







# UPRIGHT

*Traits  
of the  
Righteous  
Heart*

**Charles O. White**

**J.C. Choate Publications**  
Winona, MS

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## DEDICATION

*To Pam,  
my loving, supportive, UPRIGHT spouse*

## PUBLISHER'S STATEMENT

Having spent most of our adult years in foreign mission efforts ourselves, J.C. and I have felt a closeness with Charles and Pam White in the work they have done in France during the past thirty-three years. They are to be commended for their commitment to the people of France, and to the French world in general. Charles translated or edited the translation of **The Church of the Bible, The Gospel of Christ, and New Testament Worship** into French, so that we could make those books available for students in that language.

Several years ago we published **The Missionary Myth** for Charles, a book with much insight into the scenarios and problems as well as the joys of mission work. A number of our Christian universities have used **The Missionary Myth** as a textbook in missions classes. Recently, an elder voiced his opinion, saying, "Every eldership in the Lord's church should read that book!"

When Charles submitted **UPRIGHT** for consideration for printing, the depth of the spirituality under discussion in the thirteen chapters compelled us to decide to print it. During this age of secularism and materialism, such an introspective analysis of our "inward man" is imperative, if we really want to live with God eternally.

We sincerely believe that each one who reads these pages will finish the last paragraph with a greater closeness to God, and a more intense desire to have his heart molded after the "divine nature" of our Father.

Betty (J.C.) Choate  
Winona, MS  
June, 2009

# FORWARD

This book is written from a perspective gained during more than 30 years as a minister and missionary. It stems from the personal biblical study of a man seeking the uprightness that pleases his Lord. In my years of teaching the Gospel in France, and in all of my relationships with supporting brethren in the States, I have seen the need for the Church to seek this uprightness, especially as concerns the growing influence of the world upon Christians.

What you are about to read is addressed to Christians who are serious about their commitment to God and his Church and concerned about how best to please him. One theme throughout is that we are incapable of doing this alone; we need God's help. Another is that, as is to be expected, this kind of approach to faith in God requires radical changes in attitudes and lifestyle. Some habitual mistakes in Christian circles are pointed out, with suggestions as to how to avoid them. Eleven manifestations of inward righteousness are examined: purity; humility; commitment; contrition; receptivity; sincerity; patience; loving what God loves and hating what God hates; surrender; gratitude; contentment. In each of these areas, my approach is based on a deep search of the biblical text. The result is a series of simple lessons that I hope can help guide the Christian toward his goal.

The tone is personal and perhaps a bit didactic, as I speak from experience, while trying, at the same time, to get a lesson across. To back up my points, I quote from about 30 different authors, some Christians, some not. Throughout, I speak directly to the reader: I ask questions; I challenge; I express hope and love. I hope the reader will "feel" my commitment to him and, especially, to God.

I must not, however, leave the impression that I feel I have personally acquired all of the traits of which I write here. No one is more aware than I of my own failures in all of these areas. I pray that I will offend no one, at least not needlessly (sometimes we are offended by the truth). And I pray that the Lord will use my meager words to help someone, if only one, to grow closer to him. I know that the book you are holding in your hands has certainly done that for me.

May God bless you as you read!

Charles O. White  
Lyon, France  
June 2009





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## PRELIMINARY THOUGHTS

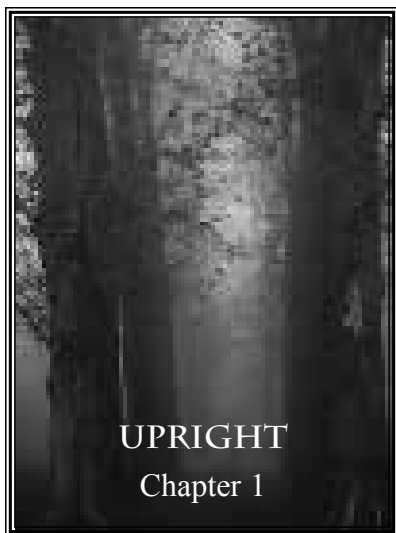
The God we worship had already loved and hated, rejoiced and punished, an awfully long time before you or I ever walked upon this planet. He is around us in every place, walking beside us at every step. When we work he observes, while we sleep he watches. Our righteousness brings him joy, our sin brings him anger (you thought I would say “sadness”?). He is absolute holiness, he is utter perfection, he is unapproachable light.

We seek the heart that pleases this God. We may spend our lives in this search, and we must indeed lose them. This is the condition, according to Jesus, to finding the heart we seek (John 12.25). It is dangerous business, with its own particular pitfalls, not to mention its outright catastrophes. But, incredibly, he asks us to seek anyway, for he knows that what we will find is worth the pain.

It is important to realize that we are not after something easily obtained, or something that we can get with just the right amount of effort and determination. There are things that effort and determination will achieve in this life; finding the heart that pleases God is not one of them. The only thing that can draw us close to the heart that pleases God is ... God (John 6.37, 44). When we submit to him, he draws us near.

And in that nearness, we discover that he is himself the best model of the heart we are seeking.

Before embarking on a brief description of the heart of God, let us realize that any attempt to list and define the qualities of an Absolute Being is destined to fall so far short as to be ridiculous. But we must begin somewhere. Indeed, he has said we may come to know him, at least in our finite way (Jeremiah 24.7; 31.34). And so, we begin.



## THE HEART OF GOD

### GOD'S HEART IS HOLY

Holiness is more than a characteristic of God; it is the sum of his being. We might define God's holiness as perfection in all of his attributes. Whatever trait he assumes is manifested to absolute perfection. For example, God is not merely powerful. This assessment severely underrates him. Instead, he is all-powerful, capable of accomplishing anything and everything he wills (Numbers 11.23).

God is not just intelligent; his intelligence is **"unsearchable"** (Isaiah 40.28), inscrutable, unfathomable. He is not only wise: his wisdom is without limits. He not only knows more than we, he is omniscient, that is, he knows everything that is knowable. He is not only present with us, he is in every place that exists (Psalm 139.7-12), from the farthest corners of our universe (and infinitely beyond) to the inside of the tiniest entity, whether it be atoms or quarks or smaller. He is not only righteous, he is completely and faultlessly upright: no evil can be found in him (Psalm 5.4). He is not only just, but perfectly just; his judgment is completely equitable (Psalm 19.9). He is not only love; his love is everlasting (Jeremiah 31.3), it knows no bounds. And this brief list does not take in, except by extension, God's sovereignty, his faithfulness, his glory, his grace, his patience, his compassion.

There is no imperfection in God, nothing to improve, restore, renovate or change (Psalm 55.19; Malachi 3.6). Everything he is, he has always been and ever will be; there are in him no faults, no weaknesses. You would expect that, would you not, of God?

### GOD'S HEART IS GOOD

The first prayer I learned as a child was this familiar and awkward rhyme:

God is great, God is good,  
God, we thank thee for this food.  
In Jesus' name, Amen.

Rote is obviously only a starting place; but when one thinks about it, those first two lines contain enough spiritual weight for a lifetime of prayer.

Have we noticed that the greatness of God and his goodness always go together? It was by his might that he brought the world to be and placed mankind in a wonderful garden. By his **“mighty hand,”** he rescued his people, time and time again (cf. Exodus 32.11); and those who humble themselves before his power, Peter tells us, will be lifted up (1 Peter 5.6).

God is good. How is this revealed in Scripture? Actually, it might be easier to challenge someone to read the Scripture without seeing the goodness of God. Could anyone read about God’s reaction to the wavering Abraham, the deceiving Jacob, the reluctant Moses, the sinful David, or the discouraged Elijah and say that God is not good? Could he read the beautiful promises made to Israel through Isaiah and say that God is not good? Let him read Jesus’ tender words to the adulterous woman and say that God is not good. Ask the skeptic if he hears Jesus’ teaching, **“The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many”** (Mark 10.45), and can say that God is not good. Can he listen to Jesus say, at his crucifixion, **“Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing”** (Luke 23.34) and say God is not good? What hardened heart could read such passages as the following, and say that God is not good?

**But God demonstrates his own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us** (Romans 5.8).

**The life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself up for me** (Galatians 2.20).

God, being rich in mercy, because of his great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our transgressions, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), and raised us up with him, and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus (Ephesians 2.4-6).

**When the kindness of God our Savior and his love for mankind appeared, he saved us, not on the basis of deeds which we have done in righteousness, but according to his mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewing by the holy Spirit** (Titus 3.4-5).

**He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross, so that we might die to sin and live to righteousness; for by his wounds you**

**were healed** (1 Peter 2.24).

Finally, who could read this, and say that God is not good?

**Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to his great mercy has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to obtain an inheritance which is imperishable and undefiled and will not fade away, reserved in heaven for you, who are protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time** (1 Peter 1.3-5).

Scripture is saturated with the goodness of God. He made mankind, and when man sinned, God formed among the nations a people from whom would come the Savior of all. He watched over this chosen people, loving them and disciplining them as a father his children, until such time as the Messiah should come. The Messiah was offered as an atonement for the sins of humanity (1 John 2.2), and on the basis of this unique sacrifice, heaven and eternal life are offered to all those who will obey him (Hebrews 9.12). This, this is goodness.

Perhaps we should consider the goodness of God in what he does not do. He did not destroy his rebellious chosen people, though tempted time and again to do so (Numbers 14.22). He did not leave them in captivity, though they certainly did not deserve to return to Jerusalem. He did not cancel his plan to send the Messiah, though no one merited this intercession. He did not permit the Messiah to escape his expiatory death, though Jesus prayed earnestly to be spared (Matthew 26.39). And, finally, he has not destroyed the earth in the 2,000 years since Jesus left, because he is **“not wishing for any to perish, but for all to come to repentance”** (2 Peter 3.9). This, again, is goodness.

### **GOD’S HEART IS JUST**

This quality in God is perhaps the least understood and the most feared, therefore the most denied. We are glad for a God who is good; but a God who is absolutely impartial and entirely just is at best scary, and at worst terrifying.

We are willing enough for him to judge our enemies. We would have him strike pitilessly all terrorists, all murderers, all abusers of women and children. But we are more cautious in asking him to condemn “lesser” sins

such as pride, lying, sexually impure thoughts, gluttony and the like. We are like the lawmakers who recoil at imposing severe penalties for drunken driving, for fear of finding themselves one day involved in an accident with too much alcohol in their veins. God must not be too hard on the “little” things, we say, because then he would have to condemn ... me!

But though Scripture does suggest stronger punishment for some sins than for others, it also teaches that all sin is an abomination to God. How could soiling of any kind — by great muddy splotches or by simple brown dusting — be tolerated by a man who always wears an immaculately white suit? But this simple analogy utterly fails to grasp God’s dreadful rejection of all unrighteousness, large or small.

This, we should remember, is the God who destroyed the wicked world in the flood (Genesis 7.21-23), who relentlessly harassed the Amalekites because they had attacked Israel as they left Egypt (1 Samuel 15.18), who sent faithless Israel into captivity, and who, when Judaism rejected its Messiah, poured out upon this unbelieving people the awful cup of his wrath, in A.D. 70 and afterwards (Luke 21.6, 20).

This is also the God who refused Moses entry into the promised land for a single rash comment (Numbers 20.10-12; cf. Deuteronomy 4.21), who destroyed a priest for a seemingly harmless gesture designed to stabilize the vacillating ark of the covenant (1 Chronicles 13.9-10), and who, when the Church had just been established, executed on the spot two Christians for lying (Acts 5.1-11).

But, if God is so just, why does he not then simply punish all the wicked and bless all the good? How can the wicked prosper and why do the righteous suffer? These questions, raised by Asaph (Psalm 73) and others in the Bible, have always been on the lips of God’s people.

It is not being simplistic to say that they are all answered in the life and death of Jesus Christ. Look at this: Jesus came to die. Do we really think that there was only love in this? Was not the justice of God also a major element in the death of Christ?

The execution of Jesus of Nazareth on a Roman cross was, in fact, the combined assault of the love and the justice of God on a sinful world. As much as God loved mankind and desired to save him, he also hated his terrible sin and was determined to punish it. In Jesus, these two perfect attributes found their rightful place. God’s redemptive work in Jesus Christ is his vengeance upon the evil of mankind. The day of liberty for

the captives, let us remember, was also the day of God's vengeance (cf. Isaiah 61.1-2; Luke 4.16-21).

Why must God do things the way we do? We would have him answer every wrong in the split second that follows. That he has chosen not to do this is more of a blessing than we are willing to admit. To live in fear of the lightening bolt would be no life, either for the righteous or the unrighteous.

While we cannot know the reason for each case of suffering, we can consider that God has already punished all injustice in the harshest way possible. It has been punished by death, by a horrible, terrifying death, that of the very Son of God on a cross. There, Jesus carried on his bleeding shoulders the sins of the world (1 Peter 2.24), there he agonized and wept in our place (Luke 22.24; Hebrews 5.7). At Golgotha, we may observe what God thinks of sin. In order to punish it, he was willing to take his only Son and nail him to a tree, to let him suffer indescribably, to turn his face from him, to leave him to his awful death.

Yes, we see the love there, and see it we must (John 3.16). How loving and merciful to us is a God who would do that, rather than deliver us up to his wrath! Jesus drank the world's bitterest cup, that of God's righteous anger at sin. He thus became the atonement for the sins of all mankind, past and future (Hebrews 9.15). When he died, all mankind died vicariously in him (2 Corinthians 5.14)!

We're talking about a just God, a God who was unwilling to forgive anyone until all debt was paid. Now that Jesus has died in the place of evil men, no one who does not belong to this Savior can expect to be saved. Not only is this a basic spiritual principle, it is a most logical thought. If a man builds the only house which will withstand an earthquake, all who are not in that house when the earthquake comes will die.

No way to the Father exists apart from Jesus (John 14.6). This excludes Buddha, Mohammed, Krishna, Moon and any other gods and all their followers. No other name, said Peter, can save us (Acts 4.12). The only God, in Jesus Christ, reconciled the world to himself (2 Corinthians 5.19). Those who come to him in obedient faith in order to have their sins forgiven are blessed; those who do not believe will finally be condemned, for the remission that Christ has obtained for them cannot then be applied. They will die for sins that have been paid, but whose payment they have not appropriated to themselves. This will be the tragedy of the last judgment. Nevertheless, it will be a just judgment, for in that day every man's

own choice will be applied.

Let the suffering Christian look to Jesus, whose death and resurrection are the guarantee that all unrighteousness will be punished. And let the wicked live in fear of the day when their unrighteous deeds will receive their just reward. The sentence has already been pronounced; it is merely waiting to be applied.

God, who is absolutely and eternally just, who speaks only truth and whose word is dependable, cannot be accused of unfairness or duplicity in his dealings. His perfect love and his perfect justice are fully and marvelously joined in the life and death of Jesus, the holy one.

### **GOD'S HEART IS WISE**

To attempt to describe the wisdom of God is — I readily admit — high foolishness. The situation itself must be hypothetical, for nothing could be more unsearchable for a creature than the wisdom of its creator. Solomon said, at the dedication of the house of God: **“Behold, heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you; how much less this house which I have built.”** (2 Chronicles 6.18). We can only quote the passages that speak of his wisdom and describe our own inadequacies in the face of its terrible depth.

But since we have set out at least to talk of this wisdom, we will begin by saying that it contains (at least) two aspects, which we can call (1) the passive and (2) the active.

The passive aspect is simply the fact that God knows everything. This is called his omniscience. No fact known or ever to be known can escape the conscious knowledge of God.

The only way we can consider this knowledge of God is to wonder at our own limitations and try to answer the questions that God himself asks us:

**Who has directed the Spirit of the Lord,  
Or as his counselor has informed him?  
With whom did he consult and who gave him understanding?  
And who taught him in the path of justice and  
taught him knowledge  
And informed him of the way of understanding?** (Isaiah 40.13-14)

And how would we answer these questions? How do we respond to a God whose **“understanding is inscrutable”** (Isaiah 40.28)? I’ll tell you



how: with a closed mouth and a bowed head. In the face of such impenetrable knowledge, we can say nothing more than what Job uttered after the terrible questioning to which the Lord submitted him: **“I know that you can do all things, and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted”** (Job 42.2).

Considered carefully, the wisdom of God leaves no room for man to glory in his discoveries. Science and technology, all the fantastic findings that, through the centuries, have brought mankind from the threshing floor to the edge of outer space, hold no wonder, no amazement for God. The incredibly complex mathematical formulas applied to interstellar travel are playground antics to an omniscient Deity.

Not that there is no glory whatever in these accomplishments. Man has used his superb intelligence to work out a multitude of fascinating and forbidding problems. But where did he get this understanding? Did it burgeon accidentally on a wild evolutionary tree? No, the splendor of man's accomplishments is in the source of his intelligence. It is God who gave man not only his life and his soul, but also his brain, God who placed mankind at the head of his creation (Genesis 1.28) and put eternity in his heart, along with a certain desire to know things **“from the beginning even unto the end”** (Ecclesiastes 3.11). When mankind capitalizes on his intelligence and uses it to develop himself and discover his natural surroundings, doing good and thus honoring his maker, his resplendence is real, if derived. Indeed the only true distinction to which mankind can pretend is to glorify his maker by fulfilling his maker's purpose for him. This includes discoveries and applying those discoveries to his own good and that of generations to come.

But nothing he can discover is or was ever outside of the knowledge of God. In fact, we might even consider that man can discover only what God permits, and that what remains unrevealed is determined by God alone (Deuteronomy 29.29). In July of 1969, God permitted mankind to step onto the moon for the first time. That “one small step for a man, one giant leap for mankind” was truly an unprecedented, almost unbelievable accomplishment. As the ambitions of mankind develop and as his keen eye looks to Mars, will God now allow that bold, incredible adventure? Only he knows. But this much is sure: the first human being to walk out onto the surface of Mars or any other planet of our universe, will discover nothing that God has not known since before time or space or planets existed. And the feeble findings of a few Nobel physicists and celebrat-

ed astronomers will never make them more than what they are: children playing in the vacant lot of infinity.

The active aspect of God's wisdom affects us more directly, at least in the spiritual sense, for it involves his dealings with us. Perhaps we are now saying, "Well, this part of God I can understand. It is all described in the Bible." Is it? Do we really understand what God has done with and for us, just because it is written in the Bible?

The Bible does tell us a beautiful story of redemption, outlined in the garden, directed through a chosen man and his descendants, developed in a rebellious nation, then crystallized in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, a Jew of low birth but unequaled qualifications. We know that he died for us and we write books about his love. We preach his message and we invite people to believe it and be saved. We study letters of his apostles addressed to the problems and aspirations of the first Christians. We thrill to promises of heaven after this life. But do we really understand?

I think we do not. I am not saying that we believe ignorantly, not knowing who is our Savior or from what we have been saved. Rather, I am saying that the "why" that goes back to the beginning, the wisdom that describes the reason God chose to make us, to love us, and then to die for us, is in the final analysis beyond comprehension.

Can human reasoning determine why an all-powerful Deity would ever want to create weak men and women, give them moral choice and watch them spiral into sin? Not at all. Is there any human reason why he would then (having planned this from the beginning, Ephesians 3.11), send his only son to save them by taking on their physical form (Hebrews 2.14-17) and by suffering and dying a horrifying death? Again, not at all. We can quote John 3.16 and Romans 5.8 all day long, marveling in the absolute love that could conceive and implement such a plan; but we would be no closer to understanding it.

This is because the human wisdom we are speaking of cannot encompass the divine wisdom of God. What seems impossible to us, or improbable, or unseemly, or undesirable, is exactly what God has done. He even tells us that were he to have explained it to us in advance, we would not have believed it (1 Corinthians 2.9).

And when at last he accomplished our salvation by the death of Christ, that ignominious death became for some a stumbling block and to others a lot of foolishness (1 Corinthians 1.23). Why? Because **"the**

**foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men”** (1 Corinthians 1.25).

Perhaps we can at least understand, then, that in matters of the wisdom of God, we can expect to be surprised. We should also understand that it is not our place to judge the Almighty, whose thoughts are as far above our own as the heavens are above the earth (Isaiah 55.8-9). We should rather learn to walk in the dark, tightly holding the hand of the One who knows all things.

God is all-wise; we will not surround him or hem him in. And many have gone far astray for having forgotten that.

### **GOD’S HEART IS STRONG**

The theological term for God’s power is “omnipotence”. It means “having or possessing all power”. Sometimes we call God “the Almighty”, precisely with this idea in mind.

We frequently associate “big” with “strong”, and rightly so. Sometimes I say to myself, when passing a particularly formidable-looking character in the street: “I wouldn’t want to meet him in a dark alley at night!” Why? Because he is big, and he could do anything he wanted to me (2 Chronicles 20.6).

Indeed, God is so big, so strong, that he really can do absolutely whatever he wants with you, and with me. If he decides he doesn’t want me to finish this sentence, he has nothing more to do than squeeze his hand on my heart, or any one of innumerable other solutions that men don’t even know about, and you will never read this book. If you are reading this book at present, that means he did permit me to finish. If he decides he doesn’t want you to finish reading it, he can take care of that, too.

When I was in high school, my friends stumped me by asking me if God can make a stone so big he can’t carry it. My dear mother gave me the answer: “God can do whatever he wants to do.”

In the film “Contact,” a young astronomer struggles to get in touch with an alien intelligence. The main body of the film is not half as interesting as the first three or four minutes. In that segment, by a very skillful use of special effects, the director has the camera move backward, away from the earth, always looking at the receding planet. We see the moon go by, then the sun, then a few other planets, then we fly backward through the Milky Way, still looking in the direction of the distant Earth.

After that, galaxy after galaxy goes whirling by, formation after formation of heavenly bodies. In a few minutes we cover distances measured only in billions of light years, distances too incredible to be grasped. And still we move ever backward, until we reach the destination, a distant star.

My thoughts during this unbelievable trip centered on the fact that, however far we might go from the Earth, to unimaginable distances, God is still there! How big is God? The answer to that one would leave us baffled.

One day as I drove along a highway near Dallas, Texas, I had a clear view of a large portion of the sky, unobstructed by buildings. Directly in front of me, a huge thunderhead stretched for what looked like 100 miles to my left and an equal distance to my right. It must have been 50,000 feet high. I drove along looking at that immense mass of concentrated energy, and I thought, "If God were only that big, he would still be very much to be feared." Could we see the hugeness of God, contemplate the very size of him (if we may speak in such terms of a Spirit), we would gasp and be afraid (or unable) to speak.

The Bible says that God is **"great and awesome"** (Deuteronomy 7.21), that he can shake the earth and command the sun (Job 9.6-7), break so that repair is impossible, shut so that there can be no opening (Job 12.14). It says that none can stand before him (Job 41.10), that he rides upon the heavens (Psalm 68.33), that he melts the hills at his presence (Psalm 97.5), that he is never weary (Isaiah 40.28), and that nothing — absolutely nothing — is too hard or too difficult for him (Jeremiah 32.27).

**For behold, he who forms mountains and creates the wind  
And declares to man what are his thoughts,  
He who makes dawn into darkness  
And treads on the high places of the earth,  
The Lord God of hosts is his name (Amos 4.13).**

Perhaps you are thinking that I have gotten off the subject, that we are supposed to be talking about God's heart, and here we are thinking about his power. We are indeed looking at his omnipotence, but all of this can help us also see the reality of God's heart.

If you are wondering how, try answering this question: To which heart would you rather be entrusted, one that cannot control its own feelings, or the one that created the worlds?

The heart on which our lives are staked is the heart that gave men theirs.

It is the heart that created mankind with a desire to love and be loved, to know and be known. This strong heart of God foresaw that man would reject him (Isaiah 46.10), but because it was so strong, it planned the way to bring him back, before the strength of God ever founded the Earth (1 Peter 1.20)! And what was that way? To bear upon his own strong shoulders the pain and suffering that we deserved. He would send his Son, lay the totality of men's sins upon him (1 Peter 2.24), have him crucified upon a tree, then raise him up, thus allaying our weaknesses by his strength.

What a strong heart it took to bear up under the way we treated him! Jesus the holy One (Isaiah 53.3) was called everything in the book but holy. His motives were questioned, he was maligned and calumniated, he was accused of sedition and beaten: in short, he was physically and emotionally abused. Finally, he was put to death. As we have already seen, even his mighty heart hesitated before that final, devastating trial. But he leaned on his Father and weathered the awful test.

Speaking of the **"immeasurable greatness of his power,"** the text of the New Testament says that God put this power to work in Christ when **"he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places"** (Ephesians 1.19-20).

In the one stupendous act of raising Christ from the dead, God demonstrated the essence of his power and sealed the fate of all mankind. Those who believe in this Jesus crucified and raised from the dead, who change their lives, who confess him and are baptized in his name, will be saved. Those who do not will be condemned (Mark 16.16).

God's heart has power: the power to create, to supply, to love, to die — and the power to give life beyond death.

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Now, we have been looking at the heart of God, in view of being his imitators. To have the heart that pleases God, we must seek his own heart. That is what this book is about. We have seen that God is holy and good, that he is wise, just, strong. We must emulate these qualities. Our holiness can only come from his indwelling; our goodness must be inspired by him and our wisdom drawn from the well he provides: the holy word and prayer, and the daily experiences of the Christian life; our justice can only be equitable if based on the eternal principles he teaches; and our strength must be drawn from him, for we surely cannot find it in ourselves.

Let us seek, then, the heart that pleases this God. We must take the

risk and jump, knowing that the experience will be painful, but worth it. No other purpose in life can be as great as that of knowing our Maker. There is a race set before us, the end of which is eternal life. We should **“lay aside every encumbrance and the sin that so easily entangles us, and (...) run with endurance”** that race, **“fixing our eyes on Jesus”** (Hebrews 12.1-2). If we consider his example, all along the way, we **“will not grow weary and lose heart”** (Hebrews 12.3).

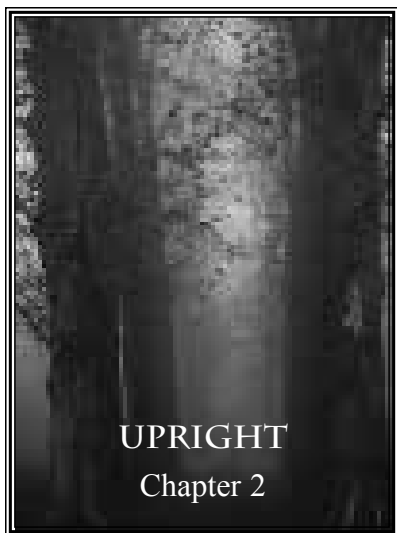
When the earth comes to its end, to have pleased God will be all that matters. Which means that this is all that matters now. We have today —but not tomorrow — to do something about it.

We will look at some specific qualities of the heart that the Lord desires to find in us. They are all equally unattainable, except by his power and love in us. But they should all constitute important goals in our Christian lives. May God help us in our search for the heart that pleases him!

## THE HEART OF GOD

### QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Why is the heart of God the only thing that can draw us near to him?
2. Explain the statement: “holiness is more than a characteristic of God; it is the sum of his being.”
3. Give several examples of God’s goodness, as described in Scripture.
4. In what way can we say God has already punished all injustice?
5. What is the best way to respond to a God whose “understanding is inscrutable” (Isaiah 40.28)?
6. Do we really understand the story of redemption?
7. How big is God?
8. Can we trust the heart of the God that created the worlds?
9. In what great act was the “surpassing greatness” of the power of God demonstrated (Ephesians 1.19-20)?



## A MATTER OF LIFE AND DEATH

### THE PURE HEART

**“Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God” (Matthew 5.8).**

That God requires his people to have a pure heart is not typical of the New Testament only; he has always insisted that his people be pure. Indeed, the first covenant furnishes some of the most precise illustrations of the purity required of an elect people.

Israel’s privileged place among the nations was demonstrated in their flesh, by the act of circumcision (Genesis 17.10-11), which, according to Adam Clarke, “was designed to signify the purification of the heart from all unrighteousness, as God particularly showed in the law itself.”<sup>1</sup>

This law contained numerous principles of moral, social and even nutritional purity, all of which contributed to the setting apart of Israel as God’s own **“treasured possession”** (Deuteronomy 26.18).

But perhaps nowhere is the idea of purity more evident than in the worship of this people. To begin with, the priests were required to perform a multitude of complex operations, in the correct order and at the right times. Their duties were filled with ritual cleansings in water, as a means of maintaining a ceremonial purity in the accomplishment of their task.

But purity in the sacrificial context went far beyond the mere washing of a priest’s body before and after officiating. In itself, the context of the sacrifice was a profound illustration of the purity God requires of his children. The worship experience was characterized by a sense of the “untouchable,” which included not only a material element (the holy objects involved in worship, the tabernacle itself, with its utensils, its furniture, especially the ark of the covenant, etc.), but also a spatial element best described as the danger of the proximity of God.

In order to circumvent this danger, God selected a particular tribe, the Levites, to approach him on behalf of the people (Numbers 8.11; 18.11,

23). Whereas any Israelite could come before God to offer a sacrifice, only the Levites, as priestly intermediaries between God and his people, had the right to actually do the sacrificing. In order to perform their duties, they were therefore subjected to a set of restrictive rules — physical, moral and ceremonial.

Among the Levites, only one was high priest, only one had the right to enter the holy of holies, and only once a year. Why? Here is the simple reason:

**“I appear in the cloud above the mercy seat”** (Leviticus 16.2).

To enter the holy of holies was to walk into the very presence of the Almighty God.

When we read the list of precautions given in Scripture concerning this risky annual venture (Leviticus 16.3-28), we are impressed by the fact that God is *serious* about purity. Here is the list of measures followed by the high Priest to insure his safety during his presentation before God:

- ◆ he bathed his body in water.
- ◆ he put on the holy linen tunic.
- ◆ he put on the holy linen undergarments.
- ◆ he put on the linen sash and turban.
- ◆ he entered the holy of holies carrying a censer of coals of fire and two handfuls of crushed sweet incense.
- ◆ he placed the incense on the fire before the Lord, so that the cloud of the incense would cover the mercy seat (or he would die).
- ◆ he entered with the blood of a bull, for his own sins and those of his family.
- ◆ he sprinkled the blood of the bull with his finger on the front of the mercy seat, seven times.
- ◆ he left his linen vestments in the tent of meeting.
- ◆ he bathed his body in water a second time.

Why all of this heavy protection, all this ritual and ceremony? Is God just into formalities? No, God is holy, and he may not be approached haphazardly. Being in the presence of God is about purity. And *purity*



*before God is a question of life and death.*

We are not obliged to wait until the New Testament in order to see that the purity God requires is not merely ceremonial. King David wrote:

**Who may ascend into the hill of the Lord?  
And who may stand in his holy place?  
He who has clean hands and a pure heart,  
Who has not lifted up his soul to falsehood  
And has not sworn deceitfully.  
He shall receive a blessing from the Lord  
And righteousness from the God of his salvation.** (Psalm 24.3-5)

David announces here that he who would **“ascend unto the hill of the Lord”** (i.e., he would worship God) must have **“clean hands”** (purity in actions) and a **“pure heart”** (purity in attitudes).

We who are members of the new covenant are not required to accomplish the rituals of the old covenant that Moses and David knew. But *the proximity of God is every bit as dangerous today as it was then*. Many, who have forgotten this, venture full speed into prayer or into worship without thought or hesitation.

Each time we come together to worship the Lord, we must allow God to examine our hands and our heart, to sound our souls with the dazzling searchlight of his holiness. Very often we approach worship — and very often go all the way through it — without considering our purity before the Lord. We sing, we pray, we take the bread and the fruit of the vine, we listen to a good (or a bad!) sermon, and we feel that we have done what we needed to do, when in fact, we have died in worship to God, just as Moses would have died had he not respected the proximity of the Lord.

The New Testament confirms what the Old Testament so strongly announces. Jesus says that the pure in heart **“shall see God”** (Matthew 5.8), suggesting thereby that those who are not pure in heart shall not see God.

What, then, is this purity that God requires? How shall we define a **“pure heart”**?

Something that is pure is not mixed with anything else; it is composed of only one element. When we talk about pure gold or pure silver, we mean gold and silver that are unadulterated, not mixed with any other metal. By extension, what is pure cannot contain any defective element; it is wholly without defilement or fault or corrupting detail of any kind.

Now, what is “absolutely without defilement or fault or corrupting

element of any kind”? God alone! Only he can place in us the pure heart we need, because we are utterly incapable of attaining it on our own. **“Create in me a clean [pure] heart, O God,”** said David (Psalm 51.7). We must seek it, we must maintain it, we must desire it, we must open our lives to it, but only the Lord can give it.

He gives it only to those who realize they cannot achieve it without him. He gives it to those who are not satisfied with a little purity on Sunday mornings, or at prayer meetings, when others are looking. In other words, just enough to get them by or to make a good impression. The idea that we can be “just a little” pure is one of the devil’s own maneuvers. And he uses it well.

Consider the beating of our own heart. Obviously it must beat continually, rhythmically. If it beats only two or three times a minute, or for only one hour a day, we are dead. Purity is a permanent concern; otherwise, we cannot remain alive for Christ.

Our perfect model and inspiration, of course, is Jesus of Nazareth, who **“committed no sin, nor was any deceit found in his mouth”** (1 Peter 2.22). This doesn’t mean he went around with a Mona Lisa smile on his face, asking no questions, reacting to nothing, refusing to commit himself in any controversy or disagreement. It simply means his heart remained ever, totally, God’s. And as such there was no room in it for anything not of God. He was able to speak and listen, challenge and be challenged, invite men to goodness and be tempted to evil, be rebuffed, scourged — crucified — and in it all maintain a pure heart. How did he do it? He leaned on God. **“My food,”** he said, **“is to do the will of him who sent me and to accomplish his work”** (John 4.34).

Being pure in our sexuality, our morals in general, our thoughts, our language, our pleasures, etc., is not simply what we do or refrain from doing. It cannot be what we do before it becomes what we are. It is the state of heart in which we are completely tuned into God’s will, his way and his life. We are undividedly for him, having only one desire: to live in his holiness. As a result of this, we will seek the pure qualities that please him and avoid the impure attitudes and deeds which displease him.

Nurturing and maintaining this purity involves examining the will of the Lord, revealed to us in his word. The Psalmist said:

**How can a young man keep his way pure?**

**By keeping it according to your word** (Psalm 119.9).

What is pure, then, is not determined by what I think, or what famous preachers have taught, or by the philosophy of the moment. Purity is identified by the word of God. Period.

That being the case, we do not have the right to say things like these (that I have actually heard):

“I know the Bible says ... but I don’t accept the teaching of that writer.”

“I know the Bible says I shouldn’t [do this or that], but really I don’t think God will hold it against me.”

“I know that the Bible says I shouldn’t [do this or that], but after all, he made me the way I am, so I’m sure he’ll accept me!”

The proverb is certainly true that says:

**There is a kind who is pure in his own eyes,  
Yet is not washed from his filthiness** (Proverbs 30.12).

**“God is not mocked,”** says Paul to the Galatians; **“whatever a man sows, this he will also reap”** (Galatians 3.7). What he commands in his word is life; therefore, to ignore it or dilute it is death.

I have often said to young people struggling with questions of purity, especially sexual purity, that on the last day what will count will not be what others think of us (or even what we think of ourselves), but what God thinks of us. In that day, the men and women who have judged God all their lives will find themselves in an awful fix. They will find themselves face to face with the God they rejected; and this time, he will be the judge.

We need therefore to examine — in all seriousness and application — what God has to say about personal purity, and to live every day according to the principles he has established. Those who have sought purity in this life, by following the laws of the Lord and depending on him, will receive it in the ~~next life in absolute abundance and perfection.~~ Those who have rejected it in this life will retain their impure selves, carrying them off in weeping and gnashing of teeth, into the place where God — and purity — are not.

**People say:** “Everyone is doing it.” If everyone were dancing on a supposedly sleeping volcano, would that save them when it erupted?

**God says: “There is a way which seems right to a man, But its end is the way of death” (Proverbs 14.12).**

**People say:** “I want to live, to experience new sensations and different horizons before I ‘limit’ myself to God’s laws.” This betrays a very poor understanding of what it is to abide by God’s laws. God is not in the “dream-dampening” business; but he does know what is good for us and what will draw us away from him. His laws are simply the Maker’s “assembly instructions”, his “directions for use”. Who, better than he who made us, is in a position to warn us against what will harm us and to encourage us to do what is for our good?

**God says: “Can a man take fire in his bosom and his clothes not be burned?” (Proverbs 6.27).**

**People say:** “As long as I don’t hurt anyone, I have done nothing wrong.” What they forget is that are hurting themselves, and much more than they realize.

**God says: “The one who practices sin is of the devil; for the devil has sinned from the beginning” (1 John 3.8).**

**People say:** “What I do in the privacy of my home concerns no one but me.” Dallas Willard comments: “The so-called “right to privacy” of which so much is made in contemporary life is in very large measure merely a way of avoiding scrutiny in our wrongdoing.”

At any rate, no walls, no shadows can hide us from the all-seeing Lord.

**God says: Even the darkness is not dark to [me],**

**And the night is as bright as the day.**

**Darkness and light are alike to [me] (Psalm 139.12 ).**

**“There is no creature hidden from his sight, but all things are open and laid bare to the eyes of him with we have to do” (Hebrews 4.13).**

**People say:** “I’ll only do it once, then never again.” If I murder only one person, is it OK? A famous brand of potato chips used to make millions with the slogan: “Bet you can’t eat just one!” how many drug-depen-

dent wrecks are on our streets, after having decided to try it “just once”? How many families are split and hurting because Mom or Dad decided to just have “just one” afternoon of illegitimate sex? How many men and women are in prison today because they wanted to steal “just one” car, rob “just one” little old lady, grab “just one” item from the shelves from a local store? “Just one” is an illusion easily believed, eternally paid for.

**God says: “Out of the heart come evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, slanders” (Matthew 15.19).**

**“Behold, you have sinned against the Lord, and be sure your sin will find you out” (Numbers 32.23).**

**People say:** “I didn’t do it, I just thought about it.” Here lies another trap: what I would accept to do in principle, I have already done (Matthew 5.21-22, 27-28; 15.19). It is in the intention and acceptance of the heart that we sin, even before our intentions are (and even if they are not) materialized.

A few years ago, a psychiatrist, seemingly highly respected in some Christian circles, declared that if he were ever to have a case in which he concluded that a patient’s spiritual growth would be enhanced by his having sexual relations with the patient, he would do so. When a brother in Christ ~~was praising this psychiatrist and his book, I asked about this statement.~~ The brother replied: “Yes, but, he said he had never done it.”

Had I jumped to my feet and shouted at the top of my lungs that I would just as soon plant my fork in my brother’s eye as eat with it (we were having a meal at the time), I think he would have considered me a dangerous, even sinful man. But without reason, obviously, since I had never done it!

**God says: “As he thinks within himself, so he is” (Proverbs 23.7).**

Aside from the word of God, our Christian hope is a nurturing element for our purity. After having rejoiced at the hope that is ours because the Father has called us his children, John explains: **“Everyone who has this hope fixed on him purifies himself, just as he is pure” (1 John 3.3).**

The context suggests that **“purifies himself”** means, not “becomes pure by his own merit” — which we know to be impossible — but rather

er “does not practice sin”. Again, this is not just because of the “rules” against sin, but because of the relation we have with the Father (1 John 1.7-9) and the eternal life he has already given us (1 John 2.25).

It is because we hope in Jesus that we can envision a future where there is no temptation, no sin, no desire to do wrong, no possibility of displeasing our Lord. Thus we can have the peace of the **“steadfast of mind”** that Isaiah speaks of (Isaiah 26.3), even in the midst of a troubled and troubling world. John says that **“the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the boastful pride of life, is not from the Father, but is from the world”** (1 John 2.16); he then declares that all of these will pass away, but that **“the one who does the will of God lives forever”** (1 John 2.17).

It is in this hope, this **“anchor of the soul”** (Hebrews 6.19) that purity before God can become a realizable goal.

After all, what is our aim? To teach the best class, to preach the best sermon, to write the best book? Or, on another, much higher plane, is it to bring an end to all wars, to be the president of the European Union, to develop an AIDS vaccine? These things are good, in themselves. But we could do all of that and more; yet, if we are not found blameless when the Lord comes, we will have accomplished nothing.

**“For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul?”** (Matthew 16.26).

Paul says that the way to a blameless (pure) soul is love, abounding more and more **“in real knowledge and all discernment”**, approving **“the things that are excellent”** (Philippians 1.9-10), so that the Lord will have filled us **“with the fruit of righteousness which comes through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God”** (Philippians 1.11).

Isn't this what we've been saying here?

Will the **“pure in heart”** actually see God? Frankly, there is no good reason to understand the promise any other way. Job understood this when, in the midst of his suffering, he expressed his living, eternal hope:

**Even after my skin is destroyed,  
Yet from my flesh I shall see God;  
Whom I myself shall behold,**

**And whom my eyes will see and not another (Job 19.27).**

And John received this promise:

**“There will no longer be any curse; and the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his bond-servants will serve him; they will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads” (Revelation 22.3-4).**

The “they” in this passage are **“those who wash their robes, so that they may have the right to the tree of life, and may enter by the gates into the city” (Revelation 22.14).**

The words, **“Blessed are the pure in heart,”** were uttered by the purest heart that ever was. May he be followed by myriads of hearts filled with his own purity, through the heavenly gates!

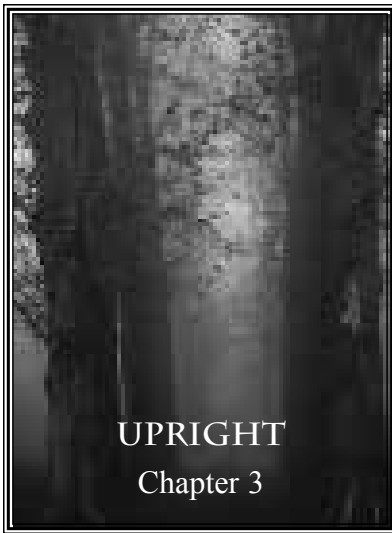
To finish this chapter, I might suggest a little test. Think for a moment and try to identify the Christian in your entourage who is most in need of improvement in the area of purity. Then, after identifying that person, I would ask you: was that person yourself? It should be, for purity goes hand in hand with humility (read on). Before working on others in this area, we should do a radical job on ourselves (Matthew 7.1-5)!

## **A MATTER OF LIFE AND DEATH**

### **THE PURE HEART**

#### **QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION**

1. In what specific area of Old Testament religious life is the idea of purity most evident?
2. Why is the “proximity of God” so dangerous?
3. Why did the high priest of the old covenant have to follow such a rigid ritual before entering the holy of holies?
4. How does purity of heart affect the Christian’s worship?
5. How can we best define a “pure” heart?
6. How did Jesus maintain his pure heart during his ministry and suffering?
7. Who/what ultimately defines what is pure or not?
8. On the last day, what will count even more than what people think



of us?

9. Who is the person in your entourage most in need of purity?



# GOD ON HIS KNEES

## THE HUMBLE HEART

He has told you, O man,  
what is good;  
And what does the Lord require  
of you  
But to do justice, to love kindness,  
And to walk humbly with your God? (Micah 6.8).

“What good does it do to speak learnedly about the Trinity if, lacking humility, you displease the Trinity? Indeed it is not learning that makes a man holy and just, but a virtuous life makes him pleasing to God.” (Thomas a Kempis, *The Imitation of Christ*)

Here’s an understatement for you: humility is not a natural characteristic of the human race. To be humble is to not seek glory. But we do it all the time. We poor creatures of the only-glorious God, looking for some way to swell our throats and fill our banners with wind, needing recognition and admiration, shun humility and cultivate pride instead. It seems to be necessary to our psyche. Without it we wither and die in relative obscurity. We are like the artists who cannot be happy unless under the lights, smothered in applause. Humility is, in the present Western culture, worse than a weakness: it is a fault. We are told to assert ourselves, to be impertinent, insolent, to dare. While there is something to be said for boldness, it is also true that impertinence will get us nowhere with God.

The Bible starts with this fact: **“In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth”** (Genesis 1.1). This is where true humility begins: we must recognize that we are not the Creator. There was a time when we did not exist; but God is and always was. If we can just remember that even at this moment, as I write and as you read, God is in heaven, and our little selves are doing nothing that will ultimately change the course of ... anything, we will have understood an essential element of humility. In 100 years, if the world remains that long, most traces of our brief passage on the earth will have disappeared. We will be reduced to a memory, occasionally stirred by the sight of an old photo in an even older photo album. So, why do we get so puffed up about what we happen to be doing at the moment? God can do without me, and without you. (The

marvelous thing is that he chooses not to; but that is another question.)

E. M Bounds (1835-1913) wrote:

“Humility ... is born by looking at God and his holiness, and then looking at self and man’s unholiness. ... Humility is just feeling little because we *are* little. Humility is realizing our unworthiness because we *are* unworthy, feeling and declaring ourselves sinners because we *are* sinners.”<sup>3</sup>

God himself is the best example of humility in the Bible. The cross, says C. Leonard Allen, “... challenges and breathtakingly alters our human conceptions of what God must be like. We think of God as high and lifted up, enclosed in glory; the cross reveals God as stooping and lowly, enduring shame. We think of God as omnipotent, invulnerable, and unaffected; the cross reveals God as making himself vulnerable because of love, exposing himself to all the world as one who appears weak and powerless. We think of God working his will through sheer almightiness; the cross shows us that God has chosen to work his will through the power of suffering love.”<sup>4</sup>

According to prophecy, the Messiah was to be a humble person:

**Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion!  
Shout in triumph, O daughter of Jerusalem!  
Behold, your king is coming to you;  
He is just and endowed with salvation,  
Humble, and mounted on a donkey,  
Even on a colt, the foal of a donkey (Zechariah 9.9).**

This prophecy was accomplished in Matthew 21.5, when Jesus entered Jerusalem in the middle of the same enthusiastic crowd that was to clamor for his death just a few days later. Knowing that, he remained “humble”, for he was indeed “endowed with salvation”.

Instead of walking in regal procession to a golden throne, there to raise a scepter and scorn the common man, Jesus washed his disciples’ feet. Leaving no doubt as to his right to be served (“**You call me Teacher and Lord — and you are right, for that is what I am**” - John 13.8), he insisted that he must serve.

Indeed, the glory of God seems to be tied irrevocably to his service to his human creature. In Philippians 2, after having described the incredible humility of Christ, how he “**emptied himself,**” “**humiliated himself by**

**becoming obedient to the point of death — even death on a cross**” (Philippians 2.7a, 8), Paul says that for this reason **“God also highly exalted him”** (vs. 9) giving him the highest name, that to which every knee should bow if one would glorify the Father (vs. 10-11). This seems to suggest a kind of cause-effect relationship between the humility of Christ and his subsequent glory.

Peter seems to confirm this idea when he writes: **“the Spirit of Christ within [the prophets] (...) predicted the sufferings of Christ and the glories to follow”** (1 Peter 1.10).

Perhaps the grandest passage on this subject is found in the book of Hebrews. In the second chapter of that letter, the author indicates that Christ took on human flesh, suffered and died because he had to. If he wanted to help the **“children”**, those **“who through fear of death were subject to slavery all their lives”** (2.14-15), it was necessary for him to take on the same body of flesh and blood. This necessity, and the resulting glory, are cited in Hebrews 2.9:

**We do see him who was made for a little while lower than the angels, namely, Jesus, because of the suffering of death crowned with glory and honor, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone.**

**“So that....”** That Jesus had to die is evident. But the reason he had to die was that, if he wanted to save mankind, it was the only way. And he wanted desperately to save mankind. So he came, and he died.

A good definition of “humble” is “unpretentious”. God has demonstrated this humility from the beginning. To deign to visit and talk with his creatures, to explain to them his will, to grieve and thunder over their iniquity, to counsel and encourage, to teach and correct — all of which is far below his dignity. An almighty God just doesn’t do such things.

But our almighty God does. And therein lies the extraordinary difference between the true God and the host of pseudo-gods which men have given themselves. This God, this one true God, does what a man-made god would never think of doing: he sits down with us.

He sat down with Abraham, permitting him to plead for the lives of the people of Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis 18); he sat down with Moses, talking with him face to face, as a man would talk with a friend (Exodus 33.11); he sat down with David, promising to build him a dynasty and establish his royalty forever (2 Samuel 7.11-13); he sat down with Israel

in captivity, inviting them to return to their country and enjoy a harvest they had not sown in a land they had not earned (2 Chronicles 36.22-23).

But when he sent the Son into the world, he did infinitely more than sit down: in Christ, God prostrated himself before mankind. Not in worship, but in humble service. If this is not the case, what can possibly be the meaning of passages such as these?

**But he was pierced through for our transgressions,  
He was crushed for our iniquities;  
The chastening for our well-being fell upon him,  
And by his scourging we are healed.  
All of us like sheep have gone astray,  
Each of us has turned to his own way;  
But the Lord has caused the iniquity of us all  
To fall on him** (Isaiah 53.5-6).

**The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many** (Mark 10.45).

**The Word became flesh, and dwelt among us** (John 1.14).

**God demonstrates his own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us** (Romans 5.8).

Jesus himself announced that he was **“gentle and humble in heart”** (Matthew 11.5). Here is, then, the first reason why a Christian should be humble: in the person of Jesus Christ, God himself, Creator and Master of the universe, humbled himself before men.

The songwriter has put it this way:

When I survey the wondrous cross  
On which the Prince of Glory died,  
My richest gain I count but loss,  
And pour contempt on all my pride.

See, from his head, his hands, his feet,  
Sorrow and love flow mingled down;  
Did e’er such love and sorrow meet,  
Or thorns compose so rich a crown?<sup>5</sup>

Paul even says that the one who **“knew no sin”** actually was made to be sin **“on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of**

**God in him”** (2 Corinthians 5.21). What a reversal of roles!

Say this to yourself right now: “God humbled himself before (your name here).” There is enough in that thought to keep us reflecting for a long time.

If, therefore, God’s own Son humbled himself before the Father and before us, should it surprise us to learn that God requires humility in those who would please him? Does God permit posturing and strutting among his people? He made peacocks for that. How can we justify our refusal to humbly do what the Almighty has already done for us? I’m not speaking of dying on a cross, but of considering others as better than ourselves (Philippians 2.3). The Bible is full of “one another” passages that take humility to understand. Here are some examples:

**Be devoted to one another in brotherly love; give preference to one another in honor** (Romans 12.10).

**Be of the same mind toward one another; do not be haughty in mind, but associate with the lowly. Do not be wise in your own estimation (conceited - NIV)** (Romans 12.16).

**Accept one another, just as Christ also accepted us to the glory of God** (Romans 15.7).

**Through love serve one another** (Galatians 5.13 ).

**Bear one another’s burdens, and thereby fulfill the law of Christ** (Galatians 6.2).

**Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you** (Ephesians 4.32).

As you noticed in reading these passages, the example of Christ is often cited. “**Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus**” (Philippians 2.5) is, henceforth, an eternal principle. We should therefore remember his greatness and our littleness, at all times, and never pretend that we are what we are not.

Now, the “humble” man can be the one who is so because of his social status (James 1.9), but there is no biblical injunction requiring God’s people to be poor, though the Bible certainly does warn about the dangers of riches (Luke 18.25; 1 Timothy 6.9). Our subject here is the humility of the person,

whatever his or her physical and social status happens to be.

When Israel was given the commandment to “humble” their souls, especially just before the feast of Atonement, the law was speaking of a time of fasting, of denying oneself physical food in order to humble oneself spiritually before the Lord (Leviticus 16.29, 31; 23.27, 32; Numbers 29.7).

Speaking of the **“faithful remnant”** in Israel, the prophet Zephaniah says:

**But I will leave among you  
A humble and lowly people,  
And they will take refuge in the name of the Lord.** (Zephaniah 3.12)

Here the “humble” are doubtless so because of their spiritual condition before God, which keeps them faithful to him.

The prophet Isaiah announces the coming of a Messiah who will bring good news **“to the afflicted”**. The King James translates **“to the meek”** and the NIV **“to the poor”**. When Jesus reads this passage in the synagogue at Nazareth, he reads: **“to the poor”** (Luke 4.18).

Here again, the poor or the humble are not necessarily those whose living conditions are difficult, but especially those who remain humble before God. The Gospel is addressed to those persons who recognize their need for it. It was in this vein that Jesus sarcastically announced to the grumbling Pharisees that **“it is not those who are well who need a physician, but those who are sick”** (Luke 5.31). Because of their disbelief, the Pharisees could not be among the **“poor in spirit”** who would inherit the earth. (Matthew 5.3). In that declaration, Jesus referred to those who humble themselves before the Lord.

Humility makes us remember, when the Lord has blessed us, that it is he who is the source of our well being. Moses declares to Israel:

**Beware that you do not forget the Lord your God by not keeping his commandments and his ordinances and his statutes which I am commanding you today; otherwise, when you have eaten and are satisfied, and have built good houses and lived in them, and when your herds and your flocks multiply, and your silver and gold multiply, and all that you have multiplies, then your heart will become proud and you will forget the Lord your God who brought you out from the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery** (Deuteronomy 8.11-14).

Look around you, now. Are you at home, on a couch, at your desk? Riding in a car or bus, or airplane? Look at your clothes. Think about the job the Lord has given you. Think about your family, your wife or husband, your brothers or your sisters, your general well being. Has God blessed you? When was the last time you were hungry, really hungry? I mean because you didn't have enough food to eat? Have you forgotten that God has given you the comforts that surround you now?

Consider the last part of Deuteronomy 8.14. Have we forgotten that God has brought us out of the house of bondage and into the holy Land of his grace and forgiveness? Every plate of food that we eat is a new gift from God. Every lovely benefit of our wonderful salvation is a present from on high, from whence come only **"perfect gifts"** (James 1.17). When we forget the Lord's blessings, material or spiritual, we are not only being ungrateful, but we are being proud, we are refusing to humble ourselves before him. And that can lead to only one thing: **"destruction"** (Proverbs 18.12).

Jesus put it this way: **"Everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted"** (Luke 14.11). We should leave it to God to exalt us; exalting ourselves never goes over well with him. And Peter adds this detail: **"humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, that he may exalt you at the proper time"** (1 Peter 5.6). And what is "the proper time"? We would like it to be yesterday! Or today at the latest. Perhaps tomorrow, if we must absolutely wait that long. But in reality, the proper time is when God has decided it shall be. Not before, not after. Which means it can be during our time on this earth, or after our death. At any rate, we can know that we will be exalted, according to his promise, in the world to come.

This puts before us an eternal truth: every man and every woman will be either exalted or humbled in the last day. Those who have humbled themselves before God while upon the earth will be glorified; those who have been haughty will be brought low. No proud person will remain proud in that day, and no humble person will remain in his low state. God will see to it.

On one occasion Jesus answered his critics by accusing them of receiving glory from one another, and not seeking the glory that is from the one and only God (John 5.44). This glory of God is to be our abiding interest; we are to seek it in "whatever" we do (1 Corinthians 10.31). This is being humble. Indeed, our very righteousness is given to us as the

fruit we offer **“to the glory and praise [not of ourselves, but] of God”** (Philip-pians 1.11).

This attitude obviously should be prominent in the Church. Paul tells us that a Christian is **“not to think more highly of himself than he ought to think”** (Romans 12.3). That is, no Christian has a reason to be pretentious, either toward those **“who are perishing”** outside of Christ’s blood, or toward **“those who are being saved”** (1 Corinthians 1.18). How many Church squabbles and trench wars could be avoided if we were only willing to think of others first? In fact, this is what we are commanded to do!

I once heard a Christian lady say, referring to her brothers and sisters in Christ, that if they weren’t Christians, she wouldn’t even associate with them. I’m sure she was feeling good about herself for associating with such lowly people. But I’m not sure this is what Paul had in mind when he told us to be **“devoted to one another in brotherly love”** (Romans 12.10), as we saw above. Our interest in the welfare of the other is to come from a change in our heart, a change that makes us really care about the other, not just because we are obeying a rule that the Lord has laid down, but because we have truly come to be most interested in his or her wellbeing.

Even those living outside of God’s will can benefit from humbling themselves :

- ◆ When the people of Nineveh humbled themselves at the preaching of Jonah, they were spared (Jonah 3.5-10).

- ◆ The wicked king Ahab, after having had Naboth killed in order to confiscate his vineyard, repented when the prophet Elijah announced the judgment of God. God then delayed his judgment until after Ahab’s death (1 Kings 21.27-29).

- ◆ When Josias tore his garment because he had discovered the law that he and his people had neglected, God promised that the chastisement which must fall on Israel would be delayed until after this king’s death (2 Kings 22.15-20).

- ◆ Rehoboam, a wicked king of Israel, had abandoned God. When the prophet Shemaiah announced the imminent destruction of Israel by Shishak, king of Egypt, Rehoboam and his counselors humbled themselves and God reduced the sentence against them (2 Chronicles 12.5-7).

Do we see how important humility is to the Lord of heaven? If he blesses thus those who do not normally desire to please him, how much



more will he, as the Father who has already given us his Son, happily respond to his humble children? (Romans 8.32).

God blesses the humble in special ways: (1) he hears their prayers and strengthens their heart (Psalm 10.17); he leads them in righteousness and teaches them his way (Psalm 25.9); he gives them grace (James 4.6) and exalts them (Luke 1.52).

Sometimes, God is obliged to humiliate a man (or woman, or nation) in order to make certain spiritual truths understood. This humiliation thus becomes a blessing for the persons or nations concerned. For example: the Bible says that God humbled Israel in the desert and nourished them with manna “that he might make [them] understand that man does not live by bread alone, but man lives by everything that proceeds out of the mouth of the Lord (Deuteronomy 8.3).

Therefore, when Jesus quotes this passage in resistance to the devil’s temptations, he is not only saying that we must live on God’s word, but also that we must be humble before him!

According to Jeremiah in Lamentations 3.33, when God is obliged to humble someone, he does not do it willingly, but only in order to bring about the well being of the person concerned. The psalmist also knew this truth:

**Before I was afflicted I went astray,  
But now I keep your word (Psalm 119.67).**

**It is good for me that I was afflicted,  
That I may learn your statutes (Psalm 119.71).**

**I know, O Lord, that your judgments are righteous,  
And that in faithfulness you have afflicted me (Psalm 119.75).**

If we find that the Lord is afflicting us, we should consider that he is being faithful toward us, for he does not want any to perish (2 Peter 3.9). Perhaps we have been haughty, taking for granted the multitude of his gifts. In this context, his humbling us (by trials, difficult circumstances, frustrated efforts, etc.) is only in order to prevent the “destruction” that must befall the proud.

Let us remember the Canaanite woman, whom Jesus compared to a dog. This was a seemingly cruel humiliation to her, and she could have reacted indignantly. Instead, she humbled herself: **“Yes, Lord; but even the dogs feed on the crumbs which fall from their masters’ table”** (Matthew 15.27). Jesus, struck by the depth of her faith, healed her

daughter. This is the kind of humility he was looking for in Israel. And it is the kind of humility he seeks in his children today.

Even when the Lord grants us spiritual victories, we must remain humble. To his disciples returning from a successful mission effort, Jesus says: **“Do not rejoice in this, that the spirits are subject to you, but rejoice that your names are recorded in heaven”** (Luke 10.20).

Is your name recorded in heaven? What other fact of your life can be more significant — and humbling — than that?

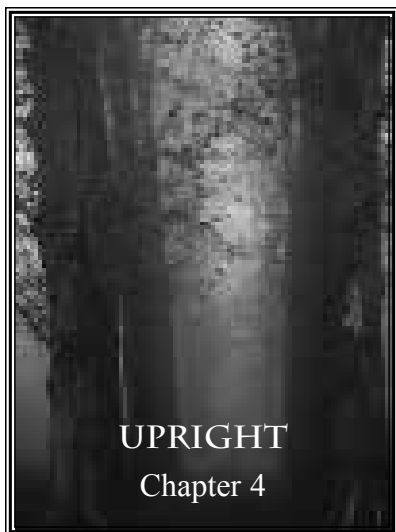
Should we never boast? There are two things, the Bible says, that we can boast of :

**But may it never be that I would boast, except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world** (Galatians 6.14).

Thus says the Lord, **“Let not a wise man boast of his wisdom, and let not the mighty man boast of his might, let not a rich man boast of his riches; but let him who boasts boast of this, that he understands and knows me, that I am the Lord who exercises lovingkindness, justice and righteousness on earth; for I delight in these things”** (Jere-miah 9.23-24).

We are all beneficiaries of the **“lovingkindness, justice and righteousness”** exercised upon the earth by our Lord. It can be summed up in one word: Jesus. In him **“are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge”** (Colossians 2.3).

Would we please God? We must humble ourselves before him and before each other. Today.



## GOD ON HIS KNEES

### THE HUMBLE HEART

#### QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Why is humility considered a fault (or at best a weakness) in the present Western culture?
2. Describe the cause/effect relationship between the humility of Christ and his subsequent glory.
3. How has God been humble in his dealings with mankind?
4. What do peacocks do that Christians should not do?
5. Are the “poor” to whom Jesus appeared necessarily of lowly material condition?

appeared necessarily of lowly

6. What is the “proper time” for God to exalt the humble?
7. In what special ways does God bless the humble?
8. How did the Canaanite woman show her humility (Matthew 15.27)?
9. What can we boast about, as Christians? Do we? Discuss.

## "ALL ER NUTHIN"

### THE CIRCUMCISED HEART

**For indeed circumcision is of value if you practice the Law; but if you are a transgressor of the Law, your circumcision has become uncircumcision. (...) For he is not a Jew who is one outwardly, nor is circumcision that which is outward in the flesh. But he is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is that which is of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter; and his praise is not from men, but from God (Romans 2.25, 28-29).**

The upright heart is a circumcised heart. Circumcision, the cutting off of the male foreskin, was first introduced as the **"sign of the covenant"** between Abraham and God (Genesis 17.12). Abraham was ninety-nine years old when he was circumcised (Genesis 17.24), and from that day onward, with the exception of periods of unfaithfulness in Israel (rather frequent, actually, cf. Joshua 5.2-8), every male child was circumcised on the eighth day (Genesis 17.12; Leviticus 12.3).

As a covenant sign, this rite set Abraham and his offspring apart from the nations, placing them in a unique position of privilege and responsibility: privilege because only a **"set apart"** nation had the right to observe the feasts and ceremonies of the covenant (Exodus 12.48); responsibility because the circumcised were called upon to serve God faithfully, under threat of his wrath (cf. Deuteronomy 28.58-59).

This last detail establishes clearly not only that circumcision was more than a matter of cutting human flesh, but also that it played no direct saving role. If that had been the case, Israel could have done whatever it liked and God would have been pleased (or at least he would have not objected), the sign of the covenant covering all wrongdoing on Israel's part. Israel did in fact adopt this reasoning by assuming that the mark in their flesh sufficed to save them, even without the holiness that God expected.

But God emphatically rejected this faulty logic. There was, he declared, much more to this ceremonial gesture than what met the eye. It was not to be seen as an end in itself, but the sign of a committed heart (Jeremiah 4.4), of a life entirely dedicated to doing the will of the Lord. In the Jewish law — and in the mind of God — circumcision and covenant were synonyms.

Circumcision was, then, more about a heart commitment than anything else. The symbolic force of the physical ritual is evident, if only in the fact that it was applied exclusively to males. If the men alone were set apart, the women of Israel were but a useless decoration on the hem of the covenant. But in fact the circumcision of the males represented the sanctification of the entire nation for God's purposes, even as the service of the Levites was accepted in lieu of the lives of all the firstborn in Israel (Numbers 3.12).

Covenant and circumcision being inseparable, it was impossible to consider an unfaithful Jew as truly belonging to God's people. The sign in the skin had no effect if the heart was not involved. Real circumcision, Paul was to write later, **"is that which is of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter"** (Romans 2.29). That is, the true circumcision is the spiritual one, of which the physical act is only a symbol.

This explains the exasperated outcries of some of Israel's prophets in the darkest days of their history. Here is the forceful challenge of Jeremiah:

**Circumcise yourselves to the Lord  
And remove the foreskins of your heart,  
Men of Judah and inhabitants of Jerusalem,  
Or else my wrath will go forth like fire  
And burn with none to quench it,  
Because of the evil of your deeds** (Jeremiah 4.4).

The prophet did not invent a new idea here. In fact, as early as the giving of the law in the desert of Sinai, God had made it clear that Israel's heart was to be circumcised: **"So circumcise your heart, and stiffen your neck no longer"** (Deuteronomy 10:16), **"so that you may live"** (Deuteronomy 30.6).

When Jeremiah announced that **"the days are coming, declares the Lord, that I will punish all who are circumcised and yet uncircumcised —"**, he was announcing the wrath of God on a people who had always purposefully misunderstood the importance of circumcision of the heart. By assuming that a mark in the skin would save, without the commitment which must necessarily accompany it, Israel plunged headlong down a long, dark road from which, by the way, it has yet to

return. Nowhere is the circumcision of unbelieving Israel shown to be more worthless (Romans 2.25) than when Israel rejected its own Messiah.

This paved the way for Christians — strange as it sounds to a Jewish ear — to become the truly circumcised:

**For we are the true circumcision, who worship in the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh** (Philippians 3.3).

**In him you were also circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, in the removal of the body of the flesh by the circumcision of Christ** (Colossians 2.11).

When Paul spoke thus of **“the circumcision of Christ”**, he referred not to his visit to the temple at eight days of age, but to his atoning death, into which we are buried when we are baptized. Paul says to the Romans:

**Therefore we have been buried with him through baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have become united with him in the likeness of his death, certainly we shall also be in the likeness of his resurrection, knowing this, that our old self was crucified with him, in order that our body of sin might be done away with, so that we would no longer be slaves to sin; for he who has died is freed from sin** (Romans 6.4-7).

The **“body of sin”** that is **“done away with”** through baptism, according to this passage, is, then, the **“body of the flesh”** that is removed by the circumcision of Christ, according to Colossians 2.11.

It is not surprising that a definite link can be made between the circumcision of the Old Testament and the act of baptism in the New Testament. Both are physical acts bearing symbolic meaning and required for belonging to the people of God; both must be accompanied by a committed heart, the absence of which nullifies the physical symbol. The difference between the two acts — and it is enormous — is that in the old covenant circumcision was imposed upon a non-consenting child. In the new covenant, baptism is the choice made by an active faith (Mark 16.15).

This choice produces two results:

1. Because it is a choice, and because that choice is offered by a better covenant (Hebrews 8.6), baptism requires an even greater commitment

of the heart than did circumcision.

2. Without this commitment, this faith, baptism can have no real effect upon its recipient (except to get him or her wet!). J. W. Monser says:

“The water of baptism can no more save the subject than the water of the deluge could have saved Noah, apart from the faith he possessed, and the preparation it led him to make in constructing and entering into the ark. It was because he held and exercised such faith that the deluge brought salvation to Noah while it overwhelmed others in destruction. So it is in baptism when received in the spirit of faith. There is in this also the putting off of the man of corruption — crucifying it together with Christ, and at the same time a rising through the resurrection of Christ to the new and heavenly life, which satisfies the demands of a pure and enlightened conscience. So that the really baptized person is he in whom there has been a killing and a making alive, a breaking up and destroying of the root of sin, and planting in its stead the seed of a divine nature, to spring, and grow, and bring fruit into perfection. In the microcosm of the believer there is, thus, the perishing of an old world of sin and death, and the establishment of a new world of righteousness and life everlasting.”<sup>6</sup>

As those who would serve the Lord in Israel could not do so without having submitted to circumcision, those who would seek a righteous heart under the new covenant cannot hope to find it without accepting the baptism that Jesus himself requires (Mark 16.16). It is commanded of every believer and is accompanied by the forgiveness of sins (Acts 2.38; 22.16). This writer finds it truly amazing that millions of believers, under the credible guise of applying the very biblical tenet of salvation by grace, have, in the name of a tradition known as Reformation Theology, made the unthinkable mistake of ignoring the Bible’s own definition of this grace. What F. LaGard Smith calls “evangelicalism’s incredible blind spot” is condemning many sincere believers to eventual separation from God.

It just won’t do to announce the uselessness of baptism as a condition for salvation on the basis of such passages as the following:

**For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything, but faith working through love** (Galatians 5.6).

First of all, do we note the words, “**faith working**”? Next, if we read this passage in its context, we see that Paul was fighting a particular

doctrinal heresy invented by some Christian Jews, who were teaching that **“unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved”** (Acts 15.1; cf. v. 5).

What they were teaching was that when a man hears the Gospel, believes in Jesus and repents of his sins, he must then be baptized in the name of Jesus and circumcised in order to receive the salvation that Jesus obtained for him by his death on the cross.

This teaching created the first major theological challenge to the Church in the first century. And the stakes were high. Was the Church of the Lord to be nothing more than a Jewish sect, following the rigorous ceremonial rites of the old covenant? Was she nothing more than another branch on the Jewish vine? And behind these questions is another, even more fundamental: *how* are we saved? Must we go through Moses in order to get to Christ?

Paul’s teaching on this matter is perfectly clear: Jewish circumcision, required by God under the old covenant under penalty of separation from Israel, has nothing whatsoever to do with the salvation offered to us in Christ. No article of the old covenant may be forced on believers in Christ as a condition of their salvation, and the passage quoted above denounces the teaching of those who would have it so.

Remember, now, what we’ve said here. No old covenant rituals can be imposed as preconditions to entering the new covenant. This truth does not in any way nullify or alter the clear commandments of the Lord and his apostles in the new covenant, which explicitly link obedience to those commands and the salvation of the soul.

Proponents of the “faith only” doctrine point to Ephesians 2.8 as proof of their position.

**For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast** (Ephesians 2.8-9).

This wonderful verse says a lot of things; it does not say that salvation can be had apart from obedience to God’s own pre-established conditions. The salvation that is available to us has been afforded by the grace of God as a gift. It is “not of [ourselves]”. When we receive it, we have done nothing to earn it.

Was Israel not saved by the grace of God? Absolutely! And yet, was not circumcision required, under penalty of being cut off from Israel? The



entire story of the Bible makes it clear that only God can save mankind; men are lost without the outstretched hand of the Lord to lift them up. But the Scripture always — always — requires a response to that outstretched hand, a response without which we will be unable to avail ourselves of the free salvation it offers. When we grasp the compassionate hand of God, what have we earned? Nothing at all. Have we attained a level of spirituality that requires he grant us our lives? Certainly not. We have only obeyed his commandments, accepting the conditions he has imposed upon us in order to receive his grace. Far from adding a work to his grace, we thereby declare even more clearly our desperate helplessness without him. Obedience does not place him in our debt; it submits us to his will. And his will is to save us all (1 Timothy 2.4).

Do we then make the blood of Christ ineffective? Of course not! Nothing can add to the saving power of the pure blood of Jesus, by which we receive redemption, **“according to the riches of his grace”** (Ephesians 1.7). How anyone can think that to obey the commandments of God constitutes a declaration that his grace is not sufficient to save is Greek to me. This reasoning is the product of a deceptively circular logic, which reveals an imperfect knowledge of what grace really is.

In an otherwise sound attack on overt pragmatism in the preaching of the Gospel, John F. MacArthur, Jr., says this :

“[Charles] Finney’s fundamental theological error was his rejection of God’s sovereignty.... He believed the purpose of evangelism should therefore be to convince people to choose differently — or as many would today, “make a decision for Christ.” The sinner’s choice — not God’s — therefore became the determinative issue in conversion. The means of moving out of darkness into light was in Finney’s opinion nothing more than a simple act of the human will. The preacher’s task was to secure a decision of faith, applying whatever means proved useful.”<sup>7</sup>

While I could not endorse all of Charles Finney’s theological positions, and while the Bible would hardly approve a preacher’s using “whatever means proved useful” to lead people to conversion, MacArthur should not say that no salvation can be had without the operation of the human will. Read the following declarations of Jesus and his apostles :

**Jerusalem, Jerusalem, who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! how often I wanted to gather your children together, the way a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were unwilling** (Matthew 23.37).

He came to his own, and those who were his own did not receive him (John 1.11).

**For if the word spoken through angels proved unalterable, and every transgression and disobedience received a just penalty, how will we escape if we neglect so great a salvation? (Hebrews 2.2-3).**

**For if we go on sinning willfully after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a terrifying expectation of judgment (...)** (Hebrews 10.26-27).

All of these verses declare unequivocally that the human will is involved in the acceptance or rejection of God's grace.

Does this mean that people are sovereign and God is not? Where could one possibly get that idea? For God to allow people to choose is in no way surrendering his supremacy, if he is the one who in fact establishes this pattern. On the contrary, his lordship is thus affirmed.

As we have seen, when the believer is baptized, in obedience to the command of God, not only does he imitate symbolically the death, the burial and the resurrection of Christ (Romans 6), but his heart is also circumcised. He dies to a former way of life and commits himself as a **“living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God”** (Romans 12.1).

It is unthinkable that he should then say to himself: “Since I now am a baptized believer and a part of the new covenant, what I do or do not do is no longer important, for God will always save his children.” The Scriptures do not permit this kind of reasoning, which would lead to the same error committed by Israel, and with the same terrible result: exposing oneself to being rejected by the Lord who loves us.

S. de Diétrich says this:

“God gave to Abraham a visible sign of his covenant: circumcision, a physical sign which believing Israel would one day understand as having no meaning separate and apart from the true circumcision, that of the heart (Jeremiah 4.4; Romans 2.25-29). It was the visible sign of an invisible grace: **‘So shall my covenant be in your flesh an everlasting covenant’** [(Genesis 17.13)]. Jesus, circumcised on the eighth day, removed the old covenant only by substituting a new, sealed by his blood, of which the sign is **‘baptism into his death’** (Romans 6.3).”<sup>8</sup>

I agree with this, but only partly. Since baptism is the moment of entry into the covenant (cf. Acts 22.16; Romans 6.3; Galatians 3.27), it is the outward sign that corresponds to physical circumcision for the Jews.

But since no baptism can be valid without a genuine faith in Christ (or vice versa, cf. Mark 16.16), the true sign of the new covenant is not baptism alone, but faith expressed in, culminated in, baptism.

We are talking about circumcising the heart, about having a heart that is submitted to the will of God. This is faith: submitting to the will of God.

God wants to find in us a faith that *trusts* in his will, a faith that *obeys* his will, and a faith that *perseveres* in his will. There are not three faiths, but one (Ephesians 4.5), a faith with three facets. In order to examine these facets, we will look at an example from the Old Testament.

### A FAITH THAT TRUSTS

True faith, biblical faith, places all its confidence in God. Throughout the Bible, God encourages us to do this. Indeed, according to Hebrews 11.6, having confidence in God is what enables us to please him. It is therefore imperative for the upright heart, the heart that seeks to please God, to discover this faith.

As Israel approached Canaan and appeared before the fortified city of Jericho, God gave Joshua a stunning order :

**“See, I have given Jericho into your hand, with its king and the valiant warriors. You shall march around the city, all the men of war circling the city once. You shall do so for six days. Also seven priests shall carry seven trumpets of rams’ horns before the ark; then on the seventh day you shall march around the city seven times, and the priests shall blow the trumpets. It shall be that when they make a long blast with the ram’s horn, and when you hear the sound of the trumpet, all the people shall shout with a great shout; and the wall of the city will fall down flat, and the people will go up every man straight ahead”** (Joshua 6.2-5).

Notice that God says : **“I have handed Jericho over to you”**; that is, the defeat of the city is already decreed, already obtained. God is giving Israel a victory it cannot win, which it can do nothing to earn.

But Israel must trust God to keep his word, for only by trusting God can Israel ever hope to take Jericho, or the rest of Canaan, for that matter.

The upright heart must trust God absolutely, not relying on its own insight (Proverbs 3.5). This means accepting what God tells us about our salvation and how to obtain it (whatever our own ideas or “traditions” might be). Like Israel, we must trust God to keep his word; like Noah, we must trust God to save us (Hebrews 11.7); like Abraham, we must trust

God to fulfill his promises after our death (Hebrews 11.13). Without this trust, the victory Christ obtained on the cross escapes us.

Our salvation is in Christ alone. **“No other name”** (Acts 4.12; cf. John 14.6) can ever have anything to do with the salvation of anyone on the earth. He alone earned it (Matthew 26.28) and he alone can confer it (Romans 3.24). Without him we are dismally and eternally lost. The bottom line is simple : everyone who believes on him will be saved (Romans 1.16; cf. John 11.25), everyone who does not believe will be condemned (Mark 16.16b).

### A FAITH THAT OBEYS

We must not, however, misunderstand saving faith. It is not and has never been merely an intellectual assent or a purely mental choice. Simple logic tells us that if we believe in God, we will obey his commandments, and that if we do not obey, we do not believe. The Scripture says: **“If you love me, you will keep my commandments”** (John 14.15). Only in this biblical sense can we define faith as the source of our salvation.

Did Israel say to God: “We trust you to give us the city, as you have said. And we now claim Jericho as ours on the grounds of your grace and our faith”?

Certainly not! Israel had something to do, something that God had commanded and without which all their faith in God was useless: the people must march around the city, according to God’s directions. Without their obedience to God’s commandments, they would not obtain what God promised. This was the condition that God placed on his gift. Faith acts. Faith obeys. **“By faith Abel offered”** (Hebrews 11.4). **“By faith Noah (...) built”** (Hebrews 11.7). **“By faith Abraham obeyed”** (Hebrews 11.8). Jesus once asked his disciples, **“Why do you call me ‘Lord, Lord,’ and do not do what I tell you?”** (Luke 6.46).

Israel could have camped around the city of Jericho for a hundred years, confident that God would throw down the walls, and nothing at all would have happened. The promise was linked to their obedience. And so it was that when they had circled the city, blown the trumpets and shouted, as the Lord had commanded, their faith was answered. **“Joshua said to the people, ‘Shout! For the Lord has given you the city....’ As soon as the people heard the sound of the trumpets, they raised a great shout, and the wall fell down flat”** (Joshua 6.16, 20b).

No amount of marching around a city, of blowing of trumpets or of

shouting, can ever influence the stability of walls several dozen feet thick. I'm saying that Israel did nothing to physically bring down those walls; but they did come down, because Israel obeyed God. It was the condition he imposed, and Israel complied.

Now, the Bible says that it is through the blood of Jesus that we have obtained our redemption (Ephesians 1.7; cf. Romans 5.9 ; Revelation 1.5, etc.); it says that we are saved by the grace of God, **"through faith"** (Ephesians 2.8); it says that **"if you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved"** (Romans 10.9); Jesus said that **"he who has believed and has been baptized shall be saved"** (Mark 16.16); Peter commands repentance and baptism **"in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven"** (Acts 2.38); Paul declares that **"whoever will call on the name of the Lord will be saved"** (Romans 10.13) ; and Peter says that **"baptism (...) saves you"** (1 Peter 3.21).

What will the circumcised heart make of all of that? It will determine that Christ has already made atonement for sin, in his loving act on the cross (Hebrews 2.14-17). It will believe that this act suffices for earning the salvation which he offers (1 John 2.2) and that only in Jesus can this salvation be had.

This is like Israel at the gates of Jericho. The city was already given, God had taken care of all of the details, and there was nothing Israel could do to physically take the city. But God commanded them to do something, without which the walls would not fall. They had to march around them and shout. In the same manner, God commands us to do something, without which the salvation he has obtained for us will not be applied: we must trust in him, turn from our sinful ways (repent) and be baptized in water, in imitation of the death and crucifixion (and resurrection!) of God's son.

Let us be absolutely clear about this: just as the walls would not fall before Israel obeyed God, salvation today is not accorded without obedience to his commands. I am saying that a person who believes in Christ and has repented of his sins, but who has not been baptized for the remission of those sins is not saved, is not a Christian. You and I would perhaps have arranged things otherwise, if we had been deciding. But you and I do not determine the conditions for salvation. That is God's realm, and when he speaks, the truly circumcised heart is going to throw its own opinions to the wind and obey.

## **A FAITH THAT PERSEVERES**

To obey God by faith today is a good thing. But tomorrow is just as important. Jesus calls us to a permanent faith, a faith that pursues its calling every day, all days, the good and the bad. Circumcised Israel was faithful before the walls of Jericho; but once it was established in Canaan, the hard days came, and the people of God did not persevere. Did God excuse this unfaithfulness on the basis of the circumcision or the faith of Israel at Jericho? Not at all. Listen to the fire of his anger, expressed through his prophet Ezekiel:

**I will pour out my indignation on you; I will blow on you with the fire of my wrath, and I will give you into the hand of brutal men, skilled in destruction (Ezekiel 21.31).**

In the New Testament, God still calls the circumcised heart to persevere:

**Be ... not lagging behind in diligence, fervent in spirit, serving the Lord (Romans 12.10-11).**

**By your endurance you will gain your lives (Luke 21.19).**

**For you have need of endurance, so that when you have done the will of God, you may receive what was promised (Hebrews 10.36).**

**Now for this very reason also, applying all diligence, in your faith supply moral excellence, and in your moral excellence, knowledge, and in your knowledge, self-control, and in your self-control, perseverance, and in your perseverance, godliness, and in your godliness, brotherly kindness, and in your brotherly kindness, love. For if these qualities are yours and are increasing, they render you neither useless nor unfruitful in the true knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. For he who lacks these qualities is blind or shortsighted, having forgotten his purification from his former sins (2 Peter 1.5-9).**

As it was possible to be circumcised in one's skin but not in one's heart, it is equally possible in the Church to have one's body baptized without the heart being involved in the matter. And the result is the same: God will cut that person off from his people.

Whereas God desires a truly circumcised heart, many try to approach him with a heart that is insincere or divided. We will consider these two scenarios.

## AN INSINCERE HEART

I understand that the Greek word translated “sincere” comes from a word that means “without wax” (Fr. sans cire). Potters, when discovering a flaw in a bowl or a vase, would cover the error with wax, then paint over it. The finished product would show no exterior trace of the flaw, but it would still be there. The apparently perfect object was still imperfect, its defects deliberately disguised.

The ancient Greek actors gave rise to the word “hypocrisy” by wearing masks in their theatrical performances. In his beautiful but frightening book, *Lord of the Flies*, William Golding portrays the social organization of English schoolboys in isolation on a desert island. As the lines of rivalry between the good boys and the bad become clear, Jack, the chief of the bad boys, prepares for war by painting a mask on his face. “Like ... trying to look like someone else,” he says. “The mask was a thing on its own, behind which Jack hid, liberated from shame and self-consciousness.”

This sounds like many Christians at worship on Sunday morning. You’ll notice I said “at” worship, and not “in” worship. How often Christians enter a worship service with uncircumcised hearts! In other chapter, we have seen this word from Psalm 24 :

**Who may ascend into the hill of the Lord?  
And who may stand in his holy place?  
He who has clean hands and a pure heart,  
Who has not lifted up his soul to falsehood  
And has not sworn deceitfully** (vs. 3-4).

The Lord expects weekly worship services to be the concentrated reflection of our life during the week. Of course our hands are innocent during the two hours or so that we are together in worship; during that time, we do not lie (unless it be during our song service), we do not steal (unless during the contribution), we do not commit adultery (unless it be with our thoughts concerning the sister or the brother in the row in front of us), and we love one another (at least outwardly). On second thought, it is hard to have innocent hands, even in worship! So what is the psalmist getting at? Among other things, perhaps, it seems to me that he is saying that the Lord does not accept worship from those who are not truly committed to him. They cannot be perfect, of course, but they can and must be entirely dedicated to doing his will. And this dedication is exercised not only on Sunday morning, but during all of every day of the week.

God doesn't want a heart that is only circumcised on Sunday. This is a 24-hour affair.

So, are our hands really innocent when we arrive at worship? Is our heart completely circumcised? Probably not. We've tried, but we've still sinned. Even our motivation is sometimes lacking. But if our hands are not clean upon arrival for worship, they must imperatively be clean when we leave worship.

I say that not only because we must be cleansed from our sins, but also because the worship of God must necessarily change his people's heart. If it does not, then we have not worshiped. I don't know which is worse: ho-humming into worship, or ho-humming out. Coming to worship unprepared is human, at least, though it is still an error. But leaving worship without being changed, without the circumcision of the heart being confirmed and affirmed is an offense. If we enter the worship of God unworthy, we must never leave it unchanged!

### A DIVIDED HEART

God never accepts a partial commitment. Brother A may have more faith than Brother B, but all of the faith of both must be consecrated to the Lord. **"Trust in the Lord with all your heart,"** said Solomon (Proverbs 3.5). The Chema of Israel (Deuteronomy 6.4-8) begins thus: **"Hear, O Israel! The Lord is our God, the Lord is one! You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might"** (vs. 4-5).

That sounds like a pretty comprehensive program. It is, indeed, the program that Jesus places at the head of the list for his disciples. Now, if the "first" commandment (Mark 12.29-30) requires that our whole heart and soul and might must be dedicated to loving God, what is there left for other objects of worship? When a lamb was laid on the altar of the temple as a burnt offering to the Lord, was a part of it permitted to go on living? What a ridiculous question! (I'm almost embarrassed to ask it; but you see my point.) The lamb died; *all* of the lamb died.

And yet, we would really like to find a way to serve the Lord with just enough to get us by, just enough to satisfy the minimum requirements, just enough so as not to have to be uncomfortable, or less rich, or have less time for our favorite pastimes.

Wilbur Rees put it this way:

"I would like to buy \$3 worth of God, please, not enough to explode



my soul or disturb my sleep, but just enough to equal a cup of warm milk or a snooze in the sunshine. I don't want enough of him to make me love a black man or pick beets with a migrant. I want ecstasy, not transformation; I want the warmth of the womb, not a new birth. I want a pound of the Eternal in a paper sack. I would like to buy \$3 worth of God, please."<sup>10</sup>

In the famous Rodgers and Hammerstein musical *Oklahoma!*, Will, a character from Kansas City, sings to his sweetheart, Ado Annie:

With me it's all er nuthin'.  
Is it all er nuthin' with you?  
It cain't be 'in between'  
It cain't be 'now and then'  
No half and half romance will do! (...)  
If you cain't give me all, give me nuthin'.

Now listen to Jesus' direct words to the Church at Laodicea :

**I know your works; you are neither cold nor hot. I wish that you were either cold or hot. So, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I am about to spit you out of my mouth** (Revelation 3.15-16).

I am aware of the scholarship that has discovered the apparent meaning of the "cold" and "hot" references here. But this does not change our point. A mouthful of lukewarm water is still very unpleasant. Do we want God to be so disgusted with us as to spit us out of his mouth? And yet, I am thinking that many of us, convinced as we are that we are living a life of vibrant Christian faith, with a circumcised heart, are in fact being constantly rejected by the Lord.

Why? Because other interests have crowded out of our lives the crucial one: that of praising and serving the God who has saved us. Does not the word "crucial" come from the Latin word meaning "cross"? This is especially a problem for Christians of the younger generation in Western cultures, dangerously accustomed to wealth, ease, and tranquility. It would seem, to observe many Christians, that they put more planning into what they do on Saturday night than into what they do on Sunday morning. Or, put another way, the "before" has become more important than the "during". It is not uncommon in the Church which I serve to have Christians absent on Sunday morning simply because they stayed up so late on Saturday night. Is it really necessary to say that fatigue is not a valid reason for not being in worship on Sunday morning? Does it keep

us from going to work on Monday?

Such commitment as the Lord receives from many of us would get us fired from most jobs. No boss would take that kind of laxness. And we must make no mistake about it: the Lord won't take it either. Let us not fool ourselves about his grace and his mercy, when we are unwilling to give him our best. God's goodness is for those who give themselves entirely to him (and anyone else he desires to extend it to, of course). We must not think that we can ignore the piper and still be invited to dance.

Of course, we are not talking here just about Church attendance on Sunday mornings. The principle of the circumcised heart concerns every aspect of our obedience to the Lord. Is there anything in my life, in yours, that is more important to us today than the God of heaven and the salvation he has given us? If so, we must strike that thing from our lives, mercilessly and without pity, for it could cause us to be lost (cf. Matthew 5.29-30). Concerning sinful habits of the old man, Anne Ortlund writes :

“If you let some of them hang around instead of ruthlessly killing them — understand right now that, as he did to Saul, God will remove your stature, he'll cut down your influence, he'll give you disgrace .... The world is full of Christians who pass around little ‘spiritual’ books and go to Bible classes and say ‘praise the Lord’ a lot — at the same time showing no desire to put to death the characteristics of their earthly natures.”<sup>11</sup>

We could say they show “no desire to circumcise their heart”.

On the same subject, Andy Cook says:

“Whenever Satan is attacking your heart, do whatever it takes to kill that sinful practice. Remove the television or the video player. Take a different route home from work. Change jobs. Fall to your knees and pray, right in the midst of temptation, wherever you are. I tell you the truth: You cannot fall on your knees and pray and continue to sin at the same time.”<sup>12</sup>

As we consider further the “divided heart”, I would like to object to an expression that is popular in certain Christian circles. A preacher or teacher will invite his listeners to “make Jesus Lord” of their lives. A convert to Christianity will declare proudly: “I have made Jesus the Lord of my life.”

Now, think about that for a minute. The person concerned has to make a choice between other allegiances by which he is also bound, and about which we have been thinking; in this sense (and in this sense alone) he has to “make” one thing or another his master. But it is a mistake to

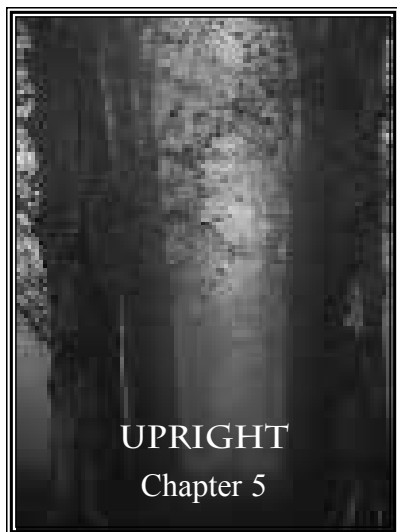
think that we can “make” God the sovereign of our lives. He is already the Lord of your life and mine, whether we want it that way or not!

In the Old Testament, did God ever say to Israel: “Make me your God”? Of course not. He was already their God and he did not hesitate to remind them of that fact (Exodus 20.2; Leviticus 18.4; 26.2; Isaiah 42.8; 45.6; Jeremiah 32.27, etc.). The command of God is never to place him in a position that he already occupies, but rather to place *ourselves* in the position that *we* ought to occupy, that of his servants and obedient followers.

In 2 Chronicles 16.9, the biblical historian tells us this:

**The eyes of the Lord move to and fro throughout the earth that he may strongly support those whose heart is completely his.**

As Jeremiah said in his prophecy (4.4), our circumcised heart is “**to the Lord**”. It is because of who he is, and what he has done for us, that we want to commit ourselves entirely, wholeheartedly, “circumcisedly” to him.



## **"ALL ER NUTHIN' "**

### **THE CIRCUMCISED HEART**

#### **QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION**

1. In what way were "circumcision" and "covenant" synonyms in the Old Testament?
2. How does one circumcise a heart?
3. How does the expression "the circumcision of Christ" refer to his death?
4. What is the link between circumcision in the Old Testament and

baptism in the New Testament? What is the difference between them?

5. Under what conditions can baptism be of no effect upon the person baptized?
6. Was Israel saved by the grace of God? How, then, could circumcision be required, under penalty of being cut off from Israel?
7. How do we know that grace does not exclude the operation of the human will?
8. What is the true sign of the new covenant?
9. How does the story of Jericho (trust, obedience, perseverance) illustrate the circumcised heart?

# BROKEN FOR GOD

## THE CONTRITE HEART

**The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise** (Psalm 51.17).

Years ago, I participated in an evangelism campaign in Marseilles, France. I attended as a posted missionary, while most of the workers present were in France only for the summer, for the precise purpose of working in such efforts. One morning during group devotionals before a day of work, a young Christian man from Lausanne stood and said he had something to say. We listened expectantly as he began, “What we need in French-speaking Europe,” and he paused, just for a second or two. During that short time, I was finishing his sentence for him. I was saying, “What French-speaking Europe needs is more missionaries, more Churches willing to send them, more money for missions, etc., etc.” Then he finished his sentence: “is more broken hearts.” I was as stunned as if he had hit me with a sledgehammer. I realized how flippant I was being, and how right my young brother was. By going back much farther than I, to the true source of righteousness, he taught me a very valuable lesson that day. If more hearts are broken (and mine in particular), both in the mission field and at home, then in fact there will indeed be more missionaries, monies for missions, interest in Churches.

Now, brokenness is contrition. And contrition is an unavoidable part of a good relationship with God.

Contrition is not an easy word to define, and the concept it represents is even less easily grasped by our Western minds. Thomas a Kempis, in his 14th century *Imitation of Jesus Christ*, said that he would rather “feel contrition than know how to define it”.

We all certainly want to know what it is like to feel contrition, since it is the contrite heart that God will “not despise”. Let us begin, nevertheless, with the dictionary definition of this word: “a feeling of remorse for sins or guilt; earnest repentance”.

Reading the Bible, we definitely get the impression that the contrition God is looking for is more than remorse, even more than repentance. It is an attitude of sensitivity and openness to God, (here, we join the dictionary) of sincere regret for the evil we have committed and (here we leave

the dictionary again) a constant feeling of earnest heart-gripping sadness for what we desire to be but can never be, as long as we are on the earth (cf. Romans 7.15-25).

Dallas Willard says:

“Much of what is called Christian profession today involves no remorse or sorrow at all over who one is or even for what one has done. There is little awareness of being lost or a radical evil in our hearts, bodies, and souls — which we must get away from and from which only God can deliver us .... It is common today to hear Christians talk of their “brokenness”. But when you listen closely, you may discover that they are talking about their *wounds*, the things they have suffered, not about the evil that is in them.”<sup>13</sup>

The contrite heart wants so much to please God and suffers when it realizes how it has hurt him! This heart can never take for granted God’s forgiveness or his holiness.

I once asked a Christian young man who had been caught in blatant sin if he could say he would never do it again. He responded that none of us could say such a thing, that we are all sinners, all prone to give in to temptation. At the moment, that response satisfied me; but upon reflection, I considered it insufficient. I would really have preferred hearing him say: “Though I cannot say I will never succumb to this sin again, I can say that I am so grieved by it that I will, with the help of God, do all that is in my power to resist the devil and deny him access to me again in this way.” That would have been, I feel, true contrition.

Some Christian movements, especially those that teach the “faith only” doctrine, are prone to develop what I have called “evangelical lightness”, an attitude characterized by an often shallow conception of the true weight of God’s love.

In their ranks, a continual emphasis on the “free” grace of God and on the facility with which it can be experienced can prevent the believer from grasping the gravity of his or her sin and its effect on the God of heaven. As Jerry White says, their tendency is to believe in Jesus “then to go on to conduct [their] lives in pretty much the same way [they] did before.”<sup>14</sup> In these believers, joy — obviously a necessary quality in Christians — often entirely replaces the contrition that is equally as necessary. It is in the balance of these two concepts that the Christian becomes whole. (It goes without saying, of course, that contrition without joy is just as con-

demnable.)

In another chapter I refer to the story of David and Bathsheba, and to how the gentle singer of Israel turned into the bloody butcher of a noble and faithful warrior in the king's army. After his adulterous and murderous folly, David is boldly confronted by the prophet Nathan, who declares to him the Lord's disapproval and the subsequent judgment that must fall upon him and his household. Part of this judgment is that the child born of his illicit union with Bathsheba must die.

We know how David fasted and prayed until the death of the child and how he then resumed his kingly activity, having learned his bitter lesson.

The verse quoted at the head of this chapter is apparently from this time of upheaval in David's heart. When we read it, we see his tears and feel his pain. We can almost feel the contrition and the brokenness he describes. How he must have agonized when he realized how grievously he had offended his Lord and how terribly awful would be the consequences of his rebellion, for himself and for his family — indeed for the entire nation of Israel.

But, wait a minute. David is not describing the feelings he had after his sin, any more than he is describing those you and I should have after having offended God by sinning against him. The broken and contrite heart that David describes is the one he should have had *before* he sinned, the heart that would have prevented this blackness in his soul in the first place.

Of course, God wants us to be sorry when we commit sin; but more importantly, he wants us to have the kind of brokenness that will avoid the sin in the first place.

David's joy in God's blessings had made him forget the weight of his sinfulness; he had "gotten used" to God. This is a dangerous thing, even (especially!) for a king in Israel. He had just been assured by the Lord that he would have a descendant on his throne forever. He had reached the pinnacle of his power and influence and God had always been with him (2 Chronicles 1.1). It probably did not occur to him that he should be careful with this awful privilege, that he should weigh his words and attitudes, search his heart and keep to the narrow path.

As a result, his glory became glitter and his confidence became nonchalance. In this moment of weakness, the devil was there (isn't he always?), and David fell with a crash. No, it was not afterward that he

should have been contrite, but before.

**This is the one to whom I will look, to the humble and contrite in spirit, who trembles at my word** (Isaiah 66.2).

David had lost his tremble. God had become his buddy, his pal, his heavenly, indulgent friend, instead of his exalted Lord!

How long has it been since we actually trembled at the word of God? I am referring to hearing the word for what it is — *absolute law* — and realizing that it must be obeyed, at all cost; realizing at the same time that we cannot possibly obey it perfectly, that we are therefore going to find ourselves inevitably guilty before the Almighty.

Someone will say here that it is precisely in this realization that the Christian should be reassured in the forgiveness of his sins in Christ. Reassurance we have, and joy in the knowledge that God has provided our pardon. But this does not prevent my dread of doing what is contrary to his law. I cannot simply say, “My sin is forgiven,” without shuddering at the awfulness of the pain that he had to bear and at the awesome nature of the love that inspired his sacrifice.

We need more tremblers in the Church. Church leaders are called upon constantly to deal with Christians having an under-developed sense of the Lord’s presence and of his holiness. They speak and act as if he were ... absent!

I remember a plaque attached to the wall of my grandparents’ farmhouse, the words of which gradually found their way into my heart:

Christ is the head of this house:  
Unseen guest at every meal,  
Silent listener to every conversation.

These same words have for many years adorned the wall beside the door of our own apartment, reminding my family of the ever-presence of God. And I have more than once looked at those words and realized that what the Lord had just heard coming out of my mouth was not worthy of him!

I never cease to be amazed at the indifference with which we live and move in the presence of the Supreme Being. Here is the God of heaven, who sees our every move, hears our every word, reads in our minds — and does all of this from eternity, before we ever existed. He is every-



where, knows everything, cannot be hidden from or fooled.

And yet we proliferate with ugly words and shameful attitudes, all displayed openly before the God of holiness and absolute purity!

Perhaps (and this is more dangerous yet) we simply think that since he is so kind and gentle, he will forgive us our temporary slips. Let us listen, then, to what he says to us:

**I tell you, on the day of judgment you will have to give an account for every careless word you utter; for by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned (Matthew 12.37).**

In his book, *The Practice of the Presence of God*, a certain very mystic “Brother Lawrence of the Resurrection” made a good point: the more we can approach a constant sense of the presence of God (and therefore a sense of our unworthiness before him), the better. He *is* present, in fact. We must never, not for an instant, forget that. Contrition requires it.

In the midst of his terrible suffering, Job occasionally showed genuine contrition, as when he said:

**Though he slay me, I will hope in him (Job 13.15).**

At other times, under the harassment of his friends and his own waning strength, he set aside his contrition and challenged God openly, in chapter 10, verses 2 and 3:

**I will speak in the bitterness of my soul.  
I will say to God, ‘Do not condemn me;  
Let me know why you contend with me.  
Is it right for you indeed to oppress,  
To reject the labor of your hands,  
And to look favorably on the schemes of the wicked?**

But, after having been grilled under the seething interrogation of the Almighty, Job finds his contrition again:

**I know that you can do all things,  
And that no purpose of yours can be thwarted. (...)  
I have declared that which I did not understand,  
Things too wonderful for me, which I did not know.”  
(...) I have heard of you by the hearing of the ear;  
But now my eye sees you;**

**Therefore I retract,**

**And I repent in dust and ashes** (Job 42.2-3, 5-6).

Consider the contrite heart of Daniel. This man had been a teenager at the time of his deportation to Babylon; he could hardly have been guilty of the persistent sins that caused the Lord to punish Israel. He served his captors with dignity and his God with conviction during his long life, which spanned the rule of several foreign kings.

As related in chapter 9 of his prophecy, his access to the writings of Jeremiah led to his discovery that the captivity of Israel was to last for 70 years. In reaction, he turned the Lord with **“prayer and supplication with fasting and sackcloth and ashes”** (2.3). Let us read his “confession”:

**Ah, Lord, great and awesome God, keeping covenant and steadfast love with those who love and keep your commandments, we have sinned and done wrong, acted wickedly and rebelled, turning aside from your commandments and ordinances. We have not listened to your servants the prophets, who spoke in your name to our kings, our princes and our ancestors, and to all the people of the land. (...) Open shame, O Lord, falls on us, our kings, our officials, and our ancestors, because we have sinned against you. To the Lord our God belong mercy and forgiveness, for we have rebelled against him, and have not obeyed the voice of the Lord by following his laws, which he set before us by his servants the prophets** (Daniel 9.4-10).

The text that follows shows that Daniel continued in this vein for quite a long time, beseeching the Lord to forgive his people and to act in favor of Jerusalem. As we have noticed in his prayer, this wise man associated himself completely with Israel’s sinfulness, even though he had not himself participated in it. He even said that it was **“while I was confessing my sin and the sin of my people Israel”** (9.20) that Gabriel appeared and gave him the celebrated vision of the seventy weeks.

We must notice the contrition in this great heart. Why should Daniel feel responsible in any way for Israel’s rebellion or for its consequences? It was because Daniel’s heart was sensitive and open to God, sorry for what his people had done, and associated with his people’s sinfulness. In addition to this, Daniel desired more than anything that the name of the

Lord be glorified:

**O Lord, hear; O Lord, forgive: O Lord, listen and act and do not delay! For your own sake, O my God, because your city and your people bear your name! (Daniel 9.19)**

Perhaps the essential nature of true contrition is this desire to see the name of the Lord uplifted. Whatever is seen as preventing or restricting his glory — especially when it consists of sin on one's own part or that of God's people as a whole — is lamented and decried. Daniel declared that the Lord had been righteous in his judgments, while the people had been wicked in their transgressions. If he could have, he would have repented for the entirety of the Hebrew nation. Indeed he did place his confession in that context. This is true contrition.

Nehemiah exhibited the same contrite heart upon learning of Jerusalem's broken state. In an expression of sorrow that reached deep within his soul, he also fasted and prayed before God, identifying himself with the sin of Israel: **"We have sinned against you. We have offended you deeply, failing to keep the commandments, the statutes, and the ordinances that you commanded your servant Moses"** (Nehemiah 1.6-7). Nehemiah was several generations removed from the destruction of the holy city. And yet he lamented this catastrophe as one who had seen the walls on fire, as one who had witnessed the horrible ravages of Nebuchadnezzar's armies. More importantly, he mourned as if he and his family had been personally responsible for this terrible event. He also desired, as did Daniel, to see the name of the Lord magnified. In this way, he displayed a contrite heart, a heart sensitive to God.

In the New Testament, perhaps the best example of a contrite heart is that of Paul. Listen to him in Romans 7:

**I am not practicing what I would like to do, but I am doing the very thing I hate. (...) For the good that I want, I do not do, but I practice the very evil that I do not want (Romans 7.15,19).**

If we are to take literally this statement of Paul, we must consider that in public he was an apostle of Jesus Christ, but that in private he was some kind of a monster. I don't believe that. It seems to me that what Paul is lamenting here is the distance between how he would like to glorify the Lord and how miserably short he falls of that goal. (The fact that he speaks thus in a law/faith context should also be taken into consideration.)

This is surely what Paul is getting at when he calls himself the “**foremost**” of sinners (1 Timothy 1.15) and “**the least of the apostles**” (1 Corinthians 15.8). Admittedly, he had been guilty of persecuting the Church and seeking to destroy it. But I am convinced that his contrition is not due solely to sins committed; he is also “trembling” before the Lord, aware of God’s presence and seeking his glory above all else.

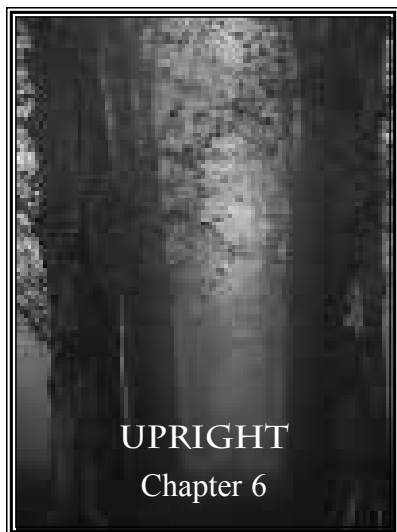
What a lesson for us! If the apostle who saw Jesus on the road to Damascus, who received the word of the Lord directly from his mouth (Galatians 1.12), who was privileged to rise into the third heaven (2 Corinthians 12.2) and who served him so magnificently must necessarily deplore the weakness of his Christian life, where does that leave you and me? How sensitive and open do we need to be toward God, and so to our own weakness? How sorry must we be for our sins and for that of God’s people, the Church? How must we lament and bewail the miserable testimony of our faith! Indeed, this contrition is a part of the sanctification without which no one will see the Lord (Hebrews 12.14).

Finally, contrition could be considered the moving action of “piety”. Here is a lovely old word that seems to have lost its savor. It generally is understood as devotion to religious duties. Though devotion to religious duties can be wrongly motivated, there is one quite good motivation: contrition. What better reason can there be for wanting to carry out what the Lord expects of us than the consciousness of our own unworthiness?

Perhaps you are saying, “Well, how about *love* as a motivation? Isn’t that better than mere contrition?” But contrition’s base is love (I should have said it sooner). It cannot be had without love. Do I fear to offend a person for whom I have no love? “Yes,” you say, “a law enforcement officer.” No, that is not contrition, but simple fear of reprimand. True contrition seeks to please *because* it loves, it admires, it respects, and wants to be like the object of its attention. God being this object, we realize that we can never live up to his standards, and therefore to ours, which consist in pleasing him. None of this would happen if we didn’t love him. Do I care if my neighbor’s cat finds me boring? Obviously, there’s no comparison. That’s my point.

We need contrition. We need a heart that knows its place before the God of the universe, that desperately desires to please him, and that looks forward to the day when it will displease him no more.

There will be no contrition in heaven.



## UPRIGHT

### Chapter 6

## BROKEN FOR GOD

### THE CONTRITE HEART

#### QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Why is “brokenness” a good definition of contrition?
2. Discuss this statement: “The contrite heart wants so much to please God and suffers when it realizes how it has hurt him!”
3. What does the author say about “evangelical lightness”? How do you feel about this statement?
4. Can we really “get used” to God? How? What are the results of this kind of thinking?
5. Discuss this question: “how long has it been since we actually trembled at the word of God?”
6. How important are the “careless” words we utter?
7. How did Job show contrition?
8. Why did Daniel and Nehemiah confess sins they had not personally committed?
9. Was Paul “some kind of a monster” in private? Discuss.

# STICK AROUND, THERE'S MORE!

## THE RECEPTIVE HEART

**Let your heart therefore be wholly devoted to the Lord our God, to walk in his statutes and to keep his commandments, as at this day (1 Kings 8.61).**

**You were formerly darkness, but now you are light in the Lord; walk as children of light, (for the fruit of the light consists in all goodness and righteousness and truth), trying to learn what is pleasing to the Lord (Ephesians 5.8-10).**

As I begin this chapter, I have just come from a Bible study with a young woman who says she is a Christian. We have studied together the passages of the Bible that speak about how one enters Christ, and she is convinced that she has done exactly that and is in a good relationship with the Lord.

She has one problem, though, she says. She cannot bring herself to try to convert her family. Why? Because she is living with a man to whom she is not married, and she fears that her family will remind her that this is not what a Christian should do.

Now, the very fact that she has this hesitation shows that her conscience is bothering her on this point. So, that's where I started. I pointed out, as gently as I know how, that there is another person, a person much more important than her family, a person who is not happy with her present situation, and whom she should be seeking to please before anyone else. She recognized that God cannot be happy with her fornication (we might as well call it by its name), but, after all, said she, God understands that she and her boyfriend have to live together in order to survive financially, until they can be married. That is why, said she again, "I have justified myself before the Lord." She adamantly refused the very idea of changing her life to please him, so sure was she that he has accepted her present situation.

With all due sympathy for the difficult financial situation of this young lady and her boyfriend, I suggest to you that what we have here is a heart that needs teaching about the holiness of God and the absolute nature of his commandments. The Bible has not said "For this is the will of God, your sanctification; that is, that you abstain from sexual immorality, unless you are forced into it by financial problems" (1 Thessalonians

4.3, with some words added, of course). But that is exactly the way this young woman — who calls herself a Christian, remember — takes that passage and all the others that declare sexual immorality a thing to avoid. She is interpreting those passages through her life situation, instead of doing the opposite: judging her life by the words of the Lord. We'll look at that idea a bit further on.

Not only does this heart need to be taught; it needs to learn to be receptive to this teaching. And “receptivity” is a trait that God wants to find in every heart that has already committed itself to him. I'm saying that, if, to become a Christian, one must receive certain truths, it is even more necessary to be open if one wants to continue pleasing the Lord after having become his child. If to take the plunge requires faith, swimming successfully requires even more. To change the metaphor: if coming off the starting blocks requires some discipline, breaking the finish line tape will need an even greater effort.

But all of this is the simple logic of our Christian life. We have given ourselves to a gracious Lord; once having embarked on this journey, it should be our daily desire to open our hearts to everything he wants to teach us. Otherwise, we shall stray and lose the path toward his glory.

Every Christian, at the outset of his journey with the Lord, should carefully consider the history of Israel, for it shows an excellent example of how not to follow God.

When we read the Old Testament, we discover that the people the Lord most complains about are not the Assyrians, the Egyptians, the Babylonians and all the other pagan nations around Israel (though he does have some choice prophecies for all of them), but rather God's people themselves. Before the entry into the Promised Land, God through Moses warned Israel against adopting the idolatry of their neighbors:

**You know how we lived in the land of Egypt, and how we came through the midst of the nations through which you passed; moreover, you have seen their abominations and their idols of wood, stone, silver, and gold, which they had with them; (...) there will not be among you a man or woman, or family or tribe, whose heart turns away today from the Lord our God, to go and serve the gods of those nations; that there will not be among you a root bearing poisonous fruit and wormwood (Deuteronomy 29.16-18; cf. 30.15-19).**

In spite of this direct warning, from this moment on the Old Testament

is a constant record of unbelief on the part of the very people whom God had chosen for his inheritance.

The text speaks of (selected verses):

- ◆ **an “obstinate” people** (Exodus 32.9; 33.3, 5; 34.9; Isaiah 48.4; Ezekiel 2.4; 3.7).

- ◆ **a people with “hardened” hearts** (1 Samuel 6.6).

- ◆ **a “stubborn” people** (Deuteronomy 9.6; 9.13; Judges 2.19; Nehemiah 9.16-17; 9.29; Psalm 78.8; Jeremiah 5.23; Ezekiel 2.4; 3.7; Hosea 4.16; Zechariah 7.11).

- ◆ **a “rebellious” people** (Deuteronomy 9.7, 24; 31.27; Psalm 5.10; 78.8; Isaiah 65.2; Ezekiel 2.3, 5).

- ◆ **a “treacherous” people** (1 Chronicles 5.25; Psalm 78.57; Jeremiah 3.7-8, 10-11; 5.11; Ezekiel 20.27; 39.23; Hosea 5.7; 6.7; Zephaniah 3.4; Malachi 2.11, 14).

- ◆ **an “unfaithful” people** (Joshua 22.16, 22; 2 Chronicles 12.2; 24.18; 29.6; 30.7; 36.14; Ezra 10.2, 10).

- ◆ **an “idolatrous” people** (2 Kings 17.12; 23.5; Psalm 106.36, 38; Jeremiah 8.19; Ezekiel 5.11; Hosea 10.5; Zephaniah 1.4).

- ◆ **a “harlot” people** (Numbers 25.1; Judges 8.33; 1 Chronicles 5.25; Jeremiah 2.20; 3.9).

Having barely left Egypt, Israel was already worshiping the golden calf; during the wandering in the desert (caused, by the way, by their refusal to believe in God’s power against their enemies), they doubted and rebelled, complained and protested, dragging their feet in the sand, as it were, like spoiled, disobedient children. The conquest of Canaan was followed by the moral and spiritual mayhem of the period of the judges. Then there were the revolts of the period of the kings, leading up to the division of the kingdom and the idolatry that led to Israel’s, then Judah’s captivity.

The people of Israel never really decided to be receptive to their God.

I hasten to say, parenthetically, that even in the middle of this “unbelievable unbelief”, during the reign of the wicked queen Jezebel, God shows Elijah that there are still a good number of faithful children in Israel. We can be encouraged in this: there is always light somewhere, even in incredible darkness.

But Israel, in general, totally rejected the God of heaven and **“went**



**on turning away, in the way of his heart” (Isaiah 57.17).**

Another, most significant passage is Isaiah 29.13:

**This people draw near with their words  
And honor me with their lip service,  
But they remove their hearts far from me,  
And their reverence for me consists of tradition learned by rote.**

Why is this passage familiar to us? Because, during his ministry, Jesus faces such closed hearts on the part of the Jewish leaders that he quotes this same passage from Isaiah (cf. Matthew 5.8-9).

In a way, it is normal that those the Bible calls “outsiders” (1 Corinthians 5.12; Colossians 4.5; 1 Thessalonians 4.12) or “those outside” (1 Timothy 3.7) should resist God. Paul, writing to the Ephesians (4.17-19), describes this lack of receptivity:

- ◆ the futility of their mind
- ◆ being darkened in their understanding
- ◆ excluded from the life of God
- ◆ the ignorance that is in them
- ◆ the hardness of their heart
- ◆ having become callous
- ◆ [having] given themselves over to sensuality
- ◆ the practice of every kind of impurity with greediness

Then Paul says to those Ephesian Christians, and therefore to all Christians:

**But you did not learn Christ in this way (Ephesians 4.20).**

If it is normal that outsiders close their heart to God, it is not normal for those who wear the name of God to become unbelieving or hardened toward him. When that happens, we are facing a veritable tragedy. God is truly disappointed when his people must perish for lack of knowledge (Hosea 4.6).

However, it seems that God, in his goodness, always expects the best of his people. He expects that they will be open to him, even in spite of a bad past record. To illustrate this, we have only to look at a dramatic moment in the synagogue in Nazareth, when Jesus’ words are doubted because everyone there knows him:

**When the Sabbath came, he began to teach in the synagogue; and the many listeners were astonished, saying, Where did this man get these things, and what is this wisdom given to him, and such miracles as these performed by his hands? Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary, and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon? Are not his sisters here with us? And they took offense at him (Mark 6.2-3).**

Simply put, they didn't believe that this young man they all knew could possibly be the Messiah. Verse 6 says: **"And he wondered at their unbelief."**

Think about this. The God who had led this people through century after century of their revolts and unfaithfulness had never grown accustomed to this persistent hardness of heart! He still expected them to love him, to understand him, and to follow him. But, instead, this people stumbled on the cornerstone (Acts 4.11; cf. Psalm 118.22) and rejected him—again.

I see Jesus leaving the temple, shaking his head, wondering how Israel can rebuff something so clear, so simply true.

And so I wonder how many times the Lord has had to shake his head and be astonished at our own unbelief, at our lack of openness to his word, at our failure to grow, at our hard-hearted determination to remain planted right where we are, spiritually, for fear of having to move forward into an area that is new and challenging for us.

Is our Christian heart teachable? What kind of baggage have we brought with us to weigh us down and prevent our spiritual growth? Let me suggest three areas in which our receptivity to the Lord suffers.

### **PRECONCEIVED IDEAS**

I'm speaking here of false (or incomplete) teachings that we have received, and that prevent us from learning biblical truth because our mind is already made up.

In my work as a missionary, I have had hundreds of studies with people of various religious backgrounds. When a man looks at a clear "2 plus 2" teaching of the Bible and says: "It doesn't say that," just because his theology does not permit it, he is obviously in deep spiritual danger. He might as well tear the page out the Bible. Only then could he say, "It's just not in there." (But you know what? It still is!)

Jesus certainly ran into the problem of preconceived ideas during his ministry. In Matthew 16.21, he tells his disciples a simple truth:

**Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem, and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and be raised up on the third day.**

Now, since this truth does not correspond to what the disciples are expecting to hear, they refuse it.

**Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, God forbid it, Lord! This shall never happen to you** (Mark 16.22).

Here is what is happening: a disciple of the Lord is saying that what the Lord himself announces is not truth, because it does not correspond to what the disciple has already been taught.

It would be impossible to underestimate the importance of teaching each new child of God to always — *always* — follow the word of God, whatever he might have been taught about it previously. We must teach Christians to search the Scripture and to do what the Scripture tells them, even if it tells them to do something we have omitted! Even if it tells them that something we taught them was wrong! Even if it tells them we added something to the text, or subtracted something from it!

I have this confidence in the word of God, that we cannot go wrong if we teach our people in this way. Perhaps we have, indeed, missed something. Perhaps we have added or taken away. If they learn to stick with the word, to let the word interpret itself, they will perhaps understand it better than we did. I'm not saying that good instruction isn't necessary. I'm saying that students of the Bible should all follow the example of the Bereans (Acts 17.11).

Have you ever found yourself at odds with Scripture because, well, you didn't agree? What would lead you to that attitude? And what should you do? I'll tell you what you should do: after confirming what the Scripture says, forget what you have been taught that is in disagreement with it. On the day of judgment, the Lord will not say: "What have you been taught?", but "Did you learn to obey the word that I gave you?"

## PRESENT CONTEXTS

The problem here is one of interpreting the Bible through the looking glass of our present life, instead of interpreting our present life through

what the Bible says. This is what the young lady, of whom I spoke in the beginning of this chapter, was doing. It is a common problem. People are tempted to justify their actions by ignoring (or adapting) what the Bible says to their own situations.

It happened in Mark 8. Jesus, after feeding 4000 people, gets into a boat with his disciples to head toward to the other side of Lake Galilee:

**They had forgotten to take bread, and did not have more than one loaf in the boat with them. And he was giving orders to them, saying, Watch out! Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and the leaven of Herod. They began to discuss with one another the fact that they had no bread** (Mark 8.14-16).

Jesus, hearing this erroneous reasoning, drills them with three pertinent questions:

**Why do you discuss the fact that you have no bread? Do you not yet see or understand? Do you have a hardened heart?** (Mark 8.17).

In the parallel passage of Matthew 16, Jesus says: **“How is it that you do not understand that I did not speak to you concerning bread? But beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees”** (Matthew 16.11). (Luke tells us that the “leaven” of the Pharisees is “hypocrisy” Luke 12.1).

The disciples missed the point entirely because of their situation: crossing the lake in a boat, with not enough bread to go around. When they interpreted Jesus’ words through this context, they got confused.

Here are some illustrations of the sort of thinking:

“The government taxes me too much, so I’m sure God approves of my cheating on my income tax.”

“I didn’t create my sex drive, God did. So why should he object to my promiscuous sexual activity?”

“My culture discriminates against women. This angers me, so I will not accept the biblical teaching of submission of the woman to the man.”

“I know that biblical baptism is “for the remission of sins”, but I felt so good the moment I believed that I know I was saved before my baptism.”

In the day of judgment, God will not be asking us how our lives affected his word, but how his word affected our lives. We had best look

through the right end of the looking glass.

## **HUMAN TRADITIONS**

Under this heading we place certain unbiblical beliefs and/or practices that we perpetuate simply because they are “there” and have been observed for so long.

A good example of this is found in John 9. In that passage, Jesus heals a man born blind. Here is a person who has always been blind, standing before the crowd and telling how Jesus has healed him. The Pharisees interrogate him and are obliged to admit that they cannot deny the miracle. So what do they do ? They declare that Jesus could not come from God, since he has done this thing on the Sabbath day!

The most amazing thing about this declaration is that, by all appearances, the Pharisees actually believe that what they are saying is logical! They are capable of overlooking a powerful miracle, of passing up a great truth, simply because it flies in the face of the traditions they hold so dear and that they have raised to the level of dogma.

It could be said that Jesus was crucified in spite of the fact that he presented all of the powerful proofs of his Messiahship. Why? Because his works did not correspond with what folks thought he would do, nor with their context at the time of his coming, nor with what their long-standing traditions dictated. They had a plan all worked out, well-prepared and very complicated; his was just too simple.

In the Church of the Bible, we must avoid looking at the Scripture through the lens of preconceived ideas, present contexts and human traditions.

We all know the progression from total dependence to total independence in human physical development. The human baby becomes a child, then an adolescent, then a young adult, then a mature adult, then an older adult, then an old person. At each of these stages, we are (or should be) constantly learning. Even the old person, having learned so much about life and humanity, can still grow in knowledge of himself and others, every day. This learning is even necessary, because the person who is no longer learning, who closes his heart to all information coming from outside himself is ... dead.

In the Church, from the day we were born into Christ until the day we depart to be with him, one of our greatest joys is to continue receiving his

instruction, his promises, his warnings, and his love.

It would be normal, at this point, to speak of the importance of personal Bible study, of regular attendance at Bible classes and worship, of growing in knowledge of the Scripture and in spiritual maturity, and so forth. As we have seen, a lack of knowledge does, indeed, lead to destruction. Hosea 4.6 should be memorized and quoted often as a warning against spiritual laziness.

But, let's adopt another approach.

In the word "receptive" there is the idea of "receiving". What, exactly, can we receive, as Christians? In order to better answer this question, let us look at what we received (or learned, or accepted, or obtained) when we became Christians (selected verses):

- ◆ The word, the teaching of Jesus and his apostles (John 12.48; Acts 2.41; 5.42; 8.14; 11.1; 16.17; 1 Thessalonians 1.6; 2.13).

- ◆ The fullness, the grace, the mercy and the forgiveness of God (John 1.16; Acts 26.18; Romans 5.17; 2 Corinthians 4.1; 6.1; 1 Peter 2.10).

- ◆ Reconciliation, justification, eternal redemption (Romans 5.11, 17-18; Hebrews 9.12).

- ◆ The Holy Spirit, the spirit of adoption, the anointing, God in the Spirit (John 7.39; Acts 2.38; 5.32; 19.2; Romans 8.15-16; 1 Corinthians 2.12; 6.19; Ephesians 2.22; 1 John 2.27).

- ◆ The Gospel (1 Corinthians 15.1; Galatians 1.9).

- ◆ The kingdom (Luke 18.17; Hebrews 12.28).

- ◆ The knowledge of the truth (Hebrews 10.26).

- ◆ Jesus:

**He came to his own, and those who were his own did not receive him. But as many as received him, to them he gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in his name, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God (John 1.11-13).**

**Therefore as you have received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him, having been firmly rooted and now being built up in him and established in your faith, just as you were instructed, and overflowing with gratitude (Colossians 2.6-7).**

We can reduce this list to four major categories of blessings received

or obtained.

- (1) The forgiveness of our sins
- (2) The kingdom of God
- (3) The Gospel and the word of Jesus
- (4) Christ and his Spirit

Our heart received these blessings, then, when we became Christians. But, our “receiving” definitely does not end there. We should continue to receive what God has prepared for us in these areas.

*(1) Receiving the forgiveness of our sins.*

On the day of Pentecost, Peter declared to a believing crowd:

**Repent, and each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2.38).**

Those Jews obeyed and became Christians. We, too, were open to this teaching; we, too, obeyed and received the forgiveness of our sins. How, then, can we keep our heart open to God’s forgiveness, now that our past sins have been remitted? I think that we do this by being always grateful, by remembering often the price that was paid for our sins, and by **“walking in the light”**.

## GRATITUDE

One of the problems of the Jewish people in the Old Testament was that they lacked not only knowledge, but also the kind of gratitude that would have stemmed from remembering what had been done for them. Gratitude was important enough to God for him to establish a particular sacrifice, called a **“sacrifice of thanksgiving”**, among the sacrifices of the old law (Leviticus 22.29). But already, he intended for the heart to accompany the act. In a psalm we consider elsewhere in this book, Asaph says:

**He who offers a sacrifice of thanksgiving honors me;  
And to him who orders his way aright  
I shall show the salvation of God (Psalm 50.23).**

Another psalm declares:

**Enter his gates with thanksgiving  
And his courts with praise.**

**Give thanks to him, bless his name** (Psalm 100.4).

In the New Testament, Paul says to the Colossians, very simply: **“Be thankful”** (Colossians 3.15). We have much to be thankful for; but let us not forget to be thankful for the forgiveness of our sins!

Here is something that can help us in this area. The apostle Peter gives a list of Christian virtues in the first chapter of his second letter (vs. 5-7).

- ◆ moral excellence
- ◆ knowledge
- ◆ self-control
- ◆ perseverance
- ◆ godliness
- ◆ brotherly kindness
- ◆ love

Notice, now, that Peter says that we should apply **“all diligence”** (“try your hardest” - NEB) to **“supply”** these virtues (2 Peter 1.5). Notice that he then says that **“he who lacks these qualities is blind or short-sighted, having forgotten his purification from his former sins”** (1 Peter 2.9).

This is a way of saying that applying ourselves to obtaining these qualities is showing our continued awareness of the fact that we have been forgiven, is staying grateful, is remaining open to God because of the forgiveness he has shown us.

We could also take a lesson from the parable of the unforgiving servant. We all know the story: a man who owed an astronomical amount was forgiven his debt; he then refused to forgive a tiny debt owed him by a fellow-servant. He ended up in prison for his ungratefulness, until he should repay all of his impossible debt (Matthew 18.23-34). Then Jesus brings down the lesson:

**My heavenly Father will also do the same to you, if each of you does not forgive his brother from your heart** (Matthew 18.35).

The clear teaching here is that God has forgiven us much; we should therefore forgive what are, essentially, “little things” compared to our own great sins. Several passages of Paul confirm this teaching. He tells



us to bear with one another and to forgive. **“Just as the Lord forgave you, so also should you”** (Colossians 3.13). **“Be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you”** (Ephesians 4.32).

## REMEMBERING THE PRICE

Another way of remaining open in this area is to never forget the price paid for the salvation that has been offered us. Aside from studying the Scripture on this subject, we need to observe the Lord’s Supper each first day of the week, as did the first Christians. By participating in this memorial, by **“sharing in the blood”** and **“sharing in the body of Christ”** (1 Corinthians 10.16) each week, we remember the suffering that Jesus accepted because of our sin. Thus, we keep our heart open and teachable.

We’re not talking here about simply observing a weekly ritual. The Lord’s Supper is a regular-scheduled sacred meeting with the holy One, in which we are brought to a remembrance of his torment in our stead. It is probably no mistake that the book of Acts refers to the worship of the early Church as a gathering **“to break bread”** (Acts 20.7). While not at all lowering the other elements of worship to any secondary importance (everything we do in worship is of utmost importance), the communion of the bread and the cup had a central place for the first Christians.

## WALKING IN THE LIGHT

Perhaps the whole idea of this chapter is contained in the expression **“walking in the light”** (cf. 1 John 1.7). Different interpretations of this expression have been suggested, but they all come down to the idea of remaining faithful to the Lord in spite of our failures and weaknesses. For, becoming Christians does not make us perfect, it does not prevent us from sinning. I’m sure I didn’t have to remind you of that. What shall we do, then, as persons who have been forgiven but continue, on occasion (every day!) to sin?

Should we deny that we really are sinners?

**If we say that we have no sin, we are deceiving ourselves and the truth is not in us. (...) If we say that we have not sinned, we make him a liar and his word is not in us** (1 John 1.8,10).

I like the way Eugene Peterson transmits this idea:

“If we claim that we’re free of sin, we’re only fooling ourselves. A

claim like that is errant nonsense. (...) If we claim that we've never sinned, we out and out contradict God — make a liar out of him. A claim like that only shows off our ignorance of God."

All right, we admit we sin; then what?

**If we confess our sins, he is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness** (1 John 1.9).

So, we should confess our sins. And we see that when we do so, he continues to forgive and cleanse us. On what basis?

**If we walk in the Light as he himself is in the Light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin** (1 John 1.7).

Two bases are given here for our forgiveness, once we have become Christians. The first is the blood already shed for us, and which we contacted at the moment of our baptism (Romans 6.4). It continues to cleanse us (this is the sense of the Hebrew verb), but (and here is the other basis), only *as we continue to walk in the light*, as he is in the light. That means that our prayers for forgiveness will be to no avail if we have re-entered the world. But, if we are applying ourselves to walking in the Lord's way, we will be forgiven. If our heart remains open to the Lord who forgave us our past sins, we will also receive forgiveness for our present sins, because he is our "advocate with the Father" (1 John 2.1; cf. Romans 8.34).

Coy Roper has this to say:

"What does God require of Christians to be forgiven? What must we do to stay saved? I tried to think of three or four points to use under this heading, but I finally decided that God requires of us only one thing — not three or four — to receive forgiveness of our sins! John tells us what that one thing is in 1 John 1.7. The one thing necessary for a Christian to be cleansed from his sins is to 'walk in the light'!

"But someone objects: 'What about repentance? Is that not necessary?' Yes, it is: the Christian must repent of his sins (Acts 8:22). But if he is walking in the light, he will be constantly repenting. If a Christian is walking in the light, he will be constantly confessing his sins (...). "What about prayer? Does a Christian not have to pray for forgiveness?" Certainly

(Acts 8:22). But the Christian who is walking in the light will be constantly praying for forgiveness. ‘Walking in the light’ would therefore include repenting, confessing sin, and praying for forgiveness. Thus, there are not three things to be done to receive forgiveness as a Christian. There is only one thing necessary: to ‘walk in the light.’ (...) The Christian does not live sinlessly, but he is always striving, doing his best in his own circumstances, to do God’s will. He often stumbles, but he is always working to accomplish that goal. If he does that, God accepts him as ‘walking in the light’”.

Roper goes on to make a point that many Christians have not grasped, knowledge that would help us all have more joy in our imperfect Christian walk.

“As quickly as we sin, the blood of Jesus cleanses us, and God forgives us. That means that if I am a Christian striving diligently to do the will of God, I do not need to worry that one day if I have a bad thought and then have a heart attack and die before I have a chance to pray for forgiveness I will go to hell because of that one unprayed-for sin! Rather, I can constantly rejoice, knowing that, because I am constantly striving to obey him, Jesus is continually forgiving my sins and I can be sure I am going to heaven!”

In the context of our receptivity to the Lord, remaining faithful (with all that entails, of course) is all that the Lord requires of us. Think about it.

## *(2) Receiving the kingdom of God.*

Jesus said that when we are baptized, we enter the kingdom of God (John 3.5). Paul says that God has **“rescued us from the ‘domain of darkness’ and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son”** (Colossians 1.13). There is plenty of scholarly (and some not-so-scholarly) discussion about the differences between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of heaven. But all we need to see here is that, when we are added to the Church (Acts 2.47), we also enter the realm of God’s reign. As we have seen, this is a state that we have “received” because of our receptivity to the love and sacrifice of our Savior.

The Hebrew writer says this:

**Therefore, since we receive a kingdom which cannot be shaken, let us show gratitude, by which we may offer to God an acceptable**

**service with reverence and awe** (Hebrews 12.28).

Here, then, is a way we can continue to be receptive in the area of our citizenship in this kingdom: through our gratitude, (this keeps coming up, doesn't it!?) and through offering to God an acceptable service ("**such worship as is pleasing to him**" - BAS) with reverence and awe.

What is reverence ? What is awe ? Are they different? How are these attitudes conducive to receptivity? My dictionary says that reverence is "a feeling or attitude of deep respect, love and awe, as for something sacred"; it says that awe is "a mixed feeling of reverence, fear, and wonder, caused by something majestic, sublime, etc." It would seem that awe produces reverence, and vice versa. So, with each producing the other, they create a circle that never ends .

The Christian whose life (service) is filled with this sense of reverence and awe toward God will be constantly open to God's way and to his will. And this openness will lead to regular personal growth in holiness. God's presence will be more and more real to him, not only in collective worship, not only in private worship, but in every aspect of his life.

This sense of awareness of God will then develop our sense of belonging to the kingdom of God. It will, at the same time, expand our separation from the kingdom of this world. This means that we will be less drawn to our human — sinful, dark, miserable — nature and more accessible to the nature of God. John speaks of this when he says:

**Do not love the world nor the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the boastful pride of life, is not from the Father, but is from the world. The world is passing away, and also its lusts; but the one who does the will of God lives forever** (1 John 2.15-17).

Again, we must define our terms. The "world" here describes all of the practices and values which are contrary to life in God. John would have us understand that we cannot commit to God and to the world at the same time. We cannot have one foot in both, or we risk terrible tensions and frightful fractures.

In the Middle Ages, tortures and executions often took the form of the ancient practice known as drawing and quartering. The victim's arms and

legs were attached to two — or four — different beasts, usually horses, their heads turned in different directions. Then the animals were whipped to make them run. The result was a person literally ripped apart, a very awful sight. But I am convinced that this sight was not more appalling than that of a Christian who tries to stay in the world and in the Church at the same time. He will go with either one or the other, or else be torn to shreds.

**For the mind set on the flesh is death, but the mind set on the Spirit is life and peace** (Romans 8.6).

In the kingdom where God has placed us, and which was prepared before the earth was created (Matthew 25.34), Christ reigns as sovereign Lord. He promises that, if we will give this kingdom first priority, he will see that we have what we need to live (Matthew 6.33). The world, however, tells us that we must always have “more” in order to be happy. The greatest in the kingdom is the one who serves (Matthew 23.11); in the world, the greatest is the one who has the biggest bank account and the most clout. In the kingdom, the holiness of God promises life eternal (1 Th. 3.13); the lasciviousness of the world promises nothing but hell.

**The world is passing away, and also its lusts; but the one who does the will of God lives forever** (1 John 2.17).

In this context, “**the one who does the will of God**” is the one who remains receptive to God and his kingdom of peace and justice.

Let’s come back to baptism to finish this point. If I entered the kingdom by my baptism, and if in baptism I was buried and raised to newness of life, could not this new life in the kingdom be defined, at least in part, as being totally receptive to what God wants for me? Could it not be defined as always moving forward, toward the holiness that characterizes the new creatures that we have become (2 Corinthians 5.17)? In fact, when we receive forgiveness and the kingdom of God by opening our hearts, we must never close them again!

To God, that is. To him, we remain totally accessible. But to the world, we must be closed up tight, locked down and impenetrable.

Our salvation depends on it.

*(3) Receiving the Gospel and the word of Jesus.*

We have seen that the Gospel is something that we received on

becoming Christians (Galatians 1.9). Paul says in 2 Thessalonians 1.8 (cf. 1 Peter 4.17) that those who do not obey the Gospel will be subject to the judgment of God. Now, if the Gospel is the fact of Jesus' death, his burial and his resurrection (cf. 1 Corinthians 15.1-4), we can well understand that to *believe* a fact is to receive it. No problem there. But, how does one *obey* a fact? Paul answers this question in his second letter to the Corinthians :

**For the love of Christ controls us, having concluded this, that one died for all, therefore all died; and he died for all, so that they who live might no longer live for themselves, but for him who died and rose again on their behalf** (2 Corinthians 2.14-15).

To accept this good news is to live for him who produced it; and to live for him is to obey him. It is simple reasoning, and it is the reasoning of the Bible, which calls this process **“the obedience and faith”** (Romans 1.5). We could say it this way:

We continue to obey the Gospel of Christ by remaining faithful Christians.

We remain faithful Christians by living for him.

We live for him by remaining receptive to his word.

A good passage to read in this context is John 15. While respecting the context and knowing that not everything said there applies to all Christians, we can nonetheless select some teachings that are for us all.

**Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself unless it abides in the vine, so neither can you unless you abide in me** (John 15.4).

**If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love; just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love** (John 15.10).

**“If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love.”** Some Christians think that all of Jesus' commandments are found only in the Gospel accounts. In fact, many are found elsewhere. Indeed, every time we read a commandment in the letters of the New Testament, we are reading a commandment of the Lord, and all his commandments are to be obeyed — which is why the Bible speaks three times of **“sound**

**doctrine**" (2 Timothy 4.3; Titus 1.9; 2.1), once of **"sound teaching"** (1 Timothy 1.10), twice of **"sound words"** (1 Timothy 6.3; 2 Timothy 1.13), once of **"strange doctrines"** (1 Timothy 1.3) and once, by contrast, of **"doctrines of demons"** (1 Timothy 4.1). The Scripture even says that **"anyone who goes too far and does not abide in the teaching of Christ, does not have God; the one who abides in the teaching, he has both the Father and the Son** (2 John 9).

I am aware that this last passage is inserted into the context of those who would deny that Jesus has come **"in the flesh"** (2 John 1.7), but the principle remains the same: we have received a Word. If we do not remain within its limits, we do not remain in God. Paul says this in terms that are a bit more direct:

**But even if we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to what we have preached to you, he is to be accursed** ["anathema" - ASV]! (Galatians 1.8).

Even though Christians today tend to bristle when we talk about this (why is that, I wonder?), it is entirely appropriate to encourage them to receive only sound doctrine, and to refuse the "new" gospels out there. Since God has given us teachings tied to our salvation, this salvation depends, in this sense, upon our obedience to these commandments. But someone (always) objects: "how can we correctly obey commandments that are not interpreted the same way by everyone?"

I have to admit that this kind of question stirs my blood and makes we want to ask a few questions of my own:

Does God not say that the Bible is his word?

Does he not say that this word contains his truth?

Does the Bible not say that "sound doctrine" exists?

Does the Bible not say to obey the commandments of God?

Does God taunt mankind by giving him commandments impossible to understand (commandments, by the way, on which he will judge the world one day)?

The answer to all of these questions is obvious. Then why are we afraid to say: "This is true," or "That is false"? I'll tell you why: because people are going to believe that we have become pretentious fanatics.

Let them! If the reigning philosophy of our times thinks that everyone has his own truth, and that one truth is as good as another, the Bible says the opposite: there is *one* truth, and it is possible — and necessary — to know this truth.

Let us remain open to this truth! Let us not be afraid to say that we have found it. Let us not hesitate to proclaim it! Let us not fear being called fanatics. That would even be a compliment in these circumstances.

Moses declared to hardened Israel:

**For this commandment which I command you today is not too difficult for you, nor is it out of reach. It is not in heaven, that you should say, ‘Who will go up to heaven for us to get it for us and make us hear it, that we may observe it?’ Nor is it beyond the sea, that you should say, ‘Who will cross the sea for us to get it for us and make us hear it, that we may observe it?’ But the word is very near you, in your mouth and in your heart, that you may observe it** (Deuteronomy 30.11-14).

This is God’s way of saying, “Stop looking for excuses! Just obey me!”

Paul quotes Deuteronomy 30 to the Romans, saying that the word that is **“near you, in your mouth and in your heart is precisely the word of faith which we are preaching”** (Romans 10.8). And it is precisely in this context that he says: **“... if you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved”** (Romans 10.9). Many movements use this verse as a word to non believers, in view of their conversion. But Paul is talking to Christians here, and he is telling them that their receptivity to the Lord is part of their continuing responsibility as Christians. Indeed, the confession of our heart, at the moment of our becoming Christians — and after — is the proof that our we are assimilating the word of God, with its commandments. It is the proof that the word of Christ dwells in us **“with all wisdom”** (Colossians 3.16).

It is, finally, the proof that we carry in us, as did Paul, the **“word of life”** that will give us **“reason to glory”** in the **“day of Christ”** (Philippians 2.16).

#### *(4) Receiving Christ and his Spirit.*

As we have seen, at our baptism we received Christ and the Spirit of God. In fact, according to Paul to the Romans (8.9), the two are the same.



Paul clarifies by saying that we have become the temple of the Spirit (1 Corinthians 3.16), the **“dwelling of God in the Spirit”** (Ephesians 2.22).

If I am the temple of the Spirit, that means that every word I speak is spoken in the holy place; that every thought is projected upon its walls in living color; that every attitude is offered up on its altar as a pleasant — or nauseating — odor; that every action is observed in detail by the one who is **“enthroned above the cherubim”** (2 Samuel 6.2; 1 Chronicles 13.6).

How do I remain in touch with this Person who dwells in me?

Let me say, first of all, that it is important to understand that this indwelling concerns the actual person of the holy Spirit, and not merely (!) the word that he inspired. That is, in fact, what I was taught as a young Christian. But I was also taught to let the Bible speak for itself. And when I do that, I see that the Bible teaches a God personally dwelling in us (1 Corinthians 3.16; 6.19; Romans 5.5; 8.11; 2 Timothy 1.14; Galatians 4.6; Ephesians 2.22; Hebrews 6.4; James 4.5). Here is a list of what his Spirit does in and for us:

### **The Spirit of God ...**

1. **is the agent of the new birth** (John 3.5; 1 John 3.9; Titus 3.5).
2. **is given as a gift** (Acts 2.38; 5.32; 1 Thessalonians 4.8; 1 John 3.24; 4.13).
3. **is the seal of God upon our life** (2 Corinthians 1.22; 5.5; Ephesians 1.13-14; 4.30).
4. **gives life** (John 6.63).
5. **washes, sanctifies, justifies, leads** (1 Corinthians 6.11; 2 Thessalonians 2.13; Romans 8.12-14).
6. **gives eternal life** (Galatians 6.8).
7. **produces fruit in us** (Galatians 5.22-25; Romans 14.17).
8. **pours out the love of God in our hearts** (Romans 5.5).
9. **testifies with our spirit that we are children of God** (Romans 8.16).
- 10 **strengthens with power our inner man** (Ephesians 3.16-19).
- 11 **leads us** (Romans 8.14; Galatians 5.18).
- 12 **intercedes in our prayers** (Romans 8.26).
- 13 **fills us with hope** (Romans 15.13).

- 14 **helps us understand spiritual concepts** (1 Corinthians 2.12-16).
- 15 **comforts (assists) the Church** (Acts 9.31).
- 16 **will be the agent of our resurrection** (Romans 8.11).

Thus, this Spirit, who is God (Acts 5.3-5) and who **“searches all things”** and knows the thoughts of God (1 Corinthians 2.10-11), speaks (Acts 13.2) and teaches, encourages and leads, intercedes. He works in the Christian’s receptive heart.

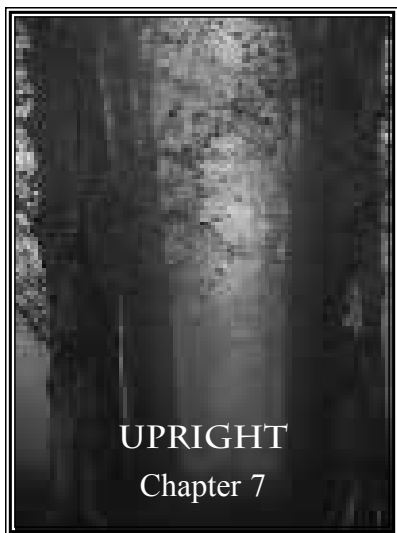
I hasten to say, lest I be misunderstood, that the indwelling Spirit will never lead us to do or believe what is contrary to — or that goes beyond — the word. But he can do nothing good in us, either, if we resist him. In fact, he is grieved by our bad behavior (Ephesians 4.30). It is possible to **lie** to him (Acts 5.3-4), and even to **“quench”** (“stifle” - NEB) him (1 Thessalonians 5.19) by refusing to live according to his way (cf. Romans 8.5). Jesus says one can blaspheme the Spirit, thus committing the unpardonable sin (Matthew 12.31-32) .

To remain responsive to the Spirit, we should obviously be continually steeped in the inspired word (cf. 2 Timothy 3.16; 2 Peter 1.21; cf. for example, 2 Samuel 23.2). Every minister of the Gospel should constantly call Christians to an ever-deeper delving into the holy Scripture! But — again — I would like to take another angle here. Look carefully at these passages, which we usually present (and with reason) in the defense of a cappella music in worship.

**Let the word of Christ richly dwell within you, with all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another with psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with thankfulness in your hearts to God** (Colossians 3.16).

**(...) speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody with your heart to the Lord** (Ephesians 5.19).

The importance of personal and collective Bible study notwithstanding, we must remember that every time we assemble, every time we sing **“psalms and hymns and spiritual songs”**, we are **“teaching and admonishing”** each other. This is one very good reason to pay particular attention to the words we sing — and to not be so concerned, by the way, with how well we sing. It is good, of course, to want to improve our singing. But God can accept a singer who is off key; he will not accept



a singer who says things that betray his heart.

Do we remember that, when we go into a worship assembly of the Church, we are surrounded by persons in whom the holy Spirit of God dwells? This is another reason to be carefully aware, not only of the words we speak in our songs, but also of every word pronounced during our worship, whether in the prayers, in the remarks before and during the Lord's Supper, in exhortations of elders, in sermons, etc.

I would not go so far as to say that everything that comes out of the mouth of a Christian is inspired; far from it! But I would say that, on the earth, if someone can speak for God, it is a faithful Christian. Preachers do it all the time (even though it is, indeed, a dangerous business). So does each Christian, in a way. I am of the firm conviction that, in certain words of sound advice given to me by mature Christians, I was being told exactly what God wanted me to understand in that particular situation.

We have seen, then, that it doesn't do us a lot of good to open our heart to God, initially, if it doesn't remain that way. Remember that, in the parable of the sower (Matthew 13; Mark 4; Luke 8), three out of the four types of soils/hearts received the word of the kingdom, even the "thorny" soil, apparently. And the "rocky" soil received it **"with joy"** (Matthew 13.20; Mark 4.16; Luke 8.13). But the one heart described as **"good soil"** (Matthew 13.23; Mark 4.20; Luke 8.15) is the heart that is **"honest and good"** and that holds the word **"fast"**, and bears fruit **"with perseverance"** (Luke 8.15).

Remember also these words of Jesus:

**No one, after putting his hand to the plow and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God** (Luke 9.62).

**The one who endures to the end, he will be saved** (Matthew 24.13).

When you opened the door of your heart to God, did you take off the interior doorknob? Did you give him the key? Every day, there is more to learn. He will give us as much as we are willing to receive!

## **STICK AROUND, THERE'S MORE!**

### **THE RECEPTIVE HEART**

#### **QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION**

1. What incident shows that God does not expect unbelief from his people. Why do you think he is this way?
2. What kind of confidence should we have in the word of God?
3. Give your own examples of thinking that erroneously interprets the word of God through the lens of present-life situations.
4. How did “tradition” contribute to Jesus’ death?
5. Name some of the blessings we received upon becoming Christians. Discuss.
6. How can seeking the virtues of 2 Peter 1.5-7 be related to being thankful for the forgiveness of our sins?
7. What does “walking in the light” mean?
8. Jesus said: “If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love.” Discuss.
9. Discuss the things the Spirit of God does in and for the faithful Christian.

# LOVE UNFEIGNED

## THE SINCERE HEART

<b>You hypocrites, rightly did sy of you:</b>	<b>Isaiah prophe-</b>
<b>This people honors me with</b>	<b>their lips,</b>
<b>But their heart is far away from</b>	<b>me,</b>
<b>But in vain do they worship me,</b>	
<b>Teaching as doctrines the pre-</b>	<b>cepts of men</b>

(Matt. 15.6-9).

One of the saddest things that can be said of a person who wears God's name is that his heart is "far" from the very Lord he pretends to serve. And yet this is exactly what Jesus, quoting Isaiah, says, in the passage quoted above.

Notice the use of the word "hypocrites". Hypocrisy is the exact opposite of sincerity. And, while sincerity alone does not suffice as a criterion for pleasing God, no valid service can take place without it. All the sacrifices, all the prayers, all the ritual in the whole law of Moses were not enough, in and of themselves, to maintain Israel's good standing before its God; something else was needed, something that would carry the nation through even the darkest hours with its head up and its eyes fixed upon its God. And that something else was a sincere heart, fine-tuned to the majesty of the Lord, a heart completely dedicated to carrying out his commands.

But Israel lacked this heart. In fact, this was Israel's problem from the beginning of its relationship with God. Somewhere along the line, in spite of the repeated warnings of its greatest leaders, the nation missed this precious point. Even while declaring their desire to serve the Lord sincerely, their heart was simply not sincerely committed to him. And so, when Joshua says ...

**Now, therefore, fear the Lord and serve him in sincerity and truth; and put away the gods which your fathers served beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the Lord. (...) Choose for yourselves today whom you will serve: (...) but as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord ...** (Joshua 24.14-15).

The people answer:

**Far be it from us that we should forsake the Lord to serve other**

**gods (...). We also will serve the Lord, for he is our God** (Joshua 24.16,18).

Joshua then replies:

**You are witnesses against yourselves that you have chosen for yourselves the Lord, to serve him** (Joshua 24.22).

They were “witnesses against” themselves because the history of Israel is dotted with examples of its lack of sincerity. In those dark hours when it should indeed have been looking to God for guidance, Israel was usually sacrificing grains and animals (and sometimes even its own children!) to heathen gods.

The strongest words of Jesus, with the possible exception of his cleansing of the temple, were addressed to those whom he called “hypocrites”. Hypocrisy, indeed, drew more fire from Jesus than any other sin. One would think that he actually could not bear the sight of people who said one thing and did another, people whose lives did not correspond to the things they said.

Seven times in the 23rd chapter of Matthew, Jesus calls the Pharisees “hypocrites”. But he doesn’t stop there. He also uses other choice terms which give us an idea of what he thought of insincere hearts. He calls them “**blind guides**”, “**blind men**”, “**fools**”, “**serpents**”, and “**brood of vipers**”.

In fact, this passage gives us a very good illustration of the insincerity God despises. Jesus makes several comparisons to define his thinking.

**You tithe mint and dill and cummin, and have neglected the weightier provisions of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness; but these are the things you should have done without neglecting the others. [You] strain out a gnat and swallow a camel! You clean the outside of the cup and of the dish, but inside they are full of robbery and self-indulgence** (vs. 23-25).

**You are like whitewashed tombs which on the outside appear beautiful, but inside they are full of dead men’s bones and all uncleanness** (v. 27).

An insincere heart takes unimportant for important, puts aside the heavy stuff and does what is the easiest (and especially the most likely to be seen). It is full of dishonesty, spiritual death, godlessness and — not the least of spiritual crimes — self-indulgence. But all of this can be craftily camouflaged, deftly dissimulated behind a clean, even beautiful exterior, which men might call “spiritual”. Jesus saw through the Pharisees, for

God sees the heart (1 Samuel 16.7); and he sees through every Christian today who lives in this manner.

In the passages that we have seen, Jesus calls religious people hypocrites because of the duplicity of their hearts. He warns them that this state of affairs prevents them from worshiping God (Matthew 15.9), for God cannot accept the praise of a divided and unfaithful heart, or a heart for which he is not the first priority.

Let us, then, consider some characteristic traits of the hypocritical heart.

### *SELECTIVE CRITICISM*

**Or how can you say to your brother, ‘Let me take the speck out of your eye,’ and behold, the log is in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother’s eye** (Matthew 7.4-5).

This passage begins with the famous injunction: **“Do not judge so that you will not be judged”** (Matthew 7.1). This important teaching of Jesus is often used, by Christians and non-Christians alike, to condemn any and all judgment. Those who thus condemn judgment forget — so conveniently — that this condemnation is a judgment in itself.

What Jesus is condemning here is not judgment in itself, but judgment in areas where we are not willing to judge ourselves. Hence the reference to the “speck” in our brother’s eye and the “log” in our own. The heart that is always ready to criticize others while refusing to recognize its own greater faults is not a sincere heart, but a hypocritical one. This is the problem that Jesus is getting at. Sincerity means recognizing one’s own faults before accusing another person.

### *EXTERIOR BEFORE INTERIOR*

The Scriptures speak of a **“faith unfeigned”** (1 Timothy 1.5; 2 Timothy 1.5; KJV, ASV), and of a wisdom **“without hypocrisy”**. This means, of course, that it is possible to fake faith and even to imitate wisdom. Hypocritical faith must be that which develops all the exterior elements without committing the soul. Hypocritical wisdom must be a worldly wisdom disguised as a heavenly, that is based, not on the truth of Scripture, but on the much less reliable ground of personal experience in the world. We have seen that the Pharisees typified both of these false hearts.

How badly do we need wisdom! how sadly are we lacking in it! We think without reflecting and we talk without saying anything at all! We act without measure, we plunge ahead without preparation. And yet, all the time, all around us, the wisdom of God is available. We have only to ask, and he gives generously (James 1.5). But let us not think that we will become regular oriental wise men for having asked God a few times to bless us with wisdom. As the young eagle learns to fly by being pushed from the nest, the Christian will learn wisdom through God's tough daily lessons. *Wisdom is not assimilated, but apprenticed; it does not soak through the scalp, but develops through hard experience.*

However, God's lessons are not confined to external experiences. He also uses our time with his word to teach us how to live. For that to happen, we must decide to delve into that word, daily. Not in a drop-it-open type of study, but in the systematic book-by-book study that many seem to think is the responsibility only of ministers and elders (but mostly ministers!). There is so much wisdom in the Word! Mighty wisdom, deep and lasting! But it will sit there, wasted entirely, unless we plow into it and take the time and trouble to work through it. How shameful to allow the written treasure of the ages, the transcribed mind of the only God, to collect dust on the shelf under the telephone! How awful to stumble around in the dark, when the **"lamp to my feet and the light to my way"** (Psalm 119.105) is available to every one! What a waste to throw away all of this good food! To know God is be wise, to be wise is to know him. And to know him, we must delve into his word.

The Scripture also orders that love be **"without hypocrisy"** (Romans 12.9). In order to understand this injunction given by Paul, we must look at the context of Romans 12. We will paraphrase this context in list form.

- ◆ Present your bodies as a living and holy sacrifice to God. 12.1
- ◆ Do not be changed by this world, but transformed by God. 12.2
- ◆ Do not think too highly of yourselves. Have sound judgment. 12.3
- ◆ Consider yourselves as members of one body and members one of another. Let each one use his particular gifts to serve the others, according to the proportion of his faith. 12.4-6
- ◆ Serve with simplicity (KJV), with diligence and with cheerfulness. 12.8
- ◆ Love without hypocrisy. Avoid evil, cling to the good. 12.9



- ◆ Be devoted to each other, honor each other. 12.10
- ◆ Always be diligent in fervor and in service. 12.11
- ◆ Help each other, practice hospitality. 12.13
- ◆ Bless any persecutors, rejoice with the rejoicers, weep with the weepers. 12.14-15
- ◆ Reciprocate in good opinions of each other, do not be condescending, do not flaunt your intelligence. 12.16
- ◆ Never pay back evil for evil; always seek the good. 12.17
- ◆ Live in peace with others, as much as you can. 12.18
- ◆ Never avenge yourselves, but allow the Lord to act. Vengeance belongs to him. You must do good to your enemy. 12.19-20
- ◆ Stand up under evil and overcome it by doing good. 12.21

This long list, with **“Let love be without hypocrisy”** as its theme right in the middle, describes an obvious sincerity of heart toward God and toward other members of one’s local assembly. I especially like the words “simplicity” and “diligence” in this context. It is obvious that the sincere heart does not complicate the life of its fellows by cultivating a kind of secrecy around itself which makes it necessary for others to read between the lines in order to make some sense of it. I remember once learning from a brother that a particular sister in Christ was angry with me. I called her immediately and asked her what I had done to make her angry. Her response was that I should pray and ask God to reveal it to me. Aside from the fact that this Christian was not applying Matthew 18.15, she was being insincere, by not being open about the situation.

This same Christian loves to criticize in the third person. Sometimes when I hear her talking about “people” who do this or that, I realize she is talking about me. Are you guilty of this? Am I? We must eliminate this back-door criticism from our Christian lives as insincere.

The Christian with a sincere heart, that is, with a love **“unfeigned”**, will, with simplicity and enthusiasm, join in the activities of his assembly. He will love, rejoice and weep, without shame.

When he speaks, his meaning will be obvious, for his words will correctly translate his thoughts. Richard Foster quotes Kierkegaard as saying: “If thou art absolutely obedient to God, then there is no ambiguity in thee and ... thou art mere simplicity before God.”<sup>15</sup> When this Christian is obliged to render a judgment, he will be first of all aware of his own weak-

nesses, as we have seen, and never criticize lightly or joyfully. He will not deal in subtleties, and when he gives reasons for his actions, people will know that he has spoken the truth. They will not have to wonder if he is not hiding something or if he is not saying *this* in order not to admit *that*, etc.

All of us know Christians who specialize in the delicate skill of inventing bogus (and sometimes quite ingenious) explanations for their indefensible behavior. They can thus do pretty much as they please and still feel good about themselves, in spite of the contradiction they are living. *It is called lying*, and I've no need here to underline the Bible's plain teaching about this sin that should not be found in a body of Christians (Colossians 3.9; Revelation 21.8).

Obviously, I am not advocating that we speak out in public on what should remain private thoughts, or that we reveal details shared in confidence. But we could all be more open with each other. It would be a way to express our sincere hearts and avoid some potential hypocrisy.

Looking again at the list above, we could say that some of these activities could be engaged in by a Christian with a hypocritical love. But he could not serve with simplicity and diligence, he could not reciprocate in good intentions, he could not avoid condescension.

Is it really possible to love without sincerity? It certainly is. Here is an example: sometimes we do good things because we are inclined to them by our nature, by our predisposition to help people and by our desire to please them. We persuade ourselves that we are loving them, and doubtless we really are, in a sense; but in fact the true motivation of our love is the desire to fulfill ourselves, to find our own satisfaction, to bask in the light of the appreciation of others.

A 19th century British theologian had this to say about this phenomenon:

"The very fact that good is in a certain sense conformable to our natural desires causes us easily to lean towards ourselves. So that even in the intentions which seem to us the most pure and the most according to the will of God, we often seek ourselves, drawing rather to what suits our own inclination than what is precisely the most for the glory of God."<sup>16</sup>

A 20th century French theologian, speaking on the same subject, wrote :

"May we note (...) that it is by their very nature, as well as by the general culture of our times, that good people are too often given to spend their energies in various movements, in fervent desires, in energetic ten-

sions, in feverish aspirations? Some Christian lives contain nothing but hurriedness, vehement wishings, an accumulation of devotions, ... a constantly unleashed whirlwind of every natural energy. They are ... never satisfied except in breathlessness. And when the day ends in complete exhaustion because of its excessive and panting activity, there remains only the strength to say to the Lord: "how you must be pleased with me! I have talked, I have run, I have spared no effort."<sup>17</sup>

Simply put, these two texts say that hypocritical love, even when doing good, does only the good it enjoys doing, the good it knows how to do, the good it does well, perhaps also the good that will attract the most positive attention from others. E. M. Forster, in his novel *Where Angels Fear to Tread*, calls this "petty unselfishness".

On the other hand, sincere love, the love of a sincere heart, does all the good that it sees to do, the good it does not like to do, the good it has difficulty accomplishing, the good that it doesn't know how to do well, the good that no one will see and that will attract no positive attention or recompense.

Let us hasten to say that having the approval of others is not a sin in itself; the sin is in the pressing desire to be well liked, to please at any price. In theology, this is called "human respect" (in contrast to respect for God).

"Look at a person who is completely under its domination. (...) It causes men to be false and insincere in their mutual relations .... It puts a man under the despotism of ridicule, which becomes a kind of false god to him. (...) A brood of sins of omission follow it wherever it goes, sprung from shame and the fear of ridicule (...). What a misery to be ashamed of our duties and our principles ! (...) Religion, which ought to be our peace, becomes our torment. (...) A general wish to please (...), reflecting on the praise bestowed upon us, and giving way to low spirits when dispraised. These are all manifestations of this horrible human respect."<sup>18</sup>

We see, then, that this kind of false love can dominate a Christian and transform his relationships into pretexts, destroying all spontaneity in well-doing or holiness. All must be done according to his own well-thought-out agenda, which no unplanned good work must come to disturb.

This is one reason we have so much complaining in our assemblies. One will say: "I don't have time for that"; another will say, "Why are there so many activities in the week?". One Christian will complain about

the prayer meetings, another about the pot lucks (“Why do we have them? I feel obliged to come.”), another about the Bible memorization programs, another about the inconvenience of going out to give food to the homeless. They are simply not loving sincerely. They want to love in their own way, doing what is easy for them, what fits into their schedule, what they like to do. Is this the sincere heart that the Lord desires?

### *GOOD AT GIVING ORDERS, NOT AT TAKING THEM*

**They tie up heavy burdens and lay them on men’s shoulders, but they themselves are unwilling to move them with so much as a finger** (Matthew 23.4).

One of the plagues of the Church is the pride of our human spirit. The denominations deal with this by actually establishing a real hierarchy, thus permitting a military-like chain of command.

This being true, we have all known (and some of us have been) Christians who set themselves up as field marshals, shouting orders and becoming angry when no one obeys. These same persons, when asked to do something that doesn’t fit into their schedules, astutely excuse themselves, pretending to have some prior commitment.

Even elders are not to lord it over the Church, but to lead by the Scripture and by their example. I am not questioning here the biblical role of elders, whose function is to feed the flock, to protect it and to lead it (Acts 20.28). And one of the best examples of a *biblical* elder is that of a *serving* elder. Jesus was Lord, but he served.

When Paul in Ephesians 5.21 declares we are to be “**subject to one another in the fear of Christ,**” he is not erasing all roles in the Church, some of which include the necessity of giving instructions; he is advocating, rather, that we not be setting up hierarchies. He is telling us, to simplify, that we need to have sincere hearts, that do not expect others to do what we are not willing to do ourselves.

### *GOOD AT MAKING UP RULES TO GAIN CONTROL OF OTHERS*

**Woe to you, blind guides, who say, ‘Whoever swears by the temple, that is nothing; but whoever swears by the gold of the temple is obligated.’ You fools and blind men! Which is more important, the gold or the temple that sanctified the gold? And, ‘Whoever swears by the altar, that is nothing, but whoever swears by the offering on it, he is obligated.’ You blind men, which is more important, the offering, or the altar that sanctifies the offering?** (Matthew 23.16-19).

The same kind of person who will set himself over others will enjoy making up rules for his Church assembly and punishing those who do not follow them. I remember a situation in which one family was habitually late for worship on Sunday. Often they did not come at all, but they never missed a Sunday when we were to have a meal! That Sunday someone from the family was always there, but late, as usual. Sometimes they actually showed up toward the end of the worship period, as if they had only come for the meal.

Obviously, this was a problem, but a spiritual one, not a material one. One Sunday when a meal was planned, a member of this family came very late, and, after worship, was promptly hustled into a side room by a sister of the congregation (the one, by the way, who organized the meal) and told, in no uncertain terms, that coming late to worship then staying for the meal was unacceptable behavior.

I repeat that this family had a problem. But was this the way to treat it? The sister wasn't wrong when she said, later, that "someone had to do it", for someone really did need to deal with this situation. But it should preferably have been one of the leaders of the congregation.

And, the solution was not to set up a rule: "No worship, no meal." Are we to understand that attendance at worship is what makes us "deserve" to eat the common meal? Of course not. But the person who places the common meal above the worship of God does need to see the error in his priorities.

Let us avoid power moves in which arbitrary rules are set up for others in the Church. Men and women can both be guilty of this.

### *GOOD AT LITTLE THINGS, BAD AT BIG THINGS*

We have already quoted the 24th verse of Matthew 23: **"You blind guides, who strain out a gnat and swallow a camel!"**

This one gets us all, right? It is so easy to get into the details and forget the broad picture! The Pharisees were experts at the little stuff, the tiny things, the things that, frankly, most everyone else ignored. But, at the same time, they ignored what Jesus calls "the weightier provisions" (Matthew 23.23).

Please notice, first of all, that Jesus does not condemn the attention given to detail by the Pharisees. Nobody likes to swallow a gnat. The Pharisees took care of those pesky critters, but they forgot to weed out the camels! (I can see Jesus smiling at his hyperbole.)

As there were lots of “little” things that guardians of the Law had to keep straight, there are also lots of little things that need attention in the Christian walk. But if we concentrate on the light responsibilities, to the exclusion of the weightier matters, we’re having problems being sincere. My thumb is a small thing, but placed in front of my eyeball, it can hide the sun. To pretend that the sun does not exist would therefore be, in this context, hypocrisy.

What are these heavier matters that the sincere heart must recognize and adhere to? Justice, mercy, faithfulness. Doing right, remembering compassion, being constant. These are signs of sincerity.

### *TRADITION BEFORE TRUTH*

So many professing Christians are faithful to their traditions in preference to the truth. Once, after I had shown a lady what the Bible says on an important, somewhat controversial subject, she responded that she saw the truth in what I had shown her, but that if she accepted it, she would be going against those who had first taught her. Now, notice: she saw the truth and rejected it out of loyalty to a human being. Do you think she really had a sincere heart? Shouldn’t our loyalty to God and his word be stronger than our loyalty to any other?

Didn’t Paul say that even if an angel from heaven tries to teach us a different Gospel, we should consider him as accursed (Galatians 1.8-9)? When we strive to please men, he went on to say, we are not the servants of God (Galatians 1.10).

Our traditions are so very strong. So strong, sometimes, that they actually prevent us from pleasing God. If we find (or if someone can show us from the Word) that we are “setting aside” the commandments of God in order to keep our traditions (Mark 7.9), we’re really in trouble.

Jesus accused the Jews of this very thing. Where they should have been honoring their parents, they were actually refusing to help them, in order to give the money to God (Corban). A good thing, designed by man, was taking the place of a better thing, commanded by God.

Do we catch the seriousness of this teaching? This kind of maneuver, says Jesus, invalidates the word of God. The insincere heart — that is, one which is not lined up with what the lips are saying — having rendered useless the Lord’s word, worships him for nothing (Matthew 15.8).

At the risk of appearing simplistic, let us examine the sincere heart in

three contexts: (1) its relationship to God, (2) its relationship to all men, (3) its relationship to brothers and sisters in Christ.

## SINCERITY WITH GOD

I cannot be straight with mankind and with my brothers and sisters in Christ if I am not straight with God, first. A beautiful passage in the Hebrew letter tells us to draw near **“with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience”** (Hebrews 10.22). To draw near to what? **“The holy place”**, that is, the presence of God. The same letter tells us, in another passage, this truth in other words:

**Therefore let us draw near with confidence to the throne of grace, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need** (Hebrews 4.16).

We are to also draw near to God’s throne, to this holy place, **“with confidence”**. Putting these two passages together, we understand that the confidence described is backed up by sincerity, and not by hypocrisy.

There is no room before God’s throne for silliness, bragging, or self-satisfaction. God has obtained our access to his throne at a very high price, that of the blood of his Son, his flesh torn, his life ripped away (Hebrews 10.20).

Sincerity in this context means that we must recognize God’s holiness and our sin, our lack of merit before him, our littleness in comparison with his grandeur. It is only so that we can have that **“full assurance of faith”**, only so that our faith can be placed entirely in him and not in ourselves, for the receiving of forgiveness.

And it is only so that we can speak of being washed **“clean from an evil conscience”**. Perhaps we do not consider often enough this aspect of our salvation. Our evil conscience haunted us up to the day we discovered Jesus of Nazareth and understood that he wanted to forgive the evil that we had done and that disturbed our innermost being.

Liberation from this troubled conscience is part of the marvel of the Gospel. Christ has lifted the weight from our soul! We are free! Being sincere with him is to accept — to seize — this wonderful gift, in all humility and gratitude. Then, and only then, can we be entirely sincere with others.

## SINCERITY WITH OUR FELLOW MAN

In the second epistle to the Corinthians, Paul says that he and his

fellow workers have conducted themselves **“in the world” “in holiness and godly sincerity”** (2 Corinthians 1.12),

To call his sincerity godly is to associate it with God himself. The ASV translates, **“in holiness and sincerity of God”**. In some way, the apostle’s sincerity came from God. We know, of course, that holiness comes from on high, that God is perfect holiness. But we are not used to considering that sincerity also can come from him.

We can consider Paul’s declaration in two ways: Perhaps Paul wishes to underline that absolute truth has its origin in God. How many passages of the Old Testament attest to the fact that God is a God of truth, that he never lies. Here is just one example:

**The works of his hands are truth and justice;**

**All his precepts are sure.**

**They are upheld forever and ever;**

**They are performed in truth and uprightness** (Psalm 111.7-8).

Perhaps Paul wishes to say that sincerity between men and women is the result of their sincerity with God. It is true that in order to lead holy lives before men, we need a holy relation with God also. In this way, the sincerity coming from God permits us to conduct ourselves honestly with men, which in turn permits us to continue to live in sincerity before God. How shall the Christian define “sincerity before men”?

(1) It consists of not hesitating to confess one’s faith in Christ, not being ashamed of one’s belonging to God, not fearing to take a position for Christ and for the faith. Perhaps this is what Jesus was speaking of in Matthew 10.32:

**Therefore everyone who confesses me before men, I will also confess him before my Father who is in heaven.**

(2) It consists of calling people to this same faith. This mission, given in the beginning to the apostles, has been given through them to all Christians.

(3) Finally, after taking a position for Christ and exhorting others to accept him, sincerity consists in respecting the choice they make about accepting him. On one hand, we cannot make the choice for them. On the other, we do not want to leave the impression that, in the end, it is all right to reject him. After all, they will stand before the bar of God just as we will. I believe that we should maintain a gentle pressure. But it takes



a wise Christian to do that without becoming overbearing.

## **SINCERITY WITH OUR BROTHERS AND SISTERS IN CHRIST**

In a passage we looked at above, I turned some words around and took out several that I would like now to put back in. Here is the verse with no “arranging”:

**For our proud confidence is this: the testimony of our conscience, that in holiness and godly sincerity, not in fleshly wisdom but in the grace of God, we have conducted ourselves in the world, and especially toward you** (2 Corinthians 1.12).

**“And especially toward you,”** you the Christians of the Church in Corinth. Let us remember that the key words of sincere love are simplicity and diligence. Peter says:

**Since you have in obedience to the truth purified your souls for a sincere love of the brethren, fervently love one another from the heart** (1 Peter 1.22).

Here is another example of the fact that it is impossible to be sincere with others if we are not already sincere with God. Peter says that our obedience to the truth is in view of purifying our souls, resulting in the sincere love of the brethren. We note the order: obedience toward purification; purification toward sincere love of the brethren. The cart must not come before the horse (if I may coin a phrase!). No one is straight with his neighbor if he is not first straight with his maker.

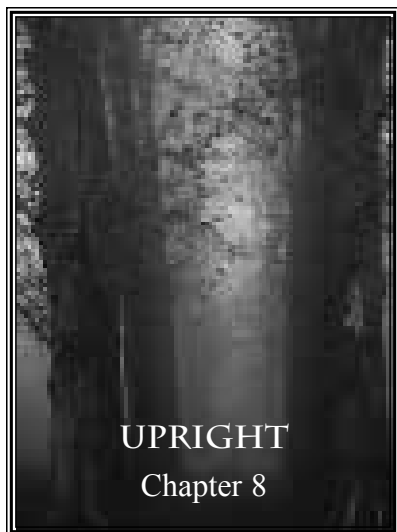
Purification of the soul is accomplished by obedience to the truth. It is the mark of a sincere heart! And we have already seen how to obey the truth: **“Let us draw near with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water”** (Hebrews 10.22).

This verse includes faith, repentance and baptism. This is how we show ourselves sincere. Following this obedience, as we saw above, we are called to a sincere love of the brethren, a love that acts **“fervently”** and **“from the heart”** (1 Peter 1.22).

Using Ephesians 4, we can add to the Romans 12 list of fervent actions of the sincere, loving heart toward its brothers and sisters.

Ephesians 4.2     **It will be humble and gentle, patient, loving, tolerant.**

Ephesians 4.15   **It will always speak the truth, in love.**



Ephesians 4.25 **It will never speak falsehood.**

Ephesians 4.29 **It will not speak unwholesome words, but edifying and gracious words.**

Ephesians 4.32 **It will be kind, full of tenderness and forgiveness, just as it has been forgiven by Christ.**

Finally, let us consider that our sincere love (2 Corinthians 8.8) will show in our efforts at sharing the Gospel. According to Paul to the Corinthians, when we announce the Lord's message, the testimony of our

conscience needs to be that we have conducted ourselves not according to fleshly wisdom, but in the grace of God, through holiness and **"godly sincerity"** (2 Corinthians 1.12). The person sitting across from you in a Bible study may not agree with what you are teaching him; but he must absolutely see that you are convicted to the core that what you are telling him is true. I have seen teachers who created more doubt than confidence, because they themselves doubted.

And I have seen many others who had absolute confidence in the "product" they were selling, but who did not understand that preaching Jesus is not "selling God as if God were vinyl siding, replacement windows, or a mortgage refinancing service."<sup>19</sup>

We are not sincere with non-believers when we pressure them into accepting Jesus, when we push and maneuver, in order to add their names to our "converted by me" list.

**For we are not like many, peddling the word of God, but as from sincerity, but as from God, we speak in Christ in the sight of God** (2 Corinthians 2.17).

Why do so many Christians leave the faith? One of the reasons is that they were converted by insincere believers. Do you think this will be mentioned at the last judgment?

**LOVE UNFEIGNED**  
**THE SINCERE HEART**  
**QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION**

1. Why did hypocrisy draw such fire from Jesus?
2. What kind of judgment is Jesus condemning in Matthew 7.1-5?
3. How is it possible to “fake” faith? How do we “imitate” wisdom?
4. How do simplicity and diligence enter into the phenomenon of unfeigned love?
5. How is it possible to love hypocritically?
6. What is “petty unselfishness”?
7. How does sincerity with God help us in our relationships with mankind?
8. How is purification of the soul accomplished?
9. How is “godly sincerity” important in our efforts to teach and save the lost?

# BEEN WAITING LONG?

## THE PATIENT HEART

**The end of a matter is better than its beginning; Patience of spirit is better than haughtiness of spirit** (Ecclesiastes 7.8).

We would like to define the word “patient” as “able to wait”. But there is so much more to patience than waiting. A lazy person can wait, but is he being patient? A stubborn person can also wait, but hard-headedness doesn’t get it either.

Let’s let the dictionary start us out: “1. Bearing or enduring pain, trouble, etc., without complaining, losing self-control, making a disturbance, etc. 2. Refusing to be provoked or angered, as by an insult; forbearing; tolerant. 3. Calmly tolerating delay, confusion, inefficiency, etc., able to wait calmly.”

I want us to notice that all three definitions involve a voluntary action on the part of the patient heart, and, I might add, an action that is not at all a simple, easy one. A patient heart must endure, must forbear, must tolerate. Tell me, now, does any of that come naturally?

There are two biblical word groups most often translated “patient” and “patience”. If the author of this chapter were an expert in the Greek, he would spell them out for you in Greek letters and in phonetics. Suffice it to say that the Bible describes the patient heart as one that is able to persevere in its piety in spite of setbacks, suffering, discouragement, ill treatment — in a word, in spite of troubles of all kinds. But, as mentioned above, we’re not talking about passivity or obstinacy (it’s interesting, isn’t it, that both of those can wait, but they can’t be patient). This kind of patience is totally involved in what it is doing: remaining unflagging even in danger, putting up with offenses and insults, bearing suffering without complaint, remaining gentle and kind with difficult people, never becoming frustrated when forced to wait, always taking life one day, one hour, one minute at a time. All of this produces these synonyms: longsuffering, endurance, forbearance, constancy.

Do we have a patient heart? If we are honest, most of us will have to admit to being very low on that totem pole. Patience, though, is part of the fruit of God’s Spirit (Galatians 5.22). That means that with his help we can (indeed we must) develop this patient heart. Not that we’ll ever

be experts, but that we will be making progress every day toward the perfectly patient model we imitate.

Our first point here will be our most important: the most patient heart is God's heart (cf. Romans 2.4; 1 Timothy 1.16; 1 Peter 3.20). Barclay says that "... if God had been a man, he would have wiped out this world long ago; but he has that patience which bears with all our sinning and will not cast us off. In our dealings with our fellow men we must reproduce this loving, forbearing, forgiving, patient attitude of God towards ourselves."<sup>20</sup>

Indeed, had God not been a "God of patience" (Romans 15.5), how would the Jews have gotten past Sinai? Even before arriving there, they had covered Moses and Aaron with complaints. At the foot of the mountain, and while waiting for Moses to come down from the summit with the law of God, they did an unbelievable thing: after having seen the plagues, the columns of fire and smoke, after crossing the Red Sea on dry land, and especially after having seen God himself come down in fire upon Sinai, this people made themselves an Egyptian god to worship! On that day, if God had not been patient, Israel would have disappeared forever and the plan of God would have been completed without them.

If God were not a God of patience, the Jews would never have survived the rebellion against Joshua and Caleb, or the disobedience of Saul, or the idolatry of Jeroboam. They would have disappeared into the woodwork during the Assyrian and Babylonian captivities.

In spite of all of these temptations, God remained patient and faithful, accomplishing the promises made through his holy prophets, and raising up his Son, the Messiah, from among the Jewish people.

But when Israel killed this Son, the patience of God had come to an end. He destroyed the holy city and its temple, terminating his exclusive covenant with the Jewish people. Even God's patience can come to an end.

But, let us look at other examples of patience in the Bible.

## **JOSEPH**

Joseph was, as we all know, sold into slavery by his jealous brothers. He was 17. He spent several years in the house of Potiphar, became the head of his slaves and the overseer of his master's house. Having been unjustly accused by Potiphar's wife, he landed in prison, where he became

the “head” prisoner. But he remained there until the Pharaoh himself discovered his wisdom and made this amazing declaration : **“See, I have set you over all the land of Egypt”** (Genesis 41.41). So, here is the little slave boy who has become first minister of the largest world power of its time. He had suffered patiently for 13 years (Genesis 41.46).

The glory of Joseph makes him more than a type of Christ; it also shows us that God always exalts those who wait on him.

We can imagine that Joseph often raised his eyes to heaven and asked: “Why?” though the Scripture does not place that word in his mouth. However, what it does say is that in all of his trials, Joseph remained faithful. He overcame his grief, he persevered, he remained constant, he waited without knowing why he must wait. This also is patience: sticking it out when one cannot see the proverbial light at the end of the proverbial tunnel.

Finally, Joseph understood why he has been sent to Egypt, and he rejoiced. In spite of his years of grief, he said to his brothers:

**“God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant in the earth, and to keep you alive by a great deliverance. Now, therefore, it was not you who sent me here, but God; and he has made me a father to Pharaoh and lord of all his household and ruler over all the land of Egypt”** (Genesis 45.7-8)

This passage suggests that certain periods of patience that are imposed upon us by God might be not only for our own good, but also (especially?) for someone else.

Having arrived at the end of his desert, Joseph felt that crossing it had been well worth the pain. That is a patient man!

## **JOSHUA AND CALEB**

Let’s talk about two persons known for qualities other than patience. We all know the story of the twelve spies and their discouraging report (Numbers 13-14). We remember that Joshua and Caleb were the only two who believed that Israel could conquer Canaan, but when they declared that the people should trust the Lord and not rebel against him, **“all the congregation”** decided to stone them. We have read that the Lord then appeared in the tent of meeting, saying to Moses that he would cause Israel to wander in the desert until all the present generation had died.

He then declared that there should be two exceptions: **“Surely you shall not come into the land in which I swore to settle you, except Caleb the son of Jephunneh and Joshua the son of Nun”** (Numbers 14.30).

So, for 38 more long years, the people of Israel roamed in the wilderness, fighting off enemies and suffering all the disgrace of their rebellion.

And for every one of those long years, Joshua and Caleb, occupiers-to-be of the Promised Land, wandered with the losers! They also had to suffer the misery, the enemy attacks, the shame. They could have bristled under this undeserved treatment, protesting their faithfulness and belief in God. Here they were, suffering with the rebels, receiving the same treatment as those who had rejected God! But the text indicates no such thinking on the part of these men. What is important is that they endured the sufferings that were imposed upon them.

At the end of this terrible time, when all of the others of their generation had died, Joshua and Caleb had the unique joy of entering Canaan and reaping the fruit of their faithfulness and their patience. All the others of their generation were then dead. For the unbelievers, the desert had been a punishment; for these two faithful, patient men, it had been a time of growth.

Caleb received a rich inheritance in the newly conquered land of Canaan, **“because he followed the Lord God of Israel fully”** (Joshua 14.14). We should note that the region given to Caleb was that of the Anaks (Deuteronomy 31.23; Joshua 15.13), that is, according to some experts, the very giants that had so frightened the people. Coincidence? I don’t think so.

And what of Joshua? We know that Joshua remained the right-hand man of Moses. At the death of the latter, Joshua was selected to succeed him and to lead the new generation of Jews into the Promised Land (Joshua 1.1-7). The Lord was with him (Joshua 6.27); he accomplished brilliantly all that the Lord gave him to do (Joshua 11.23). And when the conquest was completed, this faithful warrior received his own inheritance in the land (Joshua 19.49).

Joshua and Caleb: two patient men, whose patience is rarely praised.

## JESUS

Now, let us consider Jesus, whose patience it is difficult to speak of, for we can hardly understand it. Augustine said:

“It would occupy too much space to say anything at all worthy of him; and, indeed, to say what is worthy of him is not in the power of man. For who will explain in consistent words this single statement, that the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us?”<sup>21</sup>

That Jesus took upon himself our flesh and became one of us is a man-

ifestation of his patience, and thus of his mission. **“I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will, but the will of him who sent me”** (John 6.38), he said. Obviously, he suffered at his death; but before his death, he had already suffered at the hands of the Pharisees, the doctors of the Law, and even his own disciples. He had been misunderstood, ridiculed, scorned, rejected, tested, tricked, betrayed. But he remained patient before the fact that nobody — neither his disciples nor his enemies — understood his messiahship.

But even before all of that, Jesus’ patience was tried by the fact of his incarnation, by the fact that he was obliged to assume the condition of a man and even of a slave. Let us not forget that he was the Creator. And here he was, taking on the human body of flesh and blood, in order to suffer and even die in it.

Here is a real demonstration of the constancy, the perseverance, the submission that is called patience. It is the patience that finds its source in God.

### SOURCES OF PATIENCE

We have seen that God is a God of patience. That being the case, when we discover that we are having trouble being patient, perhaps this is in itself an indication that we need to spend more time with the patient Lord. James says we should ask the Lord for wisdom (James 1.5). Why not ask from him patience, also? He can give us that as well as wisdom, love, joy, etc. When we seek the face of the Lord (cf. Psalm 27.8), let us ask in order to receive (Matthew 7.7). Again, Jesus says that if even earthly fathers know how to give good gifts to their children; **“... how much more will your Father who is in heaven give what is good to those who ask him!”** (Matthew 7.11).

I think that God would like nothing (or at least almost nothing) more than to give us patience. I think that he does indeed give it to those who ask sincerely.

However, let us not think that since God can give us patience, we have nothing to do. There is this principle in the Scriptures: God gives wonderful gifts to his children who are willing to ask for them, then to develop them in order to use them in the service of others.

Another source of patience is the knowledge that God’s patience rests upon us. When we consider what God endures with us — lies and half-truths, anger, resentment, calumny, vulgar language, jealousy and rivalry,



lack of commitment — we understand why we must be patient with others. The Scripture teaches us to forgive because we have been forgiven (Ephesians 4.32; Colossians 3.13), to love because we have been loved (1 John 4.19), and to pray for those who abuse us because we receive sunshine and rain from a patient God (Matthew 4.45).

God is even patient with our impatience! Indeed, his patience is our salvation (2 Peter 3.15). When God gets to the end of his patience, only disaster and horror can follow. As I write these lines, I am waiting for a phone call that someone said would come at a particular time. That time is past and I find myself getting frustrated — impatient! How many times have I been late with the Lord? Absent when I should have been present? Inert when I should have been moving? Without the patience of the Lord, we'd all be dead.

Pick someone in your congregation who needs a patient friend. Take that person in and practice your patience with him or her. And remember, when you feel frustrated, how patient the suffering Master has been with you!

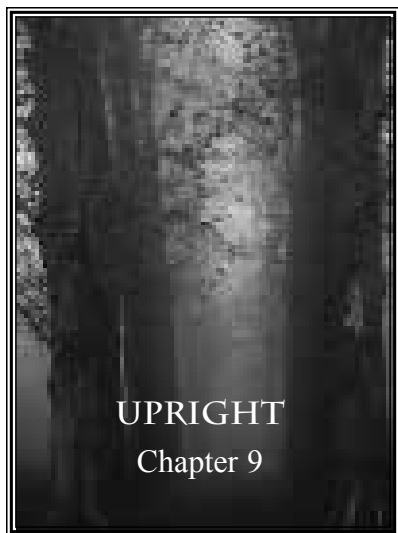
Another source of patience is the testing of our faith, generally translated as some kind of suffering: illnesses, persecutions, difficulties caused by our faith. If we study the lives of the great men of the Bible — Noah, Abraham, Job, Joseph, Moses, David, Elijah, Peter, Paul — we discover that they suffered immensely, and that all of them used their suffering to grow as persons, to develop their endurance, their perseverance, and to serve the Lord in astonishing ways.

The truest source of our patience is God himself: by his attributes, his generosity, his patience with our feeble efforts, and by his guiding of our faith daily.

### **SIGNS OF A PATIENT MAN**

A patient person is not the one who only waits, as we have seen, but the one who perseveres actively in his waiting.

A patient man is a loving man, for love is patient (1 Corinthians 13.4). He loves with a constant love, not a flippant love, because love does not seek its own interests (1 Corinthians 13.5) and it forgives a multitude of sins (1 Peter 4.8). He waits in hope for the coming of the Lord, because hope and patience are brothers (1 Thessalonians 1.10). He has been strengthened according to all the glorious power of God, in order to attain this steadfastness (Colossians 1.11). He is fruitful **“in the true knowledge”** of the Lord (2 Peter 1.8; cf. vs. 6). For the sake of his conscience



toward God, he can endure harsh and unjust treatment caused by his upright living, and he can even consider it a privilege (1 Peter 2.19-20).

This last point describes exactly what Jesus did at the cross (indeed, during all of his ministry). Peter tells us this:

**“While being reviled, he did not revile in return; while suffering, he uttered no threats, but kept entrusting himself to him who judges righteously; and he himself bore our sins in his body on the cross, so that we might die to sin and live to righteousness; for by**

**his wounds you were healed”** (1 Peter 2.23-24).

Peter is telling us that Jesus showed patience in his trials, and that this patience was necessary to our salvation. This is why God appreciates patience in his children. It shows that they are imitating Christ, and that they are thankful for his patience toward them.

### THE REWARDS OF PATIENCE

Paul says in Romans 15.4 that patience, combined with the encouragement of the Scriptures, gives us hope. How, then, can patience contribute to hope? An agricultural example will help us understand. A farmer clears out a plot of land, plows it, plants the seed, then waits. But his waiting is not idle: he waters the new plants, weeds around them, treats them for insects, protects them against bad weather. In short, he waits while working (or works while waiting), in view of a harvest. His patience, we can see, is directly tied to his hope.

James uses this same example to explain the joys of our patience :

**“Be patient, brethren, until the coming of the Lord. The farmer waits for the precious produce of the soil, being patient about it, until it gets the early and late rains. You too be patient; strengthen your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is near”** (James 5.7-8).

Our best patience is in view of that great day that the Lord is preparing, the day he will return. May he find us patiently working, and not

nodding off in the corner!

When a Christian speaks of being saved, he is speaking of being taken with God on this day of judgment, to live forever before his face.

All of this is tied to the patience that we have learned to exercise on the earth. Here are some examples of how that patience is rewarded:

◆ **[God] will render to each person according to his deeds.** Romans 2.6

◆ **To those who by perseverance in doing good seek for glory and honor and immortality, [God will give] eternal life.** Romans 2.7

◆ **By your endurance you will gain your lives.** Luke 21.19

◆ **Pay close attention to yourself and to your teaching; persevere in these things, for as you do this you will ensure salvation both for yourself and for those who hear you.** 1 Timothy 4.16

◆ **For you have need of endurance, so that when you have done the will of God, you may receive what was promised.** Hebrews 10.36

Have you been anxious to reach the end of this chapter? So have I. Was it worth the wait? He who knows how to wait patiently knows the peace of God.

## BEEN WAITING LONG?

### THE PATIENT HEART

#### QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Describe the difference between patience and passivity. Between patience and obstinacy.
2. Give some examples of God's patience in the Bible. What would have happened to Israel if God had not been patient with them? What would happen to the Church if God were not patient with us?
3. Describe the patience of: Joseph, Joshua and Caleb, and Jesus.
4. In what sense did the incarnation require Jesus to be patient?
5. How is the testing of our faith a source of patience?
6. What is the ultimate source of patience?
7. How can it be said that God's patience "is our salvation"?

8. What are the signs of a patient man?
9. What is the greatest reward of patience?

## SEEING WITH GOD'S EYES

### THE LOVING / HATING HEART

**Hate evil, love good,**

**And establish justice in the gate!**

(Amos 5.15)

**Hate evil, you who love the Lord,**

**Who preserves the souls of his godly ones;**

**He delivers them from the hand of the wicked.** (Psalm 97.10)

Before starting this chapter, and by way of reference, let us take a look at what the Bible says about what God hates and about what he loves.

### THINGS (AND PERSONS) GOD HATES:

“Abomination to the Lord” / “abominable” / “perversion” / “cursed” / “detestable” / “indecent” / “lewdness” / “the Lord hates” / “his soul hates” / “will not go unpunished”

**Homosexuality** (Leviticus 18.22; 20.13; Romans 1.27).

**Adultery, incest, all illicit sexual activity**

(Ezekiel 22.11; Leviticus 18.1-30).

**False gods, idols** (Deuteronomy 7.25; 16.21-22; Isaiah 44.19).

**He who makes an idol** (Deuteronomy 27.15).

**Divination, witchcraft, an interpreter of omens, a sorcerer, one who casts spells, a medium, a spiritist, one who calls up the dead**  
(Deuteronomy 18.10-12).

**Woman who wears man's clothing; man who wears women's clothing** (Deuteronomy 22.5).

**Divorced woman who remarries her first husband after having been married to a second man** (Deuteronomy 24.1-4).

**Fraud** (Deuteronomy 25.16; Proverbs 11.1).

**Differing weights and differing measures** (Proverbs 22.10)

**He who loves violence** (Psalm 11.5)

**The devious or perverse person** (Proverbs 3.32; 11.20).  
**Haughty eyes** (Proverbs 6.17).  
**A lying tongue, lying lips** (Proverbs 6.17; 12.22).  
**Hands that shed innocent blood** (Proverbs 6.17).  
**A heart that devises wicked plans** (Proverbs 6.18).  
**Feet that run rapidly to evil** (Proverbs 6.18).  
**A false witness who utters lies** (Proverbs 6.19).  
**One who spreads strife among brothers** (Proverbs 6.19).  
**Wickedness** (Proverbs 8.7).  
**The sacrifice of the wicked** (Proverbs 15.8; 21.27).  
**Evil plans** (Proverbs 15.26).  
**Everyone who is proud in heart** (Proverbs 16.5).  
**He who justifies the wicked and he who condemns the righteous**  
 (Proverbs 17.15).  
**The prayer of he who turns away his ear from listening to the law**  
 (Proverbs 28.9).  
**Worthless offerings, hypocritical solemnities** (Isaiah 1.13-15).  
**He who profanes what is holy to the Lord** (Malachi 2.11).  
**That which is highly esteemed among men** (Luke 16.15).

### **THINGS (AND PERSONS) GOD LOVES:**

“God loves” / “the Lord loves” / “the Lord shows his love for” / “his delight” / “he delights” / “takes pleasure in” / “is welcome” / “is acceptable” / “is pleased” / “is well-pleasing”

**The alien** (Deuteronomy 10.18).  
**His people** (2 Chronicles 2.11; Psalm 149.4).  
**Those who love the name of the Lord, serve him, keep his covenant**  
 (Isaiah 56.6).  
**Those who fear him** (Psalm 103.17).  
**The world** (John 3.16).  
**In every nation, those who fear him and do what is right** (Acts 10.35).  
**The way of the man whose steps are established by the Lord**  
 (Psalm 37.23).  
**Righteousness** (Psalm 11.7).

**One who pursues righteousness** (Proverbs 15.9).

**The righteous** (Psalm 146.8).

**Truthfulness** (Proverbs 10.32; 15.2).

**Unchanging love** (Micah 7.18).

**The sacrifice of the Christian's body to the Lord** (Romans 12.1-2).

**Service to God offered with gratitude, reverence and awe**

(Hebrews 12.28).

**Spiritual sacrifices offered through Jesus Christ** (1 Peter 2.5).

**Prayers offered with thanksgiving and petitions on behalf of all men,**

**including those in authority** (1 Timothy 2.1-3).

**Justice** (Psalm 33.5; 37.28).

**A just weight** (Proverbs 11.1).

**The blameless in their walk** (Proverbs 11.20).

**The prayers of the upright** (Proverbs 15.8).

**His chosen one, the Son** (Isaiah 41.1; John 5.20; 10.17; Matthew 3.17).

**A cheerful giver** (2 Corinthians 9.7).

**Doing good and sharing** (Hebrews 13.16).

**Those who come out of the world and are holy** (2 Corinthians 6.17).

**Those for whom the kingdom is righteousness, joy and peace**

(Romans 14.18).

**Children who care for their widowed parents** (1 Timothy 5.4)

**Children who obey their parents** (Colossians 3.20).

Please also read this word from Isaiah:

**He who walks righteously and speaks with sincerity,**

**He who rejects unjust gain**

**And shakes his hands so that they hold no bribe;**

**He who stops his ears from hearing about bloodshed**

**And shuts his eyes from looking upon evil;**

**He will dwell on the heights,**

**His refuge will be the impregnable rock;**

**His bread will be given him,**

**His water will be sure.**

**Your eyes will see the King in his beauty;**

**They will behold a far-distant land** (Isaiah 33.15-17).

These lists are printed here because God wants people with hearts that not only love what he loves, but also hate what he hates.

What does God love? We can see that he loves everything holy and pure; he also loves all mankind, enough to give himself for it. He loves his children, he loves those who seek righteousness and who hate evil. He loves you, and he loves me. God's heart is good, and it is good because it loves good.

We cannot hope to have a truly good heart while ignoring the goodness of God, or while seeking goodness in ourselves. Though the Bible teaches no such thing as "original sin" or "total depravity", it does indeed teach that as descendants of the original disobedient pair, we inevitably choose the evil, that all are sinners and that there is not one righteous, "**not even one**" (Romans 3.10). The "inherent goodness" of man is a fantastic fallacy for credulous creatures. True goodness, wherever it appears, is from God, and from God alone. *The only man capable of goodness on any scale is the man who has opened his heart to let God be good through him.* Left to ourselves, we kill and maim, we deprive, we starve and exploit, we rape and defraud, we humiliate and deny. This, it seems to me, describes the world we know today, our world without God.

Fortunately, in the midst of this world, some men love and do good. But again, this kindness does not come from their own hearts. Be they aware of it or no, the God of the universe is using them to express his eternal compassion, his loving heart. What kind of man would it take to assume the wickedness of the entire world and let himself be murdered in order to forgive even his own assassins? The man does not live on the earth today who would be willing thus to live, and thus to die. But God is love (1 John 4.8, 16), he is loving and lover. We would perhaps die for a good man, but God gave his life for sinners (Romans 5.7-8). There is the heart we need, the heart we want. We must learn to emulate the selfless giving that characterized the Christ, even if it costs us what it cost him. Our purpose is to love in return, because he first loved us (1 John 4.19). If we cannot be good people, loving, caring people, we cannot belong to God, and we cannot have the heart that pleases him.

All of that is pretty pleasant, so we follow him pretty well ... until the part about hating evil. This, unfortunately, is not one of our specialties. The humanist philosophy that permeates our lives invades the Church and filters into our consciences, makes it difficult — if not impossible — to

see evil for what it is.

And yet, if we cannot see evil as God sees it, we will never be as horrified of it as he is, and we shall never realize the danger we are in. Some of us are already paddling about in the deep sea of a very compromising life-style, all the while feeling that we are right in the center of the Lord's will. Altogether convinced that God is pleased with us, we bob and float, comfortable when we should be terrified, drowning when we think we are borne upon the waves.

Secular humanism is the dominating philosophy of the modern western world. The essence of this school of thought probably originated with Protagoras, who declared that "man is the measure of all things". The *Humanist Manifesto*, first published in 1933, describes the major tenets of this thinking:

- ◆ The universe [is] self-existing and not created.
- ◆ Modern science makes unacceptable any supernatural or cosmic guarantees of human values.
- ◆ The complete realization of human personality [is] to be the end of man's life, and [man must seek] its development and fulfillment in the here and now.
- ◆ Any religious emotions mankind might have are to be expressed as "a heightened sense of personal life and in a cooperative effort to promote social well-being."<sup>22</sup>

The revised version of this *Manifesto*, published in 1973, adds the following declarations:

- ◆ Faith in the prayer-hearing God, assumed to love and care for persons, to hear and understand their prayers, and to be able to do something about them, is an unproved and outmoded faith. (...) Reasonable minds look to other means for survival.
- ◆ Traditional dogmatic or authoritarian religions that place revelation, God, ritual, or creed above human needs and experience do a disservice to the human species.
- ◆ No deity will save us; we must save ourselves.
- ◆ Moral values derive their source from human experience.
- ◆ Ethics come from human need and interest.

Here's the picture: We are being told that nothing greater than man can exist, that man's greatest goal in life is to achieve his full potential (to fulfill himself and satisfy his self-esteem), that all may be sacrificed to



the “me” and the “now”, and that all of this may be accomplished without any concern whatsoever for a governing morality — and certainly not for a sovereign God — outside of what one decides for oneself.

What must **“the God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome”** (Deuteronomy 10.17) think of all of this? Solomon answers the question: **“God made human beings straightforward, but they have devised many schemes”** (Ecclesiastes 7.29).

The thinking that man can replace *Theos* with *homo sapiens* and God’s laws with man’s whims must necessarily be an abomination to the Lord. Idolatry is indeed an abomination, as we have seen, even — and especially — if the god is man himself! Mankind has come to love what God hates (pride) and to hate what God loves (righteousness): a gripping — and perilous — situation.

What has Isaiah said about this ?

**Woe to those who call evil good, and good evil;  
Who substitute darkness for light and light for darkness;  
Who substitute bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter!**

(Isaiah 5.20)

We have scaled the vertical cliff to the throne of the god we imagined, tossed him off into the abyss, and are now sitting smugly in the holy of holies, having nonchalantly convinced ourselves that we are masters of our own fate and larger than our own life. The trouble is that the god that men thought they were dethroning was not the Lord of heaven and earth, but rather *their conception* of him, a lesser and weaker god: a god who, in fact, does not exist.

Before we as Christians recoil at the incredibly egotistical silliness of the humanistic leaning, we must realize how much it has affected us. For *it* has affected us much more than we may think.

One day, I was talking with a Christian who complained that she got nothing out of worship services on Sunday morning. She was going to worship in a humanist mode, as so many Christians do: seeking to receive, to be entertained, fulfilled and satisfied. I will never forget the look on her face when I told her, “We don’t go to worship to get something, but to give something. We go to worship God. That’s all that counts. Nothing else.” Of course, as I also pointed out, if we truly worship, we will obviously be changed and will, therefore, “get something” out of worship. But too many Christians are looking to get a feeling, a chill, a particular

satisfaction, without which they consider they have wasted their time on Sunday morning. This is a subtle cave-in to the world's "satisfy me" ego trip. We Christians even give in to it in worship, you see.

Even when we request our "favorite song," we must be very careful not to be looking just for the "thrill" it gives us, but to be looking for how it helps us worship our Maker. See the difference?

The main attraction of the Church must not become primarily a social one. There are plenty of "clubs" in the world where one can play golf, travel the globe, visit museums and eat good food. The business of the Church is spiritual, and though many of its activities may have social underpinnings, any and all that do not promote spiritual development should be excluded.

The world has not crept into the Church; in fact, it has invaded the Church with blaring trumpets and crashing cymbals. Its "glitter and tinsel" now characterize many Church activities, in spite of the efforts of more spiritually minded Christians to eliminate them. Some "Christian" groups in "worship" can hardly be distinguished from rock bands, rolling and shaking all over the stage. Does "entertainment" worship God? Does God love this? Can the line between the Church and the world be so thin as to seem to disappear altogether?

In addition, the Christian world abounds with books on self-esteem and on meeting "felt" needs. The Christians who devour these books and their particular viewpoint probably do not realize that they are thus giving in to the first points of religious humanism.

With considerable cleverness, we have combined the Christian ideal with the humanist goal, deciding that the true worship of God will be most evident when we ourselves are truly fulfilled. Even our buildings are therefore designed for our well being and comfort. How many mission works have been cancelled because a congregation decided to build a fellowship annex, or a parking lot, or a gymnasium, or to add air conditioning? The author of these lines is in a good position to answer that one.

**"What is prized by human beings is an abomination in the sight of God,"** says Jesus in Luke 16.15. We have despised God's word, because we have followed the leanings of the world (2 Kings 17.15), because we have become arrogant (Proverbs 16.5), because, as we have seen, we have placed ourselves upon the throne of our own lives.

Scripture repeatedly pronounces this two-fold warning: (1) God's

people are to separate themselves from the world, and (2) failing this, they will suffer the same judgment that will fall upon the world.

The upright heart, therefore, must hate the things of the world and love the things of God. No other order of things will do.

## HATING WHAT GOD HATES

What, then, should we hate? Well, what does God hate? Look at the list again. He hates all that is false, all that is unjust, unfair, unfaithful, violent, proud. He hates disobedience, treachery, greed, thievery, blasphemy. Do we hate all these things? All of them, Jesus said, **“come from within, from the human the heart”** (Mark 7.21). That means that the first place to look for what God hates is not in others, but in ourselves. We must get the hatchet out and be prepared to hack away. Jesus said:

**If your hand or your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off and throw it away; it is better for you to enter life maimed or lame than to have two hands or two feet and to be thrown into the eternal fire. And if your eye causes you to stumble, tear it out and throw it away; it is better for you to enter life with one eye than to have two eyes and to be thrown in the hell of fire** (Matthew 18.8-9).

I am not saying that Christians should plan to live miserable lives. The legitimate pleasures and enjoyments of human existence are freely available to us as gifts from our own God, who is happy to see us partaking of them with praise. What I am warning against is the heart that adopts the world’s corrupted values and perverted ways: man at the helm and God at the stern, the worship of the object, the worship of sex, the worship of self. These things are the swamp in which we flounder, hopeless but happy, not knowing that we must soon perish. We should hate them, for God hates them. But we accept them in the name of the tolerance preached by a ruined world.

Tolerance, you say? The tolerance of the world is a thumb to the nose. It says, “I couldn’t care less what you do, so why should you care what I do?” It says, “People are going to do what they want to do anyway, so I am going to pretend magnanimously to condone it (besides, that leaves me the room I want). Praise me for my generosity.” It says, “Leave me alone; I am not responsible to you or to your God.”

The Bible has a lot to say about tolerating the world’s sins. Read these passages, for example:

**Do not love the world or the things in the world. The love of the**

**Father is not in those who love the world; for all that is in the world — the desire of the flesh, the desire of the eyes, the pride in riches — comes not from the Father but from the world. And the world and its desire are passing away, but those who do the will of God live forever (1 John 2.15-17).**

**You must no longer live as the Gentiles live, in the futility of their minds. They are darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of their ignorance and hardness of heart (Ephesians 4.17-18).**

**“Hardness of heart.”** Often, the Christian would give his heart to the Lord, yet continue to live as do those whose heart is hardened (This idea is examined in another chapter). It doesn’t take a genius to realize that this cannot work. **“You cannot serve God and Mammon”** (Matthew 6.24). Paul says to the Ephesians:

**You were taught to put away your former way of life, your old self, corrupt and deluded by its lusts, and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to clothe yourselves with the new self, created according to the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness (Ephesians 4.22-24).**

But too many Christians have held on frantically to that old heart, as to a comfortable pair of worn-out jeans they can’t bring themselves to throw away. Instead of hating the things of the world as God does, they compromise themselves in a dualistic kind of existence that would incorporate the best elements of both (another chapter of this book examines this phenomenon). Leaders in the Church spend their energies trying to get people of this sort to understand that if they try to live in two worlds, they will be dead in both.

This is indeed a difficult row to hoe. We are so tuned to our own rights (whatever that means) and so unaware of our duty to others. We have seen that God always does what he says he will do. Are we that honest? (Always?) We have also seen that for God a sin is a sin, whoever commits it. Is it the same for us?

It goes without saying that we are normally harder on others for their faults than on ourselves (sometimes for the same faults!). Why is that? Because by projecting the blame (psychologists call it just that: projection) on others for our own faults, we free ourselves from the burden of guilt. And guilt is the world’s biggest taboo.

One thing God wants to teach us is that we must be as “just” in con-

denning our own sins as we are in condemning those of others. In fact, God would like us to be even harder on ourselves than on others. Love can do that; selfishness cannot.

That means if we sit down with a brother or sister to talk with him or her about a particular sin, we must first have gone over our own life in view of weeding out this same sin (Matthew 7.3-5). It means, also, that if we are the object of criticism from a brother or sister about a sin we are committing, we cannot afford to focus on their manner of proceeding (offensive or not); we must rather determine if they have a point. And if so, we must act on this truth.

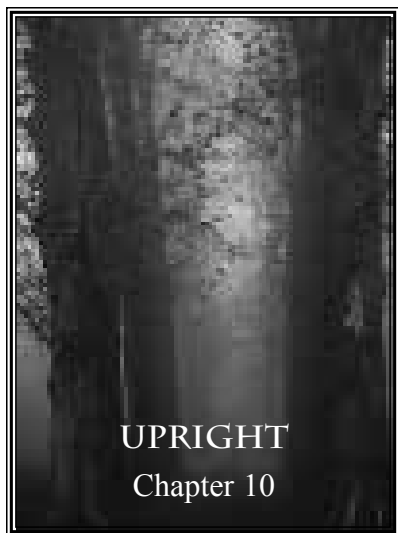
If we love, we can be just. We can see sin for what it is, we can mark it and cut it from our lives.

We need to see our sin as what took Jesus to the cross. We need to see even the sins we have not yet committed as having been laid on Jesus on the cross. Perhaps that will make us more just (and perhaps it will help us to sin less). We need to understand that we have been saved as much by the justice of God as by his love.

Anne Ortlund says, "Look carefully at these things listed in Colossians 3, and ask yourself if you hate each one as God hates them. (...) Do you let them coexist in your life as if they were acceptable? Are you tolerating God's enemies?"<sup>23</sup>

I once heard a story about a man who kept falling out of bed. He was told not to sleep on the edge. Christians too often stay on the edge of their faith and not in the middle of it. Hence they continually fall. And the first ones hurt are themselves. We have been crucified with Christ (Galatians 2.20), and having been crucified, we are raised to walk in a new life (Romans 6.4). We must, therefore, seek not what is earthly but what is heavenly (Colossians 3.1-2). We must seek what God loves and avoid what he hates.

As a missionary, I have often seen young (and older) Christians spend a year or two away from the home-Church setting, in a foreign context where they are out from under the pressures of parents and/or fellow-Christians, geographically far from their usual group of worshiping fellows. And it has often been difficult to get them to make the effort to worship with the Lord's people or to be involved in any way with the Church's work during this time. Why? Because their hearts never did love the things that God loves, nor hate the things that he hates. Because



they were never taught that to love the world is to alienate God. Because when they were out from under the surveillance of a large of group of other Christians, they cut their anchors and turned their sails to a strange wind!

Divided hearts are such excuse-makers! Leaders talking to wayward members often meet an incredibly inventive display of wordiness intended to justify what is simply unfaithfulness to the Lord.

My most recent encounter of this kind was with a would-be missionary, spending time where I live, in order

to learn French before going to another French-speaking mission point. Having announced that he was not in France to be involved with the Church, but rather to learn French, he plunged into his studies, making only occasional appearances at the worship services of the Church, participating in nearly none of its public activities and absolutely none of its works. When I reproached him for this lack of involvement, especially on the part of an aspiring missionary, I was called an oppressive legalist.

Worldliness in the Church of our Lord is an increasing concern. Occasionally we deliberately downplay the scandal of the cross, in an effort to convince others that we are not such strange people, after all. But, this is always a mistake. John R. W. Stott has said that “the Christian community is a community of the cross, for it has been brought into being by the cross, and the focus of its worship is the Lamb once slain, now glorified”<sup>24</sup> We have to admit that we have often been more a community of culture, of social graces, of feeling good, than of the cross. For the cross is a grinding point with our culture; it makes us different, and no one likes to be different. Sometimes, in my work in France, I find myself wishing that people could consider me as “normal” and not as a dangerous (or naïve) leader of a religious cult. But did people find Jesus “normal”? If he suffered, why should we not suffer as well? Indeed, Paul considered the “fellowship” of the sufferings of Christ a desirable thing (Philippians 3.10), its obvious disadvantages far outdistanced by the “surpassing value

of knowing Christ” (Philippians 3.8). He even invited Christians to consider it a privilege “not only to believe in him, but also to suffer for his sake” (Philippians 1.29). He certainly was an excellent example in this (cf. 2 Corinthians 4.7-11; 11.23-28). In spite of what we know to be true, our natural desire is to be accepted and acceptable, so that the society at large will not marginalize us. We have neglected to hate what God hates. And we end up with divided hearts.

C. Leonard Allen observes, “We presently live in a culture where Jesus’ call to follow the way of the cross has become almost unintelligible. Though Christianity seems to be flourishing, it is a Christianity with little room for the cross. The dominant vision of the good life that holds sway everywhere around us today simply excludes the cross.”<sup>25</sup>

Paul tells us that we are “the fragrance of Christ” (2 Corinthians 2.15). This aroma is a putrid stench to the perishing and a lovely perfume to the saved. But what we should be most concerned about is how we smell to God. The burnt sacrifices of the Old Testament were a “soothing aroma” to the Lord (Exodus 29.18, for ex.). The sacrifices of the new covenant, which include no less than the giving of ourselves and all we have to him (Romans 12.1-2), are also a pleasing odor to our God.

Indeed, how we smell to God will depend in large part on how the world smells to us. If we love what it loves and hate what it hates, we’re reading the book upside down.

## SEEING WITH GOD’S EYES

### THE LOVING / HATING HEART

### QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. What does God love? Discuss.
2. Should the Christian hate? If so, what should he hate?
3. Discuss the statement: “If we cannot see evil as God sees it, we will never be as horrified of it as he is, and we shall never realize the danger we are in.”
4. How does the author describe “the incredibly egotistical silliness of the humanistic leaning”?
5. Discuss this statement: “The world has not crept into the Church; in fact, it has invaded the Church with bleating trumpets and crashing cymbals.” Do you believe this? Why or why not?

6. How can it be said that we have “combined the Christian ideal with the humanist goal”?
7. Why does hating what God hates not mean that the Christian has to live a miserable life?
8. What does it mean to say that we are saved “as much by [God’s] justice as by his love”?
9. Discuss this statement: “how we smell to God will depend in large part on how the world smells to us.”



# GIVE UP?

## THE SURRENDERED HEART

If you think you are beaten, you are,  
If you think you dare not, you don't;  
If you like to win, but you think you can't,  
It's almost a cinch you won't.  
If you think you'll lose, you've lost,  
For out in the world you find  
Success begins with a fellow's will;  
It's all in the state of mind.

Full many a race is lost  
Ere ever a step is run;  
And many a coward fails  
Ere ever his work's begun.  
Think big and your deeds will grow,  
Think small and you'll fall behind,  
Think that you can and you will;  
It's all in the state of mind.

If you think you're outclassed, you are,  
You've got to think high to rise;  
You've got to be sure of yourself before  
You can ever win a prize.  
Life's battles don't always go  
To the stronger or faster man,  
But sooner or later the man who wins  
Is the fellow who thinks he can.

(Author unknown)

With all due respect to the good-thinking author of these lines, this piece is, in my humble opinion, a deceptive concoction of completely erroneous stuffy air.

Every American “baby-boomer” knows the story of “The Little Engine

That Could”, that admirable little bedtime amusement that was read to us as children. The little engine, weighted down with a tremendously heavy load, labors up the mountain side panting, “I think I can, I think I can, I think I can.” Advancing more and more slowly as he approaches the top, he strains under his burden. His exertion weighs upon us as well (and we like to feel that he might not make it, even though we know he will) until, at last, the summit is reached. Then we breathe a sigh of relief at his success; accompanying his easy slide down the back of the mountain, we chant with him, “I thought I could, I thought I could, I thought I could!”

I have always loved this story. Really. Only recently, after 50 years as a Christian, did I come to understand its devastating effect on all who believe it. The insidious philosophy of this tale would have us believe that (1) to succeed is the ultimate goal, (2) we can always do what we really want to do, and (3) failure is not an option.

In his poem, “Failure Is Never Final,” Lewis Timberlake says exactly that :

Failure doesn’t mean I’m a failure;  
it just means I haven’t succeeded ... yet.

Failure must never be considered a valid state. When we find ourselves there, we must buckle under, put the nose to the grindstone, tighten the belt, raise the chin and get back into the ring. Sound familiar?

Winning is in, losing is out. Who loves a loser? Who hates a winner? (Well, some do hate a winner, but mostly because of jealousy.) Our society teaches us not to even use the “F” word (“fail”). Better to replace it with “temporary setback”. Failure has become, says Anthony Campolo, Jr., the unforgivable sin.

The Bible suggests, however, that there is a definite place in the biblical worldview for failure. Indeed, a certain kind of failure is necessary.

As it turns out, God made us to fail. I am not referring to not doing our best (a most condemnable fault), but rather to a permanent state of conscious inadequacy best defined as a constant death to self and to self’s ambitions. We sacrifice our goals of self-glory on the altar of our love for God’s will. At the same time, we develop a complete and tenacious confidence in his person and his way. This is the failure that God approves, the failure that is part of his plan.

Paul’s physical weakness made him call on the Lord (1 Corinthians 12), for he realized that only God was able to strengthen him. The Lord,

however, considered this weakness a valid condition for a recipient of grace. The declaration, **“My grace is sufficient for you”** (2 Corinthians 12.9) suggests that once we have seized God’s grace and been saved, all of our other needs become opportunities to lean upon him even more. When Paul understood this, he declared, **“Most gladly, therefore, I will rather boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. (...) For when I am weak, then I am strong”** (2 Corinthians 12.9-10). This apparent contradiction in terms is intended to teach us that when we really realize our frailty, we then tend to depend on the Lord as we ought. Then, and only then, can we be said to be strong. But the strength is his and not ours.

Erwin W. Lutzer writes, “To be strong in ourselves is defeat; to be helpless in ourselves makes us candidates for God’s power. (...) The call of the Peace Corps, cults, and political revolutionaries is to the strong, courageous, and the shrewd. The call of God is to the weak, the helpless, and the broken. In Christianity the strong are defeated, the weak are victorious.”<sup>27</sup>

The Church does not need strong men and women (understand what I’m saying here); it needs Christians willing to understand how utterly incapable they are of serving the Lord without his help. Those feeble Christians, then, will be full of the Lord’s own strength.

## IMPORTANT FAILURES IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

Let us consider some examples of the right kind of failure, looking at this phenomenon in the light of the plan of God as it is revealed to mankind.

### ABRAHAM

Abraham has been called the “friend” of God (cf. 2 Chronicles 20.7). The Bible lauds his confidence in God and his persistence in faith, albeit through some moments of doubt. God called himself **“the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob”** (Exodus 3.15). Think of the faith of a man whose name God deigns to wear! I have on occasion asked Christians to imagine their name in one of those three spotlights. Their usual reaction is to declare that they are not worthy. Of course they are not worthy! No one is! And Abraham certainly was not. God doesn’t wear people’s names because they are perfect, but because they have learned to trust him.

Actually, Abraham didn't have much choice in the matter, once he had given his allegiance to God. When he took his precious, unsuspecting Isaac up on Mount Moriah to sacrifice him, he failed. I'm not saying he failed the test God was putting him through. I'm saying that the test itself was to see if in his heart he was willing to surrender to the Lord.

Allow me to explain: here was a man whom God had called out of paganism, giving him **"precious and magnificent promises"** (2 Peter 1.4): he was to have a land and a nation, and to be a blessing to all people. Obviously none of these could be realized unless he had direct descendants. God, however, was taking his own good time in accomplishing his promises. Abraham was 75 when God called him (Genesis 12.4). Ten years later (Genesis 16.3), the promised heir had still not appeared and Abraham (aided by Sarah, it must be said) took matters into his own hands. He took Hagar, Sarah's servant, to wife and she bore him a son, Ishmael. The birth of this son created untold jealousy in Abraham's household and certainly did not accomplish God's promise.

When Abraham was 99 years of age, the son of the covenant had still not arrived. Then God solemnly announced to Abraham that his wife Sarah, ten years his junior, would bear the son that would be the beginning of the promised nation (Genesis 17.15-22). At this news, Abraham bowed down — not to worship, but to laugh. He laughed, just as Sarah would when hearing the same news later (chapter 18). God, showing the remarkable patience that would characterize his dealings with Abraham's descendants, calmly insisted that one year later Sarah should indeed bear a son, whose name would be Isaac (meaning, by the way, "laughter").

How can we reconcile this laughter with the faith that is attributed to Abraham in Genesis 15.6? This text, taken up as a banner for salvation through faith in God (Romans 4), says, Abraham "believed in the Lord; and he reckoned it to him as righteousness." This covenant was sealed in a solemn ceremony that very day (cf. Genesis 15.7-21; Jeremiah 34.18).<sup>28</sup> Abraham clearly believed the promise that God made him. But he hadn't a clue as to how God could bring it about. So, when God told him the workings of the accomplishment, it sounded so absurd to Abraham that he actually did laugh. He had not yet applied his faith to his knowledge, enabling him to trust God for what he did not yet know (or understand).

When Isaac was born, Abraham was 100 years old, Sarah 90 (Genesis 21.5). We can hardly imagine the joy of this old couple, cuddling their

newborn in their advanced age. For Abraham, the miracle of this birth furnished the understanding he lacked. He wasn't laughing any more. Here was proof of the faithfulness and the power of God, proof that he was indeed able to fulfill his extravagant promises, that he would in fact make of this little man a tremendous nation. This was the son of the **"everlasting covenant"** (Genesis 17.19), the answer to prayer, the magnificent fulfillment of Abraham's destiny, the bearer of the dream. Abraham, the man of faith, was at the pinnacle of his joy.

Then came the devastating command. **"Take now your son, your only son, whom you love, Isaac, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I will tell you"** (Genesis 22.2). The seeming cruelty of this order is underlined by the words, **"your only son, whom you love, Isaac"**. Was God so unfeeling? Why remind Abraham of his love for his only son, while telling him that he must destroy him, and with him, apparently, the promise?

But God was anything but unfeeling. On this same mountain, two millennia later, this Father would likewise offer his own son, Jesus of Nazareth, also called the Son of Man. The pain of God's sacrifice must have burned in his own heart as he gave this order to the man, Abraham.

But why this commandment in the first place? Abraham, after having thought he understood the workings of God's plan, had now to be shown not only that nothing is too difficult for the Lord (Genesis 18.14), but also that no one, not even the father of the faithful, can pretend to do God's work. Abraham must surrender. He must be willing to place his only son in God's hands, he must be willing to let Isaac die and still believe in God's promises.

The biblical text does not reveal Abraham's immediate reaction to this awful order. But what the text does say is very much to his credit. **"Abraham rose early in the morning ..."** (Genesis 22.3). This man was ready to do what God wanted. Though we cannot read into his heart, we know exactly what is in it, for we observe that Abraham obeyed God. This, by the way, is the saving faith that Paul praises. Abraham took his son, marched him to Mount Moriah, set up his altar, bound the young man upon it, seized his dagger and resolutely raised his hand to stab the life out of his own future.

The New Testament offers a clue to his thinking at this precise moment: **"he considered that God is able to raise people even from**

**the dead**" (Hebrews 11.19). This, then, is how Abraham convinced himself to go ahead. He could thus give up his son to God, admitting his own inadequacy and trusting completely in his maker.

And so, God stayed his hand. **"Now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me"** (Genesis 22.12). Abraham had passed the test by failing, by recognizing that he could not rise above God's sovereignty. God will accept no other attitude towards himself. He dooms us all to fail.

## MOSES

We often neglect to note the high accomplishments of Moses. The Bible says he was **"educated in all the learning of the Egyptians"** (Acts 7.22) and that he was **"greatly esteemed in the land of Egypt, both in the sight of Pharaoh's servants and in the sight of the people"** (Exodus 11.3). He had access to **"the treasures of Egypt"** (Hebrews 11.26). This is to be expected, as he was raised in the palace of the Pharaoh (Exodus 2.10), thereby receiving the best training and education available at the time.

But Moses' accomplishments were not limited to his Egyptian period. Moses, whose name is mentioned 766 times in the Old Testament and 81 in the New Testament, was one of the few men of the Bible who spoke face to face with God (Exodus 33.11), beholding his glory (Exodus 33.18, 34.8; Numbers 12.8), to the point that his own face shone from the encounter (Exodus 34.29). This man even dared to contradict God, convincing him on at least two occasions not to destroy the people for their unbelief (Exodus 32.9-14, 30.35; Numbers 14.11-24).<sup>29</sup>

God doesn't let people get closer to him than this. One proof of Moses' greatness was his appearance at Jesus' side on the mountain (Matthew 17.3). His name is forever linked to the law that he brought down from Sinai and his person is greatly respected by the Jewish people and by every Christian.

Moses is great because he failed; and this was as it should be, for the work of Moses — great though it was — was designed to be inadequate. He was unable, either in his person or in his work, to bring the people of God to complete safety.

Having been brought up in the courts of Pharaoh, Moses was among the brightest stars of the Egyptian nation, perhaps in the running for the

seat of the sovereign prince himself. But Moses was a Hebrew, and the suffering of his mistreated people tormented him. One day, observing an Egyptian beating a Hebrew, he made his choice. Looking around to assure himself that he would not be seen, he killed the Egyptian, hiding the body in the sand. The next day, when trying to intervene between two quarreling Hebrews, he was surprised when one of them said to him, **“Who made you a prince or a judge over us? Are you intending to kill me as you killed the Egyptian?”** (Exodus 2.14).

Moses himself did not realize the irony of this remark. God would indeed establish him judge and ruler over Israel, forty years hence. But this answer to the Hebrew’s question was not available to Moses at the moment. He fled to Midian, abandoning all hope of glory in Egypt. Hebrews 11 tells us that Moses was **“considering the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures of Egypt; for he was looking to the reward”** (11.26). This is not to say that at this juncture Moses knew Jesus, but that he made a solid choice between Egypt’s glory and a certain solidarity with his oppressed people. But Moses was not to rise up and deliver them in a mighty way. He was not to deliver them at all; this was God’s role. Moses was to be God’s servant in this task. But first he had to learn to fail. He had to understand that it would be God — and not Moses — who would free his people.

So Moses was packed off to Midian, there to spend what must have been forty miserable years as a shepherd in the deserted countryside of that barren land. But it was in that desolate country that Moses learned to protect and drive his sheep, to nourish and save them — in a word, to be a leader. God was preparing him for a great responsibility, by showing him first of all the miseries of leadership: the pushing, the pulling, the trying to get weak, immature, discontented, hard-headed, self-willed sheep to follow.

Moses learned his own failure so well that when God challenged him with the delivery of Israel from bondage in Egypt, he was unwilling, and thought he was unable, to accept the challenge (Exodus 3.7-4.17).

When Moses saw that he had no choice (is this becoming a pattern?), he went to Egypt to do as God had instructed him. But there, failure awaited him on another level. His own people refused to believe he could lead them out (Exodus 6.1-9). Again he complained to God: **“Behold, the sons of Israel have not listened to me; how then will Pharaoh listen to me, for I am unskilled in speech?”** (Exodus 6.12; cf. vs. 30).

Indeed, Pharaoh did not listen to him: **“Who is the Lord that I should obey his voice to let Israel go? I do not know the Lord, and besides, I will not let Israel go”** (Exodus 5.2). Let us notice, then, that Moses was not able to take the people out on his own authority. It was God who would do it, and he did it by his own mighty power, not by any prowess of Moses. At the same time, we notice that God operated his great deliverance through the obedience of Moses and Aaron, who did precisely **“as the Lord commanded them”** (Exodus 7.6).

So, the great plagues of Egypt began. Moses and Aaron entered the presence of the Pharaoh on numerous occasions to deliver God’s ultimatum. As the plagues rained on the pitiful nation of Egypt, Moses took on an increasing measure of the assurance that was to characterize his nature in the coming years.

How had this come about? Moses’ heart had been more and more made to realize its own inadequacy and the necessity of leaning on the devastating power of God. He had to learn to fail. When he did so, God made him what God wanted him to be, the great leader of Israel, who could announce with all confidence, **“Do not fear! Stand by and see the salvation of the Lord which he will accomplish for you today (...). The Lord will fight for you”** (Exodus 14.13a, 14a).

In the end, after forty years of leading a reluctant people, Moses gave in to a moment of frustration and spoke some hasty words: **“Listen now, you rebels, shall we bring forth water for you out of this rock?”** (Numbers 20.10). Because he did not exalt the Lord before the people, Moses was denied entrance into the Promised Land (Numbers 20.12). God permitted him to see it from Mount Nebo before he died, but not to enter (Deuteronomy 34.1-5).

Or, did he? The synoptic Gospels record Moses standing on the mountain of transfiguration with Jesus (Matthew 17.3; Mark 9.4; Luke 9.30). Denied entrance during his earthly life, Moses was welcomed into Zion in his death. We see him there, bathing in the glory of Christ, speaking to the Savior of his coming death in Jerusalem (Luke 9.31). Moses knew something of the nature of frustrated leadership, of human weakness before a great task, of the need to lean upon the mighty arm of God. These things that he had learned, he could share with Jesus, who was preparing himself to shed the blood of the new covenant which would make Moses’ covenant obsolete.



## JOB

The only time Job is mentioned in the New Testament (James 5.11), he is lauded for his **“endurance”** (NAS). The word **“endurance”** fits Job better than the word **“patience”**, for patient — as we understand the word — he was not. This **“patient”** man said several things and adopted several attitudes that he should have avoided. (We could almost say that knowing how to endure does not guarantee that one is mature in every other aspect of life.) His merit, however, is in the fact that he maintained his faith in God throughout his trials (Job 1.21, for ex.). God himself called him **“blameless”** and **“upright”**, saying in addition that **“there is no one like him on the earth”** (Job 1.8; 2.3). This is high praise for a man who declared **“I will argue my ways before him”** (Job 13.15).

In fact, Job had to fail in order to realize the power of God and to attain the **“steadfastness”** (RSV) for which he was commended. His had been a blessed situation: a large, happy family, wealth and fame, good health. When all of this was torn from him and he sat among the ashes, scraping himself with a **“a piece of a broken pot”** (Job 2.8, NEB), listening to his friends declare that he must have sinned terribly in order to deserve such treatment, his composure — such as it was at that point — wore thin. Knowing he was innocent of wrongdoing, he implored and accused God (cf. Job 13.23-24, etc.), with the result that God appeared to him in the end, drilling him with questions that Job could not begin to answer. The very first of them was the killer: **“Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?”** (Job 38.4).

God cannot be proven unjust, no matter how wronged we feel. We can never vaunt righteousness before him. Job made the mistake of insisting that God answer his questions. He would have obliged God to explain himself. This is folly indeed.

God is not our peer! He is not a bedfellow whom we may scold for disturbing our sleep, or a bosom buddy whose difficult ways we may hope to change. Ours is not to mold his plan to us, but to fit ourselves into his plan, however painful that may seem at the moment. When his methods shock, or hurt, or intimidate, or scare us, we must remember that we are dealing with the almighty God, the Creator, who sees all things, who can do all things, who knows everything about everything. He, therefore, knows what is best for us, even if that may not seem the case to our finite minds. And he certainly is not obliged to justify his actions. Who are

we to call God to account? Would we become the judge of the Judge of the universe?

Job himself asked this question when he said:

**Can anyone teach God knowledge,  
In that he judges those on high? (Job 21.22)**

And Job had to be taught the same lesson, when God said to him:

**Will you really annul my judgment?  
Will you condemn me that you may be justified? (Job 40.8)**

It should be noted that in all the grilling at the end of the book, never once did God offer to explain to Job why he had suffered so terribly. Job had to learn that God does not always explain his ways. He had to learn to fail: we also must learn that God holds the light we cannot see, that he does indeed know the answer to the questions we don't know how to ask.

In spite of his ignorance of the coming intervention of the Christ, Job demonstrated in a prophetic way his confidence in a heavenly intercessor:

**Even now, behold, my witness is in heaven,  
And my advocate is on high.  
My friends are my scoffers;  
My eye weeps to God.  
O that a man might plead with God  
As a man with his neighbor! (Job 16.19-21)**

I am convinced that it is declarations like this that prevented God from being as displeased with Job as he was with Job's friends (42.7). During his terrible trial, Job cried out, he complained, he questioned. But never did he renounce God. His cries, his complaints, his questions — all were addressed to his maker. In this he recognized, always, that God was the final source of knowledge and the only well of hope. Job's friends pretended to know God; Job, on the other hand, lamented his lack of knowledge of God and the reasons for his suffering. And he cast himself upon the mercies of the Lord. Though God upbraided him for rash statements about divine justice, he did not label him faithless or reprobate.

Job did fail: his righteousness did not prevent his awful suffering, nor did it obtain for him a reasonable explanation (humanly speaking) for his trials. But was he discontented at the end of the path? Absolutely not. He was given a glimpse of the holiness of God (42.5), which, I am sure, sat-

isfied him a hundred times more than the later blessings God granted him.

## JOSHUA

When God spoke to Moses face to face, Joshua was also present. This **“son of Nun”** showed himself faithful from the beginning. As one of the twelve sent into Canaan to spy out the land, he demonstrated his faith in God by giving a good report and encouraging Israel not to fear (Numbers 14.9).

God chose him to secure Israel’s possession of the Promised Land (Deuteronomy 1.38). Then Moses gave Joshua the same advice Joshua had given to the people: **“Do not fear them, for the Lord your God is the one fighting for you”** (Deuteronomy 3.22).

Listen, then, to the advice God gave Joshua when speaking to him of his new responsibilities:

**I will not fail you or forsake you. Be strong and courageous** (Joshua 1.5-6).

**Only be strong and very courageous** (Joshua 1.7).

**Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous! Do not tremble or be dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go** (Joshua 1.9).

**Even the people said to Joshua, when pledging to follow him: “Only be strong and courageous”** (Joshua 1.18).

Do you think that perhaps Joshua had a problem with being strong and courageous? Was he afraid? Why was it necessary for God to continually admonish him in this way?

I believe that Joshua was indeed afraid. As the assistant to Moses during the whole of the latter’s time as leader of Israel, Joshua had accompanied Moses to the **“mountain of God”** (Exodus 24.13). He had been in the **“tent of meeting”** when Moses talked face to face with the Lord. Joshua had observed the power of the Lord in all his dealings with Israel; he had seen the anger of the Lord in the affair of the golden calf and the refusal of Israel to accept the good report of the two faithful spies, himself and Caleb. Most of all, Joshua had seen how the Lord had treated this first generation of Israelites who had been unfaithful, by forcing them to wander in the wilderness until they all died. Joshua had even had to

wander with them!

After all of this, Joshua had seen how Moses, the great leader of the Jewish people, had been denied entry into the promised land because of a single rash remark! There was reason to be afraid! Here he was, the newly established leader of this rebellious, bickering nation. Joshua knew what God was capable of doing to faithless people. He already knew the principle he was to announce to Israel at the end of his life: **“If you forsake the Lord and serve foreign gods, then he will turn and do you harm and consume you after he has done good to you”** (Joshua 24.20). So Joshua trembled, fearing the task to which he was called, for he was a just and faithful man who **“fully”** followed the Lord (Numbers 32.12). And he desired that the people of God might demonstrate their faithfulness to their sovereign.

Joshua understood that he must fail. That is, he must not assume to save Israel by his own prowess or his own plan. He must, in all things, follow precisely the plan the Lord gave him. These were the orders given him (Joshua 1.8-9), and this is the plan that he would carry out, to the letter. He did **“just as the Lord, God of Israel, had commanded”** (Joshua 10.40), he “left nothing undone of all that the Lord had commanded Moses (Joshua 11.15).

And so, Joshua accomplished great deeds. Or rather, God accomplished great deeds through Joshua, who successfully led Israel into Canaan and conquered that fertile land. The Lord fought for Israel, and by Joshua he accomplished all of **“the good promises”** that he had made to the house of Israel. **“All came to pass”** (Joshua 21.45, cf. 23.14).

It is significant, then, that at the end of his life Joshua warned the people to **“take diligent heed (...) to love the Lord your God”** and to be **“very firm (...) to keep and do all that is written in the book of the law of Moses, so that you may not turn aside from it to the right hand or to the left”** (Joshua 23.11; 23.6). He had learned that the only way to serve the Lord is to give in to him, that nothing counts as much as doing the will of God exactly as he expresses it, whatever the consequences for one’s own ambitions.

## DAVID

David, seventh of the eight sons of the aging Jesse, an Ephrathite of Bethlehem (1 Samuel 17.12; 1 Chronicles 2.15), was apparently destined to a life of shepherding.

And shepherd he did, but the flock was the people of God (2 Samuel

7.8). Here we have a life that did not need to be convinced to surrender to God. David seems, from the beginning, to have understood his desperate need for the God of Israel. At times, though, as we shall see, David let down his guard and permitted himself liberties that fell completely outside the divine will. (This, by the way, is the path of constant danger, tread by every man of God.)

He was, after all, a man, and subject to a man's temptations. When he yielded, this man whose heart was usually **"after the heart of God"** (1 Samuel 13.14; Acts 13.22) was capable of ruthlessly evil deeds. But then, as if called back from a wild, wicked dream, he stood confronted by his evil, and he accepted God's judgment without complaint. It is this willingness to submit to his own condemnation that God seems to encourage in him; and this in turns leads David to lean even more upon the Lord.

The first time we see David in action, he is a very young man, probably only a teenager. But already he has an extremely well developed sense of the sovereignty of God and of God's power over all men. This he has learned in the fields with his sheep, protecting them from lions and bears (1 Samuel 17.36-37). When he sees the giant Goliath and hears the challenge of this Philistine from Gath, he immediately sees the menace for what it is, not as a military confrontation between Israel and Philistia, but a challenge by a man, however strong, to the **"living God"**.

**"Who is this uncircumcised Philistine, that he should taunt the armies of the living God?"** (1 Samuel 17.26). This is the question David asked, and to which no one in the army of Israel had an answer. Consider the incongruity of the situation. Two armies were camped face to face, on either side of the valley of Elah, southwest of Jerusalem. The giant Goliath, huge and impressive in his ponderous battle gear, shouted to Israel to choose a man to fight with him. The issue of the battle, he bellowed, would determine the outcome of the confrontation between the two armies.

**"When all the men of Israel [including Saul, 1 Samuel 17.11] saw the man, they fled from him and were very greatly afraid"** (1 Samuel 17.24). The armies of God Almighty, whose tremendous power had already been clearly demonstrated to Israel, even in the days of Saul, found themselves intimidated by this tall, blustering monster!

But, in all fairness to them, we must admit that Goliath was not chal-

lenging the two armies to a battle, but rather inviting *one* Hebrew soldier to meet him on the field. Who, reading these lines, would want to have been that man?

But here was a young lad, freshly arrived from the fields where he had been tranquilly watching his sheep, and who, after observing the situation and hearing the challenge of Goliath, decided that something had to be done. He was neither a soldier nor a son of a soldier; he therefore had no military or tactical training. He was but a youngster in the midst of hardened military career personnel. But these supposedly toughened soldiers stood there quaking before Goliath, while David was full to bursting with confidence.

And that was the difference. The soldiers could think of only one way to beat this giant: an individual soldier must out-maneuver him on the field. But David's sublime confidence was not in himself, but in the Lord. Listen to this piece of advice, given as from the mouth of a military general full of experience: **"Let no man's heart fail on account of him; your servant will go and fight with this Philistine"** (1 Samuel 17.32).

Saul must have dropped his teeth. He was horrified at the thought of this inexperienced child taking on such a massive, seasoned beast of a killing-machine. **"You are not able to go against this Philistine to fight with him; for you are but a youth while he has been a warrior from his youth"** (1 Samuel 17.33). We can hear him saying in his head, "This kid is out of his mind!"

But David, without missing a beat, continued:

**Your servant has killed both the lion and the bear; and this uncircumcised Philistine will be like one of them, since he has taunted the armies of the living God. The Lord who delivered me from the paw of the lion and from the paw of the bear, he will deliver me from the hand of this Philistine** (1 Samuel 17.36-37).

To this Saul replied, **"Go, and may the Lord be with you!"** (1 Samuel 17.37). We might translate this, "Go on then, but don't forget to tell us where you want us to send your remains." Saul had no confidence in God.

Saul insisted that David wear the king's own armor. Now, imagine David trying to walk onto the field in this cumbersome get-up, looking like the tin man of later children's stories, creaking and clanking, with the gigantic sword of Saul dragging in the dust at his side. No, he would not

wear the armor, but yes, he would still go. And what weapons would he take? His staff in his hand, five smooth stones from the brook, his sling, and as deep a faith in God as is ever recorded in all of Scripture.

There, walking confidently out to meet the giant, David had already failed. He had given the battle to the Lord, knowing that he, David, was in fact too small a man to win this encounter on his own. Seen from a purely military point of view, David was strolling naively to suicide, for he was indeed vastly inferior to his opponent. But the battle was the Lord's, not David's (1 Samuel 17.47). And David intended to walk off the field triumphant in the God who was greater, more powerful and more able than any Philistine soldier, be he nine feet tall!

From this moment on, everything happened quite quickly. David, the man who had failed before God, was ready for God to use him to defeat an enemy of his people.

The giant mocked the ruddy youth, disdaining him, as well he might. For this young man carrying his "sticks" (1 Samuel 17.43) would not defeat him. In this, Goliath's assessment was correct. What he did not know was that the little man facing him was backed by the terrible strength of the Almighty God.

David's speech to the giant was full of his heart's faith:

**You come to me with a sword, a spear, and a javelin, but I come to you in the name of the Lord of hosts, the God of the armies of Israel, whom you have taunted. This day the Lord will deliver you up into my hands, and I will strike you down and remove your head from you. And I will give the dead bodies of the army of the Philistines this day to the birds of the sky and the wild beasts of the earth, that all the earth may know that there is a God in Israel, and that all this assembly may know that the Lord does not deliver by sword or by spear; for the battle is the Lord's and he will give you into our hands** (1 Samuel 17.45-47).

What silliness this must have seemed to Goliath! He must have chuckled all the way through it, his eyes lighting up at the incredible innocence of this poor child, who would nevertheless make an all the more delicious victim.

The giant advanced toward David, who took a stone from his bag, and, whirling it around a few times in his sling, deftly and accurately sent it deep into the forehead of the enemy. Goliath fell face down, and

David, hastening to finish the job, dispatched the giant with the giant's own sword, chopping off his head.

Did David win this battle? No, he failed. Though a vigorous young man, he was still too small, too weak, too inexperienced, too young to be of any threat to Goliath. But God won the battle (cf. 1 Samuel 19.5) and he used David to do it. What a way to fail! And what a way to win!

So many examples from the Old Testament could be examined: Noah, Joseph, Elijah, Jeremiah, and others. The Scripture repeatedly tells of great men and women who failed; that is, they surrendered their lives and their ambitions to a higher call, that of the will of the God who made them. They are all aptly described in this pertinent verse by Emily Dickinson:

Not one of all the purple host  
Who took the Flag today  
Can tell the definition  
So clear of Victory

As he defeated — dying —  
On whose forbidden ear  
The distant strains of triumph  
Burst agonized and clear!<sup>30</sup>

Compare that with this, from the book of Hebrews:

**All of these died in faith without having received the promises, but having seen them and having welcomed them from a distance** (Hebrews 11.13).

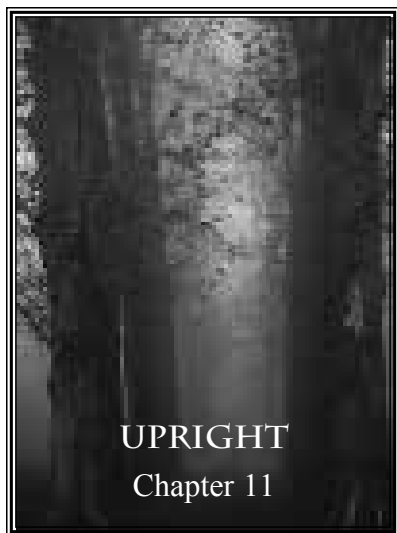
They lost, and that was what God expected them to do.

## JESUS

Let us now look at one more — ultimate — example: the Son of God. Did Jesus fail? Can we say, without blasphemy, that Jesus came to the earth to fail?

Listen to him when he says to his disciples in John 5.30: **“I do not seek my own will but the will of him who sent me.”** Now, think about that for a moment. Here is the Son of God, the Creator of the universe (John 1.3; Hebrews 1.2), the **“radiance of [God’s] glory and the exact representation of his nature”** (Hebrews 1.3), who has come from heav-





en not to be served **“but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many”** (Mark 10.45).

The inventor of life had come to die. The devil knew that in his human state, Jesus could be tempted by the glory that the Jewish nation wished to heap upon a conquering Messiah. That is why he offered Jesus the splendor of the kingdoms of the world (Matthew 4.8-9). Jesus would have none of it. But Satan did not easily abandon such a juicy prize. When Peter exclaimed, **“God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you,”** Jesus, who had just been

recognized as the Messiah by the same Peter, angrily resisted this suggestion that he should not have to suffer. **“Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on God’s interests, but on man’s”** (Matthew 16.23).

In spite of Jewish expectation and generations of tradition, the Messiah must die. Jesus knew to what extent the very idea of the death of the Prophet (Deuteronomy 18) was alien to the mind of the Jewish people. They had chosen to ignore the prophesied suffering of the Lord’s chosen one (Isaiah 53, for example) in favor of his glory (Isaiah 6; cf. John 12.41), with the result that, for them, the Lord’s Anointed could only be victorious, deathless and eternal (cf. John 12.34).

But instead of ruling on a throne of Jewish gold, Jesus was to die a criminal’s excruciating death on a Roman cross, becoming **“to the Jews a stumbling block and to the Gentiles foolishness, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. Because the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men”** (1 Corinthians 1.23-25). So then, what appeared to the world a failure was in fact the very proof of the power and wisdom of God. Is there a better reason to fail?

Jesus, by the world’s standards, was a loser. And that is what he encouraged his followers to be. Again and again he makes the point that

the world's standard of winning brings spiritual loss, while losing by the world's standard brings spiritual success and victory. **"I tell you the truth,"** says Jesus, **"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. The man who loves his life will lose it, while the man who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life."**<sup>31</sup>

The upright heart is the heart that loses to God. There is no other way to serve him. When Jesus invites us to take up our cross daily and follow him, what does he mean exactly? He means we must fail, that we must die with him.

What is this cross? (...) It is the denial of personal ambition. It is the refusal to conform to the "success" image of whatever society we live in.<sup>32</sup>

We should not be astonished that the world does not understand this, for we ourselves can hardly grasp it. We are so taken up with the spirit of the age, with the earnest desire to *win*, to be the best in everything (including in our religious "performance"), that losing is hard to envision, much less to seek.

How, then, can we lose our lives in Jesus? Look at the Messiah, completely submitted to the Father. This submission cost him his life, but as this was the will of the Father, it was Jesus' will also. This is also our road. As suffering came before glory, even for the Son of God, in the same way we cannot claim victory before giving up all we have (Luke 14.33), including our own life.

The Bible clearly establishes this order of things. Notice that it is after the description of the suffering Servant's affliction, as a lamb led to the slaughter, that the text of Isaiah 53 mentions his **"portion with the great"** and his **"spoil with the strong"** (vs. 12). Jesus, scolding the two disciples of Emmaus for their slowness in believing all that the prophets had declared, asks them this question: **"Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?"** (Luke 24.26). Notice the order Jesus himself establishes: suffering, then glory. Both Paul and Peter confirm this:

**If [we are God's] children, then [we are] heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ — if, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him** (Romans 8.17).

**If we have died with him, we will also live with him** (2 Timothy 2.11).

**The Spirit of Christ within them (...) testified in advance to the sufferings destined for Christ and the subsequent glory** (1 Peter 1.11).

Isn't failure, in this biblical sense, what Paul means when he talks about putting to death the old man and living the new life in Christ (cf. Romans 6.6; Ephesians 4.22; Colossians 3.9; 1 Corinthians 5.17, etc.)? When we learn to surrender to the Lord, he can then do his work in and for us. Then we become those **"whose trust is the Lord"** and who will not **"cease to yield fruit"** (Jeremiah 17.7-8); then we will **"not be shaken"** (Psalm 62.6).

In his book, *The Bulwark*, Theodore Dreiser's character, John Woolman, comes near to death and seems to hear an angel voice declare: "John Woolman is dead." He later writes these words in his journal: "I perceived there was joy in heaven over a sinner who had repented, and that the language 'John Woolman is dead', meant no more than the death of my own will."

Put your name here: \_\_\_\_\_ is dead.

He/she has been crucified with Christ (Galatians 2.20).

He/she has learned to surrender to the Lord.

## GIVE UP?

### THE SURRENDERED HEART QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. What does the author think of the story of "The Little Engine That Could"? Do you agree with his analysis? Why or why not?
2. How can it be said that "God made us to fail"? Discuss.
3. What does the author mean when he says that "the Church does not need strong men and women"?
4. How did Abraham surrender to the Lord? How did Moses? Job? Joshua? David? Jesus?
5. Why does it seem that Joshua was afraid?
6. Do you think that the other men, cited as examples of submission in this chapter, were afraid?
7. Can it be said that Jesus was afraid?

8. Discuss this statement concerning Jesus on the cross: "What appeared to the world a failure was in fact the very proof of the power and wisdom of God."
9. Why must suffering come before glory?

## GREAT IS YOUR FAITHFULNESS

### THE GRATEFUL HEART

**Therefore as you have received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him, having been firmly rooted and now being built up in him and established in your faith, just as you were instructed, and overflowing with gratitude (Colossians 2.6-7).**

To say that God's people should be a thankful lot borders on pleonasm, does it not? It would be like saying that fish should swim or that birds should fly. These things go without saying — but when we say that, we usually do end up saying it, anyway! So I'll say it again, as Paul wrote it to the Colossians: we should overflow with gratitude. It should exude from our pores and radiate from our hearts; it should abound in our prayers and dominate our conversations; it should accompany our days and calm our nights.

Who has as much reason to be thankful as the Christian? Can we stand by and allow the world to show us up in this area? For, the world can be thankful, too: for its rights, its standard of living, its great constructions, its space achievements, its victory over some diseases, its progress in scientific research of all kinds, even the victory of some team or other in the World Cup or the Olympics. But, to whom is all the world's gratefulness directed? To the world! To men! In other words, men are thankful that they, themselves, are so great.

The thankful heart that the Lord seeks knows the true origin of every good thing, including the good of which men are capable: it is God himself. As Jesus warned the serpent that only God should be worshiped, we also know that the ultimate thanksgiving should also be directed to him.

There is so much to be thankful for that any examination of the subject can only be cursory. We will establish several categories and look at

them individually. But one thing for which we are thankful does not fit in any category: and so we will look at it first.

### THANKFUL FOR JESUS

How can we put into words the **“unfathomable riches of Christ”** (Ephesians 3.8)? Christian, the Savior is your reason for being, for living, for dying. Non-Christian, he is the best thing that could ever happen to you, if you would only let him in the door of your heart. How can we thank God adequately for the fact that his Son actually agreed to leave his glory, descend to the earth and allow himself to be put to death on a Roman cross? How can we appreciate to its fullest extent the love that would do such a thing? How can we grasp the physical and psychological suffering that he endured, because he loves us?

Of course, we cannot understand fully. But we can be grateful. We can thank him, first, for his love; then for his sacrifice, then for his salvation, then for his presence with us every instant of every day. We can thank him for the blood that cleanses us continually (1 John 1.7) and for his constant intercession on our behalf. Our gratefulness should never cease, never waver. It should be as constant as is our Lord's care for us. Are we ever-grateful? Let us tell him so! And while we are at it, let us tell the world!

**You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God's own possession, so that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who has called you out of darkness into his marvelous light** (1 Peter 2.9).

### THANKFUL FOR WHAT GOD HAS GIVEN US

What material blessing has God given you today? You know that if you were to begin a list, it would never end. And even if you could think of every thing you can see that God has given you, there would remain the even longer list of his unseen blessings.

As I write now, good things are going on in this body of mine, things that I could not understand even if they were explained to me; and many more are going on that even the most celebrated minds on the earth cannot grasp. Truly, we are all **“wonderfully made”** (Psalm 139.14). Our own body is the single most present reason to be thankful. Should any one of dozens of vital systems stop functioning for any reason, life could not be maintained. And yet these systems chug along, day after day, with no help (and no consciousness of their existence) from us. God has made us

complex beings in a marvelous body. This is reason to be thankful.

This body moves about in lots of different contexts: family, Church, school, recreation, etc. For all of these situations, material blessings are provided by the Lord, blessings often largely ignored.

Americans, I find, are especially good at moving about with considerable nonchalance in the midst of incredible material wealth. The next time you go to the mall (where many Americans “worship”), take a minute to look around you, not for whatever you are shopping for, but at the incredibly immense quantity of goods at your disposal: shop after shop of clothing, books, CD’s, jewelry, furniture, household accessories, shoes, etc., *ad infinitum*. Then think that thousands of people (mostly children) die in the world every day for lack of the basic necessities, while you roam so comfortably through all of this ... luxury, thinking only of how many of “these” and how much of “that” you are going to buy.

The Bible says that **“every perfect gift is from above”** (James 1.17). These gifts that surround us come from God, and from God alone, not from our pocketbooks or the hard work that we have put in to fill them with money. Are we thankful?

This is perhaps one reason why Paul encourages us, when we open our hearts to God — especially in view of presenting our requests — to express also our thanksgiving (Philippians 4.6; Colossians 4.2). God cannot be expected to listen to us if all we ever do in our prayers is ask him for what we want. Requests must be accompanied by gratitude; otherwise we make God the cosmic genie of the bottle, which of course is a pretty sad way to see him (and a role he will refuse!). But, God is not just asking us to be polite! Our thanksgiving should be based upon what we have seen God do in the past in response to our fervent petitions. He knows that the heart that seriously considers his previous providence and care will definitely have a stronger faith in what he is able to do in the present. (The command to be thankful is, therefore, designed — among other things — to bolster our confidence in him!)

Do we share our food gratefully (1 Timothy 4.3), are we generous and hospitable (Hebrews 13.16), do we **“continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that give thanks to his name”** (Hebrews 13.15)?

**Be glad in the Lord, you righteous ones,**

**And give thanks to his holy name** (Psalm 97.12).

Some Christians reading these lines do not have the blessings currently available to citizens of Western nations. But, do we not all have blessings for which we can be grateful? The Lord does not set a “level” of blessings that we have to attain before he expects us to be thankful. Even the smallest brightness in our day should attract our attention and direct our hearts toward God:

a delicate flower  
the laughter of a child  
the song of a bird  
the light of the morning sun  
the warmth of a loved one’s greeting  
the solid feel of the earth under our feet  
the sweet smell of open fields  
the gentle caress of a light rain (or the bold thunder of a downpour!)  
the soft touch of the morning breeze on our face  
the deep blue of the night sky  
the twinkle of distant stars  
the glow of the moon

We are engulfed in God’s innumerable blessings at each moment of each day. Let us thank him!

## **THANKFUL FOR WHAT GOD HAS DONE, IS DOING, WILL DO**

**We give thanks to you, O God, we give thanks,  
For your name is near;  
Men declare your wondrous works** (Psalm 75.1).

**I shall wash my hands in innocence,  
And I will go about your altar, O Lord,  
That I may proclaim with the voice of thanksgiving  
And declare all your wonders** (Psalm 26.6-7).

**Oh, give thanks to the Lord, call upon his name;  
Make known his deeds among the peoples** (Psalm 105.1).

Israel was carefully taught to recount the great exploits of its God.

Several different discourses in the Bible (Deuteronomy 1-4; Psalm 106; Acts 7.1-53, etc.) do exactly that (though the people of Israel remained strangely forgetful of these prodigious events).

What prevents us from telling God's greatness? Of course, our concept of "oral tradition" is not very well developed. But we should still be able to sit down occasionally and simply relate (to ourselves, to our loved ones, to brothers and sisters in Christ), the amazing things the Lord has done in our lives.<sup>33</sup>

The phrase "give thanks" is used 60 times in the Old Testament and 9 in the New Testament. David prescribed that certain priests in Israel should be given the specific job of giving thanks to God for his everlasting lovingkindness (cf. Nehemiah 12.24; 1 Chronicles 16.41). If, in the new covenant, every Christian is a priest (1 Peter 2.9), then every Christian should be giving thanks and praising **"in the gates of the camp of the Lord"** (2 Chronicles 31.2).

What marvelous things, indeed, the Lord has done for us! The whole history of Israel and the entire story of the New Testament recount the great deeds of the God of heaven in favor of his children.

Do we realize that God took the children of Israel out of Egypt as much for us as for them? That the crossing of the Red Sea, the conquest of Canaan, the examples of faith and courage told in the pages of the Old Testament, were for us as well as for the greats of old? The way was thus being prepared for the Messiah whom we love, the salvation that we cherish. Are we grateful?

God has done marvelous things in all of our lives. The Bible tells us to be grateful especially for his goodness and his everlasting lovingkindness (1 Chronicles 16.34,41; Psalm 106.1, for ex.); it also tells us to be thankful for his truth (Psalm 138.2), for his words (Psalm 138.4), for his turning away from anger against us (Isaiah 12.1), for our brothers and sisters in Christ (Colossians 1.3; 1 Thessalonians 1.2): in fact, for everything that is a blessing to us in this life (1 Thessalonians 5.18).

I would like to note one thing for which the Bible tells us specifically to be thankful, but that we rarely mention. When the disciples return from their limited mission, rejoicing that the spirits are subjected to them, Jesus tells them, **"Do not rejoice in this, that the spirits are subject to you, but rejoice that your names are recorded in heaven"** (Luke 10.20).

Here is a good subject of daily thanksgiving: in spite of our weak-



nesses, our fears, our failings and our sin, we can know that, because our names are written in the Lord's book, he will confess us before the Father and his angels (cf. Philippians 4.3; Revelation 3.5)!

This truth is directly tied to the magnificent hope (in biblical parlay: certainty) that waits us: the heavenly city! Those whose names are written **"in the Lamb's book of life"** (Revelation 21.27) are naturally to be **"rejoicing in hope"** (Romans 12.12), **"looking for and hastening the coming of the day of God"** (2 Peter 3.12) by their living confidence in their Lord.

Let us thank the Lord openly and often for his great deeds of the past, for his loving concern in the present, and for his wonderful promises concerning our future.

### THANKFUL IN OUR SUFFERING

**To the degree that you share the sufferings of Christ, keep on rejoicing, so that also at the revelation of his glory you may rejoice with exultation** (1 Peter 4.13).

**Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance. And let endurance have its perfect result, so that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing** (James 1.2-4).

This one goes against my grain. But I notice that it goes against just about everyone's grain. Only masochists like to suffer. But the passages quoted above do not speak of *liking* to suffer; instead, they speak of *accepting, enduring*, in view of a greater good. We have seen in another chapter that the great men of the Bible accepted suffering and grew by it.

That is why we can actually be grateful for pain.

The pain of Jesus, first of all. Without it, he could not have ransomed us, and we would never have the possibility to join him in glory.

Our own pain, next. Whether it be physical (reminding us of the fallen world in which we live), or social (reminding us that the earth is not our home), or spiritual (reminding us that we've a long way to go before seizing **"the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus"** - Philippians 3.14), or all of the above, we can grow by it, learn by it, live by it.

A dear brother in Christ recently wrote to tell me he has been very ill, even close to death, and that the doctors have discovered he has a severe case of diabetes. This young man, who already has several other miseries in his life, might have considered this the proverbial straw that broke the proverbial camel's back. But, read what he had to say:

“So what if I have diabetes and may have to take insulin the rest of my life? I am alive, in the land of the living, and there are people with terminal diseases who wish they were in my condition instead. While I was sick I prayed and asked God to take the pain away, and he did, by saving my life as well. So I have a lot to be thankful for. Instead of AIDS or terminal cancer, it is diabetes. So who am I to complain?”<sup>34</sup>

When the world excludes us from its egotistical standards of “worth,” let us be grateful; when a brother or sister brings us back from our erring way, let us be thankful; and when physical tragedies strike us and our family, let us be grateful. In this last case (indeed, in the others also), I am not lightheartedly recommending flippant joyousness in moments when life demands our most sober, reasoned reactions. I’m saying that growth is possible, even in the most awful, incomprehensible situations, and that, given enough time, we will see the evidence of that growth, provided we do not let go of the hand of God.

Jeremiah was a man who suffered to the point that he is called “the weeping prophet”. After warning Judah — to no avail — about the coming tragedy, he actually witnessed the cruel brutality of the Babylonian deportation. Though he cried out to the Lord in his distress, he never lost his hold on faith in the Almighty’s goodness. Listen to this beautiful song of thanksgiving “in the dark”:

**So I say, “My strength has perished,  
And so has my hope from the Lord.”  
Remember my affliction and my wandering,  
The wormwood and bitterness.  
Surely my soul remembers  
And is bowed down within me.  
This I recall to my mind,  
Therefore I have hope.  
The Lord’s lovingkindnesses indeed never cease,  
For his compassions never fail.  
They are new every morning;  
Great is Your faithfulness.  
“The Lord is my portion,” says my soul,  
“Therefore I have hope in him.”  
The Lord is good to those who wait for him,  
To the person who seeks him.**

## **It is good that he waits silently**

**For the salvation of the Lord.** (Lamentations 3.18-26)

The late Dr. Viktor Frankl (1905-1997), eminent Viennese psychiatrist and holocaust survivor, became a specialist in survival therapy. Starting from Nietzsche's declaration, "Was mich nicht umbringt, macht mich stärker" (That which does not kill me makes me stronger), he developed the theory of logotherapy, a system that, admittedly, does not include God, but does include several principles dear to Christians, including sustained hope amidst trial, which Frankl called "tragic optimism". He quotes a Yale University School of Medicine study of Vietnam war prisoners "who explicitly claimed that although their captivity was extraordinarily stressful — filled with torture, disease, malnutrition, and solitary confinement — they nevertheless ... benefited from the captivity experience, seeing it as a growth experience."<sup>35</sup>

I think that George Matheson had a good hold on this idea when he wrote:

O joy that seekest me through pain,  
I cannot close my heart to thee;  
I trace the rainbow through the rain,  
And feel the promise is not vain,  
That morn shall tearless be.<sup>36</sup>

There is another aspect of suffering that can cause us to be grateful. It concerns our "partaking" with Christ (2 Peter 1.4) and with his holy Spirit, given to us as a gift at the moment of our baptism (Acts 2.38; cf. Acts 5.32).

The connection is this: this relationship can bring us suffering. But that suffering should make us happy, not sad.

So much has been written on this subject that it seems vain to go over it again. And yet, it still is one of the least understood truths of the Christian life: to be a Christian is to suffer; to suffer for Christ is a privilege that should bring joy and thanksgiving. Jesus told his followers:

**Blessed are you when people insult you and persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward in heaven is great; for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you** (Matthew 5.11-12).

The twelve, after being arrested and flogged, **"went on their way from**

**the presence of the Council, rejoicing that they had been considered worthy to suffer shame for his name”** (Acts 5.41). To the Philippians, Paul said: **“To you it has been granted for Christ’s sake, not only to believe in him, but also to suffer for his sake”** (Philippians 1.29).

I’m wondering when this privilege became a liability, a thing to be avoided. Of course, I am not advocating we go out looking for trouble by provoking persecution. But suffering for our Christian walk actually seems “abnormal” in our western cultures, to the point that difficulties cause us to “head ’em up, move ’em out, and roll ’em”.

Most Christians don’t know what they are in for when they take that first step. I’m convinced that some of them wouldn’t take that step, if they knew. And yet, the Bible says this is something that has been **“granted”**, as a gift. Think about it: if Jesus could bring us our salvation only through suffering, is there any reason to think that by accepting this salvation, we can avoid suffering? Indeed, Paul — of whom it can certainly be said that he already suffered immensely for Christ — sought even more to know the **“fellowship of his sufferings”** (Philippians 3.10). David Roper says: “Paul thought that no one could know Christ fully unless he shared in his suffering!”<sup>37</sup> Roper quotes Laidlaw as saying he had often seen the motto “Saved to Serve” but never the motto “Saved to Suffer”.<sup>38</sup>

To pretend to follow Jesus while avoiding suffering would be to place ourselves above our Master, who said: **“A slave is not greater than his master. If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you”** (John 15.20). The very fact that we live and teach the Gospel is often a source of very real persecution. Then, this persecution can make us think that, somehow, we have been harsh or judgmental in the presentation of our faith. Which makes us want to be a bit more careful not to offend, right? But, outside of the fact that we do, indeed, need to be gracious and gentle in our words, consider this: the presentation of the Gospel is in itself what killed our Lord and his disciples. Where, then, do we get the idea that it should create another kind of response when we are the ones presenting it?

To the extent that we do not suffer for him, we do not appreciate his sufferings for us. Not that ours could ever equal his, or that ours could ever be redemptive, but that we are called upon to participate in his pain, simply because he who suffered is our Lord.

Beyond this central idea, we should consider that suffering while doing right “finds favor with God” (1 Peter 2.20), is a blessing (1 Peter 3.14) and gives us the opportunity to entrust our souls to our faithful

Creator (1 Peter 4.19).

Would we avoid suffering? We would then avoid one of the richest blessings of the Christian walk and exclude ourselves from the fellowship of the Lord's own experience upon the earth. And we would also deprive ourselves of a prime reason to be thankful.

### **THANKFUL IN OUR WORSHIP**

**Enter his gates with thanksgiving**

**And his courts with praise.**

**Give thanks to him, bless his name** (Psalm 100.4).

**Let them also offer sacrifices of thanksgiving,**

**And tell of his works with joyful singing** (Psalm 107.22).

**To you I shall offer a sacrifice of thanksgiving,**

**And call upon the name of the Lord** (Psalm 116.17).

An important part of our worship is thankfulness toward God. Of course, we should be grateful every day, and that gratitude constitutes a kind of private worship. But I'm speaking here of the public worship of the Church, when Christians gather to proclaim the greatness and goodness of their God and to remember his love.

I cannot imagine a worship service where gratitude to our Lord and his sacrifice on the cross were not mentioned. It seems to me that it would be a hollow service indeed, were we to declare the virtues of this God's sacrifice on our behalf, without at the same time expressing our thankfulness.

I'm not referring to a simple vocalization of our gratitude, as if we gathered once a week with brothers and sisters to say "thanks" to the Lord. There is obviously much more to it than that.

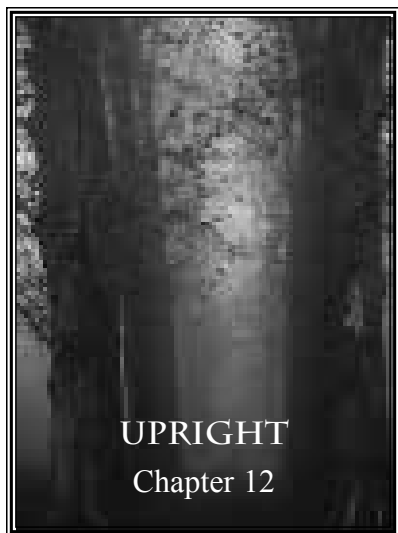
When we worship the Lord in gratitude, our gratitude must take concrete form. For instance, God said, through Asaph, in a passage we have also looked at in another chapter:

**He who offers a sacrifice of thanksgiving honors me;**

**And to him who orders his way aright**

**I shall show the salvation of God** (Psalm 50.23).

In this Hebrew parallelism, offering a sacrifice of thanksgiving is placed as a synonym of ordering one's way "aright", that is, quite simply, watching one's behavior.



So, shall we go to the assembly on Sunday and thank God for his goodness, then go to work on Monday and forget to order our way aright? The Bible says that if we do that, we are not honoring God. (It also says, by extension, that we will not see his salvation. Read the verse again.)

Another kind of thankfulness which must take concrete form is that of our vows. Asaph again says:

**Offer to God a sacrifice of thanksgiving  
And pay your vows to the Most High** (Psalm 50.14).

David adds:

**Your vows are binding upon me, O God;  
I will render thank offerings to you** (Psalm 56.12).

Simply put, one way to be grateful to God is to do what we have said we will do. (Does this hit you like it hits me?) I think this means that God tends not to listen to the expressions of our gratitude, if, at the same time, we neglect to honor our promises.

Again, another kind of thankfulness which should be apparent in worship is gratitude for the good things that happen to others.

**And if one member suffers, all the members suffer with it; if one member is honored, all the members rejoice with it** (1 Corinthians 12.26).

I wonder if the Lord hears our prayers of gratitude for the good that we receive, if at the same time we refuse to rejoice when the same good (or better) happens to brother X or sister Y. I have seen how jealousy can work its havoc among members of the Church, in direct opposition to the teaching of Paul in the passage quoted above. So, when brother A sends his son to that nice school that brother B can't afford, is there reason for jealousy? No, only reason for thanksgiving! When sister C gets a good job while sister D has been trying for weeks or months to land something

decent, is there reason for jealousy? No, only for gratitude! Unless, of course, the world has infiltrated the Church. And jealousy is a sure sign of that infiltration.

One of the things for which we should be thankful in worship is the very fact that the Church founded by our Lord is solid, lasting, eternal. The writer to the Hebrews reminds his readers that since they have received **“a kingdom which cannot be shaken”**, they should **“show gratitude, by which we may offer to God an acceptable service with reverence and awe”** (Hebrews 12.28). The fact that men and women have been worshipping the Lord in the Church for two millennia is proof of its timeless, everlasting nature. And, as the passage teaches, our gratitude should be expressed **“with reverence and awe”**, not simply with light-hearted, go-through-the-motions automatisms.

Another kind of thanksgiving, in the context of our worship, should be provoked by the repentance of sinners.

**I now rejoice, not that you were made sorrowful, but that you were made sorrowful to the point of repentance; for you were made sorrowful according to the will of God, so that you might not suffer loss in anything through us** (2 Corinthians 7.9).

In the assembly where I worship, a wandering brother recently came back to the fellowship he had abandoned. There was rejoicing on that morning! Not only for him but for the whole assembly! And not only for the assembly, but for the Church in general. This member had been disciplined because of open sin. The Church had notified him in a loving way that he could not expect to be considered a member of the body while openly defying the Lord's laws. The exclusion had caused sadness in the body and on the part of the brother concerned. And that sorrow had provoked repentance. It was a grand day.

What else can we say about the thankful heart? That God wants us to be thankful for our food (1 Timothy 4.3), and for all of his gifts (1 Timothy 4.4). All of this might give the impression that we are to be thankful in certain areas of our lives.

That is true, of course. But what he especially wants to find in us is an “attitude of gratitude” (cf. Colossians 4.2) in all aspects of our existence: a heart that seeks, at every moment, to be lovingly, sincerely grateful to the Father. As we saw in the beginning of this chapter, we should overflow with thanksgiving (Colossians 2.7), in our prayers (Colossians 4.2), in all

our service to the Lord (2 Corinthians 9.12), in our intercessions for other people (1 Timothy 2.1), in everything (Philippians 4.6). The writer to the Hebrews tells us that our lips are to offer the sacrifice of thanks to his name ... **“continually”** (Hebrews 13.15).

Tell me that the world wouldn't be a different place if every Christian were continually thankful. We would revolutionize the planet. Then, more and more people would want to know the secret of this joy, this peace. The thankful heart is a reproducing one, for joy begets joy, as sadness begets sadness.

So, Christians, let us give thanks to the Lord! We have every reason to be grateful, even some reasons we don't know about yet!

**Amen, blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might, be to our God forever and ever. Amen** (Revelation 7.12).

## GREAT IS YOUR FAITHFULNESS

### THE GRATEFUL HEART QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Why is it necessary to accompany our prayer requests with gratitude?
2. How can it be said that the great events of the Old Testament were for our benefit as much as for Israel's?
3. What specific blessing in this chapter is identified as one we rarely mention in our thanksgiving?
4. How can we say that biblical “hope” is really “certainty”?
5. Is it really possible to be grateful for pain?
6. Describe how Victor Frankl's “tragic optimism” relates to the Christian hope.
7. Should a Christian provoke persecution in order to suffer for Christ?
8. What should we think of a Christian who wishes to follow Jesus while avoiding all suffering?



9. What does the author mean when he says: “When we worship the Lord in gratitude, our gratitude must take concrete form”?

# SATISFIED?

## THE CONTENTED HEART

**I have learned to be content in whatever circumstances I am. I know how to get along with humble means, and I also know how to live in prosperity; in any and every circumstance I have learned the secret of being filled and going hungry, both of having abundance and suffering need** (Philippians 4.11-12).

Richard Swenson suggests that in any study of contentment, we should consider what it is not:

◆ It isn't pretending things are right when they are not, but instead the peace that comes from knowing that God is bigger than any problem and that he works them all out for our good.

◆ [It] isn't the complacency that defeats any attempt to make things better, but instead the willingness to work tirelessly for improvement, clinging to God rather than results.

◆ It isn't the feeling of well-being contingent on keeping circumstances under control, but instead a joy that exists in spite of circumstances and looks to the God who never varies.

◆ It isn't the comfortable feeling we get when all our needs and desire are met, but instead the security in knowing, as A.W. Tozer reminds us, that "The man who has God for his treasure has all things in One."

◆ [It] isn't that pseudo-virtue of the "American dream" where we claim solidarity with Paul from the easy chair of middle-class America.<sup>39</sup>

Having set aside those false ideas of contentment, we look to the dictionary for a definition.

My dictionary says that "contented" means "not desiring something more or different; satisfied." So, a contented heart is satisfied with what it possesses. Now, how many people do you know who are satisfied with what they possess? Are you? Am I?

In some countries, if wages are not raised regularly, workers take to the streets, invade office buildings and throw files out the windows. If anyone decided to give all of his possessions to the poor, he would be called a kind soul — and a crazy fool.

I gave a beggar two Euros the other day. Was it because I am content with what I have and am willing to share? Did those coins come from the depths of my love for the miserable? No, from a pocket where I had other Euros in waiting, and enough that I didn't miss those two. That is not really the essence of contentment.

In at least one circumstance, Jesus told a man to give away everything he had. Why would he do that? Let's look at that incident:

**As he was setting out on a journey, a man ran up to him [Jesus] and knelt before him, and asked him, "Good Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?"** (Mark 10.17).

Luke says this man was a "ruler," indicating that he may have been a member of the Sanhedrin ("member of the council" - GSPD), but more likely, since he was young, perhaps it means simply that he was a wealthy man who also held some official post. At any rate, he came to Jesus with what seems a sincere request, thinking that he could do some "good thing" to inherit eternal life (Matthew 19.16).

Jesus did not answer him outright, but asked him a question first:

**And Jesus said to him, Why do you call me good? No one is good except God alone** (Mark 10.18).

Many explanations have been offered for this question. Some say it proves Jesus was not God, because he told the man not to call him good. Did he, really! In my Bible it looks like he only asked the reason why he called him good.

In *The Case for Christ*, Lee Strobel, quotes Donald A. Carson as saying, concerning this incident: "I think all he's saying is, "Wait a minute; why are you calling me good? Is this a polite thing, like you say, "Good day"? What do you mean by good? You call me good master — is this because you're trying to honey up to me? (...) Do you really understand what you're saying when you say that? Are you really ascribing to me what should only be ascribed to God?"<sup>40</sup>

Jesus was not saying he was not good, or not God, but that the man should consider his motivation for using this adjective. Putting the emphasis on the word "why" helps us see that Jesus was making sure the man understood the implications of his question.

I would like to suggest that when Jesus said, "No one is good except God alone," he showed the contented heart he was going to ask this young man to demonstrate.

He knew he was the holy One, the Good Shepherd, the Light of the world. And yet he was contented, in the present situation, to be what the Father had sent him to be: a **“bond-servant ... made in the likeness of men, ... becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross”** (Philippians 2.7).

He therefore stepped back, contentedly gave his Father the glory, and proceeded to answer the question.

We know the rest of the story. Jesus quotes several of the commandments, which almost surprise the rich young man by their banality. He doesn't want such simple tasks to accomplish; besides, he has been doing those things all his life. Give me something heroic, he says, something that will mark me as a great servant of the Most high!

Jesus has just the thing, greater than the young man has imagined: **“Looking at him, Jesus felt a love for him and said to him, ‘One thing you lack: go and sell all you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me’”** (Mark 10.21).

In other words, Jesus told him how to have a contented heart.

But the young man, who desired the riches of heaven, on the condition of retaining those of the earth, was obviously disappointed. **“At these words he was saddened, and he went away grieving, for he was one who owned much property”** (Mark 10.22).

Hence Jesus' grave statements: **“how hard it will be for those who are wealthy to enter the kingdom of God!”** (Mark 10.23.). **“It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God”** (Mark 10.25).

How “rich” is “rich”? I have found that for most people it most often is this: “richer than me”. I remember once asking a Christian brother how his life was going. He answered, “I'm not rich.” When I asked if being rich was his goal in life, he answered that he would like to not have to go to work every day in order to earn his living. His “living” has provided him with a large, beautiful house on the hill above a lovely city, an airplane to fly and a thousand physical blessings of all kinds (In all fairness to him, I must say I have been, more than once, the beneficiary of his “riches”). And yet, he was not “rich”, because “rich” meant having more than he did. Strange.

Is “poor” (= no property), then, a synonym of contented? Obviously not, for the rich are not the only ones obsessed with possessions.

So, what is the lesson here?

What we normally do with this passage is note that Jesus says later on that what is not possible with men (a rich man entering the kingdom) is possible with God (ah!). And we are relieved. So Jesus is not making a rule here, right? He is not saying that every Christian should give up his property, right?

Wrong.

Look at this commandment, delivered by the same Jesus, this time to his disciples:

**“So then, none of you can be my disciple who does not give up all his own possessions”(Luke 14.33).**

And here is yet a tougher one:

**“If anyone wishes to come after me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it; but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul?”** (Matthew 16.24-26).

In John, these words are followed by this almost enigmatic teaching:

**“If anyone serves me, he must follow me; and where I am, there my servant will be also; if anyone serves me, the Father will honor him”** (John 12.26).

**“If anyone serves me, he must follow me.”** And where was Jesus going? Two verses earlier, he had said:

**“Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit”** (John 12.24).

Jesus was going to his death. And if we follow him, we are going to ours.

Jesus asks us, then, to be content with his cross, with the death to self to which he calls us. That means that whatever physical goods he grants us must not become our god, and that we must be glad to have whatever we possess on this earth, whether it be little or much. For we have a greater treasure, one that is not subject to stain or rust or loss: the treasure in the heavens (Matthew 6.19-20).

If our goods on the earth get in the way of our love for Jesus and his way, the same principle he gave this rich young man will apply to us: “Get rid of it all.”

Indeed, not only the Scripture, but life itself makes it clear that **“not even when one has an abundance does his life consist of his possessions”** (Luke 12.15). Even the millionaires will admit this, in their private, intimate moments. And so will the poor, when they think about it.

Let us consider some good examples of contentment in the Scripture, of the kind that will encourage us to place our confidence in God and be content with whatever he gives us.

One has already been suggested in this chapter: Jesus was content to serve, though he could have obliged others to serve him. He showed it in so many ways:

- ◆ when he tried to convince by his teaching, instead of imposing
- ◆ when he accepted to be challenged by hypocrites and glory-seekers
- ◆ when he washed his disciples’ feet
- ◆ when he accepted to be arrested, instead of calling on the angels to rescue him
- ◆ when he refused to descend from the cross

He did not “regard equality with God a thing to be grasped [exploited], but emptied himself” (Philippians 2.6-7). Paul says this “emptying oneself” is the attitude that we should also have (Philippians 2.5). It is the attitude that Paul himself had in the midst of the multiple trials he had to face for Jesus. He learned to be **“content”** with the **“sufficient”** grace of God, and with the **“weaknesses,” “insults,” “distresses,” “persecutions”** and **“difficulties”** he ran into **“for Christ’s sake”** (2 Corinthians 12.9-10). He even learned to live with the chronic physical ailment that plagued him, though he at first complained about its pain (2 Corinthians 12.8).

If we look at that list and think of examples in our own lives, we can hardly follow his reasoning. But there is no escaping it: Scripture tells us to be content, i.e., happy, with being mistreated, with suffering, with problems that emerge, when they are caused by our service to Christ. In the city where I live, many early Christians went to their deaths singing the praises of their Lord. Today, we seek rather to avoid suffering as Christians.

Perhaps our problem is one of degree. We think that if the Lord asked us to be martyred for him, we would walk right up to death with praises on our lips; but if our neighbor next door scorns us for our faith and puts nasty letters in our mailbox, we can’t see that as a cause for joy. But both

are results of our service to the Lord. Let us be content to serve him, whatever the results, serious or not.

John the Baptist told the soldiers to be content with their wages (Luke 3.14); and the writer to the Hebrews says that we need to be free from the love of money, content with what we have. The reason he gives is this: **“He himself has said, “I will never desert you, nor will I ever forsake you”** (Hebrews 13.5).

That means that when we complain that we don’t have enough ...

... time (don’t you have as much as anyone?)

... money

... food

... space

... leisure activity

... cars

... etc.

we are refusing this promise of the Lord.

It also means that when we interrogate the Lord about ...

... why we are not moving up in the company

... why we are lonely

... why we are physically unattractive

... why we don’t have any close friends

... why we don’t seem to be getting anywhere in life

... etc.

we are giving up our hope in the Lord.

Not that he will “fix” all of these problems. That is not the point. The point is that we should consider our belonging to him as a blessing far outweighing whatever problems we may have to deal with in this life. Especially those that are actually caused by our belonging to him.

We cannot hope in him if we refuse to receive his blessing. We cannot depend upon his grace if we cannot give ourselves up to his care.

On the bulletin board in our home is an old, yellowed, tattered 3 x 5 card, on which are written, in my wife’s handwriting, these words:

Acceptance (contentment) is the waiting room of hope; just wait and listen. Remain committed, pliable and don’t get in God’s way, in the way of God’s plan. Have faith in his plan for your life, in his love for you, which is more eternal than your life, in his judgment, which runs ahead of you, far into the future. There is a reason — you may never know it — it doesn’t matter. (Author unknown)

When we learn, indeed, that God's plan runs ahead of our little life, we can **"be content in whatever circumstances"** we find ourselves (Philippians 4.11).

This makes me think again of Joshua and Caleb, whom we mentioned in another chapter. They were patient, they were contented to suffer with the people of God. And the Lord rewarded them richly with an inheritance and with peace in Canaan. The Lord may never give us land to build a house on, or peace with our hostile neighbors. He may place us in circumstances which baffle and astonish us. But we should still — always — place our hope in him and remain contented.

What about questions of health? How can we be contented with cancers, the death of loved ones, the suffering that leaves our souls crying in anguish?

Here, we need to remember our Lord's own suffering. Yes, he asked that the awful cup be removed (Matthew 26.39). Yes, he cried out in agony (Hebrews 5.7) as he faced a certain, horrible death (the more I contemplate it and read about it, the more horrible it becomes). But his soul was anchored in God and his heart was content to serve him: **"Not my will, but yours be done"** (Luke 22.42). Indeed, he chastised Peter for suggesting that he might avoid the Father's will (Mark 8.33) and refused help when he could have had it in abundance : **"Do you think that I cannot appeal to my Father, and he will at once put at my disposal more than twelve legions of angels?"** (Matthew 26.53).

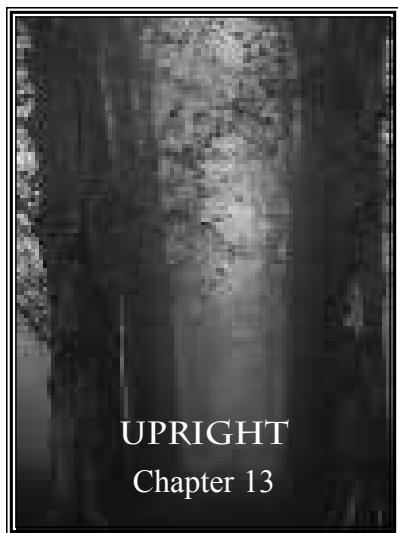
Contentment, then, is not being happy about suffering; it is being happy in spite of suffering, it is knowing that suffering cannot rob us of the satisfaction of serving God. It is surpassing suffering and drawing growth out of it, in spite of the pain. Emily Dickinson put it this way:

Magnanimous of Bird  
By Boy Descried —  
Singing unto the Stone  
Of which it died.<sup>41</sup>

Think about it this way: God was content to serve us, even though that service required he send his Son, and that his Son — though God upon the earth — suffer the hardships of persecution and death. The contentment of God made him extravagantly generous on our behalf. For contentment breeds generosity.

Why is it that, so often, those who have the least are so willing to





## UPRIGHT

### Chapter 13

part with the most? Why are the poor so often willing to share their meager pittance, when at the same time the rich want to hold on to their wealth? Contentment. When you are content with what you have, you are more likely to share it with someone who has less (or even more!) than you. Think about that, the next time someone decidedly in need asks you to help him, and be generous, as God has been with you.

Is he not generous to give us the “**living**,” the “**moving**” and even the “**existing**” (Acts 17.28; cf. Nehemiah 9.6; Isaiah 42.5)? Is he not generous

to provide us with air, food and water, every day? To give us the countless blessings of life (1 Timothy 6.8; cf. Jeremiah 5.24 ; Matthew 5.45), to rejoice our eyes and hearts with the marvels of the natural world, to surround us with giving, loving people? Every time a human being inhales, even if it is to curse God, he receives, directly from the hand of God, a heavenly gift.

Is he not generous to give us his Son (John 3.16), his Spirit (Acts 5.32), his presence (Matthew 28.20)? To teach us, counsel us, warn us? To fill us with his life, to forgive us of sins, to prepare for us an eternal home in the heavens? Who is as generous as our God? And why is he so generous? Because his heart is contented, his being is full of satisfaction, his mind is love.

Christians sing a song that says:

Count your blessings,  
Name them one by one.  
Count your many blessings,  
See what God has done.<sup>42</sup>

When we do this, we get a little handle on the generosity of the heart that we are trying to imitate. Our heart is also content, full of satisfaction and love, because of what God has done for us. And we will want to be generous, like him. I’m not talking about deciding to be generous toward such and such a person, or in such and such a situation. What I’m think-

ing about here is having a contented, generous heart that affects the way we act in all circumstances.

Jesus did not decide to be generous with his time when he talked to the woman at the well (John 4.5-34), when he called the blind man to him to be healed (Luke 18.35-43), when he followed Jairus to his home (Luke 8.41-56), etc. He was generosity incarnated. It came naturally to him, because of his contented heart.

Contentment will lead us into unusual, unknown realms where our faith and our trust will be tested. Indeed, we will necessarily have to confront the enemy of contentment: the idea that we can be in control of our lives. Our cultures encourage us to “take charge,” to “demand our rights,” to “impose our wills upon the world”. But it only takes one night spent in the path of a hurricane, or one hurried rush to the hospital emergency room, to realize that many things out there are much bigger than we. And we have already seen that our Lord asks us to give up our lives, to live in his death (Galatians 2.20).

It seems to me that the poet who declared, “I am the Master of my fate,”<sup>43</sup> was singularly short-sighted. He had not learned, as had the greats of the Bible, that since we cannot control the external elements of our life, it is best to be in deep relationship with the One who can. Thus we can know that if God will change the unusual or undesirable moments, it is good; and that, if he will not, it is still good, for he is **“our refuge and strength”** (Psalm 46.1). That is the message God was giving Paul: **“My grace is sufficient for you.”**

Richard Foster says that “when we choose to be a servant, we give up the right to be in charge.”<sup>44</sup> Would we really like to be given the power to control our lives, at the price of giving up the grace of God?

Before finishing this chapter, I would like to suggest that there is at least one area in which we should never be content. It could be called the area of our “conscience,” or of our “service,” or simply “ourselves”. We should never be content with ourselves, before the Lord.

I often say to new Christians that as they grow older in Christ, they will become more aware of how sinful they really are. The point is this: one of the marks of a maturing Christian is his grasp of his own unworthiness. I’m not calling for a “wallow in the dust” Christianity; but the fact remains that the closer we draw to our perfect model, the more we realize how far we are (and will always be) from it. The Bible shows us often that when men are made to see the holiness of God, they shirk before it,

not because it is not attractive, but because its very beauty reveals their own ugliness.

Isaiah, in the midst the beauty of the vision given to him, did not swell with pride at the fact that the God of heaven had deemed him worthy to contemplate his majesty; instead, he exclaimed:

**“Woe is me, for I am ruined! Because I am a man of unclean lips, And I live among a people of unclean lips; For my eyes have seen the King, The Lord of hosts”** (Isaiah 6.5).

Isaiah was not, in this circumstance, content with himself.

Peter (later to become Cephas, the “rock”), seeing the power of Jesus, said: **“Go away from me Lord, for I am a sinful man, O Lord!”** (Luke 5.8). Peter was not here content with himself.

The prophet Daniel was approached by **“a certain man dressed in linen, whose waist was girded with a belt of pure gold of Uphaz. His body also was like beryl, his face had the appearance of lightning, his eyes were like flaming torches, his arms and feet like the gleam of polished bronze, and the sound of his words like the sound of a tumult”** (Daniel 10.5-6). Who was this man? Compare these verses with Revelation 1.13-15 and make your own conclusions. What I want us to see here is that in his holy presence, Daniel was completely disarmed, unable to move, rendered speechless, absolutely helpless (Daniel 10.8-11, 15). He did not for a minute pretend that he was “worthy” to stand up to this heavenly visitor. (I’ve an idea that he could not have if he had tried!) Daniel was not content with himself.

In Romans 7, Paul was saying, among other things, that the Law served uniquely to identify the evil in us and to condemn us for it. But one of the “other things” that he was saying is this: we can never live up to the ideal of goodness that we have set for ourselves. So, why pretend? Paul was not content with himself.

One more example: In the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector, one man is content with his spiritual status before the Lord, and the other can only beat his breast and plead for forgiveness (Luke 18.9-14). Jesus said of the latter : **“I tell you, this man went to his house justified rather than the other; for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but he who humbles himself will be exalted”** (vs.14). This says to me that over-satisfaction with ourselves breeds pride, which in turn causes us to exalt ourselves, which in turn obliges God to humble us.

If you are saying, “Yes, but the Pharisees were obviously a self-righteous bunch, and that is not my case,” beware! We are all self-righteous. We who so often compare ourselves to the humble tax collector should probably be seeing ourselves on the other side of the room, in the skin of the proud Pharisee.

In this area, as we have seen, God does not want us to be content, but to be always moving ahead, always seeking, knocking, asking.

We could say it this way: when it has to do with what I have (possessions, loved ones, physical and material blessings), I should *always* be content; when it has to do with what I am (my spiritual state), I should *never* be content, but always seek to improve, depending, of course, upon the Lord’s help and guidance.

When I am content with what I have, I can lean on the Lord and on my hope in him. When I am content with what I am, God can do nothing further with me. He wants us to be content in him, through him, by him: happy with where we are, who he is, and what he has done for us. I need this lesson. Do you?

## SATISFIED?

### THE CONTENTED HEART

### QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. How can it be said that Jesus was trying to teach the rich young ruler to be contented?
2. Can a rich man really enter the kingdom of heaven?
3. Are you rich?
4. What does it mean to “take up” one’s cross?
5. How did Jesus show his own contentment?
6. Comment on the statement, “Contentment (...) is not being happy about suffering; it is being happy in spite of suffering, it is knowing that suffering cannot rob us of the satisfaction of serving God.”
7. How are contentment and generosity related?
8. Why is it not possible to be the master of one’s own fate and content- ed at the same time?

9. In what area should we never be content? Why?

## FINAL THOUGHTS

As suggested in the first chapter of this book, the search for the heart that pleases God is a life project. We will not simply check off each trait as we attain it, then pass on to the next. In fact, these are not qualities that we “attain,” but that we grow into, little by little. As we do not develop the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5.22-23) in chronological, mathematical order, we do not wake up one morning having “found” the heart that pleases God.

But perhaps the simple fact of examining these several qualities of that heart will help us begin. We have considered the following:

**The pure heart**

**The humble heart**

**The circumcised heart**

**The contrite heart**

**The receptive heart**

**The sincere heart**

**The patient heart**

**The loving / hating heart**

**The surrendered heart**

**The grateful heart**

**The contented heart**

A cursory search produces many others that could be proposed and examined:

**The gentle heart** (1 Peter 3.4).

**The stirred heart** (Exodus 35.21).

**The cheerful heart** (Proverbs 15.15).

**The seeking heart** (Psalm 27.8).

**The forgiving heart** (Matthew 6.14).

**The devoted heart** (1 Kings 8.61).

**The tender heart** (2 Kings 22.19).

**The meditating heart** (Psalm 19.14).

**The courageous heart** (Psalm 27.14).

**The prepared heart** (Psalm 78.8).

**The steadfast heart** (Psalm 108.1).

**The tranquil heart** (Proverbs 14.30).

**The disciplined heart** (Proverbs 23.12).

**The yearning heart** (Psalm 84.2).

**The new heart** (Ezekiel 36.26).

**The torn heart** (Joel 2.13).

**The compassionate heart** (Colossians 3.12).

**The loving heart** (1 Peter 1.22).

I will have to admit that making this last list was a bit intimidating; the Scripture suggests so many facets of the heart that pleases God! We've only touched, as they say, the hem of the garment.

But I think we have touched it solidly, enough to see that what goes on in our heart is serious business, indeed. It is serious because the Bible tells us that the Lord sees right into us, that he searches [sounds] our heart and tests our mind (Jeremiah 17.10); **"there is no creature hidden from his sight, but all things are open and laid bare to the eyes of him with whom we have to do"** (Hebrews 4.13).

The world would refuse divine, purifying examination. And God will indeed stay away from those who refuse him. But it is his way of judging them (cf. Romans 1.24, 26, 28, etc.). For the day will come when they will seek his gaze with lamenting hearts — and he will refuse them. The Christian must always say, with David: **"Search me, O God, and know my heart"** (Psalm 139.23), we must be open to the Lord's scrutiny and readily submit to the searchlight of his holiness. What he finds in us will determine his attitude and reactions toward us, as Jeremiah says in the last half of the verse quoted above. Here is the whole declaration of the weeping prophet:

**"I, the Lord, search the heart, I test the mind, Even to give to each man according to his ways, According to the results of his deeds"** (Jeremiah 17.10).

We have seen throughout this book that what the heart becomes, the mouth says and the body does. We cannot be good on the inside and bad on the outside. It is by our fruit that we are known (Matthew 7.20), it is from the depths of our inner man that our outer man expresses himself.

God does not examine us in order to condemn, but in order to encourage, correct and teach us, so that our heart will please him more and more. As we have seen, he wishes to **"strongly support those whose heart is**