

# SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES



# SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES

ESSENTIAL PRACTICES  
— OF THE —  
CHRISTIAN LIFE

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— Editors —



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# PREFACE



Receiving the Holy Spirit is a wonderful experience. New converts may feel that this is the end of their search for God, and the rest of their lives will be a breeze. After all, God is not only with them but has taken up residence within them.

Receiving the Spirit may be the end of their search for God, but it is only the beginning of their walk with God. When new believers begin to walk with God, they soon find that even though the Holy Spirit is in them, their human wills and freedom of choice are still intact. It may come as a surprise to find that God does not control their actions as a puppeteer controls a puppet.

Although we are saved by God's grace and not by our own works, we must choose whether to follow God's direction or go our own ways. Determining to follow what are known as spiritual disciplines as presented in God's Word can help believers grow in God. These spiritual disciplines are not just for new Christians, however, but for all Christians. No matter how long we have been serving God, there is still room for

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improvement. As long as we live, we are to “grow in grace, and in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ” (II Peter 3:18).

Developing a relationship with God is of utmost importance. God speaks to us through His Word, and we speak to Him when we pray. A relationship is not likely to develop without communication. Therefore, reading the Word and hearing the Word, combined with praying on a regular basis are necessary. But it is up to us to commit to making time in our daily schedules for these important disciplines.

Another spiritual discipline is worship. Though circumstances change, God never changes. Even when we may be disappointed, disillusioned, or distressed and do not feel like worshipping, God is still worthy of our worship. He still loves us, is ever faithful, and continues to watch over us and care for us even in difficult circumstances. Disciplining ourselves to worship God during the hard times shows that we trust Him and have faith in Him to work out the situations.

The discipline of forgiveness may be one of the most difficult to follow. People who have been deeply hurt may feel that they will never be able to forgive their offenders. In such situations, forgiveness may take time and will certainly require God’s help. However, forgiveness is necessary for several reasons. Unforgiveness can turn into bitterness, which harms the person who was wronged, not the perpetrator. It can cause physical problems. It can make a person feel like a prisoner bound by the offense. But forgiveness frees that person even if the offender never apologizes.

Though it takes time and effort to follow these and the other spiritual disciplines in this book, those who do so will grow in grace.



## CHAPTER ONE



# GRACE AND THE FREE OFFER OF SALVATION

### **INTRODUCTION**

Grace is one of the highest, most sacred themes in Scripture. Believers most often tend to think of grace as a dispensation, or a period of time in which God deals with humankind in a specific way. However, grace is so much more than just a specific era of time. Grace is a major aspect of the nature and character of the Almighty.

Suppose a person were to examine the Bible by dividing it into different periods of time according to the way God has dealt with humanity. An honest evaluation of these eras would cause that individual to recognize the vital role of God's grace and mercy within each of them. Were it not for His grace, the possibility of human redemption never would have registered on the scale of opportunity. Grace is the aspect of God's character that made possible the provision for human salvation, despite mankind's complete lack of merit. We did not deserve redemption, but

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by God's grace He extended to us the invitation to experience salvation.

In this book we will consider the many aspects of growing in grace. However, before anything can grow, it first must be born. Before believers can grow in grace, they first must experience the initial gift of grace—salvation through Jesus Christ. To understand the need for redemption and the great opportunity God has given humanity to experience salvation, we have to look back to the beginning of human history—all the way to the Creation, Adam and Eve, and the Garden of Eden.

### **I. SALVATION IS A GIFT OF GOD**

Some situations in life are difficult for people to escape by their own efforts; some are impossible to get out of without assistance. Human sinfulness is one such condition individuals can escape only through the intervention of the Almighty.

#### **A. We Are by Nature Sinners**

The human experience began in the Garden of Eden. God first created the world and all that is therein. In six days He made everything and brought order to the universe. He examined His delightful creation and observed “it was good” (Genesis 1:10, 12, 18, 21, 25). Still, however, God was not through with His creative work. As intricately beautiful and inspiring as His world was, God completed the six days with His crowning act of Creation when He made human beings in His own image and after His own likeness (Genesis 1:27). First, He made man—Adam—and then from Adam, God removed a rib and created a companion for him—the woman, Eve.

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So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them. (Genesis 1:27)

God had something special in mind for this final work of creation. God had a beautiful world full of unique and inspiring creations, and He had a host of heavenly angels to worship Him around the clock and do all His bidding. But God desired a creation who, with intellect, creative imagination, and free will, would choose to love Him, serve Him, and live for Him. God was not interested in robotic responses of a creation void of choice, but He wanted individuals who, in spite of other opportunities, would choose to live with an eternal purpose—a purpose beyond this human plane, one focused upon and dedicated to the Creator.

The only way to have creatures of choice, however, was to set a choice before them. Consequently, God gave to Adam and Eve the gift of human will. God abundantly cared for their needs through the many trees and provisions of the Garden, but He forbade them to eat the fruit of just one tree: “the tree of the knowledge of good and evil” (Genesis 2:17).

The serpent slyly approached Eve and convinced her God was withholding something good from her. When she partook of the forbidden fruit and gave it also to Adam to eat, everything changed within their utopian environment. Suddenly they encountered the judgment of God, the curse of sin, and banishment from the Garden. They came face to face with pain, struggle, hurts, and weariness they had not known previously. They fought with thorns and thistles to try to eek out an existence that beforehand had been provided by God. They experienced the pain and curse of sin. (See Genesis 3.)

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As is always the case with sin, they did not suffer the curse alone. Sin always affects others besides the one who commits it. Adam and Eve introduced the pain and hardships of sin to the entire human race. Soon they experienced more of sin's evil face within their own family when Cain rose up and slew his brother, Abel (Genesis 4:1–8). So the pain went on and on and continued through the ages throughout every era and generation of humanity as individuals were born into a world of sin, and as each person inherited a fallen, human, sin nature.

Wherefore, as by one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin; and so death passed upon all men, for that all have sinned. . . . death reigned from Adam to Moses. . . . But not as the offence, so also is the free gift. For if through the offence of one many be dead, much more the grace of God, and the gift by grace, which is by one man, Jesus Christ, hath abounded unto many. . . . For if by one man's offence death reigned by one; much more they which receive abundance of grace and of the gift of righteousness shall reign in life by one, Jesus Christ. . . . For as by one man's disobedience many were made sinners, so by the obedience of one shall many be made righteous. (Romans 5:12–19)

Humanity's failure did not catch God by surprise. He knew the human race would fall to temptation and sinful disobedience. "Why, then," one might surmise, "did God take a chance on and create human beings in the first place?" In His foreknowledge God already had a plan in place to provide the missing component—the necessary assistance—so humans

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could indeed choose to live above sin through the redemptive work of the Savior. God envisioned the Incarnation, and He planned for the Lamb of God who would one day take “away the sin of the world” (John 1:29). Though the Cross was centuries in the future, God saw its redemptive work and the price He personally would pay for the sins of humanity.

And all that dwell upon the earth shall worship him, whose names are not written in the book of life of the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world. (Revelation 13:8) (See also I Peter 1:19–20.)

The purpose of the Incarnation was that the Son of God—God in human flesh—might provide the sacrifice for the sins of human beings, a holy and righteous work they could never achieve on their own and would never deserve on their own merits.

### **B. We Can Do Nothing to Earn Salvation**

Like a person caught in an impossible situation, we can do nothing to extract ourselves from the sinful state into which we were born. “For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23). Try as we might to escape the sinful nature, we are like one caught in the trap of quicksand, only sinking deeper into the mucky mess of sinfulness. Because all have sinned, no individuals are qualified or able to redeem themselves or do what is necessary to escape the sinful state. They are completely dependent upon a Savior—One who is qualified and able to redeem them from sin.

The only One who could perform such an act of redemption is that “Lamb slain from the foundation of the world” (Revelation

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13:8). Through the Incarnation, Jesus Christ was the only human who ever has avoided the taint of sin. The God-man—God in human flesh—Jesus Christ was both free from sin and also willing to pay the eternal sacrifice for the sins of all mankind.

For we have not an high priest which cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities; but was in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin. (Hebrews 4:15)

Through the Cross, Christ paid the price of sin we could never pay; He provided the sacrifice we could never render. Because we could never qualify to provide the sacrifice and we would always bear the marks of sin, we could never merit or deserve the sacrifice that was made for our sins. Our hopeless dilemma called for something beyond human ability. Our pitiful plight called for the grace of the almighty God.

For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: Not of works, lest any man should boast. (Ephesians 2:8–9)

We were in a hopeless circumstance, trapped in the vices of our own sinful state. We could never save ourselves; we could never deserve redemption. Still, God extended to us the offer of His grace—the gift of salvation from sin.

**C. God Grants Us Grace**

Redemption comes only through the gift of God by His grace. As Paul wrote to the believers in Ephesus, we too were once “children of disobedience” and “children of wrath” (Ephesians 2:2–3).

But God, who is rich in mercy, for his great love wherewith he loved us, even when we were dead in sins, hath quickened us together with Christ, (by grace ye are saved;) and hath raised us up together, and made us sit together in heavenly places in Christ Jesus: That in the ages to come he might shew the exceeding riches of his grace in his kindness toward us through Christ Jesus. (Ephesians 2:4–7)

Only through God’s grace are we able to experience salvation, and the only way to gain access to His grace is through faith. Our abilities and good fortunes benefit us nothing in the realm of redemption from sin. Our heritage, lineage, or possessions cannot purchase redemption on our behalf. Our charisma and character will never increase our favorability in the eyes of the Savior. Only by underserved grace and mercy through faith can we experience the redemptive hand of the Almighty at work on our behalf.

**D. We Access God’s Grace through Faith**

But without faith it is impossible to please him: for he that cometh to God must believe that he is, and that he is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him. (Hebrews 11:6)

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Every relationship with God must begin with faith. Without faith, we cannot please God (Hebrews 11:6). Faith is the foundation upon which relationship with God is built. How can we have a relationship with anyone in whom we have no trust or confidence? Consequently, relationship with God also begins with trust, or faith in Him, which then forms the foundation for that relationship.

By whom also we have access by faith into this grace wherein we stand, and rejoice in hope of the glory of God. (Romans 5:2)

According to the eternal purpose which he purposed in Christ Jesus our Lord: In whom we have boldness and access with confidence by the faith of him. (Ephesians 3:11–12)

We access God's grace through faith, but that is only the beginning of a redemptive relationship with Him. How can we grow in grace and knowledge of Christ if we never respond to His grace by receiving His offer of salvation?

Faith and grace are conduits to salvation. Some people want to stop at only having faith, but that does not even allow a person to begin to experience the greatness of God. Others want to stop at grace, but again, they have not even begun to experience God's works within their lives; they have only stepped through the door opened by grace through faith. What is inside that door? Inside that door we discover the full realm of redemption from sin, which God alone can provide.

Faith empowers us to believe that God's grace will reach out to us in spite of our sinful condition and that He will give to us



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His gift of salvation. It opens the way to a relationship with God wherein we can experience His plan for our redemption. What is His plan? The Jewish audience who heard Peter preach on the Day of Pentecost wanted to know His plan; after hearing Peter's sermon and experiencing great conviction in their hearts they cried out, "What shall we do?" (Acts 2:37). They wanted to know how to be saved. Peter's clarion response provided a pathway forward to them as well as to all of us:

Then Peter said unto them, Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost. (Acts 2:38)

Faith and grace lead us to obey Christ's call to repent of our sins. Sin destroyed humanity's relationship with God, but Jesus Christ has paid the price that we may experience a restored relationship with Him. The way to embrace His plan begins with faith, but it moves forward by His grace and through human repentance of sin.

I tell you, Nay: but, except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish. (Luke 13:3, 5)

In addition to repentance of sins, Peter explained we also must be baptized in water in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and we shall receive the Holy Ghost. (See Acts 2:38.) Following this plan that God has extended to us through His grace begins a real and living relationship with Him. That redemptive relationship will lead us to continue

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growing in His grace as our lives are dramatically changed and we are drawn closer and closer to Him.

### **II. BECAUSE HE SAVED US WE ARE CALLED TO LIVE DIFFERENTLY**

We are not saved by works, nor could we ever do enough to deserve the grace of God and His spiritual formation within us. However, that realization should never diminish the importance of growing into the “good works” He has called us to perform. Paul wrote, “For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them” (Ephesians 2:10). While good works cannot save us, our salvation should lead us into good works. They reflect the redemptive work Jesus Christ has accomplished within us.

The Holy Spirit is a great leader and teacher. He leads and guides us into all truth, prompting us toward continual, spiritual progress as we grow in His grace and knowledge. “Howbeit when he, the Spirit of truth, is come, he will guide you into all truth: for he shall not speak of himself; but whatsoever he shall hear, that shall he speak: and he will shew you things to come” (John 16:13). Further, the grace of God will teach us to pursue holiness through Christ Jesus (Titus 2:11–12). As we pursue His leading, we will grow by denying ourselves of partaking in the fleshly desires and worldly lusts our human nature desires to pursue.

For the grace of God that bringeth salvation hath appeared to all men, teaching us that, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live

soberly, righteously, and godly, in this present world. (Titus 2:11–12)

In denying our fleshly whims and wills, we grow in the likeness of Christ Jesus. In the process of the Spirit’s work within us, we gradually grow into dramatically new and different lives than we knew before we received the Holy Ghost.

**A. We Are New Creatures**

Through the new-birth experience, we become new creations in Jesus Christ. We are no longer the same, for He has changed us by His grace and power in our lives. Paul wrote to the Corinthians, “Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new” (II Corinthians 5:17).

Our old habits and lifestyles lose their appeal in our lives, and we are drawn to new lives of new disciplines and spiritual experiences in Christ.

**B. We Should Desire to Continually Grow in Grace**

Even with the dramatic changes of becoming new creations in Christ Jesus, we are not content to stand still spiritually. Rather, we recognize the joy of continually advancing, growing spiritual lives in Jesus Christ. In his first letter, Peter encouraged believers to “desire the sincere milk of the word, that ye may grow thereby” (I Peter 2:2).

We should desire to “grow up” in Christ, which speaks of growing in spiritual maturity (Ephesians 4:15). Just as babies have to grow up, we need to grow up also. We are to “grow in grace, and in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ” (II Peter 3:18). (See also Colossians 1:10.)

### **C. We Should Walk in the Spirit**

The way to grow spiritually is to anchor our lives daily in the Spirit, that is, to “walk in the Spirit” (Galatians 5:16, 25). In other words, we are to walk through this life by living in the Spirit—thriving and growing spiritually. Paul wrote to the believers in Rome, “There is therefore now no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit” (Romans 8:1).

There are at least two things that will facilitate spiritual growth in us as we resist walking after our fleshly desires and instead walk “after the Spirit.”

1. *Discerning the right decisions.* The Spirit will empower us to discern and make the right decisions if we are careful to follow His guidance and endeavor to live our lives in Him. We all experience times when we are uncertain of the way forward. We are able to rationalize both directions, and we experience confusion as we try to humanly identify the right decision. In times like these, the Holy Spirit wants to lead us to make the right decision. The correct choice may not even appear as positive as the other path when we examine it carnally, but the Spirit sees beyond what we are able to discern in our flesh. Listen to the Spirit and heed His lead. He knows the way forward, and He will help us to discern what is right.

2. *Following spiritual disciplines.* Second, we will advance spiritually as we pursue spiritual disciplines in our lives. These spiritual disciplines will harness our fleshly inclinations and empower us to listen to the Spirit’s gentle nudges. He will lead and guide us into all truth, which includes the decisions we have to make.

## PERSONAL APPLICATION

But the God of all grace, who hath called us unto his eternal glory by Christ Jesus, after that ye have suffered a while, make you perfect, stablish, strengthen, settle you. (I Peter 5:10)

When the Scriptures speak to us of perfection, they are speaking of becoming complete. The word *perfect* in I Peter 5:10 is translated from the Greek word *katartizo*, which means “to complete thoroughly, i. e., repair (literally or figuratively) or adjust” (*Strong’s Concordance*).

The Holy Spirit and His work within us completes us. Not only does He complete the new-birth experience as we receive salvation, but He also directs our spiritual growth daily for our future life in Him. He is leading us toward and into full, spiritual completeness.

Jesus admonished us, “Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect” (Matthew 5:48). Perfection is completion, which is a continually advancing, moving target. That is not to say perfection in Christ Jesus is impossible to achieve; rather, it is to say that growing toward perfection, or completion, is a lifelong pursuit. We are to pursue Jesus Christ all our lives—every day of our lives. We will continually progress, grow, and mature spiritually as we live for Him and walk in the Spirit.

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### **QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION**

- How does our understanding of grace inform our view of God?
- How did sin enter God's perfect world? How does that fact affect humans today?
- In what way was "the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world" a foregone plan centuries before the actual event?
- Can we do anything to merit or deserve God's provision of redemption?

## CHAPTER TWO



# THE DISCIPLINE OF WORSHIP

### INTRODUCTION

Worship is more than something we do to receive blessings from God. It involves sacrifice—often seemingly costly and that does not make sense. It requires obedience, demonstrating that worship is a whole-life process, one that touches every action and thought. Worship proclaims God’s attributes and witness to His greatness, His goodness, and His steadfast love.

Abraham demonstrated that worship is an act of trust, often performed in obedience to God’s seemingly unreasonable calling and demands. Abraham leaned upon God’s record of faithfulness and blessing, even in the face of His command to sacrifice Isaac. In his book *Recalling the Hope of Glory*, Allan Ross wrote: “The truth of who God was came to Abraham through divine revelation by God himself. Yahweh was the living God; he was sovereign; he was the righteous judge, gracious and faithful.”

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As we walk by faith in obedience to God, living our whole lives as acts of worship and serving God and others, we too will reap the promises given in His Word.

### I. WHAT IS WORSHIP?

#### A. Sacrifice

In the ancient world in which Abraham lived, sacrifice to pagan gods was a regular part of worship. Thus when Abraham worshiped Jehovah, it was natural for him to build an altar and offer sacrifices to the true and living God. (See Genesis 12:7–8; 13:18; 22:9.) Although pagans in the ancient world might have offered sacrifices out of duty and obligation or to escape the wrath and judgment of their gods, Abraham offered sacrifices out of his sincere desire to please God with the gifts he gave. Abraham's sacrifice was symbolic of his need for God and His goodness as the source of life. In this way, his sacrifice differed from pagan sacrifices offered to gods out of fear or because these gods needed to be placated in some way. Allan Ross wrote: "When Abraham built his altar to Yahweh (Genesis 12:7), it was no perfunctory religious act. Not only was it the spontaneous response of a heart of faith to an amazing revelation from God, but it was also a sincere act of worship, proclaiming gratitude to the one who had called him, devotion to the one who was now his God, and submission to the plan of the one who would bring blessing to the world."

Abraham's consistency in building altars and offering sacrifices at every location is worthy of note. Deities in the ancient world often consisted of statues or objects found in nature and thus were confined to a particular location. Because



of this, worshipers of these gods had to travel to the location where their gods were housed in order to offer sacrifices.

God's command to "have no other gods before me" was unique to the ancient Near Eastern culture since it was assumed that as one moved from region to region, one would come under the authority of the deity or group of deities in that location. (See, for example, II Kings 18:33–35.) Abraham's decision to build altars as he traveled from location to location by God's command was symbolic of God's omnipresence. That God was to be worshiped wherever Abraham traveled was a bold proclamation that Jehovah was the true and living God of all the land and was not confined to one location.

### **B. Obedience**

God's command to Abraham to sacrificially offer his son Isaac must have come as a shock to Abraham. God had promised Abraham a son in his old age and had followed through on that promise in the gift of Isaac. God's sudden request for Abraham to offer the son he loved as a burnt offering must have sent a wave of panic through Abraham. Surely his mind raced back to God's promises to him in Genesis 17:1–2: "And when Abram was ninety years old and nine, the LORD appeared to Abram, and said unto him, I am the Almighty God; walk before me, and be thou perfect. And I will make my covenant between me and thee, and will multiply thee exceedingly."

Then, after Abram fell on his face, God continued in verses 4–6: "As for me, behold, my covenant is with thee, and thou shalt be a father of many nations. Neither shall thy name any more be called Abram, but thy name shall be Abraham: for a father of many nations have I made thee. And I will make thee

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exceeding fruitful, and I will make nations of thee, and kings shall come out of thee.”

Consider what might have transpired between verses two and three of Genesis 22. The text indicates Abraham “rose up early in the morning,” meaning he must have endured a long night beforehand as he considered what God had commanded him to do. How would he tell Sarah? What would he tell his friends and neighbors who knew of the miraculous gift of Isaac to aging parents? How could he offer the gift that had filled his life with so much joy and hope?

Many questions must have swirled through Abraham’s mind, yet the text indicates in verse 3 he “rose up early in the morning, and saddled his ass, and took two of his young men with him, and Isaac his son.” This remarkable level of trust in God was something Abraham had built based on God’s revelation of Himself. That obedience to God would flow out of this revelation was natural and was demonstrated in Abraham’s consistent acts of worship and sacrifice. Nothing less than total surrender and submission to God was required in Abraham’s unprecedented act of obedience. Allan Ross wrote: “This sacrifice symbolized God’s ownership of all things in Abraham’s life—including Isaac.”

As we read this story today, we have the privilege of knowing the ending, which tells us God would provide a substitute—a ram—in honor of Abraham’s obedience. But apart from his choice to trust God’s faithfulness, Abraham had no way of knowing the outcome. The writer of Hebrews captures this tension, writing in 11:17–19: “By faith Abraham, when he was tried, offered up Isaac: and he that had received the promises offered up his only begotten son, of whom it was said, That in Isaac shall thy seed be called: accounting that God was able to

raise him up, even from the dead; from whence also he received him in a figure.” What confusion Abraham must have felt as he obeyed the command to give back that which God had promised! Abraham’s faith demonstrated he trusted that God would fulfill His promises even in the face of Isaac’s death. Allan Ross continued: “Although Abraham never actually sacrificed Isaac, his obedience and willingness to do so—his offering of his own desires and wishes—became the sacrifice. The ram became the symbolic expression of Abraham’s obedience and submission to God’s command.” (See Psalm 40:6–8.)

### **C. Activity**

The story of Abraham’s willingness to sacrifice Isaac demonstrates a whole-life concept of worship, one that encompasses all of one’s being. Although Abraham’s obedience grew out of his faith and willingness of heart, his actions also demonstrated a life wholly devoted to the worship of God. When referencing worship, the Old Testament most frequently uses the Hebrew word *histahawa*, which means to prostrate oneself before a superior. Although most English translations render this word simply as “worship,” the Old Testament writers understood the idea of physically prostrating oneself before God. In Genesis 22:5 when Abraham told his servants, “I and the lad will go yonder and worship, and come again to you,” the word *histahawa*, translated as “worship,” was used to signify his prostration before the Lord. Given it was not uncommon to bow before pagan deities, which he had formerly worshiped, this act of prostration would not have been foreign to Abraham and was a natural part of his worship of Jehovah.

The Old Testament frequently references systems of religious worship such as building altars or other rituals

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practiced by various groups. Closely connected with these ritual activities is the idea of service, which is represented by the Hebrew word *abad*, meaning “to serve.” The idea connected to this kind of service is that the person works to advance the agenda of a superior by doing certain acts or by living according to another’s will.

Here we see the connection between Abraham’s obedience of heart and its expression in his worshipful actions of building an altar, stacking it with wood, binding Isaac, and laying him on the altar. His ultimate act was taking the knife to slay his son in obedience to Jehovah. However, when God saw that Abraham fully intended to slay Isaac, He intervened. An angel called to Abraham and told him not to kill his son. When Abraham looked behind him, he saw a ram that God had provided. Abraham sacrificed the ram in place of Isaac.

By dedicating the actions of sacrificial offerings and prostration to the worship of the one true God, Abraham directed worship to its rightful recipient. The outward manifestation of Abraham’s obedience proclaimed his loyalty to the worship of God alone.

## II. WHY WE WORSHIP

### A. Because of Who He Is

Abraham demonstrated that worship was a response to God, who commanded him to separate himself and move into the land He had promised. At every stop along the way, Abraham was careful to build an altar and worship God through sacrifice and obedience. Having been called out from the pagan society in which he lived, Abraham separated himself, following God wherever He commanded, choosing to believe God’s promise

of provision and blessing. Time and again as God revealed himself in covenant relationship, Abraham obeyed, building altars and sacrificing to God. (See Genesis 12:8; 15:7–21.) God was a God of covenant relationship, keeping seemingly impossible promises to Abraham. As he continued to worship and obey God, Abraham came to know Him as the covenant-keeping God, provider, sustainer, deliverer, and friend.

Abraham came to know God in real time, not having the treasure of Scripture we know and cherish today. We find in His Word a God who is faithful. “Know therefore that the LORD thy God, he is God, the faithful God, which keepeth covenant and mercy with them that love him and keep his commandments to a thousand generations” (Deuteronomy 7:9).

Jeremiah wrote: “Thus saith the LORD, which giveth the sun for a light by day, and the ordinances of the moon and of the stars for a light by night, which divideth the sea when the waves thereof roar; The LORD of hosts is his name: if those ordinances depart from before me, saith the LORD, then the seed of Israel also shall cease from being a nation before me for ever” (Jeremiah 31:35–36). God’s covenant devotion would cease to exist only if the moon and stars disappeared. The God who made these ultimate promises to Israel is the God whom we serve today.

In addition to His faithfulness, God is King of kings and Lord of lords, sovereign over all the earth. His supreme authority, control, and power over all the earth is demonstrated over and over in His Word. II Chronicles 20:6 states, “O LORD God of our fathers, art not thou God in heaven? and rulest not thou over all the kingdoms of the heathen? and in thine hand is there not power and might, so that none is able to withstand thee?” In a beautiful hymn of praise, David testified to God’s greatness

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and authority: “As for man, his days are as grass: as a flower of the field, so he flourisheth. For the wind passeth over it, and it is gone; and the place thereof shall know it no more. But the mercy of the LORD is from everlasting to everlasting upon them that fear him, and his righteousness unto children’s children; to such as keep his covenant, and to those that remember his commandments to do them. The LORD hath prepared his throne in the heavens; and his kingdom ruleth over all” (Psalm 103:15–19).

In addition to His faithfulness and sovereignty, perhaps the most beautiful attribute of all is God’s unfailing love to us, His people. As we read the history of Israel, Scripture bears witness to God’s unfailing mercy rooted in His great love for His people despite the many times they broke His covenant. Yet even in the middle of their unfaithfulness and subsequent judgment, God made promises to restore His people, to return them to their lands and cities, to give them crops, herds, healthy children, and prosperity.

For a small moment have I forsaken thee; but with great mercies will I gather thee. In a little wrath I hid my face from thee for a moment; but with everlasting kindness will I have mercy on thee, saith the LORD thy Redeemer. . . . For the mountains shall depart, and the hills be removed; but my kindness shall not depart from thee, neither shall the covenant of my peace be removed, saith the LORD that hath mercy on thee. (Isaiah 54:7–8, 10)

As we read these passages, we understand they were written for God's people at a specific time and under specific circumstances. And yet as we bring the brokenness and failures of our lives before God today, we can look back to these writings and know this same God is our God. The faithfulness, sovereignty, and unfailing love with which He cared for His people so long ago is available and freely offered to us today. This is who He is and will always be.

### **B. Because of What He Does**

God's faithfulness to Israel resulted in His saving acts. Time and again He delivered them from their oppressors (Exodus 14); provided food, shelter, and clothing (Exodus 15–16); and led them into the Land of Promise. Psalms 105 and 106 document in song the journeys of Israel and God's faithful acts of deliverance and provision. In Psalm 103:1–5, David captured God's faithful actions:

Bless the LORD, O my soul: and all that is within me, bless his holy name. Bless the LORD, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits: who forgiveth all thine iniquities; who healeth all they diseases; who redeemeth thy life from destruction; who crowneth thee with lovingkindness and tender mercies; who satisfieth thy mouth with good things; so that thy youth is renewed like the eagle's.

God, who does not change, is still the God who heals, redeems, shows mercy, provides, and renews.

God is also a God of justice, pledging Himself on behalf of the needy and afflicted. "I know that the LORD will maintain

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the cause of the afflicted, and the right of the poor” (Psalm 140:12). In the Book of Isaiah, after chastising Israel for simply going through the motions of sacrifice and service in His Temple, God commanded them to wash their hands in repentance, put away evil, and “learn to do well; seek judgment, relieve the oppressed, judge the fatherless, plead for the widow” (Isaiah 1:17).

That God was a God of the needy, oppressed, and lowly was perhaps one of the most striking differences in comparison to pagan gods of the day. In the ancient Near East, the help of these false gods was promised only to the upper class and those who were wealthy enough to bring generous offerings in order to appease the gods and be worthy of blessing. That Jehovah was a God of the downtrodden, the afflicted, and the outcast further set Him apart, making Him unique from all other deities of the day.

### III. HOW WE WORSHIP

#### A. With Our Whole Person

That worship was a whole-life orientation is demonstrated over and over in the life of ancient Israel. Every ritual, the food they ate, the clothing they wore, even the very arrangement of their tents around the centrally placed Tabernacle, demonstrated that God was at the center of all of life. Deuteronomy 6:4–5 captures this call to dedication: “Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God is one LORD: and thou shalt love the LORD thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might.”

In Luke 10:27, Jesus repeated the command in Deuteronomy: “And he answering said, Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy strength,



and with all thy mind; and thy neighbour as thyself.” Jesus’ words call us to a holistic life of worship: with our emotions, our very lives, our physical bodies in service to God and others, and our intellect as we study and grow in order to better serve. Later, Paul picked up on this command in Romans 12:1 where he called his readers to present themselves as “a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service.”

### **B. With Our Substance**

A part of living a life of holistic worship is to honor God with our substance. Proverbs 3:9 states, “Honour the LORD with thy substance, and with the firstfruits of all thine increase.” That God has blessed us with our possessions is found throughout Scripture, along with the command to honor God by giving back a portion of them to the Lord. In Malachi 3:8–10, God reprimanded the people for essentially “robbing” God by not bringing their tithes and offerings “into the storehouse.” To give tithes and offerings is a symbolic gesture of gratitude that declares to others our total dependence on God, not only for our money and possessions, but for the ability He has given us to work and to prosper.

Perhaps one of the greatest misconceptions related to paying tithes and offerings is that we will automatically become wealthy and want for nothing. Malachi 3:11–12 corrects this misconception when God stated: “And I will rebuke the devourer for your sakes, and he shall not destroy the fruits of your ground; neither shall your vine cast her fruit before the time in the field, saith the LORD of hosts. And all nations shall call you blessed: for ye shall be a delightsome land, saith the LORD of hosts.” Though we have to work for our possessions,

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God has promised provision and blessing in these labors as well as favor with our superiors and those who surround us.

### **C. By Ourselves and in Community**

As Christians, we are called to worship God both individually and corporately. Individual worship is found throughout Scripture, but especially in many of the psalms, which function as prayers sung to God. These songs were deposited in the Temple and were used repeatedly as worshipers came to bring their offerings to the Lord. Whether songs of praise, confession, lament, or thanksgiving, these individual acts of worship repeatedly demonstrated the need to honor God in all of life, regardless of circumstances. These times of individual worship were a natural outgrowth of times of corporate worship and instruction in which the people learned the history of God's faithfulness and submitted themselves to memorizing His laws and principles for living.

Both the Old and New Testaments reinforce the idea of worshiping God in community. This can be seen in the Psalms of Ascents (Psalms 120–135) that were sung in community as the people journeyed to Jerusalem. In the New Testament, the metaphors of the “body” (Romans 12:5) and the “building” (Ephesians 2:21) indicate a sense of unity among many parts, all coming together to perform one function of worship and service to God and each other. As we come together in worship, we are reminded of our mission to be salt and light to the world, together as the body of Christ. We also fulfill Paul's command to submit ourselves to one another, being accountable and supportive of our brothers and sisters in Christ. (See Ephesians 5:21.)

**PERSONAL APPLICATION**

As seen in the life of Abraham, worship encompasses all of life. God calls us to lives of obedience, often requiring sacrifice, as we center our lives around who He is and what He has done and will do. Giving of our emotions, our physical strength, our intellect, and our lives, we serve as witnesses to the world of God’s great love and sacrifice for mankind. As we offer ourselves, we can recall from Scripture God’s faithful, covenant love for Israel, a love and faithfulness also promised to us.

Offering ourselves as “living sacrifices” might place us in difficult situations as we obediently follow God’s calling in our lives. But the God of covenant love who made seemingly impossible promises to Abraham will also keep His promises to us, faithfully providing and keeping His promise never to leave or forsake us (Hebrews 13:5). May we continue to follow faithfully after God, living lives of worship to Him and being witnesses of Him that we, as Abraham, may one day be called friends of God.

**QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION**

- Even though God sometimes asks of us things that seem impossible, He will provide the means to accomplish the task and bring blessings in the process. Has this proven to be true in your life?
- Is trust in God a choice? Why or why not?
- How might one view trusting God as an act of worship?



## CHAPTER THREE



# THE DISCIPLINE OF GIVING

### INTRODUCTION

Giving is, if nothing else, a discipline. We are not born givers. Our earliest moments of life consist of taking. The whole must be subject to our desires. If we are hungry, no matter how many people we disturb, we cry. If our stomach aches, we bawl—even if our screams awaken our weary mother. If the diaper needs to be changed, there is no ceremony on earth solemn enough to coax the child to silence. As little children we are almost pure ego. All things that exist, exist for us as little more than extensions of our all-consuming ego. When the infant sees the woman who is his mother, he sees not so much a mother as a source of food; he recognizes not his father but rather the shape of something that will hold him.

For the child, it is only later that the world starts breaking into entities outside the self. But still, as we continue in our march toward adulthood, the old infant perspective of the world as a mere extension of the self dies a slow and grudging

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death. The adolescent, much to the dismay of his apologetic mother, throws an embarrassing tantrum in the store. The teenager—clothed, fed, and lavished on all sides with what would appear to outsiders to be love and attention—is, from time to time, certainly not beyond claiming to be the victim of a vast parental conspiracy to make her unhappy. This relic of our infancy, though, often follows us even into adulthood.

But what may be excusable for children is not excusable for adults. Self-centered adults continue to see others as means to an end; the worth of each person they meet is determined by what that person can do for them. Children are pushed to win the awards, honors, and accolades that their parents, for one reason or another, were never able to win. Egotists go to social gatherings only to “network”; their current friends are stepping stones to future, more important friends. This selfish trajectory has a tragic end.

Charles Dickens’s Scrooge best embodies what the end of such a life looks like: when the man is a young child, he exists and that is all that matters; he perceives everything and everyone else, as has been mentioned, as an extension of the self. But this state of mind is an illusion. Normally as children mature, they come to realize that other human beings are in their lives. However, at the end of a life lived in a persistently infantile, selfish fashion, the man finds himself alone. In Dickens’s classic story, Scrooge, a miser until seeing a Christmas Eve vision, nearly died alone in his bed, little known, unloved, and unmourned.

At some point in adolescence, the human being typically begins to emerge from this cocoon of ignorance. The mark of maturity is seen in a person’s ability to view the world as a

collection of others whose right to exist and pursue happiness is every bit as unimpeachable as that individual's own.

But the Christian ideal of giving goes a step further than our natural maturation takes us. We are called not merely to acknowledge other human beings' equality with us, but to prefer others (Romans 12:10). We are to esteem others as better than ourselves (Philippians 2:3). Our Savior set the example in denying and sacrificing Himself for the sake of His declared enemies. Far from looking to see what others can give to us—as if we were more deserving—the Christian, as a sign of maturity in Christ (that is, in becoming Christ-like), inverts the infant's view of life and sees the self as an extension of others. We take from ourselves to give to others. Giving, it seems, is God's method of reversing the self-centered tendencies with which we are born. Giving prepares us for the kind of citizenship that characterizes the kingdom of God.

The child of God, reborn of water and the Spirit, becomes a giver. Unlike our natural birth, our new birth does not suddenly transform us into givers. Instead, giving is a discipline, a habit, a lifestyle that we have to encourage.

## **SEARCHING THE SCRIPTURES**

### **I. THE NATURE OF GOD**

The discipline of giving starts with the nature and character of God. Perhaps the seminal description in the Bible concerning the nature of God, uttered by Jesus Christ Himself, is, "For God so loved the world, that he gave . . ." (John 3:16). The consequence—the manifestation—of His love is His giving. From the beginning He has given.

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Anyone who goes by the name “I AM THAT I AM” (Exodus 3:14) is saying something about one’s self-sufficiency. What normally follows a sentence that begins “I am” is a description of something that modifies the nature of “I.” For instance, when asked who we are, we would say, “I am Mr. Smith”; the “Mr. Smith” modifies the “I” in the sentence; it particularizes the identity of the one speaking. If we say, “I am happy,” we’re adding, at least for the present time, our identity. What follows “I am” in human language is always a state of being that speaks either of our need to identify ourselves by who we are in relation to another or of some state of being (short-term or long-term) that has been added to our identity. In other words, when we use an “I am” statement, we are indicating our dependence and our incomplete nature. God introduced Himself as “I AM THAT I AM,” which indicates He is all-sufficient and completely independent. Whatever He “needs” is supplied by Himself. Whatever He is at one time, He is all the time. Whatever He is not in the present, He will never be in the future.

But if it is true that God is all-sufficient and independent, why did He create the universe? Why did He not simply enjoy His own company? Theologically speaking, He did not even need anyone else’s love. There was nothing lacking in Him that He Himself could not supply better than any other entity. In fact, to receive anything from anyone outside Himself is to receive that which is second best.

From a logical perspective, the answer for why a perfect and all-sufficient God created a world, including beings other than Himself, seems to be that God created, not because of anything He lacked, but because creating and giving of Himself was part of His essential nature. In the first words of Genesis,



God created the world, giving stars to the sky; fish to the sea; animals to the land; man, God's own regent, to superintend His creation; and woman to be a suitable helper for the man.

God created not because it was necessary for Him to do so but because in the depth of His being He is a giver. God's greatest act of giving came not when He made the world but when He manifested Himself in flesh and then died for the sins of the world. At Calvary, in Christ, we see that God gave of His very self. Christ denied His own right to live for the sake of affirming His love for us. As Paul described it, in the Incarnation, He "emptied himself" (Philippians 2:7, ESV). Elsewhere Paul wrote that God "spared not his own Son" (Romans 8:32). At Calvary, God gave what He most cherished: His beloved Son.

And thus God established the eternal pattern of giving. Giving is not about what we do out of obligation. God was not obligated to give our sky the heavenly stars; but out of the overflowing generosity of His being, He decorated our nights with a parade of crystalline lights. We who have been born of the Spirit give because, as children of God, it is now a part of our essential nature to be giving.

## **II. GIVING PARTNERS US WITH GOD**

The Bible devotes two chapters to the Creation of the world. The same Bible gives over six chapters to the creation and operations of the wilderness Tabernacle (Exodus 25–31). As we learn in the New Testament, the Tabernacle was a foreshadowing of the new creation, the dwelling place of the Spirit of God. Jesus was the Word made flesh who "tabernacled" among us and, much as the children of Israel saw the glory of

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God above the Tabernacle, enabled the disciples to behold “his glory” (John 1:14).

But unlike God’s first creation, in the creation of the Tabernacle God did not create alone. He allowed His people to partner with Him by bringing the materials out of which the Tabernacle and its furnishings were made. Addressing Israel in one of the first recorded offering appeals, Moses said, “This is the thing which the LORD commanded, saying, Take ye from among you an offering unto the LORD: whosoever is of a willing heart, let him bring it, an offering of the LORD; gold, and silver, and brass, and blue, and purple, and scarlet, and fine linen, and goats’ hair, and rams’ skins dyed red, and badgers’ skins, and shittim wood, and oil for the light, and spices for anointing oil, and for the sweet incense, and onyx stones, and stones to be set for the ephod, and for the breastplate” (Exodus 35:4–9).

The offering was to supply the need for everything from the Ark of the Covenant to the priests’ service vestments. The structure they would build and the worship they would offer and the rituals they would follow were to consist of nothing but what willing and grateful hearts supplied. In other words, the creation of the Tabernacle was to stand upon the same foundational motive upon which the Creation of the universe stood: as the world was created out of the generous and free will of God, so was the Tabernacle to be created out of the generous and free will of God’s people. (See Exodus 35:20–22.)

The offering proceeded from a desire to create. Moses, inspired by the Spirit, held a vision of a dwelling place of God before the people’s eyes. Those who caught the vision, those who saw a dynamic reality that did not yet exist but with their generosity could exist, responded to the stirring in their hearts.

They went back to their tents and combed them for something to give.

These once proud but now impoverished, long-enslaved, downtrodden descendants of Abraham, parted willingly with the only luxuries they had ever possessed: the bracelets, earrings, rings, and jewels the Egyptians had given them. More than ten generations of their ancestors' back-breaking, dawn-till-dusk, soul-degrading work for their masters had earned them only one payment: these treasures. But when they envisioned a place for God to dwell among them, when they saw in their imaginations the dignity that such a dwelling place could bestow upon their children, they gladly melted down the legacy of four hundred years of work and turned it into a place to worship God.

Hundreds of years later, a woman of the tribe of Levi brought her son to what was now a very old Tabernacle so he could learn the ways of the Lord and serve Him as high priest and prophet. This boy, Samuel ben Elkanah, the distant descendant of the very people who turned their ornaments into a Tabernacle, grew up in the confines of this house of God. When he held the censer, when he touched the incense altar, when he donned the ephod, he touched the very stones and metals his ancestors broke their backs to earn only to turn around and give so that he could have a place to learn of God. He would go on to become one of Israel's most memorable prophets.

Samuel turned an awkward boy into Israel's first king, and he guided Israel to its great king, David. But none of this would have been possible if Samuel's mother had not had a place to come and offer a prayer and speak to a priest.

The children of Israel in the wilderness must have known they were building something special, but how many knew that

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day as they went through their tents gathering their treasures that they were building a place upon which their nation would one day depend? Who among them could have guessed that some fifteen or sixteen centuries after their offering, an extremely remote ancestor, John son of Zebedee, would think of their Tabernacle when he saw the final curtains of history fall and heard a loud voice emanating from the throne of God, saying, “Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and he will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself shall be with them, and be their God” (Revelation 21:3)?

What if God gives us similar opportunities? When a group of people get together and give of their time, treasure, and talent to form a church, to build a sanctuary, to fund a ministry, to take the gospel to a city, is not this group taking advantage of an opportunity similar to the one God gave to Israel? It is truly a marvel to consider that we can turn our small, seemingly limited individual gifts into something of infinite value. In what other economic system can we make such a barter? Where else can we trade one hundred dollars or five hundred dollars for the priceless gift of seeing the gospel moved? What kind of price tag can we place on a reality in which our sons and daughters and our grandchildren have a place to worship the Lord?

### **A. Giving of Our Time**

Time is the true treasure that enriches the coffers of life. In fact, time is what life is made of. And as such, wasting it is a terrible thing. On the other hand, seeing that time is the very essence of life, what could be a more sacred gift than the gift of one’s time?

The child who gives significant portions of his time to learning the piano will invariably find himself one day rewarded with a unique ability to draw pleasing harmonies from the piano. The student who spends the bulk of his time studying a subject intensely will one day find himself capable of creating interest in the subject for others. The painter who devotes himself to understanding colors, textures, brush strokes, and shapes will one day put on display the latent possibilities of a simple palette of primary colors and a canvas. Such is man's relationship with time. His investment in time makes him uniquely knowledgeable of that to which he has given his time. Life offers us a trade: knowledge of and talent in a topic in exchange for our time. There is no substitute for our gift of time; life will have it no other way. Life accepts only one form of currency for knowledge: time.

The majestic and incomparable subject of God is no different. Time spent getting to know our God will be rewarded with knowledge of Him. But time is the necessary component. We can hardly expect to know His ways, to understand His will in our lives, and to study His purposes in history without giving of our time in exchange.

The Christian ought to devote a significant amount of time each day in pursuit of knowing God. This includes the time we give to our local church and local ministries. God does not seem to offer us direct "downloads" from His mind to ours. Instead, we get to know Him by studying His Word and by our service toward others.

### **B. Giving of Our Talents**

Talents are those unique abilities given to us by God. Certainly our talents can be enhanced by practice and cultivation, but

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ultimately they are special gifts from God. Raw talent coupled with time to develop it ultimately can bring glory to God.

The person who has been given a talent for music still needs to take lessons and devote many hours of time to practice in order to develop that talent. Using that refined talent in a church service brings glory to God.

As a teacher educates students, the talent of teaching is enhanced through experience. As the teacher proceeds to teach year after year, the talent continues to be developed. Using that talent in a church setting can help students grow in their relationships with God.

### **C. Giving of Our Treasure**

A quote often attributed to Benjamin Franklin tells us “Time is money.” Those who earn money (as opposed to those who inherit or steal) have given their time and talent (labor) in exchange for currency. That currency can then be used to purchase items such as food, clothing, and shelter. Thus time is money.

But what about our giving to God and the ministry He has appointed for us? When we give money to our church’s ministry, we are enabling someone to give their God-given ministerial talent in exchange for the money that will allow them to meet their diverse needs. In return, we receive the benefit of a ministry that is able to focus primarily on pastoring, studying God’s Word, and teaching it.

Yes, 10 percent of our income, plus offerings, can sometimes seem difficult to part with. We work hard for our paychecks, and every penny counts. However, what we receive from the ministry in exchange for our tithes and offerings is priceless. As Paul taught, between the giver and the receiver, the giver always has the better end of the deal. (See Acts 20:35;

II Corinthians 9:6–14.) As it has been said, when we receive a gift, the gift is the reward; but when we give a gift, the giving reverberates through time. Giving is like a seed that continuously bears fruit. In giving to the ministry, we are essentially giving 10 to 20 percent of our time (in tithes and offerings) not only to provide pastoral care, counsel, and wisdom for our own families, but we are also underwriting a gospel ministry that stops the enemy in its tracks, frustrates its dark purposes for our city, and nourishes and beautifies our neighbors' lives. Although it is hard to measure the value of any entity that has such an impact, the church requires only a small portion of our income to be extremely effective in enriching lives.

### **PERSONAL APPLICATION**

Giving is a discipline. It allows us to partner with God in His new creation; it moves the peace-making, soul-nourishing gospel; and above all, giving transforms us into the image of our God who, by nature, gives. As such it is more about developing spiritual maturity than it is about meeting needs. In giving of time, as diamonds are the result of coal being under pressure for a long period of time, we turn time into talent. In giving of our talent, we give back to God time that has been perfected by our stewardship. And in giving of our money to the ministry of the local church, we move the world-changing gospel.

### **QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION**

- Why is giving considered a discipline?
- Have you transformed, or are you in the process of transforming, God's gift of time into a talent that you can give back to Him when He requires it of you?

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- If there were a price tag on a future in which your children, grandchildren, and city had a dynamic church in which to learn of and worship God, what price would you pay for such a future?
- Why is it better to give than to receive?



## CHAPTER FOUR



# THE DISCIPLINE OF PRAYER

### INTRODUCTION

The disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ saw Him do many unprecedented and remarkable things. They were present when He turned the water into wine. They saw Him cleanse the lepers. They were in that crowded house in Capernaum when four men, who could not find room to even get in the door, climbed up on the roof and tore a hole in the tiles large enough to let their friend down on his bed so he could have an encounter with Jesus. They witnessed that same man, at the command of the Master, stand up on his feet, take up his bed, and walk out.

This same Jesus, who was so gentle and approachable that little children felt comfortable climbing into His arms to receive His blessing, also had the power and authority to command demons and the forces of nature. On one occasion, Jesus stepped onto the deck of a storm-tossed ship and commanded

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the wind and waves, “Peace, be still. And the wind ceased, and there was a great calm” (Mark 4:39).

Although the disciples witnessed many miracles, never do we read where they asked Jesus, “Lord, teach us to perform miracles.” But we do read in Luke’s writing of their coming to the Lord with this plea:

And it came to pass, that, as he was praying in a certain place, when he ceased, one of his disciples said unto him, Lord, teach us to pray, as John also taught his disciples. (Luke 11:1)

Something about Jesus’ prayer life so affected the disciples that they innately understood if they could just learn to pray as He prayed, they would have the same amazing results He had.

### **I. THE BELIEVER**

#### **A. We Are to Pray in Secret**

But thou, when thou prayest, enter into thy closet, and when thou hast shut thy door, pray to thy Father which is in secret; and thy Father which seeth in secret shall reward thee openly. (Matthew 6:6)

Prayer is not to be a public spectacle but rather should be viewed as a personal visit with our beloved Father. This principle of prayer is also foreshadowed in the Old Testament.

He that dwelleth in the secret place of the most High shall abide under the shadow of the Almighty.  
(Psalm 91:1)

### **B. God Will Reward Us Openly**

The Scripture is replete with examples of secret prayer being rewarded and answered by the Lord. The children of Israel were saved and delivered from slavery and bondage in Egypt when the Lord “heard their groaning.”

And it came to pass in process of time, that the king of Egypt died: and the children of Israel sighed by reason of the bondage, and they cried, and their cry came up unto God by reason of the bondage. And God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob. And God looked upon the children of Israel, and God had respect unto them. (Exodus 2:23–25)

In comparison to the whole world, few heard the words Joshua spoke to the Lord when the evening sun was sinking in the west and the battle was yet to be won. But an entire world beheld the wonder of the sun standing still as God hearkened to the prayer of a man who dared to ask Him to do what had never been done before. (See Joshua 10:12–14.)

Jonah was delivered from the belly of the whale when he cried to the Lord. (See Jonah 2.)

God sent a preacher to preach truth to the house of Cornelius because his prayers and his alms had come up as

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a memorial before the Lord. The door of faith was opened to the Gentiles because a man prayed. (See Acts 10.)

Peter was delivered from prison when the church prayed. (See Acts 12:3–17.)

God still provides, still heals, still saves, and still delivers when His people pray.

### **C. Unlike The Hypocrites**

And when thou prayest, thou shalt not be as the hypocrites are: for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and in the corners of the streets, that they may be seen of men. Verily I say unto you, They have their reward. (Matthew 6:5)

Prayers directed to earthly audiences, prayed to impress men rather than God, rarely get answers. The only reward a person who prays in such a way might receive is human affirmation.

### **D. Unlike The Heathen**

But when ye pray, use not vain repetitions, as the heathen do: for they think that they shall be heard for their much speaking. (Matthew 6:7)

Jesus warned against vain repetitions and believing that prayer is effectual because of “much speaking.” Attributing the success of prayer to the amount of time spent or energy expended is dangerously close to the insidious false doctrine of salvation by works. Rather, the attitude of our hearts and the

sincerity of our faith, along with our obedience to God's Word, make our prayers acceptable to Him.

The Scripture instructs us to ask, to make known our needs. But the Word reveals that even before we ask, the Lord knows of our needs.

Consider the lilies how they grow: they toil not, they spin not; and yet I say unto you, that Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. If then God so clothe the grass, which is to day in the field, and to morrow is cast into the oven; how much more will he clothe you, O ye of little faith? And seek not ye what ye shall eat, or what ye shall drink, neither be ye of doubtful mind. For all these things do the nations of the world seek after: and your Father knoweth that ye have need of these things. But rather seek ye the kingdom of God; and all these things shall be added unto you. Fear not, little flock; for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom. (Luke 12:27–32)

## II. THE LORD'S PRAYER—THE MODEL

### A. Recognition

Jesus began His instructions regarding prayer with these words: "After this manner therefore pray ye: Our Father which art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name" (Matthew 6:9).

Jesus taught His disciples to begin their prayer by acknowledging God as their Father. We do not approach the throne of grace like an unworthy supplicant but rather with

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the confidence of children coming to a loving Father. “Let us therefore come boldly unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need” (Hebrews 4:16).

We also acknowledge that His dwelling is in Heaven. His perspective is farseeing and superior to ours. He is the high and lofty One who inhabits eternity. We can bring our needs to Him, knowing and trusting that He does all things well and that His way is perfect.

For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, saith the LORD. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts. (Isaiah 55:8–9)

### **B. Praise**

Because He is high and because He is worthy, we come with praise, acknowledging that His name is “hallowed,” or holy. The psalmist penned these words regarding our approach to the Lord: “Enter into his gates with thanksgiving, and into his courts with praise: be thankful unto him, and bless his name” (Psalm 100:4).

Even as we would not enter the home of a friend without knocking on the door, we should not come into the presence of the Lord without “knocking on the door” with praise. A grateful heart sets the tone for entering into the presence of God. As Jesus gave us the sequence and structure of the priority of prayer, praise comes before petition.

### **C. Submission**

God is not our personal servant, doing our bidding at a moment's notice. If we really believe He is God, then it follows that we should humbly submit to Him. An individual cannot even repent and begin to walk with God without being willing to submit.

Notice the next verse in our Lord's instructions regarding prayer: "Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven" (Matthew 6:10).

Before we bring our petitions and needs before the Lord, Jesus taught us that we must be submitted to His will. Submission must be more than just words. The Lord rebuked the nation of Israel for honoring Him with their words when their hearts were far from Him:

Wherefore the Lord said, Forasmuch as this people draw near me with their mouth, and with their lips do honour me, but have removed their heart far from me, and their fear toward me is taught by the precept of men: therefore, . . . the wisdom of their wise men shall perish, and the understanding of their prudent men shall be hid. (Isaiah 29:13–14)

They had not forsaken the form of prayer; they spoke with their lips all the right words. But words spoken, no matter how eloquent, poetic, or spiritual they sound, mean nothing to God if they do not come from a submitted heart.

The psalmist wrote these sobering words concerning prayer: "If I regard iniquity in my heart, the Lord will not hear me" (Psalm 66:18). Even if iniquity lies buried deep within the heart,

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far from the eyes of mortal men, it causes the Lord not to hear an individual who prays.

Our prayers must acknowledge our submission to Him, to His will, and to His kingdom. His kingdom must come. His will must be done, on earth as it is in Heaven.

### **D. Petition**

What a blessed hope we receive from the fact that Jesus included in His model for prayer a time for us to bring our needs and petitions to the Lord: “Give us this day our daily bread” (Matthew 6:11).

The Lord’s Prayer directs us to pray for daily bread, not weekly bread or monthly bread. He wants us to trust Him day by day and to ask Him daily. This reference hearkens back to the forty years Israel spent wandering in the wilderness, being fed supernaturally by heavenly manna.

New days bring new needs, but He is “the same yesterday, and to day, and for ever” (Hebrews 13:8). We are not bothering God by bringing our needs to Him, whether they be great or small.

Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you: For every one that asketh receiveth; and he that seeketh findeth; and to him that knocketh it shall be opened. Or what man is there of you, whom if his son ask bread, will he give him a stone? Or if he ask a fish, will he give him a serpent? If ye then, being evil, know how to give good gifts unto your children, how much more shall your Father which is in heaven give good things to them that ask him? (Matthew 7:7–11)



He promised to give to them who ask. He wants us to ask. We are commanded to ask. James said, “Ye have not, because ye ask not” (James 4:2).

### **E. Forgiveness**

And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.  
(Matthew 6:12)

For prayer to be effective in our lives, we must search our hearts and make sure there is no bitterness or unforgiveness lingering there. Lack of forgiveness is one thing that can prevent our prayers from being answered.

If we do not forgive, even our worship is unacceptable to the Lord. “Therefore if thou bring thy gift to the altar, and there rememberest that thy brother hath ought against thee; leave there thy gift before the altar, and go thy way; first be reconciled to thy brother, and then come and offer thy gift” (Matthew 5:23–24).

As much as the Lord loves worship, if we come to the altar, the place of worship, and there we remember an unresolved conflict between us and a brother, we are to go and first be reconciled to our brother before we come back to offer our worship.

Lack of forgiveness also prevents us from praying an acceptable prayer of repentance. Jesus made this plain in His teaching:

And when ye stand praying, forgive, if ye have ought against any: that your Father also which is in heaven may forgive you your trespasses. But if

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ye do not forgive, neither will your Father which is in heaven forgive your trespasses. (Mark 11:25–26)

### **F. Direction**

And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. (Matthew 6:13)

Jesus called Himself the Good Shepherd.

I am the good shepherd: the good shepherd giveth his life for the sheep. But he that is an hireling, and not the shepherd, whose own the sheep are not, seeth the wolf coming, and leaveth the sheep, and fleeth: and the wolf catcheth them, and scattereth the sheep. The hireling fleeth, because he is an hireling, and careth not for the sheep. I am the good shepherd, and know my sheep, and am known of mine. (John 10:11–14)

One of the most important functions of the shepherd was to lead the flock, to provide direction, and to make sure the sheep were led to pastures with no poisonous or harmful weeds.

The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters. He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake. (Psalm 23:1–3)

As we pray to our Father, let us remember that being led by the Spirit is one quality defining the sons of God. However, in order to be led, one must be willing to follow.

Therefore, brethren, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live after the flesh. For if ye live after the flesh, ye shall die: but if ye through the Spirit do mortify the deeds of the body, ye shall live. For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, they are the sons of God. (Romans 8:12–14)

The discipline of prayer helps us to crucify our own flesh and stubborn human will so we can perceive more clearly the leading and guiding of the Spirit. We can be led by the Spirit only when we spend time fellowshiping with the Spirit. By spending time in prayer, we hone our sensitivity and learn to hear the voice of the Shepherd.

### **G. Worship**

For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever. Amen. (Matthew 6:13)

Notice that in the Lord's Prayer, we are instructed to begin and end with expressions of worship. We acknowledge the preeminence of the Kingdom, and His ownership of it. We acknowledge that everything is His. All power is given unto Him both in Heaven and on earth. He alone is worthy of glory and honor. The kingdom, the power, and the glory are His, not just now but forever.

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The prophecy of the coming of the Messiah in Isaiah 9 expresses this beautifully:

For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given: and the government shall be upon his shoulder: and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, The mighty God, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and peace there shall be no end, upon the throne of David, and upon his kingdom, to order it, and to establish it with judgment and with justice from henceforth even for ever. The zeal of the LORD of hosts will perform this. (Isaiah 9:6–7)

It is important to remember that His kingdom, His power, and His glory are not bounded by time but are eternal. Our faith is anchored in the sure knowledge that our God is the ruler of a kingdom that is without end.

God is truly worthy of our worship.

### **PERSONAL APPLICATION**

Now that we studied this beautiful example of prayer Jesus gave us, how do we apply this to our lives and our walk with God?

Prayer is a place of refuge at times, a solace and a comfort during seasons of trouble and times of sorrow. When we find ourselves overwhelmed by life and circumstances, finding the time and the motivation to pray is not difficult.

Hear my cry, O God; attend unto my prayer. From the end of the earth will I cry unto thee, when my

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heart is overwhelmed: lead me to the rock that is higher than I. For thou hast been a shelter for me, and a strong tower from the enemy. (Psalm 61:1–3)

Times of crisis drive us in grateful surrender to our knees in prayer. But a crisis-driven prayer life does not make for a vibrant and healthy prayer life. There are times and seasons in our walk with God when we must discipline ourselves to pray. We cannot claim to be disciples of Jesus if we are not willing to embrace the spiritual disciplines Jesus taught us that should be a part of the life of every believer.

But when ye pray, use not vain repetitions, as the heathen do: for they think that they shall be heard for their much speaking. (Matthew 6:7)

Jesus did not say, “If you pray”; He said, “When ye pray.” There are certain things Jesus simply assumes will be a part of our lives if we claim to be one of His disciples, and prayer is one of those things.

As we survey the great men and women of Scripture, we find they were people of prayer. For example, Abraham, who “was called the Friend of God” (James 2:23), was a man of prayer. “And Abraham gat up early in the morning to the place where he stood before the LORD” (Genesis 19:27). Apparently Abraham had a special place where he regularly went to spend time talking with the Lord.

Certain places, because of how we have chosen to utilize them, have become special to us and have taken on a significance and an atmosphere that help us attain a prayerful attitude of mind and spirit. It is not absolutely necessary to have our

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own private place devoted to prayer, but it is often helpful. An established routine of prayer helps to assist us in disciplining our human nature and bringing it under subjection to the discipline of prayer. It may be a quiet place in our home or a favorite spot in nature, but it should be a place where we feel comfortable being honest and open with God.

A regular set time for prayer is not absolutely necessary and may at times be impossible to keep perfectly, but it can be a valuable tool in helping us maintain our faithfulness to prayer.

Because of various circumstances that may beset us, there will certainly be times when extra prayer and extended seasons of prayer are not only beneficial but essential to our spiritual survival. But these times of extended prayer cannot be the mainstay of our prayer life.

A regular, consistent prayer life is one of the keys to a strong, vibrant walk with God. Without the discipline of prayer, we cannot grow in grace and in the knowledge of the truth as the Lord intended us to. We can study the subject of prayer, read books about it, and attend seminars exploring and detailing its glories. But the reality is that no matter how much we may learn about prayer, we are benefited more by a single hour of time spent communing with the Master than by many hours of the best instruction on prayer.

A few minutes of quality prayer time every day yield more consistent spiritual fruit than many hours at a time separated by long stretches of prayerless days. We must strive to build a consistent, faithful commitment to the discipline of prayer.

The heights by great men reached and kept  
Were not attained in sudden flight,  
But they, while their companions slept,  
Were toiling upward in the night.

—Henry Wadsworth Longfellow,  
“The Ladder of St. Augustine”

**QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION**

- Why do you believe Jesus stressed the importance of secret, as opposed to public, prayer?
- In what ways has your commitment or lack of commitment to prayer affected your spiritual growth?
- What are some practical ways the discipline of prayer can be incorporated into your daily routine?
- How has the pace of modern life affected the overall emphasis the church places on the value of the discipline of prayer? How can this be managed?





## CHAPTER FIVE



# THE DISCIPLINE OF FASTING

### **INTRODUCTION**

In February 1906, William Seymour arrived in Los Angeles to pastor a Holiness mission located on the corner of Ninth and Santa Fe. One of its members, Neely Terry, had met Seymour in Houston, and she was instrumental in his coming to Los Angeles. After a few services, the leadership of the mission removed Seymour because he was preaching that speaking in tongues would accompany the baptism of the Holy Ghost. When Seymour arrived in Los Angeles, he was a member of Charles Parham's Apostolic Faith movement. This movement longed to restore the church to its Book of Acts roots. The Edward Lee family, who had been members of the Santa Fe Mission, invited Seymour to stay with them until he figured out his next move.

At this time, despite his preaching, Seymour had not himself received the baptism of the Holy Ghost. He was hungry for the experience. So too were the Lee family and another family

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from the Santa Fe mission, the Richard Asberry family. To this end, Seymour and these families met frequently at the Asberry home on Bonnie Brae Street. They prayed and fasted to prepare their hearts for the Spirit.

On April 9, 1906, Edward Lee received the Spirit. Then a growing number of people experienced the baptism of the Spirit. The group outgrew the Asberry home and relocated to a former AME church on Azusa Street. From there the famous Azusa Street revival touched the world.

Pioneer Pentecostals made fasting part of their spiritual disciplines. It remains important today. Many churches start each quarter of the year with a period of prayer and fasting. In this chapter we will examine the discipline of fasting.

### **I. THE GOODNESS OF FOOD**

The first chapter of Genesis develops a poetic cadence. “God said . . . and it was so. . . and God saw that it was good.” God created the world, and He does all things well. It follows then that creation is good because it bears the imprint of the Creator. Into this good creation, God placed mankind. God formed Adam from the dust of the earth and breathed into him and Adam became a living soul. Humans then are material (body) and immaterial (soul). Nothing in the Genesis account suggests that our bodies are inferior to our souls. Both bear His imprint. Both the body and the soul need nourishment to be sustained. God’s visit in the cool of the day sustained Adam and Eve’s souls. The Garden of Eden provided the food to sustain their bodies. Eating is necessary and because God is good, it is often pleasurable. It certainly is not inherently unspiritual.

### **A. Blessing of the Lord**

We are, in fact, to give thanks to God for our food. In response to His disciples' request that Jesus teach them to pray, we have today a model prayer we know as the Lord's Prayer. Included in this prayer is a request for daily bread. This request acknowledges that food is a blessing from God. Nothing in this prayer suggests that food is a necessary evil. It does, however, remind us that God is not only the giver of life but also the sustainer of life. And even our everyday nourishment ultimately comes from Him and should be received as a blessing from God.

Only one miracle account, the feeding of the five thousand, is mentioned in all four Gospels. While this account is principally about the miracle power of Jesus, it is possible to extract some insight into the subject of God and food. In this account Jesus had attempted to withdraw Himself from the crowds to rest. The crowds, however, had followed Him into the wilderness. Instead of resting, Jesus spent the afternoon teaching those assembled. As the day grew to a close, He recognized that the crowd was hungry. Although He had been spiritually nourishing them all afternoon, He understood that in addition to their spiritual hunger they were physically hungry. He did not rebuke them for their physical hunger. He did not call on them to fast. Instead He miraculously multiplied five loaves and two fish until the entire crowd had eaten their fill. He did not say He needed to perform this miracle because the people were so unspiritual they could not go without a meal. They were hungry and He fed them. He did, however, bless, or give thanks for, the food.

### **B. Feast Days as Worship**

In biblical times, food often played a role in worship. While this chapter is about fasting, it is important to understand that God also instituted celebrations that had eating as a central function of worship. When it comes to food, fasting is not the only response that leads to deeper spiritual life. In the Old Testament, feasts were important spiritual events in the life of Israel. These high and holy days were times of celebration, remembrance, and eating.

During the Passion Week, Jesus took time to eat with His disciples. In what we know as the Last Supper, Jesus broke bread with those closest to Him. Although He knew that the time for His crucifixion was near, instead of calling His disciples to fast, He invited them to participate in the celebration of the Passover. During this feast celebrating Israel's deliverance from the death angel and her subsequent deliverance from Egypt's bondage, He instituted a new celebration that included eating: communion. In addition to being a meal that looks forward to the Marriage Supper of the Lamb, communion celebrates community.

Eating together, especially in Bible times, implies a sharing of life. Since food sustains life, the act of sharing food lends itself to the building of deeper community. In the summary verses at the end of Acts 2, among the activities mentioned is home fellowship that included eating together. (See Acts 2:44–46.) It should then go without saying that the consumption of food is not inherently carnal. Food can, and often does, help build authentic Christian community.

## **II. REASONS FOR FASTING**

The Bible does talk about abstaining from food for a period of time, or fasting. In fact, fasting or going without food is mentioned more than eighty times in the Bible. Although most of the references to fasting are in the Old Testament, it is mentioned twenty times in the New Testament. There does not appear to be only one primary reason why biblical characters fasted. Sometimes they fasted, or at least did not eat, because they were overcome with grief or awe and they lost their appetite for food. More often it grew out of humility and the pursuit of God. While it is not possible to find that one reason for fasting, a number of broad themes emerge out of the Scripture. We will examine four of them.

### **A. Urgency in Prayer**

Perhaps the most frequent reason biblical people fasted was to demonstrate the urgency of their prayers. Prayer begins in the mind and the heart of a person. But at some point a person gives voice to prayer. Sometimes the mind and the mouth seem inadequate to express the deep passion of prayer. It is not unusual to see people cry when they pray. Fasting is another way to involve the whole person in prayer; in other words, it is a means to ratchet up the intensity of prayer.

People in the Bible were urgent about their prayers for a number of reasons. One recurring reason for urgency was to repent of sin. For example, the children of Israel were instructed to fast on the annual Day of Atonement. On that day the high priest would enter the Holy of Holies to offer the blood of a sacrificial lamb to God as a token of their repentance. All of Israel was to fast both food and water to demonstrate their repentance and to plead for forgiveness.

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In I Samuel 7, King Saul called Israel to Mizpeh for a time of corporate repentance for their idol worship. “And Samuel said, Gather all Israel to Mizpeh, and I will pray for you unto the LORD. And they gathered together to Mizpeh, and drew water, and poured it out before the LORD, and fasted on that day, and said there, We have sinned against the LORD. And Samuel judged the children of Israel in Mizpeh” (I Samuel 7:5–7).

After Jonah’s scathing call for judgment on their city, the people of Nineveh repented of their sin and pled for mercy. All inhabitants of the city, even the domestic beasts, were robed in sackcloth, and together they fasted in an attempt to demonstrate the depth of their repentance. (See Jonah 3:4–9.)

Physical healing was another reason biblical characters were urgent in prayer, and sometimes when praying for healing they also fasted. In Psalm 35:13–14 David prayed and fasted for the healing of his enemies. He also prayed and fasted for the healing of his infant son. In this instance the son was not healed, and as a result of his sickness he died. (See II Samuel 12:15–18.) This account should help us understand that prayer and fasting do not force God to do our bidding.

When looking for guidance and direction in their lives, people often fasted and prayed. For example, Ezra called for a corporate fast for the five thousand Israelites who were returning with him to Judea after years of Babylonian exile. Fasting demonstrated the earnestness of their prayers. They were embarking on a long-dreamed-of journey, and they desperately desired God’s direction. In the New Testament era, the leaders of the church at Antioch prayed and fasted to help them prepare to send Barnabas and Saul on a Gentile mission. “As they ministered to the Lord, and fasted, the Holy Ghost said, Separate me Barnabas and Saul for the work whereunto

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I have called them. And when they had fasted and prayed, and laid their hands on them, they sent them away” (Acts 13:2–3). Fasting and prayer helped make them able to discern God’s direction.

Obviously a crisis in life brought urgency into the life of a biblical character, as it does to us today. The story of Esther illustrates this well. Haman had skillfully maneuvered King Ahasuerus into declaring an open season on the Jews who were in Persian captivity. Mordecai urged Esther, the young Jewish girl whom the king had chosen to replace Vashti as queen, to approach Ahasuerus to intercede on behalf of the Jewish people. Given the customs of Persia, Esther knew that approaching the king uninvited was not without significant risk. She asked the Jews to fast and pray for three days to seek God’s favor in her quest. They responded by donning sackcloth and ashes and they prayed and fasted.

Esther was successful in her intercession before Ahasuerus. The Jews were spared, and ironically the evil Haman was hanged on the gallows he had built for Mordecai. To this day devout Jews celebrate this event known as Purim. They fast the day before Purim to prepare themselves for the memorial celebration.

The Jews ordained, and took upon them, and upon their seed, and upon all such as joined themselves unto them, so as it should not fail, that they would keep these two days according to their writing, and according to their appointed time every year; and that these days should be remembered and kept throughout every generation, every family, every province, and every city; and that these days of

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Purim should not fail from among the Jews, nor the memorial of them perish from their seed.  
(Esther 9:27–28)

### **B. Mourning**

Sometimes it is easier to prove a rule by its exceptions. Earlier in this chapter we referenced David's fasting for the healing of his son he had fathered with Bathsheba. Not only did the depth of David's despair prior to his child's death trouble his servants, but they were also troubled by his lack of fasting after his son's death. (See II Samuel 12:18–23.) One can ascertain then, that for Jews, fasting was usually a part of the mourning process.

When the men of Jabesh-gilead brought home the bodies of King Saul and his sons after they had been killed in battle, the men buried the bodies and then fasted for seven days as a way to mourn the loss of their king. (See I Chronicles 10:12.) When news of the death of Saul and Jonathan reached David, he and all the men that were with him mourned and fasted. (See II Samuel 1:1–12.) Sometimes—and it appears to be the case in this instance—fasting in the Bible was from loss of appetite because of acute grief.

### **C. Worship**

The first mention of fasting—in this case going without food or drink for forty days and forty nights—is found in Exodus 34. This chapter recounts the second trip Moses made to the top of Mount Sinai. His encounter there on the mountain with the glory of God left him without appetite. Evidently the presence of the Lord supernaturally sustained him because humans cannot live without water for that length of time. Elijah had a



similar encounter with the glory of God that left him bereft of appetite. He too went forty days and forty nights without food or drink (I Kings 19:7–8).

In the New Testament, Acts 13 records that the prophets and teachers of Antioch “ministered to the Lord, and fasted” (Acts 13:2). Other versions substitute the word *worshiped* or *worshipping* for the word *ministered*. It was during this time of worshiping and fasting that the Holy Ghost spoke to them about separating Barnabas and Saul for the Gentile mission. From this account it is possible to conclude that fasting is not always done in response to events or circumstances. It can and should be part of the worship life of a believer. In the Acts 13 account, it is instructive in that they apparently prayed and fasted again before they commissioned Barnabas and Saul (Acts 13:3).

#### **D. Spiritual Direction**

As Saul of Tarsus (later called Paul) was on his way to Damascus to persecute the church, he encountered the resurrected Christ, which changed his world. While that encounter opened his spiritual eyes, it blinded his physical eyes. His traveling companions helped him to arrive in Damascus, and for three days he neither ate nor drank. God sent Ananias to Saul to finish his conversion. Ananias prayed and Saul’s sight returned; then Ananias baptized Saul. Fasting helped prepare Saul to receive Ananias’s message.

Just as the prophets and teachers had fasted and prayed before they appointed Barnabas and Saul to the Gentile mission, Paul and Barnabas “prayed with fasting” before they in turn ordained elders for the Asia Minor churches (Acts 14:23). Fasting along with prayer should remove the politics

from the choosing of leaders. Fasting, done properly, produces a healthy dependency on the Lord. It demonstrates that church leaders recognize they are to work in harmony and under the direction of God.

### **III. INAPPROPRIATE FASTING**

In addition to showing us the proper way to fast, the Bible reveals how the practice of fasting can be used inappropriately. Certain attitudes and action make fasting unacceptable to God.

#### **A. Participating in Empty Rituals**

Rituals are not, in and of themselves, bad. In fact they have the capacity to add depth and structure to a person's spiritual life. Think of the value of a regular time of prayer and weekly church attendance. But rituals always run the risk of becoming empty—or just becoming an end unto themselves. They can become untethered from the truth that gives them their meaning. Think of how often Jesus challenged the Pharisees because they had disengaged a ritual from the truth behind the ritual. Because of this tendency, the Bible frequently reminds readers to be careful with them. Fasting is one such ritual that can lose its efficacy if it becomes unmoored.

One of the most extended discussions of fasting in Scripture is found in Isaiah 58. Before we look at Isaiah 58, it is helpful to remember that at times Isaiah is one of the more difficult books to follow. The prophet frequently—and often in rapid succession—changes speakers. In one verse it may be God speaking, in the next the prophet, and in the next the rebellious people. If a reader does not pay careful attention to these switches, that individual can miss the meaning of the text. Sometimes the more complex language of the King James

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Version further complicates this problem. In chapter 58 God took His people to task for their double-mindedness. While they appeared eager to please Him, they did not keep His commandments. God used their practice of fasting to illustrate His point.

“‘Why have we fasted,’ they say, ‘and you have not seen it? Why have we humbled ourselves, and you have not noticed?’ Yet on the day of your fasting, you do as you please and exploit all your workers. Your fasting ends in quarreling and strife, and in striking each other with wicked fists. You cannot fast as you do today and expect your voice to be heard on high” (Isaiah 58:3–4, NIV). God went on to ask, “Is this the kind of fast I have chosen, only a day for people to humble themselves? Is it only for bowing one’s head like a reed and for lying in sackcloth and ashes? Is that what you call a fast, a day acceptable to the LORD?” (verse 5, NIV). The implied answer is a resounding no!

Rather a fast in this case must be accompanied by looking out for the unfortunate and strangers. It must be accompanied with care for the needy and hungry. Fasting is invalidated when those who are fasting continue to oppress the poor and outcasts. Truly effective fasts help believers align their hearts with God’s heart, and He has a special place in His heart for those who are poor. This is the fast He has chosen. Don’t just not eat; act justly.

Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke? Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter—when you see the naked, to clothe them, and not

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to turn away from your own flesh and blood? Then your light will break forth like the dawn, and your healing will quickly appear; then your righteousness will go before you, and the glory of the LORD will be your rear guard. Then you will call, and the LORD will answer; you will cry for help, and he will say: Here am I. (Isaiah 58:6–9, NIV)

### **B. Fasting for Human Approval**

As referenced above, Jesus was often at odds with the Pharisees. One way these religious leaders offended Jesus was that they wanted everyone to know about their devotion. It was almost as if their primary reward for religious devotion was the admiration of other people. In response to their clamoring for public approval, Jesus insisted that their devotion should be developed in private. “Moreover when ye fast, be not, as the hypocrites, of a sad countenance: for they disfigure their faces, that they may appear unto men to fast. Verily I say unto you, They have their reward. But thou, when thou fastest, anoint thine head, and wash thy face; that thou appear not unto men to fast, but unto thy Father which is in secret: and thy Father, which seeth in secret, shall reward thee openly” (Matthew 6:16–18).

## **IV. THE MECHANICS OF FASTING**

The Bible records a number of kinds of fasts. The most radical fast is a total fast. In this type of fast an observant neither eats nor drinks. The Israelites participated in a total fast on the Day of Atonement. Both Moses and Elijah did not eat or drink for forty days. As previously mentioned, God must have

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supernaturally sustained them because the human body cannot naturally live without water for this period of time. Christians should be careful when participating in a total fast. A good rule of thumb would be not to go more than one day on a total fast.

A more normal fast would be to go without food for an extended period of time. Most biblical fasts were of this kind. Jesus went without food for forty days just before He launched His public ministry. Sometimes this fast would be practiced from morning to evening. (See Judges 20:26 for an example.)

There were occasions where biblical characters abstained from certain foods for a given period, especially from those that were especially enjoyable. The best-known and currently most popular example is Daniel's fast. Although Daniel did participate in a normal fast (Daniel 9:3), on at least one other occasion he intentionally went without certain foods (Daniel 10:3). The Bible does not call this a fast, but recently it has become known as the Daniel fast. It is probably better described as abstinence rather than a fast.

As indicated in the previously mentioned exchange between Jesus and the Pharisees, fasts can and sometimes should be individual affairs. Like private prayers, they enhance the devotional life of a believer. Fasts can also be corporate. All of Israel fasted on the Day of Atonement. The church leaders at Antioch fasted together before they commissioned Barnabas and Saul. Churches often call church-wide fasts as a time of spiritual focus and often to develop spiritual unity.

More often than not, fasting is accompanied by prayer. Or to put it in proper perspective, prayer is accompanied by fasting. Missing meals without a time of spiritual reflection and focus may just make a person hungry and sometimes a little irritable. Proper fasting takes focus. It is intentional

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and not mechanical. God does not feel sorry for us when we become hungry while fasting and as a result of His pity give us what we want. Fasting demonstrates our need of God. Done with the right attitude, it demonstrates our humility and often heightens our hunger for more of God in our lives.

### **PERSONAL APPLICATION**

It is a given that fasting is a significant spiritual discipline. And while it is significant, we should not think it earns us credits in some banking system in Heaven. Perhaps a parallel can be seen between fasting and giving. A believer is often blessed when he or she gives. But we cannot give to be blessed. If the reason we give is to gain a blessing, then we are not giving; we are investing. Fasting is about humility and dependence. In the Bible, fasting was often a sign of brokenness. Strength may come from humility but we cannot be humble to gain strength.

We who do not fast should consider it. When done with the proper attitude, it may enhance our spiritual lives.

### **QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION**

- What are the right reasons to fast? What are the wrong reasons?
- How can fasting lead to pride rather than humility?
- Do you feel as if God is calling you to fast?

## CHAPTER SIX



# THE DISCIPLINE OF FORGIVENESS

### INTRODUCTION

When John Wesley was a military chaplain, one officer told him, “I never forgive.” Wesley reportedly said, “Then I hope, sir, that you never sin.” The Lord does not forgive those who do not forgive. Jesus said, “For if ye forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you: but if ye forgive not men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses” (Matthew 6:14–15). The willingness to forgive is the evidence that individuals truly understand the nature of their own forgiveness.

Forgiveness is a discipline. Forgiveness is what believers decide to do before someone wrongs them. The heavy lifting that makes forgiveness work is a heart of humility. Those who are humble do not live with overly sensitive feelings. They do not seek to retaliate or punish those who lash out at them.

The ignition point for unforgiveness is anger. Pride maintains a hurt and continues to hold feelings or facts against

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someone. Humility and love are the undoing of bitterness. The detonator for forgiveness is a humble heart. Love gives the repentant person a fresh start and chooses not to let the past control the present.

When the Lord protected Cain, He promised that “whosoever slayeth Cain, vengeance shall be taken on him sevenfold” (Genesis 4:15). Later, a descendant of Cain took this idea to a twisted and lower level. Lamech bragged to his two wives that he would avenge himself even more than God had done for his ancestor Cain. Lamech bragged of killing a man in retaliation for physical harm inflicted upon him, saying that if Cain was to be avenged seven times, he (Lamech) would be avenged seventy-seven times.

Like Lamech, many today are drunk on their own ability to repay evil. The exhilaration of anger, hate, and knowing they are right is hard to let go. Believers experience a greater force, however: forgiveness. It takes stronger character not to hold anything against someone than to stew in one’s own juices of loathing.

Peter thought it would be enough to forgive someone the same number of times God would bring vengeance on one who killed Cain: seven times. But Jesus said, “I say not unto thee, Until seven times: but, Until seventy times seven” (Matthew 18:22). Lamech wanted to repay evil seventy-seven times for one wrong. Just as much, we should forgive others for an offense.

### **I. THE REALITY OF LIVING IN A FALLEN WORLD**

Mary Gordon told of hitting a pressure point one day when family members pushed her too far with their demands. The constant honking of the horn and yell from the vehicle



demanding that she take them swimming caused her to snap. Running outside, she started screaming at them, jumped on the hood of the car, and pounded on the windshield. As rage took over, she said it was as if she became a huge “carrion crow. My legs became hard stalks, my eyes were sharp and vicious. I developed a murderous beak. Greasy black feathers took the place of arms. I flapped and flapped. I blotted out the sun’s light with my flapping.” Family members got her down from the hood of the car, but still it took her awhile to recover from her fit. Her children were terrified of what they saw in her in that moment of raw vindictiveness (*Christianity Today*, “Why We Love This Deadly Sin,” Barbara Brown Taylor, February 9, 1998). Unforgiveness has a way of distorting a person until they cannot even recognize themselves.

Some people have dwelt in unforgiveness so long that releasing resentment leaves them looking and feeling like someone else entirely. It is almost as if unforgiveness rewires the brain. For example, adult children may not want to forgive a parent because they might not know how to function without having someone to blame for things. Just as much as people regret losing a good friend, they also regret losing an enemy. Enemies have the handy effect of making a person look good. Friends know that person is better than the enemy; if the person reconciles with the enemy, friends might see the person as being on the wrong side.

### **A. Injustices Will Come**

We are guaranteed an opportunity to forgive. Jesus promised us that offenses will come, but we should not be the ones who cause them. People will disappoint us with failures or outright hostility. Loved ones may walk out of our lives;

business partners may take advantage of us; a church member may betray us. This gives us opportunity not only to love our neighbors but also to forgive and love our enemies.

When we forgive an enemy, it changes that individual's identity in our lives. Strangely, it can be as hard to lose an enemy as it is to lose a friend, especially if we take our identity not from whom we are like but from whom we are not like. Defining ourselves over against people we are not like, or oppositionalism, is not the best way to see ourselves. It can make the task of forgiveness even harder.

### **B. We Have an Inherent Desire for Justice**

Even children know when wrong has been done: a child took too much, a bully pushed a child down, or a toy was taken without permission. This is a God-given sense humans should have. If we see someone being taken advantage of, we should feel righteous indignation. At the same time, we should not react wrongly to the wrongs we see.

Imagine the aftereffect of an employee pushing his way into the CEO's office and sitting down in the man's overstuffed swivel chair. Propping his feet up on the desk, the intruder begins acting as the CEO and giving orders. When the executive discovers this rude behavior, the employee will be severely reprimanded or terminated from the firm. However, people do this to the CEO of the universe every day.

When we take vengeance into our own hands, we are trying to do God's job for Him. He says, "Vengeance is mine; I will repay" (Romans 12:19). Unforgiveness, retaliation, and vindictiveness are acts of humans usurping God's authority. If we are going to let those who do us wrong face the full consequences of their behavior, we have to let the Lord

execute vengeance for us. Therefore, if our enemy hungers, we are to feed him; if he is thirsty, we are to give him a drink (Romans 12:20).

## II. PARABLE OF THE UNFORGIVING SERVANT

Jesus taught Peter how to forgive by telling a story (Matthew 18:23–35). In this parable, a servant owed the king millions of dollars, the modern equivalent of ten thousand talents. This is a picture of how deeply we have offended God with our sin. When the king demanded repayment, the servant clearly did not have enough, so the king began itemizing what the servant's punishments would be. The servant fell before his master, praising him and begging him to be patient until the servant could repay everything he owed. This depicts a child of God turning from a life of rebellion to a life of submission to the Master. The king could not resist such humility. In compassion, the king forgave the servant's debt and let him go free.

Feeling happy about himself, the forgiven servant skipped away from the scene. Imagine the relief: he had gone from knowing he would be in debt the rest of his life to being free to dream and invest again. This represents the huge load lifted off our shoulders when the Lord forgave us of our sins. God's forgiveness is so refreshing that new converts often feel lighter and experience joy for the first time.

Then the servant ran into another servant who owed him a few thousand dollars, the equivalent of one hundred denarii. The forgiven servant grabbed the other man by his throat and demanded repayment. This would be like a Christian enjoying the freedom from sin the Lord had bestowed but then holding a grudge, rather than forgiving, when someone wrongs him or her.

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Even though the servant begged for forgiveness, the forgiven man would not relent from his demands or show any patience toward the man. Instead, the free man threw his debtor into prison until he could pay his debt. Too many people in the church hold things against people they should have forgiven long ago. These are deep debts—real hurts—that do not go away easily. Was a Christian woman raped by a so-called believer years ago? Did a businessman do a fellow believer wrong in a business deal? Did a so-called Christian lie about another Christian who found out about it from someone else? In these situations and others like them, it is time for the person who was wronged to let it go. It is time to forgive.

When the king found out about the hostility the forgiven man had toward his other servant, he called him on the carpet. “You wicked servant! I forgave all of your huge debt because you wanted me to! Shouldn’t you have had compassion on my other servant just as I had pity on you?” In his wrath, the king sent the unforgiving servant to suffer torment until the man had paid everything in full.

Jesus concluded the story like this: “So likewise shall my heavenly Father do also unto you, if ye from your hearts forgive not every one his brother their trespasses” (Matthew 18:35). What sins has the Lord forgiven us for that He will hold against us again if we do not forgive our brothers and sisters?

### III. THE COST OF UNFORGIVENESS

#### **A. Absalom Was Unwilling to Forgive Amnon**

Absalom was furious about his half-brother Amnon raping their sister. No one could blame him. What made him angrier was that his father did nothing about it. Absalom could not

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get the thought of Amnon's sin out of his head. It made him angry that his sister now hid her face from everyone—she did not want to see anyone who knew what had happened to her. Amnon, however, continued life happily and freely, with maybe a minor twinge of guilt every now and then.

Absalom decided on a plan. He threw a big party for his brothers and made sure Amnon was going to be there. Absalom had his servants trained and ready. In the height of the celebration, they killed the unsuspecting Amnon at Absalom's command.

Panic ensued among the other brothers. David was heartbroken to see what was happening among his children. Other than Amnon suffering murder, the worst victim of Absalom's unforgiveness was Absalom himself. His hateful actions made him a social outcast. Soon his heart hardened against his own father. He met an untimely and unnecessary death in a battle against his father's warriors.

Unforgiveness kills relationships and is a potent force of self-destruction. Clearly, wrongs such as what Amnon committed are hard to forgive. However, the alternative presented by Absalom is far worse. A person has to learn that forgiveness is not saying, "What you did was OK." It is saying, "In spite of the wrong you did, I will love you anyway."

### **B. We Remain Controlled by Whoever Wronged Us**

In a folk tale, Uncle Remus tells the story of Br'er Rabbit and a tar-baby decoy. The rabbit's anger caused him to strike the tar decoy and become stuck to it. The rabbit's anger escalated, and he struck it again. Soon all of his appendages were stuck to the tar baby, and he could not get free from the sticky constraints of that creature. Resentment is like the tar baby in which we

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become so enmeshed that we cannot get free. The people we hate own us emotionally. The people we resent control our actions because we live in avoidance of them and the things they stand for.

People often become like the ones they hate. Whether negative or positive, focus is what shapes us. A girl might grow to hate her mother. Even though she despises the woman, she will take on her mother's characteristics. A young man might grow up despising his drunken father. His hatred, however, causes the person he dislikes to own him. Soon he becomes a drunkard, not realizing he is following the same path as his father. Forgiveness is how we move on rather than being owned by those who have hurt us.

### **IV. THE FREEDOM OF FORGIVENESS**

Picture a man stealing a believer's new SUV. After a few years, someone contacts the believer and says he has won that man to the Lord. The believer has wanted to see the criminal punished for all these years, but now he has been filled with the Holy Ghost and is living for God. Furthermore, this man is moving to the town where the believer lives and will be attending his church. The vehicle is long gone; the man has no money to repay. In the meantime, this man has been a great helper to the person who won the believer to the Lord. Will the believer hold the past against the individual who stole his SUV?

Such a scenario was what Paul dealt with in the Book of Philemon, but the situation was more personal. The story of Paul entreating Philemon to forgive Onesimus presents interesting dynamics in mediation, forgiveness, and reconciliation. The lessons gleaned from the Book of Philemon instruct people on any side of a conflict or personal grievance.

First, Paul could have mentioned his credentials, announcing himself as an apostle as he did in most of his letters. Instead, the apostle announced himself as a prisoner. In verse 7, Paul addressed Philemon as “brother.” Reconciliation is not achieved by throwing one’s weight around or demanding anything. Reconciling people to each other comes about by humility. A humble approach defangs bitterness.

Next, Paul complimented Philemon, pointing out the spiritual qualities of his friend (verses 5–7). Then the leader addressed the situation at hand. Paul pointed out that he could boldly command Philemon in Christ to do what he wanted him to do. Instead, he appealed to Philemon out of love, asking for a favor both as a prisoner for Jesus and as an elderly man (verses 8–9).

Bringing up the name of the offender likely stirred great emotion in the recipient of this letter. Paul softened the blow by preceding the name of Onesimus with “my son.” This personal attachment of himself to the offender was as strong a move as if one stepped up and put his arm around a friend who was being stared down by a potential attacker. In effect, Paul said, “What you do to him, you do to me.” Furthermore, Paul explained that this “son” was “begotten in my bonds” (verse 10), meaning Paul had won him to the Lord even as a prisoner. This made Onesimus a fellow believer with Philemon.

Onesimus had not stolen an SUV. He had stolen himself. He was an indentured servant—often referred to as a slave. Unlike race-based slavery in the modern era, slavery in the ancient Mediterranean world differed in important respects. Some became slaves as a result of defeat in war. The resulting captives became slaves instead of being put to death. Others entered slavery voluntarily as indentured servants, working a certain amount of time as a way of paying off debt. In some

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ways, such people could be viewed as contract workers. They could save up their money and buy their own freedom—in effect, pay off their own contract. For whatever reason, Onesimus had run off, robbing Philemon of the investment he had in the man as a worker.

Paul was not writing in defense of slavery. Contemporary readers might want to see him rail against the evils of slavery and demand laws to prevent such behavior. But Paul had a better tactic for social change. His method was humility and his anti-slavery campaign was love.

The name *Onesimus* means “useful, profitable.” Onesimus, however, had proved to be an unprofitable servant. But when he turned to the same Master as Paul and Philemon, he became a profitable person (verse 11). Onesimus was useful to Paul while in prison. This new believer became the hands and feet Paul could not use while imprisoned.

Paul told Philemon he was sending Onesimus back to him and asked Philemon to receive him, calling Onesimus “my own heart” (verse 12, NKJV). Instead of using his spiritual authority to persuade Philemon, Paul used a stronger force—love. Philemon loved Paul, and Paul loved Onesimus. Although Philemon may have had cause to hate this runaway slave, the way Paul put things, Philemon could not hate the lesser man without also directing such vehemence to his spiritual superior, Paul.

One might ask why Paul would send a fugitive back to face possible punishment. Even in Roman civilization, a person could beat a slave or even kill him. More was at stake here than just pouting or sulking by the wronged person. The situation involved more than bruised feelings. Real material



loss had occurred, and Onesimus's well-being could have been in danger.

Paul was sending the man back because of principle. Although it would have been more beneficial to Paul to keep the fugitive with him, Paul could not continue to let the redeemed man serve him without Philemon's consent.

Perhaps like the Old Testament character Joseph, could God be working what Onesimus did with evil intentions for a good cause? Joseph told his brothers not to be angry with themselves because their evil actions proved to be God's opportunity to save the whole clan of Jacob from starvation (Genesis 45:5–7). Would Philemon say the same to Onesimus? Have we come to the point we can say as much to those who cursed us, lied against us, divorced us, sued us, abused us, or abandoned us? These are not easy words to say until we have learned to see things from God's perspective.

Paul wanted Philemon to see Onesimus through God's eyes. Perhaps God had orchestrated all of this so that Philemon could get his long-lost slave back forever (verse 15). This time, he would not be welcoming him back as a slave. Paul said Onesimus would no longer be a slave but someone infinitely more valuable—a brother. Now Paul, Philemon, and Onesimus all stood on the same ground (verse 16). Paul was meaningful to Philemon as a brother in the Lord. Philemon was meaningful to Paul as a brother in the Lord. Onesimus was meaningful to Paul as a brother in the Lord. Would Philemon find Onesimus meaningful as a brother in the Lord?

In humility, Paul urged Philemon to receive the runaway as if he were receiving the apostle himself (verse 17). Perhaps Onesimus stole more than just himself. Perhaps he stole money or household goods. What of that? How would Philemon be

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repaid? By Paul. The prisoner said, “If he hath wronged thee, or oweth thee aught, put that on mine account” (verse 18). To make sure this pledge to cover the man’s debt was not doubted, Paul signed with his own hand that he would repay (verse 19). At the same time, he pointed out how much Philemon already owed him—his own self. Philemon would be lost and without hope in this world if Paul had not found him and shared the saving gospel with him. Clearly, Philemon owed Paul far more than he could exact from Onesimus.

In closing, Paul pointed out the joy that comes from forgiveness—it refreshes the hearts of all those involved. Having gotten rather intense at points in this letter, Paul reconfirmed his confidence in Philemon as a man of God who would go above and beyond what Paul suggested. He ended this request with a hopeful word that he would be able to come visit soon.

The fact that this letter is in the Bible indicates that it was well received by Philemon, and both men were well-known Christians in the first century. Philemon set Onesimus free by his forgiveness, but he also set himself free. Harboring hurts and resentment year after year is like spiritual poison. Margaret Stunt is quoted as saying, “Unforgiveness is like drinking poison and hoping the other person dies.”

Unforgiveness keeps hostages in prison. However, more than just prisoners are at a prison; so is the warden. By forgiving someone else, you set yourself free too. Forgiveness creates a double freedom. Had Philemon not forgiven, he would have become the emotional slave of Onesimus—every thought of the man would have controlled his feelings, decisions, and perspectives. By forgiving, Philemon set two slaves free. Historical writings mention an Onesimus who was bishop at

Ephesus. This may have been the same man. What a marvelous testimony to the power of a reconciled relationship to see a man go from being a slave to a man to being a slave of Jesus Christ—reaching and reconciling many others to the Lord.

### **PERSONAL APPLICATION**

We are to be forgiving people. Once we learn the discipline of forgiveness, we will see it is not just something we do after someone apologizes. It is what we do even if the person never tries to make things right. We forgive for our own health's sake, if for nothing else. We set others free from their past so we can be free to lay hold of something better. A humble heart has already decided to forgive before the wrong happens.

Anger and resentment can feel powerful, but they are useless energy because they only create more hostility. Rather than an uncontrolled atom bomb of aggression, we can harness a positive energy force through forgiveness. This changes us for good and changes others around us positively as well. Sometimes it is scary to think of being done with an age-old fight. We have so shaped our identities by who we dislike that we feel insecure defining our lives only by our own personal qualities. However, once we take this step, we will find life so free and meaningful.

When we come to the Lord for forgiveness, we find our eternal accounts marked "Paid in full." Once an account is paid, no court or collection agency can make the account holder chargeable again. When we forgive, we forever set our enemies free and no longer dwell on the "debt" we had once held against them.

To forgive, one must approach the offender humbly. Anger empowers people and makes them feel as if they tower over

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others. However, humility gives offenders the choice to change their ways. In addition, humility strengthens us, not them. Humility puts us in a stable position of not being a victim.

### **QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION**

- How are you showing forgiveness toward your fellow humans the way the Lord has shown it to you?
- What are some things you had to work through until you could forgive?
- How have you learned to forgive quickly in light of how the Lord forgives you?

## CHAPTER SEVEN



# THE DISCIPLINE OF SELFLESSNESS

### INTRODUCTION

Every human wants to be great—to have a life that is significant in some way. Many people attempt to accomplish this the wrong way. In their pursuit of greatness, they might push others away or step on people to get where they want to be in life. However, the way to self-fulfillment can be found in helping others.

We can learn a lesson from men like Samuel Rutherford, Andrew Carnegie, Edmond Halley, and Bill Gaither. Rutherford was a brilliant chemist whose insights could have won him many Nobel prizes. Instead, he inspired his students to investigate and test his theories, allowing many of them to go on to earn Nobel prizes of their own.

Carnegie was a famed industrialist with the skill for surrounding himself with great minds. His inclusion of some of the brightest minds of his time propelled him to become

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a household name. In addition, he became a significant philanthropist.

Halley could have become a force to be reckoned with in his time, but he used his sharp mind to propel Isaac Newton to become a name the world acknowledged. Halley pointed out some errors in Newton's early logic and helped him get his mathematical calculations right so his theory of planetary gravitation and other discoveries could become mainstream. Halley got little recognition during his life other than to become known for the comet he discovered.

Bill Gaither does not claim to be the best voice in gospel music. However, anyone who knows gospel music knows his name because he discovered some of the best voices and introduced them to the world. His Homecoming events, a showcase of classic singing groups and emerging talents, made him a household name to many. True greatness can be achieved not by self-promotion but by putting others first.

John the Baptist provided a great illustration of this character quality. He said, "He must increase, but I must decrease" (John 3:30). Not only do we accomplish this in worship and in sharing the gospel, but also we lift Jesus higher by showing kindness to the underdogs.

From the dawn of time, humans have asked, "Am I my brother's keeper?" (Genesis 4:9). Normal people enjoy others' company when it is convenient or beneficial. In a game of Monopoly, for example, we need others to rent from us and to otherwise contribute to our success. However, when we are playing to win, we do not help others win.

In real life there is no blessing for those who hold back in self-interest. People dislike a miser who hoards more than he needs while they suffer lack of basic necessities. (See Proverbs

11:26.) We cannot be true witnesses of Christ if we live only for ourselves.

We should not be aloof from the needs around us. We might have an opportunity to speak up and be a godly influence in some given situation. We might say nothing or hold back from doing good, and nobody may be aware of it. However, God knows. He not only sees when we withdraw from the good we could do but also will repay such stinginess to us later. (See Proverbs 24:11–12.) On the other hand, those who give to the needy will be blessed. (See Proverbs 28:27.) The way forward presents itself clearly: Do good for those in trouble, and God will look out for you in your down time; ignore the needy and you will suffer many things.

Paul said fleshly drives and Spirit drives are in conflict with one another (Galatians 5:16). The lust of the flesh includes greediness and self-interest; the desire of the Spirit includes generosity and treating others as better than oneself. We must stay surrendered to the urges of the Spirit to be truly selfless.

This is not to say humans do not often help others. Acts of altruism such as volunteer organizations helping disabled or poor people appear to be normative in human experience. However, some human goodwill has ulterior motives and is not truly unselfish (done solely for the good of others). People may volunteer or donate to philanthropic causes because they want recognition. The aspiring politician signs up to lead many charitable causes so as to build a résumé that looks noteworthy. Businesses may show kindness by providing such things as diaper-changing stations or wheelchair-accessible facilities because they want more customers.

Some people do good things for others because of the positive feelings they themselves receive. They feel a sense of

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accomplishment and feel that they have made a difference in someone's life. None of these are examples of true selflessness but may rather be backhanded forms of selfishness.

The generosity the Spirit craves is the giving that does not receive something in return. Jesus taught us to give to those who could not repay. He taught us to invite people for a meal who could not invite us over in return. We are to be good to those who might treat us poorly or even reject us no matter how much kindness we show. That is the selflessness He modeled for us.

Sometimes church people are guilty of being friendly only with other church people. One family takes another out to eat, and the other family reciprocates with a barbecue a couple of weeks later. This is good community, but it should not be mistaken for strong character. Jesus warned us not to show love only to those who love us, because even sinners show love to those who are in their "in group." (See Luke 6:32-34.) Rather, we are to do good to those who do us wrong and lend to those who cannot repay. When we do good to our enemies and lend without hope of repayment, then we have great reward in Heaven (Luke 6:35). We must learn the selflessness that God notices.

Selflessness is not just about interpersonal relationships. This also has to do with our worship to the Lord. Some worship may be based in self-interest. We worship God because we want to feel His presence; we pray because we want His provision; we give because we want a reward. Do we fast for the Lord's sake or for our own? Do we do all we do for the Lord and not for ourselves? God chastised His people for fasting and feasting unto themselves.



When ye fasted and mourned in the fifth and seventh month, even those seventy years, did ye at all fast unto me, even to me? And when ye did eat, and when ye did drink, did not ye eat for yourselves, and drink for yourselves? (Zechariah 7:5–6)

What about tithes, offerings, fasting, singing, praying, and other forms of self-discipline? Are they self-oriented or Jesus-oriented? Is our focus totally on the Lord?

## **I. TO BE HUMAN IS TO STRUGGLE WITH SELFISHNESS**

Some people struggle with drug addiction. Some have a pornography problem. Others fight a desire to gamble. However, every person has an issue with selfishness. While not everyone needs a support group for substance abuse, gambling, or some other vice, everyone needs help overcoming issues of self.

Selfishness takes many forms:

- *Peer pressured.* Some people seek to preserve self by blending into a crowd or bending their personalities to fit with others in hope of acceptance. Their desire for “self” to be accepted is so strong they are willing to morph themselves into people others will love.

- *Appreciation starved.* Others do things or buy things so as to be noticed by others. They are so desperate to be appreciated that they will give of time or resources to be noticed.

- *Quality controlled.* Others preserve self by correcting and even condemning others. This is their way of proving self to be worthwhile in contrast to those who somehow do not measure up to their values. Perhaps it is a misplaced effort to create a

flawless, non-offensive world to enjoy, so they edit and confront everything until they can have things just the way they like.

- *Tenacity driven.* Another characteristic of selfishness is pushiness. People with this characteristic want to bulldoze their way through life to accomplish certain goals. Often this self-interest will push aside or run over several others in the pursuit of a goal.

To one extent or another, we all are naturally selfish.

### **A. Eve in the Garden**

Falling into temptation is an act of selfishness. When Satan tempted Eve, he appealed to her selfishness. He told her she could be like God. When Eve saw that the forbidden “tree was good for food, and that it was pleasant to the eyes, and a tree to be desired to make one wise, she took of the fruit thereof, and did eat” (Genesis 3:6; compare to I John 2:16). In other words, she grasped after what looked good and appealed to her senses. We are tempted by the selfish desires latent within us, which come alive and conceive sin (James 1:15).

Selfishness grasps for what is immediately gratifying. When Abram and Lot had to part ways, Lot chose according to his selfish impulse: “Lot lifted up his eyes, and beheld all the plain of Jordan, that it was well watered every where. . . . Then Lot chose him all the plain of Jordan” (Genesis 13:10–11). Selfishness chooses for the moment rather than for the legacy. Rather than ask, “What will be best over the long term?” selfishness asks, “What will make me happy right now?”

Jesus was not driven by selfishness. By His example we learn to be unselfish and to “look not every man on his own things, but every man also on the things of others” (Philippians 2:4). Jesus had this others-first mindset, and although “in the

form of God,” did not think equality with God as something to be grasped at. (See Philippians 2:5–6.) Jesus stooped to serve the lowest of humanity. (See Philippians 2:7.) Because of His selflessness in obedience to the point of death, Jesus became higher than any angel or other created thing in all the universe. (See Philippians 2:8–11.) One would hope that all Christians would share the same character as Christ. However, Paul lamented the shortage of selfless servants in the kingdom of God: “I have no man likeminded, who will naturally care for your state. For all seek their own, not the things which are Jesus Christ’s” (Philippians 2:20–21). How much more we should make sure we are living like Christ.

### **B. A Child’s Natural Selfishness**

Humans are born selfish. To some extent, we have to be selfish to survive. The child screams for attention when hungry, cold, tired, wet, or needing something else for life and comfort. The role of a parent is to help train a child to think of others rather than just self. No one wants to deal with a twenty-year-old who thinks only of himself.

Part of maturity is learning to deny oneself even the survival “needs” for a time. One learns to fast—to give up eating for a day or days in order to put others’ needs first (Isaiah 58:6–10). One learns to give up her time to help others in need even though she must maintain personal time as well. A believer may give up his sleep in order to help someone through a crisis. A couple learns to give their finances to help others rather than spend their money only on themselves.

### **C. The Tyranny of Selfishness**

The quest for self-preservation can come at the expense of others' well-being. Intimidated by David, King Saul sought to kill him. Overcome by rage, Saul hurled his spear at the young musician. Some people today attempt to destroy each other because of selfishness.

We may not agree with other believers who have different convictions, values, political persuasions, and opinions. However, we should not be divisive about our differences. One person may believe everyone should be a vegetarian; another may think barbecue is God's gift to us. "Yet if your brother is grieved because of your food, you are no longer walking in love. Do not destroy with your food the one for whom Christ died" (Romans 14:15, NKJV). Selflessness will not force such personal choices on another.

Someone might say, "Yes, but some people have too many convictions and rules they go by." Romans 15:1–3 (NKJV) answers: "We then who are strong ought to bear with the scruples of the weak, and not to please ourselves. Let each of us please his neighbor for his good, leading to edification. For even Christ did not please Himself."

## **II. VICTORY OVER SELFISHNESS**

Did Jesus die so we could live according to our own agendas? No. Our Lord Jesus "died for all, that they which live should not henceforth live unto themselves, but unto him which died for them, and rose again" (II Corinthians 5:15). "Let no one seek his own good, but the good of his neighbor" (I Corinthians 10:24, ESV). That sounds far removed from the American dream, but it is the Christ-like dream. We should invest in others. Those opportunities come randomly and unexpectedly.

**A. Selfless Acts Help Us See a Samaritan as Good**

Suppose a man got mugged on the street of your city. A politician came by and saw the wounded man but was too elite to get involved in something like that. A preacher came along but was too preoccupied with his schedule to stop and help. A Sunday school teacher came by but had a deadline crunch and hurried on by. Finally, a Muslim stopped and helped the wounded man.

A simple act of selflessness can shred preconceived ideas people have. Jesus told a story like that to the people of His day who harbored deep prejudice against Samaritans. Think of the anti-Christian world. Would it surprise people to see us do some selfless deeds? Or would it confirm what they assumed about us? Do they see us as caring and loving? To much of the world, Christians appear as poster-carrying protesters with a cause they think everyone should follow. We can break cultural barriers and even convert atheists by being selfless. What if every Apostolic person started living for the good of others? We can talk a big talk about changing the world, or we can do it by stopping and showing love to others.

**B. In the Garden, Jesus Struggled with the Human Desire for Self-Preservation**

Jesus did not want to die, it appears, so He prayed, “Let this cup pass from me.” However, He surrendered the desire for survival to the divine will: “Nevertheless not as I will, but as thou wilt” (Matthew 26:39). This is an important prayer for us daily. Life is not about our desires but the living out of His desires. Just as the Spirit of Christ overcame His human urge to survive, so the Spirit in us will help us overcome our basic instincts.

### **III. THE TESTIMONIES OF TWO WOMEN**

It is easy to be selfless on one's own terms. It can be difficult, however, to give something when it takes away from self. Jesus modeled such spontaneous selflessness when John the Baptist had been brutally executed. Jesus got away from everyone, like anyone else would want to do, for an undistracted time of grieving. But when people found out where He was, they came crowding to Him. Rather than becoming upset at their being so inconsiderate, He had compassion on them and gave of Himself (Matthew 14:13–21). Jesus exemplified the principle of “in honour preferring one another” (Romans 12:10). Sometimes there are legitimate reasons not to give, but selflessness gives anyway.

#### **A. Widow Near Starvation (I Kings 17:8–15)**

The woman had lost her husband, and the drought had left her without food. She and her son had one meal left—and there would not be much in that meal either. When the traveling preacher came into town, she could have shrugged off his needs and eaten the last of what she and her son had to eat. Instead, she practiced selflessness.

How amazing that we must turn to a widow woman outside the nation of Israel—a non-believer, so to speak—to find an illustration of selflessness. When she gave everything to help another in the same situation as herself, she discovered the miracle power of the God of Israel. The Lord multiplied this single-mother's food so she never ran out of meals for herself and her son until the drought ended and food was available once again.

What miracles might we be missing out on if selfishness rules our lives? Believers carry one another's load, which fulfills

Christ's law to love one another (Galatians 6:2). The world, in contrast, teaches people to be lovers of their own selves and lovers of pleasure rather than putting God and others first (II Timothy 3:2–4).

**B. Barren Woman Who Built a Room (II Kings 4:8–37)**

Another woman could have hoarded her space for herself and her husband. Perhaps she enjoyed gardening and working in the great outdoors. What she did not enjoy was being childless.

Rather than live in sorrow for what she did not have, this woman of faith focused on someone else's need. She noticed that the preacher came through her town often but had no safe place to stay. "Honey," she said to her husband one day, "could we add onto the house so the man of God always has a place to sleep?"

"Sure," the hard-working man answered.

"We could give him a bed, a desk, and a chair. Wouldn't that be wonderful?"

Soon Elisha was sleeping in a quiet, safe place every time he came through town. One day Elisha called the woman to his quarters and promised that God would give her a child. God had noticed her selflessness as she put the needs of others first. God rewarded her with what she desired more than anything—a child.

Selflessness in the life of believers manifests in their contributions toward supporting the preacher. Selfish believers may say it is not their responsibility to make sure the preacher has food or a place to stay. But selflessness gives generously to the support of those who lead, teach, and serve in the kingdom of God. Generous believers see miracles others will never experience.

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Supporting one's leader is more of an attitude of selflessness than just a list of obligations. King David had loyal followers who were devoted enough to fight to the death beside him if need be. One day when his hometown was under siege by God's enemies, David muttered, "Oh, it would be so nice to get a drink of water from the well of Bethlehem!" His three mighty men took off in a hurry, broke through the enemy lines, and filled a flask with that precious water. Then they made their way back to bring it to the man they so deeply admired.

This selfless act so overwhelmed David that he gave the water as an offering to God. He felt that the men's risking their lives was too high of a price for him to feel justified in drinking it (II Samuel 23:15–17). Selfless leaders inspire selflessness in others.

Paul explained at length his commitment to do whatever it took to win others to the truth (I Corinthians 9:19–23). This "whatever it takes" mindset may cause sleepless nights, financial drain, adjusting to uncomfortable situations, and much more, but it is worth it to save a soul. Selflessness breeds more selflessness. Selfishness, on the other hand, will reproduce too.

### **PERSONAL APPLICATION**

In his article "To Illustrate," Mark Tidd told of a time he and his wife encountered a man from the neighborhood. When Mr. Roth first showed up, they were quite taken aback. His wrinkled face sported silver stubble and glassy eyes. Out of pity, they purchased some vegetables he offered for sale. In a week, he was back, offering more food from the earth. He proved to be an interesting character, living in a run-down shack at the end of the road. He seemed happy enough, playing



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gospel songs on his harmonica and talking about Heaven. They grew used to the sight of this mismatched man and his two right shoes on both feet.

One day, he came to their house in great excitement. “The Lord is so good! I came out of my shack this morning and found a bag full of shoes and clothing on my porch.” They expressed their excitement for him and thought of how much he could use an upgrade to his wardrobe. When they had finished their hurrahs, he shared more good news: “You know what’s even more wonderful?” he asked them. “Just yesterday I met some people that could use them” (*Leadership*, Fall 1990).

Selflessness is foundational to apostolic identity. When the Spirit was first poured out, many people may have lost jobs, work contracts, and homes because of their change of faith from Jewish tradition to embracing Jesus as Messiah. However, the new believers took care of each other.

Neither was there any among them that lacked: for as many as were possessors of lands or houses sold them, and brought the prices of the things that were sold, and laid them down at the apostles’ feet: and distribution was made unto every man according as he had need. (Acts 4:34–35)

The world will know we are true believers by our love for one another. Love cares about others more than self, gives when it hurts, and seeks the advantage for someone else rather than self. The very foundation of the gospel is selflessness: Jesus laid down His life for us. We are to lay down our lives for others.

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### **QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION**

- What are some areas where you stopped living for short-term results and started investing in long-term rewards?
- What are some ways the Spirit helps you overcome your selfish urges?
- How closely do you guard your schedule and finances? Are you selflessly flexible?

## CHAPTER EIGHT



# THE DISCIPLINE OF FOOTWASHING

### INTRODUCTION

Each Easter many churches from a broad swath of denominations observe communion. A portion of these churches also observe footwashing. Still, among these churches, often confusion and sometimes even aversion shrouds footwashing. Recent scholars have lamented the decline of the practice of footwashing and the misunderstanding of its significance for Christians.

Pentecostals are among this group for whom footwashing is largely not championed, arguably because its significance is not widely understood. Though a New Testament practice and a recognized institution among early Pentecostals as seen in historical documents defining doctrines and practices of Pentecostal organizations, footwashing seems to have declined in church practice. Many younger Pentecostals have never participated in a footwashing service and would consider it foreign to the life of the church as they know it.

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If footwashing is indeed a biblical mandate, then why is the Pentecostal church relinquishing this practice? As restorationists dedicated to the apostles' doctrine and practices, Pentecostals should be among the churches reclaiming the beauty of footwashing.

### **I. HISTORICAL PROGRESSION OF FOOTWASHING**

What is footwashing? Both the Old and New Testaments, as well as historical documents, recount evidence of footwashing, but the spiritual meaning invested in footwashing has been established over time. Certainly in church history the act of footwashing takes on a meaning that extends beyond temporal hygiene. If the church's practice of footwashing is coasting toward extinction, as some scholars believe, how has that happened?

#### **A. Church History**

In the first few centuries after the time of Christ, footwashing was construed in a number of ways. Footwashing is confirmed in the documents of early church leaders including Ambrose of Milan, Chromatius of Aquileia, Ephraem of Syria, and in canons of church councils, establishing that footwashing had a presence in the first four centuries of the church. However, as early church leaders worked to develop church doctrines, paths diverged concerning how to handle footwashing.

As church history progressed, footwashing became a way for church leaders to appear benevolent and humble by washing the feet of the poor or lowly in a public ceremony. Martin Luther objected to the faux humility and hypocrisy he sensed in the ritual that footwashing had become during the Reformation period. He critiqued the practice, admonishing

believers instead to focus on serving their neighbors rather than following a ritual.

Later, other Protestant communities gave prominence to footwashing. Yet just as quickly, footwashing seemed to regress, with many denominations looking for newer, less intimate ways of pursuing humility and service. In so doing, footwashing seemed to be declining among various religious traditions.

### **B. Pentecostal Practices**

Unlike some church practices that have not been written about extensively by Pentecostals, such as anointing prayer cloths and forming healing lines, footwashing has Pentecostal precedent. It is found not only in the New Testament text to which Pentecostals ultimately are anchored, but also in the historical record of early North American Pentecostals and in the founding documents of those organizations. Footwashing was used in services as an element of corporate worship. It appears from its inclusion in early Pentecostal documents that it was meant to be a designated and recurring practice of the church.

## **II. FOOTWASHING IN SCRIPTURE**

Given all the historical record across the centuries, the emphasis unique to Pentecostals, and the common objections to footwashing, the church must look to the Bible for appropriate interpretation of Jesus' example of footwashing and subsequent practices for today. John 13 recounts Jesus washing the feet of His disciples during what we now call the Last Supper. Almighty God manifest in flesh knelt before flawed humanity and cared for them in a manner reminiscent of a servant. Upon

completion, He directed these disciples to wash each other's feet and added, "For I have given you an example, that ye should do as I have done to you" (John 13:15).

### **A. Scriptural and Cultural Context**

A working understanding of footwashing's place in Middle-Eastern culture is helpful. Footwashing secures precedent in both the Old Testament and the New Testament for a variety of functions. The Old Testament indicates footwashing was originally practiced for sanitary self-cleansing (Genesis 18:4; 19:2; 24:32; Judges 19:21) or sometimes as a gesture of hospitality by a host (I Samuel 25:41). Typically performed by a servant, footwashing was a familiar custom.

Yet we should not dismiss footwashing as a unique cultural phenomenon meant to be relegated only to a specific time in history. John took care to record Jesus' instructions about the act. While understanding that footwashing was not without precedent and served a number of purposes, Jesus' kneeling before the disciples was not routine or expected, as indicated by Peter's reaction (John 13:6–8). Our questions after reading of the event may somewhat mirror Peter's: what was the Lord doing, and are we willing to participate?

### **B. A Call to Humility**

The most common interpretation of John 13 is that it is an example to us for the need of humility. Jesus, our mighty King and Master, stooped before His followers. He laid aside His garments and took up a servant's towel (verse 4). The image of the One who controls all time and space bowing to serve another rightfully situates footwashing as an act of humility.

However, humility simply for humility's sake is only so effective. Preferring fellow believers or avoiding arrogance is vital as a follower of Christ because we value humility as it reflects Jesus' image and transformative work in our lives. We are humble because He was humble—not proven by participating in one annual footwashing service but using such a time to realign our lives in the pattern of Jesus who commanded, “Neither be ye called masters: for one is your Master, even Christ. But he that is greatest among you shall be your servant” (Matthew 23:10–11).

### **C. In the Shadow of the Cross**

Such humility takes on even greater significance when we recognize the setting of the John 13 passage: Jesus was preparing for the work of the Cross. This context coalesces in a Oneness Pentecostal reading of Scripture that understands the man Christ Jesus to be God manifest in flesh, come to earth for the purpose of redeeming humanity in the ultimate act of love at Calvary. As Jesus laid aside His garments and took up the servant's towel, footwashing was a foreshadowing of the laying down of His life. Dan Tomberlin builds upon this recognition of the incarnational purpose of Jesus: “The story of Jesus' washing the feet of His disciples serves as the introduction to the story of His impending death on the cross, which is the climax of the Word's descent [incarnation]” (*Issues in Contemporary Pentecostalism*).

This beautiful act of Jesus kneeling before the disciples pointed ahead to the ultimate act of Calvary and meant more than a charge to be kind to others or to be humble. Given that Peter would deny Jesus and Judas would betray Him and yet Jesus still washed their feet, the passage also reveals an

almost unfathomable dimension of love. Pointing ahead to His imminent crucifixion, Jesus stooped at the feet of twelve flawed, seemingly undeserving followers and extended unconditional love, fellowship, and service. Footwashing cannot be separated from the context of Calvary and should be observed with thanksgiving and gratitude for the Atonement.

### **D. An Act of Service in Community**

To understand Jesus' role is to understand also the communal nature of His love. Footwashing was not an individual act that could be self-managed or outsourced; it was a shared experience of loving, serving, and caring for others. Furthermore, Jesus did not end the practice simply by serving His disciples or allowing them to serve Him, but He asked them to serve one another: "If I then, your Lord and Master, have washed your feet; ye also ought to wash one another's feet" (John 13:14).

Ingrid R. Kitzberger expounded on the metaphor of love and service being inextricably interwoven. She saw in John 13 a mirroring of Mary's anointing Jesus (John 12:1–8). Both instances of washing feet involved more than even the most lavish hospitality; each service involved a tangible expression of love as well as a revelation of Jesus Christ's forthcoming sacrifice. With that context in mind, Kitzberger added, "Peter's rejection of this footwashing evokes the rejection of Mary's anointing by Judas (who is mentioned now in this text as the betrayer), but it also recalls Peter's confession that Jesus is the Messiah, the Christos, the 'Anointed One,' and his subsequent rejection when Jesus announces his death (cf. Mark 8:27–33)" ("Love and Footwashing: John 13:1–20 and Luke 7:36–50 Read Intertextually," *Biblical Interpretation*, Volume 2.2).



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All of these layers to the John 13 passage compress into the contemporary act of footwashing something much richer than just an act to promote humility. Footwashing recognizes the identity of Jesus—both His incarnational purpose and His infinite love for all humanity. When we participate in footwashing together, we not only recognize Jesus' lordship by obeying His command, but we also enact our role as the family of God by loving one another in an act of humble service, together blessing one another and committing to mutual service.

So does John 13 mandate footwashing as a required practice of the church? Such a framing of the question contradicts the very spirit of the act. Instead the question should be, can we support the communal practice of footwashing from the account in John 13? John Christopher Thomas affirmed we can: "Reading Jn 13:1–20 as a literary unit has revealed that the footwashing is no option for the disciples but a necessity if they are to maintain a share in Jesus' destiny. . . . When the commands to wash feet (13:14–17) are read in light of 13:6–10, it becomes clear that Jesus, as here portrayed, intends his followers to continue the practice of footwashing and for this practice to have a significance related to that of his own action" (*Footwashing in John 13 and the Johannine Community*). While Thomas used the words *commands* and *necessity*, the larger issue is that footwashing creates an opportunity for us to be bound together with other believers in the Christ-like role of servant. Perhaps we most closely reflect Jesus when we are serving others and loving our brothers and sisters. With that in mind, footwashing can be understood as a beautiful opportunity to follow in Jesus' footsteps.

### III. FOOTWASHING TODAY

Pentecostals celebrate a rich heritage rooted in Scripture. Yet since our faith is experiential in nature—each individual can encounter God directly with the Spirit not governed by any human direction—perhaps we are hesitant to recognize rituals and are cautious about words like *traditions*, *sacraments*, and *ordinances*. We are careful for good reason; words mean something. The church should be intentional about its practices and its language for those practices. Yet for just such reasons, the church should be intentional about investigating footwashing, reclaiming the practice, and finding ways and words to keep this part of our heritage.

#### A. The Power of Remembering Together

*Sacrament* is a loaded word and can connote abuse and negative practices according to some scholars such as Bob Brenneman: “To the extent that certain practices of the early church become codified and standardized—made into ‘rituals’—they lose much of their original power and meaning” (“Embodied Forgiveness: Yoder and the (Body) Politics of Footwashing,” *Mennonite Quarterly Review*, January 2009). He went on to argue that after Constantine, church leaders used rituals as a way of controlling the church, which frequently corrupted the original meaning of sacramental acts.

Certainly the abuse of sacraments for such practices is regrettable. However, to hide from using the term *sacrament* does not change the reality that some practices are needed and meaningful in the church. Whatever term we give to footwashing, it needs to reflect the necessity and value of footwashing while giving place for it to fulfill the biblical

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mandate and exact the purpose for which it was instituted by our Lord.

Whether we deem footwashing a sacrament or not, the value of it remains as something not merely as symbolic or empty pageantry. The act of coming together to observe this biblical command has deep meaning. In light of Jesus' instituting footwashing as a predecessor to the Cross, our contemporary church service that includes footwashing prompts us to remember together Jesus' sacrifice at Calvary. It brings us together in a special way that only people who have experienced the Cross can understand. As such, it is one way to cement our bond as a church family.

Brenneman got specific about the sociological role of footwashing: "Footwashing forms and re-forms community and character in dynamic and powerful ways. . . . A community that engages in literal footwashing stands apart from the rest of Christendom that chooses to limit the observance of the Lord's Supper to the more hygienic eucharistic institutions found in the synoptic accounts" (Embodied Forgiveness). We observe footwashing because our Lord directed us to do so. Consequently, footwashing becomes another way the body of Christ is a called-out people, separate from unbelievers.

Often communion and footwashing facilitate deep moves of the Spirit. Any fear of overdoing sacraments and ordinances with the presumption it would undercut their meaning or effectiveness underestimates the capability of the Spirit to move sovereignly, the capability of sincere believers to appreciate biblically mandated sacraments or ordinances, and the sovereignty of God's Word in instituting the ordinance in the first place.

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As Pentecostals depend upon and seek the Spirit to move during footwashing, the possibilities for this special institution to be infused with meaning represent an opportunity ripe for the Spirit-led Apostolic community. If Pentecostals were to reclaim footwashing, we could be a testimony to both unbelievers and people of other faith traditions of the power of the Holy Ghost at work when we recognize the Cross, pursue humility, and care for one another.

It is important that contemporary Pentecostals learn to understand and be able to articulate the biblical basis for practices of the church. In an increasingly postmodern society, newcomers to Pentecostalism seem more intrigued by what Pentecostals do than what they believe. We understand, however, that the two are inseparably linked. It is incumbent upon us then to be able to explain the biblical roots of such practices. Developing proper terminology to help us understand and educate others about footwashing is essential. In practicing footwashing, we remember Jesus' sacrifice and remember who we are as a result.

### **B. Living Out Jesus' Words**

If we believe Jesus' command to observe communion was to be followed, so we must also follow His directive for footwashing. Many people have debated if the John 13 account of footwashing is a model and mandate for all churches or a single, localized command Jesus gave specifically to His disciples for a one-time event. Brenneman clarified, "Jesus' early followers most certainly understood him to be calling them to a concrete practice of footwashing. . . . Both the placement and structure of the text as well as the actual wording of the command promote an interpretation that calls for an imitation of Jesus' example

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as a ‘prototype’ rather than merely a cognitive appreciation of his act as a ‘moral lesson’” (Embodied Forgiveness).

In Jesus’ command to “do as I have done,” He asked for humility, service, and care for others. Again, rather than looking for a reason to stipulate Jesus’ words as not binding still today, why not celebrate the blessings His directive affords?

Surely such fruits warrant the inclusion of footwashing in the church. Perhaps as churchgoers become more prosperous and successful in society, they wish less to take on the humility, vulnerability, and interactive service inherent in footwashing. Yet this very reason emphasizes why humility is so needful in the church.

### **C. Practical Applications for the Church**

The biblical mandate combined with the shaping of identity facilitated by shared practices call for the reclaiming and retention of Pentecostal footwashing. Rather than abandon footwashing as the Pentecostal church grows, we need the special communal bond footwashing offers now more than ever. As we participate in footwashing, the church will experience a revelation of the beauty of footwashing and deeper relationship with one another for having had these shared experiences and communal acts of worship.

The conspicuous, physical act of footwashing represents an avenue to spiritual experiences that celebrate the incarnational purpose of God and our communal relationships as siblings and servants. Following the record of Pentecostal history and resting ultimately on Jesus’ directive in John 13, Pentecostals must reclaim and preserve the beautiful act of footwashing.

Our identity as children of God overshadows every other identity marker; the most basic component of who we are is

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found in our role as children of God. When we come together as a family, humbly serving one another with genuine love in spite of any societal, cultural, or carnal barriers, God is glorified and touches us in profound ways.

### **PERSONAL APPLICATION**

The study of footwashing impacts both the corporate church and the individual believer. As the church—the called-out people of God—we should commit to the unity, humility, service, and fellowship that footwashing engenders. Our prayer as the church will be for wisdom for our leaders as we strive to maintain the beauty footwashing provides in focusing on humility, the work of the Cross, and unified service within a community of believers.

In addition to the corporate church aspect of footwashing, a study of John 13 warrants examination within the life of every believer. Footwashing was set in the context of the Cross. How often do we overlook this most basic and yet most fundamental aspect of our faith? While we likely do not participate in church footwashing every day, we must find ways to make Calvary the daily bedrock of our lives.

God's Word also reminds us today of the importance of the body of Christ. It takes more than one person to have a footwashing service. While the culture of North America pushes more and more toward independence, individualism, and even isolationism, we must commit ourselves to intentional participation in the body of Christ through the worship and fellowship of the church.

**QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION**

- Footwashing preceded and foreshadowed Calvary. In reflecting on this chapter, consider Jesus' sacrifice on the cross. Have you taken time lately to thank Him for His mercy and His sacrifice?
- Consider the humility involved when Jesus washed the disciples' feet. Why is humility such an important part of Christian living today?
- Why is serving others contrary to our human nature, and how does Jesus call us away from that instinct and to His image?





## CHAPTER NINE



# THE DISCIPLINE OF SUFFERING

### **INTRODUCTION**

To live is to suffer. This is a consequence of the Fall in the Garden of Eden, and it will not be reversed until we enter into the presence of our Lord. From beginning to end, the biblical story is of godly men and women who learned to trust God when it hurt.

Even Hebrews 11, often called “The Hall of Faith,” is the story of some heroes of faith who suffered without relief in this world and other heroes of faith who suffered in the midst of miracles. Abel was murdered. Noah was ridiculed. Abraham’s wife was kidnapped; Abraham was forsaken by Lot, his nephew; Abraham was one hundred years old before his promised son was born; the tension between Ishmael and Isaac was so great Abraham had to send Ishmael and his mother away; and God tested Abraham by asking him to offer Isaac. Moses chose to “suffer affliction with the people of God” rather than “to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a season” (Hebrews 11:25). One of the

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things we learn in Hebrews 11 is that even the kind of faith that results in miracles does not exempt us from suffering.

It is common for us to put a premium on being pain free. We do not like pain, and we do not like problems we cannot quickly solve. This view of life has given birth to a multi-billion dollar industry of medicines, potions, and elixirs that promise to free us from pain. Self-help books offer the assurance of a quick fix for life's problems. This is not to suggest it is wrong to accept palliative care when needed or to reject helpful advice when seeking solutions to difficult circumstances. But there is no biblical promise that we will ever on this earth completely escape the consequences of the brokenness that entered the world with the rebellion of our ancestors Adam and Eve.

Wherefore, as by one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin; and so death passed upon all men, for that all have sinned. (Romans 5:12)

This reference to “death by sin” refers to God’s warning to Adam: “Of every tree of the garden thou mayest freely eat: But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it: for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die” (Genesis 2:16–17). The death in view here is not merely physical death, but spiritual death, separation from fellowship with God. As Paul put it, “And you hath he quickened, who were dead in trespasses and sins” (Ephesians 2:1). To the Colossians, he wrote, “And you, being dead in your sins and the uncircumcision of your flesh, hath he quickened together with him, having forgiven you all trespasses” (Colossians 2:13).

Adam’s disobedience resulted in negative spiritual consequences for all, but it also caused physical decay leading

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to death. God had placed in the Garden of Eden the Tree of Life, which would have assured eternal life and presumably everlasting health. But as a consequence of sin, the way to this tree was barred.

And the LORD God said, Behold, the man is become as one of us, to know good and evil: and now, lest he put forth his hand, and take also of the tree of life, and eat, and live for ever: therefore the LORD God sent him forth from the garden of Eden, to till the ground from whence he was taken. So he drove out the man; and he placed at the east of the garden of Eden Cherubims, and a flaming sword which turned every way, to keep the way of the tree of life. (Genesis 3:22–24)

Although we find redemption through Christ's work on the cross, we still live in a fallen world among fallen people. This guarantees a dimension of suffering; we no longer live in Eden. And though we have the promise of healing in addition to our salvation, some healing will await the resurrection, for all die.

And as it is appointed unto men once to die, but after this the judgment. (Hebrews 9:27)

So also is the resurrection of the dead. It is sown in corruption; it is raised in incorruption: It is sown in dishonor; it is raised in glory: it is sown in weakness; it is raised in power: It is sown a natural body; it is raised a spiritual body. There is a natural body, and there is a spiritual body. . . . For this corruptible

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must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality. So when this corruptible shall have put on incorruption, and this mortal shall have put on immortality, then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written, Death is swallowed up in victory. (I Corinthians 15:42–44, 53–54)

### I. OCCASION FOR REJOICING

The biblical perspective on suffering is that it should be an occasion for rejoicing, not for questioning God or giving up hope.

And not only so, but we glory in tribulations also: knowing that tribulation worketh patience; and patience, experience; and experience, hope: and hope maketh not ashamed; because the love of God is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Ghost which is given unto us. (Romans 5:3–5)

In the mid-twentieth century, a woman asked an Apostolic pastor to pray that God would give her patience. He began to pray something like this: “Oh God, I pray that you would give this woman tribulation.” She was shocked and reminded him that she wanted patience, not tribulation. The pastor informed her that patience was the result of tribulation.

The Greek word translated *tribulation* has within its range of meaning the idea of pressure. Perhaps in today’s world we could extend that notion to the common problem of stress. Our culture has many stress points, including family relationships, job responsibilities, financial crises, health concerns, violence,

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and so forth. The media's constant bombardment of bad news enhances the problem. Pressure or stress alone will not produce patience. To understand Paul's point, we must examine the context of his words.

Therefore being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ: By whom also we have access by faith into this grace wherein we stand, and rejoice in hope of the glory of God. (Romans 5:1–2)

Pressure will produce patience when we respond to the pressure with faith in God. Peace with God results in inner peace, which enables a person to trust God regardless of the circumstances of life. This is genuine faith. When we respond to the stresses of life with faith in God, the result is patience, a valuable virtue.

Cast not away therefore your confidence, which hath great recompence of reward. For ye have need of patience, that, after ye have done the will of God, ye might receive the promise. (Hebrews 10:35–36)

Paul was not alone in his awareness of the value of suffering in relationship to patience.

My brethren, count it all joy when ye fall into divers temptations; knowing this, that the trying of your faith worketh patience. But let patience have her perfect work, that ye may be perfect and entire, wanting nothing. (James 1:2–4)

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The word translated *temptations* here is different from the word translated *tribulations* in Romans 5:3. This word indicates an attempt “to learn the nature or character of someone or something by submitting such to thorough and extensive testing” (Louw-Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*).

God sends tests, not because He needs to learn about us, but because we need to learn about us. Trials of faith show our hidden weaknesses thus giving us opportunities for unexpected growth as we respond to the tests in faith. Without the patience that results from responding to temptations in faith, we cannot be perfect and entire. There will still be dimensions of our spiritual lives that are deficient.

### II. NOAH, DANIEL, AND JOB

Job’s test was so remarkable that even those who do not know much about the Bible are familiar with the phrase “the patience of Job.” Job never knew the reason for his suffering. His faith response to suffering places him in an elite group of Old Testament heroes.

Though these three men, Noah, Daniel, and Job, were in it, they should deliver but their own souls by their righteousness, saith the Lord GOD. . . . Though these three men were in it, as I live, saith the Lord GOD, they shall deliver neither sons nor daughters; they only shall be delivered, but the land shall be desolate. . . . Though Noah, Daniel, and Job, were in it, as I live, saith the Lord GOD, they shall deliver neither son nor daughter; they shall

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but deliver their own souls by their righteousness.  
(Ezekiel 14:14, 16, 20)

Why is Job compared with Noah and Daniel? The most obvious thing we notice is that none of the three men suffered because they had done something wrong.

But Noah found grace in the eyes of the LORD. These are the generations of Noah: Noah was a just man and perfect in his generations, and Noah walked with God. (Genesis 6:8–9)

Then said Daniel unto the king, O king, live for ever. My God hath sent his angel, and hath shut the lions' mouths, that they have not hurt me: forasmuch as before him innocency was found in me; and also before thee, O king, have I done no hurt. (Daniel 6:21–22)

There was a man in the land of Uz, whose name was Job; and that man was perfect and upright, and one that feared God, and eschewed evil. . . . And the LORD said unto Satan, Hast thou considered my servant Job, that there is none like him in the earth, a perfect and an upright man, one that feareth God, and escheweth evil? (Job 1:1, 8)

Noah was just and perfect. Daniel was innocent in God's eyes. Job was a perfect, upright man who feared God and avoided evil. This does not mean any of these men were sinless. Noah was discovered drunk by his son Ham. Daniel

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acknowledged his sin and confessed it to God. (See Daniel 9:20.) God rebuked Job for his words, leading to Job's confession. (See Job 38:2; 40:1–5.) But when James, who was writing to a Jewish audience, wanted to single out one man from among all the prophets as an example of patience, Job was that man.

Take, my brethren, the prophets, who have spoken in the name of the Lord, for an example of suffering affliction, and of patience. Behold, we count them happy which endure. Ye have heard of the patience of Job, and have seen the end of the Lord; that the Lord is very pitiful, and of tender mercy. (James 5:10–11)

Job is a model of genuine faith. His trust in God was such that even after losing his massive wealth, his ten children, the support and encouragement of his wife, and his health, he uttered these immortal words: “Though he slay me, yet will I trust in him” (Job 13:15).

Satan was convinced people serve God only for the benefits they receive. (See Job 1:9–12.) But after two futile attempts to prove his theory, Satan never showed up again in the Book of Job. The context of this encounter between Satan and the Lord indicates God accepted Satan's challenge in order to prove that a person of genuine faith will trust God regardless of life's circumstances. We should also keep in mind that even though God rewarded Job's faith by blessing him beyond his loss, nothing in the blessing could erase the pain of the loss of his first ten children.



### III. OTHER CAUSES FOR SUFFERING

In addition to the possibility that some suffering may be God's test of our faith, there are other sources of suffering. One of those is rejection by those who do not share our faith. Jesus explained this could happen.

Think not that I am come to send peace on earth:  
I came not to send peace, but a sword. For I am  
come to set a man at variance against his father,  
and the daughter against her mother, and the  
daughter in law against her mother in law. And  
a man's foes shall be they of his own household.  
(Matthew 10:34–36)

This is not, of course, what Jesus wanted. It is frequently pointed out in the letters of the New Testament that believers should live in peace with each other. (For example, see Ephesians 4:3; I Thessalonians 5:13; Hebrews 12:14; James 3:18; I Peter 3:11.) The point is that where there are those within a family who reject Jesus, their rejection of Him sets them at odds against those in the family who believe in Him. Jesus Himself experienced the rejection of His siblings, who did not believe He was the Messiah.

His brethren therefore said unto him, Depart hence,  
and go into Judaea, that thy disciples also may see  
the works that thou doest. For there is no man that  
doeth any thing in secret, and he himself seeketh  
to be known openly. If thou do these things, shew  
thyself to the world. For neither did his brethren  
believe in him. (John 7:3–5)

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Suffering may also arise from disappointment with those you love. Betrayal results in a devastating sense of loss. Jesus warned His disciples of the distressing events that would characterize the future.

Then shall they deliver you up to be afflicted, and shall kill you: and ye shall be hated of all nations for my name's sake. And then shall many be offended, and shall betray one another, and shall hate one another. (Matthew 24:9–10)

Throughout Christian history, these behaviors have contributed to physical, mental, and emotional suffering. Many believers today could identify with Paul in his sense of loneliness and emotional woundedness.

For Demas hath forsaken me, having loved this present world, and is departed unto Thessalonica. . . . Alexander the coppersmith did me much evil: the Lord reward him according to his works: Of whom be thou ware also; for he hath greatly withstood our words. (II Timothy 4:10, 14–15)

Suffering may also result from weakness or sickness God does not choose to heal. In these cases, we can seek medical help to relieve the suffering while at the same time valuing the spiritual benefits that can result from pain. Examples of suffering Timothy and Paul experienced clarify this response.

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Drink no longer water, but use a little wine for thy stomach's sake and thine often infirmities. (I Timothy 5:23)

Paul's advice to Timothy reveals that Timothy suffered from ongoing sickness of an apparently digestive nature. No doubt Paul prayed for Timothy's healing, but he was not healed. Rather than telling Timothy he must continue to suffer without relief, Paul suggested a possible remedy. It is probably no stretch of the imagination to think this advice could have first come from Luke, the beloved physician who traveled with Paul. (See Colossians 4:14.)

Timothy's infirmity seems to be simply a physical problem, but Paul himself suffered an infirmity connected with his spiritual well-being. It would not yield to prayer, and apparently no physical relief was available.

And lest I should be exalted above measure through the abundance of the revelations, there was given to me a thorn in the flesh, the messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I should be exalted above measure. For this thing I besought the Lord thrice, that it might depart from me. And he said unto me, My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness. Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in necessities, in persecutions, in distresses for Christ's sake: for when I am weak, then am I strong. (II Corinthians 12:7–10)

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The revelations Paul received put him in danger of pride. This is such a debilitating sin that the Lord allowed Satan to abuse him in order to ward off the arrogance that can result from a wrong response to spiritual experiences. (See II Corinthians 12:1–6.)

We can speculate about the nature of Paul's thorn in the flesh, but regardless of its nature, it was a messenger from Satan. However, God used this to develop in Paul the character that would prevent his fall into pride and be Paul's greatest strength. This was a commitment to glory in his weakness, allowing God's strength to be made perfect in him.

The idea presented in the account of Paul's thorn in the flesh is not that we should be willing to embrace weakness only if it is absolutely necessary. It is that weakness is the only way to authentic spiritual strength. The greater our weakness, the greater the opportunity for the power of Christ to rest upon us. The more fully we recognize our inabilities, the more we experience Christ's abilities.

### **IV. EMBRACING SUFFERING AS A FRIEND**

People of great faith in the Bible were people who knew how to rejoice in suffering. They learned how to embrace suffering as a friend. For example, David said, "It is good for me that I have been afflicted; that I might learn thy statutes" (Psalm 119:71). When responded to in faith, there is something about an experience of suffering that enables a person to reassess what is important in life and to be reoriented to things of eternal value.

Since we are human, we will suffer. But in our humanity, the power of God is at work to save us from despair. Here is how Paul put it:

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But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellency of the power may be of God, and not of us. We are troubled on every side, yet not distressed; we are perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; cast down, but not destroyed; always bearing about in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus, that the life also of Jesus might be made manifest in our body. For we which live are always delivered unto death for Jesus' sake, that the life also of Jesus might be made manifest in our mortal flesh. So then death worketh in us, but life in you. (II Corinthians 4:7–12)

At first, it seems that trouble, perplexity, persecution, and the ongoing experience of death's nearness would surely result in distress, despair, and a sense of forsakenness and destruction. But this was not the case for Paul. He had discovered the “excellency of the power of God” in the midst of human weakness. Later in this context, he explained how this worked.

For which cause we faint not; but though our outward man perish, yet the inward man is renewed day by day. For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, worketh for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory; while we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen: for the things which are seen are temporal; but the things which are not seen are eternal. (II Corinthians 4:16–18)

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For Paul, suffering was a friend because of its eternal value. It produced in him something much more significant than the momentary pain which, in comparison, seemed “light.”

Suffering can be our friend because God can use it to develop character in those who respond to suffering by trusting Him. This is true even when the suffering is a result of chastening.

Now no chastening for the present seemeth to be joyous, but grievous: nevertheless afterward it yieldeth the peaceable fruit of righteousness unto them which are exercised thereby. (Hebrews 12:11)

Suffering can be our friend because it helps us develop empathy for others who are going through the same experiences we have endured.

Blessed be God, even the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies, and the God of all comfort; who comforteth us in all our tribulation, that we may be able to comfort them which are in any trouble, by the comfort wherewith we ourselves are comforted of God. (II Corinthians 1:3–4)

Suffering can be our friend because it lessens our tendency to pass judgment on others. It helps us avoid the temptation to say, “I told you so” or “If I were you, . . . .”

For he shall have judgment without mercy, that hath shewed no mercy; and mercy rejoiceth against judgment. (James 2:13)

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Suffering can be our friend because it drives us to seek help from others rather than to indulge in a self-sufficient attitude with the notion that we can handle our problems alone. Christianity is meant to be lived in community, not in isolation.

Two are better than one; because they have a good reward for their labour. For if they fall, the one will lift up his fellow: but woe to him that is alone when he falleth; for he hath not another to help him up. (Ecclesiastes 4:9–10)

Suffering can be our friend because it can produce humility when responded to in faith. In the same way that giving opens us up to blessing, humility is the path one travels to gain exaltation. However, if we give to be blessed, we are not giving but investing. We cannot pursue humility to be exalted. That would be almost an oxymoron. Suffering, however, can produce humility, and as a result of that humility, God can truly exalt us.

Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord, and he shall lift you up. (James 4:10)

### **V. A GOD-HONORING RESPONSE TO SUFFERING**

What we have seen is that God is honored when we respond to suffering by glorying in weakness, rejoicing in tribulation, and counting it all joy when we experience various trials. Regardless of the reason for our suffering, whether it is sickness or disease, disappointment with those we love,

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persecution for our faith, or God's test of our faith, it is always right to trust God in the midst of our pain.

The Christian life is not about joy versus sorrow, but joy in sorrow. It is not about peace versus turmoil, but peace in the midst of turmoil. It is not about contentment versus need, but contentment in the midst of need. Paul set an example for us.

Not that I speak in respect of want: for I have learned, in whatsoever state I am, therewith to be content. I know both how to be abased, and I know how to abound: every where and in all things I am instructed both to be full and to be hungry, both to abound and to suffer need. I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me. (Philippians 4:11–13)

### **PERSONAL APPLICATION**

There is something more important than living a pain-free life, and that is being conformed to the character of Christ and embracing eternity's values. (See Romans 8:29.) Although we may acknowledge that suffering can be disciplinary in the sense of leading us to reorient our concepts about spirituality, we tend to want to learn our lesson quickly, put pain behind us, and get on with life. But there is always another lesson to learn, and the pain will not go away until sin's final sting—death—is conquered in the resurrection.

C. S. Lewis said, "Pain insists upon being attended to. God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our consciences, but shouts in our pains. It is his megaphone to rouse a deaf world."



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For Paul, to suffer was a calling. When sending Ananias to the newly converted Saul, the Lord said, “I will shew him how great things he must suffer for my name’s sake” (Acts 9:16). There is at least some sense in which all believers may be called to suffer. As Peter put it, “It is better, if the will of God be so, that ye suffer for well doing, than for evil doing” (I Peter 3:17).

Paul’s words in Romans 8:35–39 indicate that believers can expect to face tribulation, distress, persecution, famine, nakedness, peril, and sword. These are consequences of living as people of faith in a sinful world. Believers in some parts of the world may think it farfetched to say they may experience some of these challenges; but for those in many places today, these experiences are the norm. Whatever we face, we know painful circumstances cannot separate us from God’s love. No amount of suffering should be taken to mean God does not love us.

### QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- As you think about your experiences with suffering, can you imagine a way your pain could produce spiritual growth?
- Whatever your situation with suffering, do you think it is a consequence of your personal sin, a result of bad choices made by someone else, or God’s attempt to further develop your faith? If it is none of these, how would you evaluate the reason for your pain?
- What were the immediate consequences of the sin of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden? How have these consequences affected your life?



## CHAPTER TEN



# THE DISCIPLINE OF WAITING

### INTRODUCTION

Patience is not only a virtue but also a fruit of the Spirit. Patience is not an end unto itself; instead, patience is the fruit of an underlying spiritual principle. We are creatures caught in time, but we do not seem to have been designed for time. In some ways, we are alarmingly ill-equipped to deal with time. Our bodies do not hold up well through the years; without the strength and vigor of robust youth, we quickly succumb to what Abraham Lincoln once called the “silent artillery of time.”

### I. TIME

Living in this world seems to take such a toll upon our bodies that to temporarily recover enough strength to manage another day, roughly eight out of every twenty-four hours should be spent sleeping. That means we spend approximately one-third of our lives recuperating from the onslaught of time.

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Moreover, our minds tend to have difficulty reconciling the passage of time. When reflecting upon a memory, an individual may have the distinct impression that that past event, at one and the same time, seems to have taken place just yesterday but also a long time ago. When cataloging past events in the memory, the mind seems to file the same event in two different folders: the distant past and the recent past.

Time is strange. One instance of its strangeness to the human mind can be seen in the following scenario. When a man boards a train in St. Louis, headed for Seattle, he will first be taken northeast to Chicago before heading west to Seattle. The trip northeast to Chicago is particularly strange in terms of time because while the man is moving farther away in distance from his destination (Seattle), he is, at the same time, getting closer in time to his arrival in Seattle. How can a man get closer to his destination at the same time he is getting farther away from it? Our language and experience have difficulty relating to time.

Another quirk of time relates to its movement. Whereas we are able to navigate space, turning left, right, moving up and down, and retracing our steps to come back to a place we were before, time allows no such liberty within its laws. Time moves in one direction, takes everything with it, and allows nothing to move in any direction except forward. Once we leave the present moment and it becomes the past, we could sooner arrive, after a very long journey, at the edge of the universe than we could journey into the past we just left.

We were made for God's heavenly kingdom, and in that kingdom, as John the Revelator tells us, time will be no more. (See Revelation 10:6.) In the meantime, time is our lot. It is, in a way, our curse. But as we should come to expect of something as strange as time, it is also our blessing. Time is the womb

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in which God has chosen to fashion and transform us into His likeness.

Time keeps us from being able to see the future. Thus time is a tool that compels us to entrust our unseen and unknown future to someone who “holds the future.” By being shrouded in the darkness of the present, we learn to have faith, we learn to trust, and we learn to hope. In turn, this faith, hope, and trust give birth to patience. Patience is the result of an underlying trust. Waiting reveals whether we have acquired patience. Patience allows us to navigate in the darkness of the present. The fool regards the future as either an enemy to fear or an entirely blank canvas that he has to impose his will upon. But the future is neither an enemy nor a “choose-your-own-adventure” art form. Ultimately, God has only good in store for the believer. God knows that human beings are not capable at most times in their lives of creating a future that is best for them.

The fact that we do not know the future weans us off the habit of following a course of action based on the evidence of our senses. For instance, the obvious action on Judgment Day will be to fall on our knees and beg for mercy. It is easy to be humble in the presence of such overwhelming terror. But who will bow in the present? When the present presses upon us and God seems far away, who will humble themselves and live now in the light of a future Day of Judgment? Only those who, through constant discipline, patiently force the report of the present to take a back seat to a belief in the not-yet-fulfilled promises of God.

A wise person lives in the light of far-off promises. Abraham had to wait decades for the promise of a son to be realized. Did he begin to obey and follow God only after God fulfilled

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His promise? No. To follow a God who knows “the end from the beginning” (Isaiah 46:10) and who “gives life to the dead and calls those things which do not exist as though they did” (Romans 4:17, NKJV), calls for the believer to go beyond what the senses tell and live in the present according to a reality that does not yet exist.

This is exactly what Abraham understood. Thus Paul said of Abraham, “who, contrary to hope, in hope believed, so that he became the father of many nations, according to what was spoken, ‘So shall your descendants be.’ And not being weak in faith, he did not consider his own body, already dead (since he was about a hundred years old), and the deadness of Sarah’s womb. He did not waver at the promise of God through unbelief, but was strengthened in faith, giving glory to God, and being fully convinced that what He had promised He was also able to perform. And therefore ‘it was accounted to him for righteousness’” (Romans 4:18–22, NKJV).

The patient person’s present, it seems, is “larger” than the impatient person’s; the patient individual’s horizon is bigger. For those like Abraham, the present in which they live does not merely consist of the here-and-now; the present also includes the not-yet-visible future in which God fulfills His promises.

## II. A POSITIVE EXAMPLE OF PATIENCE

### A. Joseph, the Just

The story of the virgin birth of Jesus is so sacred to us and so thoroughly a part of our culture that we can easily lose sight of how scandalous it seemed to people in the first century AD. To put it another way, the family tree of Christianity has grown to such grand and breathtaking heights that we hardly notice

it has a trunk so gnarled that one of its earliest evangelists, Matthew, in what was almost certainly a defensive reaction against those who questioned the legitimacy of Jesus' birth, felt compelled, by way of the genealogy that begins his Gospel, to remind his proud Jewish critics that questionable birth circumstances had long been part of even the noblest branches of the Jewish people.

It must have been embarrassing for those critics when Matthew reminded them that if Jesus was disqualified by the strange circumstances surrounding His mother, Mary, then Solomon was disqualified by his mother, Bathsheba; Jesse, David's father, was disqualified by his mother, Ruth; Boaz, by his mother, Rahab; and Perez, by his mother, Tamar. Let us feel for a moment the sting Matthew must have felt when answering yet another round of Jesus-mockers. But more difficult still, let us try to image what it must have felt like to be Joseph, the man who had entered into a marriage contract with a young woman who was now pregnant—and not by him.

Joseph seems to have first assumed Mary had committed adultery. If that were the case, he had a few options before him. The first was to have her punished according to the Torah: "the man that committeth adultery with another man's wife, even he that committeth adultery with his neighbour's wife, the adulterer and the adulteress shall surely be put to death" (Leviticus 20:10). The second was to marry her anyway. Scripture provided precedent for this course of action as well; Hosea married an adulteress (Hosea 1:2). The third option was to release her from their betrothal and, with a modicum of dignity left, walk away.

Joseph had to have been deeply wounded by this apparent betrayal. Had he been an angry man, quick to judgment, he

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might have chosen the first option. The second option would have seemed merciful and perhaps honorable—except for the fact that Mary would have been forever dishonored in his own eyes, and their marriage would have been one of constant distrust.

“Being a just man,” however, Joseph was “not willing to make her a publick example” (Matthew 1:19). Instead, he intended to keep the matter to himself and secretly release her, which would have safeguarded her reputation and enabled her to enter into another marriage contract in the future.

Ancient writers rarely felt the need to include a key figure’s inner thoughts in a story’s narrative. Having limited access to writing materials and few literate readers, an ancient writer typically stuck to describing a man’s actions. Readers wanted to know “what happened,” and stories were designed to give readers exactly that. But Matthew broke with this literary tradition. At this point in the narrative, Matthew wrote that Joseph “thought on these things” (Matthew 1:20).

This turned out to be a rather fortunate divide between Joseph’s hearing of Mary’s pregnancy and his decision to do something about it. It is important to note that exactly here, and not a moment before, the angel of the Lord was dispatched to reveal the truth to Joseph. Matthew let us know first that Joseph, far from being compulsive, waited. That waiting, that patience in thought and deed, was richly rewarded with a message from the Lord.

Why did the angel not come before Joseph heard the shocking news about Mary? Why not spare him this anguish by telling him beforehand? The dramatic pause here in Joseph’s pondering the situation served a few purposes. First, it allowed Matthew to inform those who questioned the legitimacy of



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Jesus' birth that the question had already been put to the highest test conceivable and passed. Who could possibly have had a higher stake in determining the truth concerning Jesus' conception and Mary's purity than the man who was betrothed to her? If Joseph, the man who had the most to lose if he married a woman who had been unfaithful, was willing to believe in Mary's purity and Jesus' divine conception, then it should not be difficult for others to believe these things as well.

Second, and more important for this discussion, the pause dispensed with the notion that action is always the way forward. Sometimes, it seems, God meets us only after we have determined to wait for clarity. Joseph had in mind an option he thought was the right thing to do—releasing her. But it turned out that the “right thing to do” in this instance would have been the wrong thing to do. The salvation of mankind through the babe that was now in Mary's womb depended upon a man waiting and giving time for thought.

Again, the key piece of information in this story is in Matthew's description of Joseph as a “just man.” This underlying righteousness bore the fruit of patience. His justness predisposed him to treat Mary fairly. The underlying principle of righteousness, of trust in God and His principles, drove him not to action but to thought.

No doubt there is a place for bold action. But if we look back over our own lives, the weight of our collective experience tells us that many of our biggest decisions in life were the decisions we never had to make. Many problems will simply work themselves out in time without any action on our part.

### **B. Joseph's Family Trait**

In the end, we are left with the rather impressive fact that Jesus and his half-brothers were raised in a home where patience was a virtue. Jesus, Joseph's stepson, knew how to be strategically patient. Jesus' disciples remembered that Jesus once waited four days to raise a man from the dead. If there had ever been a time when Jesus should have been in a hurry, it seems that it would have been then. But instead, He purposely waited because He knew that Lazarus's resurrection would be "for the glory of God" (John 11:4).

Patience was a trait Joseph shared with the children he was charged with raising. And Jesus was not the only one taking notes from Joseph. Jesus' brother James told his listeners: "My dear brothers and sisters, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, because human anger does not produce the righteousness that God desires" (James 1:19–20, NIV). Because there are a number of men in the New Testament named James, to distinguish James the brother of Jesus from the others, Christian history has appropriately referred to him as "James the Just." This is the very description Matthew used when first describing James's father, Joseph. It is not difficult to imagine James telling his church what he remembered his father teaching him.

### **III. SOME NEGATIVE EXAMPLES**

The Bible is not merely a collection of stories about virtuous men and women. It also includes the sagas of men who failed, and sometimes failed miserably.

### **A. Abraham**

Sometimes the record of biblical heroes looks a lot like the record of biblical failures; some star as both heroes and villains; at times they show remarkable trust and patience, but at other times they demonstrate equally breathtaking moments of impatience. Abraham, though he was otherwise a man of great patience, once stepped out of character. And it cost him dearly. Because his wife was old, he decided to try to fulfill God's promise for a son without Sarah. The child Ishmael was the result.

### **B. Saul**

King Saul knew the rules: only the priest—not the king—could offer sacrifices. But he found himself in a fatal hurry. He needed the priest to bless him and his troops as they went off to battle; but the priest seemed to be running late. Not wanting to go on without a sacrifice, Saul did what he assumed was the next best thing: he offered the sacrifice himself. Saul's mistake to move forward hastily was the opposite of Joseph's decision to wait: Where Joseph heard from the angel after he had determined to meditate on what to do, Saul heard from Samuel after Saul had determined to take matters into his own hands. His rush to sacrifice—against God's rules—cost him dearly; it set him on a path to his and his son's destruction.

### **C. Judas**

The name *Judas* is almost unrecoverable in our culture. Such a name rivals Hitler for the most hated name in the Western world. But even after Judas's betrayal, who can doubt that the risen Jesus would have forgiven him? For all the stigma surrounding Judas, we should remember that Judas did go to

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the priests after betraying Jesus, begging the priests to take back the silver coins and release Jesus.

First, Judas went to the Temple, which had long been the place for a man to go when he suffered from a guilty conscience. Second, before the priests, Judas called Jesus an innocent man, which by implication meant that Judas was declaring himself guilty of having broken the ninth commandment in bearing false witness against Jesus. Third, and perhaps most significantly, although the other disciples remembered Judas for having loved money more than just about anything, in a dramatic gesture, he threw the money he so loved on the floor of the Temple, desperately hoping that one of the priests would feel pity and release Jesus.

Is it difficult to image a man like Judas, whose final acts are the epitome of self-loathing, being forgivable? Jesus forgave the hardened Christian-murderer Saul of Tarsus even while he was on his way to persecute more Christians. Judas was a much more sympathetic character. What about Peter? While Peter was denying that he had anything to do with Jesus, Judas was in the Temple protesting Jesus' arrest. One man claimed not to know Jesus; the other claimed not only to know Him, but also to know that He was innocent.

So why did mercy not triumph in this instance? Why, in the Book of Acts, is Judas not standing up with his compatriots on the Day of Pentecost? The sad truth seems to be as simple as this: Judas did not wait for forgiveness; he never gave God the chance. Judas went out and dealt with his own guilt by hanging himself. What if he had waited just three days as Peter did? His guilt was, apparently, too strong for that.

And this brings us full circle, back to the beginning. The patient man's horizons are larger than the foolish man's. For the

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one who is patient, there is trust that God, even in the bleakest of circumstances (which include circumstances brought on by one's own sin), will, in time, turn defeat into victory. Just a simple delay in acting—especially when one is angry, confused, hurt, or feeling condemned—can mean the difference between going down in history as a Peter or as a Judas. So much can hinge upon waiting. Joseph's pause led to the story of the Messiah. Judas's unwillingness to wait through the pangs of guilt has robbed the New Testament record of what could have been its supreme demonstration of Jesus' forgiveness.

### **PERSONAL APPLICATION**

Waiting is never fun. As people raised in a Western culture, we value action. We are taught to admire those who get things accomplished, those who seize the moment and make things happen.

But spiritual maturity cannot be rushed. Patience is not for sale at a dollar store. The discipline of waiting both reveals how much patience we have and helps to develop patience.

In a hurry-up world, learning to wait is not a wasted effort. It can, if we allow it, develop godly patience.

### **QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION**

- Think about how many times you have regretted something you said in haste. If you took more time to think before you spoke would you have fewer regrets?
- Once you believe you have come to the right decision, do you act upon it right away, or could there be value in simply waiting to act even after you believe you have come to the right decision?

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- Time is one of God's ordained "healers." Do you have a policy in life never to make an important decision when you are angry or hurt? If not, would you consider developing such a policy?

## CHAPTER ELEVEN



# THE DISCIPLINE OF MEDITATION

### INTRODUCTION

Scripture urges us repeatedly to meditate upon, not merely read or memorize, God's Word. Our minds are in the process of being transformed, the words of our mouths reshaped. The Christian transformation is to be so complete that even the things we used to delight in are being replaced with new, holier delights. But God's Word has to be internalized for these radical and fundamental changes to take place.

The word *meditation* spoken of here is not to be confused with an emptying of the mind that Eastern religions practice. Rather, for our purposes, *meditation* refers to a long, regular, and carefully measured consideration of a topic. More specifically for this context, meditation refers to a careful knowledge of Scripture, along with an intense commitment to the faithful application of Scripture to one's life and the present and future life of one's community.

## I. CAREFUL KNOWLEDGE OF SCRIPTURE

### A. Conversation with Scripture

The first psalm in the Book of Psalms begins: “Blessed is the man that walketh not in the counsel of the ungodly, nor standeth in the way of sinners, nor sitteth in the seat of the scornful. But his delight is in the law of the LORD; and in his law doth he meditate day and night” (Psalm 1:1–2). For the psalmist, the subject of one’s careful knowledge ought to start with God’s Word.

Contrary to the man who constantly situates himself in the company of foolish talkers (the ungodly, the sinners, the scornful), the psalmist said that the blessed man’s primary company is the Word of God. In place of the superfluous discussions of the godless, the blessed man takes comfort in the Scriptures. His atmosphere is filled with the echoes and whispers of the holy prophets; he takes delight in consulting the wisdom of Scripture. The voices of the holy men of old are his most familiar companions.

Above all, his meditation, or careful study of the voices of Scripture, is regular. He meditates day and night. In other words, meditation on Scripture is not a day job; neither is meditation something one is to do only after a day’s work is done. Essentially, the psalmist pronounced a blessing on the one whose life is a continuous conversation with Scripture. Like a lovestruck teenager whose every thought is bent toward the beloved, or like an old man who, after many years of silence and separation, sits down to talk with the only friend left from his boyhood, the person who makes of life a constant conversation with Scripture finds in God’s Word the incomparable companion—the companion who is at once as



unknown and enchanting as a first love and yet as familiar and knowing as a childhood friend.

### **B. Delighting in God's Word**

The constancy of meditation is regulated by what the psalmist calls “delight.” The blessed man is the man who delights to think upon the Word. He is in love; no sooner has his mind been released from having to concentrate upon some task at hand than he falls to thinking upon the Word. Scripture is the “gravity” of his mind—every thought, sooner or later, drifts naturally toward it and the God behind it. A man in this state could no more fail to treasure every word of Scripture than a lovestruck man would fail to measure, weigh, and play over and over again the priceless words of his beloved. But it is not just the words themselves he cherishes; he searches those words, listening if perchance a second meaning lies hidden in a subtle tone and expression.

So often our lives may seem to resemble the opposite of the blessed one. We find ourselves surrounded by those for whom God is an afterthought, or worse. In public life, reverence is rare, while scorn is the official language of public discourse. We are called to live in this world, and we cannot isolate ourselves from the environment to which we are called to be salt and light. Thus our public lives are not our own; we have little choice in determining what we hear. But what we meditate upon, what we take delight in, is our own choice.

### **C. The Word of God Becoming Our Word**

Great poets of the past have often agreed that the one essential habit of the individual who would become a great poet is the habit of reading, living, sleeping, eating, and breathing good

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poetry. Such poetry is not just about having good feelings and then describing them in rhymes. Good poetry requires an extreme sensitivity to words. The great poet chooses words like a pianist chooses notes; dozens of different words could get the job done and convey the author's basic meaning, but good poetry requires just the right word. He rolls words around in his mind, weighing and "tasting" each one. A word's meaning is not enough; the poet has to consider the sound of the word—its vowels, consonants, syllables, and accents. Moreover, the right word or phrase is not determined just by what the word or phrase means to him; the poet has a keen perception of what other ears hear in these words and phrases.

Thus the young poet has to live with poetry and take continuous inventory of the impressions that the past masters' words have made on him. Their rhythms and images haunt him in his dreams. He has to wake up hearing poetry. The great poems are to be memorized until they become second nature. The immersion in poetry has to become so complete that the language of the great poets begins to bleed into the everyday language of the poet-in-training and changes the way he thinks and speaks.

The careful knowledge of the would-be poet, which compels him to explore the heights and depths of every word he uses, is the kind of knowledge that characterizes meditation. When called upon to lead the people of Israel into the Promised Land, Joshua was charged with the responsibility of having a careful knowledge of the words of Moses: "This book of the law shall not depart out of thy mouth; but thou shalt meditate therein day and night, that thou mayest observe to do according to all that is written therein: for then thou shalt make thy way prosperous, and then thou shalt have good success" (Joshua 1:8).

One would think Joshua would be required to memorize military strategies for “good success.” He was, after all, Israel’s general; he was to lead Israel on a long campaign to conquer, city by city, the land of Canaan. But he was told instead to meditate upon the Law that he might observe and perform it.

The Law was not a list of battle tactics; the Law did not contain weapon-making secrets. It did not hold a list of training techniques. It did not even provide vital intelligence of the lay of the land Israel was set to conquer. The written words of Moses merely informed the reader of how to properly relate to others, how to manage one’s land and possessions, and how to worship God. Yet Joshua failed or succeeded only to the degree that he failed or succeeded in following God’s Word.

Joshua’s knowledge of Moses’ words was to become so complete that the Law was not to depart out of his mouth. That is, the language of the Law was to become the language of Joshua. His responses to questions were to be informed by the Law. His praises and rebukes were to be the praises and rebukes of the Law. The Book of Joshua lets us know that Joshua’s knowledge of God’s Word was carefully remembered and applied.

At the end of Joshua’s life, after decades of war, triumph, and disaster, Joshua’s words to Israel sound strangely familiar: “Be ye therefore very courageous to keep and to do all that is written in the book of the law of Moses, that ye turn not aside therefrom to the right hand or to the left” (Joshua 23:6). These are almost the exact words he had heard from God when Joshua was still a young man: “Be thou strong and very courageous, that thou mayest observe to do according to all the law, which Moses my servant commanded thee: turn not from it to the right hand or to the left, that thou mayest prosper

whithersoever thou goest” (Joshua 1:7). God’s word to Joshua as a young man had indeed become almost indistinguishable from Joshua’s words as an old man.

Meditation upon Scripture calls for a knowledge of Scripture that is so careful that one’s language begins to alter and conform to the language of Scripture. This does not necessarily mean quoting Scripture verbatim in King James English whenever we speak, but it does mean knowing how to give a scriptural response to the problems we face.

## **II. AN INTENSE COMMITMENT TO THE FAITHFUL APPLICATION OF SCRIPTURE**

We have discussed the chief characteristics of one who meditates upon God’s Word. Now we will closely examine how meditation upon Scripture in light of the gospel of Jesus Christ can transform one’s mind and nourish the possibility of doing extraordinary things.

Many people memorize Scripture, which is commendable. But memorization and knowledge of Scripture is not enough. There has to be a commitment to a faithful application of the knowledge one has gained from Scripture.

Paul is an exemplary figure for many reasons, but perhaps above all other reasons, he is especially exemplary for his intense commitment to meditating upon Scripture in hopes of proving that God is faithful to His Word.

Paul experienced a struggle between the promises of Scripture and his calling to evangelize the Gentiles. At one point in his life, he saw the two as mutually exclusive. If God’s Word (His law and promises) was true, then Israel was exclusively God’s people. But if the Gentiles were also to be God’s people, then God’s Word could not be true. But once he encountered, and

was commissioned by, the risen Christ, he had to conclude that indeed the Gentiles were to be included in God's covenant. So he had to ask: Was God's Word to Israel then true? Paul, through meditating on Scripture, came to the extraordinary discovery that not only had God indeed welcomed the Gentiles, but He had also done so in accord with His Word. Let us trace this discovery as Paul described it in various places in his letters.

### **A. Paul's Meditation on Scripture**

*Paul's Bible.* Paul's Bible did not include the books and letters of the New Testament. Paul's letters were written before the Gospels and the other works of the New Testament were written and circulated. What we now call the Old Testament was Paul's Bible. When he wrote that "all Scripture is given by inspiration of the Holy Ghost," he meant by the phrase "all Scripture" the words of the Old Testament. Of course, since the works of the New Testament came to be regarded as Scripture and were given equal authority with the works of the Old Testament, "all Scripture" now includes both the Old and New Testaments. But it is important to remember that when Paul explained to others his encounter with the risen Messiah, he did not have the written Gospels to read from and point to as corroborating authorities.

For Paul, the difficulty was not so much in presenting evidence from the Old Testament that Jesus is the Messiah. Other early Christian preachers, namely Stephen and Philip, were paving the way and saying that Jesus' birth, crucifixion, and resurrection were prophesied in the Old Testament. Moreover, in addition to his own Damascus testimony, Paul had Jesus' still-empty tomb in Jerusalem and more than

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five hundred eyewitnesses who had seen the risen Jesus (I Corinthians 15:6) to testify to the fact that Jesus is Lord.

The great difficulty for Paul was that he had been convinced that in spite of what had seemed to many as the Old Testament's silence on, or even outright rejection of, the subject, the Gentiles, through the Jewish Messiah, had been reconciled to God and adopted into God's ancient covenant with Abraham. Even the apostles themselves were slow to come to grips with the implications of this new gospel.

Paul was the first to see these implications for what they were: he saw that the gospel of Jesus Christ had "broken down the middle wall of partition" (Ephesians 2:14) between the Jews and Gentiles and that the "Gentiles should be fellowheirs, and of the same body, and partakers of [God's] promise in Christ by the gospel" (Ephesians 3:6).

Many early Jewish believers resisted the notion and dared Paul to find this strange and counterintuitive "arrangement" in the Scriptures. The greatest difficulty was that, as Paul noted, this "fellowship" between Jew and Gentile in the covenant was a "mystery" that had not been "made known unto the sons of men" and had been hidden "from the beginning of the world . . . in God" (Ephesians 3:4-9).

Paul's fellow Jews feared that if Paul's gospel was true, then God had contradicted His own Scriptures by forsaking the Jews and embracing the Gentiles. But Paul remained unshakeable in two convictions: (1) God was faithful to His Word, and therefore faithful to His covenanted people no matter how unfaithful they were to Him ("Let God be true, but every man a liar" [Romans 3:4]); and (2) God, through Jesus Christ, had planned all along to bring Gentiles into Abraham's covenant.

Faced with the reality that either the Bible was wrong and God was unfaithful to His covenant or Paul and his fellow Jews' traditional interpretations of the Bible were wrong, Paul chose the latter. He insisted that Scripture is a record not of God changing His mind when men change theirs, but Scripture rather is a record of God's unchanging faithfulness.

Paul decided that if he and his fellow Jews had not seen a Jewish-Gentile church in Scripture, then this was because the truth was, like the glory of God shining from behind Moses' veil, hidden from their eyes. Scripture, or what we now call the Old Testament, must bear witness to God's intentions to form a Jewish-Gentile church. Finding God's ultimate plan in Scripture must be a matter of meditating on Scripture and allowing the Holy Spirit to reveal and confirm the ministry with which Jesus had tasked Paul.

*Paul's unveiled reading of Scripture.* And this is exactly what happened. Paul went to the Scriptures and read it with new eyes. New patterns began to emerge in what had been perhaps overly familiar passages. For instance, in the story of God calling Abraham and making a covenant with him (Genesis 12–21), Jewish teachers saw Abraham as the father of the Jewish people who had been offered an exclusive covenant with God. But Paul now realized that God had declared Abraham righteous long before he had ever submitted to circumcision, which is the traditional Jewish sign of election. For Paul, this could mean only one thing: God had intricately orchestrated the plot of this narrative to lay the foundation for the Gentiles' inclusion in the covenant.

Paul now had "ears to hear" what the Spirit was saying through the timing of this Scripture: God had declared Abraham righteous before he was circumcised so that Abraham could be

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not only the father of the Jewish faithful, but also the father of the uncircumcised Gentile faithful.

Twenty centuries have passed, but Paul's excitement can still be heard as he worked this out on the parchment that would one day come to be known as Romans 4:11–12: "And [Abraham] received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness of the faith which he had yet being uncircumcised: that he might be the father of all them that believe, though they be not circumcised; that righteousness might be imputed unto them also: and the father of circumcision to them who are not of the circumcision only, but who also walk in the steps of that faith of our father Abraham, which he had being yet uncircumcised." At the foundation of the Hebrew Scriptures, at the very genesis of Israel's election, is proof of the validity of Paul's ministry to the Gentiles.

He continued to see in Scripture the inclusion of the Gentiles in the saving covenant anticipated throughout. At the end of his letter to the Romans, Paul quoted from various strategic portions of the Old Testament that show the Gentiles praising God. First, in Romans 15:9, he said, "For this cause I will confess to thee among the Gentiles, and sing unto thy name." (See II Samuel 22:50.) In Romans 15:10 he wrote, "Rejoice, ye Gentiles, with his people." (See Deuteronomy 32:43.) In the next verse, he said, "Praise the Lord, all ye Gentiles; and laud him, all ye people" (Romans 15:11). (See Psalm 117:1.) He finished this string with Romans 15:12: "There shall be a root of Jesse, and he that shall rise to reign over the Gentiles; in him shall the Gentiles trust." (See Isaiah 11:10.)

In this passage from Isaiah, Paul saw something suggesting that the prophet had seen a point in Israel's future when the Gentiles would actually precede Israel in recognizing God's



sovereign work. "And in that day there shall be a root of Jesse, which shall stand for an ensign of the people; to it shall the Gentiles seek: and his rest shall be glorious. And it shall come to pass in that day, that the Lord shall set his hand again the second time to recover the remnant of his people. . . . And he shall set up an ensign for the nations, and shall assemble the outcasts of Israel" (Isaiah 11:10–12). The order again is important for Paul. First a "root of Jesse" comes and is sought by the Gentiles. Then the text mentions God's recovery of the righteous remnant of Israel. And once more an "ensign" is set up for "the nations," which is a synonym for "the Gentiles," followed by an assembly of the "outcasts of Israel."

Wrestling with the belief in the truthfulness of God's Word on one hand, and on the other hand trying to explain why, in the present, most of his fellow Jews seemed to make void the Scriptures by rejecting their Messiah while the Gentiles were flocking to embrace Him, Paul found indeed that the prophets had described the very situation in which Paul found himself. As Paul thought upon the awful reality in which his own people struggled with unbelief, he understood that the Scriptures, being rightly read, showed that God had anticipated this order of events.

Paul's intense commitment drove him to further meditation on Scripture. Because Paul placed equal weight on the integrity of God's promises to the Jews, he could not simply write them off and say the Gentiles had become a "new Israel," a substitute for a replaced and defrocked Israel. The reader can hear Paul brooding upon this question as he wrote Romans 11:1–2: "I say then, Hath God cast away his people? God forbid. For I also am an Israelite, of the seed of Abraham. . . . God hath not cast away his people which he foreknew." The phrase "cast away"

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suggests that Paul had been meditating upon Psalm 44:8–9, in which the psalmist said, “In God we boast all the day long, and praise thy name for ever. Selah. But thou hast cast off, and put us to shame.”

Paul knew that the question of God’s faithfulness to His people had come up before, and he sought answers in Israel’s past for this current state of affairs. He must have observed that the psalmist, in complaining that God seemed to have cast him and his people away, also wrote: “Our heart is not turned back. . . . If we have forgotten the name of our God, . . . shall not God search this out? . . . Yea, for thy sake are we killed all the day long; we are counted as sheep for the slaughter” (Psalm 44:18, 20–22).

Here Paul would have seen that Israel’s past woes could sometimes be attributed not to their idolatry but rather to God’s larger purposes for the salvation of the world (“for thy sake are we killed”). What if this is an explanation of what was happening in Paul’s time? What if God was using Israel’s obstinacy (not their idolatry) constructively; what if God was using this as an opportunity to consummate His plan to include the Gentiles in the covenant? In answer to these questions, Paul refused to believe that Israel’s unbelief is the final word: “I say then, Have they stumbled that they should fall? God forbid: but rather through their fall salvation is come unto the Gentiles, for to provoke them to jealousy” (Romans 11:11).

### **B. The Result of Paul’s Meditation**

Paul’s meditation on Scripture paved the way for a healthy and successful movement. These promises were in Scripture all along, but they were veiled. God had done, in accord with His Word, precisely what He had always said He would do:

call Israel to be a light to the wayward Gentiles and use the Gentiles' belief and cooperation as an opportunity to turn around and bless wayward Israel. If Paul had continued to read Scripture as he had read before he encountered Christ and was commissioned to the Gentiles, the church would have remained just another branch of Judaism. If he had decided merely to rely only on the testimony of his encounter with Jesus without holding onto his former beliefs in the trustworthiness of Scripture, Christianity would have become merely a new religion, a Gentile movement, orphaned from its historical roots. In either case, the church would have been stripped of its unique spiritual DNA and would have long since disappeared into the dustbin of history.

### **PERSONAL APPLICATION**

It is not enough to read Scripture; it is not even enough to know Scripture. Our fathers in the faith have taught us to meditate upon Scripture. Meditating on Scripture cleanses the mind, transforms it, and alters the way we speak. Meditation is the habit of those who delight in God's Word; it is the characteristic of those for whom God's Word is the gravity to which every thought ultimately bends.

### **QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION**

- What is the "gravity" of your mind? That is, what do you think upon when your mind detaches from a task at hand? Does your mind, in those moments, ponder Scripture?
- If Joshua's primary responsibility, among all his other great tasks, was to meditate on Scripture, what are some ways you could shift your mind's priorities so that,

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amidst life's responsibilities, meditation on God's Word will be viewed as your primary responsibility?

- What, if anything, keeps you from reading Scripture regularly and pondering it throughout your day?
- Are there any circumstances in your life that seem as though they exist in direct contradiction to God's promises? If so, are you committed to continuing to believe and find answers in the faithfulness of God's Word?

## CHAPTER TWELVE



# THE DISCIPLINE OF CONTENTMENT

### INTRODUCTION

Not very often does one think of an eighteen-year-old as contented. Elijah Goodwin was a rare young man who discovered the joy of contentment at such an age. While most young men are full of unrest and ambition for the life ahead of them, Goodwin learned to savor each moment as it unfolded. He was a circuit-riding preacher in 1825 on the American frontier. Walking by faith as he traveled and ministered, he missed many meals and had virtually nothing to call his own. Preaching thirty-five sermons a month at eighteen locations in three states, Goodwin noted that his expenses well outran the contributions he received.

One night, he lost his way in the woods. Unable to find his way or to sense the nearness of any human habitation, he settled in for a night in the forest. He wrote, "I made a bed of my saddle blanket, a pillow of my saddle, and a covering of my overcoat. I tied my horse, by the bridle, to my arm, so that if a bear or a panther should approach, my horse would

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become afrightened, and, by pulling at the rein, would arouse me. It was a pretty cold night. The first snow of the season fell during the night. I was near the Patoka [River] and could hear the rippling water as it rushed against the bank and over the drift-wood near me. As I lay there, I thought it was a great pity that all that sweet music was being wasted on the air, without an ear to hear it, or a human heart to enjoy it” (“Contentment for a Poor Itinerant Preacher,” *Leadership* magazine, James Berkley, Fall 1988).

The apostle Paul said it this way: “I have learned, in whatsoever state I am, therewith to be content” (Philippians 4:11). Clearly, Goodwin did not learn contentment because he had comfortable circumstances. Paul did not learn contentment in bowling-green lawns and ivory palaces. Contentment is something that comes from God, not circumstances. Some people in even the most posh settings complain of being very unhappy. Discontent is sin. Contentment is godly character.

Western society feeds discontent. Children are not happy unless they have the latest toys being advertised. The man of the house feels uneasy about driving a gasoline-powered vehicle when all the “real men” are driving diesel trucks. Society makes women feel self-conscious and dissatisfied with their looks, hair color, weight, or anything else naturally occurring about themselves. Even young men have become consumed with fashion consciousness.

If anything, American culture is built on consumerism—the continual pursuit of something new. This has nothing to do with what is better. In the rush for newness or coolness, people often throw out things that are still functional and serve their purpose well. More than a question of “does it serve its purpose?” the question becomes “is this color in?” Men trade in

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SUVs because those models are so outdated. Women discard barely-worn garments because they want to be seen in the latest fashions.

Like a bald eagle building a nest in a tree on Madison Avenue in New York City, a contented child of God stands out from the crowd. Satisfaction is such a rare thing that people often pause and take note. Contentment is not simply a discipline, however, but the evidence of other deeper disciplines in one's life.

The child sulked in the corner, feeling dejected and disappointed. The Christmas gifts were nice but not what he wanted. Looking at the heap of presents for weeks, he had imagined getting a quadcopter with HD video capture streaming a live feed to the remote. It was the thing he had always wanted—ever since he got the last thing he had always wanted. Instead, his presents included some brightly colored socks, a model truck to build, a flashlight with survival kit inside, and a new jacket. *Dumb, dumb, dumb*, he thought to himself. He was not content with the nice new things he did receive because they fell so far short of what he felt he deserved.

Everyone wants to be contented. We want to be satisfied and happy in life—that is natural. G. K. Chesterton said, “There are two ways to get enough. One is to continue to accumulate more; the other is to desire less.” Jesus had an easy solution. He taught us to stop thinking about it. He commanded us not to be anxious or worried with problems such as “What shall we eat? or, What shall we drink? or, Wherewithal shall we be clothed?” (Matthew 6:31).

Even in Jesus' day, consumerism was killing contentment. “For after all these things do the Gentiles seek,” He said. But to God's people, He gave this promise: “Your heavenly Father

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knoweth that ye have need of all these things” (Matthew 6:32). To be contented, we must first realize that our Provider knows our needs. We can rest assured that someone who loves us is looking out for us; we do not have to live in desperation. Instead of seeking the latest trend or worrying about daily necessities, we should seek “first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you” (Matthew 6:33).

Give up worrying. That is a key feature of being a child of God. You no longer have to fear lack, and you no longer have to live in the winless pursuit of the next big thing. Jesus taught His listeners not to worry about tomorrow. He said, “The morrow shall take thought for the things of itself. Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof” (Matthew 6:34). While that is great advice, many people who know the command still struggle with how to do that.

The key to contentment is the discipline of humility. Humble people are content in whatever situation they find themselves. This is not to suggest that humble people are lazy or that they never seek to better themselves. Rather than being clothed with the latest fashion, the child of God should “be clothed with humility: for God resisteth the proud, and giveth grace to the humble” (I Peter 5:5). After giving the command to “humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God,” the writer explained that this is done by “casting all your care upon him; for he careth for you” (I Peter 5:6–7). Humility does not hold to a self-image, because its concern is with others; therefore humility can be content in every situation. Humility gives while pride takes. Humility seeks the good of others while pride seeks self. Contentment cannot coexist with pride.



## **I. PAUL'S PRESCRIPTION FOR CONTENTMENT**

The most contented people are often those who have given up the most. They have learned to be happy having little to nothing. This is not because they would not enjoy plush and fluff but because they have realized luxury and pleasure are not essential to a happy life. A spirit of happiness makes life luxurious. Paul was one of those who left everything for the cause of Christ. From him we learn the principles of contentment.

### **A. Do Not Be Anxious**

Paul said, "Don't worry about anything" (Philippians 4:6, NLT). One key to contentment in life is not to worry. To worry is to attempt to play God without His power. We try to see the future and contemplate all that could go wrong, all the while being powerless to change any of it. Instead of playing God, we should bring to Him "every thing by prayer and supplication" (Philippians 4:6).

The universe is infinitely huge with millions of galaxies and trillions of stars. Somewhere in that incredible creation there exists what appears to be a random galaxy called the Milky Way. On one of the outer arms of that spiral of stars hangs a little solar system we call home. In what appears to be an arbitrary placement, sits Earth, sandwiched between the orbits of other planets of inconsistent sizes and textures. On our planet, mostly covered by water, rise land masses where numerous living creatures dwell, including humankind. God has chosen to focus His attention and energy on humans He made from the very planet they occupy.

If our Earth or Moon were moved out of orbit only slightly, life would cease. Not only does the Lord pay attention to

humans, but even a sparrow does not fall to the ground without His knowing it. Yet humans tend to look down at the things of the Earth from which they came rather than up at the Creator who holds everything in order.

### **B. Pray for Needs**

Living on planet Earth was not our idea. God put us here and He knows the plans He has for our lives. He knows and He cares. He is concerned with what we are concerned about. So we go to Him in prayer.

Instead of praying, “Oh, God, I have no idea where this money is coming from!” we should pray, “Lord Jesus, I thank You that You’re going to see that this bill gets paid.” Then we need not think about it again except to remember to be thankful when the money comes in, whether through extra work or a gift in the mail.

Or, more practically, we might pray, “God! I need patience! Now!” Rather, we should pray, “OK, Lord, I’m at my wits’ end here. Thank You for giving me patience. You are the God who supplies all my needs and this is a need. I thank You for fulfilling it.” Then spend time in thanksgiving, remembering past answered prayers. Even reiterate them to your children, creating a memorial. Sing a worship song.

Panic-stricken prayers can leave a person feeling more hopeless after praying than before. Notice the command “Do not be anxious” is given first, and then, “Pray.” We are not to pray with anxiety but with faith. Faith does not say, “I don’t know what I am going to do, God. I am trying my best, but this is just a mess. I don’t think I have ever been so low before. This is awful.” Faith says, “Lord, I am feeling overwhelmed right now, but I know that You understand my need before I even

mention it. My problems are Your problems because I am Your child. Thank You for carrying me through this situation.”

### **C. Pray with Thanksgiving**

This situation happened in the life of a young mother who was seeking the Lord:

Knock, knock, knock came the sound on her bedroom door.

The praying mother looked toward the door. “Yes?”

“Can I have an apple?” came the voice of her five-year-old.

“Hang on just a minute. I’m almost done.” She turned back to praying again.

Knock, knock, knock came again, almost instantly.

“Yes?”

“Can I have an apple?”

Mom hesitated this time wondering if perhaps the child hadn’t heard. “Um . . . yes, give me just a minute.”

Knock, knock, knock.

In frustration she answered, “What!”

“Can I have an apple?” came the voice one more time as innocently as he asked at the first.

“Just a minute, please. I’ll be right there.”

She dropped her head to pray again for the last five minutes of her quota, and the Lord spoke. “You’re begging Me for things I’ve already promised. Instead of asking Me to do the things I told you I would do, learn to thank Me in advance before they ever happen.” Her prayer life was never the same. And the little boy was graciously given his apple.

When we learn to do everything by “prayer and supplication with thanksgiving,” we will experience the promise of Philippians 4:7: “And the peace of God, which passeth all understanding, shall keep your hearts and minds through

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Christ Jesus.” When we take a moment to apply this Bible promise, we will feel the protecting peace of God surround our hearts. It is as simple as taking our present concerns to God and thanking Him for already hearing and providing a solution. After the first request, we can thank the Lord daily for solving the problem and handling the situation. What is already done in the spiritual realm will soon appear in the natural.

A young mother learned this lesson in a difficult situation. Silent sobs wracked her body in the ER waiting room as the words seemed to come screaming over the speakers: “Code Blue Room 22! Code Blue Room 22!”

The mother prayed as Hannah prayed that day in the Temple with such deep desperation that no sound came from her mouth. “Lord Jesus, This is Your child. It’s been an honor and a blessing to have her these past three months. I couldn’t have asked for a more precious baby. However, if You want her . . . she’s Yours.” Within minutes, the baby was airlifted to the children’s hospital.

When the mom and dad arrived at the second location, something had changed. That distress, anxiety, and extreme fear seemed to have miraculously disappeared. The mother thought her child was dying or already dead and had little faith in doctors. Yet she was at perfect peace.

It didn’t make sense. How was that possible? It was a mother’s worst fear and nightmare of losing a child, yet she was calm as if this happened every day. Was she callous? No. Years before when her son had asked for an apple three times that day, this mother had learned to thank God for the answer, not to beg or demand. She never expected to be in such circumstances this day had brought, yet here she was living out yet another verse God wanted her to personally experience.

When a believer prays with thanksgiving, giving God the praise He is due in spite of the circumstances, He will give such peace that it will pass all understanding. Will one's situation change? Maybe; maybe not. Circumstances do not matter. It is our worship, our praise, that matters. We can face any situation in life when we have the peace of God. And think of the awesome stories we can pass on to our children and grandchildren of the mighty acts God has done for us and will do for them.

Everyone faces situations in life where these principles are so vital. We must learn these if we intend to enjoy life. Interestingly enough, it does not stop there. We have prayed, thanked Him, and received peace; what more could there be?

### **D. Think**

Depression overwhelmed her like a black cloak soaked in poison. It threatened to suck the life from her body. Fear came upon her so quickly she barely had a chance to get a grip on reality. It would be so easy to give in, cry, or scream. Her husband and the kids had gone out on a short trip. She wanted to beg God to save the lives of her children, whom she feared were in danger. Yet, she knew that would be pointless; nothing was wrong with them. Her body was panicking and her mind was telling her danger lurked very near. She could see her daughter calling in tears to say there had been a severe accident and she "alone was left to tell the story."

She did not cry, beg, or scream. Lessons over the years had been well-received for this very moment in her life. She never expected she would experience depression. Yet rather than give in to the chemical changes in her body, she took control of her thoughts. Quietly bowing her head, she prayed, "Lord

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Jesus, I know that You have everything under control. I realize that things are crazy mixed up in my body right now and I'm experiencing unnecessary fears. Thank You, Jesus, that You're here and there's nothing wrong; everything is OK. My husband and children are fine."

Then she quoted Philippians 4:8, a verse her mother had taught her many years ago: "Finally, brethren, whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report; if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things." The Word of God is powerful. After quoting this verse for the third time, the depression lifted. The fear disappeared.

Then the phone rang. It was her husband's number.

Fear attempted to return, but no! She refused to trade peace for fear!

"Yes?"

"Hey, Mommy!" her son greeted her and then asked a simple question before going back to his day. There was nothing wrong. There had been nothing to fear the whole time. Her only medication was the living and powerful Word of God.

We live in a world today that is surrounded by fear: the news, sickness in family members, home issues, threat of losing a job, politics, and so on. One must make the effort to think on pure, wholesome, uplifting things. Rather than talk about what is going wrong at work, we talk about what is right with God. Rather than complain about problems and worries, we talk about truth and love. Various forms of media can broadcast a constant torrent of sadness. Even weather stations seem to focus on the melancholy effects of bad weather rather than on the beauty and sunshine available somewhere in the world.

Fallen humans are prone toward what is negative. Those risen with Christ should be known for uplifting and constructive conversations.

When feeling the heaviness of life and those overwhelming feelings that the world is about to come crashing down, a child of God should start quoting Philippians 4:8. This is not to suggest that clinical depression is not real. However, in the same way we pray for the healing of a broken bone, we can pray for healing of our brain function. Thankfully, He is our healer.

### **E. Do**

Of course we not only pray with thanksgiving and fill our minds with thoughts from above, but we live a life in harmony with the teachings of the Lord. Paul told the people, “Do it!” (See Philippians 4:9.) When we do the truth we know, peace will follow. Showing kindness, preaching the gospel, and loving others are commands in Scripture from which we gain peace when we obey them.

## **II. LESSONS LEARNED FROM PAUL’S LIFE**

In II Corinthians 11:24–28 Paul told about some things he had been through. Yet he still lived for God, never wavering, standing strong. The man who said, “Learn from me!” knew what he was talking about. (See I Corinthians 11:1.) He knew how to survive life-threatening storms, hunger and thirst, being stoned to death, and being beaten on more than one occasion. The secrets to his sanity are in Philippians 4:6–8.

There will always be problems. So long as there are people, there are problems. But no one on his deathbed lies there wishing he had worried more and panicked more. No, people

wish the opposite. They look back in hindsight and realize all those situations seem to have worked out one way or another. We can enjoy life because not only do things have a way of working themselves out, but we have a loving Lord who works all things for our good.

### **A. Being Abased**

We are so quick to want to quote Philippians 4:13, “I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me,” without knowing or understanding what it takes to gain that strength. Paul was not superhuman. In our perfect world we do not like to admit it is all right to go without: fasting out of necessity sometimes, not having extra money to blow on oneself, having to make the old shoes last a while longer when one’s heart was set on a new style. We put too many things in life up there next to oxygen. Paul went without things many times and lived to tell about it.

Joy is not based on events. Samuel Johnson once said, “Happiness [contentment] is not a state to arrive at but, rather, a manner of traveling.” The Lord offers joy and peace on the journey.

### **B. Abounding**

In whatever state we are in, we can be content. Part of happiness comes with realizing how good we have it. Rather than complaining about not having shoes, one should be thankful he at least has feet. Sometimes we have to go through struggles in life to get a sense of how good we actually have it.

The story is told about one farmer who complained to his pastor about how he just could not take his home life anymore.



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His wife and kids were crowding up the house and now they had to let the mother-in-law come live with them.

The pastor asked, “Do you have a rooster?” When the farmer told him he did, the pastor said, “Bring it inside and let it live with you in the house.”

The simple man took the man of God’s word and did as he was told. The next week, he said, “Reverend, that rooster has made a mess of things. Having that noise box in the house has not helped anything!”

The preacher simply asked, “Do you have any goats?”

“Why, yes. Yes, I do.”

“Bring them inside.”

The farmer did as instructed and came back to his pastor after a week. “Pastor, this idea is not working. The goats are horrid to live with. This has been the worst week of my life! Are you sure you are getting your wisdom from God?”

“Do you own a cow?”

“Of course.”

“Bring it inside and let it live with you too.”

Fuming, the farmer stormed out to try one more outlandish attempt to please the parson. The next week the farmer was as hot as a teakettle and ready to explode. “This is the stupidest thing I have ever done. If the health department knew I had a chicken, goats, and a cow in my house, I’d be—I’d be—”

“Send them out of the house,” the pastor said.

“That’s it? Just get them out?”

“Yes.”

“I’ll do it immediately.”

A week later the pastor came to visit the farm.

“Howdy, preacher,” the farmer said in a happy voice.

“How is home life?” the pastor asked.

“Wonderful; just wonderful. I never realized how much room we had in that house until we kicked all the livestock out. It’s been so peaceful and quiet and such a pleasure to enjoy just my family again.”

### **C. Receiving the Lord’s Strength for Both Extremes**

Most people will experience both sides of life: the ups and the downs. The key to a joyful life is learning to find contentment in both the valleys of life and the mountaintops. Paul learned this in whatever state he was in (Philippians 4:11). Each believer must discover how to live like this too.

### **PERSONAL APPLICATION**

Proud people are often discontented. To be truly contented in life, one must become preoccupied with something bigger than self. To overcome the continual lust for more stuff or better situations in life, one can give. Give what little you do have and learn to appreciate what is left over.

In an interview, Mother Teresa claimed there was an amazing freedom in giving everything you had to others. Such voluntary poverty is a foreign concept in most minds, but those who have given up all, such as Paul, discover a joyful contentment not available from the shopping mall or amazon.com.

The mythical King Midas thought he would be content with only a little more gold. However, he soon found that the gift of turning everything he touched into gold robbed him of what was most valuable—the friendships and family in his life. A spirit of greed does not make one happy. A continual lust for a better life does not make a better life.

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A man was sitting on a pier, fishing from the ocean. Another man in a yacht pulled up and asked, “Are you catching anything?”

The man on the dock pulled up his stringer and showed several large fish.

“Wow, you are good at what you do.”

“Thank you.”

“You should start selling your fish and buy a boat.”

“Why?”

“So you could catch more fish.”

“And then what would I do?”

“You could buy more boats. You could have a whole fleet of fishing boats.”

“Why?”

“Then you would have all kinds of money like me,” the man in the yacht said. “Then you could live life the way you wanted. You could kick back and enjoy yourself.”

“I’m doing that now,” the man on the pier said as he tossed out his line once more.

The next pay raise, moving to another home, finding a better church—all these myths bait us along, causing us to think we will find happiness. Contentment is what we find in the Lord as we seek a better life for others. Continual attention to our own satisfaction will not make us joyful but more aware of what we lack. Caring for the needs of others will help us appreciate what we do have and be more considerate as well.

The life of contentment starts within as we learn not to worry about anything but take everything to the Lord in prayer, thanking Him for handling it best. Daily, we feast our minds on life-giving thoughts rather than on the dreadful and

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the negative. Humble living and Bible-based thinking create the perfect mix for a contented heart.

### **QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION**

- What are some tough things you have lived through that have caused you to be thankful for other aspects of your life?
- How does generosity and thinking of others help a person be more contented in life?
- What prayer can you thank God for answering today? How does this strengthen your faith and give you peace about the situation?
- How have you learned to be abased and to abound in the Lord?

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN



# EFFECTIVE, FRUITFUL CHRISTIANS

### INTRODUCTION

In a sense, this book has been a study of basic mathematics—subtraction, addition, multiplication, and division. We have studied disciplines, which involve the subtraction of carnal behaviors and the addition of practices that help form us spiritually. Ultimately, the practice of the many disciplines we have considered will produce within individuals the multiplication of spiritual fruit and will greatly limit, if not eliminate division within the body of Christ. What is the end result? For one thing, it will ensure we are becoming the effective, fruitful Christians God designed for us to become.

Before individuals can produce spiritual fruit, they must experience spiritual birth and spiritual growth. Infants are incapable of reproduction; immature trees cannot bear fruit. The process of reproduction and fruit bearing is reserved for the mature. So it is with individuals; they can bear spiritual fruit only after experiencing new birth in Christ and pursuing

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the processes of growth in Christ and His body, the church. This is not necessarily a lengthy endeavor for Christians, but it is an active one.

While on one hand bearing fruit is reserved for the mature, on the other hand all healthy, growing believers should bear fruit. Fruit is the evidence of growth and maturity. Bearing fruit is a normal and expected process as Jesus illustrated by means of a parable.

He spake also this parable; A certain man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; and he came and sought fruit thereon, and found none. Then said he unto the dresser of his vineyard, Behold, these three years I come seeking fruit on this fig tree, and find none: cut it down; why cumbereth it the ground? And he answering said unto him, Lord, let it alone this year also, till I shall dig about it, and dung it: And if it bear fruit, well: and if not, then after that thou shalt cut it down. (Luke 13:6–9)

As Christians we have the opportunity and responsibility to experience a vibrant and growing relationship with Jesus Christ daily. This is the kind of life that will result in the production of spiritual fruit and a life of effectiveness for the cause of the kingdom of God.

### **I. EXCEEDING GREAT AND PRECIOUS PROMISES**

Peter began his second letter by referencing the great salvation experience shared by all believers (II Peter 1:1–4). He made several subtle but definite comments that pointed to our salvation experience:

1. Like precious faith received through God's righteousness
2. The multiplication of grace and peace through knowing God
3. Encounter with the divine power of God
4. God's supplying our lives with all things having to do with life and godliness
5. God's calling us to glory and virtue
6. The reception of great and precious promises
7. Opportunity to partake of the divine nature
8. An escape from the corruption of this world

These all refer to the opportunities we have been given through the redemptive experience we have in Christ Jesus. Before we can grow in the grace of God and produce fruit, we have to experience the new birth, which is a great and precious gift from God that allows us to partake of the divine nature.

#### **A. Salvation Is a Gift of God**

For the wages of sin is death; but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.  
(Romans 6:23)

For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God. (Ephesians 2:8)

Numerous verses of Scripture throughout the New Testament reveal that salvation is a gift from God. It comes through divine favor that one cannot possibly purchase, earn, or deserve; it is a gift.

God was determined in Creation to have people who would, by their own free will, choose to love and serve Him. Still, in His

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foreknowledge God knew individuals would fall to temptation and sin, so He already had a plan in place: the Lamb of God who would atone for the sins of mankind.

Ye were not redeemed with corruptible things, as silver and gold, from your vain conversation received by tradition from your fathers; but with the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot: who verily was foreordained before the foundation of the world, but was manifest in these last times for you. (I Peter 1:18–20)

Jesus Christ was not crucified prior to Creation, but He was already in God’s redemptive planning. Consequently, when Eve partook of the forbidden fruit in the Garden, God was prepared with His eternal plan for redemption. He gave the first hint of human salvation in Genesis 3:15 when He spoke of a bruised heel and a crushed head—the judgment He would bring against the serpent, that is, Satan.

### **B. We Are Partakers of His Divine Nature**

This glorious gift of redemption is unquestionably an exceeding great, precious promise. The gift of salvation allows humans to partake of the divine nature of God.

Partaking of the divine nature does not eliminate the innate human nature of mankind; it only gives us the power to discipline and control the human inclinations and tendencies. Jesus promised, “But ye shall receive power, after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you: and ye shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judaea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth” (Acts 1:8). The Spirit



empowers believers both in the ability to make right choices and in the capacity to be witnesses for Christ.

As believers faithfully live by the Holy Spirit's empowerment, they experience the divine nature and through it will subdue human temptations, control human frailties, and receive divine strength. The result in every believer's life will be continual spiritual growth by the grace of God.

## II. GROWING IN GRACE

In our march toward full Christian maturity, Peter mentioned seven specific elements believers should diligently add to their faith.

And beside this, giving all diligence, add to your faith virtue; and to virtue knowledge; and to knowledge temperance; and to temperance patience; and to patience godliness; and to godliness brotherly kindness; and to brotherly kindness charity.  
(II Peter 1:5-7)

While we cannot be saved by our works, human diligence and effort is essential to genuine spiritual growth in Christ.

For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: not of works, lest any man should boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them. (Ephesians 2:8-10)

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Notice the progression of Paul's words to the believers in Ephesus: (1) We are saved by God's grace through faith; (2) it is not of our own abilities but is a gift from God; and (3) as God's people redeemed by grace, we are ordained unto good works. These stated good works are not capable of effecting our redemption in Christ, but they are both vital and necessary. While it is God's work that redeems us, it is our work that establishes cooperation with the Holy Spirit in maintaining that redemptive relationship and in preparing us to experience divine spiritual growth—and ultimately, the production of spiritual fruit. The seven vital qualities Peter mentioned will not appear suddenly without cause; human effort is necessary in order to add them.

### **A. Virtue**

Believers are to add virtue to their faith. What is virtue? Virtue has to do with moral goodness or excellence as exhibited by one's modesty and purity.

In Peter's lifetime, moral depravity was all too common in the wider cultures surrounding the holy lands. For example, Roman and Hellenistic cultures devolved into self-gratification, hedonism, and sexual immorality. This is evident both in a study of their histories as well as archeological discoveries. It is not surprising that these dominant cultures of the day were morally corrupted, for it is the path of unbridled human nature. Sadly, it appears every culture, given time, will erode eventually, diminish, and succumb to deterioration, especially with regard to its morals. History is replete with evidence of this continual human decline.

Only empowerment of the Holy Ghost can successfully protect individuals from this usual path of moral decline.

However, God will not force His redeemed people to live morally. They still are individuals who have been given the gift of free will; they must choose whether they will follow the path of morality. Human will, initiative, and discipline are necessary. For believers, that involves adding virtue to their faith. Further, Peter recognized diligence would be essential in successfully achieving this moral addition, as well as the addition of the other six qualities he mentioned.

### **B. Knowledge**

Peter went on to encourage the addition of knowledge. Moral excellence is good and necessary, but without knowledge it becomes only a human discipline void of eternal value. In other words, being a good and moral individual will not initiate salvation. Some moral people will be lost eternally because they failed to receive God's gift of redemption, and individuals cannot experience salvation through or on the basis of their good works.

Knowledge then adds wisdom to morality so that right living is not based on following legalistic codes but based on wise, intentional efforts to profoundly please God in one's choices and lifestyle.

### **C. Temperance**

As one studies through this list of seven elements for healthy spiritual growth, the progressive pattern of the list soon becomes clear: each one builds upon the previous one. That is not to suggest they do not exist or function separately; rather, it reveals how they work cooperatively to progressively build strong, spiritual health within a person.

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Peter stated that we should add temperance to our knowledge. Knowledge of God and His Word is essential, but only knowing the Word of God will not effect salvation or spiritual growth within an individual. The person must submit to the Word, embrace its truths, and obey its precepts.

The essential idea of the word *temperance* in the context of II Peter 1:6 has to do with self-control. One of the definitions of the Greek word is “self-control (the virtue of one who masters his desires and passions, esp. his sensual appetites)” (*Strong’s Concordance*). The progression is already becoming clear that believers are to exercise virtue (moral excellence) as guided and supported by knowledge (biblical understanding) and strengthened by temperance (self-control, especially of one’s passions).

If Peter’s list of the three elements covered thus far seems to be weighty and challenging to a person, that individual may need the next one mentioned in verse 6—patience.

### **D. Patience**

Patience is probably one of the most needed virtues of all. The Greek word for *patience* is *hypomone*, which *Strong’s Concordance* defines as “cheerful (or hopeful) endurance, constancy:—enduring, patience, patient continuance (waiting).” Patience, or the lack of patience, influences and affects every area and dimension of a person’s life, even for Christians. After all, it is the one characteristic mentioned by which we are to “possess” our souls (Luke 21:19). In other words, patience has the power to stabilize and anchor our redemptive relationship with Jesus Christ, and the lack of it can threaten our very lives, both physically and spiritually.

### **E. Godliness**

Peter continued to build onto his progressive chain of additives for the faith of a Christian: virtue, knowledge, temperance, patience, and godliness. As believers build upon their faith and develop a state of patience, they are poised to develop in the area of reverence and respect for the Almighty. The Greek word for *godliness* is *eusebeia*, which *Strong's Concordance* defines as "reverence, respect; piety towards God, godliness." As individuals continue to grow in Christian character, their reverence and respect for God continues to increase. This involves one's entire attitude and frame of mind toward God.

As we draw nearer to God, He draws nearer to us (James 4:8). As the distance between God and us narrows, we reach a place of complete awe similar to that experienced by Isaiah: "Then said I, Woe is me! for I am undone; because I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips: for mine eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts" (Isaiah 6:5). Godliness is an attitude of nearness to the holiness of God that evokes awe, godly fear, respect, and reverence for Him.

### **F. Brotherly Kindness**

The closer we draw to God, the more we sense and exhibit sincere love for others. This response should be no mystery, however, for God is love (I John 4:8), and there is evidently nothing dearer to Him than His children. He loves every person intensely; therefore, the more we become like Him, the more love we have for others. How can we love God and hate our "brother" (I John 4:20)? It is no wonder Jesus said our love for one another would give evidence to our being Jesus' disciple. "By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another" (John 13:35).

Believers are to add “brotherly kindness” to their godliness (I Peter 1:7). “Brotherly kindness” in the King James Version is translated from the Greek word *philadelphia*, a familiar Greek word for love. *Strong’s Concordance* defines the word as “brotherly love (kindness), love of the brethren.”

### **G. Charity**

With the addition of charity to brotherly love, we reach the pinnacle of Peter’s admonition for a progression of spiritual growth. It is befitting that at the top of this tower of truth is charity, or love (Greek, *agape*). The Greek word *agape* describes the highest form of love one can experience. Further, it is so godlike it is evidently impossible to fully exhibit it apart from God’s empowerment. *Agape* is sacrificial love, love that thinks not of itself but only of the recipient. Such love does not come naturally to humans, who are by nature self-centered, self-seeking, and self-focused. However, the love of God within the hearts of believers empowers them by the Spirit to love others as He loved us—sacrificially and supremely.

The Greek word *agapao* is the verb form of *agape*. The unabridged version of *Thayer’s Greek-English Lexicon* points out several aspects of this word for love that reveal its nature as the highest form of love. In Greek, there were at least three words to convey the various aspects and kinds of love, unlike our English language in which there is only one word. In English, we may express our love for God, for a spouse, for a pet, or even for a meal. “I love your recipe for lasagna!” Obviously, those expressions of love are not equal. Surely our love of a meal is not equivalent to our love for God!

The Greeks, in their philosophical nature, developed different words for different kinds of love. Some of the words

do not appear in Scripture, such as *eros*, sexual passion, from which we get the word *erotic*. However, we do see in Scripture the words *philos* (friendship, brotherly love, affection) and *agape* (supreme, sacrificial love as exhibited by Christ's sacrifice on behalf of mankind).

*Agape* is the highest form of sacrificial love. This level and quality of love is possible to fully express only through the abiding Spirit of God within a person. Further, this is the very kind of love to which Paul referred in Romans 5:5: "And hope maketh not ashamed; because the love [*agape*] of God is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Ghost which is given unto us." We can effectively experience and express such love only by the empowerment of the Holy Spirit.

### III. BECOMING MATURE CHRISTIANS

The list Peter gave was in no way intended to be exclusive and exhaustive with regard to a Christian's spiritual growth. We as believers should develop other qualities in our growing relationship with Jesus Christ. However, the seven qualities Peter gave offer a clear picture of a progressive pattern of spiritual growth through diligent discipline and application as a believer seeks to grow spiritually in these seven dimensions. And logically, the seven qualities do build progressively upon each other. Peter has given us a clear and concise exhortation to commit ourselves individually to seek continual spiritual growth.

In his letter to the believers in Ephesus, Paul addressed the topic of spiritual growth and maturity in Christ Jesus.

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And he gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers; for the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ: till we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ: that we henceforth be no more children, tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the sleight of men, and cunning craftiness, whereby they lie in wait to deceive; but speaking the truth in love, may grow up into him in all things, which is the head, even Christ: from whom the whole body fitly joined together and compacted by that which every joint supplieth, according to the effectual working in the measure of every part, maketh increase of the body unto the edifying of itself in love. (Ephesians 4:11–16)

Continual, progressive spiritual growth is a normal process for every spiritually healthy Christian believer. This process of growing spiritually gradually brings a believer to full spiritual maturity in Christ. God has given to His church the gift of the ministry in all its aspects and dimensions in order to perfect this process of spiritual growth for believers. The various named ministries are for “the perfecting of the saints” and “for the edifying of the body of Christ” until we all come into a state of perfect unity and maturity in the likeness of Jesus Christ, the head of the body, the church.

The Scriptures admonish us to “grow up into him,” that is, into Jesus Christ. Growing up is the essence of maturity.



Further, it involves learning to accept and grow within our individual places in Christ's body and cooperating with all the workings of the other members of His body. Each member supplies its particular functions to the body in the same way every part of our human body supplies its operation to the functioning of the whole body. Learning to fill our place faithfully and efficiently and humbly accepting the working roles of the other body members is maturity and the basis upon which the individual members are able to effectively produce spiritual fruit.

### **PERSONAL APPLICATION**

No believer wants to be cut off from the body of Christ for failing to produce spiritual fruit as the fig tree in Jesus' parable was to be cut down if it failed to produce fruit within a reasonable time. But the secret to the production of spiritual fruit is not contained within the realm of focusing on fruit production and fretting over when spiritual fruit will appear. The fig tree does not fret over its fruit; it just grows until fruit begins to appear. The secret to producing spiritual fruit just involves spiritual growth. If we grow consistently and faithfully as believers, we will produce fruit.

Perhaps the key concept to understanding how we become effective, fruitful Christian believers is that of perfection. "Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect" (Matthew 5:48). Many believers fret and worry over this concept. They fear they are imperfect, and they too often sense hopeless abandon that they will never achieve perfection. However, they fail to understand the concept of biblical perfection.

## SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES

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The word *perfection* in the English New Testament is translated from the Greek word *teleios*, which *Strong's Concordance* defines as “complete (in various applications of labor, growth, mental and moral character, etc.). . . . completeness:—of full age, man, perfect. . . . mature.” When God admonished us toward perfection, He was urging us to pursue completion.

As with every principle of the Scriptures, we witness the absolute love and grace of God in the concept of biblical perfection. It does not mean we are without flaw or error. It does not mean we make no mistakes. Should we somehow fail God and commit sin, it does not mean there is no hope for us. The idea of completeness in Jesus Christ is a moving target; we are complete as we continue to pursue God, pursue spiritual growth, and pursue our full state of maturity in Him. We should continue to grow spiritually as long as we live. As long as we continue to grow, we are pursuing and possessing biblical perfection, or completeness in Christ Jesus.

The spiritual fruit will take care of itself.

### QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- How is possessing a growing relationship with Jesus Christ daily both an opportunity and a responsibility?
- What are several indications in II Peter 1:1–4 that Peter had in mind the salvation experience shared by all believers?
- Does becoming a partaker of the divine nature eliminate a person's human nature? What does partaking of the divine nature mean for a believer's life?
- What is biblical perfection? Is it possible for a believer truly to be perfect?