reasons why people overwork. The verses will give some biblical clues to help you to complete your answers (Prov. 19:2; 1 Cor. 10:14 with Col. 3:5; Prov. 23:45 with 1 Tim. 6:9). If any of these scriptures apply to you, write down the practical measure you plan to take to remedy it. Then talk to God about them.
2. Overeating. The less polite word for this is "gluttony," which means eating greedily or excessively. Write down in your notebook why this is dishonoring to the Lord (Prov. 23:19-21; Acts 24:25 with Gal. 5:22-23; Rom. 8:12-14; 1 Cor. 9:24-27). If this is an area where you are not in God's victory, take the same steps as outlined above.

God's Daughters

Your task concerns honoring God by the way you clothe and adorn your body.

1. Read 1 Timothy 2:9-10 and 1 Peter 3:3-4. Write in your notebook:
 - a) All that these verses teach about how a woman of God should dress
 - b) What they say you should avoid
 - c) What is the one thing that both passages are stressing?
2. Do you think these scriptures allow a woman of God to be careless or slipshod about her appearance? Write down your answer and give reasons. You will find answers in the description of the woman of noble character in Proverbs 31:10-31. If this study has shown you the need for adjusting your own outlook and behavior, decide what change is needed, write it down in your notebook, and then talk to God about it.

For Further Study

1. Hebrews 10:22 speaks of our drawing near to God, "having our bodies washed with pure water." Consider the spiritual meaning of this (compare John 15:3; Eph. 5:25-27).
2. Romans 8:11-14 promises complete victory over sin when you:
 - a) offer yourself to God as one brought from death to life
 - b) offer the parts of your body to God as instruments of righteousness. Work out what that means in practical terms.
3. In Matthew 5:29-30 Jesus spoke of an eye or a hand causing us to sin. Consider the sort of temptation He was referring to (vv. 27-28) and how one would practically carry out the instruction He gave.

STUDY 7

Taming the Tongue

Read James 3:1-8

Introduction

It is the tongue that brings the message of salvation, and the tongue by which the lie of the devil is spread. By the tongue men confess Christ and by the tongue they deny Him. How much comfort and encouragement, illumination and enrichment have come to men through a tongue inspired by the Holy Spirit? But how much damage has been done in the church by an unrestrained tongue? It has "the power of life and death" (Prov. 18:21). A mature Christian is one who has every part of his being, especially his tongue, under the rule of Christ.

The Power of the Tongue

In James 3, the tongue is likened to the bit in a horse's mouth and to the rudder of a great ship (vv. 3-4). Each is small in size but great in influence. He who controls the bit controls the horse, and he who controls the rudder steers the ship. Even so, he who controls his tongue is able to bridle his whole body (v. 2). This is not said of any other part of the body. Why does this small member play such a key role?

In Study 3 (The Mind Renewed) we learned that the way you think in your heart reveals your true character. So God never assesses us by our outward appearance, but what we are in our hearts (1 Sam. 16:7). It is the heart that controls the tongue. "Out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks" (Matt. 12:34).

"The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole person, sets the whole course of his life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell.... No man can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison" (vv. 6, 8). That's the human tongue – apart from the grace of God. Why such strong language? Because Scripture and experience teach us how totally corrupt the human heart is (Jer. 17:9). Because the heart is incurable, the tongue is untamable. But, "What is impossible with men is possible with God" (Luke 18:27). The One who can change our sinful hearts – (Has he not begun this miraculous work?) – can by the same means bring the unruly member under control.

We shall now look at four important areas where this needs to happen.

1. A Lying Tongue

To speak what is incorrect is not lying if the speaker believes it to be true. With lying there must be the intention to deceive. Satan is both "the father of lies" (John 8:44) and "the deceiver of the whole world" (Rev. 12:9 – RSV). "Do not lie to each other," says Paul, "since you have taken off your old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator" (Col. 3:9-10). To do so is to sin against the body, for we are all fellow members of that one body (Eph. 4:25). Loving or practicing any form of falsehood is the characteristic of those whose final destiny is exclusion forever from the City of God (Rev. 22:15).

Worldly people may disapprove of "black lies" but justify "white lies" when they deem the motive of the untruth to be good. For example, a doctor may lie to a patient who is terminally ill with cancer, because he doesn't want to upset his patient. The fact is that every person, believer or unbeliever, has a right to know that he is approaching the great terminus of life, where all

passengers have to change. He may need to make his peace with God, or put things right with his fellow men. No, all lies are black.

Perhaps you never tell a barefaced lie, but are there grey areas where you skirt the truth? As I was going through customs on my way into the United States, an immigration officer asked me: "What is the purpose of your visit?" I was coming to preach. But I'd been warned not to say so because it could lead to lots of questions about payments for preaching and a long delay. "Just say that you are visiting friends," I was advised. This was true, but was not "the truth" for it would mislead the officer. I told him the truth, and the warning proved true. I did get asked further questions. But in five minutes I was through – and my conscience was clear.

Another grey area is exaggeration. Pride is normally the motive. We want to impress, and the plain unvarnished truth is not all that impressive, so we enlarge, embellish, and fill in imaginary details from the storehouse of our own wishful thinking. This is a form of "unwholesome talk" which grieves the Holy Spirit (Eph. 4:29-30). One kind of exaggeration that smacks of insincerity and hypocrisy is flattery, or false praise. It is buttering someone up for our own advantage (Jude 16). Scripture equates this kind of speech with lying (Prov. 26:28). Because it is something that God hates (Job 32:22), we must hate it, too.

2. A Backbiting Tongue

Backbiting, gossiping, and criticizing are forms of evil speaking which have wrought terrible havoc in the church of Jesus Christ. The devil is also the father of this activity. "A whisperer separates close friends" (Prov. 16:28 RSV). In the garden Satan whispered things in the heart of Eve, which blackened God's good character and resulted in the breakup of a beautiful friendship between God and man (Gen 3: 4-5).

Notice in Study 5 (A Sound Judgment) that speech putting others down is designed to exalt the speaker. Often there is a spirit of jealousy and competitiveness behind it. Miriam and Aaron criticized Moses for marrying a Cushite wife, but they were simply jealous of Moses' position (Num. 12:1-2). We see the humility of Moses in his refusal to defend himself (v.3) and how God showed His anger when He intervened to defend His servant (v. 9). It is specially grievous to God when there is this kind of criticism against His appointed leaders. He says "Do not touch my anointed ones; do my prophets no harm" (Ps. 105:15).

Persistent backbiting and criticism had broken the spirit of a servant of God. When he became gravely ill, one of the chief culprits became conscience-stricken and went to him to confess and ask forgiveness.

"I forgive you," said the sick man, "but I want you to take this pillow to the window and shake out the feathers." He did so.

"Now go collect up the feathers," was the sick man's next request.

"That I cannot do," was the reply.

"Nor can you undo the false things you have said about me," replied the other; "they will be put right at the judgment seat of Christ" (2 Cor. 5:10; Col. 3:25).

3. A Grumbling Tongue

From the moment God's people were redeemed they began to grumble. Whenever they were discontented with their lot, they looked for a scapegoat. Usually they picked on Moses and Aaron. Often grumbling among God's people is directed against leaders. This is not to say that leaders never make mistakes. If they do, there are ways to rectify the situation, but grumbling is

not one of them. In fact, Moses pointed out that the Israelites were really grumbling against God (Exod. 16:8). They were rebelling against His ordering of their lives. We read of God's anger being aroused when He heard them complaining (Num. 11:1). How do you think He feels when He hears our grumbling?

We may feel that Paul and Silas had an excuse to complain, when in the midst of their campaign in Philippi they were wrongfully arrested, beaten, and flung into prison. With no prospect of sleep at that midnight hour, with their backs bleeding and their feet fastened in the stocks, they could have complained. But read what they did, and then what God did in response (Acts 16:25-30). That is the way to face situations that seem to go wrong.

4. A Talkative Tongue

There is a time to be silent as well as a time to speak (Eccles. 3:7). Some believers are silent when they should speak; some speak when they should be silent; and others seem to talk all the time.

A wife was suing for divorce on the grounds that her husband hadn't spoken to her in years. "Is that really true?" asked the incredulous judge.

"Well, 'er," replied the husband somewhat hesitantly, "I, 'er , just didn't like to interrupt!"

We are told that "a chattering fool comes to ruin" (Prov. 10:8) but that "a man of knowledge uses words with restraint" (Prov. 17:27). Similarly the New Testament warns us to "avoid godless chatter" (2 Tim. 2:16). Why is this so important? Self control, which is a fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:23), is essential in every aspect of our lives, but especially in our speech. In a great flow of words we can boast, exaggerate, misrepresent, confuse – and before we realize it, say things that we may later regret. "When words are many, sin is not absent" (Prov. 10:19).

The New Testament is equally clear: "Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry" (James 1:19). If an unrestrained and undisciplined tongue exposes you to the temptation of the devil, it is equally true that by guarding your lips you guard your soul (Prov. 13:3).

How to Tame It

First, if you want to tame your tongue, you must be convinced that it can be tamed – by the grace of God. "No man can tame the tongue" means that you are shut up to Christ. Read about the power that enables Him to bring everything under His control (Phil. 3:21). A few verses later comes that tremendous confession, "I can do everything through him who gives me strength" (4:13). Make that confession your very own. Confess it until you fully believe it. What follows will be effective only if you hold fast to this confession.

Second, acknowledge where it needs to be tamed. Wherever the Holy Spirit has brought conviction you need to acknowledge that to God. In fact, we have only dealt with four of the more common sins of the tongue. There are many others. God may want to put His finger on speech that is unwholesome (unclean or suggestive), boastful, unkind, bitter, or derisive. Whatever the Holy Spirit pinpoints, take to God in humble confession.

Third, bring every area of failure under the rule of Christ. "Lord, I have confessed that power that enables You to bring everything under Your control. I now hand over my tongue to You. Take control over it. Subdue those words that are critical, unkind (or whatever the Holy Spirit has brought to your attention). Cleanse my heart that I will not even want to speak such words. Make my lips to show forth Your praise. Amen."

Memorize:

Set a guard over my mouth, O Lord; Keep watch over the door of my lips (Psalm 141:3).

Homework

1. Under "How to tame it" above, go through the three steps with your notebook. First, ask yourself whether you really believe that your tongue can be tamed. Meditate on Philippians 3:21,4:13, and John 8:36, until with real conviction you can write in your notebook, "I believe that this tongue of mine can be brought under Christ's rule."

Second, confess to God the sins of your tongue that you specifically know you need to deal with. Perhaps you feel like you sin so much in this area that you don't know where to begin. Don't be discouraged. Let the Holy Spirit focus on those areas that He sees are urgent. Write those down in your notebook.

Finally, use the prayer suggested – or better still, one of your own – to bring each area of failure under Christ's rule. Believe He is responding as you pray. Thank Him for doing so. As He shows you other areas, tackle them in the same way.

2. Now look at a tongue that was always under perfect control – that of our Lord Jesus. Notice the impression created by His first public utterance (Luke 4:22). "Gracious words" fulfilled a prophecy made about Him hundreds of years earlier (Ps. 45:2). We are not to put Him on a pedestal but to imitate Him (Col. 4:6). If our conversation is to be "always full of grace," write down what that means. List first the kind of language we would need to avoid and then the kind we would need to cultivate. Claim the promise of 2 Corinthians 12:9.

For Further Study:

1. As we become more knowledgeable as Christians there is the temptation to become quarrelsome and argumentative. In our witnessing we can win the argument and lose the man. Paul strongly discourages argumentativeness, especially among Christians (Phil. 2:14; 1 Tim. 1:4, 2:8; 6:4-5, 2 Tim. 2:14, 23-25). It could disqualify a man from being an elder (1 Tim. 3:3). List the reasons why we need to avoid this. What do you think lies behind an argumentative spirit?
2. Read Matthew 12:33-37. Why did Jesus teach that men would be acquitted or condemned on the day of judgment on the basis of their words? He also said that we would be held accountable for "every careless (idle, ineffective, worthless) word." What words would come into this category?

SECTION 2

Growing Strong

STUDY 8

Knowing the Fear of the Lord

Read Isaiah 8:11-17

We must distinguish three kinds of fear in human experience. There is:

Natural Fear, as when we react to a situation of physical danger. One winter's day I was driving too fast for the icy road conditions when my car began to swing to the wrong side just as another car appeared coming toward me. Gripped with the fear of a head-on collision, I wrestled to correct the skid. Still out of control, the car swung back as the approaching car shot past. That instinctive fear we have all felt, which motivates us to act to preserve our lives, is not sinful, it is natural.

Sinful Fear may prevent us from doing the will of God, such as not owning up to some wrong doing; or may compel us to do what is not God's will, as when Peter denied the Lord. This may come as a sudden attack, as with Elijah (1 Kings 19:1-4). Or it may be a habitual thing, a slavery of the devil to a certain kind of fear (Heb. 2:15). How prone we are to fear is apparent from the fact that there are 366 occasions in the Bible where God tells us "Fear not."

Godly Fear, or the fear of the Lord. The fact that Scripture sometimes links this kind of fear with trembling (Phil. 2:12) proves that we are talking about the same natural human emotion as the other two are. Modern translations that replace the word fear with "reverence" or "respect" are weakening it. There is a good reason why the Holy Spirit, with many alternatives at His disposal, has used the word "fear" in both the Old and New Testaments. If the emotion is the same with the three different kinds of fear, the source and the motivation are very different with godly fear.

The fear of the Lord depends on a right understanding of God's character. You could have a wrong view of God, thinking Him to be unjust, unmerciful, or even tyrannical, and that might make you frightened of Him. That would be sinful fear, not the fear of the Lord (see Luke 19:21). Sinful fear is always self-centered, while godly fear is always God-centered.

Why Do We Need It?

Scriptures on this neglected theme are so numerous, especially in the Old Testament, that we shall only be able to touch on the more important aspects. The fear of the Lord is one of the great motivating factors of the Christian life. It is a corrective when we are tempted to deviate from the center of God's will and follow some other path, and it is an antidote to so much that may be dubbed "Christian," but which is shallow and superficial. It will ensure:

1. A Right Attitude toward God

There was a holy intimacy with God that marked the lives of men like Abraham (James 2:23) and Moses (Deut. 34:10). That is something we should all seek. But there is a wrong kind of familiarity that addresses this awesome and majestic God as though He were one of our buddies, bringing Him down to our level. What is lacking here is godly fear. None of us will ever attain God's friendship unless we retain a sense of awe and wonder in our approach to Him. This will affect us in all our dealings with Him. It will make our worship acceptable, because we recognize that "our God (not just the God of the unbeliever) is a consuming fire" (Heb. 12:28-29).

2. A Needful Repugnance for Sin

"To fear the Lord is to hate evil" (Prov. 8:13). Sin is repugnant to us. We may occasionally be deceived or tempted by the enemy, but we will never flirt with sin. If we are tripped and fall into the mire, we will never wallow in it. Instead, we respond in the words of Micah 7:8 as we pick ourselves up. The fear of the Lord will cause us to avoid sin when we see it looming ahead (Prov. 16:6). There are particular temptations that are defeated when we simply turn and run (1 Cor. 6:18; 10:14; 2 Tim. 2:22).

3. A Prayer Life that Prevails.

You will find that the great recorded prayers of the Bible were saturated with the fear of God, especially those offered for the restoration of God's people and of God's house. See how Daniel addresses God (Dan. 9:4) and the true humility characterizing his prayers (v. 7). We sense the same tone with the praying of our Lord, "Father . . . Holy Father . . . O righteous Father" (John 17:1, 11, 25). We are told, "In the days of His flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears to Him who was able to save Him from death, and He was heard for His godly fear" (Heb. 5:7 RSV). Notice that Jesus didn't get a head start in prayer just because He was God's Son. He prevailed because He prayed with true appreciation of God's character. If we have godly fear, we also shall prevail.

4. A Pure Motivation for Service

As Christians we don't need to be told more things to do. We have been exhorted to do so much, and the list gets longer with every message we hear and every Bible study we go through. We need to be motivated to start doing the things we know to do. There is no more effective motivation for service than the fear of God. Fearing the Lord and serving Him go together in Scripture (Deut. 6:13; 10:12; Josh. 24:14). Onlookers must have thought Noah was crazy building the ark, but the motivation for his obedience was "holy fear" (Heb. 11:7). Do you find you are reluctant to speak to people about Christ? Paul was too, but note what it was that overcame his reluctance (2 Cor. 5:11).

5. A Means to Make Holiness Perfect

Paul says, "Let us cleanse ourselves from every defilement of body and spirit, and make holiness perfect in the fear of God" (2 Cor. 7:1 RSV). To make holiness perfect does not mean to reach sinless perfection (1 John 1:8-10). Jesus was the only one to live a sinless life (1 Pet. 2:22). Paul meant "perfect" in the sense of coming to full growth or maturity. This would mean that we live in Christ's promised victory, displaying the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22-23), and that failure is the exception rather than the rule. Cleansing ourselves is the negative side of perfect holiness; becoming like Jesus in our character is the positive side. Why do we need the fear of the Lord? It creates within us a longing to be God-like, and it provides us with the motivation and faith to make it happen.

6. A Release from Sinful Fear

"Do not call conspiracy everything that these people call conspiracy; do not fear what they fear, and do not dread it. The Lord Almighty . . . is the one you are to fear" (Isa. 8:12-13). Are we gripped by the fears that haunt the world-fear of sickness, of unemployment, of violence, of nuclear war? We are if the fear of the Lord has not taken over. A member of a bomber crew whose plane has been hit and set on fire may be fearful at the thought of ejecting and committing himself to his parachute. But he does so because of the greater fear of staying in a blazing plane. The greater fear overcomes the lesser. It was a fearful thing for Abraham to raise the knife to slay his son. But the moment he did. God stayed his hand and said, "Now I know that you fear

God" (Gen. 22:12). An epitaph to Sir John Lawrence of India in Westminster Abbey says, "He feared man so little because he feared God so much." There is no antidote for the fears that plague the human heart as effective as the fear of the Lord.

How Do You Get It?

The fear of God and the knowledge of God go together (Prov. 2:5). It was said of the coming Messiah, "The Spirit of the Lord will rest on him – the Spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the Lord-and he will delight in the fear of the Lord" (Isa. 11:2-3). Notice that there was nothing fearsome about this fear. Jesus didn't have to toughen Himself to practice it. He delighted in it, and so shall we. This passage shows us that it is the work of the Spirit, and that it is linked with knowledge. What kind of knowledge does the Holy Spirit bring? First and foremost, the knowledge of God. This is the revelation of God that Paul prayed for concerning the Ephesian church (Eph. 1:17). The more we have of this, the more we shall know of the fear of the Lord.

This work of the Holy Spirit doesn't happen automatically, or we wouldn't need to be answering this question. Those who experience the fear of the Lord are those who deeply desire it. It is a result of seeking the Lord-not just praying. There is a difference (2 Chron. 7:14). When you pray, you expect to get answers. When you seek God, you expect to make a new discovery. Read Jeremiah 29:11 -13. Verse 13 gives us the key: It tells me that I will seek God and find Him. When I seek Him _____ .

Fill in the blank, and you'll know the key.

Memorize:

Continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose (Philippians 2:12-13).

Homework

1. Ephesians 6:5 says, "Slaves, obey your earthly masters with respect and fear, and with sincerity of heart, just as you would obey Christ." This applies equally to the employer/employee relationship today. The fear is not primarily fear of the boss, but fear of the Lord (cf Col 3:22 "fearing the Lord"). List the kinds of things that a Christian employee, with the fear of the Lord in his heart, might do that others would probably not do, and those that he would not do that others probably would.
2. The fear of the Lord is to characterize not only the individual believer but the whole church. In the first reference in Scripture to "the house of God" (Gen. 28:16-17) write down what it says about Jacob (v. 17). Then turn to Acts 9:31. Write down what you think would be the difference between a church "living in the fear of the Lord" and one that was not.

For Further Study

Read Philippians 2:12-13. Paul says "work out your salvation." Write down your answers to the following questions:

1. What you think Paul meant by this, in practical terms.
2. How you think the Philippian Christians were failing to do this. The following references will give you some clues (Phil. 1:27; 2:2-4, 14-15; 4:2).
3. Why does Paul say they were to do it "with fear and trembling"? How would this influence the spiritual problem considered in question 2?

STUDY 9

Finding God's Will

Read Colossians 1:9-14

Introduction

We had touched on one aspect of finding God's will in Study 5 (A Sound Judgment). It would be good to re-read the section "Judging What the Will of God Is." Spirit-directed judgment is just one way in which we come to know God's will. The whole theme of finding God's will is one of paramount importance. We said in the earlier study that we don't have any built-in powers of self-direction (Jer. 10:23). You need to be guided by God especially concerning important decisions, such as your career, your job, your life partner, what church to join, where to live, the friendships you form. Then you need to know God's will on many other broader issues. It concerns the whole way God wants us to live and behave, work and witness. This is essential to our becoming mature. See how Epaphras prayed for his fellow Christians (Col. 4:12).

Think First of Relationship

Knowing God's will is so much more than learning some technique of guidance or applying certain principles to ascertain the will of God. We need to think less about method and more about relationship. Before leaving a church I had been ministering to in a distant city, I asked one of the leaders if he could put me on the right road for my return journey. I was expecting directions, but he gave me a guide. "Neil will pilot you. He takes that route home anyway." Instead of trying to decipher some scribbled directions as I drove, I had only to follow Neil in the blue Datsun. God didn't give the Israelites a route to follow. He Himself went ahead of them to guide them (Exod. 13: 21). Whether it is guidance in specific decisions or just understanding the will of God in important matters of life, relationship is the key. If we are living in disobedience and therefore out of touch with God, we cannot expect to receive God's guidance, even though we may pray earnestly for it (1 Sam. 28:5-6,15; Ps. 66:18-19). We must be in right relationship with the Guide.

Learn from Paul's Prayer

Paul's prayer in our reading confirms what we have been saying.

We have not stopped ... asking God to fill you with the knowledge of his will through all spiritual wisdom and understanding . . . that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and may please him in every way: bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God.

Note these characteristics of Paul's prayer:

1. For Whom Paul Prays

Paul prays not simply for the leaders of the church, but for all believers. Paul could pray like this with confidence because when he was newly converted he was told that God had chosen him "to know his will" (Acts 22:14). You, too, have been chosen to know God's will.

2. For What Paul Prays

Paul prays not simply that the Colossians may be informed as to the will of God, but that they would be filled with the knowledge of it. To be filled with the Spirit is to be possessed and ruled by the Spirit. To be filled with the knowledge of God's will means that you are so ruled by His will that you carry it out. That's what Paul wanted for the Colossians, and that's what God wants for us.

We are to first "live a life worthy of the Lord." How would we live such a life if we have never bothered to find out what pleases and what displeases God, or what is His particular will for our lives?

Secondly, we are to be "bearing fruit in every good work." If we know the will of God and are doing it by the power of the Holy Spirit, we cannot help being fruitful.

Finally, and most wonderful of all, we are to be "growing in the knowledge of God." This means that the relationship with our divine Guide whom we spoke about earlier is continually deepening. Knowing God's will and knowing God are closely related.

A young man was trying to persuade his friend to go with him to a certain questionable establishment in town.

"No thanks," said the other.

"Why not?"

"It would upset my Dad."

"Oh, I see. He's told you not to go there."

"No he hasn't. But I know my Dad."

Not only is it true that in getting to know God's will you get to know God, but in getting to know God you get to know His will, especially in many "Is it right? Is it wrong?" issues.

Importance of Heart Attitude

When people find the business of ascertaining God's will difficult, it is usually because their heart attitude is not right. Here are four requirements:

1. Dependence

Any sense of self-sufficiency must be broken down if we are to trust God with all our heart and not lean on our own understanding (Prov. 3:5-6). Common sense and human wisdom will prove totally inadequate. We are required to understand what the will of the Lord is. Not to do so is foolish (Eoh 5:17) We will not discover God's will by trying to fathom it with our human 'intellect (Job 11:7), but by asking God to reveal it to us in answer to prayer (Eph. 1:17-19).

2. Obedience

Obedience is never a problem – until you discover that God's will crosses yours! After the fall of Jerusalem to the Babylonians, the leaders of the Israelites who were carried away into captivity asked the prophet Jeremiah to ask God where they should go and what they should do. God was their witness that they would do whatever the Lord said (Jer. 42:1-6). But see how they responded when God did speak (Jer. 43:1-2). More often than not, God will not reveal His will to us if we are not disposed to obey it. Jesus once said that His teaching was not His own but God's, and that if anyone chose to do God's will they would know that this was true (John 7:16-17). In the same way, if we have hearts truly set to do God's will, we shall know assuredly what God's will is.

3. Patience

When we inquire of the Lord, it is not often we get a reply by mail. This is where our determination to obey is put to the test. We must learn to wait for God. While we wait He is acting for us (Isa. 64:4). Often Christians ask God for direction, and when He doesn't answer as quickly as they would like, they do whatever they think best. That is, they "lean on (their) own

understanding" (see above). Often God's zero hour is just after ours. We must wait for God. Failure to do this was King Saul's first major blunder, and it cost him his throne (1 Sam. 13:7-14). If our hearts are right, God will always guide in time.

4. Sensitivity

One of the great biblical promises for knowing God's will is found in Psalm 32:8-9. Instead of "I will counsel you and watch over you" most versions read, "I will counsel you with my eye upon you." The eye is a very sensitive and effective method of counselling. I recall occasions when we had visitors over for tea, and my brother and I would dig into the pastries before anyone else had a look at them – until we caught father's eye! That was enough. No words were needed.

As Christians that means keeping our eye on the Lord to pick up the signals, just as one serving a table would watch the master or mistress (Ps. 123:1-2). After promising to counsel us with His eye (Ps. 32:8), the Lord tells us, "Do not be like the horse or the mule." Does God have to tug you first this way and then that way to get you where He wants you? That's the only way He can deal with some. Pray for sensitivity to those gentle checks or nudges of the Holy Spirit.

How God Communicates

Finally we must consider briefly the practical ways by which God communicates His will to us. First, there are the **Scriptures**. As well as using these in general to teach us, God often lights up a phrase or passage to give us special direction. When I received my first invitation to minister God's Word overseas, there seemed no way that I could say "Yes." Then this scripture came strongly to me, "Go, and I will be with your mouth and teach you what you shall say" (Exod. 4:12). I took it as God's word, and amazingly the obstacles were removed one by one.

Then there is the **inward voice of the Holy Spirit** (Acts 10:19-20). We often read of God speaking to the Old Testament saints, but seldom it would seem with an audible voice, but rather with that "still small voice" within. We have the inward sensing that we have heard from God.

There is also the **ordering of our circumstances**. God has a way of cutting off our finances and of releasing them, of shutting doors and opening them (1 Cor. 16:8-9). He uses these to move us or keep us where we are.

We must include here the **counsel of others**, especially our leaders. We are not loners serving God. We are members who belong to each other and have a concern for each other in the body of Christ (1 Cor. 12:25-26). It should not surprise us when God gives or confirms His direction to us through fellow members of the body.

God also uses the **gifts of the Holy Spirit**. The first missionary movement was set in motion by a direct word from the Holy Spirit, probably through one of the prophets present (Acts 13:1-3). Note that this word was a confirmation, setting two men apart for the work to which God had already called them. If such an utterance is not a confirmation, it will need to be tested and confirmed (1 Thess. 5:20-21). God may also use dreams, as in Bible times, to enlighten us, warn us, or give us special direction (Matt. 2:12-13).

Constantly God uses two or more means in a given situation to communicate His will. If you are not sure, stay put until you are. There is one final indication that should be present every time you think you discern the will of God: the **peace of God** ruling in your heart (Col. 3:15). Here the word "rule" means to arbitrate, or act as referee. When your peace is disturbed, the referee has blown his whistle to stop the game. Never move if the peace of God is not ruling in your heart.

Memorize:

I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go ; I will counsel you and watch over you. Do not be like the horse or the mule, which have no understanding but must be controlled by bit and bridle or they will not come to you. (Psalm 32:8-9).

Homework

Write in your notebook your honest answer to the following personal questions. Also write down in full any verse, along with the reference, that confirms your answer.

1. Do you believe that God has a plan for your future which is good, well-pleasing, and perfect?
2. Are you expecting Him to unfold or to continue to unfold that plan to you?
3. Are you willing to forgo any plan of yours if it should clash with God's revealed plan?
4. For you to know God's will. God has His part to play, and you have yours. What is your part?

For Further Study

1. Study Saul's track record over this question of seeking God's will, and then examine David's record. Write down all you can learn from these incidents about the character of these two men:

Saul: 1 Sam. 14:16-20 (Note: The ark was used for consulting God), vv. 36-37; 28:6; 1 Chron. 10:13-14; 13:3.

David: 1 Sam. 23:2,4; 30:8; 2 Sam. 2:1; 5:19,23; 21:1.

2. Isaiah 30:21 is a promise that if we mistake God's path for us, He will correct us. The voice behind us tells us our Shepherd is no longer leading us, and turning to the right or to the left means deviating from the right path (Num. 20:17; Deut. 5:32). See what you can learn from two examples of God's corrective guidance in David's life and two examples from Paul's life.

David: 2 Sam. 7:1-16; 1 Sam. 25:1-34.

Paul: Acts 16:6-7.

STUDY 10

Resisting the Tempter

Read 1 Peter 5:5-11

Satan was a very high angelic dignitary, one of the cherubim, until he and his angels rebelled and were expelled from heaven (Isa.14:12-14; Ezek.28:14-16). It is these powers of darkness, not human beings, that are now our real enemy (Eph. 6:12). Satan (meaning adversary) is committed to opposing God and all those who belong to God's kingdom.

Since his ambition was to make himself "like the Most High" (Isa.14:14), he sought to tempt the first pair to transfer their allegiance to him. He first seduced Eve into disobeying God, and through her, Adam (Gen.3:1-6). The attack was on Eve's mind, and Satan came in the guise of a serpent, which suggests cunning and deceit (2 Cor.11:3). In this way he succeeded in injecting the germ of rebellion into the human race, so that death came to all (Rom.5:12). The measure of Satan's success is that he is acknowledged in Scripture as "the prince of this world" (John 12:31) and "the god of this age" (2 Cor.4:4). He has "blinded the minds of unbelievers" to keep them from seeing the light and knowing who it is they are serving. Now "the whole world is under the control of the evil one" (1 John 5:19).

God's Intervention

Now for the bright side. Satan's success caused no panic in heaven. Nothing took God by surprise. His plan of salvation was prepared before the need for it existed (Rev. 13:8). The coming of Jesus was like D day in Europe, a strategic attack by the kingdom of heaven to recapture lost territory. His preaching the kingdom, healing the sick, and casting out demons was stage one of this heavenly invasion (Matt. 12:28). Stage two was to be accomplished through the army of redeemed men and women called the church, formed at Pentecost. The final victory will be when the last trumpet sounds heralding Christ's return in glory, and a mighty cry is heard from heaven: "The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he will reign for ever and ever" (Rev.11:15). Not only does the believer have the assurance of ultimate victory, but even Satan himself knows that his days are numbered (Rev. 12:12).

Sizing Up the Enemy

A common mistake for believers is to underestimate the enemy. They think "the roaring lion" is toothless, all bark and no bite. Or they think deception is his only weapon, that he only can pull the wool over their eyes. We must take the devil seriously. He is a spirit being with supernatural power. He brought down fire from the sky and a storm from the desert which dealt death and destruction to Job's household and possessions (Job 1:12,16,18-19). He was able to transport the Son of God from the desert and set Him on the highest point of the temple in Jerusalem (Matt 4:5). Then from a high place he was able to show Him all the kingdoms of the world in a flash of a second (Luke 4:5). If we have the fear of the Lord, we shall maintain a healthy respect for the authority God has given Satan. If the great archangel was not free to slander him, we must be careful how we speak about him or address him (Jude 8-9).

It is just as serious of a mistake to think Satan has a free hand to do what he wants. Far from it. Since "the world, and all who live in it" belong to the Lord (Ps. 24:1), the devil is God's devil. He owes his existence and authority to the Most High. He is only "ruler of the world" and "god of this age" by divine permission, and until God decides to settle accounts (Rev.20:10). He cannot lift a little finger against God's children without God's approval. He launched two fierce attacks on Job, but observe how they were monitored and controlled by God (Job 1:12; 2:6) and

permitted for Job's ultimate good and blessing (Job 42:12; James 5:11). Our temptations are also controlled by God (1 Cor 10:13).

God Meant It for Good

Though God may lead us into temptation (Matt. 4:1; Acts 20:22-23) or permit us to be tempted, He Himself never tempts us to do evil (James 1:13). If God can control our temptations, we may wonder why He doesn't intervene to stop them altogether. It is because they accomplish a valuable purpose in our lives. What is God doing through temptation?

He's strengthening your faith by putting it to the test. Faith is like muscle. It must be subjected to greater and greater tests in order to reach its peak performance. Just as strong winds cause trees to bend, they also drive their roots deeper into the soil. Without temptation, faith would be flabby (James 1:2-4; 1 Pet 1:6-7).

He's purifying your character as gold in a crucible. Before he went through the fire of trial. Job was "righteous." That had more to do with his outward acts. After the fire. Job was holy for God had dealt with inner attitudes. Job himself said, "When he has tested me, I will come forth as gold" (Job 23:10).

He's maturing you for God's approval. It is only having "stood the test" under trial that we qualify for the "crown of life" (James 1:12). Two pocket watches in a jeweler's shop appeared to be identical except one was twice the price of the other. The reason? The more expensive one had undergone stringent tests, such as being subjected to enormous pressure and great temperature extremes, and being immersed in water for days, and had come through unaffected. God intends that we shall not only come through unscathed but be made "strong, firm, and steadfast" (1 Pet. 5:10).

An old Puritan was watching a blacksmith tempering metal. With a rod in his hand, the blacksmith pointed to different parts of the red hot iron. Wherever he pointed, his assistant brought down the sledgehammer with a great thud. The Puritan saw how God points out where we need tempering, and there the devil brings down the hammer of temptation.

"Thus I perceived," the Puritan said, "how God makes the devil sweat for the saint's good!" The devil meant it for harm, but God meant it for good.

How to Resist

1. Take a Positive Attitude

This means believing that God means temptation for good. I was lying immobilized on a hospital bed 12,000 miles from home. An accident had ended my preaching tour in that country before I had fulfilled the main engagements I had come for. It seemed that every bone in my body was aching, as well as my injured head. The verse God gave me was James 1:2: "Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds." How do you respond to a word like that? Only by declaring in faith, "Great good will come out of this." And, of course, it did. Have you ever shuddered when you read the list of Paul's hardships? He could refer to them as "light and momentary troubles" only because he saw them in the light of what they would achieve (2 Cor. 4:17-18).

2. Recognize the Attack

That means being constantly alert. Jesus told His drowsy disciples, "Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation" (Matt. 26:41). How would you behave if you were in the bush, and you knew there was a lion prowling around? Well, that's exactly the situation you are in, and

Peter gives you the answer (1 Pet. 5:8). To be proud or cocksure of ourselves is to be heading for a fall (1 Cor. 10:12). Often the enemy disguises his attack. We may not be aware that that strange bout of depression or that feeling of deep discouragement could be an attack of the devil. Let us trust the Holy Spirit to alert us.

3. Don't Court Temptation or Walk into Danger

We are not "to think about how to gratify the desires of the sinful nature" (Rom. 13:14b). The world about us will provide endless scope for this, but the grace of God teaches us to say "No" (Titus 2:11-12). The sinful nature is to be crucified, not pampered and nourished (Gal. 5:24). There are certain "no go" areas where the child of God trespasses at his peril. We are to have nothing to do with anything occult, however harmless it may seem. Spiritism (usually called spiritualism), witchcraft, fortune-telling, horoscopes, Ouija boards, and such are forbidden because powers of evil are operating there (Deut. 18:9-13). Any soldier who strolls into enemy territory is liable to be taken prisoner (Acts 8:9-11, 18-23).

4. Submit to God; Resist the Devil (James 4:7)

If you do not first submit to God, you will have no power to resist the devil. Submission brings God's power to your aid. How do you resist? It's not by taking a deep breath and gritting your teeth. Our fight is one of faith (1 Tim.6:12). So Peter tells us how to resist the roaring lion – “by standing firm in the faith” (1 Pet. 5:9). It is not even enough to think about God's superior strength or His promise to deliver you. You must give voice to your faith. Confess with your mouth what you are believing in your heart. If you memorize some of the great victory promises, you will be able to quote them in the heat of battle. For example:

- "Sin shall not be your master" (Rom. 6:14).
- "Thanks be to God! He gives us victory through our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Cor. 15:57).
- "We are more than conquerors through Him who loves us" (Rom.8:37).

Memorize:

Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything (James 1:2-4).

Homework

1. Temptation is a learning time. Look back over your own experiences of temptation. Write down what you have learned:
 - a) about yourself
 - b) about God and His Word
 - c) about your need for fellow Christians
2. Now make a note of what you believe temptation has done in making you a better Christian. Thank God for each thing you write down. If you are still going through some temptation, start thanking God for it, confess that you believe His purpose in it will be fulfilled and that He is giving you the victory.

For Further Study

1. Jesus referred to the devil when He said, "The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy" (John 10:10). In what ways is this generally true of mankind? In what ways does he try to rob the believer? How are we to guard against this?
2. Jesus also referred to the devil as "a strong man" guarding the valuables in his house (Matt. 12:29; Luke 11:21-22). What is his house? What are these valuables? How in practical terms are we to enter his house, tie him up, and make off with the goods? Find scriptures to support your answers.

STUDY 11

Embracing the Cross

Read Romans 6:1-14

The Bible teaches that through the cross the believer has been saved from the penalty of sin (John 5:24), that he is being saved from the power of sin (Rom. 5:10), and that when Christ returns the Christian will be saved from the presence of sin (Rev. 21:23,27). But many believers only seem to know about salvation in the past tense. They know that the cross has cleared their past account, that they have been forgiven and accepted by God because Jesus died on the cross. They incorrectly think that they can now leave the cross behind and press on into the more positive blessings of the Christian life. But Jesus says, "If you really want to be a true disciple you must take the cross along with you" (see Luke 14:27). Salvation is so much more than a free pardon for the past. It deals with those temptations that come from within.

What the Cross Signifies

Because the cross adorns a church building or is worn as a necklace, we forget that it is not a pretty emblem. The cross has to do with the execution of a criminal. Today we would compare it to a hangman's noose or the electric chair. The cross represents three things:

1. Shame.

All that accompanied the crucifixion including the execution itself was shameful as well as painful. The condemned man was whipped, mocked, and spat upon (Matt. 27:26-31). The procession to the execution place was through a hooting, jeering crowd. The prisoner carried his own cross (John 19:17). He was stripped and nailed naked to the stake for all to see (Ps.22:17b). The wonder is not that the Son of God "became obedient to death," but that it was "even death on a cross!" (Phil. 2:8). Was there ever a death more shameful? Embracing the cross means coming to terms with "the offense of the cross" (Gal. 5:11).

2. Weakness

Psalm 22:14-15 puts these words prophetically onto the lips of Christ, "I am poured out like water, and all my bones are out of joint. My heart has turned to wax; it has melted away within me. My strength is dried up like a potsherd, and my tongue sticks to the roof of my mouth." The cross puts a man into a place of appalling weakness and helplessness. Speaking of the risen Christ to the Corinthians, Paul says, "He is not weak in dealing with you, but is powerful among you. For to be sure, he was crucified in weakness, yet he lives by God's power" (2 Cor. 13:3-4). The cross is designed to bring us to the end of our own resources and to a place of total dependence on God.

3. Death

When Jesus spoke of bearing the cross. He wasn't talking about playing a game of "Let's pretend." His hearers would know exactly what He meant. A man with an ashen face, struggling down the street with the cross on His shoulder, goaded and kicked by a squad of Roman soldiers, was a man sentenced to death. He was on His way to execution.

In the last scripture, Paul said, "We felt the sentence of death." Clearly they had the cross on their shoulders. This ugly emblem lies at the heart of the Christian message. It should remind you that the gospel was never intended to give you a mere spring cleaning, to brighten you up, or to make you a little more acceptable to your Creator. It was designed to finish you off, so that there could

be "a new creation" (2 Cor.5:17). The cross is not to titivate but to terminate. It offers a radical final solution to the problem of ongoing sin, and so opens the way to bring us into all the blessings that lie on the resurrection side of the cross.

Looking Beyond

When we hear about being crucified with Christ, it all sounds dark and forbidding. Who wants to tread such a path? Christ is here, our inspiration. "Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God" (Heb.12:2). But Jesus was looking beyond the cross and seeing what it was to accomplish. It was this that filled Him with joy and took Him triumphantly through the suffering and shame. It will do exactly the same for us. Notice four tremendous accomplishments that the cross does for us.

The Cross Breaks the Dominion of Sin

To be falling into sin continually, having to confess it to God and then draw on the grace of His forgiveness is not the picture of the normal Christian life we find in the New Testament. It is substandard, and we must not settle for it. "Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase? By no means!" says Paul. What then is the answer? Read on: "We died to sin; how can we live in it any longer?" (Rom. 6:1-2). The cross means death, and death is the only solution to the problem of recurring sin.

Note that Paul does not say: "If we die to sin we would not live in it." He tells us straight. We did die to sin, so to continue in it is not an option. Perhaps you respond, "But I don't feel as though that old sinful self is dead, or if it's dead it won't lie down!" But God has not invited us to consult our feelings on the matter. He has not even suggested that we consider our track record of our past experience. He is telling us what happened when we were united by faith to Christ crucified: "We died to sin." In Romans 6:6, Paul says, "We know that our old self was crucified with him." How do we know? Only by the Holy Spirit revealing it to us.

A young woman, having asked Christ to be her Savior, was told that she was now forgiven and accepted by God. The woman said, "I don't feel forgiven. How can I know it's true?" She was told, "You will only know as you believe God's Word. The Bible says, 'Call on Him and you will be saved. Confess your sins and you will be forgiven.'" As she believed what God had said, she entered into the good God had promised. It is just the same with dying to sin. We must believe what God says and not our own feelings.

The Cross Brings Power Out of Weakness

We have already seen that the cross signifies appalling weakness, but Jesus showed us that it was the pathway to power. Only as He submitted to the way of the cross could He experience the power of the resurrection. It is that same resurrection power that we need to overcome the world. It is only ours as we tread the path He trod. Paul tells us that Jesus "was crucified in weakness, yet he lives by God's power." He then adds, "Likewise, we are weak in him, yet by God's power we will live with him to serve you" (2 Cor.13:4).

The way to know this power is to take a positive attitude toward everything that God permits in our lives to make us weak. We may not know for certain what was "the thorn in the flesh" that Paul had to endure, but we do know why God did not remove it in answer to prayer. It was sent to keep Paul humble and to keep him weak (2 Cor.12:7-9). But the thorn was just one of the many things God used to strip Paul of his self-sufficiency and throw him back upon God (v.10). Things we would have avoided, Paul gladly boasted about. To him they were the pathway to power and effectiveness.

Therefore, thank Him for thy helplessness, beloved,
And if thou needst must long,
Let it be for the rest of utter weakness
In the arms for ever strong.
Long only that He make thee bare and empty,
Take all that is thine own,
Thy prowess and thy strength and thine endeavour,
And leave thee God alone.

The Cross Makes Us Fruitful

Who does not want to be fruitful? During the last week of His earthly life some Greeks requested an interview with Jesus. It seems He did not grant this request. Did He sense that they would present Him with some attractive propositions to turn Him from the path of the cross? "The hour has come," He said, "for the Son of Man to be glorified." Yes, but not in the way these men were probably proposing. He knew that the path to glory was via the cross, so He continued: "I tell you the truth, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds" (John 12:23-25). What is Jesus saying?

First, He was pointing to Himself. He was the kernel of wheat that had to fall into the ground and die. Centuries before it had been prophesied of Him: "Though the Lord make his life a guilt offering, he will see his offspring" (Isa.53:10). Here it was being fulfilled. It was looking beyond the cross and seeing the great harvest that would spring from His death. If Jesus had been unwilling to "fall into the ground and die," He would have remained a single seed. By consenting to the cross, He would produce the harvest "a great multitude that no one could count" (Rev.7:9).

Jesus was also pointing out the path of fruitfulness for us. We, too, must be willing to fall into the ground and die if we are to bear much fruit. Strictly speaking, it is not the seed but the outer husk that dies in the germinating process. So Paul says, "We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body (2 Cor 4-10) It is by the Spirit that we must learn to "put to death the misdeeds of the body" (Rom. 8:13). As "death is at work in us ... life is at work" in others (2 Cor.4:12).

The Cross is the Pathway to Glory

This is not something we may experience only when we get to heaven. We may know it in measure now if we have embraced the cross. Peter says. "If you are insulted because of the name of Christ... the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you" (1 Pet. 4:14). Christians who have suffered much for Christ's sake usually have a joy, a radiance, and a beauty in their faces which is not of this world. They seem to carry with them a sense of God. This is only a foretaste of the glory we are to enjoy when we enter God's presence

Probably the greatest temptation Jesus had to face in His earthly life was to take a path to glory bypassing the cross. In the wilderness, the devil offered Jesus all the kingdoms of the world and their glory if He would worship him (Luke 4:5-7). Jesus knew that one day they would all be His, but first He must "face death for everyone." It was because of His obedience to death that God has exalted Him to the highest place (Phil.2:9). There was no shortcut for Him (Luke 24:26), and there is none for us (2 Tim.2:11-12a). The cross is still the only path to glory.

So if you would know –

Abiding victory over sin
God's power made perfect in weakness
A life of abundant fruitfulness

And the hope of glory

– you must come to terms with the cross as a present experience. If you have already been baptized in water this will not require you to do something that has not been done but to recognize something that Christ has already done for you.

Memorize:

For we know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be rendered powerless, that we should no longer be slaves to sin (Romans 6:6).

Homework

1. "Sin shall not be your master" (Rom. 6:14) is both a command and a promise. If there are temptations that regularly floor you, you have not yet fully embraced the cross. Read again your memory verse. It says, "We know...." This is more than a mental knowing. It comes by the revelation of the Holy Spirit. Call on God to give you this revelation. You will know that you have it when you can say boldly and with conviction, "I know that my old self was crucified with Christ." Don't move on to number two until you can do this.
2. Read Romans 6:12-14. Paul says, "Do not offer the parts of your body to sin ... " (v. 13). Instead do two things:
 - a) "Offer yourselves to God." How? "As those who have been brought from death to life." Do it right now. Surrender yourself to God in faith that the old self is dead and that you are a new person in Christ (see Rom. 12:1).
 - b) "Offer the parts of your body to him." Think of the part of your body involved in each area of temptation. "Here is my mind. Lord, that used to think wrong thoughts. I present it to You as an instrument of righteousness." Go through all of them one by one. Remember, you are not under law – you keeping it up – but under grace – God keeping you up (v. 14).

For Further Study

1. This will help you to discover the secret of spiritual power through the cross. Read again 2 Corinthians 12:7-10. Note Paul's list of the hard things he had to face (v. 10). They were not sins, but weaknesses and testing situations. Compile your own list of things you find hard, like shyness and self-consciousness, difficulty in expressing yourself, being ridiculed at work, opposition at home, and all the things that make it hard to follow Jesus. Under the list write what God says about them (v. 9). Ask God to help you believe what He says. The proof that you are believing Him will be when you can:
 - a) Boast about your weaknesses, instead of moaning about them (v.9).
 - b) Delight in them, instead of shrinking from them (v. 10).
 - c) Know that Christ's power has been made perfect in your weakness
2. The cross is the path to glory. See how this is illustrated in Joseph's life (Gen. 37,39-40). Note the events in these chapters that you think would have worked the cross into Joseph's life. What particular weaknesses do you think God was dealing with in Joseph in order to fit him for the throne (Gen. 37:2, 5-11)?

STUDY 12

Understanding God's Ways

Read Hebrews 12:4-11

Though God redeemed Israel out of Egypt and made them His people, they did not understand His ways. They saw Him do great things for them in deliverance and miraculous provision. They also saw Him judge and discipline them. Moses understood what lay behind these deeds. God's ways, but the people didn't: "He made known his ways to Moses, his deeds to the people of Israel" (Ps. 103:7). That speaks of two very different levels of understanding. Knowing God's ways is how we come to know God. See how Moses reached out for this deeper understanding in Exodus 33:13.

At the end of the wilderness wanderings, Moses said to the people: "Remember how the Lord your God led you all the way in the desert. He humbled you, causing you to hunger and then feeding you with manna" (Deut. 8:2-3). Causing them to hunger and feeding them with manna were both acts of God, but it was much easier to understand God's "deeds" in feeding them than to understand why He suffered them to hunger. In this study we are going to focus on something we find difficult to understand: God's discipline in our lives. This is vital if we are to mature.

God Is Sovereign

This means God not only governs the affairs of men, but He possesses absolute authority. He acts, He intervenes. He permits. He promotes. He forbids, and He overrules, in order to accomplish His purpose. He doesn't do all this with circumstances permitting, or human beings permitting, or Satan permitting. He does it all regardless (Isa. 14:27). That's what we mean by absolute authority. He may use men, even wicked men (Acts 2:23). He may even use Satan. The fact is, "He does as he pleases with the powers of heaven and the peoples of the earth. No one can hold back his hand or say to him: 'What have You done?'" (Dan. 4:35).

The New Testament bears equal witness to the truth of God's sovereignty. We are introduced to one "who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will" (Eph. 1:11). The circumstances of a believer's life are so perfectly controlled by God that "in all things God works for the good of those who love him" (Rom. 8:28). We have no problem in believing this when God's ways obviously work out for our happiness and prosperity. But what do we feel when His ways bring disappointment and adversity? This is where we must learn to sing the song of Moses and the song of the Lamb: not only "Great and marvelous are your deeds, Lord God Almighty," but also, "Just and true are your ways, King of the ages" (Rev. 15:3). To have full faith in God's sovereignty is essential for a proper understanding of God's ways.

God, Satan, or Chance?

How do you react when unforeseen events overtake you? If it was a legacy of \$50,000 left you by Aunt Fanny, you will no doubt bless God and bless Aunt Fanny. But if, as in the case of a friend of mine, you learn that you have lost \$50,000 as a result of a business failure, you may find you have conflicting reactions. Do you simply dismiss it as "bad luck," one of those misfortunes that could happen to anyone? The fact is you are not "anyone," but someone very special to God, one of His children for whom He takes a fatherly responsibility. If we have grasped the truth of God's sovereignty, we will know that our affairs, good and bad, are not subject to luck, fate, or chance (Rom. 8:28).

Of course you might feel it was your own silly fault for agreeing hastily to invest in that firm or for not seeking the advice of others. But the fact is, you were still in the hands of the One who is

willing and able to intervene and overrule your foolish decisions. And He often does. Why didn't He do it this time?

Was it Satan? If you grasped the lesson of Job's misfortunes (Study 9) you will know that though Satan possesses supernatural power and is our sworn enemy, he is permitted only to operate within clearly defined boundaries. These are laid down by God, and God has purposes of blessing in all that He permits. In Job 1:6-12 and 2:1-6, we are told about the argument between God and Satan as to whether Job was the good man that God said he was. After that argument, Satan is never mentioned again in the book. Job came right through into victory, and his health and fortunes were restored. As far as we know, he never knew Satan had any part in the attacks on his possessions, his family, and his health. When God shows us that we are under satanic attack, then we resist the devil by faith. At other times we deal with God, as Job did, and whether Satan is involved need not concern us.

Divine Punishment?

Does God punish us? Well, yes and no. If we are thinking of punishment as divine condemnation for sins committed, the answer is "No." The ungodly will suffer this on the day of judgment (Matt. 25:41, 46), but the true believer "has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life" (John 5:24; cf Rom. 8:1). If we mean, "Does God punish us by corrective discipline?" the answer is "Yes." Scripture teaches us that just as surely as a human father who truly loves his son will not spare the rod (Prov. 13:24), so our heavenly Father uses His rod with his children (Deut. 8:5). You will have seen from the reading that this is a New Testament as much as an Old Testament concept.

A man noticed some of his choice apples were disappearing from his orchard. That evening he saw a figure among the trees. When the young culprit was apprehended, it was his own boy. Had the thief been a stranger, the man would have called the police. Since it was his son, he said, "Go to your bedroom and wait for me there." In due course "the board of education" came into painful contact with the "seat of learning."

When we sin we are not handed over to the law to face the Judge of all the earth. Christ's death on the cross has fully satisfied the demands of the law on our behalf. But that doesn't mean we can sin with impunity because we are believers. There is still the discipline and correction of our heavenly Father (1 Cor.11:32).

The Discipline of the Lord

We must understand the Lord's discipline in order to respond to God correctly.

1. Discipline is an Expression of Love

Look at Hebrews 12:8: "If you are not disciplined (and everyone undergoes discipline), then you are illegitimate children and not true sons." From the beginning of Scripture to the end that's the way discipline is viewed (Rev.3:19). If we ever speak of God "punishing" His children, we must understand His action is proof of His loving commitment to bring us into maturity. Verse 8 is teaching us that it is the absence of God's fatherly discipline and correction in our lives that should give us cause for concern. We should have to ask ourselves, "Am I a true son?" God doesn't discipline the unsaved and the ungodly, any more than the man with the orchard would have felt free to apply the stick to someone else's son. Discipline is the mark of God's special concern.

2. There Are No Exceptions

Did you notice these three words in verse 8, "everyone undergoes discipline"? Certainly not everyone of the Father's children are worldly, wayward, or backslidden, but all are disciplined. So not all discipline is because of unrighteous acts. Job's friends made the mistake of thinking that about Job, though God had expressed the very opposite when He spoke to Satan. But there was still a purifying of his character God had to accomplish. Even when we are generally living in victory and walking in the Spirit, thoughts, motives, and attitudes need to be purified (2 Cor.10:5).

3. It Hurts!

The closing verse of our reading says: "No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful." Our older versions usually use the old-fashioned word "chastisement" instead of discipline. This is the word describing the fatherly "laying on of hands" in the case of the son caught stealing his father's apples. It is not meant to be pleasant. It's meant to hurt. Sometimes the pain is mental, sometimes physical. With Job it was both. But far more painful than the physical affliction of being covered with sores was the mental pain of being wrongfully accused by "the friends" who had apparently come to comfort him. One thing is certain. Whatever affliction God orders or permits, it is always an expression of His unfailing love and always for our ultimate blessing (Lam. 3:33).

4. It's for Our Profit

Verse 11 in our reading says: "Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it." Not just a little fruit, but a harvest. Take Job. God had blessed the early part of Job's life. According to Satan that was the only reason why Job served God. Satan, the accuser, implied it was cupboard love (Job 1:9-11), but "the Lord blessed the latter part of Job's life more than the first" (Job 42:12). This doesn't mean that God only increased his possessions. Job had had a conviction, even in the midst of his trial, that God was refining him, and that he would come forth as gold (Job 23:10). That's exactly what happened. God changed a man who was outwardly righteous into one who was inwardly holy. "God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in his holiness" (Heb. 12:10).

Handling Discipline Correctly

"You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good" (Gen. 50:20). That's what Joseph said years afterward to his brothers who had sold him into slavery. Whether our misfortunes come to us through the malice of the devil or the evil intentions of men, it is always true that "God intended it for good." That is another way of expressing Romans 8:28. Whether God's intention is fulfilled depends on our reacting correctly. Would Joseph have ever qualified for the throne, would he have ever become the instrument of blessing and salvation that God intended, if he had allowed his brothers' cruel injustice to fill him with bitterness and resentment? Hebrews 12:5-6 notes two negative commands that teach us how to respond correctly to the Lord's discipline.

1. Do Not Make Light of It

We may be tempted to shrug off the Lord's discipline. We explain it away. "Surely this couldn't be God saying anything to me." It is humbling to acknowledge that God is disciplining us and adjusting us, so we dismiss the thought and look for natural explanations. Verse 12 is saying, "Take God's discipline seriously. Things don't happen in your life accidentally." The right response, as our reading reminds us, is one of submission (v. 9). See how the Psalmist responded to his trials positively and with faith (Ps.119:71,75).

2. Do Not Lose Heart

Losing heart is the other temptation. We don't shrug it off or deny that it is God, but we take it badly. We feel God is being harsh and unloving. "Doesn't He understand all that I've been through already?" We let feelings of resentment lodge in our hearts. If our trial has come through God's people, we may have resentment toward them. It's really against God, though, that we have these feelings. This is what happened to Job. His "friends" with their false accusations stirred him up, and then out came his words about God being unjust (Job 9:15-18). In the midst of his fiery affliction, poor Job lost heart altogether. He wished he had never been born and only wanted to die (Job 3:11, 20-21).

Job felt the way he did because he couldn't see the purpose of grace that God had in mind for him. He could only hear the devil's whisper, "You are going through this because God hates you and has abandoned you." Have you ever heard Satan whisper that? God says, "No, you are going through this because I love you and accept you as My son (see Heb. 12:6,7). And because you are My son, I want you to bear the family likeness, that is, share My holiness (see v. 10). What you have had before has been first fruits, but I want to give you a harvest" (see v. 11).

Memorize:

No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it (Hebrews 12:11).

Homework

1. Note some of the ways in which God changes us through trials and testings. What are the changes described in the following scriptures? Jot them down. Are you able to identify with some of them from your own experience?
 - a) Psalm 107:17-20
 - b) 1 Peter 1:6-7
 - c) 1 Peter 5:10
 - d) Hebrews 12:10
 - e) 2 Corinthians 1:3-4
 - f) 2 Corinthians 4:17
2. Are you going through some discipline of the Lord right now?
 - a) Make sure you are not falling into either of the two traps mentioned in Hebrews 12:5-6.
 - b) Do you understand what God is wanting to do in you through this testing? If not, ask Him to show you, and then call on Him for grace to respond correctly to His working in you.

For Further Study

In 1 Corinthians 11:17-34 Paul speaks of the way the Corinthians had been misbehaving when they celebrated the Lord's Supper in church.

- a) Write down the things for which Paul reprimanded them (vv. 20-22).
- b) How is their behavior described in verse 27 and then in verse 29?
- c) This had serious physical consequences for the believers concerned. What were they (v. 30)? The last phrase in this verse becomes clear by its use in 1 Corinthians 15:6.

- d) These consequences are described as being "disciplined" by the Lord (v. 32). How else are these consequences described in this verse and in the previous verse?
- e) What does all this teach us about how we should celebrate the Lord's Supper?

STUDY 13

Enjoying Spiritual Nourishment

Read Romans 6:1-14

Meditation is the theme of this chapter, but it has nothing to do with TM (Transcendental Meditation). TM claims to be a scientific method of exploring into the deepest levels of your own being, and so finding freedom from stress and peace of mind. But it is a deception. Though it claims to be non-religious, the mantras that are recited are prayers to Hindu gods and the practice involves opening up oneself to spirits other than the Holy Spirit. The meditation advocated in the Bible does not focus on ourselves, but on God and His Word. Most of the teaching on this theme is in the Old Testament, but it is equally a New Testament practice. Our handling of scriptures may involve hearing, reading, memorizing, studying and even singing scriptures, but meditation is the major means of our spiritual nourishment.

An Old Testament Picture

As soon as God had delivered Israel from Egypt He spoke to them about their daily food, "bread from heaven," that He promised to supply. They were to gather it each day, and this was to be a discipline, a test of obedience (Exod. 16:4). Gathering the manna was not simply something for leaders to do or a special squad. Each redeemed Israelite had to gather it. Nor was it an annual, monthly, or even weekly event. It was to be gathered daily, for it could not be kept (vv. 19-20). This "bread from heaven" is a picture of Christ (John 6:32-35). It is equally a picture of God's Word, for feeding on God's Word is feeding on Christ. So no one who has been redeemed is too young in the faith to start gathering His daily manna. If this was an important discipline for the Israelites (Deut.8:3-5), it is equally so for us.

A Farming Picture

1. Chewing the Cud

We have all watched cows grazing. Most of the time they are not nibbling, but lying down endlessly munching. This is called "chewing the cud" or ruminating. They chew the grass over and over to get all the nourishment out of it. The dictionary tells us that to ruminate also means "to revolve, to turn over and over in the mind, to meditate deeply upon, to consider with a view of subsequent action" (Oxford Dictionary). Biblical meditation, however, is more than a mental exercise. It includes the human spirit, and requires the aid of the Holy Spirit.

2. Mind or Spirit

Bible study and Bible meditation often overlap, but there is a distinction. Study puts the emphasis on the mind. It is an intellectual activity, also needing the aid of the Holy Spirit. But not all believers have the mental equipment to cope with Bible study. In meditation, though the mind is used, the focus is more on the human spirit, and all believers must learn this art. Intellectual ability, yielded to God, is valuable, but we don't need it to hear God speak to us through His Word. When that happens the simple become wise in the estimate of heaven (Ps. 19:7).

3. The Secret of His Effectiveness

Sitting on the conference platform was a big man wearing a rough suit, his hat on one side and his mouth half open. "Who is that?" asked a young man in the congregation, turning to his friend.

"He's the speaker," came the surprising answer. "He's a farm laborer who left school at the age of twelve." The young man groaned and then settled down to endure what was to come! The speaker began by quoting a verse of that old hymn, "O Christ What Burdens Bowed Thy Head." Suddenly the place was filled with the presence of God. Then he opened his Bible and gave the assembled company "honey out of the rock." So impressed was the young man that he asked the preacher afterward where he got such great truths. He told him that he rose early in the morning, lit a candle, got dressed, and then read one or two verses over and over again. Then he put his coat on and walked the country lanes, trusting the Holy Spirit to put the truth that was in his head into his heart. "That's where I get it all," he concluded. Oh, yes, he had been educated all right – in the school of meditation – personally tutored by the Holy Spirit.

The process of meditation consists of three phases which God uses to impart truth:

1. Apprehension

This initial phase involves spiritual understanding or insight (Ps.119:99). Remember in the parable of the sower, Jesus spoke first of how the seed fell on the path. He said that this spoke of those who heard the message and did not understand it (Matt.13:4,19). He was speaking of spiritual understanding that comes by the revelation of the Holy Spirit. Notice the contrast of what Paul says about us believers who have the Spirit (1 Cor.2:12), with what he says a moment later about the unbelievers who have not the Spirit (v.14).

2. Assimilation

This is more than spiritual understanding. To feed the spirit, it is not enough to take in spiritual food; it must be digested. This is the heart of the meditation process. You can eat a lot, so the medics tell us, and still be undernourished, if the body fails to assimilate food. If we are reading the Bible regularly, receiving much teaching, but not growing or maturing, it is because our spiritual digestive system is underdeveloped or out of order. *You Are What You Eat* is the provocative title of a book on health foods. It is a reminder that your food becomes you in terms of bone, blood cells, tissue, and so on. Equally our spiritual food forms our spiritual character when we assimilate it. Good spiritual digestion gives soul satisfaction (Ps.63:5-6). Paul is talking about this in Col. 3:16.

3. Application

Finally there is a practical outworking of the process of meditation. As well as building up character and nourishing our faith, there are adjustments in our lives. We assimilate the Word that we may conform our lives to it. We meditate on it with a view to obeying it (Josh.1:8). To put it differently, we become doers as well as feeders (James 1:23-25).

We also let the Word of God convict and purge us where we have failed to obey it. David records how he kept quiet about something that he should have confessed to God; but as he meditated, the fire of conviction burned (Ps. 39:2-3). He later confessed to God (vv. 7-11).

Psalms 1 lists the benefits of meditations. These should be sufficient to motivate us.

1. Enjoyment

"His delight is in the law of the Lord" (v. 2). Though there is a discipline involved in getting down to meditation, when you do it, there are delightful surprises in store. To the psalmist, discovering God's promises was like tasting honey or finding treasure (Ps. 119:103, 162). This same psalmist has no fear that he will neglect God's Word, because it is his delight (v. 16). No wonder he bursts out, "Oh, how I love your law! I meditate upon it all the day long" (v. 97).

2. Nourishment

"He is like a tree planted by streams of water" (v. 3), so that the roots are well nourished. A sickly Christian is almost always undernourished. He has not learned or has neglected to feed his soul on God's Word. This was one of the first lessons the Old Testament prophets had to learn. Ezekiel was told to eat the scroll which had words from God on it before he could go and speak to the house of Israel (Ezek. 3:1-4). Similarly Jeremiah records: "When your words came (were found KJV, RSV), I ate them" (Jer. 15:16). God's words "being found" suggests that Jeremiah had made a discovery, one that comes by the revelation of the Spirit. Only when the truth reaches the heart is it assimilated, and we are nourished.

3. Fruitfulness

"A tree.. which yields its fruit in season" (v. 3). We saw that feeding on the manna was a picture both of feeding on Christ and feeding on His Word. The parable of the vine emphasizes abiding or remaining in Christ, and Christ remaining in you. The result? Fruit! But Jesus linked this with His word, when He said, "If you remain in me, and my words remain in you" (John 15:7) you will be very fruitful, for you will always get your prayers answered. Christ is the source of our life (John 14:19), and the Word is also the source of our life (John 6:63). If you try hard to remain in Christ while neglecting to dwell in His Word, you will court failure and frustration. If we meditate in His Word we shall be truly fruitful.

4. Healing

"Whose leaf does not wither" (v. 3). What has that to do with healing? In Ezekiel's vision of the river flowing from the sanctuary he saw fruit trees on the banks and was told, "Their fruit will serve for food and their leaves for healing" (Ezek. 47:12; also Rev. 22:2). Jesus said, "These signs will accompany those who believe... they will place their hands on sick people and they will get well" (Mark 16:17-18). Note, this was not said of leaders or those with special gifts. It is a promise to all believing Christians. Sharing in a ministry of healing, whether spiritual, emotional, mental, or physical, is open to us all.

5. Success

Finally, "whatever he does, prospers" (v. 3). What does that mean? "The Lord was with Joseph and he prospered.... The Lord gave him success in everything he did," even though he was a slave (Gen. 39:2-3). To prosper in the estimate of heaven is to have God with you so that everything you do is successful. What Christian does not want that? Notice how God promised exactly this to Joshua, that God would be with him, and that he would prosper, but with exactly the same condition as the man in Psalm 1 who meditated on God's word day and night and obeyed it implicitly (Josh.1:5,8).

Getting Down to the Job

1. Reading and Meditating

If you cannot give time to meditate separately from your daily reading, you can quite successfully combine the two. It is a good way to start. First, ask God where in the Scriptures He wants you to read and meditate. Try to avoid flitting from one passage to another. Instead, meditate consecutively. Read slowly your passage, looking for God to speak. Soon a phrase or thought will arrest you. Stop your reading and start to meditate. Turn it over and over in your mind. It may take you to other verses or incidents in the Bible.

2. Uttering and Muttering

The two main words in Hebrew for meditate also mean to speak, commune, even to mutter or talk to yourself. This is not the first sign of madness! David often did it (Ps. 42:6). God said to Joshua, "Do not let this Book of the Law depart from your mouth." That is, don't stop uttering it, but "meditate on it day and night" (Josh. 1:8). Mouthing and meditating go together (Ps. 19:14). Uttering and muttering are not simply to fix truth in your mind. It is part of the digestive process. You are assimilating the truth. Often it develops into confession, prayer, or praise.

3. Writing about the results

Even when it reaches your heart, there is no guarantee that your mind will retain it, so use a notebook to record the fruit of your meditation. Writing will also help to clarify your thinking and order your thoughts so that you can better share these good things with others.

Memorize:

Do not let this Book of the Law depart from your mouth; meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do everything in it. Then you will be prosperous and successful (Josh. 1:8).

Homework

Choose a portion of Scripture for meditation. Ask God to guide you to the right passage. If nothing springs readily to mind, turn to your last scripture reading and follow the instructions I have given under "Getting Down to the Job." When you have fixed on a verse or sentence, read it over and over again, but don't bite off more than you can chew. One verse should give you plenty of scope. Pray continually, "Lord speak to me the truth I need to hear. Feed me with the food You see I need." As thoughts come, write them down in your notebook. And don't forget to utter or mutter! You will need to allow twenty to thirty minutes for this. Your meditations may well lead to confessions of failure, to thanksgiving, or to supplication for yourself and others. It may help you to record the gist of these, too, in your notebook.

For Further Study

1. What are the main things that God has taught you in this study on meditation? When you have noted them down, write underneath what action you have determined to take to carry out this teaching.
2. Psalm 119, as we have already noted, has much to teach us on meditation. If you are using the NIV you will find "meditate" occurs eight times. Note down each verse and what it teaches:
 - a) The situations and circumstances in which the psalmist meditates.
 - b) His testimony as to what meditation does for him.
 - c) The conditions that make for successful meditating.

STUDY 14

Maintaining the Fullness

Read Acts 6:1-8

This study is written for those who know they have received the baptism in the Holy Spirit. If you have not yet come into this experience, I recommend you read Study 6 in my previous book *Living God's Way, Nourishment for New Believers*. If necessary, seek help from a mature Christian you trust who has been baptized in the Spirit, who will counsel and help you. If you are not Spirit-baptized, you are not yet ready for this study, for you cannot learn to maintain a fullness that you have never received.

Fullness Must Be Maintained

Experiencing "baptism in the Spirit" doesn't immediately lock us into a place of spirituality and effectiveness from which we can never lapse. On the contrary, because we have been endued with power, we have become a greater threat to the enemy. He will redouble his efforts to bring us down. Notice what happened to our Lord after the Holy Spirit came upon Him at the Jordan (Matt. 3:16-4:3).

It is sad but true that believers can, and in some cases do, lose the blessing of the Holy Spirit's anointing. David had a real fear of this after his grievous sin with Bathsheba, as we see from what he says in his prayer of repentance (Ps. 51:11). He should have remembered what happened to Samson, one of Israel's judges, on whom the Spirit came in power (Judg. 14:6; 16:20-21). Or even more vividly, what happened to his predecessor, King Saul. David always acknowledged him as "the Lord's anointed," for King Saul had had a powerful enduing of the Spirit (1 Sam. 10:9-10; 16:14).

Charisma or Character?

Charisma (meaning gift of grace) emphasizes what we do. Character emphasizes what we are. The Bible teaches that the baptism of the Holy Spirit is an enduing of power (Luke 24:49; Acts 1:8) and brings spiritual gifts. The emphasis is clearly upon charisma and what we do. Notice that the baptism of the Holy Spirit was normally received by new converts. They were not required to reach a special standard of holiness, to become mature or knowledgeable, before they received the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:38-39; 8:14-17). Jesus had promised that His heavenly Father would give the Holy Spirit to those who asked Him (Luke 11:13) provided, as always, they asked in faith (Gal. 3:14). It was as simple as that. However, though the Galatians and the Corinthians had received the Spirit by faith, the Galatians lapsed into legalism and the Corinthians into carnality (worldliness).

We must understand clearly how the blessing is to be maintained. As we go on living the Christian life, we receive more light (understanding of truth). God then requires us to walk (conduct our daily lives) in that greater light we have received (1 John 1:6-7). The crisis of receiving must be followed by the process of maintaining and increasing. The renewal of the Spirit is not a once-and-for-all experience. It must be renewed day by day (2 Cor. 4:16). There is no doubt the Ephesian church had had the crisis. They had been marked with the Spirit's seal (Eph. 1:13). We are told how the twelve founding members of that church had this experience through the laying on of Paul's hands, immediately following their water baptism (Acts 19:4-7). So when Paul exhorts them to "be filled with the Spirit" (Eph. 5:18), he is not emphasizing the crisis but the process. It could be translated, "be being filled" or "go on being filled with the Spirit." In other words, let your experience of "being filled" become a state of "being full."

Understanding "Spirit-filled"

When Scripture uses "filled" in connection with the Holy Spirit, it is emphasizing quality rather than quantity. When we say, "That man is Spirit-filled," we are not describing measure, how much he has of the Spirit, as much as influence, how much the Spirit has of him. When Jesus spoke in the Nazareth synagogue, the hearers were "filled with fury" (Luke 6:11 RSV). That is to say they lost all self-control, anger took over, and they behaved like men "possessed." Anger characterized their words and actions.

To be Spirit-filled is to be Spirit-possessed. Your speech and behavior take on the characteristics of the Holy Spirit, who is both holy and spiritual. Let us ask ourselves some questions about someone who has received the Holy Spirit and even come into an experience of spiritual gifts.

1. If he is not walking with God anymore, is he Spirit-filled?
2. Though he may attend church and participate in meetings, if he is not a witness for Christ and if his life lacks power and effectiveness (Acts 1:8), is he Spirit-filled?
3. If he engages in many forms of Christian service, but produces little or no lasting fruit, is he Spirit-filled?
4. If his fellow believers find him as difficult to get along with as they did before he received "the baptism," is he Spirit-filled?
5. If he has the gifts of the Spirit, but little of the fruit of the Spirit, is he Spirit-filled?

The Corinthian church had received the power of the Holy Spirit and was moving strongly in spiritual gifts. Paul thanked God for this (1 Cor. 1:4-7). He encouraged them to press on into greater gifts (1 Cor. 12:31; 14:1,12), but he says reprovingly, "I could not address you as spiritual but as worldly-mere infants ... acting like mere men" (1 Cor. 3:1,3). Hardly the description of a Spirit-filled company! They had not maintained what they had obtained. The crisis had not been followed by the process. They had received the Spirit but were not walking in the Spirit. They were strong in charisma but weak in character.

Christ Is Our Model

The marks of a Spirit-filled person are seen first in our Lord Jesus.

1. Spirit Led

At His baptism the Spirit came upon Him. Then we read, "Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit into the desert" (Luke 4:1). So a Spirit-filled man is led by the Spirit. He does not initiate a lot of Christian activity, and then ask God to bless it. He lets God do the initiating, and he does the responding. This marked Jesus' entire ministry (John 5:19).

2. Spirit Empowered

After the wilderness temptation, this Spirit-filled Man "returned to Galilee in the power of the Spirit" (Luke 4:14). There is no evidence in Scripture that He displayed this power before the Holy Spirit came on Him. We know during all His life He was "holy, blameless, pure, set apart from sinners" (Heb. 7:26), but for those first thirty years, we do not read of one sermon being preached, one disciple being made, or one miracle being performed. After the Jordan experience, what a change! Wherever He went, the power of the Spirit accompanied His ministry and made it effective. So after Pentecost, Peter could even address a foreigner, like the Roman centurion, and say, "You know what has happened throughout Judea . . . how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power, and how he went around doing good and healing all who are under the power of the devil" (Acts 10:37-38). Had not Jesus told the disciples Himself

that the evidence that the Holy Spirit had come upon them would be power (Acts 1:8) – power which would make their witness and their ministry effective?

A man was pushing his bicycle to the top of a steep hill. A motorcycle zoomed past him to the top. When the bicyclist arrived at the top, puffing and panting, the motorcycle was parked and the owner, looking cool and relaxed, was enjoying the view. While ruefully eyeing the Suzuki, the bicyclist said, "The difference between your machine and mine is, yours is 'spirit-filled'!" Power is an indispensable mark of being Spirit-filled. As the fullness is maintained, we should expect the power to be increased, as it was with Saul of Tarsus (Acts 9:18, 20-22).

3. Character

Jesus was not only full of power, He was also "full of grace and truth" (John 1:14). This was the "character" aspect of His fullness, the perfect balance to the "charisma" aspect. Power unrelated to godliness may produce results but no lasting blessing. How unacceptable would have been Jesus' miracles if they had been devoid of grace. How dubious would His healings have been if we never read, "Jesus, moved with compassion," healed the sick. He wept at Lazarus' tomb before He called him back to life. Grace and power are essential ingredients of the Spirit-filled life.

There was a man who turned up in a Christian circle I know and dazzled everyone with his charisma. When he laid hands on people for the Holy Spirit, they were filled and spoke in tongues. When he prayed for the sick, they were healed. He had remarkable words of knowledge about people's situations. Soon everyone was referring to him as the leader, but he was a phoney. He was a married man. When his colleagues heard about the other women in his life, his lying, and his dishonesty over money, they could not believe it. Charisma is dangerous without character.

Balaam was a prophet. He had a reputation for predicting things that would come to pass (Num. 22:6). He certainly heard God and spoke words from God. He was so at home in the supernatural that when the Lord opened the donkey's mouth to speak to him, he answered him without batting an eyelid (Num. 22:29). But his character was crooked, and in the end, he was slain by the Israelites and branded as an occultist (Josh. 13:22).

Christ Shows the Way

Even as Jesus demonstrates the perfect Spirit-filled life. He also reveals the open secret of how it is to be maintained.

1. Loving Good and Hating Evil

"You have loved righteousness and hated wickedness; therefore God... has set you above your companions by anointing you with the oil of joy" (Heb. 1:9). Back of this unique and remarkable fullness that Jesus enjoyed was a passion for what pleased God and a loathing for the things God hated. When His Father anointed Him at the Jordan, God declared audibly, "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased" (Luke 3:22). Because all through His earthly course He never deviated from this and never compromised His convictions, the Spirit continued to rest on Him in power. But there was also the element of faith.

2. Drinking from the Brook

Did you know that the Son of Man had to live by faith just as we are required to do? It is said of the coming Messiah, "He will drink from a brook beside the way; therefore he will lift up his head" (Ps. 110:7). Alongside the God-directed path that He followed was the brook, "the supply of the Spirit," needed for living as well as for serving. Had He strayed from the path, He would

have been out of touch with the brook. Of course. He never did. Whenever He grew weary, or was assaulted by the devil, or was tempted to discouragement, or was challenged by the need of opportunity, He simply drank from the brook and pressed on with His head held high. Jesus was living out what He had taught the woman by the well – that the Holy Spirit would be "a spring of water welling up to eternal life" (John 4:14), continually renewing, refreshing, and invigorating the inner man. Drinking is receiving the Spirit by faith, and it is not something you do once-and-for-all. "There is no such thing as a once-and-for-all fullness," said Dr. Charles Inwood, a preacher at the turn of the 20th century. "It is a moment-by-moment faith in a moment-by-moment Savior, for a moment-by-moment cleansing, and a moment-by-moment filling." That's how fullness is maintained.

Memorize:

"If a man is thirsty, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes [present continuous tense] in me, as the Scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within him" (John 7:37-38).

Homework

1. If you believe you have been filled with the Spirit, check yourself out to know whether you are still full of the Holy Spirit or if you have become a leaky vessel; Go over the three points under "Christ Is Our Model" and see how your Christian life measures up to these three marks of being Spirit-filled. Where you sense that you come short, seek God for a renewing or a fresh infilling of the Spirit by means of repentance (for sin and failure) and faith to lay hold of God's grace which is abundantly available.
2. Note that the blessing of the Spirit is maintained and increased by the same principles by which it was initially received. Pick out from the following scriptures the two main conditions for receiving:
 - a) Acts 5:32; cf John 14:15-16
 - b) Galatians 3:14; cf John 7:38

Consider carefully whether you have failed to continue to fulfill these two key principles. Talk to God freely and frankly about these areas of your life. Here is a simple resolution you may want to use: "I resolve by the grace of God and His enabling that I will continue day by day to _____ and to _____ (the two key conditions) in every area of my Christian life."

For Further Study

1. Jesus promised His followers power. It has been said, "Power is dangerous stuff in the hands of those not qualified to handle it." Write down in your notebook:
 - a) Whether you think this is a valid and important statement in relation to the power of the Holy Spirit. If so, why?
 - b) What do you think the safeguards are? Try to support your statements from Scripture.
2. King Saul is one of the saddest cases in Scripture of a man who lost his spiritual anointing. The following passages tell the story of how his decline began: 1 Samuel 13:5-14; 14:24-28, 36-45; and 15. Pick out the places where he went wrong, and write down any lessons or warnings that you believe God has for you.

SECTION 3

Living in the World

STUDY 15

In It – But Not Of It

Read John 15:18-21; 17:13-19

We are taking a look at "the world" in this study. It is important to understand what Scripture means by "the world" because the term is used in different ways.

Defining "The World"

Scripture speaks of the world in at least three distinct ways.

1. The World of Nature

This demonstrates God's wisdom and power. It should always move us, as it did the psalmist, to recognize God's greatness and our nothingness (Ps. 8:3-4), and so to worship Him as the great Creator (Ps.104). Here we have to watch that we do not worship the creation rather than the Creator. From antiquity this has been the curse of heathenism (Job 31:26-28). God warned Israel against such idolatry (Deut. 4:15-19).

2. The World of Men

This is "the world" that "God so loved" and for which "He gave His one and only Son" (John 3:16). This is the world that we must learn to love, too, even in all its sinfulness, if we are to play any part in winning it (2 Cor.5:14,20). It comes down to loving individual men and women who are lost.

3. The World Order

This is the system that controls the thinking and behavior of mankind. Satan masterminds it, and he is therefore called "the prince of this world" (John 12:31; 14:30). His lieutenants in that spirit world are fallen angels, described as "the rulers... the authorities... the powers of this dark world" (Eph. 6:12). In contrast to "the world of men," this is "the world" that we are commanded not to love. If we do love it we do not have the love of God (1 John 2:15). It is the world that hated Christ and eventually crucified Him, because He testified against its evil (John 7:7). It will likewise hate us because we side with Christ and not with it (John 15:18-19).

In It – But Not Of It

1. Why Are We Here?

You will have noticed in our first reading that Jesus told His disciples, "You do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you" (v. 19). We are like members of "The Resistance" in France during the Nazi occupation. Living under an alien rule, they felt at times like strangers in their own land. Perhaps you wonder, that if, as Jesus says, the world hates us because we don't belong to the world, why doesn't God take us straight to heaven when we are born again? One reason is that this very situation of conflict in which we are called to live is designed to shape us and make us what God wants us to be.

2. Conformed or Transformed?

The very thing God would use to make us, the devil can also use to mar us. The question is how we handle the conflict. Paul puts the issues squarely: "Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind" (Rom. 12:2). The believer in the world is either being conformed or transformed. J. B. Phillips translates this verse well: "Don't let the world around you squeeze you into its own mould, but let God remake you so that your whole attitude of mind is changed." Whether we are conformed or transformed depends on our attitude of mind. After Hitler invaded France in World War II, German troops arrived in overwhelming numbers. The French Resistance fighters must have often been tempted to give in and conform. That was the easy way of escaping from the conflict. This is the greatest danger we face. We do not escape the temptation because we have been filled with the Spirit. We must heed fully what God says about our attitude and relationship with the world.

Two Opposing Kingdoms

Jesus said, "My kingdom is not of this world" (John 18:36). His kingdom is opposed to the world's kingdom.

1. The Kingdom of This World

This is the world order that we have just been describing, which is totally antagonistic to the rule of God. Although energized and controlled by Satan, he has made rebel man – man without God – the center of his empire. It is ruled by human wisdom and human reason (1 Cor. 1:17-20). A characteristic of this kingdom is its impermanence. It is passing away (1 John 2:17). Its rulers are coming to nothing (1 Cor.2:6). Those who live for it are tragically short-sighted. One day it will be destroyed forever and the reign of Christ will take over (Dan. 2:44; Rev. 11:15).

2. The Kingdom of God

In this sphere God is the center. His revealed will, not human reason, is the rule and measure of all things. Men may only see and enter this kingdom by means of the new birth (John 3:3,5). As we know, that involves changing sides, coming under God's rule, and submitting to His new order. Before this we were motivated by "the spirit of the world" in all our thinking, but now we have received "the Spirit who is from God" (1 Cor.2:12) so that our lives have been radically reoriented.

What Is Worldliness?

1. An Inadequate Concept

Christian tradition sometimes presents us with a view of worldliness that is not strictly biblical. It deals with externals but fails to touch the root of the matter. How a believer dresses, whether or not he indulges in certain habits or engages in certain entertainments or pleasures, what he drinks, and what he permits himself to do on Sunday will, according to this view, determine whether or not he is worldly. Such a believer may of course be worldly. But those who criticize him may be worldly in more serious areas. These externals are not the true criteria. The scribes and the Pharisees had a similar list of rules by which they judged the piety of others. They were so careful about the trivial but overlooked the vital. They looked at the outside but neglected the inside. Jesus told them, "You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel" (Matt. 23:23-26). Those who are quick to judge their fellow Christians today by such external standards would do well to study a little more carefully what the Bible says.

2. The Biblical Concept

As we know, it is sadly possible to be born into God's kingdom, and yet behave as though still belonging to the world. "You are still worldly. For since there is jealousy and quarrelling among

you, are you not worldly? Are you not acting like mere men?" (1 Cor. 3:3). This gives us the biblical concept of worldliness, "acting like mere men" instead of men who belong to God. Paul is not speaking here of how the Corinthian believers dress or spend their leisure time, but of the more important matter of their relationships together, which were more characterized by "the spirit of the world" than "the Spirit who is from God." In other versions of this passage you may find the word "worldly" more literally rendered "carnal" or "fleshly," but it makes no difference because, as we shall now see, carnality is worldliness.

The Bible Defines Worldliness

First John 2:16 says, "For everything in the world – the cravings of the sinful man, the lust of his eyes and the boasting of what he has and does – comes not from the Father but from the world." Scripture contains no definition of worldliness more comprehensive than this. It may touch body, mind, or spirit.

1. Your Body

If your body is not under the rule of the Holy Spirit it will be ruled by "the cravings of the sinful man" ("the lust of the flesh" RSV). This refers to the appetites of the body. They are God-given and good, but we must learn to rule them. If they rule us, we are "acting like mere men" – we are worldly. This word "craving" (lust, desire), which occurs three times in verses 16-17, is the main characteristic of the world (note v. 17 especially). It is not confined to mere bodily appetites. Paul speaks of "worldly passions" (Titus 2:12). It is the major motivation for all that the worldly man does.

2. Your Mind

The worldly mind finds its main satisfaction through "the lust of the eyes." Eyegate is the main avenue to the mind. Consider the modern man's insatiable appetite for "viewing" and spectating, and the massive industry that exists to satisfy it. It dominates his leisure time. He finds momentary satisfaction by being transported into an artificial and unreal world which leaves him empty and dissatisfied with his humble lot. Then his mind is bombarded with commercials to try to persuade him to buy on easy terms what he can't afford. He is ruled by the false philosophy that wealth is the secret of happiness, and that acquiring more and more of this world's goods will bring satisfaction. And so he craves. See what God says to him (Isa.55:1-2).

3. Your Spirit

If our spirits are not ruled by the Spirit of Christ, they will be ruled by "the pride of life" (RSV) or "the boasting of what he has and does" (NIV). This pride of life may also cause the worldly man to crave money, not only to acquire material things, but for the popularity, prestige, and worldly influence he believes it will bring. All this is the spirit of the world. Not only are many in the kingdom of God subtly influenced by it, but it even invades the work of God's kingdom. All competitiveness and rivalry has this spirit behind it. It lay behind the "jealousy and quarrelling" of the Corinthian Christians that Paul said was worldly.

As you consider the above characteristics, notice that they are all self-centered. We saw that that was the mark of the kingdom of this world. The man who truly lives for God's kingdom, however, is always Christ-centered (Phil. 1:21).

The Answer to Worldliness

We have already seen that the New Testament is very clear in its commands. It says:

Don't love the world (1 John 2:15).

Don't be a friend of the world (James 4:4).

Don't be conformed to the world (Rom. 12:2).

But how can you live in the world without doing any of these?

1. The Wrong Weapons

You can't do it by rules and regulations. This is the way of the scribes and Pharisees. You can't do it by escaping from the world, so Jesus did not pray this for His followers, but that in a hostile world they would be protected (John 17:11-15). We are not called to a cloistered life but to let our light shine before men (Matt. 5:16). You can't do it by dealing with the externals. "O God, sweep away the cobwebs of pride, of jealousy, of selfishness in my life." A brother used to weary everyone by praying after this fashion every week in the prayer meeting. One day someone cried out in the middle of his prayer, "God, please kill the spider!" We must get to the root.

2. The Right Remedy

The only remedy for the spirit of the world in the life of the believer is the cross. We must view the world as a man would view it when nailed to the stake. That's what Paul says: "May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world" (Gal. 6:14). Though it may take on a thousand forms, worldliness is self-centeredness instead of Christ-centeredness. That's why the cross has to be the answer. We have dealt with this in Study 11, but we may now see new areas in which that teaching needs to be applied.

Memorize:

Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For everything in the world—the cravings of sinful man, the lust of his eyes and the boasting of what he has and does, comes not from the Father but from the world (1 John 2:15-16).

Homework

1. Israel's deliverance from Egypt (a type of the world) by the blood of the Passover lamb is a parable of our salvation. It has been said, "It was one thing to get Israel out of Egypt, but quite another to get Egypt out of Israel."
 - a) Note the different forms that their worldliness took on (1 Cor.10:1-10).
 - b) How did God react? Note the things that happened to them.
 - c) Could believers today who behave similarly experience the chastening of their Heavenly Father (vv. 10:11; and 11:17-34)?
2. In Scripture worldliness is pollution. Believers are called upon:
 - a) To come out and be separate (2 Cor. 6:17-18).
 - b) To keep themselves from being polluted (James 1:27; Rev. 3:4).

Write down what you think these mean. Also what they do not mean (see under "The Answer to Worldliness"). If there are areas in your life where you know that you have compromised with the world, confess this to God now, receive His cleansing and declare in faith that, through the cross, you are dead to the world and the world is dead to you.

For Further Study

1. Compare the three-fold definition of worldliness found in the memory verse with:
 - a) Eve's temptation in the garden (Gen. 3:6a)
 - b) Our Lord's temptation in the wilderness (Luke 4:3-13)

Do you see a correspondence? What lessons should we learn from the woman's defeat and Christ's victory?

2. In Luke 17:26-36, Jesus likens the period preceding His return to "the days of Noah" and "the days of Lot."
 - a) Make a list of the characteristics of those days from the Genesis account.
 - b) What is Jesus mainly emphasizing in verses 30-36 in making this comparison? Can you find other scriptures where Jesus gives the same warning?
 - c) What is the lesson for us from Lot's wife (v. 32)?

STUDY 16

Salt and Light

Read Matthew 5:13-16

In the last study we viewed the believer in the world from a negative viewpoint. The world is an alien society that can overwhelm and absorb him. He needs to watch lest he be corrupted and seduced by the love of the world. He must know that he belongs to another kingdom and preserve his spiritual identity.

Now we must look at the positive influence he may exert to affect the world around him. In Christ's words. His followers are "the salt of the earth" and "the light of the world."

Significance of Salt

To the Oriental, salt had two main uses:

1. Seasoning

"Is tasteless food eaten without salt, or is there flavor in the white of an egg?" (Job 6:6). So even Job liked salt with his egg! Salt gives flavor to what is otherwise insipid. Our conversation is tasteless if it is without spiritual seasoning (Col. 4:6). Humanity is morally insipid. We cannot say to God, "O taste and see that mankind is good," for mankind is not only tasteless but rotten.

2. Preserving

Salt is rubbed into meat and fish to prevent them from spoiling. In the days of Noah we read, "Now the earth was corrupt in God's sight and was full of violence" (Gen. 6:11). You might think that was the 20th century, but it was describing the days of Noah in the dawn of human history. This was the world that God visited with the judgment of The Flood. Noah and his family alone were righteous. They were the salt in their day. Had they been present in the earth in greater numbers they would no doubt have saved the earth from destruction. It was the same with Sodom. Had God found a righteous remnant of only ten people He would have saved the city (Gen.18:32). All this gives force to Jesus' statement here: He is saying that though the earth is corrupt, "You are the salt [or preservative] of the earth."

What God's Salt Is To Do

1. It's Not a Permanent Remedy

Salt is not a final solution to decay. At best it can only delay the process. As salt, we are not called to bring complete healing to human society. Christ's church is not a Human Improvement Society. We are to evangelize the world, but not to try to Christianize it. Scripture does not give us the expectation that evangelism will win over the whole of society, but rather that it will result in "taking from [the world] a people" for God (Acts 15:14). It is important to be clear on this. The world is under judgment. "Babylon the Great" is doomed to fall, never to rise again (Rev. 17:18-18:3), and nothing will happen to change this. We are not looking for a paradise on earth, for it is destined to be destroyed by fire (2 Pet.3:10-13). Our citizenship and our inheritance are not earthly but heavenly (Phil.3:20; Heb.11:13-16).

2. It Must Oppose Sin

We live in a world full of violence, greed, materialism, dishonesty, and immorality. We are to be God's antiseptic in this putrefying carcass. Our standards are to be totally different. If the presence of a Christian has a restraining influence on profanity and smut in his work place, that

Christian is salt.

"You're wanted on the phone," a Christian said to his boss.

"Tell him I'm out," he replied.

The Christian picked up the phone and said, "I'm sorry, sir, but the boss says he's out!" Surprisingly, the Christian wasn't fired, but he was never asked to do that again. That man was salt. To God, "white lies" are black lies. With salt there is no compromise.

3. It Must be Society's Conscience

Even in the "enlightened" West there is injustice, inequality, and selfishness. We are loud in our condemnation of apartheid, but within our own society there is racial discrimination and a lack of respect for the sanctity of life. More than one million human lives are legally aborted each year in the United States. There is also pressure to permit euthanasia and the use of human embryos for scientific experiments. Looking further afield, there are the prisoners of conscience, especially believers, behind the iron and bamboo curtains, and the starving millions of the Third World, and many other issues of social justice and morality.

Are Christians to try to influence society in these areas? A Spirit-filled church will inevitably do just that. Far-reaching social change has always come, even if not immediately, in the wake of spiritual revival. There have always been the labors of individual Christians. Dedicated men and women have changed society. England, for example, has been deeply affected by people such as Lord Shaftesbury, an evangelical who was one of the greatest social reformers of the 19th century; William Wilberforce, who led the fight in Parliament against slavery; and Elizabeth Fry, a Quaker who in the 1800s served as one of Europe's chief advocates of prison reform. However, social action as such is not part of Christ's "great commission" to the church (Matt. 28:18-20). That is confined to evangelism, which includes healing and deliverance (Matt. 10:8), and to the discipling of those who believe.

Social action is an individual matter. Some are particularly called to this, and they must know what part of this massive need they are to address. The church must always watch that it is not deflected from its major task of evangelism by the vast needs of suffering humanity. When this has happened in the past, serious spiritual loss resulted. Involvement in social action by believers does reflect the compassion of Christ, who fed the multitudes as well as preached the good news to them, and may often pave the way for the reception of the gospel. You can't expect a man with no food in his stomach and no shirt on his back to listen to the gospel. Jesus told His disciples to let the world see their good deeds (Matt. 5:16). Paul made reference to them in Titus 3:8,14. Verse 14 says, "And let our people learn to apply themselves to good deeds, so as to help cases of urgent needs, and not to be unfruitful" (RSV). Note that this is an appeal to the individual.

How Salt Works

1. It Must Be Different

How could salt have any beneficial effect if it was the same in its nature as the meat, that is, subject to corruption? Salt and meat are in character diametrically opposed. This points to the nature of the new birth experience. Believers and unbelievers are as different as chalk is from cheese. They are a different order of being (2 Cor. 5:17). This is why we are told not to conform to the world (Rom. 12:2). There is always pressure to do just that, and so be accepted. God called His people "holy" (1 Pet. 1:16); in other words, "Be what you are."

Jesus didn't say, "Try to be the salt." He said, "You are the salt." He warned that it was possible for the salt to lose its saltiness, that is, for the Christian to lose his influence. Scientists tell us that

salt does not usually lose its saltiness. It is not affected, for example, by exposure to the elements. It is probably only by excessive dilution that this can happen. For us, who are spiritual salt, the world is the diluting element. See how closely this theme is related to our last study. If we do not take heed to the things said there, worldliness will rob us of our distinctiveness and of our influence.

The American writer, Ron Sine, refers to this when he says, "We have been remarkably effective at diluting Christ's extremist teaching and truncating His radical gospel." Then speaking of the United States he goes on, "That explains why we can have a nation of 200 million people, 60 million of whom profess to be Christian, and yet make such an embarrassingly little difference in the morality of our society." Though Britain does not have such a large proportion of professing Christians, the situation is the same. Our influence is minimal. Jesus told us to evangelize and then to disciple (Mark 16:15; Matt. 28:19-20). We have many converts but too few disciples. The disciple is always different. He is salty salt.

2. It Must Make Contact

To be the conscience of society we must permeate society. To be the preservative of mankind we must mingle with mankind. "You can't preserve fish by putting the fish in one barrel and the salt in the other." In this, as in all else, our Lord Jesus is our perfect model. He lived no cloistered life. He could talk freely with Nicodemus the theologian, with Zacchaeus the tax collector, or with the woman of "easy virtue" whom He met by a well. In His mingling He never compromised His standards. Two statements concerning Him, one by His critics and the other by the Holy Spirit, give us the perfect balance. The one said that He was "a friend of sinners" (Matt. 11:19), the other that He was "set apart from sinners" (Heb.7:26). If we are to be salt, we shall not allow ourselves to be segregated from the world nor assimilated by the world.

Significance of Light

"You are the light of the world" (Matt. 5:14). Salt emphasizes more the believers' negative influence on the world – that is, counteracting corruption – while light emphasizes the positive.

1. Lights of the Lord

Many have seen that the creation account in Genesis 1 is a parable of salvation. We see a world in chaos and darkness, like man without God. Then God said, "Let there be light," and the situation began to change. In verse 16 we read, "God made two great lights, the lesser light to govern the night." This corresponds to the two statements of Jesus, "I am the light of the world" (John 8:12) – He is the sun – and "You are the light of the world" – we are the moon. In the darkness of this age the church is to govern by being God's moon, and the only light we emit is the reflected light of the unseen "Sun," who is at God's right hand. The New Testament confirms that ours is a borrowed light. We are not light in ourselves; we are only "light in the Lord" because Christ has given us light (Eph. 5: 8,14).

2. The Light at Work

It is only because God has imparted to us His life that we are the light of the world (John 1:4). Jesus goes on to speak of how the light is to be manifested in the life of His disciples: "Let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven" (Matt.5:16). The Bible teaches us that we are not saved by good works, but we are saved *for* good works. That is, we are saved to do them (Eph. 2:8-10). They are the visible expression of the life God has put within us. They are the output of Christian character. They are not confined to doing good turns to neighbors. They are rather a demonstration of a totally different lifestyle. Such good deeds will mean at times our confessing Christ before men (Rom.10:9-10), witnessing

to what He has done for us (Mark 5:19), giving a ready answer to those who ask us about our hope (1 Pet. 3:15). Letting our light shine means influencing others by our lives and by our words.

3. No Compromise

This is the same characteristic found in salt. The same way salt reacts to corruption, light reacts to darkness. Light has nothing to do with darkness except to expose it (Eph. 5:12-13). God is like that (1 John 1:5), and we are to be like that, too. "For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light (for the fruit of the light consists in all goodness, righteousness and truth)." Almost every day we see and hear things which are the fruit of darkness. They are the normal fare on our TV screen. Have they become acceptable practice to us? Paul warns us, "Have nothing to do with the fruitless deeds of darkness, but rather expose them" (Eph.5:8,9,11). Turn over a stone, and all the insects that live in the dark will scurry for their holes. That's the effect we are to have. We can seize the initiative and put the enemy on the defensive.

4. Light Must Not Be Hidden

The danger facing salt is losing its saltiness, but the danger facing light is being put in a concealed place (Matt. 5:15). There were secret disciples in Christ's day who for fear of the authorities would not confess Him (John 12:42-43). They are still around. By failing to shine they rob God of His due (Matt. 5:16). They also rob the church, the world, and themselves. See what Christ says of them: "Whoever acknowledges me before men, I will also acknowledge him before my Father in heaven. But whoever disowns me before men, I will disown him before my Father in heaven" (Matt.10:32-33).

Memorize:

Let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven (Matt. 5:16).

Homework

1. In what ways might a believer lose his saltiness? Don't merely quote scriptures like Rom. 12:2 or Eph. 5:11, but give practical examples of what these verses could refer to today.
2. In what ways might a believer hide his light instead of letting it shine? What might be the main reasons for doing this? What is the remedy?
3. Take time to examine your own life in the presence of God and ensure that neither of the two situations above are true of you.

For Further Study

1. Consider the following statement:

When believers understand their true function as salt and light, they will be preserved from a wrong view of what the Bible teaches about separation from the world (see 2 Cor.6:17).

- a) What does that mean?
- b) Can you give scriptural examples of this wrong separation?
- c) Can you think of examples of it in church history?

2. Jesus was speaking to a bunch of very ordinary men, most of them fishermen. He did not tell these humble disciples of His, "You have some part to play in influencing the world for good and lighting its darkness." He said, "You are the salt of the earth You are the light of the world."
 - a) What does this teach us about the nature of Christianity in relation to other religions and philosophies of the world?
 - b) Have these other religions any answers to a world in decay and darkness?
 - c) Do they provide an alternative way to God? Quote scriptures for your answers.

STUDY 17

On the Job

Read 1 Peter 2:13-21

Most people spend the bulk of their waking moments in secular employment. For some this is a drudgery and a bore. For many it is the constant scene of strife, with disputes and strikes over pay and working conditions. Does the Bible give us "a work ethic"? What does it say about how we should perform our daily task?

God Is Our Model

1. At Work in Creation

This is how the Bible story opens. After six days of activity God "rested from all his work" (Gen. 2:2). Thus God has given to "work" the concept of dignity, significance, and value. He has taught us that seasons of labor need to be followed by times of rest. God pronounced His work "very good" (Gen. 1:31). So the first Worker enjoyed "job satisfaction," and His work was stamped with excellence. God did not sentence man to work because he fell into sin. He created man in His own image to be a worker to "subdue" the earth (Gen. 1:28), and then in the Garden of Eden, "to work it and take care of it" (Gen. 2:15).

2. Continuing to Work

Having launched the universe on its course and placed man at the helm, God did not then leave him to get on with it. God continued to work. Jesus said, "My Father is always at his work to this very day," and then He added, "and I, too, am working" (John 5:17). Jesus was implying that He took His cue from His Father. We must do the same. In the fourth commandment God commands us to work as well as to rest and pointed to Himself as the model (Exod. 20:9-11).

Importance of Right Attitudes

A believer's attitude should sharply contrast the attitudes of his unbelieving colleagues. His whole attitude toward his secular employment should be entirely different. He is to have a kingdom "work style," which will be a powerful witness of Christ.

1. The World Is Watching

If we are in secular employment, there is no other place where unbelievers see more of who we are than at our place of work. Peter exhorts us, "Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us" (1 Pet. 2:12).

It was in an army barracks in 1942 that I was often accused. The men picked on me for anything I did or said that didn't measure up to their concept of a Christian. They would get on me, for example, when I used some expression I had picked up from the other men, not knowing it had some unseemly connotation. It kept me on my toes, and before long I saw that despite my faults and failings my lifestyle was making an important impact.

2. What is Your Attitude Toward the Boss?

Those watching us immediately pick up on our attitude toward our superiors. If we have a bad attitude or if we fail to give our boss our full respect, all that we stand for may be compromised, for God's name and our teaching may be slandered (1 Tim. 6:1).

In contrast, a right attitude of fidelity and trustworthiness toward those over us "will make the teaching about God our Savior attractive" (Titus 2:9-10). We will have more to say about this as we look at three very important areas where we need to watch our attitudes about what goes on in the workplace.

Attitudes About Your Work

1. Society's Attitude

The vast majority of people cannot think of work except in terms of money. They think work is a necessary evil to be endured in order to earn enough money to maintain a desired standard of living. Those who work hard and conscientiously and who find enjoyment and fulfillment in their work are a diminishing segment of the work force. Those advocating more pay for less work are on the increase.

I saw the following notice on the wall at one work place: "Some time between starting and quitting time, without infringing on lunch periods, coffee breaks, rest periods, story-telling time, holiday planning, and the rehashing of yesterday's television programs, we ask that each employee try to find some time for a work break!"

2. The True Motivation

The average worker is joyless and unfulfilled not primarily because his work is boring, but because his attitude toward work is not right. It is the spirit of "get" rather than "give." The Christian's primary motivation must be serving. This will dramatically change a person's entire approach to his work. He will no longer do his job half-heartedly with one eye on the clock and the other on his paycheck. This serving spirit within him will make him faithful, conscientious, and hard-working.

3. Serving Which "Boss"?

Does this concept of serving seem rather unreal in our modern society? "I don't mind you telling me to serve Christ. But how can I possibly serve that so-and-so I work for?" In fact it is Christ we are talking about. Paul tells believing slaves how they should obey their earthly masters, working with all their heart. Then he drops the bombshell to blow their resistance to smithereens: "It is the Lord Christ you are serving" (Col. 3:24). If that was true in relation to working for an unscrupulous slave owner of the first century, it is certainly true in relation to a 20th century employer.

Attitudes About Money

1. The Worker and His Wage

Like every other member of society, the Christian must work to live. Jesus taught that "the worker deserves his wages" (Luke 10:7). He is also responsible to support his dependents (1 Tim. 5:8). What a worker should look for is "a fair day's pay for a fair day's work." But as we have been saying, money is not to be his primary motivation for working. What is commanded of an elder should be true of the believer in his secular job: "not greedy for money, but eager to serve" (1 Pet. 5:2). The "get rich quick" philosophy of modern man should have no place in the heart of the follower of Christ (1 Tim. 6:9). If, as it often happens, God does prosper him, he is not to set his heart on it (Ps. 62:10) or put his hope in it (1 Tim. 6:17).

2. The Contented Spirit

Solomon tells us that "all labor and all achievement spring from man's envy of his neighbor" (Eccles. 4:4). He looks at what the other man has and becomes discontented. He's forever trying

to "keep up with the Joneses." John the Baptist told the soldiers who came to his baptism and professed repentance, "Be content with your pay" (Luke 3:14). God commands us, "Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have" (Heb. 13:5). This is an increasingly difficult command to keep in a world where we are bombarded with commercial propaganda designed to effect the very opposite in our thinking. There is, however, a legitimate money motive in working hard. It is to help the weak and give to the needy as Jesus Himself commanded us (Acts 20:35; Eph. 4:28).

Attitudes About Authority

The Christian's attitude toward authority will be as different from that of the world's as is his attitude toward work and money, for everywhere authority is being attacked and undermined.

1. Authorities Are Established by God

This is true not only in the church but in the secular world. Governing authorities are established by God, and we are commanded to submit to them – not because they always act rightly or justly, but because they are "God's servants" to rule in the secular realm (Rom. 13:1-5).

2. Your Boss - God's Authority

What the New Testament teaches about the master-slave relationship applies now to the boss-worker relationship in our modern society. It is clear that "masters" (employers) are viewed as acting for God, because we are told to "be subject" to them and to "try to please them" in all things (Titus 2:9). We are further told to do this "with all respect" (1 Pet. 2:18).

3. The Call to Obedience

Paul says in Ephesians 6:5 that we're to obey our authorities as we obey Christ. In the scripture reading that opened this chapter, Peter does not confine submission to masters "who are good and considerate, but also to those who are harsh." That's heavy stuff. Read on and see what he says about the spiritual value of "unjust suffering" (vv. 19-21). You will find nothing in these passages about "workers' rights," but everything about how the Christian worker is to respond to authority. Does God then have no concern about employers being just and considerate? Yes, He does. We shall see what He says to them in a moment. They are dealt with at another level. All that God says to the Christian worker points away from the worker taking action against an unjust boss. Sarah, overtaken with jealousy, mistreated her slave girl Hagar so that she ran away. See what God said to Hagar (Gen. 16:8-9). This teaching is not nullified because slavery has been abolished in our society. This is the only teaching in Scripture on how a worker is to relate to an employer.

The Marks of a Christian Worker

Fulfilling the command to obey your earthly master "just as you would obey Christ" and to serve him "as if you were serving the Lord" (Eph.6:5,7) will radically affect how you work and whether you are fulfilled. It will not be difficult to work as the Bible exhorts us to:

1. Work with Heart and Soul

Solomon, a great and successful worker, said, "Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might" (Eccles. 9:10). Paul says the same thing, but notice the motivation he gives for doing so (Col. 3:23-24).

2. Work with Fidelity

By our trustworthiness in material things we are qualifying to handle "the true riches" (Luke 16:10-11). Christians are told "not to steal from [their masters], but to show that they can be fully

trusted" (Titus 2:10). I have met those who seem to have no conscience about using office stamps or stationery for their own use, or stealing the boss's time by not giving him a fair day's work for their pay. Unrighteousness may go unnoticed by our earthly boss, but not by our Heavenly One (Col. 3:25).

3. Work without Complaining or Arguing

To refrain from complaining and arguing is a tough command, but it is there. It's an important aspect of our witness before "a crooked and depraved generation" (Phil. 2:14-15). It's an expression of true respect for authority, as is the command "not to talk back" (Titus 2:9).

4. Work with Proper Motivation

Our motivation to work should not be to curry favor or to gain promotion. We are to do what our employers want, "not only when their eye is on you and to win their favor, but with sincerity of heart and reverence for the Lord" (Col. 3:22). Therefore, you work just as conscientiously when the boss is not around as when he is, because you are really working for another Boss – and He's always around (Gen.16:13).

A Word to Employers

In the work place, there is always a judge who stands at the door to see if there is fair play (James 5:9). In verses 1 through 6, James pronounces "woe" on the rich men who have hoarded ill-gotten wealth at the expense of the poor. See what God said of a king who was unscrupulous toward his workers (Jer. 22:13,18-19). The cries of the oppressed always reach God's ears (James 5:4). He may bide His time, but He will act. In the words of Friedrich von Logau:

Though the mills of God grind slowly,
yet they grind exceedingly small;
Though with patience He stands waiting,
with exactness grinds He all.

1. Be a Do-Gooder

Having told slaves, "The Lord will reward everyone for whatever good he does," Paul goes on to tell their masters, "Treat your slaves in the same way" (Eph. 6:8,9). The law even commanded a master to give a "golden handshake" to a slave being freed (Deut. 15:12-15). So the Lord carefully watches boss-worker relationships to reward each as they do good to the other.

2. Don't Threaten

Ephesians 6:9 tells masters not to threaten their slaves as the rulers of the Jews threatened the apostles (Acts 4:21). A fair warning is justified, but threatening is a wrong use of authority. He who had all authority in heaven and on earth did not do this (1 Pet. 2:23).

3. Give a Square Deal

Colossians 4:1 says, "Provide your slaves with what is right and fair." This admonition covers the whole area of salary and working conditions. The Christian employer is to act in the knowledge that his own "Boss" in heaven is watching.

Memorize:

Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men, since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving (Col. 3:23-24).

Homework

"When it comes to work, some turn up their sleeves, and some turn up their noses." The Bible calls this latter attitude "laziness." We are only talking of those who could work but don't and of those who are lazy in their work.

1. Read the following scriptures and list all the things characterizing and accompanying slothfulness: Prov. 10:5; 24:30-31; 26:13,16; Matt. 25:24-25; 2 Thess. 3:6-8, 11-12.
2. Read the following scriptures and make a list of all the encouragements to diligence and all the discouragements to slothfulness: Prov. 6:9-11; 10:26; 12:24; 13:4; Eccles. 10:18; Eph. 6:7-8.

For Further Study

1. "I'd rather have a man of the world as my employer than a Christian." I have had believers say this to me. What do you think could be wrong with the attitudes of employer and/or worker to call forth such a remark? Consider all the scriptures in this study, and look at 1 Tim. 6:2.
2. Matthew 20:1-16 is a parable about unemployment and work. Why did some of the workers think the boss was unfair? What factors could have caused him to pay the later workers the way he did and still fulfill his promise to pay them what was right (v. 4)? What may we learn from this?

STUDY 18

Pressing On Toward the Goal

Read Hebrews 11:8-10,13-16

In this final study, we shall see that the only way to be living in this world as a mature Christian is to live for the next world! Our goal must be heavenly, not earthly. We need to understand that we are "strangers in the world" (1 Pet. 1:1), compelled by a heavenly vision.

The World Is Passing

We have seen that salt is not a permanent solution to decay. It only delays the process. As "the salt of the earth" we can only delay corruption until God's purposes have been fulfilled. For the world, the sands of time are running out.

1. The Natural World

The natural world is like an old garment wearing out, soon to be rolled up and discarded (Ps. 102:25-26). Men are tempted to think that "nothing changes here," or in the words of Peter, "everything goes on as it has since the beginning of creation." But they deliberately forget, Peter tells us, that the world has once been destroyed by water and is finally to be destroyed by fire (2 Pet. 3:4-7).

2. The World of Men

The world is also under judgment. The knowledge of this should be a great incentive to us to persuade men to believe in Christ, and thus escape from God's wrath (John 3:36). Noah, "a preacher of righteousness" (2 Pet. 2:5), warned men of the coming judgment, but they did not heed his warnings. "As it was in the days of Noah, so it will be at the time of Christ's return" (Luke 17:26), only this time it will be a judgment of fire, not water (2 Thess. 1:6-10).

3. The World System

It is obvious that the world system must also be doomed: "The world and its desires pass away, but the man who does the will of God lives forever" (1 John 2:17; 1 Cor. 7:31). This puts mankind into two classes: Those who live to fulfill their own desires, who are thus identified with the world system, and those who live to fulfill the will of God. The future of the one is grim, while the future of the other is glorious (Matt. 25:46; 2 Thess. 1:6-10).

How Should This Affect Us?

"Since everything will be destroyed in this way, what kind of people ought you to be?" (2 Pet. 3:11). That's a good question. Peter answers it along three lines:

1. Our Living

"You ought to live holy and godly lives." The knowledge that the world is to come to a fiery end should compel us to live lives that are pleasing to God. If we are different in our nature from the world and have a totally different destiny from the world, surely we should be different in our lifestyle. This was a powerful statement when Peter wrote those words. How much more powerful it is now that we are nearly two thousand years nearer the event.

2. Our Outlook

"Looking forward to the day of God" (2 Pet. 3:12). We must be a forward-looking people. The future prospect for the world is one of "doom and gloom," but for us it is thrilling. We are

looking forward to "the glorious appearing of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ," when He will be finally vindicated (Titus 2:13). It is "the blessed hope" of the Christian (Titus 2:13). It should make us perpetual optimists.

3. Our Aim

"To speak [or hasten, RSV] its coming." We are not to wait passively for zero hour to strike. We have our part to play to bring that day nearer. Only God knows the full number of His chosen (2 Tim. 2:19) whom He has given to His Son as His inheritance (Ps. 2:8; John 6:37), but every conversion to Christ brings this final harvest nearer. As we play our part in the world as salt and light, we inevitably "speed its coming."

Our Status in the World

1. We're a Heavenly People

Having been rescued from the dominion of darkness, we have entered the kingdom of heaven. We are therefore a colony of heaven, living on earth. Our thinking is now to be dominated by this unseen heavenly world, not by the seen world (2 Cor. 4:18).

2. We Have a Heavenly Vision

For Paul this happened on the road to Damascus. A light brighter than the midday sun blinded him (Acts 22:11). It was symbolic of the glory that burst upon him and left him blind to the dazzling sights of earth. A businessman saw a young child licking a dirty sucker the boy had picked up off the ground. He could not persuade the boy to part with it. After a few minutes, the man emerged from a nearby store with a big chocolate candy bar. Suddenly it was no problem for the boy to let go of his sucker. This has been called, "The expulsive power of a new affection." Paul said, "Whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ" (Phil. 3:7). Paul "was not disobedient to the vision from heaven" (Acts 26:19).

3. We're a People with a Heavenly Calling (Heb. 3:1)

Conversion is an about face. It is when we begin moving in a new direction, propelled by a heavenly calling. Paul speaks of this as though he were an athlete, with a powerful motivation to go for gold: "I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus" (Phil. 3:14). What we experience here and now is but a foretaste of our heavenly inheritance, an appetizer before the banquet.

4. We're Strangers on Earth

Many young Christians have been distressed to find that their conversion has alienated them from their own families. That's how Christ felt (John 1:10-11 RSV). Conversion means a change of citizenship, from one that is earthly to one that is heavenly (Phil. 3:20). This inevitably brings a sense of alienation. The world has an increasing number of displaced persons, who for military, political, or economic reasons have been uprooted and are now without a homeland. The Christian is like that. The only difference is that he has no sense of loss. He is convinced that he has another and far better homeland awaiting him – and he's on his way.

5. We Are in Conflict

The world is seeking to draw us. It wants to break down this sense of alienation and get us to conform (Rom. 12:2). The world is uncomfortable with us as we are and wants to assimilate us. Here is the conflict for the Christian – having to resist this perpetual influence. Jesus said, "In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world" (John 16:33). God could have evacuated us when we were converted. He could have airlifted us to our true

homeland, as He will do one day (1 Thess.4:15-18). But this conflict is itself preparing us to reign with Christ in His coming kingdom (2 Tim.2:11-13; Rev. 20:6).

A Contrast in Character

Abraham and his nephew Lot were citizens of Ur of the Chaldees. They turned their backs on its idolatry in response to a call of God, lured by the promise of an eternal city. Though they were wealthy, they became tent dwellers in the land of Canaan.

1. Abraham

Stephen gives us the key to Abraham's astonishing career: "The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham" (Acts 7:2). Abraham was sick and tired of Ur, and that day he caught a vision of "a city with foundations" – which he knew Ur didn't have – "whose architect and builder was God" (Heb. 11:10). That heavenly vision didn't simply spoil him for Ur, it spoiled him for earth. It turned him from a city dweller into a tent dweller (Heb. 11:9). Of course there is no special virtue in being a tent dweller, but Abraham was called to demonstrate something which should be true for every Christian. "Here we do not have an enduring city, but we are looking for the city that is to come" (Heb. 13:14). In pursuing this heavenly goal Abraham not only became a giant of faith, "the father of us all" (Rom.4:16), but he also had the supreme honor of being the man in Scripture whom God called "my friend" (Isa.41:8; cf Gen.18:17-19).

2. Lot

Lot never caught the vision that drew Abraham out of Ur. He seemed to tag along, no doubt admiring his uncle and holding on to his coattails (Gen.12:4; 13:1), but you can't get very far on someone else's vision and faith. Self examination is needed (2 Cor.13:5). Lot is described as "a righteous man" (2 Pet. 2:7). Because he didn't have the heavenly vision, however, he was compelled to part company with his uncle (Gen.13:5-9). Abraham couldn't pursue the heavenly calling with someone who had only an earthly vision, even if he was righteous.

Lot, it seems, wasn't sold on the tent dwelling life of Uncle Abraham. He didn't feel comfortable as "a stranger and an exile" in the land. Of the faith pioneers we read, "If they had been thinking of the country they had left, they would have had opportunity to return" (Heb.11:15) – but they didn't. They were hooked. Tent dwelling or city dwelling is not a matter of location but of heart attitude. Lot was a man who had "opportunity to return," and took it. Why? His heart was not in the other lifestyle. Faced with a choice, he turned back. Soon he was again a city dweller – in a city even more wicked than Ur. Consider the fatal steps he took:

"Lot looked up and saw . . ." (Gen.13:10). How we look is vital.

"Lot chose for himself..." (Gen.13:11). Material advantage was the motive.

"Lot pitched his tents near Sodom" (Gen.13:12). Swim near the whirlpool and

"Lot was living in Sodom" (Gen.14:12).

"Lot was sitting in the gateway of the city" (Gen.19:1). He had achieved a position of authority (Prov. 31:23).

The world will always applaud the Lots. "A man gets praise when he does well for himself (Ps. 49:18). But in the end, Lot lost everything: his wife, his home, his possessions, the chastity of his daughters, and his self respect (Gen.19). It all sprang from a wrong choice – a choice that every Christian has to face throughout his life. There will always be an opportunity to turn back for those who want to take it. Pioneers of the heavenly way are volunteers, not conscripts.

The Prize of the Heavenward Call

1. Needing a Goal

The more things we have to do, the more we need motivation and vision to accomplish them. In the Philippian epistle, Paul draws back the curtain and shows us his inner life, what made him tick spiritually:

"Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already been made perfect, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. Brothers, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus" (Phil. 3:12-14).

We, too, need a goal that is more than a stimulus for immediate progress and personal fulfillment. It must be big enough to offset the undertow of the world, the flesh, the devil, and all that prevents us from pressing on for the prize.

2. Forgetting What's Behind

Paul knew that the memory of his past could hinder him. Many of us are hindered by our track record. "Forgetting what is behind" (Phil. 3:13). But what do we need to forget?

Sin that we have confessed and which God has forgiven, but for which we haven't forgiven ourselves. Injured pride is usually the root. When we humble ourselves, receive God's forgiveness, and then forget, we are through.

We also need to forget the memory of mistakes and failures. Satan tells us that these will disqualify us. He is a liar. See what kind of people God chooses (1 Cor.1:27-29). Praise God, we all qualify! We are "jars of clay," weak and unworthy, so that it's all by God's grace, and God gets the glory (2 Cor.4:7,15).

Neither should we live on the memory of past blessings, for they can be a source of pride. We are wrongly limiting God, only expecting Him to do in the future what we have seen Him do in the past (see Eph. 3:20).

3. Reaching Out to Take Hold.

We are exhorted to reach out to take hold of "that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me" (Phil. 3:12). On the road to Damascus, Paul was "arrested" by the long arm of God's grace. He was never again free to do his own thing. He was only free to do the will of the One who had arrested him. Our understanding of the purpose for which Christ took hold of us doesn't come all at once. It is a progressive revelation. To know God's will and to do it was not a pastime but a passion for Paul. It was all bound up with knowing Christ, and he pursued it relentlessly. Everything else was "rubbish" (Phil. 3:8). It was the prize for which God had called him heavenward (Phil.3:14).

This was not true just for Paul. He goes on to say, "All of us who are mature should take such a view of things" (Phil. 3:15, italics added). Such an attitude toward life is an indispensable mark of the mature believer. In striking contrast, note what he says about those whose "mind is on earthly things" (Phil.3:18-19).

4. The Prize that Awaits Us

Enlisting for the race doesn't secure the prize. There are many competitors, few prize winners. "I press on ... to win the prize." In verse 8, Paul speaks of his desire to "gain Christ." In this race, "Christ is the path and Christ the prize." Gaining Christ could mean a deeper and more intimate relationship with Him. When he found himself at last on "the home straight," he had the assurance that he had fully laid hold, and that the prize of the heavenward call was his.

"The time has come for my departure. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day – and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing (2 Tim. 4:6-8).

The last sentence could include you. The prize is not just for the Pauls and the other great characters, it's for all, all who have had the heavenly vision, who have set their affection on things above, "who have longed for his appearing." This is what it means to be mature.

Memorize:

One thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus (Phil. 3:13-14).

Homework

1. An enterprising firm, learning that a sizeable proportion of the community were "Bible-believing Christians" and eager to cash in on this market, decided to investigate what ways these people differed from the rest of the community, in lifestyle, habits, likes, dislikes, and so on. Their conclusion? "They are no different!"
 - a) In what ways should citizens of heaven be different?
 - b) As you note each point ask yourself, "Am I different here?"
2. In pressing toward the goal for the prize, we spoke of the "undertow" of the world around us.
 - a) Make a list of the things you find to be the greatest hindrance and talk to God about them, claiming such promises as John 16:33; 1 John 4:4; 5:4.
 - b) How would you help a Christian who feels he (or she) has never had "the heavenly vision" (Jer.29:11-13; 33:3; Matt. 7:7-8)?

For Further Study

1. Christians are called to be spiritually influential in the world. Someone has said, "The world has been much more successful in influencing the church than the church in influencing the world." The story of Lot has something to teach us here.
 - a) What do you think caused Lot to make the decision described in Genesis 13:10-11?
 - b) Why do you think God allowed him to be carried away captive while living in Sodom, and then to be rescued by Abraham (Gen. 14)?
 - c) How did Lot's residing in Sodom affect his influence on the people around him (Gen. 19:9, 14, 26, 31-36)?
 - d) Study Lot's situation in the light of these scriptures: 1 Cor.15:33; 2 Cor.6:14-18; Eph. 5:8-13.
2. Why does Hebrews 11 emphasize so strongly that these men and women of faith were also characterized by a heavenly vision? What is the connection?